Online Meditations:

An Autoethnographic Study of Spiritual Tourism in the Liquid Internet Age

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ABSTRACT

In 1912 Émile Durkheim asserted that the "cult" of religion "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) by which he meant that the way humanity expresses its religions evolves as the world does, in order that they may continue to be relevant. A century later, in a period which is significantly influenced by the advent of technologies such as the internet, and which has been characterised by Zygmunt Bauman as "liquid modernity" (2000), it is perhaps not surprising that we might question how religious beliefs and practices may manifest themselves in contemporary social life.

This thesis is an autoethnographic study which compares online and offline expressions of spirituality in order to question whether the 'liquid internet age' – an age of impermanence and individualisation - influences the way that we engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism; and whether the internet can truly offer us a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality. Given that autoethnography is still an emerging methodology, it also questions what the pros and cons of using autoethnography to explore online/offline spiritual tourism are.

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that the emergence of a liquid society provides the social conditions fostering the need for greater self-creation of identity - including spiritual identity; and that the liquid internet age is facilitating a period in which the "cult" of religion is indeed recreating itself by encouraging the emergence of spiritual tourism. It also concludes that autoethnography is an effective methodology for the study of spiritual tourism, and aims to prove this point by finishing with a creative interpretation of the findings which will – it is hoped - expose them more fully and stimulate thought and questions about the issues at hand in the mind of the reader.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my very favourite pal and eternal lighthouse, Russ, who, by always believing that I would complete it, ultimately ensured that I did...

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, Madeleine Genevra Beatrice Frost, confirm that the material presented in this thesis is my own and that it has not previously been published in its current form. Elements of Chapters Three, Six and Seven were presented by myself at various conferences during my time as a PhD student.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

In his 1912 book The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Émile Durkheim asserted that the "cult" of religion "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) by which he meant that the ways that humanity expresses its religion evolves as the world does, in order that it may continue to be relevant. A mere century later, in a period significantly influenced by the advent of emerging information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, it is perhaps not surprising that we might question how religious beliefs and practices may manifest themselves in contemporary social life. Characterised by the prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as "liquid modernity" (2000), he suggests that we increasingly live in an age in which social relations and identities are fragile and ever-changing. In the liquid age impermanence is therefore a defining feature of everything from our identities to our careers to our relationships to our communities. It is as if all the frameworks which once gave our lives structure (cultural identity, organised religion, etc.) have been liquidised leaving us all able to be whoever we want to be – and whilst this is emancipatory it also means that we are all responsible for undertaking individual, private journeys towards discovering or developing our identities. At the heart of this phenomenon is the internet, which it could be argued is the ultimate symbol of liquid modernity because it both illustrates and facilitates our newly fluid lives.

Amongst the frameworks which seem to be challenged as part of liquid modernity are traditional religions. On the whole, in the west, religious practices such as church-going are in decline (see Doward 2008, Butt 2010, etc.) and the influence of the church has therefore diminished. We now live in multi-faith societies which grant us the freedom of choice – we can choose to be atheist, to be agnostic, or to learn about any religion on the planet almost effortlessly via ICTs and potentially to adopt it (or elements of it) as our own. And the internet is making this possible even if we do not live geographically close to other people who consider themselves to be – for example – Buddhists – or to any physical spaces such as temples in which we might worship. The internet also allows us to explore our spiritualities – albeit within clear physical limitations -

and even define ourselves as being ‘spiritual’ whilst bypassing organised religion altogether.

In 2001, Robert C Fuller suggested that approximately 20% of all Americans say that they are "spiritual but not religious." (Fuller, 2001) -and by 2005 a poll by Newsweek and Beliefnet suggested that this figure had risen to 24% (‘Newsweek/Beliefnet Poll Results’, beliefnet.com, 2005). Fuller also described how the concepts of ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ have changed since the start of the 20th century – they were once two words meaning more or less the same thing but have now evolved so that, whilst they still have much in common, ‘religion’ implies organised religion with a community of fellow believers engaging in shared rituals whereas ‘spirituality’ has become a more private and personal practice (Fuller, 2001). Durkheim, meanwhile, also saw 'religion' as being tied to a community – he said:

> … a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church. (Durkheim, 1912, p. 46)

I am defining a spiritual tourist, therefore, as an person who is on an individualised journey towards discovering more about themselves and the world in which they live by finding their own way of connecting with a higher power which may or may not resemble the higher powers one might recognise from any existing religions, using practices which may or may not resemble the rituals which are present in any existing religions. And because I consider myself to be a spiritual tourist, as well as a citizen of the liquid internet age, I am a part of the phenomenon that I am studying and I have chosen for my work to be autoethnographic in approach.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis aims to tackle three key questions which are as follows:

Does the ‘liquid internet age’ influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?

This first question necessitates a detailed exploration of what Bauman means when he calls the age we now live in 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000), what it means to be a citizen of this age, and the ways in which this relates to or affects our current relationship with religion and spirituality. As I have already suggested, one of the potential effects of the internet age is that traditional, formalised religions are breaking down in favour of a more individualised journey towards spirituality. *My first hypothesis, therefore, is that the internet may open up opportunities for spiritual tourism*. By exploring online versus offline spirituality I will also be questioning whether we should accept and embrace the ways that the liquid internet age is evolving our understanding of religion and spirituality, and whether Durkheim is ultimately right in his assertion that the "cult" of religion "periodically recreates itself". (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312)

How does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?

If, as I have suggested, virtual spiritual tourism is becoming more commonplace it is arguably worth pausing to explore to what extent a virtual experience can compare to, or even replace, an offline religious encounter. Clearly an offline experience is an embodied experience and will therefore have properties that an online cannot and so *my second hypothesis is that the internet cannot hope to provide a viable alternative to embodied spirituality*. I question this by firstly asking how important physical elements such as the body, proximity to others, and tangible spaces (such as temples) and props (such as prayer wheels) are to spiritual pursuits; and secondly, by asking whether one can have a genuine spiritual experience without these elements, or whether a virtual experience is always a superficial experience. Of course defining what constitutes a 'genuine' spiritual experience may in itself be a tricky task and it is possible that this too is something that, to use Durkheim's words again, "periodically recreates itself". (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312). However, I will be using my feelings about my own spiritual experiments online and offline to help me decide how genuine they are (which may only answer how genuine they are for me but will be a useful starting point) and I will also consider the nature of the spiritual energy/life force *prana* (I use this

Sanskrit term because this thesis focuses on eastern spirituality), and then explore whether it is possible for *prana* to be present / developed online to help me answer these questions too.

What are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?

An autoethnography occurs when the writer is a part of the phenomenon that they are studying and is unusual in that it allows the writer's experiences to be clearly visible and permits a slightly more creative approach than other more traditional methodologies. It is, as Heewon Chang tells us: "... a self-focused inquiry that utilizes autobiographical data as the basis for sociocultural analysis." (Chang, 2011, p. 15) Autoethnography is very new, having been first referred to in the late seventies in the US, and is only just starting to gain momentum – particularly in the UK – but I believe that it has the potential to make a significant and exciting contribution to academia. *My final hypothesis is that an autoethnographic approach is a valuable and effective way of studying modern spirituality.* Part of my thesis is therefore dedicated to an exploration of the methodology during which I will look at how autoethnography developed, and ask what it can offer that other methodologies cannot. In addition, my conclusion will include an interrogation of the success, or otherwise, of using it in my chosen topic, and I will also endeavour to answer an autoethnographic research question which questions what a satisfying, authentic & viable spiritual practice might be for me – and for others like me - going forward.

1.3 Methodological Approach

I will address the key research questions that I have laid out by undertaking a journey which will compare my own experiences of online and offline spirituality over the last nine years. This long period is significant both in terms of how I have developed as a spiritual person and, of course, in terms of how the technology available to me has evolved. As I have alluded to, the internet and its related technologies have developed massively over the last decade and so in some ways my research has also become an exploration of that evolution too. My thesis will blend academic theories with autobiographic elements of my personal story – these elements include diary entries, reflections on my experiences, and creative responses in the form of short play scripts – together

with frequent analysis of my findings in the hope that I will uncover truths not just about myself but about society too. The theatrical scripts, which are also examples of Performative Social Science, are an important inclusion because they will both draw inspiration from and inform my academic work, and because – again - technology is developing incredibly fast and I see theatre as a place to pause and reflect on one's world at a defined moment in time. This idea ties in with Bauman's theory that liquid modernity as a whole, being ever-changing, can only ever be recorded in the way that any liquid can – i.e. via a snapshot. For as he says:

> When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture. (Bauman, 2000, p. 2)

In fact, given the nature of what I am studying, my whole thesis is structured as a series of 'snapshots' each of which captures a moment in my research both in terms of my personal journey and in terms of technological advances. It is my hope that when these snapshots are viewed together they will start to build up a picture of my journey, of the research I undertook, and of the technological developments that happened during my research period; and that when they are analysed together they will offer some insights into the research questions that I have posed.

1. Does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?

* What defines the 'liquid' world as described by Bauman (Bauman, 2000)?
* What are the definitions of religion and spirituality and what are the differences between the two?
* To what extent is the liquid modern world a dystopia? And is this a fair/accurate representation of life today?
* What other models of identity (other than those expressed by Bauman, Bauman 2000) exist in the disembodied age of the internet and what are the pros and cons of each?

* How is the way we consume religion and spirituality evolving – and is Durkheim right in his assertion that the "cult" of religion "periodically recreates itself"? (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312)

2. How does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?

* How important are physical elements such as the body, proximity to others, and tangible spaces (such as temples) and props (such as prayer wheels) in spiritual pursuits?
* Does 'virtual' = 'superficial'?
* How can '*prana*' be defined and is it possible for *prana* to be present / developed online?
* Can the internet provide an alternative to an embodied existence, and if so - should it?

3. What are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?

* How has autoethnography developed?
* What can autoethnography offer that other methodologies cannot?
* How effective is using autoethnographic methods to explore my chosen topic?
* What conclusions has using autoethnography to explore online / offline spiritual tourism allowed me to draw with regards to my own attitudes towards new technologies and my spirituality?
* What might a satisfying, authentic & viable spiritual practice be for me – and for others like me - going forward?

1.4 Thesis Outline

In Chapter Two - 'Identity in the Liquid Internet Age' - I clarify the concepts of liquidity, the internet and identity in order to establish the theoretical position which is at the heart of this thesis. I provide an overview of Bauman's liquid world (Bauman, 2000, 2003, 2006) and then look at how this relates to the internet, to religion and to identity. I also examine some of the other models of identity that arguably exist in the internet age. Ultimately, this chapter is an effort to start answering my first research question - *does the 'liquid internet*

age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?

Chapter Three - 'Putting Me in My Work – Autoethnography' – is an introduction to, and an analysis of, autoethnography and also of Performative Social Science (PSS). In it I also establish my own personalised methodology by detailing how I will approach my autoethnographic study, presenting a short autoethnographic play which is designed to be a demonstration of how a creative piece of writing can sum up a body of research, and looking at the ethics of autoethnography. The chapter as a whole aims to start answering my third key research question - *what are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?*

Writing a thesis about the internet across nine years in its history presents a unique set of challenges and in Chapter Four - 'The Personal Challenge of Internet Research' – I explore the issues and challenges that potentially exist when conducting online research, particularly in terms of legal, moral and ethical issues, and then go on to create a list of personalised internet research guidelines for myself. The chapter finishes with an autoethnographic section which describes how I discovered an additional guideline whilst I was researching.

Chapter Five – 'Buddhism – An Overview' - offers a brief summary of Buddhism in terms of its philosophy, history and entry into the west, as well as an exploration of the benefits and challenges of online Buddhism, and an explanation of why I am using it in my thesis, in order to provide a context for my case study chapters.

In Chapters Six to Nine I present my main 'snapshots' which consist of a mixture of academia, personal journals and experiences, and interactions with other people on and offline.

Chapter Six – 'The First Snapshot – 2006 – Online v Offline Rituals' – compares my experiences of online and offline versions of chanting in front of Gohonzons, meditating, and turning Tibetan prayer wheels as well as introducing key

theories from Walter Benjamin amongst others. I supplement my academic and personal work by providing viewpoints from my 'cybersangha' – people that I meet in online Buddhism discussion forums.

Chapter Seven – 'The Second Snapshot – 2007 / 2008 – MySpace, Buddhism & Identity' – is an introduction to the social networking site MySpace and looks at a sample of the member profiles of people who belong to the site's 'Buddhism' group in order to find out how solid people's spiritual identities are online. I then use my findings to analyse my own MySpace profile as it was in 2007.

In Chapter Eight – 'The Third Snapshot – 2009 – Online v Offline Spiritual Journeys' - I explore the concept of 'pilgrimage' and then compare two spiritual journeys I made in 2009 – one to a Buddhist temple on the virtual world website Second Life, and the other to an offline Buddhist temple in Pocklington, York.

Chapter Nine – 'The Fourth Snapshot – 2009 / 2010 – Online v Offline Spiritual Life' details my most intensive period of research. It explores the concept of reality by looking at the film *The Matrix*, the theatre, Disneyland (through the eyes of Jean Baudrillard - Baudrillard, 1981) and Second Life; and compares the month I spent as an online spiritual tourist (with a focus on Buddhism) in Second Life with the month I spent as an offline spiritual tourist (with a focus on Buddhism) in the 'real' world.

Chapter Ten is my conventional conclusion, and Chapter Eleven is my creative conclusion which takes the form of a dialogue between me and my Second Life avatar, Maisie.

2 IDENTITY IN THE LIQUID INTERNET AGE

This chapter aims to clarify the concepts of liquidity, the internet and identity that I introduced in my introduction in order to further underpin the thesis with a theoretical position through which all subsequent chapters can be viewed. In particular, this chapter is an attempt to further define what Bauman meant by a 'liquid' world (Bauman, 2000, 2003, 2006) and then to ask how this relates to the internet, to religion, and to identity in order to begin to unpick my first key research questions – *does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* Throughout this chapter I will begin to outline, and expand upon, the theoretical position which is at the very centre of this thesis. This position may best be illustrated by the below flow diagram:

(1) The emergence of a liquid society provides the social conditions fostering the need for greater self-creation of identity

(2) This process of reflexivity and creation of subjectivity/self is facilitated by new media (especially the internet)

(3) This process also has a dark side whereby uncertainty produces anxieties

(4) All this may lead to greater spiritual tourism through the internet as both reflexivity leads to search for self and religion has to adapt to meeting those needs in new (consumerist) ways

I will explore, using Bauman's theories, each of these four stages in much greater detail throughout this chapter. Clearly, Bauman's theories are very important to this thesis but this chapter is also an opportunity to explore some of the ways in which Bauman has been criticised, some of the other thinkers who are producing similar theories (Ulrich Beck – Beck, 1992 - and Anthony Giddens – Giddens, 1991 - being key examples), and – because identity is so crucial to my theoretical position - some of the other models of identity that arguably exist in the internet age.

(1) The emergence of a liquid society provides the social conditions fostering the need for greater self-creation of identity

As I stated in my introduction, Bauman's liquid modernity is an age in which social life is increasingly experienced as fragile and ever-changing (Bauman, 2000). His 'fluid' metaphor works well because it encapsulates the "time/space compression" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2) that he spoke of as being the key feature of our times. In his 2000 book, *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman describes fluids thus:

> Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flows or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'. In a sense solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture. (Bauman, 2000, p. 2)

In other words, impermanence is a key feature of the liquid age, and as such identity becomes fluid and in a state of constant flux. Arguably, this state has been brought about because all the frameworks which once held us together as a society, and indeed as individuals – e.g. social class, gendered relations and religion - have been liquidised leaving us all free to pick and choose who we want to be, what we want to believe, what 'groups' we want to belong to if any. In this sense liquid modernity is interchangeable with postmodernity (indeed, Bauman has suggested that liquid modernity is just a more accurate term for our contemporary society which might also be known as postmodernity or, as Beck prefers it, second modernity - see Bauman, 2000, p.23) – which is defined by the absence of certainty and which is said to have come about following the breakdown of what Jean-François Lyotard would term "metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. xxiv-xxv). Metanarratives being the traditional frameworks through which we once understood the world – organised religion being an obvious

example – which are challenged in both liquid and postmodern society.

The transformation of these frameworks has, if we follow the theory of liquid modernity, led to a few profound changes in our society. Essentially – Bauman would argue - it has led to a lack of defined communities (because there is no longer anything to tie people together) and what Bauman called a "crisis of trust" (Bauman, 2006, p.69), perhaps caused by the fact that people no longer know where they belong and therefore who is 'with them' and who is 'against them'. This has resulted in what Bauman says is "the most seminal of all modern creations / inventions" – the "birth of identity" (Bauman, 1998, p.68). A liquid society is, therefore, an individualised society for as Bauman says:

> Individualized society is marked by a dissipation of social bonds... It is also notable for its resistance to a solidarity that could make social bonds durable – and reliable. (Bauman, 2006, p.21)

The net result of all of the above is that in a liquid society we all emerge as individuals, each tasked with the responsibility of creating our own identities. However, if Bauman is to be believed this is a difficult – possibly even paradoxical – task because we are seeking something solid in a world defined by liquidity. He says:

> The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless... Identities seem fixed and solid only when seen, in a flash, from outside. (Bauman, 2000, pp.82-83)

And warns us all:

> Being modern means... having an identity which can only exist as an unfulfilled project. (Bauman, 2000, pp.28-29)

And here, according to Will Atkinson (2008), is the difference between Bauman and other theorists of individualization such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) – because whilst all three describe a world in which individuals must reflexively

create their own identities, only Bauman tells us that this project can never be completed (Bauman, 2000). In liquid modernity there is no re-embedding into a new way of thinking (as Beck & Giddens might suggest) – for as Atkinson says of the citizens of liquid modernity:

> ... individuals must remain chronically disembedded, on the move, searching out and choosing their flexible identities as they go from the vast array of options available, all the while feeling incomplete, insecure and unfulfilled. (Atkinson, 2008, p.6)

And so those of us who are members of Bauman's liquid society – and is perhaps worth pointing out that not everyone who is living today can be considered to be so because there are many pockets of civilisation across the planet for whom community, religion and ethnicity are still defining qualities which tie them together in a very solid manner – are free (or should we say obliged?) to drift through a never-ending array of options, opportunities and possibilities in a life-long attempt to solidify our identities. What is of central interest to us in this thesis is the emergence of an electoral affinity between this search for identity and the means of its discovery through the virtual spaces and social networks of the Internet. It is to this relationship that we now turn.

(2) This process of reflexivity and creation of subjectivity/self is facilitated by new media (especially the internet)

In 1996 William Gibson, the man who coined the term 'cyberspace', said the following:

> I was born in 1948. I can't recall a world before television, but I know I must have experienced one. I do, dimly, recall the arrival of a piece of brown wooden furniture with sturdy Bakelite knobs and a screen no larger than the screen on this Powerbook. Initially there was nothing on it but "snow," and then the nightly advent of a targetlike device called "the test pattern," which people actually gathered to watch.
>
> Today I think about the test pattern as I surf the Web. I imagine that the

> World Wide Web and its modest wonders are no more than the test pattern for whatever the 21st century will regard as its equivalent medium. (Gibson, 1996)

This analogy of a television test pattern holds true even in 2013, seventeen years after Gibson spoke. The internet has come a long, long way since 1996 but it is still in its infancy, and we still live in a world where the majority of people remember life before it. We are fascinated by its increasing powers and properties, and we are astonished by the speed at which it is evolving and working its way into the very core of what it means to be a human being. Perhaps more than anything else, the internet both represents and facilitates Bauman's idea of "time/space compression" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2), which he says "encapsulates the ongoing multi-faceted transformation of the parameters of the human condition" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2). New communication technologies, such as the internet, offer instant communication and access to an array of cultures which were once alien to us. As Paul Virilio says:

> From here on, people can't be separated by physical obstacles or temporal distances. With the interfacing of computer terminals and video-monitors, distinctions of *here* and *there* no longer mean anything. (Virilio, cited in Bauman, 1998, pp. 17 - 18)

New technologies compress time and space by making international travel and international exchanges of products and information available to anyone who can afford them, thus creating a big melting pot of cultures. At the heart of this melting pot is the internet – the ultimate symbol of the liquid era. The internet probably compresses time and space more effectively than any other invention by giving everyone who has internet access an immediate gateway to a whole new world of information and connectivity. For some (Lupton, 2000; Barlow, 1995; Johnson, 2012) the internet is almost utopian – they argue that it is democratic, it gives a voice to everyone who wants one (including those who might not be heard in the offline world because of disability, shyness, remoteness of location or low status), it allows people from across the world to communicate instantly and it allows new communities - made from people with shared interests - to form and blossom in a safe and anonymous arena, its

potential for interactivity makes it a really exciting medium in which anything can happen, and of course it simplifies our lives by allowing us to shop, pay bills, apply for jobs, bank, run businesses, etc. from wherever we are. However, for others (O' Leary, 2005; Vandelanotte et al, 2009; Turkle, 1995) it is closer to a dystopia – they argue that it encourages a sedentary lifestyle, it can be isolating as it discourages us from leaving our homes, getting fresh air and meeting other people face to face, it encourages short attention spans, it is bad for our eyes, fingers and backs, it compromises our privacy, it puts vulnerable people at risk as it is hard to police, it takes business away from offline businesses and puts those without internet access at a distinct disadvantage, it makes quality control very difficult and potentially threatens the livelihood of talented writers, film-makers, etc., and it allows people to 'hide behind' their online personae and to only present very specific (and possibly untrue) images of themselves.

Bauman's view of the internet and other new technologies (such as mobile phones, email, etc.) appears to be fairly pessimistic – he believes that these things are making human bonds and relationships ever more fragile because of the internet's tendency to promote quantity over quality for as he says:

> There are always more connections to be used – and so it does not terribly matter how many of them might have proved frail and breakable... *Each* connection may be short-lived, but their *excess* is indestructible. Amidst the eternity of the imperishable network, you can feel unthreatened by the irreparable fragility of each simple, transient connection. (Bauman, 2003, p.60)

And, as he concludes:

> The advent of virtual proximity renders human connections simultaneously more frequent and more shallow, more intense and more brief. (Bauman, 2003, p.62)

What is interesting for the purpose of this thesis is that the internet may have this effect not only on human relationships but also on the ways that humans interact with anything and everything. We might equally apply Bauman's last

quote to our connection with any number fads that we might engage with thanks to our broadband connection. In the case of religion and spirituality – we can very quickly (and very superficially?) research one faith, engage with it for a while, and then just as quickly move on to another faith with – literally - the click of a button. And Bauman tells us that the liquid internet age is encouraging this fickle behaviour because one of our driving motivational forces is the fear of making the wrong choice. He says:

> Postmodern men and women, whether by their own preference or by necessity, are *choosers*. And the art of choosing is mostly about avoiding one danger: that of *missing an opportunity* – by virtue of not seeing it clearly enough, or not chasing it keenly enough, or being too inexperienced a runner to catch it. (Bauman, 1998, p.68)

And, as we have seen, the internet is perfectly designed to present us with many, many options from which to choose, and – importantly - with a quick and easy way to correct any 'choosing' mistakes that we may make along the way. Clearly, the internet can be seen as being the ultimate tool for the endless task of liquid identity building...

(3) This process also has a dark side whereby uncertainty produces anxieties

In some ways, we might choose to see the liquid internet age as very emancipatory – being able to create our own identities is, one might argue, a privilege and represents a very exciting opportunity that hasn't been seen before in the history of humanity. However, Bauman tells us time and time again that the underlying feeling that defines liquid modernity is fear. He says:

> Occasions to be afraid are one of the few things of which our times, badly missing certainty, security and safety, are not short. (Bauman, 2006, p. 20)

And, of course, there are many reasons to be afraid in modern times. Beck has famously suggested that we are increasingly confronted by global risks arising from scientific and technological developments arising from modernity (Beck, 1992). Climate change, nuclear weapons, and world health problems have

"manufactured uncertainty" (Giddens, 1994) and become a daily source of stress for people. All of these threats might be seen to be causes of guilt and anxiety, and whilst we may well choose to fight back by, for example, going to the gym or recycling household waste, Bauman would have us believe that, despite the many privileges that we (and by 'we' I mean those of us who live above the poverty line in the developed world of course) enjoy in these modern times (access to clean water, life-saving drugs, increased life expectancies and more food than we can ever hope to consume, for example) – we remain more afraid than ever before in our history. He says:

> Contrary to the objective evidence, it is the people who live in the greatest comfort on record, more cosseted and pampered than any other people in history, who feel more threatened, insecure and frightened, more inclined to panic, and more passionate about everything related to security and safety than people in most other societies past and present. (Bauman, 2006, p.130)

This paradox can perhaps be explained by the way that we are now expected to create our own identities and don't necessarily have any inherent starting points (such as a religion) which, as we have already touched upon, can be very stressful; and by the many time and space compressing technologies which now exist, making international travel (virtual and actual) and international exchanges of products and information (again, virtual and actual) available to anyone who can afford them. Their presence has the effect of creating a world of infinite possibilities – and because cultures, faiths, cuisines, fashions and everything else are all now available to us in a big melting pot, it is arguably harder for us to know, or to decide, who we are. This may result in us embracing a wide variety of cultural values, products and beliefs, or it may result in us becoming fanatical about emerging ourselves in one particular lifestyle. Either way, the stress that comes with choosing is apparent – for, as Bauman says:

> The consumers' misery derives from the surfeit, not the dearth of choices. (Bauman, 2000, p.63)

Indeed, another central element of Bauman's liquid modernity is the rise and rise

of consumerism which Bauman sees as being partially responsible for the individualisation of society. He says:

> In the liquid modern society of consumers, each individual member is instructed, trained and groomed to pursue individual happiness by individual means and through individual efforts. (Bauman, 2006, p. 48)

And of course, many industries now manipulate and take advantage of our fears in order to create effective advertising for their products – for, to quote Bauman once more:

> A lot of commercial capital can be garnered from insecurity and fear... (Bauman, 2006, p. 143)

And:

> Like liquid cash ready for any kind of investment, the capital of fear can be turned to any kind of profit – commercial or *political*. (Bauman, 2006, p.144

And what is fascinating about this notion is that in the liquid internet age when our religious status is by no means a given, we are now potential consumers for all religions and spiritual organisations who, in turn, might choose to use our fears and anxieties to their advantage.

(4) All this may lead to greater spiritual tourism through the internet as both reflexivity leads to search for self and religion has to adapt to meeting those needs in new (consumerist) ways

There would appear to be no space for organised religion in Bauman's liquid modernity, it being one of the many traditional frameworks which are being challenged in these fluid times. Indeed, Bauman tells us that:

> The modern life strategy has been a matter not of choice, wise or foolish, but of a rational adjustment to totally new life conditions which humans has never visited before... In this process of rational adjustment there was little

use for religion. (Bauman, 1998, p.62)

And speaks of liquid modernity as being an era in which God is "on a protracted leave of absence" (Bauman, 2000, p.55). However, religion and spirituality are not entirely absent in the liquid internet age. In fact, the internet has allowed all of us to have access to information about a wider variety of world religions and spiritual pursuits than ever before. It is fascinating that whilst the internet both reflects and encourages liquid modernity, it is also becoming a place where world religions are establishing themselves – perhaps hoping that all the confused, anxious, fearful people to stumble upon them and lap up all their comforting certainty! We might see this, as Bauman does, as religions 're-branding' themselves in order to appeal to, and be relevant to, the postmodern consumers that make up the current world, for as he says:

> ... it may well be that churches, like other producers of goods and services, had to occupy themselves first with the production of their own consumers: they had, if not to create, then at least to amplify and sharpen up the needs meant to be satisfied by their services, and so to make their work indispensable. (Bauman, 1998, p. 59)

Of course – this situation only became possible when one's religion was no longer a given. At one time one was born into one's religion and this was reinforced throughout life by the community in which one lived. Obviously – as I have stated - there are still pockets of the modern world in which this is the case but those of us who are Bauman's "denizens of the liquid modern world" (Bauman, 2006, p.70) are free to float about, picking and choosing from the many options that are available. And this might mean that we land upon one particular religion and stick with it (which could be an eastern religion rather than one which is traditionally part of our ethnicity or geographical location), it might mean that religion passes us by altogether, or it might be that we draw inspiration from various religions and create a unique 'patchwork' style of spirituality. However, whichever option we eventually settle upon (if a 'settling upon' is possible in liquid modernity) we can see how the liquid internet age becomes a fertile growing ground for spiritual tourism.

To summarise the theory which underlines this thesis then - the liquid age as presented by Bauman is defined by an impermanence which was caused by what Bauman refers to as "time/space compression" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2) – a phenomenon which has arguably led to the decline of the traditional frameworks – organised religion being a key example – which once glued society together. The result of this is the creation of a society of individuals who are free to flow towards whatever belief or interest might appeal to them at any given moment – but also to flow away again as soon as something else catches their attention. This has allowed consumerism to flourish – everyone is a potential consumer of everything in the liquid world - but it has also caused the fear that comes with an absence of certainty to rise and rise. As a result many may now be searching for meaning in their lives and so begin to be drawn back towards spirituality but in a new, more liquid way.

Of course, Bauman isn't the only thinker out there to have laid out a theory about what defines our contemporary times, nor is he without his critics. Atkinson, for example, describes some of Bauman's flaws as :

> ...his abstract, generalising style, his dependence on scraps of others' research or anecdotes as his primary source of evidence... (Atkinson, 2008, p.8)

And Jensen Sass says:

> Bauman's key term is at best ambiguous: the idea of liquid modernity is predicated on the claim that we have moved into a new era, but there is no indication (nor even a hint) of when this change took place, who the we are that are subjects of this change, or what (apart from "we") has undergone this radical change. (Sass, 2012, pp. 635-640)

So we need to be cautious in our use of Bauman's conception of liquid modernity. Its use in this thesis is as a device to contextualize the developments of spiritual tourism, and to understand such online excursions as possible evidence for reflexivity. Thus we may agree with Sass's suggestion that the best way to approach Bauman's work is to see it as:

> ... a project in provocation, a kind of theory whose claims enjoy sufficient plausibility to demand reflection but whose ultimate aim is to stimulate the sociological imagination, compelling us as both sociologists and citizens to ask bold questions of ourselves and our societies. (Sass, 2012, pp. 635-640)

2.1 Identity and the Internet in a Postmodern Society

I now wish to explore the elective affinity between the characteristics of a postmodern society and the emergence of the internet. There are several words that we associate with postmodernism which have the power to generate visual images. If we see 'solid' as being the antithesis of postmodernism, then 'fluid', 'multiple', 'fragmented', 'exaggerated', 'projected', 'reproduced', 'reconstituted', 'machinelike' or 'disembodied' can all describe postmodernism, and can all be applied to postmodern identity in the internet age. The word that is arguably common to all forms of identity in relation to the internet is 'disembodied'. In the next section of this chapter, therefore, I will be looking at the disembodiment which occurs when one is using the internet through an examination of the principal concepts related to models of identity, and which will be a recurrent theme throughout my thesis. I will divide the models into four categories – solid identity, fluid identity, fragmented/multiple identity, and cyborg identity. The categories overlap at times, but are worth looking at individually. In keeping with my idea of using Buddhist philosophy throughout my work, I will also be introducing a Buddhist model of identity to the collection, which I will call 'collective' identity. For each model I establish, I will attempt to show how it might manifest itself on the internet, and what effect it might have on the spirituality of the individual.

Disembodiment & the Internet

Our bodies arguably become almost obsolete when we are online. Of course we do still use our eyes, our hands and our fingers when we are surfing the internet (as the injuries which it is possible to sustain to these parts when at our desks will testify) but once in cyberspace our physical appearance is irrelevant (although the appearance that we create for our online personae – whether profiles on social networking sites or avatars – is not), we are extremely inactive

(even as our avatars leap through uneven terrains and fly through worlds) and we are not held back by our bodily limits as lack of strength, lack of energy and presence of disability in the offline world do not affect us in cyberspace. Of course this is – to take a utopian viewpoint - liberating but it is also a potential problem. Our physical bodies, whilst fragile, allow us – via the gift of our senses - to fully experience the world which surrounds us and also to know our limits. Without our bodily participation – how authentic can an experience be? And, as Nancy K. Baym puts it: "How can we be present yet also absent? What is a self if it's not in a body?" (Baym, 2010, p. 3), and as Lorne L. Dawson warns us: "Cyberspace is a land of anonymity and multiplicity when it comes to matters of identity." (Dawson, 2004, p. 84) In other words - without the physical limits that our bodies give us, how can we stop our identities from being endlessly divided? On the internet we can be present on an enormous number of websites simultaneously – does this make our identities unmanageable? Stephen O'Leary is also concerned about the lack of physicality in cyberspace and asks the following pertinent questions about online religion:

> What will happen to our spiritual senses... when rituals are performed purely in the realm of the virtual? We may lose the smell of the flowers or the smoke in the ritual fire offering, but will the ritual necessarily be any less efficacious for its practitioners if the flowers are cyberflowers and the flames are cyber-flames? And if the full sensory experience of the ritual is diminished by its reduction to the text, sound and imagery now possible on the Web... what in turn may be gained by working within these limitations, and what are the possibilities for transcending them? (O'Leary, 2005, p. 43)

What lies at the heart of these questions is the notion of authenticity. O'Leary is asking the same questions that I am asking in my key research questions – i.e. whether a virtual experience can be authentic and whether the way we express our spirituality should be updated to suit our contemporary age?'

Of course, it is not just the walls of our bodies which dissolve when we are online, it is also the walls of the places that we visit. Cyberspace is full of virtual temples, but how valid can something which is not tangible be? Can we worship in a place without the physical walls, ceilings, smells, atmosphere of an offline

temple? O'Leary is also concerned with these questions. He uses the example of the Wall in Jerusalem and says:

> Isn't the physicality of the place itself something that cannot be dispensed with? How could a cyber-temple ever replace the wall of the real one? (O'Leary, 2005, p. 42)

The internet removes the physicality of both our own bodies and the places that we choose to visit. But what is the effect does this have on our spiritual identity? Somewhere like a church has real gravitas – its walls are tangible but so is its *prana* which, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis, is essentially spiritual energy – so how can a virtual version hope to compare?

My thesis, then, assumes the internet to be a place where physicality is compromised and where disembodiment, both in the sense of our human bodies, and in the sense of the 'bodies' of places we visit online, is inevitable. So, taking this as a given – what forms of identity are possible in the internet age? And what does each form of identity mean in terms of our spiritual identity?

Solid/Liquid Identity

I would suggest that not only is fluidity an appropriate metaphor for the modern world in, but that it is also a perfect metaphor for the internet with its slippery and ever-changing nature. Like the picture of fluid, a description of a website must come with a date because its accuracy is only fleeting (Bauman, 2000). In addition, Bauman's work on fluidity also provides two of my models of identity.

Firstly, a solid identity: a solid identity is one that remains constant, and is probably grounded by the ideals of the individual's family, culture or community. Someone with a solid identity would seek out like-minded people on the internet, and visit sites which adhered to their set of beliefs. The solid identity, when applied to religion, suggests either someone who was born into a particular religion and so has never questioned it, or someone who has developed their own religious framework and is now confident of, and comfortable with, their beliefs. Someone with a solid identity would be happy to be labelled with a particular religion. Firm atheists would also fall into this category. The solid

identity model is the only one which isn't really postmodern – but a solid identity would always have the potential to melt into a liquid identity, for as Bauman says: "Identities seem fixed and solid only when seen, in a flash, from outside" (Bauman, 2000, p. 83).

And secondly – a liquid identity – as we have seen, a liquid identity is one that is constantly evolving, which can flow in any number of different directions, taking on board any number of different properties as it goes. The liquid identity model, when applied to religion, suggests someone who is constantly redefining their spirituality, and adapting their beliefs as they move through time and space (cyber or otherwise). Someone with a liquid identity might be able to state their religion at a given moment, but would not be able to label him or herself permanently, except perhaps as Agnostic. Traditionally, someone with a liquid identity might have the ultimate goal of developing a solid goal but it is perhaps possible that a liquid identity can be an end (if something ever-changing can be an end…) in itself. One might even question whether a solid identity is out-dated in a postmodern era. Is it time to accept that a liquid identity is the more natural and appropriate outcome in a world of infinite possibilities? The internet is changing the way we experience things, including spirituality, but is this necessarily a bad thing? Or is it just a sign of progress?

Fragmented/Multiple Identity

Connected to the liquid identity is the fragmented identity, which can be seen in the internet's ability to generate multiple identities in its users. We are different people on different sites (because different sites draw out different aspects of our personalities), and is also possible to be different online and offline – for example when one creates an avatar for a virtual world which neither looks nor behaves like one would in the offline world. In terms of religion, we can explore a religion online that we might not actively belong to offline, or we can explore different beliefs on different sites and try out opposing viewpoints in different chat rooms. Another symptom of the fragmented identity is the way we use multiple windows when working on our computers – Sherry Turkle says of this:

> Windows provide a way for a computer to place you in several contexts at the same time. As a user, you are attentive to only one of the windows on

> your screen at any given moment, but in a sense you are a presence in all of them at all times… your identity on the computer is the sum of your distributed presence. (Turkle, 1995, p. 13)

In other words, we can literally be in more than one place at once, and therefore be more than one person at once. Of course, we have always been able to put on different personae for different areas of our life (for example, work and home life) but the internet adds to and compresses this phenomenon. But is a fragmented identity a good thing? Or is it dangerous? The reduction in our attention spans in recent years is well documented – but could the fragmented way that we operate online be partially responsible for this?

Cyborg Identity

Cyborg is an amalgamation of the words cybernetics and organism. It was coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in article about human space exploration written in 1960 (Clynes and Kline, 1960) and was later popularised in the social sciences by Donna Haraway in her influential 1991 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in which she says:

> A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. (Haraway, 1991, p. 291)

Technically, the term meant a literal combination of flesh and machine – for example someone with an artificial heart valve – but it has now has a broader meaning as Katherine Hayles explains:

> Cyborgs actually do exist; about 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin. A much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber optic microscopy during an operation, and the

teen gameplayer in the local videogame arcade. (Hayles, 1995, p.322)

According to Hayle's definition, then, we can move into a temporary cyborg state whenever we are utilising modern technologies. This means that we are arguably cyborgs whenever we are surfing the internet. However, for my purposes I will take a cyborg to be someone who uses technology to do things which their flesh and bones body is incapable of – such as flying in Second Life. In terms of religious identity, someone with a cyborg identity might endlessly turn digital prayer wheels (an online version of a traditional practice in Tibetan Buddhism, which I explore later in the thesis) without ever becoming tired, or visit a religious monument on the other side of the world via a virtual tour. In other words, someone with a cyborg identity can participate in rites which might not have been options for them in the offline world. But is a cyborg identity a good thing or does it have sinister undertones? Does there come a point where we are more machine than organism? Does the machine in us repress our natural elements? How much nature do we need to remain human? And if we don't get enough – what happens to us?

Collective Identity

The Buddhist take on identity is that we are all part of a collective 'I' - that we are all drops of water in the ocean of life and are therefore intrinsically linked to everyone and everything around us. A collective identity on the internet is the utopian notion of the internet as being a project belonging to and representative of every person who contributes it. The internet itself, therefore, in this model, is the 'ocean', and every word or image is a 'drop'. Similarly, a discussion forum on a Buddhist website is the 'ocean', with every contribution from every member being a 'drop'. This is quite a beautiful concept – it illustrates the internet at its democratic, utopian best – but is it truly possible in the fragmented postmodern era? And even if it is - what happens to our individual identities when we are all part of one thing? Is a collective identity actually dis-empowering? And if the internet is a melting pot, into which all our individual quirks, cultures, religions, viewpoints, whatever go and are reborn as one 'global village' cocktail, how do we know what makes us us? Perhaps the fact that we all now have access to all these things does not turn us into clones, but does mean that we are free to pick and choose our own unique identities. We are no longer tied to the lifestyles and

belief systems that we are born into – geography no longer defines us. Instead is it possible that the internet, along with the rest of postmodern culture, has given us the freedom to be true to ourselves?

2.2 In Summary

In this chapter I have clarified some of the key concepts which will run throughout this thesis, paying particular attention to Bauman's liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and the way that I see it leading to an increase in spiritual tourism in our contemporary times. I have also suggested some key identity models for the internet age, some of which challenge Bauman's position, and posed questions about each. In the next two chapters I will explain my methodology for tackling my subject throughout the remainder of the thesis.

3 PUTTING ME IN MY WORK - AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

> I do believe that the sociological research literature has become unnecessarily dominated by a particular kind of empiricist monologue, derived from the natural sciences, and that this restricted form of analytical discourse has prevented sociology from being as fruitful as it could otherwise have been and, indeed, can still be. (Mulkay, 1985, p. 9)

My thesis is autoethnographic. This chapter details what autoethnography – and Performative Social Science (PSS), which elements of my thesis are also arguably examples of - is all about, why I have chosen to use it, what the advantages and potential pitfalls of this sometimes controversial methodology (Clough, 1997; Morse, 2000; Krizek, 2003) are, and how I plan to use it throughout my work. The use of autoethnography is both somewhat novel and relatively underdeveloped in the discipline of sociology hence the importance of my third key research questions - *what are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?* This study then provides a valuable opportunity to critically explore this methodology as a potential tool for sociological investigation.

Autoethnography is an emerging form of academic research which places the author/researcher in a visible and sometimes even central role within the text/research. Kim Etherington describes autoethnography thus:

> Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research… a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context… Autoethnography is a word that describes both a method and a text. (Etherington, 2004, pp. 139-140)

And Elizabeth Dauphinee tells us that autoethnography "shatters the illusion of expertise – the divide – between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'" (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 809). This occurs because in autoethnography the researcher becomes the researchee, so to speak, for, as Chang puts it:

> ... instead of privileging "objectivity" and "impersonal" stances, researchers intentionally embrace personal memory, self-observation, self-reflection, and self-analysis as means to collect autobiographical data. Self-data that they collect about themselves become the foundation for analysis and interpretation and a window through which they explore to understand their sociocultural context of the external world. (Chang, 2011, p. 15)

And Stacy Holman Jones offers the following:

> Autoethnography is a blurred genre. . . a response to the call. . . it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art... making a text present . . . refusing categorization. . . believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (Jones, 2005, p. 765)

The term autoethnography was first used in 1979 when David Hayano used it to describe anthropologists who were members of the community whom they were studying (cited in Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Of course, texts that utilised what we would now consider to be autoethnographic techniques did exist before this time, or before the researcher was aware of the method - for example Leon Anderson (2006) offers Nels Anderson's 'The Hobo' (written in 1923), as an early example of the form, whilst Carolyn Ellis (2004) suggests that later examples of autoethnography are the essays 'Another Shootout in Cowtown' by Tom Benson (written in 1981) and Michael Pacanowsky's 'Slouching Towards Chicago' (written in 1988). On these, Ellis says:

> These articles represent early attempts to include the author as a main character in our academic stories. The authors were writing autoethnography, though they didn't use that term. (Ellis, 2004, p.12)

However, in recent years the method has become more widely known, and more widely used by researchers from a number of different disciplines – and in August 2006 the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* produced an issue that was dedicated to autoethnography, in which Anderson said:

> Over the past fifteen years, we have seen an impressive growth of research that has been variously referred to as auto-anthropology, auto- biographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography. (Anderson, 2006)

This growth has been seen as either a symptom or a result of postmodernism by many theorists, including Anderson who goes on to suggest it to be linked to "the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims" (Anderson, 2006) – in other words postmodernism, with its breakdown in meta-narratives, is more likely to favour the individual experience over a collective story. Etherington takes this further by saying:

> As an alternative method of inquiry, postmodernism invites other, often tentative, marginalized voices to be heard alongside those of the dominant western discourses that value certainty, action and decisiveness. (Etherington, 2004, p. 21)

Again, the diminishing importance of the collective experience gives hitherto unseen opportunities for voices from minorities to be heard loud and clear. Of course, autoethnography is only one way that this is happening in the twenty-first century, where the rise of blogs and personal websites and web pages gives everyone with access to a computer the means by which to tell their story. Although, according to Ellis, blogs themselves are also a form of autoethnography (2004) – indeed, for Ellis and Art Bochner, autoethnographic texts may appear in any number of forms – they say:

> Usually written in the first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed *through action, feeling, thought, and language.*" (Ellis & Bochner, in Etherington, 2004, p.

