CAN CYBERSPACE TRULY BE A TEMPLE FOR THE CYBERSANGHA?

by

MADELEINE FROST

Buddhism was quick to embrace the opportunities that new technologies have afforded the Western world, and there is now a widely recognised term: the cybersangha (sangha being an order of monks) that has been defined thusly:

> *…a community of persons who actively scout their way to truth; who have, as an additional gift, the ability to communicate instantly without regard for their geographical proximities.[1]*

But several academics have questioned the validity of the Internet as a space for religious activity, given that human bodies and human senses are absent or restricted during its use. This paper will therefore firstly be a survey of the online resources available to the cybersangha (which will be taken to mean any Buddhist individuals who make use of the Internet for their spiritual pursuits) and will secondly tackle the question – is Cyberspace an appropriate arena for Buddhist development?

INTRODUCTION [1]

Cyberspace has become an increasingly significant social sphere for the West over the last ten years. When I started my undergraduate degree in 1996, the Internet was not something I was particularly aware of - I used books for research and hand-wrote my essays – ten years later I research using search engines and write up my findings on my computer. Religions, like everyone else, have been quick to set up camp in cyberspace - in fact, unbeknown to me, 1996 was also the year of two significant events that her-

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[1]   Steingrubner, J. H. (1996),'Cybersangha: Building Buddhist Community Online', from
       Cybersangha: The Buddhist Alternative Journal. Retrieved 24 July, 2006, from
       http://www.newciv.org/CyberSangha/stein95.htm

alded the era of religion online – a group of Tibetan monks conducted a formal blessing of cyberspace in February 1996, and an electronic Jesus graced the cover of Time magazine in December 1996.

These days everyone with Internet access has the ability to visit what Robert Wright refers to as a "high-speed spiritual bazaar"[2] No longer are we tied to the religion of our parents or our local community, instead we can learn about a variety of religions and pick and choose from the ones that interest us. This has led to some westerners assimilating fragments of Eastern culture – yoga, meditation, Feng Shui, etc - without necessarily establishing an understanding of the underlying religions or philosophies. However, others are developing a genuine interest in these religions and philosophies – all of which are more accessible than ever before thanks to their presence in cyberspace. If nothing else, the Internet affords every religion the opportunity to be heard, and to be introduced to a mass audience. As Clayton Morgan says about Buddhism: 'Getting started in a spiritual life, or "taking refuge" is where the Internet becomes especially helpful.'[3]

Even in the couple of years that I have been studying Buddhism online I have seen a boom in the available resources. When I began my research two years ago the Dalai Lama's official website was 'under construction' – it is now up and running. In fact the Dalai Lama is well known for having no great desire to convert people to Buddhism, rather he aims only to share with them the benefits that some of its philosophies and practises can bring. Cyberspace is clearly useful to Buddhism in that it encourages the sharing and discussion of information. Indeed the word "cybersangha" was coined in order to describe the emerging online Buddhist population who are doing just that.

I will therefore begin my paper with a brief overview of what is available to the surfer who is interested in learning more about Buddhism, and in discussing their experiences with others. I will then go on to consider whether cyberspace has the potential to act as a sacred arena, offering the Buddhist community the tools needed for the spiritual rites that Durkheim

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[2]   Wright, R. quoted in 'Buddhist Enlightenment & the Internet' by David W. Chappell. Retrieved 20 August, 2006, from http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/j9/chappell.pdf

[3]   Morgan, C., 'Being Real in Cyberspace'. Retrieved 5 August, 2006, from http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/php/phil/mclaughl/students/Phil224/cm/HomePage/p2.htm, p. 1.

refers to as 'the set of regularly repeated acts that constitute the cult'.[4] In short, I will ask: can cyberspace truly be a temple for the cybersangha?

BUDDHIST INFORMATION
AND COMMUNICATION ONLINE [2]

Before going any further, it is important to note that Buddhism, like any religion, has many different schools with different views, beliefs and practices. However, most schools refer to a notion which is sometimes called the Three Refuges because making a commitment to Buddhism is known as 'taking the refuges'. The Three Refuges are: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and their exact meanings vary from tradition to tradition, but very briefly: 'Buddha' refers to the belief that Buddha-nature (the possession of noble virtues such as compassion, wisdom and purity) lies within everyone. 'Dharma' refers to the study and contemplation and practical use of Buddhist teachings. 'Sangha' refers to the Buddhist community, who should be there to offer inspiration, help and support as one proceeds down a spiritual path. If we take Dharma to mean information and Sangha to mean communication, then we can see how both might operate in cyberspace.