140)

And clearly, this multidisciplinary approach is in itself postmodern – for as Etherington adds: "Postmodern times have opened up new freedoms in methodologies and also in methods of data collection." (Etherington, 2004, p. 77). Another postmodern property of autoethnography is its ability to be multi-layered – as Ellis says:

> Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness." (Ellis, 2004, p. 37)

One of the reasons that these layers are evident in autoethnography is because the author must take on many roles - the researched, the researcher, the storyteller, the analyst, the protagonist, etc. - in order to create a successful piece. Ellis likens this need for the autoethnographer to wear many hats as a kind of zooming in and out – she describes the method they undertake as follows:

> First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition." (Ellis, 2004, pp. 37-38)

So, to summarise, we can make the following ten statements about autoethnography:

1) It is both a process and a product
2) It has narrative properties
3) It situates the writer within a cultural world
4) It is self-reflexive
5) It describes and critiques both the self and the society in which the self is

situated

6) It is a product of postmodernism
7) It has multiple layers
8) It may utilise a variety of academic & artistic forms
9) It shows as well as, or even rather than, telling
10) It seeks to contribute to our understanding of the world we live in

I would now like to examine the work of Ellis, one of America's most well-known autoethnographers, in more detail. Amongst Ellis' published work is her book *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography* – which is, as its title suggests, a book about autoethnography written as autoethnography. I am starting with this example because not only is an exemplary one, but also because it was the first book I read when I started researching autoethnography, and so I am hopeful of allowing the reader to travel down a similar path that I did as they read.

Ellis writes, mostly in the first person, about a fictionalised course on autoethnography which she teaches at the university at which she works. The course participants are a mixture of her real students, her real students but with pseudonyms, and a couple of composite characters, based on a variety of people whom Ellis knows. The book explores and teaches autoethnography, but within the framework of a novel. For example, student Valerie comes to see Ellis, and the conversation goes as follows:

> '"I don't use grounded theory much anymore," I say. "Most of what I do is autoethnography."
> "Autoethnography? What's that?" she asks, writing the word on her notepad.
> "I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call 'systematic sociological introspection' and 'emotional recall' to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story...`' (Ellis, 2004, p. xvii)

Thus, Ellis shows rather than tells her readers about autoethnography by

allowing them to become involved in the story she creates about her fictional class so that her readers become like invisible students in the room. She describes her own book as follows:

> The story is set in a class on autoethnography. I showcase the process of doing and writing autoethnography as I teach students about it, thus making pedagogy a part of this book. In showing what happens in the classroom, I want to provoke readers to experience the power of autoethnography, and to feel its truths as well as come to know it intellectually. (Ellis, 2004, p. xix)

As she writes, Ellis also offers insights into her own mind, describing how she feels at the end of each class, she gives us examples of her inner monologues as she drives home, and records relevant dialogue that takes place at home between herself and her partner, Art. And although her book is a novel, it is based on real events, real characters and real conversations and so has an air of authenticity about it. The effect of this is that the book's readers are drawn into the world she describes, and encouraged to empathise with the characters who inhabit it because they are so real and so well-rounded. As a result, the reader becomes absorbed in the book, and learns about the things that Ellis is teaching almost by accident. This makes for what is, in my opinion, a highly effective and extremely pleasant way to learn. Ellis passionately argues for:

> ... story as analysis, for evocation in addition to representation as a goal for social science research, for generalization through the resonance of readers, and for opening up rather than closing down conversation. (Ellis, 2004, p. 22)

And her own work literally offers just this. However, it also offers a model for working which is ground in solid theory. Ellis describes qualitative research as covering a broad spectrum of approaches. She says, to her fictional class:

> "Qualitative research falls along a continuum ranging from an orientation akin to positivist science to one similar to art and literature." (Ellis, 2004, p. 27)

And whilst she doesn't argue against a more scientific approach, her own style is clearly firmly on the art and literature end of her spectrum. She says of people who work in this way:

> "Working from an orientation that blends the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art, these researchers seek to tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience. The goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience. These writers want readers to be able to put themselves in the place of others, within a culture of experience that enlarges their social awareness and empathy." (Ellis, 2004, p. 30)

Towards the end of her book, Ellis wraps up her novel and provides some more academically conventional tables and lists in the appendices. These are useful for the student – as they are far easier to quote and utilise than the rest of the book, which although an excellent teaching aid, is complicated to quote authoritatively. In Ellis' 'Chart of Impressionist and Realist Ethnography' (Ellis, 2004), she offers a series of continuums which on the one end have 'art' or 'impressionist ethnography' and on the other end have 'science' or 'realist ethnography'. Of course, autoethnography is situated at the former end of the continuum. A section of the chart is reproduced below:

Figure 3.1 – Partial reproduction of Carolyn Ellis' 'Chart of Impressionist and Realist Ethnography' (Ellis, 2004)

ART	◂-----▸	SCIENCE
vocabularies: ambiguity, change, adventure, improvisation, process	◂-----▸	vocabularies: order, stability, snapshot, routine, control
hunger for concrete details, meaning, piece of mind	◂-----▸	appetite for abstraction, facts, rigor
emphasis on creating something interesting, useful	◂-----▸	emphasis on finding what is there, uncovering

specific	◂-----▸	general
relationship between author, text, reader: reader is important to the text	◂-----▸	takes reader for granted, tries to control reader
how to judge: Do stories ring true, resonate with our lives, engage us? Are they plausible; do they cohere?	◂-----▸	how to judge: standard criteria (although created by us), accuracy, proper methodological process
no single standard of truth	◂-----▸	single standard of truth
validity: Does the study take into account the whole person (including emotions and body), help readers communicate with others, offer a way to improve lives? Is it useful?	◂-----▸	validity: Do indicators measure what we say they do?
generalizability: Does it speak to readers about their experience or about the lives of others they know or unfamiliar lives?	◂-----▸	generalizability: Do findings generalize to a larger population?

(Ellis, 2004)

Of course, since this table is presented as a series of sliding scales rather than a set of black and white statements, we can see that a study might occur somewhere between the two extremes of art and science, and that individual researchers and authors are free to pick their own ratio of art to science within their ethnographic study.

By the time I finished *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography,* I felt hopeful that autoethnography would be the appropriate method to critically explore the experience of spiritual tourism and reveal an understanding which would not be susceptible to interviews or textual analysis. I felt a particular affiliation with the aim of creating a piece which stimulates thought about their own lives in the reader which, as I said in my introduction, is a passion of mine that runs through both my theatre and my academic careers. Ellis' book was able to expose and illuminate autoethnography for me in a way

that made me feel excited about the potential of the method for my own study. However – my one concern was that almost every autoethnographic project described by Ellis seems to tackle a deeply emotive issue, and the projects that the students in her fictional class undertake – which include papers which focus on bi-cultural identity, interracial relationships, caring for a father at end of his life, gay parenting, cancer, conversion to Messianic Judaism and physical abuse – all seem to focus on survivor stories. Towards the end of Ellis' book, in the section where she describes her characters' reactions to the book (a slightly paradoxical situation, perhaps, but a good example of her style nonetheless) the character Hector observes to her:

> There seemed to be a theme among the characters in the book of having been wronged in their lives. Their stories were about righting that wrong. (Ellis, 2004, p. 324)

This observation holds true in many of the examples of autoethnography which I have since come across, and this beckons the question: is autoethnography an appropriate medium for my research, which fulfils the criteria of being a personal journey with cultural relevance but doesn't hold enormous emotional resonance for me. The definitions of autoethnography at the start of this section don't suggest that a autoethnographic work must be therapeutic – and Chang has recently dedicated a whole book to the subject of autoethnography as an appropriate method for spiritual research, saying:

> Autoethnography offers a unique vantage point to the understanding of the social through the self and therefore should be added to the methodological repertoire of spirituality research in higher education. (Chang, 2011, p. 11)

However, it does seem that reflexive research methods are most readily accepted amongst counsellors like Etherington, whose book *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research* utilises a variety of research methods. Etherington calls her book:

> ... a piece of reflexive research which is an example of a 'bricolage' of narrative, heuristic, autoethnographic, and feminist methodologies...

(Etherington, 2004, p. 22)

Etherington utilises the heuristic enquiry method, which was developed by the psychology researcher Clark Moustakas in 1990, but warns students:

> For some heuristic researchers it may be helpful and supportive to engage in personal therapy during the research as well as ensuring access to good supervision. (Etherington, 2004, p. 126)

And Etherington quotes Moustakas who says:

> Through an unwavering and steady inward gaze and inner freedom to explore and accept *what is*, I am reaching into deeper and deeper regions of a human problem or experience and coming to know and understand its underlying dynamics and constituents more and more fully. The initial 'data' is within me; the challenge is to discover and explicate its nature. In the process, I am not only lifting out the essential meaning of an experience, but I am actually awakening and transforming my own self. Self-understanding and self-growth occur simultaneously in heuristic discovery. (as cited in Etherington, 2004, p. 124)

However, as with autoethnography, despite the emphasis on self-growth and self-searching, Etherington's description of the heuristic enquiry suggested the most appropriate approach for my study. She says:

> Moustakas described six stages – not implying a linear process but rather stages to enable the researcher to locate themselves and guide the research. He named those stages as:
- *Initial engagement:* when researchers begin to connect with their interest in the topic, and find and connect with participants. They may also begin to engage with the literature;
- *Immersion:* through interviewing, transcribing, listening, analysing, reading, communicating;
- *Incubation:* a period when the research is 'put on the back burner' for a while, creating space for new understanding to unfold, or emerge through

ideas, dreams and images;

- *Illumination:* new insights and understanding develop, perhaps through recognizing structures or patterns and themes;
- *Explication:* articulating and making sense of the material;
- *Creative synthesis:* the researcher produces a synthesis that depicts her integration of the data, reflecting personal knowledge, tacit awareness, intuition, and understanding of meanings. (Etherington, 2004, p. 111)

The heuristic enquiry is a methodology which I am yet to discover in any fields other than counselling & therapy, yet these six stages seem to provide a useful if not fundamental step by step guide for doing an autoethnography. Clearly the two forms are linked and are both grounded in self-healing and therapeutic writing. Thus, the concern about whether autoethnography of the sort advocated by Ellis and Etherington is too emotive a form remains.

In actual fact, both Ellis and Etherington draw attention to the fact that they didn't feel able to undertake autoethnographic work until their academic careers were firmly established, and they both give examples of other autoethnographers who have felt the same way (Ellis, 2004, and Etherington, 2004). One of the reasons that is frequently offered for this reluctance to do autoethnography early in a career is a fear that it will be seen as being self-indulgent and narcissistic. As Wikipedia reports:

> Some qualitative researchers have expressed their concerns about the worth and validity of autoethnography. Robert Krizek contributed a chapter to *Expressions of Ethnography* in which he expresses concern about the possibility for autoethnography to devolve into narcissism. Krizek goes on to suggest that autoethnography, no matter how personal, should always connect to some larger element of life. (Wikipedia, 2007)

It seems that Krizek answers his own concern with a perfectly good solution – autoethnography can be 'worthy' so long as it connects the author to his or her community, and so long as the reason for telling his or her story is to illuminate a social issue which resonates beyond his or her own life. This, perhaps, is what stops the piece from being self-indulgent. Krizek would perhaps also argue that

the reader should be given a piece which inspires not just an emotional reaction, but an intellectual one. Anderson takes what Krizek is saying further by separating "evocative autoethnography" from what he terms "analytic autoethnography" (Anderson, 2006) – he says that in analytic autoethnography the researcher is:

> ... a full member in the research group or setting... and... committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (Anderson, 2007)

He is quick to point out that he has a lot of respect for the work that autoethnographers like Ellis do, but says:

> I am concerned that the impressive success of advocacy for what Ellis... refers to as "evocative or emotional autoethnography" may have the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry. (Anderson, 2006)

He goes on to suggest five key features which differentiate his proposed "analytic autoethnography" from "evocative autoethnography" – these are:

> (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis. (Anderson, 2006)

To expand upon these features, firstly - the researcher must be a genuine native of the community that he or she is studying, secondly - the research should entail:

> ... self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others. (Anderson, 2006)

Thirdly, Anderson offers a theatrical metaphor when he suggests:

> A central feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a highly visible social actor within the written text. The researcher's own feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed. (Anderson, 2006)

Anderson's fourth feature alludes to his clear belief that an autoethnographic text should offer multiple viewpoints. For him, this is the best form of defence against the self-indulgent accusation – he says:

> Given that the researcher is confronted with self-related issues at every turn, the potential for self-absorption can loom large... solipsism and author saturation in autoethnographic texts are symptoms rather than the underlying problem. They stem from failure to adequately engage with others in the field. (Anderson, 2006)

These first four features are, in my opinion, present in both evocative and analytic autoethnography. Indeed, at the very onset of her book, Etherington echoes the fourth by saying:

> This book has come to represent my own journey as I travelled alongside others who appear within its pages. My stories are reflected in their stories and theirs in mine, and as we witnessed each other's stories our understandings were enriched, challenged and confirmed. (Etherington, 2004, p. 9)

However, the fifth feature is not necessarily found in every example of evocative autoethnography. Although I would suggest it isn't unique to analytic autoethnography, the very phrase 'commitment to theoretical analysis' does seem to be at odds with the evocative autoethnography's commitment to showing rather than telling. Anderson doesn't believe in autoethnographic stories for their own sake, he says:

> The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal

> experience, to provide an "insider's perspective," or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research. (Anderson, 2006)

In other words, Anderson draws autoethnography back into the safe embrace of academic tradition. In his essay, 'Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu all Over Again', which was published in the same journal as Anderson's piece, Norman K. Denzin questions this return to tradition, saying "Anderson seems to fear that we are in danger of forgetting our past." (Denzin, 2006, p. 421) Denzin likens evocative and analytic autoethnography to apples and oranges:

> Apples and oranges—are we dealing with two different things? Leon wants to use analytic reflexivity to improve theoretical understandings... Carolyn wants to embed the personal in the social... Are we in parallel or separate universes? Who is talking to whom? It's déjà vu all over again. (Denzin, 2006, p. 420)

The 'déjà vu' phrase seems to refer to Denzin's hint that people like Anderson are living in the past, and are, perhaps, afraid of moving forward. He goes on to suggest that Anderson can be said to be a part of what might be termed as a "third Chicago School" (Denzin, 2006, p. 421) - a school who borrow "one or two techniques from the creative, analytic, evocative autoethnographers" (Denzin, 2006, p. 422) but who mostly focus on expanding "the reach of analytic ethnography into their version of reflexive autoethnography" (Denzin, 2006, p.422). Meanwhile writers like Ellis are a part of the "CAP School" (Denzin, 2006) – CAP is an acronym for the creative analytical practices that these writers utilise, and, accordingly to Denzin:

> These new writing practices include autoethnography, fiction-stories, poetry, performance texts, polyvocal texts, reader's theatre, responsive readings, aphorisms, comedy and satire, visual presentations, allegory, conversation, layered accounts, writing stories, and mixed genres. Creative

> non-fiction, performance writing, mysteries, memoirs, personal histories, and cultural criticism can be added to this list of narrative forms that can be used by the creative analytic ethnographer. (Denzin, 2006, p.420)

Denzin says of Anderson: "In discounting the arguments of the CAP school, he returns almost uncritically to the past." (Denzin, 2006, p. 422), and goes on to align himself firmly with the CAP School:

> I seek a writing form that enacts a methodology of the heart, a form that listens to the heart... In writing from the heart, we learn how to love, to forgive, to heal, and to move forward. (Denzin, 2006, p. 422)

At the end of his essay, Denzin offers an example of his own work to illustrate the power of his preferred methodology. It is an extract from his project which:

> ... enacts a critical cultural politics concerning Native Americans and the representations of their historical presence in Yellowstone Park and elsewhere. (Denzin, 2006, p. 422)

The extract he presents is in the form of a script which gives a voice to the author as a child, an adult and a writer, as well as offering a voice to other people too. The effect is an evocative piece which gives the reader a real sense & feel of the topic, without interrupting the creative flow with any analysis. He describes the full project as follows:

> In bringing the past into the autobiographical present, I insert myself into the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it. History becomes a montage, moments quoted out of context, "juxtaposed fragments from widely dispersed places and times" (Ulmer 1989, 112). I move across and between several writing styles, genres, and representational performative forms, some borrowed from Dos Passos (1937), including news of the day (NEWSREEL) and the Camera Eye. Words and quotations, visual texts, historical advertisements, maps, and photographs are performance vehicles, ways of "revealing and evoking the character of the person who spoke [or produced] them... they are not an

> end in themselves” (Smith 1994, xxiii-xxiv). With Anna Deavere Smith (2000), I seek a dramatic, performative poetic, a form of performance writing that includes excerpts from personal histories, official and unofficial government documents, scholarly articles, and popular culture texts. (Denzin, 2006, p. 423)

Denzin doesn't say whether his project also includes passages of more conventional analysis, which one suspects is what Anderson would want it to contain. However, the wealth of materials it contains certainly suggests a piece which is well-grounded in research, and the very act of juxtaposing such a large number of different words and voices effectively is, in itself, a task which involves a critical engagement with the source materials. Do these two facts make it an academically viable project, or can it only be considered as a partial success, perhaps with more in common with an organised appendix than anything else?

The question remains, then, which school of autoethnography should I follow? Clearly there is overlap between the two, but there are also considerable differences both in the methodologies and the intentions. Admittedly for me the CAP School, as advocated by Ellis, Etherington & Denzin presents a more seductive option – its free, creative, artistic, emotive style appeals to the theatre practitioner in me. However, given that I am currently undertaking a PhD in a sociology department, and given that even Ellis and Etherington issue warnings about the risks that arise in terms of being taken seriously and achieving success within the academic world with their brand of autoethnography(Ellis, 2004, and Etherington, 2004), Anderson’s analytic autoethnography begins to seem like a more logical choice. However, I believe that the correct path for my research lies somewhere between the two in what I am terming – to utilise a Buddhist notion - the middle way...

One of the most inspiring examples of 'middle way' autoethnography that I have come across is Kevin D. Vryan's essay 'Expanding Analytic Autoethnography and Enhancing Its Potential' (Vryan, 2006) in which Vryan acknowledges Anderson's contribution to the debate about analytic autoethnography (AA) but goes on to say:

> Joining Anderson in his optimism and effort to better specify AA, I suggest an understanding of it that is less restricted, more flexible and inclusive, and more able to enhance our abilities to learn and teach about human life in new ways. (Vryan, 2006, p. 405)

Vryan makes the valid point that there is more to autoethnography than a specific story. For him, if autoethnography is done well it will have a much wider resonance than the case studies it highlights. He goes on to say:

> Perhaps a manifestation of his specification of analytic autoethnography as a subtype of traditional sociological ethnography (albeit with a twist), Anderson discusses AA exclusively in the context of studying groups or social worlds. My own past experience as a false-identity enactor for two years constitutes the primary empirical context of my PhD dissertation (along with another, unrelated, former impostor's experiences). However, this research is not about impostors or any particular group or social world; it is about discovering and better modeling how identities and interpretations of their authenticity are accomplished, both when authenticity of identity is problematic and when it is "normatively" accomplished. Made unusually observable in the unique empirical contexts of my naturally occurring life and in my access to data not obtainable via other methods, the abstracted conceptual and theoretical formulations I am able to offer as a result of studying aspects of my own life have relevance beyond my own personal experience. (Vryan, pp. 405-406)

For me, Vryan's philosophy is inspiring, and provides a useful model for my own work – my experiences of Buddhism online and offline is my case study, and provides me with my empirical data, but in reality my PhD is not about me, not about Buddhism, and not about the internet but is instead about a wider, and perhaps more theoretically sound, issue around humankind versus machine, nature versus culture, progress and postmodern identity, and the search for spirituality in a liquid internet age.

And so I will bear in mind Anderson's features when creating my own set of

guidelines, but I will also allow my methodology to be influenced by the CAP School, by heuristic enquiry, and by Vryan's 'middle way' (Vryan, 2006). In addition, I will remember the three pitfalls that Chang warns autoethnographers to be aware of:

> (1) neglecting the context, where the self is situated, when exploring the self; (2) overrelying on personal memory instead of collecting a wide range of data; and (3) ignoring ethical issues of privacy protection of self and others. (Chang, 2011, p. 16)

And I will also utilise Etherington's adaptation of Laurel Richardson's list of criteria for judging social science papers. Richardson is a renowned autoethnographer, and Etherington's adaptation seems to provide a useful check list of questions to refer to as my work develops:

3.1 *Does the work make a substantive contribution* to my understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social science perspective and demonstrate how it is used to inform the text?

3.2 *Does the work have aesthetic merit?* Does the writer use analysis to open up the text and invite interpretative responses? Is it artistically shaped, satisfying, complex and interesting?

3.3 *Is the work reflexive enough* to make the author sufficiently visible for me to make judgements about the point of view? Does the author provide me with evidence of knowledge of postmodern epistemologies that convince me of their understanding of what is involved in telling people's lives? Am I informed how the author came to write the work and how the information was gathered? Have the complexities of ethical issues been understood and addressed? Does the author show themselves to be accountable to the standards for knowing and telling the participants' stories?

3.4 *What is the impact of this work on me?* Does it affect me emotionally, intellectually, generate new questions, move me to write or respond in any other way?

3.5 *Does the work provide me with a sense of 'lived experience'?* Does

> it seem to be a truthful, credible account of cultural, social, individual or communal sense of what is 'real'?" (Etherington, 2004, p. 148)

And so, by taking the above guidelines, as well as the information I have assimilated during my research into autoethnography, into consideration, I will now turn my attention to creating a set of guidelines for myself, and to creating an appropriate methodology for my own study...

3.1 A Statement of Intent for My Research

My intention for my research is as follows: to tell my own story about experimenting with Buddhism and spirituality as a whole both online and offline as well as sharing my concerns/views about emerging technologies, and then to use my findings to illustrate, expand upon, and contribute to debates about postmodern identities (both embodied and disembodied), whilst also zooming in and out of my story and the wider picture, as discovered during my research. Finally, to produce some creative explorations of my research, which will most likely take the form of short scripts or theatrical performances. To ensure my work contains enough to be considered analytic as well as emotive, and cannot be dismissed as self-indulgence, I will ensure the following:

1) That I am a part of the communities that I am researching.
2) That I remain constantly aware that the aim of my project is to provide illumination for its audience, not to tell my story for its own sake.
3) That I only give personal details and relate personal anecdotes which I believe contribute to, or are relevant to, my work.
4) That the stories of other people, and the work of other theorists, are fairly and openly represented within my work.
5) That I give academic and artistic values equal weighting.
6) That I analyse my own stories in the same way that I analyse everyone else's, by ensuring that I practise a degree of self-reflexivity.
7) That I am mindful of the ethics of autoethnography (which I will be exploring in more detail at the end of this chapter) at all times.

The methodological approach which I will take with each chapter / section of my

project will be as follows:

* I will begin each chapter / section with an explanation about why the topic is important and significant to me, and give any background about my own history which helps illuminate my views or helps clarify my reasons for exploring the topic.
* I will then describe my experiences during my fieldwork both in terms of my feelings, and in terms of what I see and discover.
* I will then 'zoom out' and think about the wider issues that are important in the section / chapter, possibly exploring existing theories which tackle this issues, and decide which research questions are most pertinent on this basis.
* I will then give others a voice by presenting the views of other people whom I meet during my fieldwork (whether online or offline), and of those whose work tackles the questions which I have decided to focus upon.
* I will then use the evidence I have collated to try and answer the research questions which I have set up for myself, and then widen the study back out to wider issues, and use what I have discovered to try and make some comments about the theories I introduced earlier.
* Next, I will return to 'my story', think about what I have learnt during the work of the chapter, and offer some sort of conclusion.
* Finally, I will – in some cases - present a creative piece of work (most likely a script) which will act as a summary of my findings, and of the chapter as a whole.

In keeping with the above guidelines, I will be finishing this section of the chapter with an example of creative autoethnography – it is a play about my own reasons for coming to autoethnography, and consists of dialogue between two 'mes' – Arty Madeleine and Academic Madeleine. This is a technique which was used by Mulkay in his 1985 book *The Word and the World: Explorations in the Form of Sociological Analysis* – he includes dialogues between himself in various forms such as “The Author”. “The Analyst”, “The Textual Commentator” and his imagined audience who he gives the character of “The Reader” (Mulkay, 1985). He defends his technique by saying:

> There’s no way of separating reality from the symbolic realm of human

> discourse and no way in which reality as such can be used to check our factual claims. Thus, both facts and fictions are interpretative creations. (Mulkay, 1985, p. 11)

In other words, fact and fiction are both constructed and can both tell us something about the world about which the author writes. This idea is, of course, closely related to that of autoethnography, but it also moves us in the direction of Performative Social Science (PSS) which advocates, amongst other things, using artistic tools to disseminate research. And as I have chosen to produce scripts as part of my work, and scripts are inherently linked to performance (given that a script is a promise of the potential for future performance, if not performance itself), I will now take a closer look at this emerging field.

3.2 Performative Social Science (PSS)

The term 'Performative Social Science' was coined by Denzin in 2001 (source: Gergen & Jones, 2008) but has undoubtedly been happening under different names for much longer. Essentially, it is a method by which, to quote Mary Gergen:

> Both the aesthetic means, as promoted by those we call artists, and social science concerns, as advanced by scientists, are melded into a unified whole. (Gergen, 2008)

Like autoethnography, and the techniques used by Mulkay, PSS has arguably grown in popularity in recent years because of a dissatisfaction with traditional social science methods. Kip Jones, who is the Leader of the Performative Social Science (PSS) Group at Bournemouth University, says:

> Exploring the possibilities of a "performative" social science, for me, grew directly out of dissatisfaction with limitations in publication and presentation of my own narrative data. For instance, my reciting papers to audiences or, worse, reading text from PowerPoint presentations directly to them... contributed to my self-inflicted discontent. I began, therefore, to look to the arts and humanities for possible tools which might be transposed in order to better disseminate my interview material at conference gatherings... In

> practical terms, promising possibilities include, but are not limited to, performance, film, video, audio, graphic arts, new media (CD ROM, DVD, and web-based production), poetry and so forth. (Jones, 2006)

PSS, then, arguably has a great deal in common with autoethnography – indeed Brian Roberts sees it as a natural progression of autoethnography for he says:

> The use of poetry, fiction and more reflexive writing, as in auto/ethnography, challenged what had constituted "academic" or "research" writing. The "performative turn" was a further step, asking questions not merely about representation and dissemination but what "performative" elements of the arts... could be adopted in social sciences. (Roberts, 2008)

And so it is the 'performative' element which sets PSS apart from other methods (although, interestingly, an autoethnographic study could utilise PSS) and the use of the self as research subject which sets autoethnography apart from other methods (although, interestingly a piece of PSS could also be autoethnographic!) – and the key thing about the word 'performative' is the implication that an audience is involved. For, as Jones tells us:

> What 'performative' refers and relates to in social science is the communicative powers of research and the natural involvement of an 'audience', whether that be a group of peers or a group of students, a physical audience or a cyber audience, even an individual reader of a journal or a book... (Jones, quoted in Roberts, 2008)

So, by this definition, elements of my thesis are potentially examples of PSS too because the inclusion of scripts points to a possible audience (although we might question whether it only becomes PSS when the hypothetical audience becomes a real one?) And, as Jones tells us, an audience transforms a piece of social science:

> When we move to the performative, as researchers, we cede "control" of interpretation of our work to our audience. This is the singularly most

> important shift in social science practice that PSS makes. Ironically and at the same time, we gift ourselves with the opportunity to be more interpretive, more intuitive, more creative, in our outputs. Our job is not so much to convince as to provoke and stimulate. (Jones, 2008)

As we can see, using PSS is a more creative way of working than one would typically expect in the social sciences – and would perhaps fall nearer the "art" end of Ellis' chart of ethnography than the "science" end (Ellis, 2004) – but for those who advocate it this is part of its appeal. Jones believes that working with people from other disciplines in order to develop a performative piece of social science can be very fruitful – he says:

> Engagement in co-operation with others outside of our own disciplines itself can become a creative act, often stretching the boundaries of our understanding and prodding us to come up with fresh and innovative ways of overcoming practical obstacles in knowledge transfer... It is a historical fact that the major upheavals and transformations in Western art and science occurred during periods of cross-pollination from discipline to discipline. (Jones, 2006)

And he acknowledges that the PSS movement is being partially mobilised by those who – like me - come into the social sciences having worked in the creative industries, saying:

> Those particularly attracted to PSS in higher education include people with backgrounds and experience from the media, as painters, musicians, etc., who are now engaged under the wide umbrella of Social Science scholarship in some way. These are the initial pioneers of PSS who bring both the utility of their arts-based backgrounds and creative problem solving skills to their academic pursuits. (Jones, 2008)

And so whilst my work is predominantly an example of autoethnography, I am also happy to include elements of PSS, namely the two theatrical scripts which explore my research. And now, I return to the first of these plays - a fictional account which I hope will reveal something about my methodology and will also

serve as a small example of the long creative script which will later form a substantial part of my conclusion.

3.3 I Am… A Short Autoethnographic Play

This short play was written for, and performed at, the Breaking Boundaries conference at the University of Warwick on Saturday 7th March 2009. It was preceded by a more conventional presentation about my journey to autoethnography and what autoethnography is all about. The play, which I read aloud, whilst also projecting each line as part of a Power Point presentation, was intended to summarise what I had said in a fun, light-hearted and digestible manner, whilst also being an example of an autoethnographic piece. It was also intended to capture where I was with my research at that time, and to illustrate some of the inner dialogues which have existed inside me over the last few years. My performance of the play seemed to received warmly – there were lots of laughs from the audience and it sparked a great deal of debate. Several people approached me after the presentation to compliment me on it, and I felt that I had achieved my aim of making my work more accessible by illuminating it in a creative manner and by being open about my own feelings about it.

Academic Madeleine Good afternoon. I am here to tell you a bit about me and how I came to develop my autoethnographic style...

Arty Madeleine First me! I work in theatre...

Academic Madeleine And I study at the University of York...

Arty Madeleine I direct plays, I write, I perform...

Academic Madeleine And I am writing a thesis about the internet and identity, using a case study of Buddhism both online and offline...

Arty Madeleine Anyway, I'm working on a little theatrical piece at the moment – to creatively express my

research...

Academic Madeleine If only I spent as much time getting my word count up as I do writing little plays then I might not have another 40,666 words left to write in the next 6 months...

Arty Madeleine Although, I am paying for my PhD myself and I'm damned if I'm gonna write some dry and dreary conventional academic thesis...

Academic Madeleine People used to say that my style was too journalistic and populist...

Arty Madeleine And that it was 'too readable' – too readable! How ridiculous is that...

Academic Madeleine Anyway, at first I tried to tone my style down...

Arty Madeleine But then I thought – I am a creative person and I truly believe that art is the best medium through which to communicate ideas and messages...

Academic Madeleine If not necessarily the best way to get a doctorate...

Arty Madeleine So I decided to rebel and continue writing in the way that I wanted to...

Academic Madeleine A move that might have proved fatal had it not been for my timely discovery of autoethnography...

Arty Madeleine Autoethnography allows me to use artistic

methods within my work...

Academic Madeleine As long as I back them up with academic evidence...

Arty Madeleine Boring...

Academic Madeleine It's brilliant – I have found a legitimate way to combine my creative and academic sides...

Arty Madeleine And a way to suffocate the rebel in me...

Academic Madeleine Now all I have to do is finish my thesis...

Arty Madeleine And find a new way to channel my inner Hunter S. Thompson...

Academic Madeleine Of course, I still run the risk that my work will be considered narcissistic or self-indulgent...

Arty Madeleine But hey, if I fail I've had fun trying and can always write a play about my experiences...

Academic Madeleine A play about a girl who spent £9000 on an impossible dream...

Arty Madeleine £9000 that might have been better spent on shoes – or on taking little plays to the Edinburgh Festival...

Academic Madeleine Or, I suppose, I could knuckle down and get this thing written...

Arty Madeleine Again - boring...

Academic Madeleine Anyway, I've talked long enough...

Arty Madeleine So – any questions..?

3.4 The Ethics of Autoethnography

As the above script will most probably illustrate, an autoethnography inevitably involves a much greater exposure of the self (and potentially of others around the self) than a more traditional academic study. Is it therefore vitally important that one has a solid grasp of the ethics that will be involved before undertaking an autoethnographic project. Unfortunately these ethics are not set in stone – and one might suggest that there is a need for further research into the area – which is why this section of my chapter exists. I start by looking at what some researchers have said on the topic, and then create for myself a set of rules that I can follow as this thesis unfolds.

As Barbara Jago said in 2002:

> You can't do "good" autoethnographic work without constantly questioning the ethics of your pursuit. As soon as you put that "I" on the page, you can't avoid asking if your revelations might be harmful to you or anyone else. (Jago, 2002, p. 753)

Following on from this I would suggest that there are perhaps three main ethical considerations for the autoethnographer – firstly that they protect themselves from others (this might be a matter of being mindful of one's professional or social reputation or even of one's safety if one is revealing any controversial information about the self); secondly that they protect the other people who are present in their work either explicitly or – importantly – implicitly (by discussing one's own life one cannot help but make reference to the people around oneself and it is this that one must be particularly mindful of because these individuals are not necessarily direct 'subjects' of the research and may therefore slip under the radar of the usual ethical research guidelines); and thirdly that they protect themselves in a more personal way (i.e. that they do not do themselves damage by going back over painful memories or unresolved issues without the assistance of a trained professional such as a counsellor or therapist). I will now address

these three considerations one by one.

Protecting Oneself from Others

One of the dangers which are often cited by autoethnographers is that of risking one's professional reputation. For example – in her article 'Chronicling an Academic Depression' Jago tells us of her concern that her autoethnographic work on depression would affect the way she was treated at work and elsewhere (Jago, 2002) and asks the question "Am I undermining my credibility (as an author, teacher, human being) by the very act of testimony?" (Jago, 2002, p. 738) Similarly, April Chatham-Carpenter tells us how she pondered the wisdom of publishing her autoethnographic work on anorexia by sharing her thoughts from the time with us:

> Could I give up my goal of publishing a nice, neat little story on recovery from anorexia in order to write through my struggles? What impression of myself as a professional would I leave if I gave up control and let people know I still struggled? (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010)

And echoes Jago's question by saying: "Is there such a thing as being too vulnerable for one's own good, when doing autoethnography?" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). This question resonates for me because, whilst spirituality is perhaps not as provocative a topic as depression or an eating disorder, some of the other things that I reveal about myself as part of my autoethnographic research are arguably risky to my reputation – for example in the play above I expose my view that traditional academic writing is, at times, 'boring' which is not necessarily the best move on my part if I want a future in academia! However, I justified (and justify) the content of my play by saying that it is something that will resonate for other people too, and is therefore worth including for the debate and thought that it will hopefully spark. Jago and Chatham-Carpenter also justify exposing their 'secrets' in a similar way. For example Jago says:

> I write my story not only to make sense of what happened to me, to note the signs and symptoms of my illness as well as the strategies for coping in case it happens again, but also to enhance others' understanding, to

> provide a window into the illusive world of depression for my family, friends, and colleagues. (Jago, 2002, p. 738)

So we can perhaps use the rule that it is acceptable to expose potentially vulnerable parts of ourselves if doing so is ultimately for the greater good. Although Ellis – an example of someone who arguably risked her safety by co-authoring an autoethnographic piece about abortion in the US, a country known for its extreme views on this particular subject (see Ellis, 2007, p. 22) – sends us the following warning by telling us what she advises her students:

> I tell them to think of the greater good of their research—does it justify the potential risk...? Then I warn that they should be cautious that their definition of *greater good* isn't one created for their own good. (Ellis, 2007, p. 24)

Protecting Others

As I have stated, there are two types of people who need to be protected in an autoethnographic study – firstly, one's research subjects and secondly, one's personal circle of friends and family who may appear in one's autoethnographic writings, or who may be affected by the revelations in one's work. The former will most likely be covered under the umbrella of existing research ethics guidelines (which I will talk about in more detail in my chapter on internet research) but the latter may require more thought. Ellis tackles this in her 2007 essay 'Telling secrets, revealing lives' in which she talks about "relational ethics" which she describes as being "closely related to an ethics of care" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). She says:

> Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work... (Ellis, 2007, p. 4)

And poses the following question:

> Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between

> experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. When we write about ourselves, we also write about others. In so doing, we run the risk that other characters may become increasingly recognizable to our readers, though they may not have consented to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity; or, if they did consent, they might not understand exactly to what they had consented. How do we honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers? (Ellis, 2007, pp. 13-14)

Ellis offers some suggested solutions which include being open and honest with those whom we are researching, or whom will be potentially affected by our research; to remember that "self-revelations always involve revelations about others", that we "don't have an inalienable right to tell the stories of others", and that "intimate, identifiable others deserve at least as much consideration as strangers and probably more." (Ellis, 2007, p. 25); that we "should make ethical decisions in research" in the same way we make them in our "personal lives" (Ellis, 2007, p. 23) and that ultimately we might need to decide to:

> ... omit things, use pseudonyms or composite characters, alter the plot or scene, position your story within the stories of others, occasionally decide to write fiction. Sometimes it may be appropriate to... not publish. (Ellis, 2007, p. 24)

In other words the onus is on each individual researcher to 'do the right thing' and to use their own moral code to make decisions which feel right to them. This seems like a perfectly manageable idea – at least it does to me – which probably just requires periodic reminders to keep checking that one is continuing to act in what one considers to be an ethically sound manner. However, it is arguably a more challenging notion when it comes to tackling the final ethical consideration – that of protecting oneself from oneself...

Protecting Oneself from Oneself

As I have already stated, this consideration is about ensuring that we as autoethnographers do not do ourselves damage by going back over painful memories or unresolved issues without the assistance of a trained professional

such as a counsellor or therapist. Chatham-Carpenter, for example, has spoken about how writing autoethnographically about her anorexia before she was fully recovered, and before she had discovered a safe way to present her illness in her academic work, actually drew her back into the disease (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010) and says that:

> Protecting myself was integrally tied into the process of getting published and the ethical choices I made in representing myself and others in my own autoethnographic work. Although my work was eventually published... I asked myself during the process and afterwards: "At what cost?"" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010)

Clearly an autoethnographic study of an eating disorder is a more risky proposition than one of spirituality. However, I am mindful that my journey towards spirituality has involved some very difficult times for me personally and so it is worthwhile my asking how much of the story it is appropriate, necessary and wise for me to share. In some ways asking these questions is also useful in terms of safeguarding an autoethnography against being self-indulgent, or, as Andrea Stöckl would describe it, in preventing an “auto-ethnography” from becoming an “ego-ethnography” (Stöckl, 2006). Stöckl tells us that in order to prevent this from happening:

> ... we need to ask why we think that we have to appear in a text? Why can we not go beyond our own importance? Why do we constantly have to refer to ourselves in order to understand the other? Secondly, we need to take into account that if we write about ourselves, we can only write about a fictional person, even if we think that it is "me" who we are writing about. Only by alienating ourselves from our culture can we return to it. (Stöckl, 2006)

In other words we need to be discerning about what elements of our story we include, we need to be aware that by writing our story down we are inevitably constructing a fictionalised version of ourselves, and we need to be in a position whereby we can establish a certain distance from that fictionalised self in order to be able to be analytical about it. Or – as Dauphinee puts it:

> ... rather than some self-indulgent attempt to insulate oneself from critique, autoethnography must instead open the self to that critique. (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 810)

Ultimately, then, autoethnographers need to be both aware of and open to the risk that sharing their story brings. For, as Dauphinee says:

> Autoethnography opens space for the reader to see the intentions – and not just the theories and methodologies – of the researcher. It opens us to a deeper form of judgement. That is the core of its ethics. (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 813)

And, as Chatham-Carpenter concludes:

> Writing about your experiences is so tied to your life course that you have to be in a certain space to feel comfortable to write. Autoethnographers have to be willing to do the hard work of feeling the pain and learning through the process of writing, approaching autoethnography not as a project to be completed, but as a continuous learning experience. (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010)

And so, in the spirit of embracing my own "continuous learning experience" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010), I now present my personalised autoethnography ethics rules:

MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ETHICS RULES

1) I will make an effort to examine every potentially sensitive disclosure I make as part of my autoethnographic work and ask myself: "could this disclosure damage my professional or personal reputation?" If the answer is "yes" then I will weigh up whether I consider the risk to be worth it...
2) I will also ask myself the following question every time I make a potentially sensitive disclosure: "is this something that could be hurtful to someone I know – either because it reveals something about them or because it is something that will be upsetting for them to read about?" If

the answer is "yes" then I will either speak to the relevant person/people or take the disclosure out of my final thesis.

3) I will follow a code of ethics with regards to those people who I meet during my research and either quote or describe as part of my work. As these people will largely be people that I encounter online my chapter on internet research will tackle this issue, but I will also make an effort to be conscious of the potential effects to these people when deciding what to include in my thesis.
4) I will pay particular attention to my own well-being whilst researching and writing up my research, and will make an effort to think objectively about whether each personal disclosure I make is worth the potential risk to me in terms of its value to the thesis.
5) I will try, at all times, to be true to the spirit of the thesis whilst also being kind and mindful of those who may be affected by its words. In fact, to use a term which is important in both Buddhism and yogic philosophy, I will endeavour to practice *ahimsa* – which is a Sanskrit word which means the avoidance of violence and which is essentially about showing compassion to all beings – throughout my research.
6) Finally, I will draw inspiration from the following two quotes:

> As researchers, we long to do ethical research that makes a difference. To come close to these goals, we constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling. (Ellis, 2007, p. 26)

> There are always gaps in the telling. Names withheld. Details left out. Conversations kept in confidence. Secrets protected. Intersecting with other lives as it does, this story isn't only mine to tell. So I can't tell you everything. But that doesn't really matter. The "truth" is still here... (Jago, 2002, p. 737)

4 THE PERSONAL CHALLENGE OF INTERNET RESEARCH

The internet is at the very heart of this thesis, and online research is a central part of the research that I have undertaken in order to answer my first two key research questions – namely d*oes the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* And h*ow does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?* This chapter is therefore an exploration of the issues and challenges that can come up when researching online - including ethical ones of course – which I have undertaken with the aim of creating a personalised list of internet research guidelines to help me during the remainder of the thesis. I present my list towards the end of the chapter – before finishing with an autoethnographic section which describes how I discovered an additional guideline whilst I was researching.

As Christine Hine says in the introduction to her 2005 book, *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet,* "The coming of the Internet has posed a significant challenge for our understanding of research methods." (Hine, 2005, p. 1) The internet, and particularly the internet that has emerged since the onset of the interactive Web 2.0 (in which users become writers, editors and creators) offer a new research arena which is an exciting opportunity for academics, but which also poses new problems that the researcher must be aware of. However, since the internet, and therefore also internet research, is still in its infancy it is fair to say that even leaders in the field are still learning and developing techniques, and therefore one of the problems is that it is actually difficult to predict exactly what problems are likely to occur when conducting internet research until it is too late. This makes for an uneasy situation that Hine articulates thus:

> … there is considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions. (Hine, 2005, p. 1)

This anxiety may be caused largely by the relative newness of the technologies with which researchers are dealing, but even in the fullness of time it is hard to imagine a consensus ever being reached regarding an ultimate guide to internet fieldwork. This is because the field in which we are working is so big and so diverse, it is expanding and changing so quickly, its very nature makes defining private and public problematic, it represents so many cultures and lifestyles, and it encourages people to be whatever they want to be (which may have nothing to do with their personae in real life). The internet, with its promise of absolute freedom, with its promise than we can go anywhere, do anything, be anyone, with its endless possibilities, is a challenging field in which to work.

However, progress is being made. For example, although the sheer number of different cultures that are represented on the internet means it is difficult to find a definitive set of legal, moral and ethical guidelines to adhere to when undertaking internet research, the Association of Internet Researchers produced a list of recommendations for internet researchers in 2002 (Charles Ess and the AoIR working committee, 2002) and has recently released an updated version called 'Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Version 2.0' (Buchanan and Markham, 2012), explaining the need for a new version by saying the following:

> While the first AoIR document enjoyed extensive use, much has changed in the field of Internet Studies since 2002. The scope and contexts of internet research have been dramatically expanded through the continuing global diffusion of the internet into nearly every country in the world, as facilitated through a growing array of devices (including game consoles, internet-enabled phones and other mobile devices) and ever-increasing bandwidth; rapidly expanding suites of new communication applications; and the increasingly seamless interweaving of online and offline activities and experiences. (Buchanan and Markham, 2012, p. 2)

Interestingly though, neither the original 2002 document nor the updated 2012 one set out a list of rules - instead both provide the researcher with a series of questions that they should think about before commencing their work. The reason for this seems to be that the AoIR, like myself, see the internet as a fluid

and ever-changing medium for, as Elizabeth Buchanan and Annette Markham say:

> Although we identify current internet technologies and contexts, we acknowledge that technologies themselves change rapidly. Therefore, this document is designed to emphasize processes for decision-making and questions that can be applied to ever-changing technological contexts. (Buchanan and Markham, 2012, p. 3)

Therefore, for the moment at least, the onus is very much on the individual to read what information is available, and then to make his or her own personalised set of rules before setting off into the promised land which is the online world. This chapter is my attempt to do this for my own research. I will use examples from social networking sites, virtual world sites, and sites that offer interactive spiritual experiences because these are the sites that I will be studying later in the thesis, and – of course – I will refer regularly back to the AoIR's documents. By the end of this chapter my aim is to have established my own document which outlines a personal set of rules that I can constantly refer to, and potentially update, as I proceed through my research.

I have broken down the areas of concern into 6 sub-categories, and tackled each one separately. They are:

1. The relative newness of the internet
2. The speed of growth and change on the internet
3. The debate regarding whether the internet is a public or a private sphere
4. Online ethics, morals and legal issues
5. Authenticity online
6. Disembodiment online

4.1 The Relative Newness of the Internet

The internet is a rapidly growing phenomenon in the west and has very quickly become familiar to a large percentage of us – in 2004 Dawson and Douglas Cowan told us:

> The speed and extent to which the Internet has been embraced by a wide diversity of people in such a short period of time are unparalleled in human history. The rate of growth is staggering. Worldwide, the number of Internet users is estimated to have been 16 million in 1995, 378 million in 2000... and more than 500 million in 2002... (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 5)

And since then the number of internet users has continued to explode – the 2012 figures suggest that the number of worldwide users now exceeds 2.4 billion[1]. However, it is worth remembering that the internet – familiar though it may be – is still a relatively new technology for, as Dawson and Cowan caution us: "The fact that we have adopted the technology so fast… means that we are at risk of overlooking its significance." (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 9) In order that we not take the internet for granted, then, it is important online researchers continue to interrogate the medium on behalf of everyone. For, as Hine says:

> The 'pioneering' ethos may render online research in general, and online methods in particular, a fruitful field to enter: rewards can be high for being among the first to enter uncharted territory. There is no doubt that the perceived newness of the new technologies is a powerful resource in stimulating the development of the field. (Hine, 2005, p. 6)

The word 'pioneer' conjures up images of uncharted territory just waiting to be explored / claimed and the internet - with its nearly infinite landscape – makes it a highly attractive research arena. But of course, unknown terrain makes for an uncertain, slow and potentially perilous journey – it is the road less travelled and one has to be ready to predict the unpredictable, and to expect good times, bad times and indifferent times.

[1] Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (Accessed 19 December 2012)

One of the ways in which we can equip ourselves for the journey, however, is to not avoid existing knowledge in our quest to find new knowledge. It makes sense to learn lessons from research in other fields, and to refer to the history of research when creating our methodologies. Indeed, Buchanan and Markham explicitly encourage us to take existing policies/documents such as the "UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report" as the basis for any research (Buchanan and Markham, 2012, p. 4) and Hine warns us "to be wary of the risks of over-asserting differences between virtual methods and their traditional counterparts" (Hine, 2005, p. 10) and it is certainly important to learn lessons and be inspired by earlier research which has common ground with one's own research project, whether that common ground be an objective, a research question, or a desire to conduct one's research online. My first rule for my personalised research document is therefore is *apply the principles of existing research models when establishing your own methodologies.* In addition, because the field is expanding so rapidly I am also going to endeavour to *keep up-to-date with emerging ideas within internet research*.

As well as acknowledging previous research models when creating new ones, it is also important to avoid becoming too wide-eyed at the technologies that are emerging and thus missing the fact that it is human nature to progress and to invent and to evolve. The internet may be changing the world but it is not the only technology that has done so – we have turned our lives upside down many, many times before and will undoubtedly do so many, many times again. Everything from fire, to the wheel, to the printing press, to the telephone and numerous other inventions have transformed society in their own way and despite the attitude I had at the start of my research, it could be argued that the internet is neither a utopia nor a dystopia, it is simply another string to the bow of man-made creations. Debates about the effect of the internet upon the world should therefore make a nod to wider theories about human progress, and about nature versus culture, and my rule will be *remember that the internet is one of many inventions with the potential to have a profound effect on human development.*

4.2 The Speed of Growth and Change on the Internet

This thesis was written across nine years – this is an incredible amount of time in terms of the development of the internet which has presented a range of both challenges and opportunities. However, the challenge of writing about the internet is present even in shorter studies. How can one hope to undergo a reasonable exploration of the internet when it – being, as we have already seen, a liquid medium - is expanding and evolving so rapidly and when even a single website can contain more information than one could ever hope to soak up? For example, in 2007 *The Guardian* printed an article about the virtual world website Second Life which said:

> At first Second Life was a barren landmass divided up into lots of 500 sq metres. It is now so big that it is reckoned that no person could see it all in a lifetime… (Keegan, 2007, p. 8)

Indeed, Second Life - which, recent figures suggest, is now 1846.54 km² and has a total of 31,964,949 'residents'[2] - is so extensive that it has its own economy and its own currency, and it is by no means the only such website. Clearly it would be impossible to visit the entire site during one research trip, just as it would be impossible to interview the millions of people who reportedly inhabit it. Of course, this problem is equally true in the real world – and this is where the rule regarding both the use of existing research methodology (in this case that which deals with samples, focus groups, etc), and remembering that the internet is just another event on the time-line of human development (rather than becoming awestruck by its size) should be applied.

The speed of growth on the internet not only necessitates making focused decisions regarding surveying methods, it is also means the pressure is on for the researcher to produce results quickly. It has been suggested that "'Internet time' now runs at a clock speed several orders of magnitude faster than that of academic research" (Beer and Burrows, 2007), and this makes it very difficult to produce a piece of academic research which remains accurate and relevant when it is ready for publication. Changing trends make things difficult – for even as one prepares to write a piece on MySpace, one finds that it is no longer the

[2] Source: http://gridsurvey.com/ (Accessed 22 December 2012)

website du jour, and that many people have moved to Facebook. Similarly, one cannot get definitive numbers about users/members of a website as they change so rapidly. As Hine says: "the Internet is both cultural context and cultural artefact" (Hine, 2005, p. 9) – in other words the internet is at once a live medium and a museum. It is literally changing from moment to moment in every word we add to our MySpace profile, in every new outfit we give our Second Life avatar, in every new website we visit and thus provide with a 'hit', we are permanently altering the internet in an irreversible way. We cannot stop time to explore and define the internet; we can just try to record a constantly evolving place. To use Bauman's analogy – it is liquid and therefore ever-changing (Bauman, 2000). It seems that three options are open to us - we can produce what we might term a 'snapshot' piece of writing that will inevitably be locked into the time in which it was researched, in the hope that it will be of some historical use and interest; alternatively we can produce what we might term a 'montage' piece of writing which might provide information about the changes in a website over a defined period of time by capturing data at regular intervals. For example, a very simple example would be defining the number of MySpace members – it would be impossible to state a definitive number of members in a paper but one could produce a 'snapshot' of how many members there were on a particular day at a particular time, or one could produce a 'montage' which would consist of a series of regular readings over a set period – for example – fortnightly readings over a 3 month period. The second method would show the rate of change over its set period but would still become a historic document the moment the final reading had been taken. The final option would therefore be to find a method to present one's research in a more immediate way – of course this is the most challenging option, and is therefore perhaps the one that should be most actively pursued. My rules about newness on the internet will therefore be: a*cknowledge that any data you give in a written paper on the internet will quickly become outdated* and also to *seek out research presentation methods that are more immediate than the traditional written paper* (which might include autoethnography or online PSS, for example).

4.3 The Debate Regarding Whether the Internet is a Public or a Private Sphere

The debate regarding whether the internet is a public or a private sphere rages on and on. Buchanan and Markham say this on the subject in their AoIR document:

> Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing. People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy. Or, they may acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is - or ought to be - used by other parties. (Buchanan and Markham, 2012, pp. 6-7)

Of course, some areas of the internet are designed to be private and secure, such those in which you give payment details, or create passwords, and we as users must decide whether we trust these areas to be as secure as they claim themselves to be. Scandals such as the one back in April 2007 which involved private information about thousands of junior doctors being accidentally exposed online[3], and other breaches of security have made many of us a little uneasy about giving personal information about ourselves in secure areas of the internet. However, issues about privacy elsewhere on the internet are even more alarming. Many people are uploading details about themselves on websites without really understanding that they may be available for viewing by anyone – for example, 17 year old Rachel Bell caused chaos in her home village of Woodstone, in County Durham, and was later questioned by police, when posts on MySpace about her forthcoming my-parents-are-away-let's-party party resulted in an alleged several hundred gatecrashers arriving at her home and an alleged £20, 000 worth of damage being created (Wainwright, 2007, p. 11) Similarly, there have been reports of job applicants being unsuccessful after potential employees have looked at their MySpace profiles, and the 'job searching' page on the website www.about.com warns:

> Did you know that your MySpace and Facebook profiles aren't as private as you think they are? Employers have been known to peruse MySpace

[3] This leak occurred following an error on the Medical Training Application Service computer system where student and junior doctors apply for jobs. Details retrieved 25 April 2007, from: http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/society/health/exclusive+junior+doctors+details+exposed+online/469137

> and Facebook, along with blogs and web sites of prospective employees... It's really important, when job searching, to presume that anyone may be able to read what you post online, and to be very careful what you say about your personal life and your activities. (Doyle, 2007)

From this, we internet researchers can learn two things, firstly, when creating our own web content to *always assume that anyone will be able to see what you post online,* and secondly to *never reproduce details that may jeopardise someone's privacy* because, like Rachel Bell and countless job seekers, they may have placed it online without truly understanding the potential consequences.

4.4 Online Ethics, Morals and Legal Issues

Ethics are one of the key concerns when one undertakes online research. The term 'lurker', which is sometimes used to define someone who enters internet chat rooms and reads online forums without making their presence known, haunts the research community because of its negative connotations, and whilst there is a move to address this[4], the fact remains that no one is really very clear about whether the content of the internet is or should be truly public. Deciding whether to reproduce comments made in a chat room in which one has been 'lurking' is difficult – we don't technically have permission to do so, but the fact that we have been able to freely enter the site and read words which have, after all, been uploaded onto what is a public arena means it feels like we should be able to do so. Out of respect, we should certainly avoid reproducing details that might jeopardise someone's privacy, and of course, we are all aware that we must provide references when quoting the words of another person – but should we go further? The ease with which one can drop contentious remarks into one's online contributions means that both ethical and legal ideals can be jeopardized by even the most seemingly innocent of postings. For example, users of Facebook were thrown into the centre of controversy when they created online memorials after the shootings at Virginia Tech on the 16th April 2007. Amongst the postings were some that named and discussed the chief suspect, despite the fact that the police had not revealed his name for legal reasons. In its report about the incident, the BBC quoted Alfred Hermida, journalism professor at the School of Journalism of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, as

[4] For example on the AoIR mailing list in May 2007

saying:

> This idea that if you set up a memorial site within Facebook it will be private is a bit of a misconception… A lot of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are almost seen by their members as 'their space' but they are actually very public forums… once you have written down something online, that actually has legal repercussions beyond just you and your friends on that forum. (as cited in Jackson, 2007)

This warning is aimed at internet users, but is also important for internet researchers, who should remember just because something appears online it doesn't make it legally and ethically sound. It seems that another of my guidelines needs to be *never reproduce any online material that you are not comfortable is legally and ethically sound*.

Of course the other side of the internet research ethics coin is that as well as protecting others, the researcher must also be mindful about protecting themselves. The internet can be a dangerous place, and it is all too easy to be trusting of the people one meets online because they do not necessarily seem 'real'. However, they are and I would suggest that the internet researcher must be careful not to give away too much personal information, and to maintain a vigorous approach to self-protection. Some of the questions that the AoIR document suggests that we remain mindful about are "Are we acting in ways that minimizes risk?" and "Does our research adequately protect the researcher as well as the community/author/participant?" (Buchanan and Markham, 2012, p. 11) My next guideline will therefore be to *ensure that you consistently act in ways that protect the self from harm when conducting internet research*.

4.5 Authenticity Online

Apart from the fact that one has to be careful about ensuring online information is factual and comes from a reliable source, one also has to be aware of the fact that the internet proves the saying that one man's fact is another man's fiction. A good example of this is the birth of Conservapedia (www.conservapedia.com) in reaction to Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com). Both websites are online encyclopedias which allow users to create and edit their content, but whilst Wikipedia is often seen as a highly democratic website for this reason,

conservative users were upset by the speed at which their posts on topics such as creationism and homosexuality were edited to reflect more liberal views, and so set up their own version which they describe as "The Trustworthy Encyclopedia" (www.conservapedia.com, n.d.), proclaiming it: "A conservative encyclopedia you can trust. The truth shall set you free" (www.conservapedia.com, n.d.), and which has a whole page explaining why their website is better than Wikipedia (www.conservapedia.com/Conservapedia:How_Conservapedia_Differs_from_Wikipedia, n.d.). Of course, contributors to both websites absolutely believe that they are right, and whilst we may have a view on their opinions, we cannot deny anyone the right to have an opinion or a belief. One of the things that the internet truly advocates and supports, at least in the west, is freedom of speech – and because of this we are bound to find people whose beliefs we vehemently oppose online, for as Jones says:

> The democratisation of the Internet was built into the medium from the outset. This means that the medium will include the good, the bad and the ugly. Democracy also means choice. There are no ticket takers or gatekeepers on the Internet, try as some may. The Internet is the global water cooler. (Jones, 2008)

However, I would suggest that researchers such as myself should *report what you find without making any moral judgements about the results* and that we should also *be aware that inaccuracies will occur online and that you should take facts and figures that are reported online with the proverbial pinch of salt.* This second point may be particularly relevant when quoting figures that are displayed on websites for example - hits per day, etc., which are hard to qualify. It alludes to the fact that people may choose to post inaccurate information either as a joke, as a means of remaining anonymous, or as a way of leading a separate life online.

One worry that internet researchers have is that people will not, for whatever reason, be truthful on the internet. For example - I know from personal experience of MySpace that people often give incorrect information in their profiles – they might put themselves down as being 6 foot 3 when they are

actually 5 foot 9, they might put themselves down as being single when in fact they are in a relationship, and they might post a picture which isn't actually of themselves to go with their profile. Furthermore – they might pretend to be someone else altogether. For example, the Dalai Lama's MySpace page[5] has received several postings from his 'friends' which ask whether he is the 'real' Dalai Lama (a sensible question, perhaps, but one that is unlikely to be answered truthfully by an impostor!). I believe that whilst the rule about taking the information one finds with a pinch of salt holds true in this case, there is also merit in believing that the online persona of a person is as valid and as 'real' as their offline self, because it is their creation. This is neatly illustrated in photographer, Robbie Cooper's book: *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators* which pairs pictures of online avatars with their offline creators. Of the book, New Scientist Tech Editor, Will Knight, says:

> The results are pretty interesting. It's curious how some people create an avatar exactly like their real self, while others chose something much more alien. It's also fascinating how this choice often relates to their personality, their personal history and to how they got involved with virtual worlds in the first place. (Knight, 2007)

The point is that people do *choose* their online persona, indeed their online presence is likely to be far more carefully constructed than their offline one because it is much easier to control. We may or may not learn more about someone's offline self by examine their online persona(e), but an avatar is as real in Second Life as its creator is in the offline world, and should probably be treated as being just as worthy a research subject. Certainly for my purposes, I would like to make it a rule that *whilst it should be acknowledged that online personae may differ from their offline creators, they should nonetheless be treated as worthy subjects for study.* In addition, I should be remember that *'real' is a subjective term that should be used cautiously.*

4.6 Disembodiment Online

The absence of a physical presence may be seen to be a fundamental problem when dealing with online communication. Without access to the face and to body

[5] The Dalai Lama's page can be found at http://www.myspace.com/jetsunjamphelngawanglo

language, without access to the subtle nuances of speech rhythm and pattern, without the ability to use all five senses, without the immediacy of a face-to-face conversation, it can feel like a debilitating form of communication. As Hine says:

> A tersely expressed textual communication, received and read in a context far detached in time, space and warmth of social connection from the circumstances in which it was written, provides the stereotype for a mode of communication which seems hopelessly inadequate for the formation of intimacy. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has come to be seen as dependent on the achievement of trusting relationships with informants… At the outset, then, there seems to be a problem with employing CMC in qualitative research. (Hine, 2005, p. 17)

It should be remembered that a "tersely expressed textual communication" (Hine, 2005, p. 17) is easy to misinterpret (we have all agonised over texts and emails which seem to be saying something which wasn't intended at all by the sender) and this works both ways. I will therefore *take great care that our meaning is clear when formulating text-based communications* but also a*cknowledge that misunderstandings are possible when analysing online communication*. Of course, society was using textual and other non-intimate methods of communication long before computer-mediated communication came along – for example letters, telephones and Morse code. Furthermore, survey methods such as written questionnaires and telephone interviews may be said to have similar disadvantages as online research, but also have the same potential advantage – they can make the interviewee feel less nervous about revealing information, and therefore more open and honest. On the other hand, they can also make it easier for the interviewee to be less honest or measured in their responses. The job of the interviewer remains the same, regardless of the medium involved, as Hine explains:

> Just as in face-to-face interactions, researchers need to both draw on their existing social abilities and develop new talents, They need to become adept at creating comfortable spaces for informants and interviewees to share their experiences, and they have to attend to the ethical responsibilities which new forms of research relationship place upon them.

> They have to find ways of immersing themselves in life as it is lived online, and as it connects into offline social spheres. Clearly there is far more to conducting effective qualitative research online than the ability to send email. (Hine, 2005, pp. 17-18)

It is clear that if one is going to interview or talk to people online then it is important to do one's research in cyberspace and to *be very familiar with the online environments that one is analysing.* This means, to use some of my own research as examples, that if one is to analyse MySpace, one should consider creating a MySpace profile and making a few friends; if one is to discuss Second Life then one should create an avatar and have a good look around; and if one is to comment on the merits or otherwise of online rituals then one should have a go at online meditation or whatever it may be. It is tempting to think of a disembodied existence as an inferior – or less 'real' - existence and I am certainly guilty of this, but if one is to talk to people who enjoy online life then one must also *respect the online world that interviewees and informants inhabit* in order to make everyone who actively assists in one's research comfortable. This leads back to the idea that the idea of 'real' should be approached with caution. It seems very simple but perhaps the most important research rule for me to remember is *stay open-minded*.

4.7 My Internet Research Rules

Based on all of the above work, I have created a set of personalised rules which I shall endeavour to honour as I proceed with my research. They are as follows:

1) Apply the principles of existing research models when establishing your own methodologies.

2) Keep up-to-date with emerging ideas within internet research.

3) Remember that the internet is one of many inventions with the potential to have a profound effect on human development.

4) Acknowledge that any data you give in a written paper on the internet will quickly become outdated.

5) Seek out research presentation methods that are more immediate than the traditional written paper.

6) Always assume that anyone will be able to see what you post online.

7) Never reproduce details that may jeopardise someone's privacy.

8) Never reproduce any online material that you are not comfortable is legally and ethically sound.

9) Ensure that you consistently act in ways that protect the self from harm when conducting internet research.

10) Report what you find without making any moral judgements about the results.

11) Be aware that inaccuracies will occur online and that you should take facts and figures that are reported online with the proverbial pinch of salt.

12) Whilst it should be acknowledged that online personae may differ from their offline creators, they should nonetheless be treated as worthy subjects for study.

13) 'Real' is a subjective term that should be used cautiously.

14) Take great care that your meaning is clear when formulating text-based communications.

15) Acknowledge that misunderstandings are possible when analysing online communication.

16) Be very familiar with the online environments that you are analysing.

17) Respect the online world that interviewees and informants inhabit.

18) Stay open-minded.

In addition, in the spirit of my thesis, I have also adapted the Eightfold Path[6], which is a Buddhist set of guidelines which help people live their lives. The guidelines are divided into three categories: wisdom, ethical conduct and meditation, which in this case we can take to be about studying and mental development, and are as follows:

1. Right view (also known as right understanding) - wisdom
2. Right intention (also known as right thought) - wisdom
3. Right speech - ethical conduct
4. Right action - ethical conduct
5. Right livelihood - ethical conduct
6. Right effort - mental development
7. Right mindfulness - mental development
8. Right concentration - mental development

Obviously, the Eightfold Path is very much about spiritual development, but I think it also offers as a set of guidelines which, when followed, will ensure that I conduct my work in an efficient and productive way, with the ultimate aim of creating an interesting, balanced and fair piece of work.

It is my hope that my internet research rules, together with the adapted Eightfold Path, will form the basis of a working document that I can refer to as I proceed with my research. I anticipate that it will evolve and change as I discover new rules, and as I find times when the rules must be broken – and of course, it will also need to evolve as the internet research community makes progress. For now, however, my rules can become the foundation on which I will build my research.

4.8 A Final Rule

On Wednesday 15th August 2007, I had my first experience of stumbling upon an obvious new rule for my personalised set. I was busy working away,

[6] The Eightfold Path is widely available from most Buddhist resources and literature.

documenting the profiles of members of the Buddhism group that I had chosen to study for my MySpace chapter. I was taking a random sample of member profiles and recording certain information about them – including basic biographical information as well as an overview of the presence of Buddhism and other religions within their profiles. I was finding that whilst not all the members were explicitly Buddhist, most showed compassionate views that are in line with Buddhist thought – many were anti-war, against cruelty to animals, or trying to explore the world using creative or spiritual methods. As I worked, I felt strongly that most of the people whose profiles I was looking at were nice people, good people, interesting people, and the kind of people who I would want for friends. I was really enjoying exploring each of their profiles in more detail, getting a sense of what these people were like, who they were. Suddenly, the Buddhism group page shut itself down. At first I thought I'd accidentally shut a window, or that the computer on which I was working had froze, and so I rebooted. The Buddhism group was nowhere to be seen, it had disappeared from my personal list of groups on my homepage, it didn't come up when I did searches. It was gone.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that we tend to take what we've got for granted, and only realise what we had when it is too late, and it is gone. The sudden loss of the Buddhism group obviously had an immediate effect on my thesis – a sudden question mark appeared as to the worth of the work I had already done on the group, and a new rule became obvious for my personalised list of rules…

Never assume that the website you have been working on today will still be there tomorrow.

And yet the loss for my thesis was not my only concern. My first thought when it became clear that the group was definitely gone was how important it has become to me. Not as a field for research, but as a personal community. My mind went back to the days that followed the Virginia Tech shootings – when the boy who had shot all the people at the university was called evil and inhuman, when my own instinct to be compassionate and ask 'why?' was absent from the media's coverage. Right there in the discussion rooms of the MySpace group

that I had decided to study, I found solace amongst a group of people who felt the same way as I did. Who had the kind of views that I wasn't finding anywhere else, and who were experiencing the same emotions about that situation as me. I had accidentally stumbled upon my very own 'cybersangha' (an online Buddhist community). In all honesty I had approached this thesis with an interest in Buddhism and a suspicion that the internet cannot provide experiences which can compare with those which we find in the 'real world', but there, two-thirds of the way through my time as a PhD student, I was suddenly faced with the fact that somewhere along the way I have become something approaching a Buddhist, and that it was an online community of faceless 'friends' who provided me with the proof I needed. Yes, turning prayer wheels in the Himalayan sun was a more spiritual experience than watching digital wheels online, but my ultimate moment of truth, my academic epiphany, my glimpse at Buddhahood, wasn't up a mountain but was rather in a soulless university computer room, or somewhere in cyberspace, whichever way you prefer to look at it.

Fortunately, the following day the group was re-instated, but the experience was valuable because it taught me a new rule, and gave me a fresh insight into the lives of the people who rely on the internet for support from like-minded people.

5 BUDDHISM – AN OVERVIEW

Before getting into the specifics of my case studies, this section provides a brief overview of Buddhism in terms of its philosophy, history and entry into the west, as well as a look at the issues that have arisen from its appearance on the internet, and an explanation of why I am using it in my thesis. It is important to note at this point, however, that I do not consider this thesis to be about Buddhism per se – rather it is about spiritual tourism more generally but with a focus on my own journey as a spiritual tourist who has a particular interest in Buddhism. The function of this chapter, then, is to provide a context for the remainder of the thesis using some information that I have found helpful and illuminating as I travel my path as a spiritual tourist.

5.1 History & Basic Introduction to Key Principles

Unlike in other religions, there are no deities in Buddhism. Indeed the religion might be more accurately described as a philosophy, or a way of living. Its teachings come from the Buddha, who was a real man born approximately 2500 years ago in northern India. His name was Siddharta (spellings vary) and his family name was Gautama (again, spellings vary). He was born a prince, and had every luxury available to him. At 16, he married a princess and lived a privileged life until the age of 29 when, horrified by the suffering he witnessed in a nearby town, he decided to give up his life as a prince and leave his wife, son and kingdom behind him in order to search for a way to end all human suffering.

Gautama visited a series of renowned religious teachers but, having studied and learnt and researched, decided that he must seek out a new way of living. Famously he lived in a forest and sat under a tree, until finally he attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha (literally 'the awakened one') at the age of 35. He dedicated the rest of his life to teaching others the things that he had realised and he soon had a strong following. This consisted of a community of Buddhist monks and nuns, known as the Sangha, as well as a wealth of ordinary men and women from all classes and backgrounds. The Buddha eventually died at the age of 80, but his teachings remain the framework for the various strains of Buddhism that exist today.

Of course, Buddhism is a complex religion which one could spend a lifetime researching, and of which one would find dozens of different strains, just as you do in Christianity and all other religions. However, the key concepts in Buddhism are that of practising compassion, and of alleviating suffering. His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso - the fourteenth Dalai Lama - who is the current spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism sums up Buddhism as follows:

> The ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to serve and benefit humanity… Converting other people to Buddhism is unimportant in comparison with the contribution we Buddhists can make to human society. The Buddha gave us an example of contentment and tolerance, through serving others unselfishly. His teaching is essentially to help others if you can, and if you cannot, at least not to harm them. (The Dalai Lama, 1996)

A Buddhist aims to find inner peace, to live in the moment, to practise kindness and compassion towards all living things, to live a modest life and avoid extremes, to be a pacifist, and to be as good a person as possible and practise good karma in order that one might have good fortune in one's future whether in this life or in a re-incarnation. The ultimate aim of a practising Buddhist is – in most cases - to strive to reach Nirvana. Most Buddhist notions are readily understandable but karma, re-incarnation and Nirvana may need more explanation…

Karma is a word that had been assimilated into our western vocabulary from Buddhism. It originally meant action, but has come to mean something slightly more complex. Basically, rather than believing in a pre-destined future or in fate, Buddhists believe that you can affect your life depending on your actions, so if you do good things then good things will come to you and vice versa. Put simply – you get what you deserve! Of course, you don't have to be a Buddhist to believe in karma for as Pat Allwight points out in her book, *Basics of Buddhism: Key principles and how to practise:*

> Every thought, word and deed is a cause which creates an effect. On a simple level, if we go to work we will get paid. If we exercise, we will become fit. (Allwight, 1998, p. 31)

However, Buddhists believe that not only do your actions affect your current life, they also believe they have an impact on your future lives. Re-incarnation is possibly the only concept in Buddhism that one must believe in, everything else in the religion is about self-discovery and a certain way of living. But, it is not as fantastical a notion as it may seem, it simply follows on from the Buddhist view that we all part of one intrinsically linked organic universe. The following Buddhist Society explanation of this is, interesting, not a million miles away from Bauman's description of liquid modernity:

> Buddhists do not believe that there is anything everlasting or unchangeable in human beings, no soul or self in which a stable sense of 'I' might anchor itself. The whole idea of 'I' is in fact a basically false one that tries to set itself up in an unstable and temporary collection of elements… the body *(rupa)*, feeling-sensation *(sankhara)* and consciousness *(vinnana)* – Upon death these elements do not vanish from the face of the universe, they form new combinations elsewhere. Thus the whole universe is a great, ever-changing orchestration of interconnected movements without beginning or end. (The Buddhist Society Prospectus, 2004-2005, p.10)

In Christianity, when someone who is died is buried the vicar says "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" referring to the way that our bodies naturally decompose and become part of the earth. This may be a somewhat uncomfortable thought, although of course a Christian believes that the soul is taken elsewhere so that one can live an eternal life in Heaven or Hell, but for a Buddhist this is as natural and as non-scary as the rain cycle. Allwight explains re-incarnation using this analogy. She says:

> Rain falls and is absorbed into the earth. It reappears in streams and rivers, eventually flowing in to the ocean. When the water evaporates, it loses its visible form temporarily, until it condenses into clouds and becomes rain again. Even though we cannot see the water vapour, we know it is still there, in its invisible form of H_20. The visible water is like life, and the unseen water vapour like death. The water vapour has the

> potential… to become rain when the circumstances are right. This continues in a never-ending cycle, which is why it makes such a good analogy for the cycle of life and death. (Allwight, 1998, p.74)

Nirvana is another word which has been assimilated into our culture, although many people would probably mention the cult grunge band of the early nineties of the same name when asked to explain it! In Buddhism, Nirvana is the Ultimate Truth. This is probably the trickiest concept in the religion because it is something that one must discover for oneself, possibly through meditation, possibly just by following a Buddhist way of living. However, it is the journey to Nirvana that is more important than Nirvana itself.

To summarise, Buddhism is basically a way of living which seeks to give its followers the tools with which they can cope with life, discover inner peace, and practise compassion. Buddhists aim to keep their faith evolving so that it may always be contemporary, and so that it may continue to provide what they consider to be a viable framework for a better world (which may explain why it was one of the first religions to embrace the internet). In his book, *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula provides a useful summary of the religion:

> Buddhism aims at creating a society where the ruinous struggle for power is renounced; where calm and peace prevail away from conquest and defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vehemently denounced; where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military and economic warfare; where hatred is conquered by kindness, and evil by good; where enmity, jealousy, ill-will and greed do not infect men's minds; where compassion is the driving force of action; where all, including the least of living things, are treated with fairness, consideration and love; where life in peace and harmony, in a world of material contentment, is directed to the highest and noblest aim, the realization of the Ultimate Truth, Nirvāna. (Rahula, 1959, pp. 88-89)

5.2 How Buddhism Came to the West

Buddhism, as we have seen, was born in India, but it quickly spread to the rest of Asia and became firmly established in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Korea, Japan and Tibet by the seventh century[7]. Interestingly, it dwindled in India, overshadowed by Hinduism and Islam, and remains a minor religion there today, accounting for an estimated 1.05%[8] of the population. It wasn't until the nineteenth and twentieth century that Buddhism began to emerge in the west, helped by scholars and colonialists who translated some of the key Buddhist texts, and by Buddhists visiting the west from their native Asian countries. Edwin Arnold's 1879 poem 'The Light of Asia' brought the story of Prince Siddharta to many westerners, saying in his preface that it was inspired by "an abiding desire to aid in the better mutual knowledge of East and West" (Arnold, 1879); Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (known as D.T. Suzuki) is widely credited as being instrumental in introducing Zen Buddhism to the west when he moved from his home in Japan to the US in 1897, and later when he travelled throughout Europe; Alan Watts – who met D.T. Suzuki in London in 1936 – wrote many influential books about Buddhism (including 1957's *The Way of Zen*); and Christmas Humphries, a British barrister, founded the Buddhist Lodge, which later became the Buddhist Society, in Britain in 1939, and went on to write many key texts on Buddhism.

In the fifties beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg - who spent two years in Varanasi in India - and Jack Kerouac were very influenced by the teachings of D T Suzuki and subsequently introduced Buddhist ideas to their readers, for as Donald K. Swearer tells us:

> During the 1950s, D. T. Suzuki's depiction of Zen Buddhism as antirational and iconoclastic had great appeal to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac (author of The Dharma Bums [1958]), and other members of the Beat Generation. The appeal spilled over into the counterculture movement, which made books such as Watts' Way of Zen (1957) and Herman Hesse's Siddhartha (1922; translation 1951) part of the young's standard equipment. (Swearer, 1997, p. 82)

By the sixties Buddhism – and the influence of Eastern philosophy generally –

[7] Source: http://buddhism.about.com/library/weekly/aa013103a.htm. Retrieved 29/08/07
[8] Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_by_country. Retrieved 29/08/07

was really taking off both in Britain and the USA, as cultural changes sparked a new desire for spiritual growth. Famously, the Beatles were transformed by their trip to Rishikesh in the late sixties; and hippy travellers visited the east in search of inspiration. As Rory Maclean writes of the time:

> The counterculture tried to reform the West in the sixties. A generation rebelled against institutional authority, espousing communality without ideology, confronting spiritual emptiness by pursuing a collective dream for self-knowledge. (Maclean, 2006, p. 77)

This quote also hints at the idea that people in the west started turning to eastern religions, etc., when their own culture started to feel empty and superficial (and liquid?). In his 1958 essay 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', Watts pondered the growing popularity of Zen Buddhism – interestingly referencing the disquieting effect of new technologies in his analysis - saying:

> There is no single reason for the extraordinary growth of Western interest in Zen during the last twenty years. The appeal of Zen arts to the "modern" spirit in the West, the work of Suzuki, the war with Japan, the itchy fascination of "Zen-stories," and the attraction of a non-conceptual, experiential philosophy in the climate of scientific relativism-all these are involved... Always in the background there is our vague disquiet with the artificiality or "anti-naturalness" of both Christianity, with its politically-ordered cosmology, and technology, with its imperialistic mechanization of a natural world from which man himself feels strangely alien. (Watts, 1958)

Before going on to say the following about the appeal of Zen Buddhism to westerners:

> Here is a view of the world imparting a profoundly refreshing sense of wholeness to a culture in which the spiritual and the material, the conscious and the unconscious, have been cataclysmically split. (Watts, 1958)

However, in the same essay Watts warns that we should be careful not to be too quick to dismiss the religions in which we were born into because of the allure of

formerly unknown religions (Watts, 1958) and this view is shared today by the Dalai Lama whose books are best sellers across the world and who is perhaps the most influential figure in terms of Buddhism in the west today. The Dalai Lama believes that the east and the west have much to learn from each other, a view which is reflected in books such as 1998's *The Art of Happiness,* which he co-wrote with American psychologist Dr Howard Cutler, and which presents a marriage of eastern philosophy and western psychology. He also believes that one doesn't have to be religious in order to live a satisfying spiritual life, and that people can learn from the Buddhist faith without becoming Buddhists themselves. In his 1999 book *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World* he says the following:

> I cannot... deny that my whole thinking is shaped by my understanding of what it means to be a follower of the Buddha. However, my concern in this book is to try and reach beyond the formal boundaries of my faith. I want to show that there are grounds for supposing it possible to describe some universal principles which could help everyone to achieve the happiness to which we all aspire. (The Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 22)

The Dalai Lama, then, appears to be a strong advocate for spiritual tourism! However, Buddhism as a faith is growing in the west - Buddhists now account for an estimated 1.2% of the British population, and an estimated 2% of the American population.[9] New schools of Buddhism, such as The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, which was founded in London in 1968, have adapted Buddhism to suit western lifestyles, and claim to be playing a significant role in the growing popularity of Buddhism in the west[10]. Of course, it possible that by 'adapting' Buddhism, western practitioners are making fundamental changes in the religion – for as Ally Ostrowski says:

> ... it has been argued whether a religious tradition developed in an eastern cultural realm can be translated into western thought and practice. Do certain cultural differences prevent the religion from being observed as it was in the country of origin and do concessions responding to societal requirements need to be incorporated? (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 92)

[9] Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_by_country. Retrieved 29/08/07
[10] Source: http://www.fwbo.org/fwbo.html. Retrieved 29/08/07

Another factor for the recent growth in interest in eastern religion and philosophy may be the state of the world, and the fact that the recent acts of fundamentalists have given religion a bad name. In 2006, Nerina Pallot pondered "How to have faith when faith is a crime?" (Pallot, 2006) and the answer for some is to adopt a religion which can also be defined as a philosophy, and which has compassion and peace at its core. And of course the internet, with its ability to deliver information at the click of a mouse, has become a valuable resource for westerners who are interested in Buddhism...

5.3 Buddhism and the Internet

Online Buddhism, and the relevant literature which surrounds it, will be explored in much more detail in later chapters but for now it is important to say that Buddhism has a very strong presence on the internet which has made it accessible to many more people than ever before. As Kenshin Fukamizu tells us:

> The Internet, that postmodern communication medium descended from the printing press, has opened up the possibility for message dissemination to anyone with access to Internet technologies. (Fukamizu, 2007)

Clearly this is a very beneficial situation for several reasons. Firstly – it means that people who are not geographically near other Buddhists can still access information and communicate with fellow believers. As Charles Prebish tells us:

> ... the possibility (now) exists for any Internet-linked Buddhist to connect with the enormous richness of the Buddhist tradition throughout the world. By using the ability to navigate through cyberspace, the practitioner can remain an active part of a Buddhist community in which he or she does not reside. (Prebish, 2004, p. 144)

Secondly, as Prebish tells us, the internet: "can provide for some practitioners a Buddhist community *without location in real space*" (Prebish, 2004, p. 145). This location-less Buddhist community is also known as the 'cybersangha' and – as Ostrowski says:

> ... the features of the Internet can provide a particularly welcoming venue for the development of a cybersangha. For example, the Internet offers a wide range of religious information and space quickly, provides space for conversing without influence of religious authorities, and allows for interactivity and discussion of private and focused topics in a relatively free environment. (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 94)

And as Christopher Helland adds:

> ... for many people cyberspace is a real space. And for many of them, it is an acceptable medium for religious and spiritual participation. It is becoming an environment – a place – where people can "be" religious if and when they choose to be. (Helland, 2004, p. 31)

This idea that the internet allows people to express their spirituality at a time which is convenient to them leads into the third benefit of online Buddhism – it allows people to create their own version of their spirituality by reading a wide variety of materials and then 'picking and choosing' the beliefs, practices and philosophies which speak to them. For as Helland says:

> As an open and developing religious environment, the Internet caters to people who wish to be religious and spiritual on their own terms. (Helland, 2004, p. 34)

However, this 'benefit' can also be seen as a danger of online Buddhism because by creating spiritual tourists who are responsible for developing their own religiosity, the internet is arguably encouraging a 'watering down' and blurring of traditional Buddhist values. As Fukamizu says:

> In pre-modern times... the world heard only polished, charismatic voices, and followers invested their faith in these people... But postmodern media like the internet have opened up the floodgates for the voices of the masses, charismatic or otherwise. The quality of these messages varies, and even those dulcet broadcasters admired by religious groups have lost the special status they enjoyed earlier. There is no religious group that is

> able to regulate and control its followers. (Fukamizu, 2007)

And Helland concurs, saying:

> Although the Internet is in many ways a blessing to religious institutions that use it to their advantage, it can also be an official religion's worst nightmare. Like the printing press, power has shifted through the development of a tool of mass communication. Doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day. (Helland, 2004, p. 30)

And this power shift is certainly one of the most striking things about online Buddhism – and online religion generally. For just as Web 2.0 is user-generated, the religions/spiritualities of the people who visit it have the potential to be to. Of course, it is debatable as to whether this is a 'good' thing (which one suspects would be the view of the Dalai Lama), a 'bad' thing, or just a part of the cult periodically recreating itself (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) – but certainly it puts a lot of extra pressure on the online Buddhist to be discerning for as Fukamizu tells us:

> ... by increasing the number of information sources, the Internet promotes horizontal interaction and undermines the one-way, top-down information flow of doctrine. Given the glut of information of varying quality, people are becoming increasingly unable to place absolute faith in a specific voice. Awash in a flood of information, Internet users must constantly examine information critically to see if it is worthy of faith. (Fukamizu, 2007)

And one final challenge that comes with online Buddhism is the absence of personal contact with other Buddhists – whether teachers or peers. For as Prebish tells us:

> ... it is possible to construe the cybersangha as a true sign of the cold, rational, contemporary world in which communication is faceless and even impersonal. For many, the loss of face-to-face encounter, personal support,

> and shared practice in real space may be a strong liability that undermines the potential value of the cybersangha. Buddhist practitioners continue to struggle to find a sane balance between their easy access to and personal use of the Internet, and their need for direct human encounter. (Prebish, 2004, p. 147)

All of these issues, and many more, will be explored throughout the remainder of the thesis but for now we can say that the growth of Buddhism on the internet – whether for the better or the worse - demonstrates the meeting of east and west that was first articulated by Arnold in 1879.