There is plenty of information on Buddhism available on the Internet, including several online libraries such as the Buddhist Studies WWW Virtual Library;[5] homepages for almost every Buddhist organization; online art galleries of Buddhist art work, and online versions of journals, including Tricycle: The Buddhist Review,[6] the Journal of Global Buddhism,[7] and BuddhaZine which is the magazine of BuddhaNet,[8] one of the most comprehensive Buddhist resource sites. Of course, there are potential dangers associated with online information – one might doubt its authenticity, accuracy and origin, for example, or one may become confused by the sheer volume of available material. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that digital Buddhist resources are easily accessible.

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[4] Durkheim, E. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* (1912) trans. Carol Cosman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 edition, p. 312.
[5] Online. Available at www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html
[6] Online. Available at www.tricycle.com
[7] Online. Available at www.globalbuddhism.org
[8] Online. Available at www.buddhanet.net

There are also plenty of options for talking to Buddhists online – for example in chat rooms, and discussion forums; and in community group spaces on websites such as www.beliefnet.com and www.myspace.com. One can even put questions to monks, for example the 'Cyber Monk' at Zen Mountain Monastery's website.[9] Again, there are potential dangers such as meeting intruders, people who aren't who they say they are, or people who may be disruptive; and there is the possibility that one may misunderstand or be misunderstood in a solely textual world. However, there are certainly many outlets for Buddhists to engage in online communication.

We have seen that cyberspace is capable of providing an enormous amount of online information; and of giving people from all over the world an opportunity to engage in an open dialogue. But does this make it a fitting temple for the cybersangha? The term 'temple' implies a place for spiritual activities, which for Buddhists might include: group and solitary meditation of various kinds, chanting, bowing before sacred objects, turning prayer wheels, making offerings to shrines, burning incense, and ringing bells. Could any of these activities be possible online? And if they were, would they retain their spiritual essence? In order to tackle these questions, I went in search of some Buddhist rites both out in the real world, and in cyberspace.

GOHONZONS [2.1]

Gohonzons are special scrolls or plaques that are inscribed with key Buddhist teachings, and are particular to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. Followers believe that by chanting in front of their Gohonzon, they will develop the qualities needed to tackle the problems in their everyday lives. The Dai-Gohonzon ("dai" meaning 'original') was inscribed in 1279 and can still be seen in Japan. However, high priests of Nichiren Shoshu are entrusted to inscribe replica Gohonzons, which are lent to dedicated followers during a special ceremony that marks the receiver's commitment to the practice. Followers treat their replica Gohonzons with great respect - they keep them clean, make offerings to them, and are forbidden from photographing them.

I attended a meeting of a local Nichiren Shoshu group, and saw a Gohonzon, which was housed in a special shrine. When the chanting began - a hypnotic, melodic and resonant sound - I did find myself transfixed by the

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[9]   Online. Available at www.mro.org/zmm

scroll, which did seem to emanate a spiritual aura, perhaps because so many eyes were fixed firmly on it. I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's writings on art:

> *A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legends tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.[10]*

Interestingly, several members of the group had expressed their dismay to me about the news that someone had scanned their Gohonzon and downloaded it onto the Internet. I wondered whether the group's reaction might be in part a fear that it fall into the hands of 'the distracted mass' or, in this case, the casual Net surfer. Alternatively, their dismay might be explained by the perceived damage to the 'aura' of their Gohonzons, for as Benjamin says:

> *The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from the beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.[11]*

The aura of the downloaded Gohonzon, with its history of having been blessed by a high priest, and possibly owned by several different people, could be said to have been jeopardised by its reproduction. I sought opinions from the Nichiren Buddhism community group discussion forum on the multi-faith website, www.beliefnet.com.

My post led to a heated debate between two participants whose opinions on the issue were quite different. One of the respondents, Etoro was firmly against the notion of online Gohonzons, he said:

> *The spread of the correct teachings and practice of Buddhism depends upon those who take up its calling correctly. In order for Buddhism to be properly practiced, it must be properly transmitted. Nichiren did not intend for Gohonzon's to be so frivolously distributed.[12]*

The use of the word 'frivolously' suggests that people are downloading Gohonzons with no real consideration of the consequences, which might include the practice being taken up by people who are not serious about

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[10]   Benjamin, W. (1955), *Illuminations.* London: Pimlico, 1999 edition, trans. Harry Zorn, p. 232.
[11]   Benjamin, W., op. cit., p. 215.
[12]   etoro (2006). Online posting. Retrieved 31 October, 2001, from
         http://www.beliefnet.com/boards/message_list.asp?boardID=300&discussionID=539302

Buddhist teachings. Another respondent, Engyo, emphasised the fact that a Gohonzon is a tool and should not in itself be treated as a sacred object in and of itself. He said:

> *The power, or the thing that makes a Gohonzon 'work', is the person chanting, not the format of the signpost they are chanting in front of. There are pictorial mandalas, there are statuary mandalas, and there are letter mandalas. All perform the same function, whether they are in a scroll or a frame, large or small, 2d or 3d or on a screen.*[13]

Here Engyo suggests the real spiritual power lies within the individual. If we follow this argument through to its natural conclusion, then perhaps there is no reason why the Internet cannot ultimately provide equally valid 'signposts', or methods of practice, for the suitably motivated individual.