5.4 Why Take Buddhism as my Case Study?

As we have seen, Buddhists believe that 'I' is an illusion based on a random series of temporary conditions, the body being one of them, which come together for a fleeting moment. This fleeting moment is what we understand to be human existence with all its associated bodily limits. It is difficult to think beyond our bodily existence, but it is nearly impossible to accept that when our body expires when we cease to be. Many religions give us a framework in the form of a belief system that enables us to envision life after bodily death, and in Buddhism this framework is the notion that life is organic and that nothing really dies – our bodies do not vanish from the Earth, they merely become absorbed back into it and re-emerge as other things in an endless cycle. Thus we are all part of one big organic life that is ever changing and never-ending – we are all part of a collective 'I'.

There is nothing particularly revolutionary about the Buddhist view of life but here in the western world the organic nature of life has been masked for many of us by the new technologies that shape our environment and our lives. It is therefore fascinating that Buddhism is now emerging online and is becoming available for us – the citizens of the liquid internet age – to either take up wholeheartedly or to utilise as we see fit as part of our time as spiritual tourists. In addition, the rise in online Buddhism in the west is a paradox because it is both a reaction against, and an example of, the liquid world in which we now find ourselves. On the other hand, the fact that Buddhism was so quick and so willing to utilise the internet makes it a good case study for a thesis which tackles the

notion of online spirituality. And because it is something which is of personal interest to me, it offers an opportunity to write an autoethnography. It is my hope that a deeper understanding of twenty-first century identity can be created by interrogating the ways that the internet is influencing our spirituality, and by analysing my own small steps into Buddhism both on and offline.

6 THE FIRST SNAPSHOT – 2006 – ONLINE V OFFLINE RITUALS

For some people Buddhism is a philosophy, for others it is a religion, but for all it is a spiritual quest for enlightenment. Buddhism was quick to embrace the opportunities that new technologies have afforded the western world and to explore extending that quest into cyberspace – in 2006 Ostrowski told us:

> ... the Buddhist presence online is growing at a rapid rate, providing users with access to information about the religion, means to contact other adherents, and ways to shop for Buddhist-related items. (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 91)

In 1991, Gary Ray had coined the term: 'cybersangha' (source: Prebish, 2004, p. 135) – a combination of 'cyber' which obviously suggests a computer-based virtual reality and 'sangha' which is a Buddhist word which refers to a community of Buddhist practitioners (or, more strictly, in its original use – an order of Buddhist monks). Prebish described the cybersangha as follows in 2004:

> ... a kind of Buddhist community, or *sangha*, never imagined by the Buddha. Nevertheless, this new and unusual *sangha* unites Buddhist practitioners and scholars worldwide into one potentially vast community... (Prebish, 2004, p. 135)

and Joachim Steingrubner describe it as follows:

> … 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 – an ability which would have been considered a siddhi, a magical power, just a couple of decades ago. *(*Steingrubner, 1996)

And by 2006, the cybersangha already had a wealth of Buddhist websites at their disposal. In the special 'Religion and the Internet' issue of *Communication Research Trends* (which, by its very existence, hints at the explosion of religion

online at the time) Heidi Campbell identified the four different forms of religion online that existed at the time - these were: “Gathering Religious Information Online”, “Online Worship and Rituals”, “Online Recruitment and Missionary Activities”, and “Online Religious Community” (Campbell, 2006, pp. 5-6).

This chapter is largely concerned with the second of these forms – i.e. online worship and rituals. One might imagine that these things might be particularly challenging to replicate online - several academics (e.g. Dawson, 2005; O'Leary, 2005) have expressed concern regarding the validity of the internet as a space for religious activity, given that human bodies, human senses, tangible walls and objects, and face-to-face contact (all things which might one might see as being central to performing religious rituals) are absent or restricted during its use. This chapter will be an attempt to start tackling this concern and to begin answering my second key research question, namely: *how does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?* I will be doing this by comparing my experiences of online and offline versions of some Buddhist rituals (which will be described autoethnographically and then analysed in each case), by gauging the opinions of some members of the cybersangha, and by exploring relevant theories, which – it should be noted – all date back at least to 2006 in order to reflect the thinking of the time. In order to tackle of the above, several sub-questions will be important as this chapter unfolds. They are:

* What benefits does the internet offer Buddhists and those who are interested in Buddhism?
* What are the benefits and limitations of the internet in terms of the cult of Buddhism? Does 'virtual' = 'superficial'?
* How can *prana* be defined and is it possible for *prana* to be present / developed online? In other words - can the internet truly be a sacred arena, and can it offer authentic spiritual Buddhist experiences?
* How important are physical elements such as the body, proximity to others, and tangible spaces (such as temples) and props (such as prayer wheels) in spiritual pursuits?
* How did this experience affect my own thoughts about and attitudes to both

Buddhism and technology?

6.1 Autoethnographic Introduction

This chapter is obviously about online Buddhism versus offline Buddhism, and looks particularly at the online and offline versions of three Buddhist rituals. For me, however, this chapter is also about the distrust I had of all online activities at the time (i.e. 2006), most of which I perceived to be disembodied and soulless or spiritually weak. I did most of the research and writing for this chapter back in 2006 and presented my findings at the Religious Norms in Cyberspace stream of the 2006 Cyberspace conference in Brno, Czech Republic. At the start of my presentation I talked about 2006 as being a ten year anniversary of the beginnings of religion & the internet, and of my own personal journey into technology. I said:

> It need hardly be said that cyberspace is an ever-expanding, increasingly significant social sphere for the west, we can see the way it has entered our collective conscious for ourselves on a day-to-day basis, as more and more businesses and organizations offer websites and online services, and as more and more individuals find a way to be heard via blogs, MySpace pages and personal websites. 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 using scribbled notes – now I research using search engines and write up my findings on my computer, using windows to provide quick access to dozens of documents. Religions, like everyone else, have been quick to set up camp online - in fact unbeknown to me 1996 was also the year of two significant events that heralded 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.

I moved on to describe the very dystopian and suspicious view of the internet that I held at the time. I said:

> These days everyone with Internet access has the ability to visit what Robert Wright refers to as a "high-speed spiritual bazaar" (as cited by

Chappell, 1997) which gives all of us the freedom of choice – no longer are we tied to the religion of our parents or our local community, instead we can read about a variety of religions and pick and choose from the ones that interest us – and as Jeff Zaleski says:

> Anywhere and anytime, anyone with Net access can now learn something about… any… religion. How will this ease of access to the universal store of sacred knowledge reshape the spiritual life of our species? Will religions keep their belief systems and their body of believers intact in a virtual world where it takes only a click of a mouse to jump from one temple, one mosque, one church to the next? (Zaleski, 1997, p. 4)

In other words, the internet is giving us more choice and more information than we have ever had before, but its nature as a medium that, in Dawson's words:

> … inculcates a strong and almost reflex-like preference for heightened visual stimuli, rapid change of subject matter, and diversity, combined with simplicity of presentation... (Dawson, 2005, p. 18)

This means that a superficial knowledge of a wide range of subjects is made more possible than an in-depth knowledge of one – in other words the internet, along with other fast-paced media designed for those with short attention spans, potentially encourages us to create our own pick 'n' mix religion in the same way that we eat international cuisine and absorb popular culture from all over the world. This phenomenon can be clearly demonstrated in the cultural exchange that has occurred between eastern and western cultures. We wear kimonos and practise Feng Shui in the same way that people in the east eat McDonalds and listen to western pop music (clearly there are pros and cons to this cultural exchange!)

The reference to pop music is interesting because I think the changes in the music industry were at the heart of my overall suspicion about the internet and

new technologies as a whole. Looking back to 2006, I can remember being increasingly distressed about downloadable music appearing on the internet and I must admit that I still have many reservations about it today. I am open minded enough to know that online music has transformed the music industry, and has been a great blessing for many people. However, for me it has brought about many losses - we no longer have to brave HMV on a Saturday, or trawl happily through endless racks in second-hand record shops in search of rare albums, we no longer have to carry heavy records around with us, or go through the routine of taking a record from its sleeve, gently dusting it, putting it on a turntable and delicately placing the needle in the correct place, hoping to avoid scratches, whilst being strangely fond of the scratches which bear witness to our immense, immeasurable love of certain albums, no longer must we watch the black vinyl spinning, or be on hand to turn the record over halfway through the album, no longer are we obliged to listen to album tracks in order, or to engage with albums as complete experiences. In summary – digital music and online music shopping rob us of the physical and spiritual music rituals that we became accustomed to in the twentieth century and their presence represents an assault on, to borrow a term from Durkheim, the "cult" of music (Durkheim, 1912).

Of course, digital music consumption does bring new rituals with it – but this is of little comfort to nostalgic music fans such as myself. For years therefore, I have refused to engage in online shopping, and have insisted on continuing to purchase 'real' singles and albums in 'real' shops with 'real' money. However, as time has gone I have began to question whether this makes me a strong person who is taking a stand against unwanted new technologies or an old-fashioned person who is living in the past and denying the cult of music the right to "periodically recreate itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312). Furthermore, the onset of online music and other new technologies represent, in my mind, the decay or 'watering down' of spiritual experiences and this has led, I suspect, to my increased interest in Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, and therefore to my attempts to find grounded 'meaning' in my life. However, when I started using the internet to explore the very things that I felt it was destroying – i.e. spiritual, embodied experiences, I realised that there was a certain irony in my position on the internet and other new technologies, and I wondered whether I had been too quick to damn them. Was it possible that the cult of Buddhism was

indeed recreating itself using the internet to move with the times?

6.2 The Cult of Buddhism

In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim refers to the significance of religious rites, which he defines as "the set of regularly repeated acts that constitute the cult" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) – and here he obviously means cult as in a system of worship rather than a sinister religious group – he says:

> … it is the cult that evokes… impressions of joy, of inner peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm, which the faithful hold as the experimental proof of their beliefs. The cult is not simply a system of signs by which faith is expressed outwardly, it is a collection of means by which it is created and periodically recreates itself. Whether it consists of physical manoeuvres or mental operations, it is always the cult that is efficacious. (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312)

Durkheim's suggestion that the cult can periodically recreate itself is something that we will return to at the end of this chapter, and throughout this thesis, but for now let us establish what is meant by the cult of Buddhism. Again, the specific rites, or rituals, will be different from school to school but they may include: group and solitary meditation of various kinds, chanting, bowing before sacred objects, turning prayer wheels, making offerings to shrines in homes and in temples, attending sermons or informal teachings, circumambulation of sacred sites, burning incense or butter-lamps, ringing bells, using rosaries, placing prayer stones, flying prayer flags and the ritualised consecration of images. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and some may surprised by the number of different methods of devotion that do exist in Buddhism, however one thing is common to all of them – the implied presence and necessity of the human body in all the activities.

By 2006, many of these Buddhist rituals were starting to appear – albeit in a slightly different form - on the internet. This makes sense because, as Dawson and Cowan told us in 2004:

> Cyberspace is not quite as unusual a place as sometimes predicted. Life in cyberspace is in continuity with so-called "real life", and this holds true for religion as well. People are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently. (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 1)

However, the question that naturally follows this would be: is an online version of a Buddhist ritual still an authentic experience? For Dawson and Cowan "a crisis of authenticity" is amongst the "very important social consequences of the Internet" (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 2). I would argue that this crisis is partly due to the disembodied nature of cyberspace and would join Zaleski, who asked the following question in his 1997 book *The Soul of Cyberspace:*

> The online world is a world of mind alone. How will the human spirit fare in such a realm, sundered from the mystery of the flesh? (Zaleski, 1997, p. 6)

And Zaleski, like me, was also concerned with what the effect of an online version of online rituals would be on *prana*. He said:

> *Prana* is a Sanskrit word sometimes translated as "life force," sometimes as "breath." It is equivalent to the Chinese concept of *chi*, and somewhat to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic concept of *spirit.* In all the major religious traditions, this force is seen as manifesting through the physical body of the human being. This view has profound implications for spiritual work in cyberspace, where the body is absent. (Zaleski, 1997, p. 34)

Of course, *prana* is a slippery concept which is not very easy to measure scientifically – although I will attempt to do so in terms of my own experiences. It might also be worth pointing out that in some ways we could argue that ultimately a ritual only really plays out in one's mind anyway (particularly if we go with the Buddhist notion that everything around us is an illusion) and so the method of delivery is potentially irrelevant anyway. Hopefully this chapter will shed some light on both of these matters.

6.3 Method

In order to tackle these questions I went in search of some Buddhist rites both out in the offline world, and in the depths of cyberspace. As part of my offline research I met some Buddhists in the 'real' (i.e. non-cyberspace) world, and took part in some of their spiritual activities. In Dharamsala, India, I met some Tibetan Buddhists, and turned some mani (prayer) wheels during circumambulation; in Harrogate I met a Soto Zen Buddhist, who taught me zazen, which is the Zen form of meditation; and in the Dales I met some Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists who allowed me to experience chanting in front of a Gohonzon (a sacred scroll). The three schools of Buddhism are totally different, but each experience was fascinating and enlightening in its own way. As part of my online research I downloaded a virtual Tibetan prayer wheel from http://dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm, I meditated in the online zendo at www.dailyzen.com, and I chanted in front of an online Gohonzon (found at http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/GohonzonShu/). My aim in each case was to find the online equivalent of the offline experience that I had already had.

As well as trying out some Buddhist rituals both online and offline, I also sought out opinions online from my 'cybersangha', via forums in MySpace and BeliefNet. It should be noted that it was me who started each discussion, and so I may well have coloured the conversation in some way despite my desire to be as neutral as possible. In the interest of ethics I did openly explain that I was a student studying Buddhism in each thread, and that any opinions expressed may well make their way into my work. Therefore, my intentions were clear, and the respondents were aware that they were contributing to an academic piece of research and may be quoted. All the people who contributed to the conversations used publicly available user names which don't necessarily identify them in the offline world, and since they were aware that they would very likely be quoted as part of my thesis I believe that referring to these names in my research is ethically sound. However, in order to protect the people that I met offline, I have avoided using too many personal details about them despite the fact that they too were aware that they were contributing to my work.

6.4 Gohonzons

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism & Gohonzons

I found out about Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism from someone I had known for sometime without being aware that she was a practising Buddhist. This fact I only found out one day, when having briefly explained what my thesis was about it transpired that not only was she a district leader for a local group of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, but also that she and her group were deeply upset because someone from within the organization had scanned a Gohonzon, a sacred object of worship in their school, and downloaded it onto the internet for all to see. In order to understand the significance of this act, I examined Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism in more detail.

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism was founded some 700 years ago by a Japanese monk, Nichiren Daishonin, who distilled the important Buddhist teaching, the Lotus Sutra, into the words: "nam-myoho-renge-kyo" - literally 'devotion to the mystic law of the lotus sutra'. His intention was that ordinary people would chant this mantra and thus develop the qualities needed to tackle the problems in their everyday life using the philosophy of the Lotus Sutra, the details of which we don't need to go into here. In order to provide his followers with a focus for their daily practise, he created an object of worship – the Gohonzon. A Gohonzon is a sacred scroll or plaque that is inscribed with the key elements of the Lotus Sutra, and which a Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist faces whilst chanting, and which is said to reflect back one's own life, a bit like a mirror. The Dai-Gohonzon ("dai" literally meaning 'great' or 'original') was inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin on 12th October 1279 and can still be seen in the head temple of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism at the foot of Mount Fuji in Japan. In order that all people have access to a Gohonzon, high priests of Nichiren Shoshu have been entrusted to inscribe replica Gohonzons that are then reproduced using a woodblock process. This process is still in action more than 700 years later.

Today, the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists continue to consider their Gohonzons, which are lent to dedicated followers during a special ceremony that marks the receiver's commitment to the practice, to be highly important and sacred. They keep them in special cupboards, out of sight, except during their chanting sessions, they keep them clean, make offerings to them, and are forbidden from photographing them. This explains why some members of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist community are upset by the fact that many Gohonzons have now been

scanned and are readily available for viewing online.

My offline AE experience of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism & Gohonzons

My colleague invited me to attend a meeting of a local group of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists at her home . About ten people were in attendance and the mood was friendly and informal. There was small talk and refreshments and it was all very pleasant and – if I can use this word – normal. After a short time we made our way into a small room which was full of Buddhist imagery, and in which all the chairs, sofas and cushions were pointed at a small, decorative wooden cupboard, known as a butsudan (literally, 'place of the Buddha') which housed my colleague's Gohonzon. The butsudan itself was surrounded by offerings and incense – and perhaps it was because of this, perhaps it was because of the seating arrangements, and perhaps it was because I could feel the respect that was aimed at the Gohonzon when the cupboard was opened in the room, but it really did seem to have a powerful spiritual presence. Everyone's eyes were fixed firmly on the Gohonzon when the chanting began – it was a strange, melodic and powerful sound (although in reality it was simply the repetition over and over again of the sacred words: "nam-myoho-renge-kyo") which seemed incredibly strange when juxtaposed against the English countryside outside the window. I felt too self-conscious to join in with the chanting (I can't hold a tune to save my life and I didn't want to damage the effect) but I did begin to feel quite hypnotised by the sound and by the scroll itself which, despite the fact that all the inscriptions on it were in an unfamiliar language, was beginning to feel like the centre of the world.

After the chanting was over (and this could have lasted anything from a couple of minutes to an hour – time had lost all meaning) the group had a discussion about how chanting before their Gohonzons has affected their lives. Almost all of them had a story to tell about how it had helped them overcome adversity – for example, one of the group felt that chanting had given her the strength to cope when her child had become seriously ill. All of them indicated that they felt happier, calmer and stronger as a result of their practise and were keen for me to have a go – one of the ladies gave me a small card with the words "nam-myoho-renge-kyo" on it to keep. They also talked about the pride that they felt on receiving their own Gohonzon. Although I liked the idea of having something

to focus on during one's spiritual practise, I felt the idea that one had to be formally initiated into this particular school of Buddhism was a little at odds with everything I had previously believed about Buddhism as a whole. I had enjoyed meeting the group, and they definitely seemed to have benefited from involvement in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, but the experience had slightly unnerved me. And then I realised something which unnerved me a whole lot more – in order to complete my research experiment I was going to have to do something which I knew would be offensive to this lovely group of people – find and use an online Gohonzon...

My AE online experience of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism & Gohonzons

Online Gohonzons may be offensive to the members of the group I met but there's no shortage of them on the internet. I found an extensive gallery of them on the Nichirens Coffee House website (found at http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/GohonzonShu/) and picked one I liked to use for my online experiment. I also found a guide to chanting "nam-myoho-renge-kyo" on the web – and in doing so learned that there are many examples of celebrity fans and use of the chant in films and popular music (for example - apparently chanting helped Tina Turner recover from her abusive relationship with Ike Turner[11]). My teacher was the following web page: http://www.comp.glam.ac.uk/pages/staff/srharris/nmhrk/home.htm which told me when I should chant, how long I should chant for, what I should wish for when I chant (it would seem that one can use the chanting experience to 'ask' for something as one might with a Christian prayer – this definitely doesn't correlate with my overall experience of Buddhism but I was willing to go along with it!) and even offered a free audio file to demonstrate how the chant should sound. I decided to chant for 3 minutes (apparently the most important thing is to pick a time limit and stick to it), to wish for the strength and determination to see me through to the end of my PhD, and to sit in front of my online Gohonzon while doing so.

Three minutes went by surprisingly quickly and I found myself enjoying the chanting and the unexpected powerful sound that seems to emanating from me. Visual images of my finished thesis came into my head as I chanted and when I finished I did feel optimistic about completion. The online Gohonzon definitely

[11] Source: www.wikipedia.com

did provide a useful focal point, and the Japanese writing on it seemed to dance and move as I gazed at it. However, I didn't feel its spiritual presence and I didn't feel mesmerised by its power or aura like I was by my colleague's 'real' Gohonzon. I also felt slightly guilty because I know the group I met wouldn't approve of my use of the online Gohonzon. Overall, the online experience was very interesting but lacked the 'magic' and 'energy' of my offline one. The chanting, however, was really brilliant and I wished that I had had the courage to join in when at my colleague's house – I'm sure the combination of what I felt to be an aura-emitting Gohonzon and the powerful effect of the chanting would have been mind-blowing.

Aura

My experiment reminded me of Benjamin's writings on art. He says:

> 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. (Benjamin, 1955, p. 232)

Perhaps the scroll was so powerful because we were all concentrating so hard on it. I wondered whether the group's dismay about the downloaded Gohonzon might be in part a fear that it fall into the hands of "the distracted mass" or, in this case, the casual net surfer. (Actually, a "distracted mass" is probably a very accurate definition of the human race in the age of the internet!) Furthermore, perhaps Benjamin's writing on the 'aura' of an original piece of artwork might provide some more illumination on the situation – he 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. (Benjamin, 1955, p. 215)

If the aura if a piece is tied up in its history then it is understandable that the group would be upset that the aura of one of their Gohonzons - which has been blessed by a high priest, which has possibly been owned by several different people, and which has been the focus of numerous highly personal chants – was

damaged by its reproduction. On the other hand, why shouldn't an online Gohonzon have the chance to develop a history too – after all, it has the potential to affect many more people than one in someone's living room. I may not get the chance to visit my colleague again but I will always be able to access an online Gohonzon. As Benjamin concedes:

> … technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself... it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room. (Benjamin, 1955, pp. 214-215)

In other words, to return to my music analogy, just because nothing beats seeing a live band in a fantastic music venue, that doesn't mean there isn't merit in owning a recording by that band (or even – dare I say it – downloading a track by the band). They are two different mediums, both with their own merits – but can one say the same about the two Gohonzons? The difference between the case study of the band and the Gohonzon is perhaps one of respect and reverence – the Nichiren Shoshu tradition states that one shouldn't display one's Gohonzon publicly, and so to do so may certainly seem to be disrespectful. I decided to seek opinions from one of my adopted cybersanghas – the Nichiren Buddhism community group on Beliefnet.

Beliefnet

Beliefnet can be found at www.beliefnet.com. It offers spiritual guidance for a number of different faiths, and describes its mission as follows:

> Our mission is to help people like you find, and walk, a spiritual path that will bring comfort, hope, clarity, strength, and happiness.
>
> Whether you're exploring your own faith or other spiritual traditions, we provide you inspiring devotional tools, access to the best spiritual teachers and clergy in the world, thought-provoking commentary, and a supportive

community.

> Beliefnet is the largest spiritual web site. We are independent and not affiliated with any spiritual organization or movement. Our only agenda is to help you meet your spiritual needs. ('About BeliefNet, n.d.)

It offers Buddhists what it calls “the Living Dharma board”, a discussion forum that is broken down into various sub-groups. I joined the Nichiren Buddhism group in order to gauge opinion on online Gohonzons.

The Cybersangha on Online Gohonzons

(For full transcript see Appendix One)

The first thing I learnt in my online discussions on Beliefnet is that opinions always vary from person to person. My seemingly innocent post about online Gohonzons soon 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 practised, it must be properly transmitted. Nichiren did not intend for Gohonzons to be so frivolously distributed. (etoro comment in 'Online Gohonzons' discussion forum thread at Beliefnet, 2006)

The use of the word ‘frivolously’ obviously suggests that people are downloading Gohonzons with no real consideration of the consequences, which Etoro seems to see as the possibility of the practice being taken up by people who are not serious about Buddhist teachings. This belief, whilst understandable, could be seen to be somewhat at odds with the widespread Buddhist belief that people should feel free to learn from whatever elements of Buddhism make sense to them, and risks making Etoro’s brand of Buddhism slightly elitist. 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. (Engyo comment in 'Online Gohonzons' discussion forum thread at Beliefnet, 2006)

So Engyo is advocating putting the onus back on the individual, and rendering the rites of the cult of Buddhism as mere tools for the spiritual development of the follower. If we follow this argument through to its natural conclusion, then there is no reason why the internet cannot ultimately provide equally valid tools, or methods of practice.

My mini AE conclusion

After my experiment I decided that whilst I benefited from my online experience of chanting to a Gohonzon, I wouldn't do it again out of respect to the people I met offline. But I also wondered whether I might feel differently if I was a practising Nichiren Buddhist who got separated from her 'real' Gohonzon for whatever reason and wanted to chant – would it really be so bad use an online Gohonzon as a substitute in the same way that one might have a photo of a missing loved one or a Kylie Minogue CD because Kylie refused to do a personal concert in one's front room every evening?

I also thought about why my online experience felt less authentic than my offline one and decide it has a lot to do with the absence of others – other voices, other gazes fixed firmly on the Gohonzon, and others validating and supporting each other's experiences. But I also think that 'aura' is a factor – the offline Gohonzon was tangible, 3D and real, it was a handmade original, it has been blessed by a priest and it had been earned by my colleague. It had a spiritual history and so was respected in the same way that a knowledgeable person or teacher might be. My own body wasn't really a factor in the experiment – if anything the online experience was a more embodied one because I did at least do the chanting that I was too self-conscious to do in front of the group I met – but the Gohonzon's 'body' and the bodies / physical presence of others definitely was important.

6.5 Zazen

Zen Buddhism & Zazen

I learnt about zazen - the Zen style of meditation – from a Soto Zen Buddhist whom I met following an enquiry I put to the Buddhist Society (which exists to promote the principles of all the major Buddhist schools in Britain) about local Buddhist groups. Each Buddhist tradition has a different view on the correct method and purpose of meditation and most westerners have now got a basic understanding of it, even if it is a rather stereotyped version (lotus position, fingers crossed and raised, eyes shut) that they see in their minds. In actual fact, meditation is one of the eastern practices that has been assimilated into our postmodern culture – many westerners practise meditation without any real understanding of the potential religious or spiritual undertones of such an activity. Indeed, I am one of many people who fell into this category as I practised it for many years before becoming interested in Buddhism itself. This is because its benefits are universal, and are described by Peter Harvey:

> The general effects of meditation are a gradual increase in calm and awareness. A person becomes more patient, better able to deal with the ups and downs of life, clearer headed and more energetic. He becomes more open in his dealings with others, and more self-confident and able to stand his ground. (Harvey, 1990, p. 245)

Clearly, these benefits would be appealing to most people, and are reason enough to take up meditation. However, for the Soto Zen Buddhists, from whom I learnt zazen, there are additional reasons to practise – unlike in other schools of Buddhism (including Rinzai Zen) where meditation is just one of the tools used in the quest for enlightenment, zazen is taught as *being* enlightenment. Harvey describes zazen as:

> ... a way of simply exhibiting one's innate Buddha-nature… A person must sit in *zazen* with constant awareness, and with faith that he is already a Buddha. (Harvey, 1990, p. 166)

My AE offline experience of Soto Zen Buddhism & Zazen

The lady whom I found via the Buddhist Society invited me to go to her home to learn the basics of zazen on a one-to-one basis before attending one of her group sessions. She was very warm and welcoming and talked me through the technique before practising alongside me. Of course, zazen, although simple, is still a spiritual practice, and has associated rites that go along with it. My teacher lit candles and incense, and rang a bell at the start and end of our session, and her room was filled with images of the Buddha. However, the practice itself was very straight forward – 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. Easier said than done but a strange feeling did wash over me, a great calmness and ease in my own skin, perhaps a tiny hint of my Buddha-nature calling. Another important element of the practice was the intimate solidarity that was built up between my teacher and myself as we accompanied each other in the simple activity of what her group terms 'serene reflection meditation'.

After we finish meditating she asked me how it felt and gave me some advice on how to clear my mind and then we sat down with tea and biscuits and I asked her about her journey to Soto Zen. It would seem that she was very keen to find a religion that suited her and tried lots of different ones before discovering that Soto Zen suited her perfectly (the perfect example of a spiritual tourist whose religion ultimately solidified!). She told me of the peace it has given her, and of the joy that she finds when attending retreats with fellow Soto Zen Buddhists at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in Hexham, Northumberland. She explained that the only problem, as she sees it, is a lack of local interest especially from younger people which stops there from being much of a local community for her to tap into. I was utterly charmed by this gentle old lady and by the method of meditation she taught me and planned to go to her next session. Unfortunately I received a letter from her a few days later recommending that I didn't go after all as they would be discussing disbanding as a group. It seemed that the lack of numbers had reached crisis point. This made me feel very sad indeed. I hoped that she will still find ways to leave a full spiritual life and that she has plenty of others friends who can visit her in her little bungalow. I also hoped to find another kind and gentle teacher online to guide me through my online experience...

My online experience of zazen

I didn't find a zazen teacher online, nor the sense of intimacy or heart to heart dialogue that I enjoyed in my offline experience. However, I did discover Daily Zen, a website that offers its visitors the opportunity to meditate in an online zendo (a Japanese word for meditation hall). Daily Zen can be found at www.dailyzen.com. It began in 1998 and claims to have been visited by 5 million people from all over the world. It aims to be "a tranquil haven with a flavorful *(sic)* Zen aesthetic" (www.dailyzen.com, n.d.) and indeed is frequently recommended by other Buddhist websites for its simple and minimalist design. The popular site BuddhaNet says the following about DailyZen:

> A unique and elegant environment. Profound contemplation of the day, inspiring artwork, seasoned with a dash of humor *(sic)* to en-lighten the day… visit this spacious haven steeped in Zen spirit. ('BuddhaNet's Web Links – Zen Buddhism', n.d.)

In addition to a daily quote from ancient Zen and Taoist teachings, and archived quotes from previous days, the site also offers free subscription to its monthly journal, 'On the Way', and a shop that sells exclusive merchandise depicting Zen artwork. The site does not offer any opportunities to interact with others, but it does offer online meditation in its unique zendo, of which 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. ('DailyZen Meditation', n.d.)

The site, therefore, promises something quite interesting – the possibility of sharing a spiritual experience with a potentially limitless number of other users. 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. I was excited at the possibility of experiencing an online Buddhist ritual, so I visited the zendo at Dailyzen.com to find out what it was like…

I made myself comfortable and clicked to enter the zendo, and as I did a bell rang, just as it had in my real life experience of zazen. However, herein lay problem number one – the hypnotic and enveloping resonance of a real bell is lacking in cyberspace, no matter how good your speakers are. Nonetheless, I tried to put this thought aside as I had been taught to do, and focused on the screen. Another thought came to the surface, this time a flutter of excitement at my discovery, again I tried to discard this feeling, but just as quickly another thought came and another, my head was full of ideas and possible new lines of research, and then the temptation to click out of the zendo and begin a search for other online meditative spaces became too much. Of course, it was reasonable that I should be excited, given the nature of my thesis, and so I tried again another time, and another, and another… Every time I was distracted and had moved on to another page before I'd had a chance to stop myself, and in fact before I'd even realised what I'd done. It was only later, when I asked some people in a discussion forum about the zendo and one participant asked me whether the bell rang at the end of the session and I didn't know because I'd never got that far did it occur to me how unable to concentrate I had been – and even when I returned to the zendo I was still unable to focus long enough to find out the answer to this question. I concluded that meditation, a prolonged period of concentration, was at odds with the very nature of the internet. However, I still felt that the zendo was an interesting model for the possibility of solidarity online. I was fascinated by the idea that I could meditate with an anonymous group of people whose size and make-up it would be impossible to define. But I also felt that this couldn't be as rich an experience as meditating with another person, particularly with such a gentle and wise teacher. Of course, there might be any number of such teachers meditating in the online zendo at the same time as me but their lack of embodied presence would limit the positive influence that they could have on me.

Intimacy & Interactivity

An important element of most forms of Buddhism is the relationship between pupil and teacher, and this is of particular significance in Zen Buddhism. A key concern of David W. Chappell's is the inability of cyberspace to provide the necessary intimacy for Buddhist development. He says:

> The interpersonal interaction between master and student emphasised in the Zen is necessary for the transmission of enlightenment "mind to mind" or "heart to heart"… No electronic medium is adequate for this degree of intimacy. (Chappell, 1997)

Defining intimacy is perhaps difficult as it means different things for different people but to me intimacy must surely be about a physical presence and connection – or at the very least a live & instant connection such as that which a telephone conversation which might provide. The interactivity which is available on the net is largely textual and as Dawson asks when discussing the limitations of online religion:

> Part of the problem seems to lie with the strictly textual character of so much computer-mediated communication. Can religious experience be embodied in words alone? (Dawson, 2005, p. 17)

However, he does (correctly as it turns out!) hint at a future in which the internet might begin to have a much higher degree of interactivity (and therefore a much greater potential for 'intimacy' online) when he says:

> At this point I would say that the interactive religious potential of cyberspace remains largely a dormant and untapped capacity. It is difficult to say why this is the case… but I believe that part of the answer lies in gaining a better grasp of the nature, limitations, and reality of 'interactivity' on the internet. (Dawson, 2005, p. 16)

In the light of this, I tried to picture a situation in which my attempt at online meditation might have been more 'authentic' – for example perhaps if I could have eliminated the feeling of separation between the computer screen and myself by wearing a virtual reality headset I might have felt more relaxed. However, I still believe my real life experience of 'fully present' zazen would be infinitely superior because the sounds and movements and relationships were resonant and, to my mind, charged with *prana*. In this case *prana* might mean intimacy, resonance, fluidity of movement, connection between mind and body, and human companionship. My virtual reality headset idea would fall short on all

these counts – for as Chappell says:

> The Internet is trying to develop to the point where we can consider its images to be "virtual reality", whereas the Buddha is trying to do the opposite, namely to get us free and focused so that we can be in touch with the mystery and wonder of each thing rather than to construct substitutes, either mentally or electronically. The Internet as an electronic medium may give us more information about things, but may make us even more out of touch with their experienced reality than ever before. (Chappell, 1997, pp 2-3)

Confused, I decide to once again turn to my BeliefNet sangha to see what they think.

<u>The Cybersangha on Online Meditation</u>

(For full transcript see Appendix Two)

My first respondent, following my post on the Zen Buddhism forum on BeliefNet 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…Still, I think it is nice that someone is helping people like this… One final thought; I would prefer it if the site encouraged people to get instruction from an authentic teacher before they attempt to jump into Zazen any where for that matter. (laystudent comment in 'Online Meditation / DailyZen' discussion forum thread at BeliefNet, 2006)

Here, laystudent reinforces the idea that the internet is certainly a good place to start, but also emphasises the importance of the intimate relationship between teacher and student and of getting the technique right. Interestingly, laystudent also places the control back into the hands of the individual by suggesting that what might constitute authentic Zazen practise for one person may not for another, 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’ (zenmonk_genryu comment in 'Online Meditation / DailyZen' discussion forum thread at BeliefNet, 2006) but didn’t go on to explain why, another new member suggested, perhaps in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way (that’s the problem with text based conversation – sarcasm is hard to detect!) that ‘it might cause the Earth to wobble on its axis’ (termite comment in 'Online meditation / DailyZen' discussion forum at BeliefNet, 2006) – perhaps alluding to the idea that if we all sat in isolation, staring at our computer screens then we would never get anything done out in the ‘real world’. (Although, of course – it is debatable as to whether we would be truly alone if we were all interacting with the same online facilities, and therefore all part of the cybersangha or collective ‘I’.) At this point, laystudent jumped back in and said:

> 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 people. (laystudent comment in 'Online meditation / DailyZen' discussion forum at BeliefNet, 2006)

Thereby returning the debate to being one of intimacy, and to the power of people being ‘fully present’ flesh and bones and all. A late contributor to the debate, nnn123, then added:

> … sometimes there is a choice of time… either we are taking time to interact in the real world with live human beings or we are taking time to interact through a limited medium like the Internet. It is not that the Internet is so bad, it is that we are not devoting time to creating communities in the real world. In that sense, our devotion to the Internet seems to be usurping real human interactions… I don't think that interactions by machine can replace these… I have hopes that the Internet will soon go beyond mostly text to being fully audio and video so that the interactions change dramatically in tone. I think that will help solve some of these concerns. (nnn123 comment in 'Online meditation / DailyZen'

discussion forum at BeliefNet, 2006)

The late participant hinted at a slightly dystopian view of cyberspace, seeing it as a force with the ability to usurp 'real human interactions'. It should be noted of course, that wise though nnn123's words were, he or she was actively continuing the apparently inferior online community building by joining the debate! Nonetheless, his or her point about the limitations of the internet is a valid one and brought me back to Dawson's argument that we are not yet seeing the internet's true potential as an interactive medium.

Mini AE Conclusion

Unfortunately, none of the people who responded to my post shared any experiences of online meditation and so more research is required to find out whether it does actually work for some people. For me though, meditation in the 'real' world with 'real' bells and 'real' people was a much richer and more spiritually rewarding experience. DailyZen was fun but just didn't take me to the same place as my offline meditation – whether because my body wasn't engaged, whether because the intimate relationship between teacher and pupil was missing, or whether because the internet just isn't yet advanced enough to support such an endeavour, for now I will be sticking to meditating in the real world!

6.6 Prayer Wheels

Tibetan Buddhism & Prayer Wheels

Tibetan Buddhism is an ornate, complex version of Buddhism, about as far from the simplicity of Soto Zen and the pragmatism of Nichiren Buddhism as one can imagine. One of the many distinctive features about the tradition is the role of prayer wheels, known in Tibetan as *Mani* wheels.

Mani wheels are used in Tibetan Buddhism as one way of releasing the powerful mantra, or formula, *Om Mani Padme Hum* (it is also chanted or murmured under the breath). 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, an idea relating to that of the Buddha's first sermon as the 'setting in motion of the *Dhamma*-wheel'. '*Mani* religious wheels are of various types… The largest wheels, found at the entrance to temples, may be 4 metres high and 2 metres in diameter, and contain thousands of *Mani* formulas, along with scriptures and images. (Harvey, 1990, p.186)

In short, Tibetan prayer wheels are huge, heavy, intricately designed, sacred and surely impossible to reproduce online.

<u>My offline AE experience of Tibetan Buddhism & Prayer Wheels</u>

Whilst researching this chapter I was extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to visit Dharamsala, the Indian home of the exiled Dalai Lama, and a large community of his Tibetan people. Reaching the small Indian town in the Himalayan foothills is a truly terrifying adventure – our car zoomed around narrow roads, narrowly avoiding both sheer drops on the sides of the road and packed buses which charged down the inner lane with seemingly no regard for the vehicles by the cliff edge. I texted several people to tell them I loved them and then spent most of the journey with my eyes pressed firmly shut. However, as soon as we arrived all was forgiven and all was forgotten – it was a magical town. Having been in Dharamsala since 1959 following the actions of the Chinese government in their homeland the Tibetan people, under the guidance of the Dalai Lama, have re-built Buddhist temples and monasteries in their new Indian home, reinventing Dharamsala and the surrounding Himalayan area as a colourful tribute to the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism – prayer flags in every colour fluttered in the trees, prayer stones lined the walls, and traditional Tibetan wares – colourful thangkas, bright prayer beads and Buddhas carved from sandalwood were available on every corner. Monks and nuns in maroon robes filled the streets, and large posters of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan people's spiritual leader smiled down on you from every shrine. Given the horrors that the people of Tibet have faced at the hands of the Chinese, it is little short of miraculous that they are the kind, gentle laughing people that they are, and their welcoming smiles are the greatest advert imaginable for Tibetan Buddhism.

It is no wonder that people from all over the world flood into this small town to soak up their compassionate spirit.

Whilst in Dharamsala, I had the honour of joining the many visitors who were engaged in the spiritual practice of circumambulation in which one slowly circles a sacred site, in this case the temple in the grounds of the Dalai Lama's monastery, turning the large prayer wheels that lined the walk as we went. The practice is simple but quite physical - the feel of the cool metal engraved containers against the fingers provides great comfort in the blazing Indian heat, and the sight of so many wheels turning, and so many people helping to keep them turning, is powerful and moving in a way which can't quite be explained in words, except – inadequately - to say that it feels quite spiritual. Even if one misses the finer points about the reasons for the tradition, and becomes involved in the hypnotic game of keep-every-wheel-spinning (kind of like keepy-uppy for spiritual grown-ups), one feels that one is contributing to something, like each person spinning is a drop of water on a water mill, playing a small but essential role in the working of the machinery.

Prayer wheels also appear in various other guises – for example Tibetan people often carry small, hand-held versions on their person, small versions are placed on tabletops to be spun, and wheels are often placed where they can be spun by wind, water or heat from fire or steam (for example, above a stove). However, they are also now widely available in various digital forms, as I discovered by chance on my return to England.

<u>My online AE experience of Prayer Wheels</u>

Having so recently had the experience of turning 'real' prayer wheels in Dharamsala, I was somewhat dubious about the power of online prayer wheels. However, in the name of research, I loaded a few up (at http://dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm) and dutifully watched them spinning. It was actually quite hypnotic, perhaps because it was so rhythmic, but I felt no spiritual attachment to these digital versions. I forced myself to consider why this experience wasn't charged with prana *– I concluded that it was firstly because I knew that the digital wheels weren't filled with secret or hidden blessings, scriptures and images and so somehow felt somewhat fake; and*

secondly because the digital wheels didn't involve an embodied ritual – I couldn't feel my body moving as they moved, I couldn't feel the cold metal on my hands, and I wasn't feeling the warmth of my face as I walked around the temple in real air. In this case, therefore, the prana *was tied up in authenticity and embodiment. However, it occurs to me that I am unlikely to have the chance to return to Dharamsala any time soon or indeed ever (and even if I did get the chance I'm not sure I could stomach the journey again!) and it is clearly beyond my power to build prayer wheels of the sort I saw in India so really, the online prayer wheels are all I have (much like a photo of an absent loved one). Now, obviously I am not a Tibetan Buddhist and so don't actually need access to any prayer wheels but I start to think once more about the horrors that the Tibetan people fled, and how many of them fled their homes, never to return, and I start to think that maybe some of them might be grateful for an online prayer wheel to spin in the corner of their screen.*

Moving with the times

After my experiment with the online and offline prayer wheels I thought back to Durkheim's suggestion that the "cult" of a religion "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) and for the first time considered that this might happen because it has to happen – a Tibetan Buddhist who can no longer visit a temple for complex political reasons might develop a new online ritual so that they can keep the spirit of their religion alive. After all, the rites of a religion are not the religion – they are just expressions of it. Dawson says:

> …there is evidence that those seeking to practise religion in cyberspace may be reconceptualizing what it means to be religious in ways that pose problems for both conventional religious and social scientific approaches to religious life, while permitting them, nevertheless, to be fully religious online. (Dawson, 2005, p. 16)

And perhaps this is true for Tibetan Buddhists and indeed for remote members of any faith. For a final time, I sought the opinions of my cybersangha.

My Cybersangha on Digital Prayer Wheels

(For full transcript see Appendix Three)

The Virtual Tibetan Buddhist Sangha, a discussion group within the popular website MySpace, were unanimous in their approval of digital prayer wheels – one respondent gave me the link to the Dharma Haven site where I had began my research, and another gave me a link to a MySpace homepage which was bursting with spinning wheels, and gave an extensive and enthusiastic explanation of their benefits. I looked elsewhere and found one westernised Tibetan sect who no longer uses prayer wheels, but nowhere was there any evidence of disapproval of the digital wheels. Even the Dalai Lama was quoted as approving and the more I looked, the more wheels I found. I wondered whether the fact that many of the Tibetan people have had to deal with being uprooted to another country might have made them a more adaptable and open-minded group. Indeed Jaron Lanier, the man who coined the term 'virtual reality' (as cited in Zaleski, 1997, p. 135) pointed 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. (Lanier, as cited in Zaleski, 1997, p . 155)

The suggestion here is almost that cyberspace could become a new base for Tibetan Buddhism, which doesn't seem like such a crazy idea really, given the horrors that they endured in their homeland. The lack of body that I found problematic in my attempted use of digital prayer wheels is perhaps no bad thing for those who have endured great physical violence in their offline homeland.

Mini AE Conclusion

I started to suspect that the reason I couldn't get to grips with the online rites that I'd tried out had more to do with my inability to be flexible than anything else. Perhaps the Tibetan Buddhists had shown prana *to also be as much about courage and flexibility, and about making the most of new technologies, than as embodied rites. Nothing would ever live up to the incredible experience I had in India but perhaps it was time to embrace the internet and all it has to offer me from the comfort of my own home...*

6.7 Conclusion

My experiences in offline – or 'real' - and online Gohonzons, zazen and prayer wheels produced some interesting results. In each case I found the online version to be inferior (in my subjective opinion) than the 'real life' version for various reasons: lack of aura and reverence for tradition in the case of the Gohonzons; lack of intimacy, resonance, fluidity of movement, connection between mind and body, and 'fully present' human companionship in the case of zazen; and lack of authenticity and bodily contact in the case of prayer wheels; in short – there was, as far as we can measure such subjective things, a lack of *prana* in all cases. 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. So whilst I did find a wealth of information about Buddhism online, and whilst I did meet a lot of Buddhists as I travelled through the virtual plains, I wasn't convinced that cyberspace could truly offer a viable arena in which to conduct Buddhist rites. Nevertheless, I finished the research period determined to evaluate my experiences fairly and so I returned to the questions that I had set for myself at the start of the process:

What benefits does the internet offer Buddhists and those who are interested in Buddhism?

The first thing which I have to concede having been through this process is that whilst conducting rituals online might be limiting, the internet does have a very useful function in terms of providing information. I actually used it to find the Soto Zen Buddhist who taught me meditation, to look up more information about Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, and to plan my trip to Dharamsala, and it certainly saved me an enormous amount of time during my offline endeavours. It also allowed me an easy way to seek opinions from a large number of Buddhists because of the many forums and discussion boards that are available at the click of a mouse online. It enabled me to connect to people and to information that I wouldn't have been able to access without extensive research and expense and this was certainly beneficial to me and I'm sure would be to anyone else who is interested in Buddhism.

What are the benefits and limitations of the internet in terms of the cult of Buddhism? Does 'virtual' = 'superficial'?

I was able to easily access the tools I needed to conduct online versions of the

Buddhist rituals that I chose for the project so it is good that these resources are available on the internet for the taking. This is particularly useful in terms of accessing things that one might not otherwise be geographically able to. For example, I don't know if I'll ever make it to Dharamsala again but I will always be able to spin my digital prayer wheel that is now on my desktop. The main limitations were lack of a physical body, lack of the presence of others and a lack of a full, three dimensional, five senses reality. These limitations made each online experience rather empty and unsatisfying. However, the online versions were a reasonable alternative when the offline versions weren't available – a bit like carrying a photo of an absent loved one.

How can prana *be defined and is it possible for* prana *to be present / developed online? In other words - can the internet truly be a sacred arena, and can it offer authentic spiritual Buddhist experiences?*

As I suspected, this was the hardest question to answer because the concepts of 'sacred', 'spiritual' and *prana* are very difficult to scientifically measure. However, I do believe that you know in yourself when you are experiencing each of them and so I can categorically state that I didn't personally feel *prana* during any of my online experiences. Arguably, I did have a sense that I was undertaking something spiritual in each case – but this was more of an intellectual knowledge than anything else. For me, at this point in time, I cannot see cyberspace, or any of the websites that I have so far discovered as part of my research, as being sacred.

How important are physical elements such as the body, proximity to others, and tangible spaces (such as temples) and props (such as prayer wheels) in spiritual pursuits?

The short answer to this is 'profoundly'. It is my understanding that a Buddhist ritual aims to unite mind, body, soul and universe and that these four things are very much interdependent. Therefore, an activity which excludes any one of them cannot hope to be as spiritually satisfying or authentic as one which includes all four. The physical body allows us to utilise all our senses, it allows us to experience physical proximity to others, and it allows us to have an awareness of our surroundings and the world in which we live. Whilst an online experience might include some sights and sounds, this can only be in a limited

two dimensional way, and smell, touch and taste are eliminated altogether. Similarly, we may make connections with others via textual communication but this is an extremely limited method of communication. Finally, without an awareness of our surroundings we cannot fully participate in our role within the universe. Of course, in some ways the lack of a physical body is liberating – for example prejudices about gender, age, race, appearance and disability are removed or severely lessened, and embarrassment may also be reduced – for example I chanted happily in the privacy of my own home but was too afraid to do so when the other Nichiren Buddhists were present. Overall though, I believe that disembodiment of online existence is debilitating.

How did this experience affect my own thoughts about and attitudes to both Buddhism and technology?

My offline research greatly increased my knowledge about Buddhism and the range of different schools and traditions that exist within it. It allowed me to meet some fantastic people and cemented my belief that Buddhists generally have the kind of personality and nature that I aspire to. I really enjoyed each of my offline experiences and the memories of each will stay with me forever. I particularly enjoyed learning the Soto Zen meditation and will aim to incorporate it into my life so that I can go on benefiting from my experience. I found my online experiences interesting on a more intellectual level. Interestingly I completely forgot that I was researching during my offline experiences but was acutely aware of this during my online phase. I think this must be because the offline experiences were richer and allowed me to succumb to the moment and be fully engrossed in each activity whereas the online research was less engrossing and much less fun so and felt much like work. However, the experience did open my eyes to the potential of the internet for Buddhists who, for whatever reason, struggle to access offline experiences whether due to lack of money, time, resources or geographical proximity. The open minded view that some of the cybersangha (and the Dalai Lama himself) had to cyberspace led me to believe that it does have the potential to be spiritually important to those who are willing to embrace it. And, of course, more and more people are becoming computer-literate and those who are younger than me are naturally more accepting of the technologies that I remain suspicious of. The implication here is huge – as time goes on, the population will consist of a bigger and bigger

percentage of people who are comfortable with digital experiences. The cybersangha will begin to create new online experiences and will have no reason to compare them with non-digital experiences. It seems inevitable that the cult of Buddhism will begin to recreate itself, just as Durkheim taught (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312), but perhaps it is worth considering whether this is really going to jeopardise the fundamental essence of Buddhism or not.

In my limited research I found members of the cybersangha who were prepared to advocate the online spiritual rites, and were able to find the *prana* in each, if only because they pointed out that all the activities were simply tools to assist with the true goal of Buddhism, that of unearthing one's true Buddhahood. And cyberspace is a tool that has enormous potential to offer new ways to do just this. Not only does this make the possibility of participating in online rites more acceptable, but it also unites the members of every different Buddhist tradition – for it is only their spiritual rites that are different, their goals remain resolutely the same. Nothing will ever replace the unique benefits of person-to-person, 'fully present' existence; but it is possible that cyberspace will be able to add a new list of benefits, which will have very little to do with what has come before them.

I am beginning to feel that perhaps it is a mistake to try to compare online and offline rites – they are two very separate things. Just as Benjamin spoke disparagingly on the "ill-considered" (Benjamin, 1955, p. 220) nineteenth-century debate about the artistic value of painting versus the artistic value of photography; just as one cannot compare the magic of film with the magic of live theatre, so, I suspect, one cannot compare online and offline activities. This is difficult for those of us who can remember life before cyberspace, for we are a generation in transition, but today's young people are – it has been argued - different from us (Prensky, 2001). Therefore, it is possible to conceive of a new Buddhism for the new generation whose goal remains consistent with the schools that have come before it, but whose methods become more technologically minded – for, once again, as Durkheim pointed out, the "cult": "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312). That is not to say that these methods are already in place, cyberspace is a relatively embryonic arena and its potential, as Dawson pointed out, still lies dormant (Dawson, 2005).

However, as Venerable Pannyavaro says: "21st century Buddhism will be left behind as a museum piece if we do not harness ourselves to the new technologies and the Internet" (Venerable Pannyavaro, n.d.) and the same can be said for any religion, any business, and, indeed, any group or organisation. Fortunately, Buddhism has always been at an advantage because it is so open to change and progress, and I predict that as we see great leaps in the possibilities of cyberspace in the next few years, we will see the cult of Buddhism begin to recreate itself. At this point in the history of digital technology we cannot yet know exactly what this means, but I nonetheless suspect that the cybersangha will start to find a way to lead a spiritual existence in cyberspace. As a member of the last generation of – to borrow Marc Prensky's term - "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001), and as a student of religion online, I wholeheartedly look forward to observing this recreation.

7 THE SECOND SNAPSHOT – 2007/2008 – MYSPACE, BUDDHISM & IDENTITY

This chapter is about MySpace which, in 2007 and 2008, seemed to be the social networking site that everyone wanted to be on. The main focus of the chapter is on one of the largest Buddhist groups which existed on the site at the time (and which was an important community to me personally at the time) and its members. By analysing the group and its members I was looking to get a sense of the kind of individuals who were accessing this 'cybersangha' and, more specifically, whether I could find any evidence of spiritual tourism within the group. This chapter, then, is part of my attempt to answer my key research question: *does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?*

Around the time that I carried out this research, other scholars in the field of online religion were starting to find suggestions that the internet was facilitating a diversifying and individualising (and, indeed, a liquefying) of spirituality and religion in the west. For example, in 2004 Dawson and Cowan said:

> ... the easy coexistence of so many different and openly heterodox views in cyberspace exposes the Net surfer to a more fluid doctrinal environment, one that has the potential to encourage individual religious and spiritual experimentation. (Dawson & Cowan, 2004, p. 3)

And in 2006, Ostrowski quoted Thomas Tweed as follows regarding western converters to Buddhism:

> 'Religious identity also can be complex for converts. Conversion involves a more or less (often less) complete shift of beliefs and practices. The old tradition never fades completely; the new one never shapes exclusively' (Tweed 1999, 73). (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 93)

Ostrowski also presented some of her own research as follows:

> Based on this study, the profile of those using the Internet to access

> information on Buddhism tended to be white (72%), raised as Catholics (27.2%) or Protestants (26.1%), and not members of a Buddhist temple or meditation center (74.5%)... Participants indicated a wide range of current religious traditions, but tended to affiliate with no religion (21.2%), Buddhism of an unspecified sect (19.0%), a sense of spirituality (11.4%) or were still searching for a religious tradition (11.4%). (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 97)

And Phil Henry – unusual at the time in that he focused his research on Buddhists in the UK (Henry, 2006) – said:

> In my own research, engaged Buddhist participants often admit to a hybrid religious identity, laying claim to their Buddhist Jewish-ness, or Christian Buddhist sympathies, rarely removing these cultural and religious identities from their perspectives and outlooks. (Henry, 2006, p. 15)

Before expanding by saying the following about the UK Buddhists he had studied:

> Other spiritual influences in people's lives showed up positive for 64.8% of the sample, the majority of which were Christian influences, or earth ecology, music or friends. Over 50% had another faith before coming to Buddhism, 38.7% were formally Christian, 46.6% had no faith, 2% were Jewish, 1.6% Hindu and 9% other/not specified. (Henry, 2006, p. 26)

What all of this research seems to reveal is that although there was a great deal of interest in Buddhism in the west in the mid-noughties, people were not necessarily becoming Buddhists in the traditional sense – instead they were constructing new faiths for themselves which were influenced by a variety of religions including Buddhism. In other words, spiritual tourism was on the rise. This chapter is my contribution to this work.

7.1 Autoethnographic Introduction

I researched the majority of this chapter in 2007 and now, looking back at it in

2010, it feels quite dated and almost anachronistic. MySpace has now become a website which predominantly seems to exist as a platform for new music artists – until I revised this chapter I hadn't felt to log in and visit my own profile for several years (although I have visited several music pages recently) and it is really incredible how it now feels really basic and unnecessary when compared to Facebook, Twitter, etc. However, when I first created my MySpace profile it felt like I was venturing into a brave new world – and indeed I was. I was very reluctant to do it (that fear of technology again) and really felt like it was something that I was doing for very academic reasons as my 'About Me' profile statement, which still remains today, testifies:

> *I have recently discovered that all my friends have been merrily rendez-vousing in cyberspace whilst I have been skipping about doing quaint and retro things like going to the pub, so I am tiptoeing in to see what all the fuss is about. Plus I am working towards a PhD which is largely about the Internet so I thought maybe, just maybe, I better address my fear of technology...*

However, it didn't take long until I got into the swing of the site and for a while it became quite fun, and quite sociable, as well as being a focus for my research. And then, in April 2007, it suddenly became something really important...

On Monday 16th April 2007, student Seung-Hui Cho opened fire on the campus of Virginia Tech and killed 32 fellow students and staff and injured many more before killing himself. It was a really terrifying massacre which shocked the world and ultimately caused a lot of criticism to be levelled at US law but the thing which no one seemed to be saying at the time was that Cho was clearly a very disturbed young man and that the tragedy was deeply sad not just because of the people who had been killed, and their friends and families, but also because Cho was clearly in need of some help which never came. I found myself feeling an enormous amount of compassion for him and for his family, a view which wasn't being expressed anywhere in the media. However, when I turned on MySpace and went to the Buddhism group to do some research I was astonished to find an out pour of similar feelings to mine and this really helped me feel comforted – I wasn't alone in my feelings and suddenly felt part of

Buddhism, a religion which has always been big on compassion for ALL beings and people. I inched closer to being a Buddhist, and to being an internet convert!

7.2 An Introduction to MySpace

The website www.myspace.com is a social networking site – a place where users can create their own profile page, share pictures, chat to friends and would-be friends, and discover new music. It creates online communities by allowing people to build a group of 'friends' with mutually agreed links to each others' profiles; and by offering the opportunity to establish or join 'groups' which represent an almost endless array of hobbies, interests and beliefs, and which enable members to post bulletins and participate in forums. Its content, in summary, is largely user-created and user-maintained and it can therefore be classified as an example of Web 2.0. The site was born in 2003, and although there is some controversy in terms of who founded the company and why (Wikipedia reports that it may have been a more corporate and arguably cynical birth than the stories of a humble beginning in a garage would have us believe[12]), it is certain that one of the founders is Tom Anderson, an arts graduate with an MA in film criticism, who remains the company's President today as well as being the first "friend" that any new user will make. The site grew quickly, so quickly that just two years later, in July 2005, Rupert Murdoch bought it for $580 million. At the time his decision was questioned, as the *Guardian Weekend* said: "Rupert Murdoch had what was widely seen as a brain-fart" (Lanchester, 2006, p. 18), going on to explain:

> The company was seen as a fad by the few grown-ups who knew about it, and was notorious amongst geeks for its horrible irregular site design. It had no revenue stream to speak of. The "business model" for the company – the way it was eventually going to make money – was… er… next question. There was widespread tittering. (Lanchester, 2006, p. 18)

As well as "tittering" from the "grown-ups", and mocking from the "geeks", there was also some grumbling from the users of MySpace who liked to believe that they were a part of an independent, democratic and possibly slightly anarchistic

[12] Source: Wikipedia. Retrieved 29th August 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MySpace#Controversy_over_corporate_history

site, and were peeved that the site was now linked with capitalist notions such as advertising and Rupert Murdoch, and some gloating from its competitors who were aware of new restrictions that News Corp were placing on the site - for example Justin Goldberg of Indie 911 was quoted as saying "Why shouldn't they call it FoxSpace? Or RupertSpace?" (as cited in Swash and MacInnes, 2007, p.16) when the site starting urging musicians who used the site to remove links to online music stores that were unconnected to News Corp.

However, despite the tittering, mocking, grumbling and gloating, MySpace was continuing to grow, having signed a deal with Google in August 2006 that guaranteed the site $900 million across 4 years. By 2007 the site had exploded into an international phenomenon with over 200 million members from across the world, and targeted advertising had become a key part of MySpace. Adverts that are tailored to a specific user appear on their individual profile page – it took me a few months to work out that there was a reason why all the adverts on my own page were about Buddhism or Kylie Minogue but when I did I was at once impressed and alarmed! Amongst those promoting themselves are many bands and singers, who all have their own profile pages that allow users to listen to their music and become a "friend" of the artist. In recent years there have been several artists from within the music world who it is claimed have achieved success solely or largely because of the site - for example the Arctic Monkeys whose presence on the site was credited for the success of their debut album in January 2006, which sold 363, 735 copies in Britain in its first week (Heath, 2006). As the *Observer Music Magazine* said:

> Within the media this was greeted as marking the rise of a phenomenon – not of a wonderful new group, the Arctic Monkeys, but of the power of the Internet and, in particular, MySpace. The suggestion seemed to be that these newfangled tools had hyped the group – that there was a brand new trick in town, and the Arctic Monkeys were the first to use it. (Heath, 2006, p. 29)

It would seem that the Arctic Monkeys themselves were displeased with this connection, feeling that it took credit away from the hard work that they had put in prior to their success, but the now legendary story has ensured that the

artists who are snapping at their heels are all firmly ensconced in MySpace. The relationship is a three way one – bands use MySpace as they know it connects them to many potential fans, fans join MySpace in search of the latest and coolest music, and with every music success story, the popularity of MySpace grows, for as John Lanchester pointed out in November 2006:

> Readers of the business pages first heard of MySpace when Murdoch bought it in 2005, and the site forced itself into the consciousness of the wider public over the past year, mainly through the MySpace-powered breakthroughs of three musical acts: Gnarls Barkley, the Arctic Monkeys and Lily Allen.
>
> That was no accident. Music made MySpace what it is today. At the time the company launched, in 2003, the then biggest social networking site, Friendster, didn't allow bands to promote themselves. The men behind MySpace saw that as a crucial mistake, not least because of music's centrality to young people's self-definition. (Lanchester, 2006, p.29)

And young people have been seen as the lifeblood of MySpace for some time. So much so that the term 'MySpace generation' was coined to describe the 18 – 24 year olds who were the products of the digital revolution - as the online version of the magazine Business Week declared: "They live online. They buy online. They play online. Their power is growing." (Hempel, 2005) Just as my generation, the so-called 'MTV generation', were defined by the newfangled way we assimilated music (for us it was all about short attention spans – which don't seem so short now of course – and ludicrously expensive pop videos), so the new brand of youth have found their label. And just as every young generation has had their poison of choice questioned by the older generation, so much worry and fear is aimed at MySpace, not helped by horror stories such as the one I have already mentioned in which 17 year old Rachel Bell caused chaos in her home village of Woodstone, in County Durham, and was later questioned by police, when posts on MySpace about her forthcoming my-parents-are-away-let's-party party resulted in an alleged several hundred gatecrashers arriving at her home and an alleged £20, 000 worth of damage being created (Wainwright, 2007, p. 11).

So important has the notion of the MySpace generation become that the entire state of Israel has a profile page to promote itself to young people around the world, and particularly in the USA – as *The Guardian* reported in March 2007:

> Officials hope that running a MySpace page dedicated to Israel will help improve relations with people from other countries, and increase awareness and communication with those under 35. (Johnson, 2007, p. 27)

And David Saranga, an Israeli diplomat based in New York was quoted as saying:

> We saw that we had a problem with the 18 to 35 age group. The reason is that this group doesn't see Israel as relevant. We have to talk to them in their language, in platforms they are using, and the new media is one of the ways to do so. (As cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 27)

MySpace, then, has become a platform not just for musicians, but for all sorts of things including countries (such as Israel, with their desire for popularity on the Arctic Monkeys' level) and religions. The Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual leader, for example, has a profile page and 13,404 friends[13], amongst which are myself. But the MySpace users are not passive members waiting patiently to be told about the next big thing, instead they are generating the content of MySpace themselves, as the rising number of groups which focus on a diverse range of hobbies, interests, languages and cultures will testify. As part of this there has been an explosion of religious pages within MySpace including a large number of pages dedicated to Buddhism.

Amongst the growing number of MySpace groups are hundreds of thousands that fall under the category 'Religions and Beliefs'. On the 27th April 2007, there were 117,427 such groups, and typing in the keyword "Buddhism" brought up 443 US groups[14]. One of the most popular Buddhist groups – the one in which I found solace in after the Virginia Tech tragedy - is named simply "Buddhism"

[13] At the last count on 29th August 2007. Retrieved from http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=30238032&MyToken=511db9af-8530-47bb-b977-f38633f2e03b

[14] Not all these groups are explicitly Buddhist, but all have some Buddhist content. It was necessary to specify what country the groups originated in during the search.

(http://groups.myspace.com/buddhism), was founded on 7th June 2004 and has nearly 20,000[15] members from across the world, and it is this group that I have chosen to focus my chapter on. The group's page provides a full list of members, making it possible to visit any of their profiles by simply clicking on an individual user's picture. It also offers an archive of forum topics making it possible to trace the conversations that have been taking place in the group's bulletin board. This chapter is an attempt to begin to harness the information that the "Buddhism" group affords the researcher by taking the group and its members as its case study for an investigation into the way religion is explored online. It analyses the profiles of members of the groups, in order to establish patterns about the sort of people that make up the Buddhist community on MySpace (especially in terms of what religion they consider themselves to have offline) and what uses these people have for the MySpace resources they access. I also hope to compare my results with my own profile and in doing so learn something about myself and my Buddhism...

7.3 Why Study MySpace?

In the time between me deciding to write this paper and now, there has been a noticeable migration from MySpace to Facebook amongst my friends, and if reports in the media are to be believed, this is representative of a wider phenomenon, and there has been some speculation regarding what percentage of profile pages on both MySpace, and other social networking sites, are now inactive. However, whilst it is true that many of my friend's pages have been dormant for months, they do still exist – and, like fossils, still have a relevance as they provide a lasting 'time capsule' into each person as they were the last time they logged on or updated their profile. Of course, it means that the information within the profiles may be 'out of date', but it is impossible to capture the internet fully in the present moment because it is constantly changing, constantly evolving. Indeed, the internet, to borrow Bauman's metaphor once more, is liquid as so are MySpace profiles for – again - as Bauman says:

> Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture. (Bauman, 2000, p. 2)

[15] The figure was 19,585 members on 09/09/07

Therefore every MySpace profile is a snapshot of a given moment, and the job of the MySpace researcher is to analyse a series of given moments. This may be limiting, but it is also a way to extract clear and finite results from a transient and slippery medium.

The advantage that MySpace has over Facebook for the researcher is that it allows access to everyone's profiles regardless of whether they are amongst one's 'friends'. It is possible to set a MySpace profile to private, as 28% of my sample did, but even these pages give a lot of basic information about their creator (age, gender, location in the world, etc), and in any case, with nearly 200 million members (as of 2007), the researcher still has access to a multitude of profile pages which are not set to private. MySpace, then, is a rewarding site for fieldwork, and it remains one of the flagship sites for the MySpace generation, and for the digitised people of the world.

7.4 An Analysis of 100 members of the "Buddhism" MySpace group

The information that I was looking at during this analysis were:

- What kind of people, in terms of gender, age, location in the world, and ethnicity, are members of the Buddhism group, and how do they compare to the wider MySpace community?

- What percentage of the members of the Buddhist group actually align themselves with Buddhism within their own profiles, whether by classing themselves as Buddhists, or by including Buddhist imagery or textual evidence of their interest in Buddhism within their profile?

- What percentage of members displays an interest in religions other than Buddhism in their profiles?

- How can the degree to which the members have a fluid approach towards their spiritual identity be classified?

- What does my own MySpace profile tell me about myself, especially my spiritual identity, given my findings?

Method

My first survey of the "Buddhism" group involved analysing a sample of 100 member profile pages. The group shows all its members on over 400 pages each containing the names and photos (which act as links to profiles) of 40 members. The method in which the profiles is ordered wasn't clear, so I took the first profile on every 4th page starting at page 4 to ensure that a random selection would be available to me. I noted the following details for each of my 100 strong sample:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Location in the world
4. Religion
5. Ethnicity
6. Whether there was any evidence of an interest in Buddhism in their profile (other than an indication that they belonged to the Buddhism group)
7. Whether their user name appeared to have any Buddhist connotations
8. Whether their profile picture appeared to have any Buddhist connotations
9. Whether there was any evidence (visual or otherwise) of an interest in any other religion within their profile

I also sourced a 2008 article entitled 'Social Networks, Gender and Friending: An Analysis of MySpace Member Profiles' by Mike Thelwall (Thelwall, 2008) which extracted basic information from two larger samples (15,043 and 7,627) of profiles, randomly selected from the entire MySpace population. I used this to compare my results from the Buddhism group with a more general set of results, in order to discover whether the people in the Buddhism group were different in any way from the average MySpace user.

It should be pointed out at this stage my method clearly has several limitations. Firstly, my sample of 100 profiles was very small, and was made even smaller in some of the categories as 28% of the sample had private profiles which only revealed basic information. Therefore, this study is really only a preliminary

piece of research and would benefit from becoming a much bigger project at some point in the future.

Secondly – the privacy and ethics issue surrounding using data without obtaining the members' permissions. I did not seek permission from the members whose samples I used. However, I have not quoted any of the profiles directly, nor have I given the names or web pages of any of the members involved. The information I obtained from MySpace is available to anyone with a computer and internet access, and so can be said to be public. Obviously, privacy is one of the hot topics surrounding internet research, and an ultimate guide to how researchers should conduct themselves is noticeable by its absence. However, I hope I have done my best to protect the privacy of the individuals involved throughout this paper.

Thirdly, people are free to download whatever information they wish onto their profile pages, and may, for whatever reason, choose to download information which is factually incorrect. For example – a 39 year old may describe themselves as a 21 year old; a male member may describe themselves as female, etc. In my sample, there were two members who listed their age as being over 100, which the laws of average, as well as information in the rest of their profiles, would suggest is not true. This represents a frequent problem for internet researchers – that of not knowing whether they are dealing with 'authentic' information or not. Two of my personalised internet research rules (which are detailed in Chapter Four) are therefore relevant. They are:

** Whilst it should be acknowledged that online personae may differ from their offline creators, they should nonetheless be treated as worthy subjects for study.*

** 'Real' is a subjective term that should be used cautiously.*

And in this case I decided to apply these rules by making the decision to treat any information on my sample profiles as being accurate representations of the members' online profiles, and thus of their MySpace identity, and to consider that this be reason enough to study them – the thinking being that the way

people choose to present themselves is as worthy of study as the way that they really are (if the two things are even different to begin with – arguably they are two sides of a coin).

A final issue that internet researchers face is that they can only ever access a snapshot from the internet – because the content of the internet, like the people who contribute to it, is constantly changing and evolving. This means that whilst a profile that I have sampled may include 'meditation' as an interest, it could be removed by the user and replaced by 'rock climbing' at any time. Therefore the information that I present in this paper is based on still snapshots of MySpace, as it was in the particular moments that I visited it to research. In an ideal world I would revisit the profiles that I analysed for this chapter and compare them, but for now this chapter is technically a historical account of a small sample of MySpace profiles in 2007.

The Results

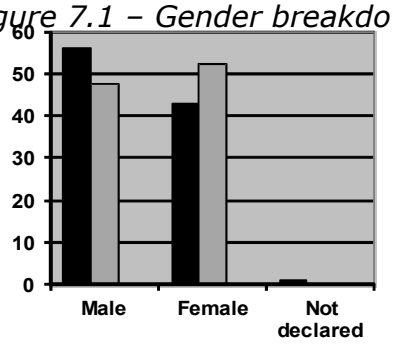
All the figures for my study are correct to two decimal points. The figures for the comparison study vary.

Research Question One: What kind of people, in terms of gender, age, location in the world, and ethnicity, are members of the Buddhism group, and how do they compare to the wider MySpace community?

Gender breakdown of Buddhism group sample

There were 56 males, 43 females and 1 member who didn't declare their gender in my sample. Figure 7.1 shows my sample's percentages in black, and the comparison survey's in grey.

Figure 7.1 – Gender breakdown of Buddhism group sample

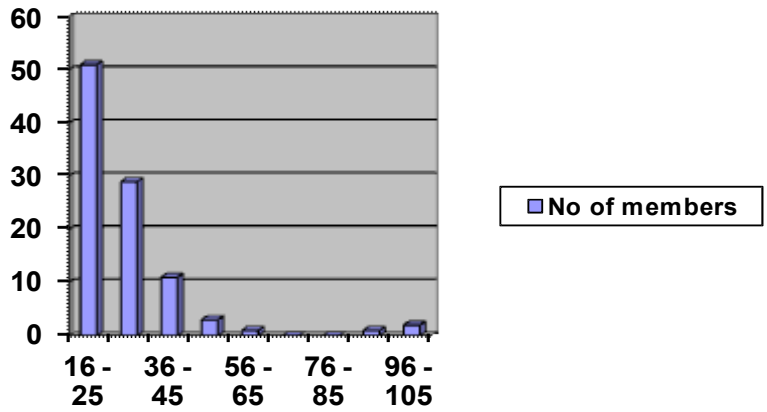


The comparison study found that 52.16% of their profiles were female and 47.84% were male (Thelwall, 2008). Therefore my sample suggests that the Buddhism group contains 8.16% more men, and 9.16% less women than the overall MySpace population. It is difficult to speculate the reason for this – it is true that there tend to be more male Buddhist monks than female Buddhist monks, but whether there are more male Buddhists than female Buddhists in the world generally is debatable without further research.

Age breakdown of Buddhism group sample

The youngest person in the sample was 16 and the oldest was 101. One person did not declare their age. The most popular ages for members were 22 and 29, with eight members of each. The mean age was 29.03, and the median age was 25. Figure 7.2 shows the percentage of members in 10 year age ranges in my sample.

Figure 7.2 – Age breakdown of Buddhism group sample



The comparison study found that the median age was 21, and experienced a similar phenomenon in terms of an unexpectedly large number of people in the highest age range (Thelwall, 2008). The average member of the Buddhism

group, then, would seem to be substantially older than that of the wider MySpace population. We might speculate that this is due to the fact that westerners are rarely born Buddhist, tending, instead, to discover it for themselves in later life, or that people tend to become more interested in spirituality as they get older.

Location of members

When creating a MySpace profile you can declare whereabouts in the world you are located. You can be specific in terms of town/city and state/county, or you can just give the country in which you are located. This information can be seen whether your profile is set to private or not. 15 countries were represented in my sample. Only one person elected not to declare their location in their profile. Table 7.1 shows the breakdown of the countries and the percentage of members from each.

Table 7.1 – Location of Buddhism group sample

Country	**Percentage of members in sample**
Argentina	1%
Australia	1%
Belgium	1%
Canada	4%
Columbia	2%
Denmark	1%
France	1%
India	1%
Ireland	1%
Portugal	1%
Spain	1%
UK	6%
USA	76%
Yemen	1%
Yugoslavia*	1%
Not declared	1%

** Obviously Yugoslavia is no longer a country.*

My results clearly show that the vast majority of members were from the USA, which we might have concluded was due to the fact that the Buddhism group is classed as a 'United States' group on the search page on MySpace and is in the English language (although, interestingly, two of the profiles in my sample were

not in English), or because the USA has a lot of Buddhists. However, the comparison study reported a very similar 77% of members from the USA (Thelwall, 2008), so it would seem that my study is simply mirroring the wider MySpace population. Indeed, the comparison study found that 5% of members were British (Thelwall, 2008), which is also very similar to my figure of 4%.

Ethnicity of the Buddhism group members

When creating a MySpace profile, you can choose to describe yourself from a set list of ethnicities, or you can ignore the question. Ethnicity can not be seen on a profile page which is set to private (28 of the 100 samples were set to private). Of those with public profiles, 26.39% of members chose not to declare their ethnicity – this statistic, whilst being high, is much lower than the 51% reported by the comparison study (Thelwall, 2008). Table 7.2 shows the percentage of ethnicities for members with public profiles who did declare their ethnicity in the Buddhism group as compared with the percentages of the comparison study.

Table 7.2 – Ethnicity of Buddhism group sample & comparison study

Ethnicity	**% of members in the Buddhism group study**	**% of members in the comparison study**
Asian	9.43%	6%
Black / African descent	1.89%	12%
Dutch, Norwegian, Native	1.89%	0%
East Indian	1.89%	0%
Latino/ Hispanic	13.21%	14%
Native American	0%	1%
Pacific Islander	0%	1%
White / Caucasian	60.38%	59%
Other	11.32%	7%

It is clear that the ethnicities of the Buddhism group members closely mirrored those of the wider MySpace population, with the notable exception of those of Black/African descent, who were very under-represented in the Buddhism group sample. This may be indicative of a wider statistic about the number of Buddhists who are black or of African descent.

Research Question Two: What percentage of the members of the Buddhist group actually align themselves with Buddhism within their own profiles, whether by classing themselves as Buddhists, or by including Buddhist imagery or textual

evidence of their interest in Buddhism within their profile?

Religion of Buddhist members

As with ethnicity, when creating a MySpace profile, you can choose to describe yourself from a set list of religions, or you can ignore the question. Religion cannot be seen on a profile page which is set to private (28 of the 100 samples were set to private).

As I looked through each profile, I recorded the religion of each member, but I also made a note of any member who expressed an interest in Buddhism within their profile (by including Buddhist imagery, by referring to Buddhist figures or ideas, by citing Buddhist books and films amongst their favourites, etc. – the only thing I didn't count was membership of the Buddhism group, which obviously applied to 100% of my sample). I did the same for other religions. Again, this was only possible for the 72 profiles that weren't set as private. Table 7.3 records my findings and is on page 147.

Table 7.3 – Religion of Buddhism group sample

Religion	**No. of members**	**No. of members expressed as a percentage of the 72 profiles which were**	**No. of whom showed visual or textual evidence of interest in Buddhism**	**No. of whom showed evidence of interest in religions other than Buddhism**

		accessible	within their profile	within their profile
Agnostic	6	8.33%	4	2
Atheist	2	2.78%	1	1
Buddhist	28	38.89%	23	11
Christian – other*	2	2.78%	1	2
Hindu	1	1.39%	0	1
Spiritual	1	1.39%	1	0
Wiccan	2	2.78%	0	1
Other	12	16.67%	7	7
Not declared	18	25%	4	4

** This is a category for those who don't fall into a listed school of Christianity such as Catholic or Protestant, etc.*

As would be expected, the Buddhism group sample has a much larger percentage of Buddhist members than the comparison study, which records 'Christian – Other' as the dominant religion. The percentage of members who didn't declare their religion on their profiles was much higher on the comparison study at 59%. This is most probably to be expected given that members of the Buddhism group are united by their interest in religion. The other categories were similar across both studies.

Although the percentage of members who declared they were Buddhist in my sample was much higher than that of the comparison study, at 38.89% of the sample of public profiles, it is still surprisingly low. However, it is worth remembering that for many people, Buddhism is not a religion but a philosophy. Therefore, it is possible that there are members of the Buddhism group who live their lives as Buddhists, without defining themselves as being religious. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that , a further 18 members – or 25% - of the group, who didn't call themselves Buddhists, showed evidence of an interest in Buddhism within their profiles. Therefore a total of 63.89% of the members associated themselves with Buddhism within their profiles. (Of course, the remaining members associated themselves with Buddhism in so far as they had all joined the Buddhism group).

In addition, 4% of the sample profiles had a profile picture which contained Buddhist imagery and 5% had a profile name which included a reference to Buddhism (although one member had called himself 'Buddha Christ!!!!!' which is possibly worthy of a thesis in itself!) Some of these profiles overlapped, so in

total 7% had a profile name and/or a profile picture which referenced Buddhism. As these are arguably the two most significant modes of identification within MySpace, we might be forgiven for thinking that these members must be extremely keen that people be aware that they are Buddhist, and that Buddhism is a key part of their MySpace identity. However, amongst these members, 4 of the 7 also showed evidence of interest in religions other than Buddhism within their profiles. This arguably unexpected result is indicative of a wider trend within the Buddhist group members.

Research Question Three: What percentage of members display an interest in religions other than Buddhism in their profiles?

Looking back at Table 7.3, we can see that 39.29% of the members who classed themselves at Buddhists on their profiles nonetheless showed an interest in religions other than Buddhism elsewhere in their profile.

We can also see that 33.33% of the sample with public profiles actually defined themselves as being of a religion other than Buddhism (but 54.17% of these members showed an interest in Buddhism anyway) and a further 22.22% showed evidence of an interest in religions other than Buddhism. Therefore a total of 55.55% of the Buddhism group members associated themselves with a religion other than Buddhism within their profiles.

In addition, aside from the fact that they were members of the Buddhism group, 36.11% of the members with public profiles showed no interest in Buddhism whatsoever within their profile. Furthermore, amongst this section of the group, there were several who showed an interest in more than one religion – even if Buddhism wasn't one of them.

Research Question Four: How can the degree to which the members have a fluid approach towards their spiritual identity be classified?

My results clearly show that the Buddhism group is not made of people who are devout Buddhists with no interest in any other religion or spiritual path. Instead, the majority of the group are pursuing a variety of spiritual interests, and seem

flexible and open about their beliefs – i.e. they are arguably spiritual tourists. Having analysed the data I collected during my research, and having found that a large number of the sample showed an interest in more than one religion, I went back and labelled each of my sample profiles according some identity models which were inspired by Bauman's notions of liquid and solid modernity (Bauman, 2000) as mentioned earlier in this paper. I identified five models which seemed to cover the religious situation of all the members in my sample – they were:

1) Solid Buddhist identity – people who show no evidence of interest in any religions other than Buddhism within their profiles

2) Liquid Buddhist identity – people who define themselves as Buddhists but who also show interest in other religions

3) True Liquid Identity – people who don't define themselves as any one religion, but who show an interest in more than one (I put all Agnostics into this category)

4) Liquid Other identity – people who define themselves as religions other than Buddhists (or who don't define themselves at all) but who show an interest in Buddhism and/or other religions

5) (Nearly) Solid Other identity – people who show no evidence of interest in any religion other than a declared religion other than Buddhism within their profiles, or who show no interest in any religions. They are only nearly solid because they are members of the Buddhism group.

The results, for all the members in the sample with public profiles, from lowest percentage to highest percentage, were:

5th: True Liquid Identity: 8.33%
4th: Liquid Buddhist Identity: 15.28%
3rd: Liquid Other Identity: 23.61%
2nd: (Nearly) Solid Other Identity: 25%

1st: Solid Buddhist Identity: 27.78%

The results are represented in Figure 7.3, and are then condensed into liquid and solid (regardless of religion) in Figure 7.4:

Figure 7.3 – Religious 'identity' of Buddhism group

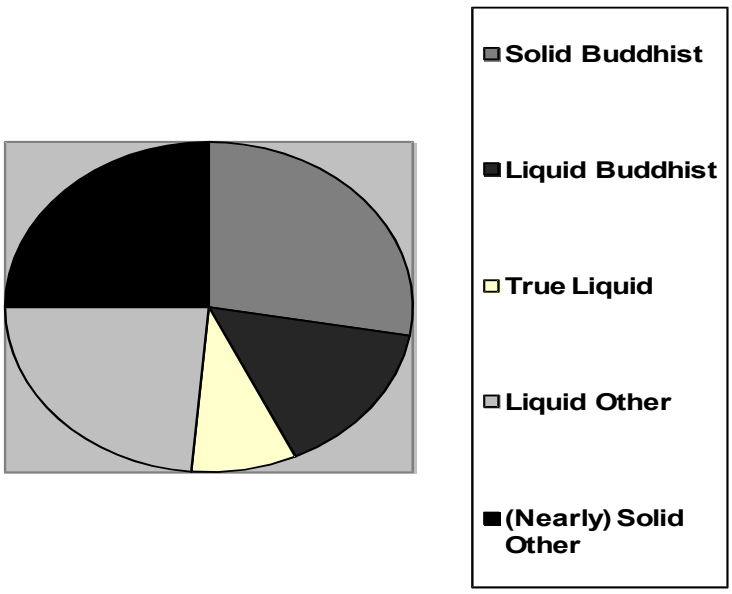
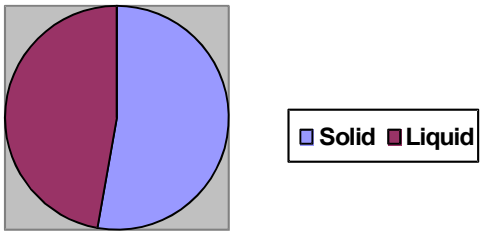


Figure 7.4 – Religious 'identity' of Buddhism group – solid v liquid



As can be seen, whilst the solid Buddhist identity had the highest percentage of profiles, there were also a very significant number of members who were interested in several religions. It is interesting, therefore, to speculate as to why members of the MySpace population join the Buddhism group. Clearly, for some it is because they are Buddhists, and for others it is out of a desire to discover more about Buddhism, for whatever reason. It should also be remembered that some of the profiles which I used as data may well belong to members who

haven’t visited the Buddhism group in a long while, indeed they may only ever have visited it the once. It would be interesting to see how a sample of members who are clearly active within the group (i.e. because they are contributing to discussion forums or posting new messages on the bulletin, etc.) might differ from my existing sample.

Research Question Five: What does my own MySpace profile tell me about myself, especially my spiritual identity, given my findings?