ZAZEN [2.2]

Zazen is the Zen style of meditation. Each Buddhist tradition has a different view on the correct method and purpose of meditation, and in many schools it is seen as one of the tools used in the quest for enlightenment. However for Soto Zen Buddhists, zazen is taught as *being* enlightenment. Peter Harvey sums up zazen as 'a way of simply exhibiting one's innate Buddha-nature.'[14]

I learnt zazen from a lady from the Soto Zen tradition. The practice itself was very straightforward – I sat on a chair with my hands touching, my back straight and my eyes open, facing the wall, trying to keep my mind blank. This was quite difficult, but eventually a feeling of increased aware-ness and clarity of mind began to wash over me. I also felt a sense of solid-arity building up between my teacher and myself as we accompanied each other in the simple activity of what her group terms 'serene reflection med-itation'. A key concern of David W. Chappell's is the inability of cyberspace to provide the necessary intimacy for Buddhist development. He says: 'No electronic medium is adequate for this degree of intimacy.'[15]

I tested this theory in the online zendo (Japanese word for meditation

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[13] Engyo (2006). Online posting. Retrieved 31 October, 2001, from
http://www.beliefnet.com/boards/message_list.asp?boardID=300&discussionID=539302

[14] Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices,* (1990) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 edition) p. 166.

[15] Chappell, D.W., 'Buddhist Enlightenment & The Internet'. Retrieved on 20 August, 2006, from http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/j9/chappell.pdf, p. 2.

hall) at the website www.dailyzen.com, a site which began in 1998, and which claims to have received more than 5 million visitors. Of its zendo, it says:

> *You are just one click away from a meditative cyberspace, where at any given moment you may be sharing silent meditation with others from around the world.[16]*

This is a powerful idea for those who do not have the luxury of a local meditation group, or even those who wish to connect with a larger, more global group in an act of unprecedented solidarity. But could it provide the sort of online intimacy that Chappell felt to be impossible, and would it be an authentic zazen experience? I asked the Zen Buddhism community group on Belief Net for their thoughts.

My first respondent was laystudent, who commented:

> *… I am all for anything that gets people to meditate… As for how authentic your Zazen is, only you can know what you are doing on your cushion. Is it Zazen? So the issue of on line or not isn't really relevant.[17]*

Here, laystudent places the control back into the hands of the individual, thus mirroring Engyo's view on Gohonzons. I went on to ask the participants whether there was any value in the idea of a large number of people meditating in front of a single image in unison. A new participant immediately answered no, that it was 'useless'[18] but laystudent replied:

> No doubt there is some value in it. Anything that brings people together has some value. Personally though, I find there is no substitute for being fully present to train with a group of like minded *(sic)* people.[19]

Thereby returning the debate to being one of intimacy, and to the power of people being 'fully present'. A late contributor to the debate, nnn123, then added:

> *… our devotion to the internet seems to be usurping real human interactions… I have hopes that the internet will soon go beyond mostly text to being fully audio and video so that the interactions change dramatically*

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[16]   Retrieved 25 October, 2006, from www.dailyzen.com

[17]   laystudent (2006). Retrieved 31 October, 2006, from http://www.beliefnet.com/boards/message_list.asp?pageID=1&discussionID=539301&messages_per_page=4

[18]   zenmonk_genryu (2006). Retrieved 31 October, 2006, from http://www.beliefnet.com/boards/message_list.asp?pageID=1&discussionID=539301&messages_per_page=4

[19]   laystudent (2006). Online posting. Retrieved 31 October, 2006, from http://www.beliefnet.co m/boards/message_list.asp?pageID=1&discussionID=539301&messages_per_page=4

in tone.[20]

This is a slightly dystopian view of cyberspace in its current form, but it is true that whilst the Internet might not yet have the ability to provide us with an adequately intimate and authentic meditation experience, it is likely that it will soon be able to offer experiences which may have new benefits for the open practitioner.