Based solely on a (relatively) objective analysis of my own MySpace page, and using my own system of classification, I would have to define myself as having a true liquid spiritual identity. This is because whilst my profile indicates an interest in Buddhism (I mention the Dalai Lama as a favourite author, in the 'Who I'd like to meet' section one of my answers is 'secret Buddhists', and I am a member of several Buddhist groups), I define my religion as 'Other' which suggests that I have considered the question and purposefully eschewed the answer 'Buddhist', either because I am not quite sure of my religion, or because none of the given options quite define it, or because I choose to remain mysterious for whatever reason. Taking my objective hat off, I would have to say that 'true liquid identity' sums up perfectly where I was at spiritually at the time that I analysed my profile – I was increasingly interested in Buddhism but was also not willing to be defined by this interest. I picked 'Other' because I wanted to acknowledge my interest in my spiritual identity, which wouldn't have been achieved by leaving the 'Religion' question blank on my page and because I felt that 'Agnostic' was too defeatist in a funny sort of way – it suggests a 'wait and see' attitude whereas for me 'Other' was closer to my state as someone who was actively honing her spiritual identity.

7.5 Conclusion

My results suggest:

1. That the average member of the Buddhism group is more likely to be male than a member of the wider MySpace population, and have a higher average age than the wider population. He or she is most likely to be a white/Caucasian American, which mirrors the statistics in the comparison study

2. That just over a third of the Buddhism group are likely to define themselves as Buddhists, whilst about two thirds show evidence of an interest in Buddhism in their profile
3. That just over half of the Buddhism group show evidence of an interest in religions other than Buddhism
4. That is possible to use Bauman's solid and fluid metaphors (Bauman, 2000) to categorise the degree of fragmentation, in terms of religious identity, of a member of the Buddhism group – but only as they exist in a single moment
5. That analysing my MySpace profile provides a very accurate snapshot of my spiritual identity as it was in 2007

Having completed this very basic analysis of the sample, it would have been very interesting to redo the same study with a larger sample from the group, and then with a sample from the members who frequent the group's bulletin board and discussion forums in order to see how my initial results compare with a sample of the active members of the group; but even without doing this I believe that these findings – or certainly points 2 to 5 – suggest very strongly that spiritual tourism was present on MySpace at the time of my research. This small scale study cannot prove this conclusively by itself but it certainly seems to back up the research done by scholars such as Ostrowski (2006) and Henry (2006) by hypothesising that westerners who turn to Buddhism are likely to retain elements of their previous faith, or to be spiritual tourists who are exploring various religious options on their personal spiritual journeys. With regards to my overall research question for the chapter - d*oes the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* – I would say that this chapter hasn't proved that the internet *causes* spiritual tourism or liquid religious identities, but it has confirmed that MySpace is amongst the websites that encourages these things (or did at the time of the research) by providing the correct tools for anyone who fits into either of these categories.

However, possibly one of the most interesting things to come out of the research for this chapter was the comfort that I – and, presumably, other members of the Buddhism group – drew from the online presence of other people who shared

similar reactions to the April 2007 killings at Virginia Tech. This group was certainly a worthy cybersangha for me at an upsetting time, and this correlates with what other researchers have said about the effect that the September 11th tragedy had on online activity back in 2001. For example, Elena Larsen tells us that "The September 11 terror attacks compelled millions of Internet users to turn to religious issues and concerns online." (Larsen, 2004, p. 17) – listing sending/receiving prayer requests, finding out more about Islam and making charitable donations (Larsen, 2004, p. 17) as some of the ways in which this manifested, and Helland said:

> After the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the attack upon the Pentagon, hundreds of thousands of people began posting online prayers, lighting virtual candles, and entering into religiously based dialogue in an attempt to cope with the tragedy... As time went by, many other religious Web sites shifted their content, devoting whole sections to Islam and creating avenues for individuals to learn more about different Islamic traditions and opportunities for dialogue with Muslims about the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. A need arose, and the Web was able to respond quickly and diversely. (Helland, 2004, p. 33)

Thus illustrating what the internet can be on its finest hour – a source of instant information and infinite comfort. Indeed, if the internet can provide – as it did for me after the Virginia Tech killings and for millions after September 11 – a community of moral support then it is certainly starting to seem like a very acceptable arena for religion, for as Durkheim told us – at its core religion is "... a unified system of beliefs and practices... that unite its adherents in a single community." (Durkheim, 1912, p. 46)

8 THE THIRD SNAPSHOT – 2009 - ONLINE V OFFLINE SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

This chapter is about the concept of 'pilgrimage'. After a short autoethnographic section which explores my relationship to churches/sacred places by describing my childhood experience of religion, I examine the word 'pilgrimage' and attempt to provide a working definition of the term before moving on to giving an overview of virtual or online pilgrimages. I describe autoethnographically, and then analyse, my personal experience of an online and an offline 'pilgrimage' – I put this in inverted commas because a key question that this chapter brings up is: can a journey undertaken by a spiritual tourist (such as myself) even be considered to be a pilgrimage, given the fluid, unstructured and exploratory nature of spiritual tourism? The chapter is also an exploration of how important embodiment is in pilgrimage, whether a virtual spiritual space - with its lack of tangible bricks and mortar - ever contain that sense of *prana* which seems to be present in churches and temples in the physical world, and whether online pilgrimage – being an instant, non-linear experience with a distinct lack of physical endurance - is a contradiction in terms. It is also brings up a personal question – where is my church? Clearly all of these questions relate back to my second key research question for the thesis which is: *how does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?*

8.1 Autoethnographic Introduction

This is my church
This is my church
This is where I heal my hurts
For tonight
"GOD IS A DJ."

(From 'God is a DJ', Faithless)

This chapter was – in some ways - born out of the above song. I was listening to it, indulging in the usual blissed out state that it tends to generate in me, when I

suddenly started to think about its message. If a dance floor can be a church, then what is a church, and does a church actually need to be formed of bricks and mortar or can it be a state of mind? Arguably, for each of us our 'church' is a different space or place. 'Church' can perhaps incorporate three things – a physical space, a community and a faith. However, if we interpret 'faith' loosely and take 'church' to mean a 'sacred space' or 'spiritual place' then any number of different venues might fit the bill. It could be anywhere we can take take refuge, where we can seek solace in the company of people with shared beliefs, where we can feel free to explore the world and seek answers or, if not answers, then comfort in difficult times. For someone who is not particularly religious, like myself, this might well be a night club or the home of oneself or of a loved one, and it is definitely a theatre which, for me, always buzzes with prana *and potential and the magic that belief can conjure. But I also believe that a real church or temple also houses something that goes beyond space, community or faith, because the moment one steps into a religious building, regardless of which God it honours, one can feel its physical walls vibrate with something which is hard to define (could it be that pesky* prana *again?) but which is often overwhelming in its spiritual power, and which must surely be felt by even the most emphatic of atheists...*

My mother is the most emphatic of atheists. For my mother, it seems like religion is almost dirty word. When she heard that I was using Buddhism as a focus for my thesis, she was distinctly unimpressed (although she has since been won over by arguments that Buddhism is more a philosophy than a religion in the traditional sense). She is one of those people who believes that religion lies at the core of many of the world's troubles and conflicts. My father, meanwhile, once sang in a church choir – and his parents, my grandparents, were good Christian people who taught me prayers when my mother wasn't looking – but in adulthood he mellowed into agnosticism. In any case, by the time my parents decided to get married, they were both definitely anti mainstream religion. But they wanted to get married in the church in the village that my mother grew up in. So they went to the vicar and said 'look – we're not Christians but will you marry us in this church anyway?' The answer was yes. Why did they want a church wedding despite their views? I've never asked but I suspect that the reason is twofold – firstly, it probably had something to do with

honouring my mother's childhood home and community, but secondly, I am convinced it was because whatever one might think of Christianity, or Islam, or Buddhism, or any other faith, we are irresistibly drawn to that spiritual power which is felt only in churches and temples. Perhaps my parents, for all their cynicism, wanted a little prana *for their wedding...*

Into my parents' liberal but fiercely anti-religion world I was born. Growing up, my parents were not strict at all – but I knew that there were three things that they would absolutely have disowned me for. But not sex, drugs and rock and roll – instead cigarettes, Conservatism and religion. Even when I was younger, aged 7 or 8, I knew that playing the religion card would wind up my mother (something I was very fond of doing, being an only child). It started when I read a novel called All-of-a-Kind Family *by Sydney Taylor. The book, and its sequels, is about the life of a large Jewish family in New York at the turn of the century. It describes all the rites and rituals of the Jewish family life in appealing detail. I was captivated by the sense of family, community and ceremony (none of which I really had first hand experience of) and decided – with a sneaky sideways glance at my mother, who was ranting as ever about some war of faith – that I was going to Become Jewish. The next day I skipped merrily to the library at school and got out a load of books about the Jewish faith. Back at home, I curled up amongst the books and read them cover to cover. And to my mother, I announced 'I'm getting really interested in this Jewish stuff'. The look she gave me, the heavy silence that followed, and the expression on her face as she clearly weighed up the best way to deal with this traumatic event in her career as a parent was priceless to a cheeky 8 year old. 'Could I become Jewish?' I continued innocently. Oh, to watch her choke over her words as, having clearly decided nonchalance was the way forward, she said 'well, yes, I suppose you could if you wanted to...' with forced disinterest. 'Cool' said I, equally nonchalant whilst inwardly triumphant as I returned to my books. Of course, my time as a Jew was brief, although my interest in the Jewish was genuine – and the fact that I craved the sense of family, community and ceremony may have indirectly led to me writing about religion, most unexpectedly, twenty-two years later.*

Another childhood occupation that my mother most fervently objected to, but which she managed with the same measured indifference, was my occasional

visits to Catholic services with a friend whose family were very religious. Again, I loved the ceremony of it all – curtseying before taking a seat in a pew, crossing oneself, etc. But most of all I like being in the church, which was huge with tall, tall, tall ceilings and ornate, grand décor. I felt that feeling of prana *I think – I don't think I could have put my finger on it then but it did feel intensely spiritual as a place, and even though I didn't really buy into the Catholic faith at all I loved going to the services in that church. And of course, I liked the knowledge that I was being rebellious!*

So the question I had as a child, as a sulky teenager, as a young adult, and as a student of sociology now is thus: if my parents are so firm in their dislike of religion then why was I constantly being dragged into churches, cathedrals, temples and all manner of religious buildings all over the world? I suspect that if I were to ask them they would say about architecture and history and art. But if one is so anti something then why would one spend a lot – a lot! - of time visiting places that so joyfully promoted and celebrated that one thing? I am a pacifist and so wouldn't spend time in a museum filled with weaponry, no matter how well crafted the specimens may be. No - 'architecture', 'history' and 'art' cannot tell the full story, the prana *of a religious space must be a factor, as must be the element of pilgrimage – because we really did travel far and wide to reach some of these sacred buildings...*

8.2 Introducing the Concept of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage. A romantic concept perhaps. The idea that we should go on a journey of great hardship (physically, mentally, emotionally) in order to reach a place of spiritual significance, and that in doing so we should prove our alliance to the spirituality in question, and perhaps to learn something about ourselves along the way. Spirituality should, in this case, probably be taken in its very loosest definition as being something important to us. For example, one might make a pilgrimage to the grave of Jim Morrison in Paris, if one were a big Doors fan. However, the destination, whilst inevitably being a place of immense holiness and a place to aspire to reach when the going gets tough, is less important than the journey in a pilgrimage. It is not the actual viewing of Jim Morrison's grave that is important (indeed it is reported to be rather disappointing by some – covered by graffiti and concealed by stoned

backpackers), rather it is the fact that in making the journey one its acknowledging and signposting the significance of the Doors in one's life, and awakening the possibility that undertaking the journey might generate some sort of epiphany about what this significance actually means.

Before going any further, I will establish a more formal definition of the word 'pilgrimage' in order to make my mission in this chapter perfectly clear, and in order to provide the means for analysing whether a journey undertaken by a spiritual tourist can truly be considered to be a pilgrimage. Firstly, the Collins Essential English Dictionary gives two definitions of pilgrimage: "a journey to a shrine or other holy place" and "a journey or long search made for sentimental reasons" (as cited in http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pilgrimage, n.d.). Secondly, the website www.onpilgrimage.com describes a pilgrimage as follows:

> In a nutshell, a pilgrimage is a journey inward as well as outward. Pilgrims seek to strengthen and renew their faith through travel.
>
> Our working definition of pilgrimage is a transformative journey to a sacred center.
>
> That's what makes being a pilgrim different from being a tourist. For a tourist, travel is an end in itself. For a pilgrim, travel is a means to an end. (http://www.onpilgrimage.com/_wsn/page2.html, n.d.)

In her 2006 essay 'Walking Pilgrimage as *Caritas Action* in the World', Jean Watson picks up on the idea of pilgrimage being about both inner and outer journey, saying:

> A pilgrimage is an inner/outer passage toward silence and simplicity; solitude, and slowing down. It is an entrance into unknowns and mysteries of being and doing. (Watson, 2006, p. 290)

Watson also explores the difference between being a pilgrim and being a tourist – she says:

> A pilgrim is not a tourist; you are and feel very much apart from the rest of the world, a world in which you are familiar but of which you are not at that moment an immediate part. You are an observer in the traditional sense of the word. (Watson, 2006, p. 290)

For some, a pilgrimage must be partly about hardship or physical endurance - the Encyclopaedia Brittanica says a pilgrimage is a:

> Journey to a shrine or other sacred place undertaken to gain divine aid, as an act of thanksgiving or penance, or to demonstrate devotion. (as cited in http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1B1-375272.html, n.d.)

The idea of pilgrimage as being an act of penance hints at the fact that a pilgrimage doesn't necessarily have to be a celebratory event – in fact for some the suffering is a key element. For example - in the classic 90s comedy series *Father Ted* Mrs Doyle says:

> "I'm off on my lenten pilgrimage now father... I want a GOOD MISERABLE time" (Linehan & Matthews, 1996)

There are also many other reasons to undertake a pilgrimage. Describing traditional Buddhism pilgrimage, Harvey says that it:

> ... may be done for a variety of reasons: to bring alive events from the life of holy beings and so strengthen spiritual aspirations; to make 'merit'; to be suffused by the power-for-good of relics and Bodhi-trees; to receive protection from deities at the sites; or to fulfil a vow that pilgrimage would be made if aid was received from a certain Bodhisattva. (Harvey, 1990, p. 190)

A modern pilgrimage might be more about escaping the trappings of modern life and searching for new answers and new meaning than following a specific religious (literal) path. For as Christy Turlington says:

> So much of our lives is spent traveling... We travel every day, to and from

> our homes, work, the supermarket, the movies, in vehicles, in airplanes, and even from our couches and through the pages of our favorite books. But for as much traveling as we do or perceive that we do, sometimes it is simply not enough. We long for something more, something meaningful. We long for the journey. (Turlington, 2002, p. 205)

Using information from all these quotes, here are the things that I will take as a given and use as a basis of my research and writing in this chapter.

1. A pilgrimage must be undertaken for a spiritual or sentimental reason
2. A pilgrimage is a statement about one's beliefs
3. A pilgrimage must have a significant destination (generally one which is of historical or biographical significance for the faith or figure that one is honouring in the pilgrimage), but the journey is at least as important as the destination
4. A pilgrimage is both an inward and an outward journey
5. It is anticipated that the pilgrim will learn something, or be affected or even transformed by their pilgrimage. This may be seen to be the true goal of a pilgrimage.
6. It is anticipated that the pilgrim will need to undergo either sacrifice or endure some sort of exertion or hardship during their journey.

Although offline pilgrimages have probably been happening for as long as religion has been a part of human life, in more recent times online pilgrimages have began to emerge. In her summary of online religion as it was in 2006, Campbell said the following:

> Common rituals include cyber-pilgrimages, whether they be to virtual shrines of Catholic saints such as Mary... or the Japanese Culture Club's Shinto virtual shrine... Other cyber-pilgrimages involve online visits to traditional spots, such as a pilgrimage to Virtual Jerusalem... which enables Jews to explore cultural and religious information on Judaism or even "email a Prayer" to be placed in the cracks of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. (Campbell, 2006, p.5)

And in 2002, an article called 'Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet' by Mark W. MacWilliams appeared in the journal *Religion*. In it, MacWilliams defines 'virtual pilgrimage' as:

> ... an Internet neologism for a site on the Net where people can simulate a sacred journey for educational, economic and spiritual purposes. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 316)

He said that virtual pilgrimages were booming and gave many examples of websites that 'armchair pilgrims' could visit to take advantage of the new technology. Most of the examples are very simple, textual and typical of the technology that existed at the beginning of the 21st century – i.e. there is an emphasis on providing information rather than offering a genuinely interactive experience – and he does admit that some of the sites are limited – he says:

> Shawn Wilbur has noted that 'virtual' typically means something that appears to be but is not real, authentic or proper. It is important to note that some virtual pilgrimage sites fit this definition. They are informational only, designed to provide clever simulations or representations for instructional purposes. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 317)

However, his article is optimistic about the potential of the internet to transform pilgrimage – he says:

> ... virtual pilgrimages... exploit the new technological possibilities of the Internet to re-imagine the sacred by constructing an immaterial reality from four components. First, they create a mythscape, a highly symbolic sacred geography, largely based upon oral or scriptural traditions. Second, they use interactive visual-auditory techniques to evoke experiences of divine presence. Third, they provide liminoid forms of entertainment for the traveler / viewer. Fourth, as a leisure activity done at home or office computers, virtual pilgrimages allow individuals to join online traveling communities. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 320)

Interestingly for the purpose of this thesis, he also holds the view that virtual

reality is actually nothing new in the field of religion. Giving the example of the bread and wine which represents the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist, he says:

> The exact nature of Christ's 'presence' in the host was hotly debated throughout Christian history, especially during the Reformation. Nevertheless, both Catholics and Protestants could experience a 'spiritual presence' of Christ in the communion meal, whether it was conceived theologically as a physical transubstantiation into the body and blood or not. To describe the Eucharist as 'virtual' would not mean illusory, intangible or the opposite of real. Virtual comes from the Latin word *virtualis*, meaning 'strength' or 'power', and in scholastic philosophy it refers to something that exists potentially rather than actually... I argue that the Eucharist is virtual because, for the ordinary believer, it provides a ritual means of potentially experiencing Christ's spiritual power. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 317)

This argument is very interesting because if we follow it through to its natural conclusion then we might equally say that all religious rites and ceremonies are examples of virtual reality and if we can believe this then we can certainly believe that a virtual pilgrimage can be as significant and as 'real' as an offline pilgrimage. Indeed, MacWilliams also states that:

> ... some have argued that, despite the fact that cyberspace is a technological byproduct of the new physics, it has its conceptual roots in religion, particularly in a Christian spatial dualism that conceived of a 'soul space' of heaven and purgatory that were non-physical spaces that existed 'outside' of the material world. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 316)

and argues that "pilgrimage, even to sacred places in the physical world, always has an interior, ideal, spiritual dimension" (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 320) and of course this dimension is equally possible in a virtual pilgrimage as is the "intensely visual experience" (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 322) which MacWilliams argues is at the heart of any pilgrimage. However, he does also point out the differences between offline and virtual pilgrimages. He says:

> ... virtual pilgrimage is not the same as 'the real thing'. First, it is instantaneous. Travel to the site is a click of a button away. Second, it takes place figuratively not literally. The arduous journey to a distant place, the ascetical practices that are so important in penitential pilgrimages, do not exist virtually. The virtual journey is a disembodied act of the imagination that cannot fully simulate the physical rigors of the RL original... A third difference is (with virtual pilgrimages) users jump from site to site netsurfing wherever the spirit (or often a wilful mouse) takes them. Rather than... the structure of real life pilgrimages from home to sacred site and a return, Net surfers jump all over the place, often in ways that have no logical or simple geometric form. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 326)

So, the question is do these differences matter enough to compromise their validity of using the word 'pilgrimage' with regards to an online journey? Or should we just accept them, keeping in mind Durkheim's belief that the “cult” of religion will “periodically recreate itself” (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) and MacWilliams's own assertion that the internet offers the potential for people “to experience a powerful new means of religious expression” (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 319)?

A more recent example of the virtual pilgrimage to Jerusalem which was arranged by the charity Christian Aid for Lent 2009. The virtual pilgrimage was backed (and undertaken) by church leaders from various different denominations who wanted to encourage people to not only visit the spiritual home of Christianity safely in a turbulent era in its history, but also to raise awareness about how the Israeli / Palestine conflicts have affected local people of all faiths. The pilgrimage included opportunities to watch short videos, visit photo galleries, hear stories from local people and to pray in the places that Jesus was said to have preached, and was accessed by more than 16,000 people who were then able to exchange thoughts about the things that they have seen, heard and learnt. Christine Elliot, the Methodist Secretary for External Affairs was among the many people who were involved in the pilgrimage and said of it:

> A virtual pilgrimage is a contradiction of terms but the opportunity to hear

> people from parts of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and enter into their lives gives greater opportunity for us to begin to walk in an other's shoes. (As cited in 'Church leaders launch online pilgrimage for Lent' 2009)

But is a virtual pilgrimage really a contradiction of terms when the offline pilgrimage would have been extremely difficult if not impossible? Some of the other church figures brought this up in their praise of the project – for example the Rt Rev Peter Price, the Bishop of Bath & Wells said:

> If you can't go to the Holy Land in reality then the next best thing is this virtual journey. It's important for us to have a picture of the Holy Land today to understand better what Jesus was saying to us in the Gospel. (As cited in 'Church leaders launch online pilgrimage for Lent' 2009)

And the Christian Aid Intercommunity Initiative Manager Nigel Varndell said:

> The situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories is politically complicated, theologically challenging and, at a human level, heartbreaking. For many of us it is so difficult we don't know where to begin. I think this online pilgrimage is the perfect place to start... (As cited in 'Church leaders launch online pilgrimage for Lent' 2009)

So perhaps the question should be – if a physical pilgrimage is too difficult to manage for whatever reason then a virtual one can provide an acceptable alternative, possibly in the same way that the bread and wine of the Eucharist provide an acceptable alternative in the absence of the physical body of Christ?

I will now move on to an exploration of my two spiritual journeys.

8.3 Choosing the Destinations

This may or may not be important – and it is perhaps worth analysing later in this process – but in order to choose a 'real' destination for my offline pilgrimage, my first thought was to type 'sacred Buddhist temple UK' or similar into Google. However, I quickly realised the irony in this notion, and so decided

that my offline pilgrimage must be undertaken with no help whatsoever from the internet – i.e. I would need to make use of libraries and actual maps made of actual trees rather than whizzing through Google and getting directions from the RAC website or similar. Damn. OK, this alone proves that the internet is not without its advantages, but, on the other hand, I had already established that a pilgrimage should involve great effort and great hardship so decided that perhaps a visit to the local library might tick a few boxes... Meanwhile, this obviously meant that in order to choose a 'virtual' destination for my online pilgrimage, my research should be conducted entirely in cyberspace. Easier – hurrah! But, wondered I, where was the great effort and great hardship? I was about to find out...

Second Life. My mortal enemy during the writing of this thesis. The one website that should have been a gift to a student like me, but was instead the one thing that I couldn't seem to get the hang of it! The website, which launched in June 2003 and describes itself as "the Internet's largest user-created, 3D virtual world community" (http://secondlife.com/?v=1.1, n.d.), is free to use but does have its own currency, the Linden dollar, which users can buy (its exchange rate fluctuates daily just with any RL currency) and then use to purchase land, clothing and almost anything else that can be dreamt of . The virtual plains of Second Life can be navigated using a self-designed avatar, which can fly and teleport as well as walk, run, etc. So, Second Life has numerous functions – indeed, it tells us in its introductory video that it is:

A place to connect.
A place to shop.
A place to work.
A place to love.
A place to explore.
A place to be.
Be different.
Be yourself.
Free yourself.
Free your mind.
Change your mind.

Change your look.
Love your look.
Love your life. ('What is Second Life' introductory video, n.d.)

The website has been embraced by many individuals and many businesses who do indeed, by all accounts, get all the above things from the site, but for me all it was was a place to be frustrated and love my RL (Second Life speak for 'real life')... My avatar had an inexplicable black mask (literally the most terrifying sight I have yet witnessed in cyberspace!), my flying was at best passable, my fear of the constant stream of naked newcomers speaking to me (or of kidnapping me and putting me in a box – it happens! Apparently!) was crippling, and my inability to get passed the training zone was absolutely infuriating. Second Life, my nemesis, my foe, my biggest frustration – aha! Frustration, you say? Crippling blah blah blah, you say? Terrifying sights, you say? Bingo! A place truly worthy of a pilgrimage / spiritual journey...

So, the plan was that my two spiritual journeys would take place as closely together as possible (so that my reactions to them wouldn't be affected by any major changes in my life or developments in my character!). I would try to choose destinations that were comparable in terms of their function, their perceived spiritual importance in Buddhism, and their aesthetic appeal. My online 'pilgrimage' would be conducted entirely online, and my offline 'pilgrimage' would be conducted entirely offline. I would report back from both experiences in terms of the journey, as well as the destination and would judge them in terms of the following 'pilgrimage' categories:

1. The spiritual and / or sentimental significance of each journey and of each destination. Obviously, it could be said that the primary function of both journeys would be an academic one, and that both would be undertaken in the name of research. However, as an autoethnographer it is important that I seek to report on things which I have a genuine motivation to be involved with which goes beyond my academic career. It was vital that I experience the journeys as a spiritual tourist first and foremost. Any analysis would have to come later, and would in fact only be valid if I had an authentic experience about which to ponder.

2. The *prana* of the planning, the journey & the destination. Almost impossible to quantify, but I hoped that by writing about both journeys in descriptive terms, I might be able to accurately reflect on the *prana* of both (and perhaps in doing so learn something about the nature of *prana* itself.)

3. My perceived significance of both journeys both at the start and on reflection at the end.

4. Any transformative effects of each pilgrimage.

5. The embodied experience of both journeys, and a decision on whether the embodiment of each journey was an important factor in its significance or not.

6. The sacrifice / exertion / hardship that each journey required.

7. Whether – by taking into consideration all the above points - either, or both, journeys could ultimately be considered to be pilgrimages.

8.4 My Online Spiritual Journey

The first task for my online trip is to pick a suitable place to visit. I've already decided that it should be in Second Life, not least because the challenge of conquering my inability to function successfully in Second Life feels like it might be a pilgrimage in and of itself. I am kind of excited about the prospect of mastering it, and of seeing my avatar, Maisie Fonda, again. She looks how I would like to look – skinny, pretty and with vivid pink/purple hair (the colour I would dye mine if I only had the nerve). However, I wonder if her appearance is appropriate for a young lady who is about to embark on a spiritual quest... Anyway, I decide to find a suitable Buddhist temple to visit in Second Life by typing 'Buddhist Temple Second Life' into Google. The top result was a blog called 'Virtual Living' on a website called www.dananourie.com. The blog is about the author's experiences of living in Second Life and is an extremely interesting potential subject in itself. It distracts me a little from the task in

hand and leads me off in new directions – this is both the internet's strength and downfall for the academic student. I save some of the material on the blog and do my best to get back on my chosen path. The author mentions many Buddhist temples and retreats that she has visited, and recommends several. However, in the piece that I come to first, she is excited that a new temple – the 'Buddhist Temple on Tarington' has been built behind the house that she rents in Second Life, where she leads meditation sessions and all sorts of other Buddhist rituals are on offer. I decide that fate has led me to this blog and that her temple should be my destination. I follow the link to the temple. Immediately a map which shows an aerial view of Second Life with Tarington highlighted comes up. A pop-up box asks me if I want to 'teleport now'? A particularly exciting prospect given that I saw the new Star Trek film less than 24 hours ago! So – the answer is yes, beam me up (or down?)...

An agonising pause ensues. I am impatient and excited. Then a beautiful garden of flowers appears, and somehow it knows that I am Maisie Fonda. However, it would seem that my version of Second Life is outdated and I am obliged to download a new one. This is a long and frustrating process – god, I hate technology sometimes! However, the long wait gives me a chance to stare out of my living room window (it looks down through a lovely leafy tree onto a busy street and is great for people-watching), listen to some music, and have a drink. I successfully download the new version on my second attempt, click on 'teleport now' again and suddenly I arrive at the temple. It is empty and very quiet. There are cushions to sit on and meditate, there are pictures, statues and carvings of the Buddha everywhere, which come into focus once you have looked at them for several moments. Intellectually, I know this is something to do with the speed of the technology, but I also find something quite zen-like about it. One of the most appealing things about Buddhism for me is the way it encourages you to look at the world with fresh and open eyes, and to really take everything in. This helps you to stay in the present, and means that you can find beauty in anything if you only look at it with the right intent. One of the Buddhist statues, which starts as an indistinct blur, gains sharp focus after a few moments and a message appears – 'Touch the Buddha to receive a Notecard about the Four Noble Truths'. I do so. It begins by saying:

> Buddhism is taking off in the West in dramatic fashion. The Dalai Lama can sell out the Wembley Conference Centre for three days, with queues waiting outside. Over 5 million Americans now call themselves Buddhist. Spiritual and lay communities are growing up all over Britain. ('Four Noble Truths note card', 2007)

It goes on to quote some of the work of Stephen Batchelor, of whom I am a big fan. It is an incredible piece of writing which articulates the anxieties and uncertainties that many of us have about our very existence and the inevitability of our mortality. Some of what I read is reproduced below:

> We inhabit the universe of relentless motion and flux, in which everything from an idle thought to a solar system comes into being, then hastens to its end. While this way of seeing things might induce a sense of religious awe, it can also send a chill of terror through one. One is unsettled by the sheer groundlessness and vastness of nature's unfolding...
>
> ...The instability and contingency of things provoke a brooding disquiet that hovers in the background of our lives. We know that our presence on this Earth is not as secure as we would like it to be, but we tend to ignore this fact and lose ourselves in the more pressing issues at hand. Paradoxically, though, to confront such inescapable truths may turn out to enrich our existence, rather than undermine it...
>
> ... I did not choose to be here, but now I cannot accept the thought of not being here. However certain I feel about the necessity of my existence, the only certainty I face is that this seemingly necessary being will perish, this heart will cease pumping blood, these lungs will cease drawing air, these neurons will cease firing in my brain, my body will rot or be consumed by fire, and within a matter of years, I will linger on only as a memory in the fading minds of those who once knew me. (Batchelor, as cited in the 'Four Noble Truths note card', 2007)

I admit that as I am really moved as I read this – it really hits a nerve I suppose, as well as reminding me of Bauman's words on fear and liquid

modernity (Bauman, 2000, 2006) - and as I do I become aware that the temple in which I am standing is surrounded by a beautiful garden, and I realise that I can hear birdsong and wind chimes. I switch off the music in my living room so I can hear it more clearly, and can become more absorbed in my 'second life'. I go into the garden and see butterflies flitting about – I love butterflies – and lots of birds too. Normally I am terrified of birds (I have a big phobia of them) but in Second Life, where I am freed from the possibility that they might suddenly fly up at me or scratch me with their beaks, I find myself quite happy to share my environment with them as I wander around the grounds of the temple. The words I am reading on the notecard, the incredible surroundings that my avatar is moving around, the fact that I appear to have mastered Second Life, the beautiful Buddhist artwork, the fact that back in my living room I can see my tree swaying outside and I can hear my boyfriend quietly playing his guitar in our bedroom, the sense of peace and serenity that is washing over me, all of these things combine and suddenly I am crying. I am flabbergasted that I am so moved by my experience. I wasn't expecting this at all. I continue walking around and see fountains, cherry blossom trees (my favourite) and endless other things tucked away in various corners of the grounds including a deer who is happily chomping on some grass (this makes me gasp out loud with delight, and I work out how to 'whisper' "hello little deer" to it – it ignores me of course!). I take 'photos' of Maisie (of me?) in front of a Buddha statue in the garden, and in front of a hologram of the Dalai Lama who dispatches wise words when you click on him. I feel happy and relaxed and it really does feel like a spiritual experience. Suddenly I remember that one can fly in Second Life so I take off. This is one thing I am yet to fully master and soon find myself flying over water and over to what seems to be an island of private properties. I don't see anyone but am warned that I am trespassing and am then ejected from the land. I fly around for a bit longer, getting increasingly lost. I get a little panicky and wish I hadn't left the temple grounds. But then I think, I am in Second Life and can play by Second Life rules and therefore it wouldn't be cheating to teleport back to the temple – and I do so.

Back at the temple I stumble upon a meditation area. I click on it – it says: "Meditation zafu – free! sit on it, you are buddha". I need no further encouragement. I sit down on the cushion, atop the rock, looking out over the

temple. I am ready to get spiritual but it seems that Maisie – the little hussy – has other ideas. She keeps raising her arms above her head and throwing her head back in a most provocative manner. But worse then this, as I move the camera around I realise that her pants are on display thanks to the short skirt that she is wearing! I hastily create a pair of black leggings for her to wear under her skirt, thus protecting her modesty. Then I become over-excited about the fact that I am meditating in Second Life and start taking photos of Maisie (myself?) before summoning my boyfriend to see how clever I have been. We then go off to hang out for a while, but I leave Maisie meditating. I am fascinated by the notion that I can be two places at once – getting on with my 'first life' whilst simultaneously meditating in my 'second life'. Again, this tallies with a zen notion that one should be meditating all the time, and during everyday mundane activities. But when I return to my laptop, Second Life has switched itself due to a lack of activity. Hmmm. In her blog, Dana Nourie describes going to group meditation sessions – she describes:

> ...a common question people frequently ask: "How do you meditate with people in Second Life?" Obviously, our avatars sit quietly on the cushions provided. In real life, people often need chairs, but here everyone is comfortable cross-legged. The person running the meditation tells everyone when the meditation is beginning. In real life, you sit in front of your computer, close your eyes and meditate until you hear the gong. The leader of the group rings the gong at the designated time. So, it's no different from meditations in real life, except the occasional coughs and sneezes you hear in real life are absent. (Nourie, 2009)

I decide to return to the temple and try and meditate along with Maisie, my avatar. As I will be on my own, I decide that I can use my mobile phone alarm in the absence of the gong that sounds at the end of the group meditation sessions. Elsewhere in her blog, Dana mentions that her meditation sessions last twenty minutes, so I decide to stick with this for my experiment.

<u>Meditating in Second Life</u>

I teleport back to the Buddhist Temple on Tarington. This is my third visit so the place is starting to feel very familiar. I find myself feeling increasingly fond of it,

and increasingly at home there. It really seems to promote a sense of calm and peace in me. Yes - it has become almost sacred to me. As with my previous visits, it is abandoned. I leave the temple and walk through the gardens to the meditation area. I settle Maisie down atop the rock in the meditation area on the zafu (meditation cushion). I set my phone timer and position myself in the chair with my eyes shut. I change position between a crossed legs position and a conventional chair position several times during the twenty minutes. I also alternate between having my eyes shut and having them open and focused gently on Maisie. Both seating positions and both eye positions are acceptable in zen meditation although the fidgeting is definitely not encouraged. But I find my body (and my mind) to be somewhat restless – as is very common in all forms of meditation. What eventually helps is the sound of the waves in Second Life – I am able to synchronise my breath with the sound and this helps me achieve a deeper state of relaxation. The other thing that helps is the knowledge that Maisie is also meditating and also fidgeting (more provocative arm-raising and head-throwing!). After the session finishes it occurs to me – I felt like I was meditating with a partner because Maisie was there. I was alone in the physical world and she was alone in the virtual world but we were together in our meditation practise. Obviously, in some ways we are manifestations of the same person and in that sense we were both present in both worlds but I have also started to see her as a separate being – a friend or a sister. Oddly, I find this really emotive. I start to think about the belief that I've always had that I should have been a twin (twins run in my family) and it is almost as though Maisie has become representative of the twin I didn't have. She is part of me, shares common characteristics with me, but she has also kind of become a person in her own right. I am stunned that I am feeling this way. It goes against everything I've always thought about the internet and its limitations. I look at a piece of writing I did about Second Life a couple of years ago – it says "the limited manoeuvres of ones avatar in Second Life ... must surely lead to misunderstandings and limited experiences". This now seems naïve. I always thought the fact that one was 'disembodied' in a virtual space meant that one couldn't have a full, genuine, complete experience. But I now feel that the combination of Maisie and myself meditating creates a more complete experience than either one of us could have had alone. Maisie is able to take me to a beautiful environment that is perfectly conducive to meditation and that I

couldn't have reached in the physical world without a considerable investment of time and money; and I am able to provide a tangible body and mind through which to experience the meditation. We are stronger than the sum of our parts. Together, it seems that Maisie and I are something like the Haraway's cyborg (Haraway, 1991, p. 291), and I am suddenly part of a world that once seemed alien – Haraway says:

> ... a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. (Haraway, 1991, p. 295)

This erosion of fear seems a good summary of how this experience has made me feel. With each moment that I spent with or as Maisie in Second Life, I am becoming more open to the possibility that their presence could have a positive effect on me. In fact, I am now thinking that they might both be permanent fixtures in my life, as opposed to merely a part of my research.

I should mention that just as my mobile phone alarm sounds and my meditation session ends, my laptop starts ticking (ticking?!!) and then switches itself off. It continues ticking and refuses to be switched back on until the following day. Here is a genuine limitation of technology which causes an abrupt end to my practise. But the limitation has nothing to do with embodiment or disembodiment, and it doesn't upset me as much as it might have done previously. It does, however, cause me to wonder what happens to Maisie in the moment the computer switches off – if someone else had been observing her in the garden (which could have happened if another avatar had entered whilst I had been absorbed in my meditation) would she have vanished before their eyes? My assumption is that one's avatars only 'exist' when one is logged into Second Life but I find myself surprisingly calm about this notion too.

I decide that my virtual 'pilgrimage' is over – although I plan to visit the Buddhist Temple on Tarington again in the future. Time to turn my attention to the categories that I decided to use to analyse each of my journeys before starting this experiment.

The spiritual and / or sentimental significance of the journey and of the destination.

I was slightly dubious about this before beginning – partly because I didn't really believe that I would be able to master Second Life to a standard that would allow me to successfully undertake a spiritual journey. The fact that I did manage to complete the experiment is significant in itself. Ultimately I did find spiritual significance too – the pilgrimage gave a me a new way to engage with my foray into Buddhism, and a tool that I think could have permanent use of in my spiritual life. My choice of the Buddhist Temple on Tarington was in a way quite random – I did feel that it was destined that I find it but of course it didn't have any existing significance in terms of Buddhism or the Buddha or anything else, and I had never heard of it before beginning, so in that way the journey was perhaps not a pilgrimage in the traditional sense.

The *prana* of the planning, the journey & the destination.

I planned the journey on the internet and wasn't expecting the process to be a particularly *prana* filled one. However, the fact that my initial Google search led me straight to a really useful website and therein to the perfect 'pilgrimage' destination seemed a bit like divine intervention and had definite *prana*. The journey itself was a little tiresome because of the logistics of updating my Second Life software, etc. However, the act of teleporting to my destination felt almost magical – and again had definite *prana*. The actually destination, the Buddhist Temple on Tarington was to my surprise an immensely spiritual place – it made me feel incredibly serene and I felt a real connection to the place in terms of my own personal Buddhism – after a couple of visits it had definitely started to feel sacred.

My perceived significance of the journey both at the start and on reflection at the end.

At the start of the online journey I expected it to be far less significant than my offline 'pilgrimage'. I am yet to undertake this, but I now see the virtual journey as being hugely significant in terms of material for my thesis, in terms of opening my eyes to a new way to practise spirituality, and in terms of the dramatic difference it has made to my views about technology as a whole.

Any transformative effects of the 'pilgrimage'.

I feel completely different now, at the end of my virtual journey, then I did at the start of it. It has had a profound effect on my views, and has been a deeper and more emotional experience that I would ever have predicted. I also feel closer to being Buddhist than I have ever done before – because it has given me a personal and practical way to practise Buddhism which I have never had before. I am now desperate to not only return to the Buddhist Temple on Tarington often, but to visit other Buddhist spaces in Second Life, and to make an attempt to meet other Buddhists when I do.

The embodied experience of the journey, and a decision on whether this was an important factor in its significance or not.

In Second Life I was freed from the usual restraints of human embodiment and was able to teleport, to fly, to look the way I wanted to look, to roam and to sit cross-legged without ever becoming tired. The journey itself was much less arduous because no physical exertion was required so was arguable less 'worthy' as a pilgrimage. The meditation I did at the temple benefited from both my avatar's lack of physical body and the existence of my physical body. I think embodiment was significant in all these ways, but my lack of virtual embodiment was not the disability that I thought it would be before starting.

The sacrifice / exertion / hardship that the journey required.

The virtual trip required very little physical exertion (except perhaps for when I meditated in front of my laptop), the hardship involved amounted to no more than a little pre-pilgrimage anxiety and a few niggling moments when the technology failed me. The biggest sacrifice was that of my belief system. I have had to swallow my words about technology and to open myself up to a new way of thinking about technology. But then again, I think that is what has ultimately made this an incredible journey.

Whether the journey could ultimately be considered to be a pilgrimage

In some ways I feel that there is no right answer to this question. However, with regards to the definition of ‘pilgrimage’ which I have already identified, I think I can say that my online journey was certainly something that closely resembled a

pilgrimage because: 1) I undertook it for spiritual reasons, 2) it was a statement about my beliefs at the time, even if it didn't necessarily reflect my lifelong spiritual path, 3) it was both an inner and outer journey (if the realms of 'outer' can be seen to include cyberspace), 4) it certainly did teach me something, even if I wasn't utterly transformed by the experience, and 5) although I didn't endure physical hardship as part of the journey, I did have to challenge my preconceptions and fears along the way. As I have already stated, the one area in which the journey was really not a pilgrimage was in the sense that my destination was chosen in a rather random way and didn't hold true significance for me, or – I would suggest - for people like me (be they spiritual tourists or online Buddhists).

8.5 My Offline Spiritual Journey

My offline journey doesn't happen for some months after my online one. This is because of the many hurdles that have to be overcome in order to conduct such a trip in the offline world. I lose count of the number of false starts I have before I finally set off for my 'pilgrimage'. The reasons for the failed attempts are numerous but include:

1) *A lack of time*
2) *A lack of money*
3) *Bad weather*
4) *Being tired*
5) *The difficulty of getting directions without resorting to using the internet. I decide to visit the Madhyamaka Centre in Pocklington but don't know the address so have to wait until I randomly find a flyer for it in a shop. My boyfriend offers to drive me but loses interest when he can't type the postcode into a website to get directions. I decide to go by bus but can't look up the timetable online so have to find the time for a trip to the tourist information centre to pick up a paper one. And then I have to work out which stop to get off at and directions from there so have to call the centre – and it takes weeks before I don't get the answer machine.*

All of these reasons were not a factor at all with my online journey but do make it more difficult which means that when I finally set off on my trip, I already feel

a great sense of achievement and of journey. The day I go is the first sunny one for months – it is a beautiful day, I have energy, I have the day off, I have enough money to pay for my adventure, and I managed to get through to the Centre on the phone the previous day to get directions. It feels like this is the day that I was always meant to go on my pilgrimage and I am in a fantastic mood as I set off for the bus stop.

The bus journey is bliss – I sit on the top deck at the very front so feel like I am flying through the gorgeous, sun-soaked Yorkshire countryside. I am really excited about visiting the Buddhist Centre and am really pleased with myself for finally getting off my backside and doing so. I start to read some words about pilgrimage in a yoga book I have but abandon this in favour of staying in the moment and enjoying my journey. I press the button at the advised time and the driver drops me on a corner of the main road, a small sign indicates that the Centre is up a smaller lane. It is only after the bus drives off that I realise that there was no bus stop – the driver dropped me at the right place in an act of kindness. I feel very touched by this and am warmed by both his gesture and the wintry sun as I set off towards the Centre. It is a 10 minute walk down a long and winding lane that goes through lovely land. After a short while I see the Madhyamaka Centre building – which I recognise from photos I have seen of it – and I gasp with delight. It is a beautiful, historical hall which I imagine once housed an important aristocratic family. As I near it I pass families, cyclists, walkers, all of whom greet me cheerfully and I feel confident that I am approaching a very happy and friendly place.

I enter the hall and pick up various flyers and booklets that are displayed for visitors to browse. Then I enter – the inside isn't as grand as the outside (and a collection to fund renovations greets me almost straight away) but it is warm and inviting. I take my shoes off and creep around – it is made clear that visitors are free to roam freely but I do feel like a bit of a trespasser as I peep into rooms and see dorms for the resident Buddhists, domestic paraphernalia such as ironing boards, etc., and rotas for the cleaning & cooking. I am not the only visitor – there are several courses and workshops going on for members of the public. In one room, a monk is helping a group of children to create some artwork which makes me smile. I tiptoe upstairs and find an abandoned

meditation room (the main one was being used for a Sunday morning course when I arrived). It is a simple, bright, airy room with lovely views over the grounds but it also contains a very ornate altar with many gold statues of the Buddha as well as photos of Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, the 'New Kadampa Tradition – International Buddhist Union' (NKT-IKBU)'s founder and spiritual leader. There are also many bowls of water, and a cup of tea that I consider drinking briefly! I am also confused by the large number of bottles of expensive cordials, Green and Blacks bars of chocolate, and various other luxury consumables – after a few moments I realise that these are modern offerings which I find quite amusing! The room also contains plenty of meditation cushions, chairs, stools, etc., so I take a cushion and sit down cross-legged on it, facing the altar. I do some meditative breathing but don't feel inclined to attempt a full meditation (it is all a little too ornate for me) so turn and face the window instead and enjoy watching people walking peacefully around the grounds. After a few minutes I decide to join them.

Outside I spend a very happy hour walking around the grounds, enjoying the weather. I go down to a river and watch ducks swimming and then I carefully navigate the uneven ground until I come across a tiny abandoned church with barbed wire around it. I guess churches aren't needed when you have an ornate meditation room for your spiritual reflections but it does make me feel a little sad for a moment. I carry on and see monks , nuns and residents tending to the garden, all busy with selfless employment. Everyone seems very calm and very content, and the atmosphere is infectious. To my delight, I come across a swing made from a sawn-in-half log which is attached to a big, strong tree with some rope. I love swings and so fling my bags at the tree's base and sit on it. At first I am slightly irritated by the fact that it doesn't swing in a straight line but instead curves around on an angle but then I have an epiphany – I see the swing's path as a metaphor for life and think about how our life journey never goes in a straight line but rather veers in all sorts of unexpectedly directions. I begin to enjoy the swing's random path and allow myself to be led by it and realise that this is how life should be lived – expect the unexpected and enjoy all the times that you veer from the path you had planned for yourself. This is my most 'spiritual' moment of the whole day and I am interested that this has happened out in the open air rather than in one of the dedicated meditation rooms – it

makes me feel that my Buddhism is closer to zen than anything else, it is life not a break from life... Having never previously realised that I have a 'Buddhism' of my own, I feel quite emotional at this point and decide that lunch is required!

The Madhyamaka Centre's Peace Café is a sanctuary – it is a tiny room set back in the gardens and is packed full of chattering people, all tucking into the absolutely delicious home-cooked vegetarian food. I opt for a baked potato with salad and a vegan curry topping and have it outside. Whilst I wait for it to come I sit in the sun and read through some of the literature that I picked up in the reception. I recall that when I met the Soto Zen Buddhist several years ago she spoke in hushed tones about the Buddhist Centre – she said that it wasn't approved of by other schools of Buddhism and that it had been publicly 'disowned' by the Dalai Lama. I don't know whether this is true but reading the pamphlet about the NKT-IKBU I do pick up on a slightly defensive tone. It is at pains to point out that it is not a cult (it's always a worry when a religious group feels the need to do this) and also to distance itself from Tibetan Buddhism which it sees as being coloured by political problems. I find all this very off-putting, but also at odds with what I have seen during my few hours at the Centre, am relieved when my food arrives and I can put away the literature and get back to enjoying my day. It is cold but it is exhilarating to sit outside in the sun eating and watching some children play with the Centre's clearly much-loved black Labrador. When I finish a monk comes and collects my empty plate and seems genuinely pleased that I have enjoyed the food – the staff (including voluntary residential visitors) clearly take a lot of pride in their work and it pays off.

Satiated, I head back into the main building and investigate the shop. It sells fair trade food and trinkets, cruelty-free cosmetics, candles, cards, and lots of different Buddhism books and guided meditation CDs. It all seems slightly random but it's a lovely peaceful shop and I browse happily for sometime before the monk who is manning the till announces that the shop will close for an hour whilst he has his lunch. I had been planning to buy a few things – souvenirs of my trip – but I don't get a chance. I had also intended to bring my camera to document the day but forgot it so feel a little disappointed that I won't have any mementoes of my trip but then decide than carrying the memories of it in my

heart/soul/mind is probably more Buddhist anyway.

I move on to to the main meditation room which is now empty. It is larger than the first one I visited, but even more ornate (and even more laden with expensive mineral water and Swiss chocolates!), and is full of chairs facing the altar – in fact it feels very church-like. I ignore the chairs and find a cushion at the sunny back of the room which I settle down on and contemplate my day. The Madhyamaka Centre is a really beautiful, peaceful, serene, welcoming place but it doesn't feel like my spiritual home. I would visit again but the overly decorated meditation rooms are at odds with the simple Buddhism that I have come to realise is my own, and the slightly worrying tone of the NKT-IKBU literature is a turn-off. Having said that, the half-log swing outside in the grounds was the scene of my epiphany and did feel like a place I was meant to be, and the food was good enough to worship. I have learnt that I must find Buddhism in the everyday – in the outdoors, in a nice meal, in a cup of tea, in a warm breeze, in a loving embrace. And if I am ever looking for a dedicated arena for my spiritual pursuits then simple Japanese-style Zen temples and gardens and grounds are what I need. The question then becomes - can I find them in Yorkshire? The answer, I suddenly realise, is yes – in Second Life.

And so I put my shoes back on and leave the Madhyamaka Centre behind as I start the 45 minute walk back to Pocklington town centre to catch my bus. It is a beautiful walk and I feel elated by the sounds of birds and animals, by the feel of the sun on my face and the stones and grass beneath my feet, and by the view of life all around me. Cyclists greet me as they pass, I sing a little, I feel alive. This walk is Buddhism, I realise, as is the celebratory bottle of wine I buy when I reach Pocklington centre and as is the drive back to York on the front of the top deck of the bus. I get home tired but happy feeling that I have truly had a pilgrimage.

Back at home, I once again turn my attention to the categories that I decided to use to analyse each of my journeys before starting this experiment.

The spiritual and / or sentimental significance of the journey and of the destination.

The offline journey was much easier to feel spiritual about before I began – perhaps because it took so much more planning, motivation and dedication than my online one. I felt a sense that I was planning a visit to somewhere that could truly be a spiritually rich destination, that I had heard about and which I had wanted to go for a very long time. Having said that, the Madhyamaka Centre, like the Buddhist Temple on Tarington, doesn't have any particular significance in terms of Buddhism and the Buddha and isn't an established destination for pilgrims.

The *prana* of the planning, the journey & the destination.

The difficulty of planning my trip made it feel more authentic – the fact that I had really 'suffered' (in the lightest possible of meaning of the word) made it feel more like what springs immediately to mind when you hear the word 'pilgrimage'. The fact that I had to physically travel also made it feel like more spiritual, and I felt a sense of *prana* very keenly as I made my way towards the destination. The feeling I had that everything suddenly fell into place the day before I went also felt a bit like divine intervention. Surprisingly, I felt much less *prana* in the Madhyamaka Centre itself than I had done in the Buddhist Temple on Tarington, although the grounds felt profoundly spiritual as I walked around them and felt the sun on my face. Outside, having a physical body allowed me to experience everything through all of my senses, and this definitely made for a richer experience.

My perceived significance of the journey both at the start and on reflection at the end.

At the start of this journey I expected it to be far more significant than my online trip. The build-up was longer and more intense, and I was far more excited about undertaking it. Having completed the journey, I think it was deeply significant but in unexpected ways...

Any transformative effects of the 'pilgrimage'.

My epiphany on the swings has soaked through me and I hope will have a profound effect on my life – I really want to be able to enjoy the journey of life, and to expect – and enjoy – the unexpected paths that life drives me down. I also now feel an increased sense that spending time outside, amongst nature, is

really important for the soul as well as for the mind and body. The most radical transformative effect of the journey, however, is that it brought me closer to believing that my true spiritual homeland could actually be found in Second Life. So the offline trip had as much of an effect on improving my feelings about technology as the online one.

The embodied experience of the journey, and a decision on whether this was an important factor in its significance or not.

The offline journey itself was obviously much more arduous than my online one and I did enjoy the sensation of walking slowly towards my final destination, bathing in a full-sensed experience. My physical body was also an advantage when enjoying the grounds at the Madhyamaka Centre, and it was instrumental in me being able to have my epiphany on the swings. I suppose something in Second Life could have taught me the same lesson but I think the epiphany was more intense because it came to me as the sun shined on face, and the birds sang all around, as my legs worked to swing me back and forth. However, my physical body also constricted me – it meant I couldn't explore all the grounds because it couldn't move me around quickly enough and safely enough. Again, the overall effect was an increased respect for the beauty of Second Life.

The sacrifice / exertion / hardship that the journey required.

The offline journey required time, money, energy, and for a number of factors to come together at the right time. However, it can't really be said that I suffered any hardship, or that I made any significant sacrifices in order to achieve a successful 'pilgrimage'. On the other hand, I definitely couldn't plan to visit the Madhyamaka Centre frequently as time and money would not allow it, whereas Second Life is available at a click of a button. Perhaps this means a visit to it cannot really be classified as a pilgrimage (just as you wouldn't call a weekly trip to church a pilgrimage) but it does mean that it is a more viable spiritual home. Indeed – I am left with the question: can Second Life be my church? Because it feels like it could just be...

Whether the journey could ultimately be considered to be a pilgrimage

As with the online journey, I again feel that there is no right answer to this question. However, once again – one could argue that it was a pilgrimage

because 1) I undertook it for spiritual reasons, 2) it was a statement about my beliefs at the time, 3) it was both an inner and outer journey which was comprised of a number of substantial embodied experiences, 4) it was a transformative experience, and 5) it did require a considerably amount of effort on my part in order to bring to fruition. As with my online experience though, the one area in which the journey was really not a pilgrimage was in the sense that my destination isn't an established destination for pilgrims and didn't hold true significance for me. Having said that, I would say that it does hold true significance for me now – and therefore any future trips to the centre may well be considered to be pilgrimages, even if this one wasn't.

8.6 Conclusion

I have been astonished by how both my physical and my virtual spiritual journeys have affected me. The expectations that I had before beginning my research have been completely blown away and I have had to reassess my feelings about many things included my instinctive reactions to my research questions...

How important is embodiment in a spiritual journey?

Prior to starting I would have said that embodiment would be paramount in a pilgrimage and that a virtual 'pilgrimage' would not have been valid because of the absence of both a physical body and a physical space to touch and move through. In actual fact, whilst I enjoyed the full-sensed experience of being at the Madhyamaka Centre (particularly when outside) and whilst having all my senses at my disposal during my offline 'pilgrimage' did enhance it, it by no means defined it. Meanwhile, my online 'pilgrimage' was a surprisingly rich audio-visual experience (and the unexpected things that I saw and heard delighted me in a much greater way than I could ever have anticipated) and I found that Maisie's 'body' was a perfectly appropriate body for me to 'borrow' for my online adventure.

Is *prana* possible in virtual spaces?

The Buddhist Temple at Tarington blew me away in terms of how much *prana* I felt whilst exploring it. It was precisely the sort of place that I would have imagined for myself to go for spiritual pursuits and it really felt tailor-made for

me. It felt truly magical being there and so – to my surprise – my answer to this question is an emphatic 'yes'. However, I do suspect that if I found somewhere like it in the offline world (which probably wouldn't be possible without travelling a very long way indeed – possibly to Japan?) then the *prana* present there would really be something and would in all probability dwarf that of any Second Life place. However, there is something about the magic of Second Life which really got under my skin (not Maisie's – mine) during the virtual journey and so perhaps I am wrong there. And in any case – I couldn't test this hypothesis without considerably time, money and resources so Second Life is a sensible and not-at-all inadequate substitute.

Do the differences in online 'pilgrimage' – the fact that it is instant, the fact that it lacks in a physical endurance element, the fact that it is non-linear – make it a contradiction of terms or are they merely a sign of the cult recreating itself?

These are the very things that made me suspicious about the credibility of a virtual pilgrimage before starting and whilst I did find each of them to be the case during my Second Life visit, and to very much not be the case during my offline trip, it didn't matter as much as I thought it would. Yes, getting to Second Life was instant but only once I had mastered the technology, and yes being there wasn't physically hard but it was a completely new experience for me and involved a lot of mental adjusting as well as a considerable shift in my attitude towards virtual worlds and technology as a whole. I don't think online pilgrimages will ever fully replace offline ones (although perhaps they will if fossil fuels run out and global travel is no longer possible) but I do now believe that they are an appropriate addition in the twenty-first century.

And on a personal level – where is my Church?!!?

Astonishingly, this experiment has started to teach me the answer to this very big question. Actually, I think my Church is several places – it remains the dance floor as Faithless pointed out at the very beginning of this journey, it remains the theatre which in my life is perhaps the most spiritually significant place of all, but it is also the great outdoors (the Madhyamaka Centre taught me that) and the hope of one day finding an offline version of the Buddhist Temple of Tarington. Having said that, what is interesting is that all the virtual pilgrimages

which I read about during my research (for example the Christian Aid virtual pilgrimage to Jerusalem) were all substitutes for physical journeys to existing places in the offline world and so were all very much replicas for the original and therefore arguably lacking in authenticity. However, to my knowledge there is no such place as the Buddhist Temple on Tarington in the offline world – indeed if you asked me where the Buddhist Temple on Tarington is then the answer would be 'Second Life' – so a pilgrimage to it would have no choice but to be a virtual one and is therefore not a replica at all. Therefore, any offline place which might have the feel of the Buddhist Temple on Tarington would in fact be the replica in that instance. So, if the Buddhist Temple on Tarington is the original place then perhaps it is worth adjusting my viewpoint to such an extent that it becomes possible to accept that some places are located in the offline world and some are only found online and that both are equally valid and equally 'real' and authentic for as MacWilliams says:

> ... despite the fact that it is immaterial, cyberspace has its own geography, landmarks and potential for freedom of movement like the real world... Cyberspace offers a new architecture that, like the physical temples and shrines of the past, orients the human sense of 'what we mean by "reality"'. (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 315)

Of course, writing in 2002 MacWilliams perhaps didn't know just how true this might become for me, eight years later, because if I can accept Second Life (born 2003) as being a real place then perhaps it is possible that it can be not only a valid pilgrimage destination but that it can also contain my church and might even be a place where I can retreat to for all of my spiritual pursuits, and therefore contains the potential to, as MacWilliams says "re-imagine the sacred" (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 315).

And as to whether my journeys were true pilgrimages – perhaps I would have to ultimately conclude that they weren't. But I would say that they were both significant spiritual journeys which did reflect the following statement by Watson:

> To embark on a pilgrimage is to engage in a challenge and encounter a new

way of seeing and being with the stillness and quiet, yet action-filled moments of everyday life; a way to challenge one's sense of self in harmony or disharmony with nature, the universe and life itself. (Watson, 2006, p. 290)

9 THE FOURTH SNAPSHOT – 2009/2010 - ONLINE V OFFLINE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Having had my eyes well and truly opened by my spiritual journey into Second Life, the next step in my research was to test my new found faith in the potential of the website to "re-imagine the sacred" (MacWilliams, 2002, p. 315) and to give me personally a new arena in which to experiment and to solidify my spiritual beliefs. This chapter is therefore an exploration of a much longer and more intensive experiment than that which was conducted in Chapter Eight. The first half of the experiment was to spend a whole month (September 2009) as an online spiritual tourist by visiting Second Life and trying to immerse myself in the Buddhist landscapes, teachings, groups and other opportunities that were available to me. The second half of the experiment was to spend a second month (split over November 2009 and January 2010 because of illness) as an offline spiritual tourist immersing myself in the Buddhist teachings, rituals, etc., which were available to me without the use of a computer – in 'First Life' as it were. I then planned to analyse the journals that I kept, and the experiences that I had, as well as a variety of relevant theories including Prensky's "Digital Immigrant" versus "Digital Natives" theory (Prensky, 2001), Baudrillard's work on Disneyland and simulacrums (Baudrillard, 1981) and the creation of virtual realities in the Godless age (Baudrillard, 2001); and also to look at a couple of related metaphors – namely the theatre and the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Ultimately, the aim of the chapter was to continue answering my key research questions: *does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* And *how does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?* by looking at the following chapter-specific questions:

1. How does Second Life compare with the offline world as an arena for spiritual development?
2. How important is embodiment in spiritual pursuits? Is its absence a help or a hindrance in Second Life?
3. Is it possible for a "Digital Immigrant" to become a "Digital Native?"
4. Is time in Second Life wasted time? Does it damage or limit our potential

in our offline world? Or can the two live alongside each other?

5. How possible it is to see Second Life in the same light as Baudrillard sees Disneyland – as another simulacrum which masks the futility and phoniness of our lives offline (Baudrillard, 1981)?
6. Is this idea that our Godless times have created a desire to build worlds which we can take full responsibility for, and which we can do with what we will, one explanation for the existence of both Disneyland and Second Life? (And is it significant that my adventures in Second Life are actually explicitly spiritual?)
7. How far does the analogy between theatre and Second life hold true? And is it possible that Second Life might be able to serve a similar function as theatre – i.e. to provide a safe space in which to explore issues and then apply what we have learnt in our offline lives?
8. Is Second Life as real as the offline world and if so – is it viable as an alternative?

There were several reasons for me wanting to conduct this experiment – firstly because I wanted to compare the spiritual potential of the two arenas and to further explore my question of how important embodiment is in spiritual pursuits, and secondly because I wanted to see how far I could push my newly discovered faith in the internet itself. In a way I wanted to see whether I could not only be, to borrow Prensky's language, a "Digital Immigrant", but whether I could also become a "Digital Native" (Prensky, 2001). In his essay 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', Prensky describes Digital Immigrants as follows:

> As Digital Immigrants learn – like all immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their "accent," that is, their foot in the past… There are hundreds of examples of the digital immigrant accent. They include printing out your email (or having your secretary print it out for you – an even "thicker" accent); needing to print out a document written on the computer in order to edit it (rather than just editing on the screen); and bringing people physically into your office to see an interesting web site (rather than just sending them the URL).(Prensky, 2001, p. 2)

In other words, Digital Immigrants do use modern technology but continue to hold on to the procedures that used to be a part of their lives before it came along. I can certainly see myself in his description – I am certainly 'guilty' of printing out work to read and edit rather than keeping it on the screen, for example, and of downloading music to a disc rather than to a computer (although even that is definite progress of course!). However, none of this, according to Prensky, is my fault – it is simply due to my age. Writing in 2001, Prensky defined the then college students (who might be as old as 32 in 2012) as being the first generation to have grown up entirely immersed in digital technology. It is these young people that Prensky describes as "Digital Natives" and he says of them:

> Today's students have not just changed *incrementally* from those of the past, nor simply changed their slang, clothes, body adornments, or styles, as happened between generations previously. A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a "singularity" – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back. This so-called "singularity" is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century.
>
> Today's students… represent the first generations to grow up with this technology… Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.
>
> It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students *think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors. (Prensky, 2001, p. 1)

Prensky, who works in the field of education and learning and who has created many software games to assist teachers, then goes on to talk about the need for the Digital Immigrants who teach the Digital Natives to modify and modernise their teaching practises. However, my question is – is it possible for a Digital Immigrant to become a Digital Native, particularly when she is only a few years older than the biological Digital Natives? In terms of Second Life I think I will

have successfully become a native if and when I master the technology and am able to operate fully there, when I feel one hundred percent comfortable there, when I know my way around my chosen neighbourhoods and when I am happy to call it home.

The third reason for my experiment is more complicated and comes back to my inherent distrust of digital technology and of anything that makes the body obsolete. When I first started writing this thesis back in 2003, my focus was not on Buddhism but was rather on film and one of the key films that I planned to use was *The Matrix* (1999), which I saw as a metaphor for what I strongly felt at the time was a sinister increase in the presence of and reliance upon new technology in society. My original thesis was born in the wake of the Twin Tower disaster on September 11th 2001 in which – as I saw it - man-made technology allowed one of the most awful terrorist attacks of all time to take place. At the time I also felt that the sudden boom in internet use and digital music technology was jeopardising our natural human identities. For me, 'the Matrix' of the film, which was essentially a computer game which simulated a world in which humankind 'lived' in blissful ignorance whilst their bodies were being used to power the 'real world', was a fictionalised warning about what damage might be done to us by new technologies, especially the internet. In the film the character of Morpheus says:

> Morpheus: What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this. *[holds up a Duracell battery]* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

and this represented modern technology perfectly. Not because I believed in any kind of sinister conspiracy theory but because it seemed to perfectly represent the blind way in which humankind was moving towards an increasingly technological way of living without ever stopping to question the effect that it was having on their bodies, on their relationships and on their identities. Writing in 2010, I think that my fear was to some extent justified – one only has to look at the many studies which suggest a link between a high usage of media such as the internet, television and video games, and obesity, drug abuse, depression

and low academic / employment achievement (St. George, 2008; Vandelanotte et al, 2009; ''Internet addiction' linked to depression', 2010) to see that some caution with regards to time engaging with modern technologies could be beneficial. However, I am now far more open to technology than I started my research which means that I now see *The Matrix* not so much as an apocalyptic cautionary tale but more as interesting analogy which might – I have come round to thinking in recent months – help shape my understanding of Second Life. The similarities between the Matrix and Second Life are quite striking – for example, it often interests me how Second Life has become a place where money and economy are important, capitalism is rife and crimes are committed rather than the utopian paradise that it could so easily have been, and this is perhaps because human beings are involved and human beings always crave drama and by definition suffer (this is part of what Buddhists see as the human condition - achieving enlightenment is all about escaping the endless cycle of human suffering). Meanwhile, in the film, Agent Smith says:

> Agent Smith: Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this: the peak of your civilization. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

Furthermore, Second Life is a complete virtual world which one can 'plug into' via a computer, and which causes one's physical form to remain more or less dormant whilst one traverses through an alternative universe using an avatar. like the Matrix, Second Life is arguably seductive when compared to one's complicated offline existence as it allows one to forget all that whilst one is plugged in. In the film, Morpheus says:

> Morpheus: Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you

know the difference between the dream world and the real world? (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

In fact, a lot of the film's power lies in the way it manages to persuade both Neo (the hero, played by Keanu Reeves) and the viewer to question what we understand by 'reality' - Morpheus says:

Morpheus: If real is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then 'real' is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

Neo: I thought it wasn't real
Morpheus: Your mind makes it real (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

This is later confirmed by the character Cypher, who knows the truth about the Matrix but chooses to live in it anyway. He says:

Cypher: You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize?
[Takes a bite of steak]
Cypher: Ignorance is bliss. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

And if we take this thinking through to its natural conclusion then we could argue that the Matrix is as real as the world in which one's physical form is located and Second Life is therefore as real as its offline counterpart. But the question is – even if this is true should we really, to use the film's device, take the blue pill and carry on living in the Matrix or in Second life and ignore the realities of the alternative world which houses our physical bodies?

Morpheus: This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

It is interesting that Morpheus refers to the non-Matrix world, with all its difficulties and grim truths, as the 'Wonderland' of the two options – the suggestion is perhaps that truth, although always harder to swallow, has a more infinite and exciting potential for adventure, growth and joy. For example - it is said that it wouldn't be possible to see all of Second Life in a lifetime but we can be damned sure that doing so would take a lot less time and would be a lot less inspiring that seeing all of our offline world. So is time in Second Life wasted time? Does it damage or limit our potential in our offline world? Or can the two live alongside each other?

Another reason for conducting my experiment is to tackle questions about the reason for the existence of Second Life. Another 'alternative world' which it might be worth comparing it to for this purpose is Disneyland. Disneyland, like Second Life, is an arena which has been designed for pleasure and leisure, and which offers something that real life cannot – magic. In both Second Life and Disneyland we can fly, we can meet creatures which don't exist elsewhere, we can spend our time in worlds which we could never otherwise reach, and we can indulge our inner child. However, Disneyland has been cited by Baudrillard (who was, incidentally, a big influence on the Wachowski brothers whilst they were creating the *Matrix* trilogy) as being a classic example of a simulacrum, a copy with no real original. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard refers to Disneyland as being an "embalmed and pacified" (Baudrillard ,1981, p 12) version of America and describes its purpose as follows:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (Baudrillard, 1981, pp 12-13)

So, for Baudrillard, Disneyland becomes an empty concept, a place designed to protect us from the unappealing truth of what lies beyond it. Like an elaborately painted set that is just wood and splinters beyond the audience's sight lines,

Disneyland is something that we buy into in the hope of forgetting how empty our lives have become. And certainly it might be possible to ask whether this might also be how we might see Second Life – another simulacrum which masks the futility and phoniness of our lives offline? In fact, in another work, *Impossible Exchange*, Baudrillard suggests that our ever expanding technological advances are a reaction to the meaningless of our Godless existence – he says:

> It is only since God died that the world has become our responsibility... In the past we could give thanks for the gift (of the world), or respond to it by sacrifice. Now we have no one to give thanks to. And if we can no longer give anything in exchange for the world, it is unacceptable. So we are going to have to liquidate the given world. To destroy it by substituting an artificial one, built from scratch, a world for which we don't have to account to anyone. Hence this gigantic technical undertaking for eliminating the natural world in all its forms. (Baudrillard, 2001, pp 13-14)

Here Baudrillard is in agreement with Bauman who once said: "In our modern times, with God on a protracted leave of absence, the task of designing and servicing order has fallen upon human beings." (Bauman, 2000, p.55) So is this idea that we have a desire to build worlds which we can take full responsibility for, and which we can do with what we will, one explanation for the existence of both Disneyland and Second Life? (And is it significant that my adventures in Second Life are actually explicitly spiritual?) Baudrillard goes on to suggest that virtual reality is the ultimate expression of this desire and of the need to exchange our world for an equivalent in order to validate its existence – he says:

> With all things, we have to find their ultimate equivalence, have to find a meaning and an end for them. When we have that end, that formula, that purpose, then we shall be quits with the world; all will be 'redeemed', the debt will be paid and radical uncertainty will come to an end. Up to now, all systems have failed. The magical, metaphysical, religious systems which worked in the past are now a dead letter. *But this time we seem to have found the final solution, the definitive equivalent: Virtual Reality in all its forms* – the digital, information, universal computation, cloning. In short, the putting in place of a perfect virtual, technological artefact, so that the

world can be exchanged for its artificial double. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 14)

This theory is obviously tested in a very literal way in *The Matrix* but another way in which mankind reproduces the world is through art and this provides a final reason for the experiment. I want to question whether theatre might also provide a good analogy for Second Life. As a theatre professional who acts, directs and writes, it has recently occurred to me that working in theatre is a bit like retreating into a virtual world. A theatre is a space in which stories which might be found in real life too can be safely explored within the established theatrical conventions. The characters of a play are like the avatars in Second Life and the Matrix, and are operated by the writer, the director and the actor who might, in doing so, forget about their real life and become completely engrossed in the imaginary world of the play. The audience too, generally becomes very still and lives through the action on the stage, often forgetting about their daily lives whilst doing so. However, a good play is also art and therefore has a function which is as much about making a statement about human life and encouraging its audience to engage actively in the issues that it raises, as it is about entertaining and providing escapism. When the audience leave the theatre it is the hope that what they have seen will stay with them in some way, and expose truths about their own lives, identities, environments, etc. (which, of course, is also the aim of autoethnography and PSS). The power of theatre has sometimes frightened people and it there are many examples of it being censored or banned throughout history (and it's still happening – for example the play 'Moonfleece' which tackled issues around the BNP and homophobia in an attempt to open up a debate about the far right in Britain was banned by Dudley Council in March 2010 – source Akbar, 2010) but I am, unsurprisingly, a huge fan of the medium and am not at all frightened by any aspect of it. So is it possible that Second Life might be able to serve a similar (if watered down) function in my life – by providing a safe space in which to explore issues and then apply what I have learnt in my offline life?

9.1 Results from my month as a Second Life Spiritual Tourist

Following my successful online spiritual journey to the Buddhist Temple on Tarington, which opened my mind and convinced me that there is something potentially special about pursuing a spiritual life in Second life, I decided to go

one step further and become a 'Second Life Spiritual Tourist' (with a particular interest in Buddhism) for the month of September 2009. My aim was to visit Second Life most days in September, to meditate, to visit various Buddhist locations, to ponder Buddhist readings, to enjoy the sacred Buddhist sites, to relax and try to really learn something about myself and my relationship to Buddhism, Second Life and my avatar Maisie. In addition, I planned to take a snapshot (the Second Life equivalent of a photo) everyday to document my adventures, and to keep a journal too. The snapshots are collected in Appendix Five and the journal for my month as a Second Life Buddhist is below.

'Wake Me Up When September Ends':
A journal about my month of life as an online Buddhist in Second Life

Day One - 1st September

I teleport to the Buddhist Temple on Tarington but become lost instantly. However, I wander around the surrounding area and am startled to find it looking quite different. Even more strangely, it seems to be filled with things which reflect my offline life at present – recently I have been fixated upon the idea of a hot air balloon ride and I see one in a garden in a private property. I have also been planning to go camping and I come across a seemingly abandoned tent compete with two camp chairs, a camp fire and a barbecue cooking some dinner. I also see butterflies, another current obsession, everywhere. Obviously this could all be sheer coincidence, but I feel a slight sense that these things are signs that my idea has been a good one, and that there will be much to learn over the next month. I also see another person for the first time since I have the training area of Second Life – an attractive male avatar standing in a private property. A strange privacy device composed of trees prevents me from going any closer to him. I am kind of relieved, I rather like the solitude that I have discovered in Second Life. I decide to type 'Buddhist Temple' into the SL search engine and decide to visit The Buddha Center which promises 'Buddhist teaching and meditation' as well as a Buddhist art shop, and which describes its mission as follows:

> The Buddhist Center was developed in September of 2008. The basic tenet is that Buddhism must be unequivocally and purely taught by experienced

monastics and lay people of Second Life. This is a non-profit organization that allows all individuals the opportunity to gather and hear Buddhist monastics and lay people speak of various Buddhist practices. Weekly Dharma discourses will be held, as well as occasional forums where the audience can present questions regarding all aspects of Buddhism. (From information displayed at the The Buddhist Center, Second Life, retrieved 1/9/09.)

I teleport there. It isn't as pretty as my Tarington temple (in fact I feel homesick for it and plan to set it as my home page when I'm done) and it has been hit by the evil wand of capitalism – everywhere you go things are for sale. They're pretty cool things though – lots of interactive Buddhist paraphernalia which you can play with for free. I do. I light candles and extinguish them with the click of a button. I change the colour of urns and carvings and busts of the Buddha. I find objects that you make 'glow' in all sorts of ways, and things that make all sorts of meditation-friendly sounds. I burn incense. Then I find a giant pink lotus flower and sit down in it. I set it to make gentle gong noises and for it to omit hundreds of purple 'Om' signs which float away as Maisie meditates. I join her in a 5 minute meditation. It's not bad but I am conscious that I am in a commercial place and I decide to return to Tarington. I teleport back but get lost again. I can't understand where I am and where the temple has gone. Then within the space of a couple of seconds two separate avatars approach me and ask if I'm lost. The first is the attractive male avatar I saw earlier with whom I have a brief, pleasant conversation with (transcript in Appendix Four). The second is called Beccca Baxton (transcript in Appendix Four) – she tells me that the temple has indeed gone – apparently the 'sim has a new owner'. Means nothing to me. Then she says she saw me in her house, I apologise if I trespassed but explain I haven't quite got the hang of Second Life. She obviously sees that I have had an account since 2007 and questions this. I am shocked to find myself feeling somewhat upset by what I perceive to be a slightly unfriendly air (though in a purely textual medium I could be misreading the situation of course) but thank her and compliment her home. Then I log off.

Day Two - 2nd September

I feel unsettled all day in my offline life. The unfriendly encounter and the

destruction of my first Buddhist temple have affected me more than I would have imagined. But then I realise that Buddhism is all about impermanence and I decide to see the loss of the temple as an opportunity to find somewhere new. When I get back from work, I return to Dana Oceanlane to find another recommendation. This leads me to the Zen Retreat, which describes itself as follows...

> In Second Life, which surrounds us with various intimations of reality, nothing is real. We allow ourselves the luxury of being deceived by an illusion, in hopes of gaining knowledge, relaxation, or pleasure. Similarly, a garden uses natural elements in a contrived way. In a garden we may still our minds, commune with nature, and open to the possibility of viewing ourselves and our usual ways of thinking from a different perspective.
>
> This little SL garden has been created in the hopes that someone will see things differently. (From information displayed at the Zen Retreat, Second Life, retrieved 2/9/09.)

The Zen Retreat is beautiful. So beautiful that I actually gasp a couple of times. It is a lovely Japanese style garden with cherry blossom trees & willows, streams, sand gardens (one of which seems to perfectly match the miniature one I have in my offline bedroom), little bridges, little temples everywhere. It is truly wonderful. I find an icon that you can click on and receive a random zen note. I get one about how the truly wise man never lives in the past or the future – seems poignant given yesterday's loss. I feel glad of impermanence and the ability to put the past to one side and discover new, even better, life paths...

I find a lovely meditation spot – when I click on it, Maisie puts her hands together and kneels down, perfectly still. I am finding it really enchanting the way each meditation spot makes your avatar do something different. I don't join Maisie in the meditation because my boyfriend is in the room, but I leave her peacefully in the garden, meditating for me?, whilst I type up some journal from a previous day. I then log off reluctantly – I can't wait to return tomorrow because this garden really has opened up the possibility that I might start to see things differently.

3rd September

I stumble upon a meeting of a group called Play as Being. I stay and listen and talk (transcript in Appendix Four) – I learn that they are a meditation and discussion group who meet four times a day to talk about all sorts of things – including philosophy and the nature of reality but also many more everyday topics too. The members are from all sorts of different countries and cultures (I meet both Buddhists and Christians) and some of them have just returned from an offline retreat at which they met face to face for the first time. The group are charming, funny, intelligent and very welcoming and I really enjoy talking to them. I even transport to another meeting that they recommend and get gently teased for not standing before transporting (very bad manners apparently!). I am really excited to have found such a friendly and interesting group, and am fascinated that having been quite unsure about talking to other people in SL, I am now thinking that doing so has proved to be the richest experience I have had so far during this project.

4th September

I go back to my now favourite Zen Retreat and, buoyed by yesterday's experiences, happily chat to someone I meet there (Serenity Clarence) about how beautiful it is (transcript in Appendix Four). She also recommends another beautiful Second Life spot – Chakryn Forest.

6th September

I decide to visit Chakryn Forest – the place that Serenity Clarence recommended. I have a lovely wander and see lots of people (but don't have conversations) as well as a strange photo-esque huge statue (I guess you'd call it?) of a very voluptuous human female.

7th September

I meditate in what can only be described as a fake forest orb (an orb which you enter and images of a forest are sort of projected onto the walls) which somehow displeases me – of course SL is itself 'fake' but the idea of a virtual space within a virtual space is more than I can bear.

8th September

I watch a sunset – blissful.

9th September

I visit the Play as Being website to find out a bit more about the group. I am intrigued by their "One Percent Time Tax" technique which the website says the following about:

> During each day, we take an hour or more during which we impose a one percent time tax on our activities. Roughly each quarter of an hour, we spend about nine seconds on this type of exploration (there are 900 seconds in 15 minutes, hence the 1% tax). During this time, take a full breath, relax, and focus on considering yourself as Being. In other words, play as Being. Immediately following that, write down a few words in your journal, whatever pops up in your mind. Keep it short, and write at most one short sentence.
>
> It would be optimal if during the roughly 15 minutes in between each 9-second pause, you would keep the notion of play as Being in mind, tasting it, playing with it, considering it, holding it in mind in whatever way feels most natural. But no matter how much or how little you succeed in thinking about it, at least during those 9 second intervals do try to focus on playing as Being, and then jot down a quick one-liner, reflecting whatever comes up spontaneously. (Available at http://playasbeing.wik.is/Information/Hints, retrieved 9/09/09)

I am quite charmed by this idea but decide I cannot do it as part of my online month. Back in Second Life I visit the Nirvana Path Garden in Momil, where I fall off the edge of a temple (and cry out loud in fear for Maisie who of course survives!) and meditate under a willow tree, I briefly try meditating by synchronising my breath with Maisie's. I plan to try for longer tomorrow.

10th September

I visit the Heart of Brightness temple and play gongs, listen to Tibetan monks chanting, bow ('humbly' apparently) to an image of the Dalai Lama, read note

cards - one of which is particularly apt. It says:

> We can all be Buddhas.
>
> To do so, we need to understand that we are all gods. We are all living entities manifesting Divine Force, or God.
>
> As gods, we are separate to the physical world our bodies live in. (From information available at the the Heart of Brightness temple, Second Life, retrieved 10/9/09.)

There are lots of things are for sale, but it still feels like a wonderful place, very reminiscent of the Tibetan temples I saw in Dharamsala when I visited.

12th September

I stay in the Heart of Brightness temple, kneel at the altar to make an offering, read some more notecards and do some SL tai chi. Then I find another lovely place – the Peacemaker Institute – and make a note of the group meditation times (something I'm yet to do), before settling down on a big squishy purple bean bag...

14th September

I visit a place where I read about the art of tea drinking via a notecard I receive by clicking on a simple Japanese altar, I then sit at a table and accept a cup of green tea. I decide that Maisie is left-handed (I am influenced by Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials *trilogy and decide that Second Life is like my world but slightly different) Today I talk to Maisie, ask her what she is doing – she is looking around the shrine endlessly, I coax her to face the 'camera' but she doesn't. She is starting to seem very real to me...*

15th September

I arrive at night and visit all sorts of recommended Buddhist landmarks which have now gone, leaving barren slightly sinister at night land. I retreat to the Zen retreat and meditate - as I do the sun starts to come up. I also discover that once your avatar is seated you can zoom away from them, taking in a wider

picture of where they are, who else is there, etc. With the sun up and the birds singing, I find a pool and float in it – bliss. I spot another avatar – Jeni Luik - and have a chat to her (transcript in Appendix Four). She tells me that she is creating a Buddhist dance floor! Not quite sure what that is but is sounds very exciting! She also tells me about another meditation group to check out.

Next I head to another Play as Being meeting (transcript in Appendix Four). I have a fantastic time talking to everyone about work, places we'd like to live, theatre, and Second Life.

16th September

I change my top. I stay in the Zen Retreat but once again discover new things. I find someone meditating and silently join them.

17th September

Decide to join the group meditation at the Peacemaker Institute, arrive late and debate the etiquette rules for joining my fellow meditators once they have begun. Go ahead anyway, and sit peacefully with 3 other female avatars, around the fire in a little temple, sounds of nature all around us. It's rather nice. At the end of the session everyone stands, says "namaste" and goes on their way. Obviously it's all very spiritual and lovely but I am mostly jealous of my fellow meditator's glamorous appearances and spend the rest of my SL visit trying to jazz up my (Maisie's?) simple outfit and cursing the fact that my (Maisie's?) eyebrows must be the same colour as my (Maisie's?) hair (which is a bright pinkish purple)...

18th September

Accidentally arrive back just outside the Peacemaker Institute again, just after meditation has started. Decide not to interrupt this time and instead teleport to the Kannonji Zen Retreat amongst the Snow Lion Mountains. Wonderful to have beauty of snowy landscape but no cold. Float in a fountain amongst the mountains then find a beautiful spot and sit on a bench in a rainbow, looking out to sea as the sun sets.

19th September

Something strange happens when I log in – it says it can't take me to my previous location and that it has moved me elsewhere. I land in 'Korea1' – the architecture is that of a highly modern if grey city, and there are dozens of avatars everywhere. It feels a bit eerie and I suddenly realise that none of them are moving. I teleport away and return to the Buddha Center – this time I manage to find a beautiful part (on my last visit I couldn't get past the shopping area) and sit silently with another avatar in a lovely little temple which overlooks the sea. I also accept a cup of coffee and drink it with my left hand. I don't want to disturb the other avatar when I leave, so work out how to bow and do so. Next I find a huge temple hall with a golden Buddha omitting 'om's – a couple of other avatars are there too, one of whom welcomes me before we sit in silent meditation.