PRAYER WHEELS [2.3]

Prayer, or 'mani' wheels are one of the distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhism. The wheels are used as one way of releasing the powerful mantra, or formula, 'Om Mani Padme Hum' (it is also chanted or murmured under the breath). Peter Harvey describes the wheels as follows:

> *The formula is carved or painted on the outside of a shorter cylinder, and is written many times on a tightly rolled piece of paper inside. Each revolution of the cylinder is held to be equivalent to the repetition of all the formulas written on and in it.[21]*

Whilst in Dharamsala, India, where many Tibetan Buddhists, including their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, live in exile, I joined other visitors who were engaged in the spiritual practice of circumambulation. This involves slowly circling a sacred site, turning the large prayer wheels that line the walk as you go. This practice is quite physical - the feel of the cool metal engraved containers against the fingers provides comfort against the heat, and the sight of so many wheels turning, and so many people helping to keep them turning, is powerful.

Prayer wheels also appear in various other guises – for example Tibetan people often carry small, handheld versions on their person, small versions are placed on tabletops to be spun, and wheels are often placed where they can be activated by wind, water or heat from fire or steam. However, they are also now widely available in various digital forms from many websites.

Digital prayer wheels are quite hypnotic to watch because they are so rhythmic, but because one knows that they aren't filled with secret or hidden blessings, scriptures and images, and because they don't involve an em-

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[20] nnn123 (2006). Online posting. Retrieved 5 November, 2006, from http://www.beliefnet.com/ boards /message_list.asp?pageID=1&discussionID=539301&messages_per_page=4

[21] Harvey, op. cit., p. 186. (Italics author's own)

bodied ritual, they feel somewhat fake. However, when I sought the opinions of The Virtual Tibetan Buddhist Sangha, a discussion group within the popular website MySpace, I found nothing but praise for the digital wheels, indeed several respondents gave me links to web pages where they could be found.

Maybe the fact that many Tibetan people have had to deal with being uprooted to another country might have made them a more adaptable and open-minded group. Indeed, as Jaron Lanier, the man who coined the term 'virtual reality'[22] points out:

> *Tibetan Buddhism in particular has had to live as a diaspora for quite a long time because of the Chinese regime. The Internet can be very, very important to it.*[23]

Perhaps the Tibetan Buddhists can teach us that to moving to cyberspace, with its customs and systems, is not so different from moving to a new country, with all its cultures and laws, and that an open mind is more important than a physical presence in a spiritual act.

CONCLUSION [3]

In each of my three experiences of Buddhist rites, I found the online version to be inferior to the 'real life' version. This was due to lack of aura and reverence for tradition in the case of the Gohonzons; to lack of intimacy, fluidity of movement, connection between mind and body, and 'fully present' human companionship in the case of zazen; and to lack of authenticity and physical experience in the case of prayer wheels. In addition, the conversations and experiences that I had with people face to face were infinitely more rewarding than the ones I had with people in cyberspace. I wasn't convinced that cyberspace could be a temple for the cybersangha. However, not only is my opinion subjective, but, according to American thinker Marc Prensky, it is also outdated, for I am a mere 'digital immigrant'. As Prensky says:

> *As Digital Immigrants learn… to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their "accent," that is, their foot in the past.*[24]

Whereas, today's young people are what Prensky terms 'digital natives',

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[22] Source: Zaleski, J. (1997) *The Soul of Cyberspace*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, p. 135.

[23] Lanier, quoted in Zaleski, op. cit, p. 155.

[24] Prensky, M., 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants' from *On the Horizon* (NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001), p. 2.

people who have grown up with digital technologies and so do not see it as something new or difficult. Indeed, these technologies are an 'integral parts of their lives'[25] with the result that these young people '*think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors.[26] Even in my limited research I began to find members of the cybersangha who were prepared to advocate the existing online spiritual rites, if only because they saw them simply as tools to assist with the true goal of Buddhism, that of unearthing one's Buddha-nature.

Nothing will ever replace the unique benefits of a person-to-person, 'fully present' spiritual existence; but it is possible that cyberspace will be able to offer an additional set of benefits, which may not yet be imaginable. Our mistake is trying to compare online and offline rites – they are two very separate things. This is difficult for those of us who can remember life before cyberspace, for we are a generation in transition, but for today's young people, for the emerging tribe of 'digital natives' online experiences will most probably be acceptable in their own right. Durkheim said that the cult of a religion 'periodically recreates itself'[27] and I believe that this is what is beginning to happen in Buddhism as the possibilities of cyberspace expand, and as the human race becomes more in tune with digital technology. As a member of the last generation of digital immigrants, and as a student of religion online, I wholeheartedly look forward to watching this transformation.

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[25] Prensky, M., op. cit., p. 1.

[26] Prensky, M., op. cit., p. 1. (Italics author's own)

[27] Durkheim, op. cit., p. 312

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