22nd September

I am still by the Buddha Center hall when I log in and to my surprise it is filled with about 20 avatars. One, whose label tells me is the Buddha Center founder, welcomes me and asks if I can hear him. This is most confusing but I realise that everyone is not meditating – rather they are listening to RL monk Yuttadhammo Darwinian from the Buddha Center. Amazingly, with the help of some fellow SLers, I work out how to turn the live streaming on and find he is about 2/3 of the way through a talk on the eightfold path. It's wonderful and I pick up some new meditation techniques. Afterwards he invites questions and when a pause comes I decide to go for it and ask him what function he thinks SL can play in Buddhist practise (transcript in Appendix Four, but monk's words not included as they were audio). I am delighted that he answers at some length, but I am surprised at what he says. He starts by admitting that he is sceptical about practising in SL. He says he thinks it is a good medium for spreading the message of Buddhism but that he himself finds that there are too many diversions when sitting in front of the computer. He says he thinks that SL might have benefits in terms of its potential to offer group work, and that it proffers a chance to get together with other Buddhists which is arguably a good incentive to go deeper into the practise. However, he then goes on to muse that he is not sure whether online group work is more useful than solitary practise and that he feels that whilst it is theoretically possible to meditate in front of a computer he thinks a quiet room is a better option because people probably don't take it as

seriously in SL i.e. that they sit in meditation but are not necessarily "in the moment". He says that meditation in SL "doesn't have a body, it doesn't have the physical", that it is "much more of an intellectual exercise in SL" and that it "doesn't allow us the concentration that the body does". He admits that he has considered offering lessons in walking meditation in SL and that he does think it has value in terms of a meeting & teaching tool. He does say he thinks it is cool that you can watch yourself meditating but says of SL "it's eye candy – cause for attachment". He concludes that he is 'most hesitant to pass judgement in a positive sense'. I am flabbergasted at the richness and honesty of his response and am intrigued by how cautious he is about SL given that he himself offers talks within it! However, I get the sense that he sees its benefits, that he enjoys the playfulness of it, but that he doesn't necessarily think it is the best medium for meditation. However, other people at the talk speak of SL in a very positive manner and one person says: "Thank you for giving buddhism to those who can only know it through the computer and don't have the opportunity in RL to meet with others of like mind" which I can definitely relate to. All the dialogue except the Monk's (as he didn't use text) is in Appendix Four.

24th September

Back in that hall again – am welcomed by those who were there on Tuesday. The same monk is about to give another talk. Great timing! We wait as people gradually arrive and greet each other. All the time, everyone sits serenely, cross-legged, as crickets chirp (it is night) and gentle music plays. The talk lasts an hour and it flies by. It is about different things that you can focus on during meditation (40 in all). I find it deeply inspiring. I realise I have read a lot of Buddhist writing, and visited many Buddhist places, but I never been to a talk, lecture or class, or heard about Buddhism directly from a monk. It makes me want to reach for one of my many Buddhist books and use my new knowledge, or try out one of the meditations. But I can't! Not until my offline month...

26th September

Decided to go on first thing – very calming to walk around the Buddha Center and Zen Retreat grounds, it was very quiet with just the sounds of birds, crickets and water. Decided to join the Buddha Center group after all my successes there recently but when I did 'Buddha Center' appeared above

Maisie's name, as if to label or define her, and this upset me and I couldn't remove it so left the group again. Found a lovely little indoor temple, with sandals left on the table outside, in the Zen Retreat. Inside was a bookcase whose doors you could open and shut and whose books you could click on individually to receive chapters of Dhammapada Sutta. I had Maisie kneel down by the fire and decided to start at the beginning: Chapter 1 - the Twin Verses...

28th September

Busy day ahead so sat Maisie down in our favourite Zen Retreat temple to meditate whilst I got on with having my breakfast, etc., in the offline world. Kind of a 'I can have it all' mentality. Worked fine, except that the crazy world of SL went from day to night as she meditated – quite distressing for the offline body clock!

29th September

Penultimate day – am feeling quite sad as I have decided that there is to be no Second Life during my month as a RL Spiritual Tourist! Arrive back into the Zen Retreat where all is peaceful and beautiful and almost immediately have a a sudden and very clear sense of the geography of the place. This is a new sensation for me as previously I have either wandered randomly, stumbling upon things by accident, or I have teleported to the places I have wanted to visit. But now I am able to walk around and deliberately go to my favourite meditation point, float in the pool, refresh and cleanse by the little outdoor washing point, and go back into the temple with the book case and read chapter 2 of the Dhammapada Sutta. For perhaps the first time I am completely at home, everything seems familiar yet wonderful and calming. I plan to return and read the remaining chapters after my offline month is over and leave reluctantly to proceed with my first life...

30th September

I arrive home from work late, exhausted and ill, but I'm determined to visit SL on my last day. I stay in the Zen Retreat and soak up its sounds and sights. I find a tiny temple with a red book which contains the Heart Sutra. I kneel down on a cushion and read.

Looking back, a brief summary of key moments / experiences / observations from the month follows:

How visual the experience is

I am surprised by how rich, detailed and frankly beautiful much of Second Life is. It is not just technically amazing but is truly artistic in its execution. The whole experience is really visual – my eyes are definitely actively engaged even if the rest of my physical body is dormant! - and in my journal I find that my text is limited whereas the daily 'photos' really tell the story of my journey.

The Zen Retreat

Despite the setback of discovering that the Buddhist Temple on Tarington (the destination of my online pilgrimage) had been demolished (if that world makes any sense in a virtual world), I was very quickly able to find a place I liked even more – the Zen Retreat (see Figure 10.1). I found it on Day Two and visited it most days from then on. I couldn't get over how beautiful it was, how peaceful it was, how much I got from my visits to it. With its cherry blossom trees, simple temples and endless corners to explore, it felt tailor-made for me.

Figure 9.1 – Day Two: Maisie meditating at the Zen Retreat

My experience with the 'fake forest orb'

On day 7 I stumbled across a meditation orb which you enter and then it gives the impression that you are in a forest (see Figure 10.2 – on the left is the doorway beyond which you can see the genuine Second Life landscape – it was at night so you can see stars in the sky). For some reason this really annoyed

me because it seemed so fake. Now, of course, in terms of its technical make-up it was as real as the rest of Second Life but even by day 7, the rest of Second Life had become 100% real for me – I had bought into it completely but wasn't prepared to accept the illusion that the orb offered. If I had found such an orb in the real world I think I would have been enchanted but in some ways I have found such an orb – Second Life – but finding a Second Life (Third Life?) within Second Life was just one leap of faith too far...

Figure 9.2 – Day Seven: Maisie meditating in the 'fake forest orb'

My relationship with my avatar

I was entranced by the way that I could leave my avatar, Maisie, to meditate whilst I did other things, which did make me feel like a part of me was meditating. The relationship that I developed with Maisie was really interesting – at times I felt that we were one person, at times she felt like a friend, sister or imaginary friends and at times I felt protective of her – as if she were my child or a vulnerable person that I was responsible for. There were also times that I was very jealous of her. My relationship with her became so complex, in fact, that I decided very early on that I wanted to expand my work on avatars at some point in my academic career.

The moment when I realised that I was immortal...

One of the moments that I felt protective over Maisie was on day 9 when I/she

accidentally walked off the edge of a temple and fell a long way. My fear was definitely real – it was partly for Maisie as I thought she might hurt herself or die but it was partly also for me in the sense that by then I really felt like Maisie was a part of me so when she fell – I fell. Of course, it being Second Life, Maisie eventually landed on her feet and wasn't injured at all. If was at that moment that the obvious struck home – Maisie is immortal, through her I can do all the things I am too scared to do without fear. This thought was incredibly liberating as I roamed confidently around for the remainder of the month.

Meeting other people

The biggest surprise of my Second Life month was the fact that I met so many people. I had many interesting conversations, met many people from all over the world, listened to a monk talking with a welcoming group of other people (see Figure 9.3), and meditated silently with many more people. I was truly astonished by this, and by how freeing it was to be able to strike up conversations with anyone without fear – it felt like being a child again. After a couple of days of this I went to a festival in the offline world on my own and found myself much more able to chat to strangers than I usually am. This really did feel like it was as a result of my time in Second Life.

Figure 9.3 – Day Twenty-Two: listening to a RL monk talk at the Buddha Center with dozens of other students

The fact that insecurity about appearance can still exist in Second Life

When I created Maisie, I made her look like I would in an ideal world – tall, very slim, violet eyes and – most importantly – long flowing pinky purple hair (the exact colour that I would dye mine if I had the nerve). I also gave her really high

black heels about halfway through the month when I realised that she, unlike me, could wear them without the slightest discomfort or risk of falling! However, even given all this freedom to create perfection, I was surprised to find that I still felt jealous when I met other avatars with more elaborate and interesting clothes, hair, etc., than Maisie. This was partly because I am not artistic enough or good enough with the clothes-making software, but is also because if you choose to join the Second Life economy then you can actually spend a lot of money improving your appearance – e.g. by buying designer clothes, etc. It is amazing how closely Second Life mirrors real life in this way and how human nature finds a way to be envious even when there is really no need!

The variety

I was pleasantly surprised by the variety of things that I saw as I moved around Second Life, as well as the variety of people that I met and activities that I did. For example – I watched a sunset, drank coffee, did tai chi, floated in a lake, meditated alone and with people, read Buddhist texts, joined meetings, listened to a real life monk talking, saw a huge statue of a naked female, played gongs, lit incense, indulged in a Japanese tea ceremony, and climbed a snowy mountain. All in all, it was a really incredible adventure.

The effect on my offline life

As I said, I felt much freer to talk to people offline following my experiences in Second Life. In addition, I downloaded my first song during the month – I think as a result of my shifting attitude towards technology. However, I also began to feel unwell and my long battle against anxiety, panic attacks and identity crisis started. The reasons for this are of course complex but I do wonder whether my disembodied online existence was the straw that breaks the camel's back. On the other hand, Second Life became a good place to hide when the illness developed...

Green Day know best!

My month as a Second Life Buddhist took place in September so I wrote the lyric "wake me up when September ends" (Green Day, 2004) at the top of my journal without giving it too much thought. It was only as the month neared its end that I realised that I would indeed need to wake up (or perhaps unplug) from the

beautiful dream that Second Life had become for me...

The way that Second Life offered connection and a sense of community for myself and others

As I said earlier, Second Life was a much more sociable arena than I had been expecting, and I was much more open to interaction than I had expected to be. I think one of the reasons for this is that I sought out Buddhist landmarks, groups and destinations and so naturally met people with whom I had things in common. Given that I don't have any offline friends who are Buddhists, it was really nice to find an online community, and it was clear that other people felt the same.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my month as a Second Life Spiritual Tourist and – interestingly – when the month was up I was very sad and missed Second Life enormously when I was doing my offline month and so wasn't allowed online.

9.2 Results from my month as an Offline Spiritual Tourist

I had intended to go straight from my month as a SL Spiritual Tourist into my month as a RL / Offline Spiritual Tourist but when it came to it I found that I needed a break, partly because I felt I needed time to reflect upon my experiences and partly because of the bad health that I had been suffering since the start of September. So I gave myself October for reflection and recuperation, and then began my month as an Offline Spiritual Tourist in November, the full journal for which is below.

"Nothin' lasts forever even cold November rain" (from 'November Rain' by Guns n' Roses): A month of life as an Offline Spiritual Tourist

Day One

A rainy Sunday. I spend the day with my boyfriend, trying to relax and for the most part succeeding. I decide to ease myself into my Offline Spiritual Tourist month slowly – I have a book which contains a different quote from the Buddha for every day of the year and I decide to read today's and spend some time reflecting on its message. The quote is essentially about the fact that true happiness can only come to us when we are able to accept the impermanence of

all things and accept detach ourselves from all bonds, whether to material things or to people. It is an unfortunate place to begin my journey as it is the Buddhist teaching which I struggle with the most (well, that and the whole not drinking fermented liquids thing!) - I can see its wisdom and am on board with the detaching ourselves from material possessions thing but don't feel like I want to detach myself from the bond that I have with the important people in my life. On the other hand, one of the many things which has been panicking me in recent months is the thought of losing certain people – I am haunted by the fact that I have friends who I am no longer close to and by the fear that something might happen to jeopardise my relationship with my boyfriend at any minute. I decide that I must interpret the teaching in a way which is relevant to my life (which is what the Buddha himself always wanted anyway) and use it to a) accept that all relationships will ultimately end either because the people involve drift apart or because death intervenes and then to b) use this knowledge to help inspire me to make the most of the time I do have with the people I love. A tough lesson but with a potentially very enriching outcome. The working title I have already given this month's journal 'Nothin' lasts forever even cold November rain', a Guns n Roses lyrics, is unexpectedly elevated to a pertinent saying which represents Buddhism almost perfectly!

Day Two

Unlike with my month as a SL Spiritual Tourist, this month's project cannot help but be profoundly influenced by other aspects of my life. Today I have a bad panic attack / coughing fit combo on my way to work and am forced to come home and arrange cover for myself. I feel useless, pathetic, ill and extremely worried that I am jeopardising my career despite the fact that my boss and the other managers at my workplace have been extremely supportive. I get a little air, have a little food and then sleep. When I wake I feel like I need to do something positive to help myself so decide to attempt a full on meditation. Other than my efforts to meditate with Maisie in SL, I haven't meditated since much earlier in the year when I was in India and spent 15 minutes meditating in front of the largest crystal ball in the world in a room designed solely for the art of reflection. Things are not so simple in my cluttered one bedroom flat in York. However, I decide to do my best to make my front room conducive to meditation. I find some incense which I bought at the Dalai Lama's temple in

India, I put on a CD of Buddhist prayers, I turn off all the lights except a chain of fairy lights, and I sit myself in front of our largest statue of the Buddha on a red heart rug which was given to me by a good friend. At first technology fails me – the four remaining matches in the box refuse to work, the CD player and digital radio seem to omit an almost unbearably distracting amount of light, and the sound of cars outside and of the fridge in the kitchen are amplified and hinder my progress. Ironically, I also miss the hypnotic power of the laptop screen which helped my Buddhist endeavours in Second Life – the way that the internet seems to suck us in, once the subject of my distrust and dislike, now seems like a Very Good Thing Indeed. I also miss Maisie because she never suffered from cramp, discomfort and pins and needles unlike my stupid human body. However, as I allow the chants to wash over me and do my best to concentrate my attention on my breath and on the image of the Buddha, I manage to achieve a reasonable degree of concentration and calm. I had never listened to the CD before and interestingly, it turns out to be a repeated chant of "nam-myoho-renge-kyo" which I first heard when meeting Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists for this thesis some years ago. The endlessly repeating mantra has a soothing effect and its connection with the past and therefore familiar quality is comforting. I do a 15 minute meditation, after which I feel exhausted but in a good way. But then I immediately cough up a load of blood – I wonder whether this can be seen as a potentially positive purging of toxins or similar but my boyfriend is worried so a night of NHS helplines and general fears begins. I am pleased with my achievement though, and feel inspired to persist with this method of meditation over the next month.

Day Three

I go to the doctor in the morning and, on telling her about the whole coughing up blood thing, am packed off to the hospital for an X-ray. Apparently it was less of a beneficial purging of toxins and more of a worrying symptom that needs checking out... More panicking, some antibiotics and some sleep follow. But I decide to read a book which I hope will inspire me – A Meditator's Diary *by Jane Hamilton-Merritt in which the author describes how she learns Buddhist meditation from monks in Thailand (Hamilton-Merritt, 1976). It does inspire – it emphasises the fact that meditation is really about the concentration and stilling of the mind. It occurs to me that this is something I could do with across all*

elements of my life, which is currently ruled by worries which intrude on everything I do and stop me from focusing on one thing at a time – I worry about work when I should be sleeping, I think I should be writing whilst I'm having my dinner, at work I'm trying to do five things at once, with my academic work I have many started chapters but not many finished ones, etc. A flitting and flickering mind, I realise, is my main problem and whilst my SL month, with its teleporting and wandering from one place to the next with multiple windows open at the same time, did nothing to help this perhaps meditation in the real world can. If I can quieten my mind during meditation then perhaps – just perhaps – I can apply the same principle to my wider life. I decide that I will attempt the first meditation method that she learns – it is a way of focusing on the breath by counting inhalations and exhalations thus 'one-in, one-out, two-in, two-out' etc. The idea is that you should go back to the beginning every time your mind wanders. She describes not getting past two for attempt after attempt (and that's in a dedicated meditation room in a monastery) (Hamilton-Merritt, 1976) so with low expectations, I get out my heart rug and give it a go. It is very difficult – my mind cannot help but flit from thought to thought, my ears cannot help but hear every noise both in my flat and out, and my body cannot help but hurt and itch and cramp up. But I persist for ten minutes and do manage to spend most of the time concentrating on my breathing. It does feel like a bit of a stop / start method though and it kind of becomes a game which doesn't seem to be quite the thing. However, I avoid coughing up any blood at the end but do feel strangely hot (and my front room is freezing) – I take this as a sign of energies stirring in my body, rather than another worrying symptom... I vow to try another method tomorrow but am pleased with today's efforts.

Day Four

I have to go to work today, despite the chest infection, because I am directing a play which is being performed in a few days. However, on my commute I read more of 'A Meditator's Diary'. In turns out that the author also struggled with the 'one-in, one-out' counting breath method and ultimately found more success with a simpler method where one simply focuses on the breath by acknowledging it, saying 'breathing-in, breathing-out' over and over again (Hamilton-Merritt, 1976). This appeals to me more too – it takes the competitive

element out and feels like it will require less thought so will leave the brain freer to relax. When I get home I set up my heart rug and also light a candle in front of the Buddha statue – I am reminded of one of the meditation methods that I learnt from the monk in Second Life which involves staring at a candle and muttering 'fire, fire, fire' repeatedly until you are able to close your eyes but keep the image of the candle in your 'mind's eye'. I really want to try out this method but decide that since I discovered it in Second Life it would be against the rules. There is a niggling voice in my head which is saying I should combine SL and RL to create my very own middle way method but I do my best to ignore it for now. Anyway, I try the 'breathing-in, breathing-out' method and whilst distractions are still rife, it is the easiest meditation yet – and oddly once again I get warmer and become aware that my body is vibrating slightly (perhaps this explains the heat which I am generating?). Another strange find is that for the third night running I have meditated for almost exactly 12 minutes before coming around and checking the time. Post-meditation I find that my mind is comparable quiet for the rest of the evening which hasn't happened in months (normally is it plagued with reruns of the current day and worries about the next day) which has to be a good thing. I read a bit more of my book and the author has moved on to a new monastery where she is learning vipassana meditation (insight meditation) – the Abbot talks to her about mindfulness – he says:

> Be aware of every movement, every muscle, every touch – all the time. Even when you are eating, be aware of tasting... Be aware constantly – be mindful. (Cited in Hamilton-Merritt, 1976, p. 99)

Given my struggles, I decide that it might be worth trying to be more mindful – which I interpret as being present in the moment and concentrating on the task in hand. It strikes me that this is incompatible with worrying either about the past or the future and so may help me calm my mind on a more ongoing basis. I am also reminded of a quote in a book I have about Zen – the author, Robert Allen, says:

> Don't let anything distract you from your meditation. The distractions are the meditation. (Allen, 2003, p. 90)

I love this quote because it suggests that life is the meditation, and that meditative practise doesn't need to be a ritualised appointment but instead can be a gentle part of everyday activities. It also gives you permission to 'fail' - i.e. be distracted - during a designated meditation which is comforting as it seems like the main goal of meditation should be to just do it, rather than focusing too much on how good you are at it. I decide that tomorrow I will try to be mindful all day and stay in the present as much as possible, I also decide that I will not worry about distractions during my meditation practise, and that I will try to let them wash over me. I can't wait!

Day Five

It turns out that being mindful all day long is very hard indeed. Interestingly though, the most successful moments were those involving the four elements (feel of water on skin when washing hands, hypnotic visual appeal of candle flame, feel of wind on my face, sound of autumn leaves under foot) which probably says something profound about the important of nature in true happiness and contentment. As the four elements are also a recommended meditation focus according to my SL monk (who I shouldn't be thinking about but hey) I suspect they are easy places to begin when practising mindfulness so I will try to develop them throughout the month. The other flashes of success are all sense related – the smell of dinner, the feel of a fabric, the sound of a firework, the taste of a chocolate, etc. The most difficult thing to control as the day wears on is my mind – and it is mostly fears which creep in and beat my mindfulness black and blue. I think about how much fear controls my life and how unnecessary it is. I think it comes from over-thinking so can see how meditation and mindfulness which focuses on elements and senses may be helpful in combating it. I do my meditation after dinner and, like yesterday, is does quieten my mind. Once again I seem to generate and start to gently vibrate (I don't know what to make of this as yet), and I enjoy the feeling of letting distractions wash over me like waves (which works some of the time), However, today I only manage 10 minutes – I blame the fireworks going on outside which I can't quite tune out.

Day Six

Following yesterday's musings on elemental meditation, I decide to focus on a

candle flame for today's effort. Unfortunately I burn my finger trying to light the tealight, which is nearly out of wax. This does nothing for my not-great mood but does give me a bit of an insight – it is very easy to forget both the past and the future and be mindful only of the present when pain is searing through you... Not quite sure what this means or what use this knowledge might have but it's a thought. Anyway, the pain and bad mood mean I struggle to concentrate my mind on the meditation so not one of my better attempts. I do find a quote which offers some comfort in terms of the worrying and fearing that is going on in my life at present – surprisingly not from a Buddhist book but rather from my guilty-pleasure-chick-lit book, Life Swap *by Jane Green, which is seeing me through my commute at the moment – the quote is "there's nothing to fear but fear itself" (Green, 2005, p. 404). I like this because it is wise and reminds me how pointless worrying can be, but more importantly because it comes from a non-Buddhist source which reminds me of the fact that wisdom and enlightenment can come from the everyday, not just from deeply spiritual texts, places and practises.*

Day Seven

Following the only good night's sleep I have had in as long as I can remember I have a busy and productive day. The show I have been directing is performed in the evening so I do a quick focusing meditation (and once again experience the vibrating sensation) before I set off and it all goes very well. I wonder whether a good meditation can have as powerful an impact as my beautiful night's sleep. Hopefully it can, and in time it will be within my grasp!

Day Eight

After a successful show and a lie in, and with nothing but a lazy Sunday spent with friends ahead, my need to meditate doesn't seem so pronounced. However, I am enjoying the routine of it so make the time anyway. Since my boyfriend is working in our front room I try meditating in the bedroom – it's quieter which is good, and I am able to carry my heart rug through for continuity, but I don't have my makeshift shrine of my Buddha statue, candle, incense and plant and so have to make do with a rather messy and crowded room instead. I wonder whether I will be able to get into the meditation without all the paraphernalia that has become part of my routine – I hope I can because I like the idea that

one can meditate anywhere and carry that technique for calming the mind into any situation. As it turns out, once my eyes are shut and I'm into my breathing rhythm it doesn't make much difference and I am soon experiencing the strange vibrating sensation once more. This is still puzzling me but since it is quite calming (& warming in our freezing bedroom!) in itself I am happy to go with it.

Day Nine

Monday. Mondays are always the worst day for my panic attacks and stress levels – partly because of their Monday-ness but also because my work timetable means they are always particularly long, hectic and tiring. However, in my newly positive Buddhist month state I decide to arm myself by doing an early morning meditation. Unfortunately this is a dismal failure because I cannot quieten my mind and all sorts of random thoughts and worries about work and life keep intruding on my practise. I give up after several minutes and proceed to have a long, hectic and tiring day, as predicted. Clearly meditation is no quick fix solution but I am pleased with myself for trying and hopefully with more practise I will have more success...

Day Ten

Yesterday was stressful, today is stressful and I don't find the time for meditation at all. Having hoped that I would do it every day without fail I am somewhat cross with myself, but decide to be gentle with myself (another Buddhist idea) and embrace the mindfulness of watching 'Deal or No Deal' with utter concentration and commitment!

Day Eleven

Today I have to see the mental health nurse (a counsellor) at my doctors because of my panic attacks and general high levels of stress and worry. I have mental images of self indulgent lengthy monologues on a psychiatrist's couch but it turns out to be very much about strategies for coping rather than an in depth exploration about my feelings, etc. To my surprise we talk at some length about mindfulness – it would seem that it is a medically sound way of tackling panic attacks because it can prevent worrying about the past or the future and keeps you grounded in the present. She suggests experimenting with a method which basically involves delivering an inner narration of what one is doing. So –

if you are preparing the vegetables you can say 'I am chopping carrots in my kitchen whilst wearing my stripy jumper and favourite jeans. Now I am tipping the chopping board to allow the carrots to fall into the pan of boiling water...' and so it goes on. She tells me that this helps you to remain mindful because it keeps your mind busy and thus distracts it from lapsing into worrying. I am very taken with this suggestion as it confirms what I have been thinking for the last few weeks - i.e. that I must try to dwell into the present – and offers a practical, workable method too. I feel calmer than I have in a while in the evening, and I am once again surprised but pleased and very encouraged that I have found Buddhist teachings in an unexpected place...

Day Twelve

A long, long day at work. I experiment with inner narrating during my commute and on my lunch break but am otherwise too busy, particularly in the evening when my 9 – 11 year old Youth Theatre members make it impossible to be anything other than present in the room with them...

Day Thirteen, Fourteen & Fifteen

Friends of ours come to stay for the weekend with their one year old daughter. I discover that a) babies are naturally mindful (it helps that they don't yet have words & language to encourage defining and analysing) b) that playing with babies is a simple method to achieving mindfulness oneself (it's impossible to worry whilst playing peek-a-boo or concentrating on keeping a vulnerable infant safe in a cluttered flat) and c) that a few drinks and good conversation with friends are relaxing and therefore assist one to be in the present.

Day Sixteen

On day sixteen I have a terrible panic attack – something approaching a complete breakdown - and I have to stop all forms of work. This project, being part of my academic research, counts as work so I have to suspend it. However, in the difficult weeks that follow I take refuge in several Buddhist avenues. Firstly, I read The Wisdom of Forgiveness *by HH the Dalai Lama and Victor Chan – I have had it for years and never read it because I consider myself to be a very forgiving person but in this difficult period in which guilt reigns supreme I suddenly realise that I actually do need to learn how to forgive one particular*

person – myself. In the book the Dalai Lama suggests that forgiveness is absolutely key to having a calm and happy mind and life (HH Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998). For him of course this relates to his attitude to the Chinese people and the things that they have done to Tibet, but for me I can see that I won't have peace of mind until I act compassionately to myself as well as others. At one time I would have dismissed this as a rather twee thought but it now becomes absolutely key to my recovery. I also read several other texts which blend self-help with Buddhism, I watch Little Buddha *which reminds me of where my Buddhist journey began (it affected me profoundly when I saw it in the cinema as a teenager), and I return to yoga. Yoga obviously isn't a strictly Buddhist pursuit but I do find an admirable guru - who teaches meditation and detachment with a gentle brilliance - in my new yoga teacher. I cannot write in this time but I grow and recover in part thanks to my links with Buddhism. I decide to complete my official Buddhist month in the new year and give myself permission to rest in the meantime.*

Day Sixteen – Take Two (January 2010)

Guns n' Roses were right. The cold November didn't last forever - it gave way to cold December snow and that, in turn, gave way to freezing January ice. I have struggled in the last couple of months and there have been difficult days and days when I couldn't see an end to the unexpectedly dark place that I had found myself in. But even this doesn't last forever - I read a lot of inspiring books about Buddhism and yogic philosophy and autobiographic spiritual journeys; I spend time with people I love; I do yoga: I try and put things in perspective; and I await the new year and the new decade with something approaching giddy excitement... Finally the new year comes and I manage a full week at work and on one particular icy commute into work I am suddenly filled with an enthusiasm and drive to continue with my Buddhist month. I have been reading The Miracle of Mindfulness *by Thich Nhat Hanh, a birthday present, and am excited to find that towards the back of the book he suggests 32 mindfulness exercises (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). The number 32 seems like a sign to me – as it means I can do 2 exercises a day for the remaining 16 days of my experiment. And so I begin. The first exercise "Half-smile when you first wake up in the morning", involves setting up a sign that you will see immediately on awakening which will remind you to smile and to breathe three times, maintaining a half smile, before*

beginning your day (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). I tie a little bell on a ribbon around the Buddha that lives by my bed and position him in front of my alarm clock. Day Sixteen duly arrives – I have to get up at 6am as I have an early appointment at work but the amusing image, enforced smile, and quiet moment of breath gives me a brilliant start. This is fortunate as I have to trudge through snow and ice, in freezing temperatures, to the station where I find that train upon train is cancelled or severely delayed due to the weather. As I wait on the cold, cold platform in the knowledge that I am going to be very late despite my best efforts, I distract myself with the second mindfulness technique that I am to try today, "Half-smile during your free moments": the idea is that whenever you are seated or stood still, you pick something to focus upon whilst you maintain a half smile and breathe three times whilst knowing that the image in front of you is part of the world that you are also part of (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). And so I meditate on a crow, a picture of Heather Mills and a bird dropping amongst other things and this does – despite how unlikely it seems – give me a greater sense of calm and presence of mind throughout my difficult day. I am impressed and inspired and looking forward to Day Seventeen...

Day Seventeen

Day Seventeen falls on the weekend and I have nothing to do but play with my boyfriend's nephews for a bit then relax, try out mindfulness techniques, do a little writing and look forward to dinner and a movie. Brilliant. But then I read that one of today's techniques: "Half-smile when irritated" involves smiling at once when you feel yourself being annoyed or irritated and then breathing 3 times (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). "Oh dear" thinks blissfully naïve I: "I'm not going to be able to do that – for nothing is likely to irritate me today." Famous last words. Enter technology. The computer freezes for a couple of hours and won't respond to anything. When it finally reboots it has lost everything that I wrote in the hour and a half I managed before it crashed. I decide to take a break and watch 'Deal or No Deal' using our On Demand service. This also fails to work. I find myself smiling and breathing all afternoon – which is a nice way to spend my time given everything. I feel a bit like an unflappable zen goddess and move merrily on to the next exercise "Half-smile while listening to music" which involves listening to a piece of music whilst continuing to smile and be aware of the breath (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975) and is also something that I can

do whilst my laptop is sulking. Of course, the CD skips but I smile through it and am thankful to the mindfulness techniques for saving my sanity and my weekend.

Day Eighteen

The weather is horrible but it's a Sunday and there's no need to leave the house – so I don't! As my boyfriend plays his guitar in our front room, I practise some yoga in the bedroom and finish with today's mindfulness techniques. I am already very relaxed and find both exercises very effective – the first, "Letting go in a lying position" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975), involves lying on your back on the floor, imagining yourself as a cat in the sun and observing your breath. This is very similar to savasana or 'corpse pose' which is traditionally the last posture you practise in a yoga class so it already carries a strong connection with relaxation and mind awareness for me. The second, "Letting go in the sitting position" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975), involves smiling and watching the breath in the lotus position. Although my body is capable of the position, I haven't managed to do it comfortably in some time (as it is the purist's meditation position I tried it at the start of my month but ended up returning to the easier cross-legged position). However today it comes easily to me – maybe it is because the yoga has prepared my body well, maybe it is because I am so relaxed, and maybe it is because it is Thich Nhat Hanh – a man I increasingly love and respect – tells me to do it. Whatever the reason, I feel something approaching a union between body and mind – this is an important goal in both yoga and meditation so I feel very pleased with myself.

Day Nineteen

The next mindfulness technique on Thich Nhat Hanh's list involves a slow, gentle & peaceful walk (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975) and I decide this is physically impossible in the current ice-rink-world in which I appear to live. So I decide to come back to that one and move on to "Deep breathing" which involves lying on my back breathing and watching the movements of my stomach and chest (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). Although the exercise is short there is something about it which makes me intensely aware of the machinelike yet organic body in which I dwell. I would have thought that this exercise might have freaked me out but in fact it is very calming and peaceful to watch my body doing its job.

Energised, I turn the page to find my second technique for the day and am somewhat enchanted to discover that I have already accidentally done it in the morning! It is a simple meditation exercise called "Counting your breath" which involves watching the breath (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975) and I had done it at the end of my morning yoga practise. So far, the resumption of my Buddhist month has a lovely feel to it and I am starting to feel like I am making a little progress.

Day Twenty

Today is long and cold and slippery and I am not in a very good frame of mind when I finally get home at around 9.30pm. However, today's mindfulness tasks are very simple - the first, "Following your breath while listening to music", involves listening to a piece of music whilst remaining the master of one's breath and the second, "Following your breath while carrying on a conversation" is to talk to a friend whilst, again, keeping the breath long and even and controlled (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). I find both calming and I do maintain a good awareness of my breath and my body moving in time with the breath. However, it is hard to also truly concentrate on the external sound – i.e. the music or the other voice or even my own voice – and I find myself feeling a little floaty or spaced out or kind of absent which can't be the goal really. I decide to keep practising this particular skill until I can listen to both myself and something else comfortably.

Day Twenty-One

Another hard day brings me home in a rather sulky and tired mood. I had planned to go to a taught meditation session in town but train delays and lethal pavements mean I am not able to do this. This means that even now, on day twenty-one, I am yet to meet anyone as a result of my offline month. Oddly enough, my online month was infinitely more social. Of course solitary contemplation is a valuable part of the experiment and I am finding it really enjoyable and useful, but I do miss what I now realise were becoming a real cybersangha (unlike the people I met online when I first began researching all those years ago). So many of the people I met in Second Life were so friendly and compassionate and interesting and I miss them. Anyway, back at home I put off doing my mindfulness work which makes it start to feel like a chore. I finally reluctantly sit down to complete the first task, "Following the breath" - a

longer meditation with more complicated breathing instructions than any of the previous techniques, just before bed (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). I am exhausted and whilst it is nice to sit and breathe, the technique is complicated and I cannot help but wish it was over so that I can curl up in bed. I certainly don't feel able to smile through it. Clearly I haven't done a great job of this. The problem with taking on this mission is that it is part of my research and so on some level I always know it is 'work'. I am always aware that I will need to write things up and later to analyse them and this is having a negative impact. However, I have hit upon a brilliant – and blindingly obvious – plan: I must conduct my academic writing in a mindful state too. It must be part of the experiment not something which falls outside of it. From now on, I decide, I must breathe and half-smile and focus as I work and perhaps then it will no longer be work – all the barriers will melt away and everything will flow into one river of fun and productivity! I don't do a second mindfulness technique but the day is no longer wasted.

Day Twenty-Two

The day is full of tears and panic attacks but when I come home I am determined to focus on my mindfulness techniques. Earlier, on the train, I read something which inspires me to make more of an effort to concentrate on smiling my way through my mindfulness techniques (and my yoga practise as well) – I have been reading an autobiographic book called Eat, Pray, Love *by Elizabeth Gilbert and in it she talks to an Indonesian medicine man. He says to her that if you have a serious face when meditating or practising yoga then you will scare all the good energy away. (Gilbert, 2006, p. 242) I definitely don't want to be scaring away any good energy so I resolve to do better! Firstly, I repeat yesterday's exercise because I am told not to move on until I've mastered it and because I want to be sure to smile this time! I do a much better job this time around and so tackle the more complicated second exercise "Breathing to quiet the mind and body to realise joy" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). This exercise is a meditation which involves counting and saying rather complicated things to yourself. However, I decide not to worry about getting the words exactly right and instead focus on getting the sentiment right – basically that you and breathing in and out peace and joy and in doing so are uniting your mind and body in a calm and blissful state. The book tells me to continue for 5 to 30 minutes and I manage 8 without even trying so am pleased with myself.*

Overall, I find this exercise really effective as a meditation and feel great afterwards. I feel like progress is being made.

Day Twenty-Three

Today is very busy because I have to get up early, do my yoga practise, work from home all morning and then entertain an old school friend who I haven't seen for years in the afternoon and evening. I therefore only manage to do one exercise: "Mindfulness of the positions of the body" which involves maintaining an awareness of each position your body finds itself in throughout the day – thinking about why you are in each position and breathing slowly when you realise you are in it (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). I am clearly not being very present today as I only remember to do the exercise a couple of times during the day. When I do remember it is really interesting – I have never really thought about the many shapes my body makes during the day (except when doing yoga) and it is really quite fascinating to observe and analyse them. I will definitely be practising this technique more.

Day Twenty-Four

Last night's entertaining has produced a staggering pile of washing up. My boyfriend apologises that he doesn't have time to do it as he dashes off to work – "that's OK" say I "today's task involves washing up..." This exercise, "Washing the dishes", is perhaps one of the most important and famous that Thich Nhat Hanh suggests. Of it he says:

> If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not "washing the dishes to wash the dishes." What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future – and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975, pp 4-5)

So the pressure is really on to get this right! Now, normally when I wash up I play loud music and entertain myself by dancing and singing whilst washing up. I don't think this is a bad way to do it – after all it does mean I enjoy the moment but it does also mean that I have fun washing up despite the fact that I am washing up so today I decide to complete the task with no props or distractions. To my surprise I find this exercise much easier than I had been anticipating – I enjoy studying each object as I wash it up and I enjoy the satisfaction of getting each object clean. I don't think I'll abandon my all-singing, all-dancing method altogether but I'm pleased to think that I am alive enough to be able to relish the act of washing up in its own right.

Day Twenty-Five

Today's first task is "A slow-motion bath" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). This is no great hardship! I am discovering that mindfulness comes much more easily when a) I am doing things which I already associate with relaxation, b) it is the weekend or a day on which I don't have to work and am therefore less stressed and c) when I am engaged in activities which are primarily elemental (e.g. having a bath involves water and so encourages presence of mind). I am thinking that by the end of this experiment I will be able to write a longer list of this sort and then use it to help me create conditions under which I can lead a more calm, content, mindful existence. My second task is "The pebble" which is a meditation in which you think of yourself as a pebble sinking to the bottom of a stream and then staying there (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). Being an actor, I enjoy this exercise and think of myself as bobbing up and down in time with my breath which is also the tide. I am not sure whether this constitutes a mindful practise but it's very relaxing and lots of fun.

Day Twenty-Six

I don't try out any new techniques today as I work a ten hour day, plus three hours of commuting, and don't get home until about 10.30pm. I am initially a little cross with myself for this, but then I realise that in my early morning yoga practise, which has now become an integral part of my life, I have used several of the techniques which I have already learnt from Thich Nhat Hanh. Although I haven't spent a lot of time talking about it in this journal, yoga is increasingly becoming the highlight of my day and is making me feel lighter, stronger, more

peaceful and more balanced. Yoga isn't an official part of Buddhism but is often practised by Buddhists and has very similar goals. As a spiritual pursuit, it has become rather important to me and is complementing my Buddhist endeavours perfectly. I am actually starting to believe that whilst I may never be a fully fledged Buddhist, yoga is definitely starting to define me...

Day Twenty-Seven

Today I try out the "Mindfulness while making tea" exercise (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). This is especially challenging for me as I don't normally make tea. I don't like regular black tea and only have herbal and fruit teas occasionally when they're offered to me or when I'm out. Before my boyfriend moved in I had no kettle, and when he arrived he bought the Kettle of Terror which must be heated on the hob, which whistles when it's ready (that bit I like!), and which seems like something which is much more likely to scald me than provide me with a mindful experience or even just a nice cup of tea. However, undeterred, I start the process. Being 'mindful' of waste, I fill my mug with water first and then transfer this into the kettle. I leave it on the hob whilst I find my tea bag – it is the last green tea bag in the box and this strikes me as appropriate for some reason. Pleased with myself, I await the whistling noise... There is a long pause, then there is a hissing noise, then the water appears to bubble over from the lid and the spout. I am certain that this doesn't happen when my boyfriend uses the kettle and when the thing still hasn't whistled after a good ten minutes I take it off the heat and realise that the lid wasn't on properly. Gingerly, I attempt to move the spout plug (no idea what the technical word is!) using an oven glove to avoid a scalding incident. I pour the water into my mug. There is a mere trickle. The rest, it seems, has evaporated in the whole hissing/bubbling-over débâcle. Still, I top up with cold water and sit down on my sofa, determined to enjoy my very small tea – the first I have prepared for myself using the Kettle of Terror. I am quite proud of myself really and congratulate myself on my work both in mindfulness and tea preparation. And then I spill the whole thing down my front and on the sofa. And for the second time in this experiment I learn that living in the moment is simple when you are in pain.

Day Twenty-Eight

Unless you count my now regular morning yoga practise, I don't do any official

mindfulness exercises today. However, my boyfriend and I go to Newcastle and call in at the BALTIC modern art gallery. One of their exhibitions is by a Korean artist called Kimsooja – the exhibition is called 'A Needle Woman' and consists of eight films being projected simultaneously onto the black gallery walls. Each shows her on a busy street in one of eight different cities in the world, standing perfectly still as all life rushes past her. The camera is hidden and is behind her so we see her back and people heading both to and from the camera. Some people stop and stare at her, some make a point of ignoring her, but all seem to be aware of her because by being totally still she stands out like a sore thumb. For me the exhibition captures one of the big lessons I am learning during my adventures in Buddhism and mindfulness – modern life is manic, chaotic and over-stimulated and it is well worth taking the time to get off the treadmill and reflect in a still and silent state. Kimsooja looks so peaceful among the hustle and bustle of the city life and I find this incredibly inspiring.

Day Twenty-Nine

Today I am very good and revert to doing the planned two mindfulness techniques. the first is "Washing clothes" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975) which I adapt to "Cleaning shoes" instead as my shoes are dirty and my clothes are not – and even if they were I have a perfectly good washing machine... (One form of technology that I am more than happy to live with!) The spirit of the exercise is unaltered anyway as I find a comfortable position, enjoy the feeling of the soapy water and feel myself becoming cleaner as the shoes do. I find the whole thing incredibly enjoyable and satisfying and I really do feel like I'm living in the present. I am actually disappointed when I run out of shoes to clean as it has truly felt like a meditative practise. Inspired, I move on to the much more challenging second exercise "Contemplation of interdependence" which involves sitting in the lotus position, considering a photo of myself as a baby (my physical characteristics, my feelings, my perceptions of the world then, my mind and my consciousness) and then to do the same for myself in the present and then to move on to the question 'who am I?' (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). This exercise is extraordinary and I have something which can only really be described as a spiritual epiphany. I realise that since both the person in the picture and the person looking at it are at once the same person and completely different people then 'I' am neither – I am not either body, I am not either set of

thoughts, feelings and perceptions, and so I must be something beyond all that. I think about what must have happened to the me in the picture – where are the cells that have now all been replaced or the primitive thoughts that I would have had back then? And where will my current cells and thoughts go? I conclude that they must go back into the universe and this means that I am the universe. I also see that there is a 'me' which is beyond language and beyond my current comprehension – a 'me' which must be the thing that we call a 'soul' and that this thing (this light?) is merely using my body and even my mind as a vessel or spaceship and will continue to live on when these things 'die'. For some reason I picture Captain Kirk on board the Enterprise as being the closest analogy that I can conjure and this silly thought brings me back into the room with a bang. Astonished and dazed and elated, I finish for the evening.

Day Thirty

The final day of my experiment arrives and I find that I am still thinking a lot about my epiphany yesterday. I am still excited by it but there is a tiny voice inside me asking whether it might have been a case of art imitating life. Since the beginning of my offline Buddhist month I have read a total of twelve books on Buddhism, yoga, meditation & spiritual journeys and whilst the books have inspired me, I can't help but wonder whether they have already informed my subconscious to such a degree that yesterday might just have been a parroting of what I have read. After all, many of the authors have described having similar experiences. But in the end I cannot deny how real my epiphany felt – and whilst I might have had an intellectual understanding of some of the things I felt because of my reading, I only felt them yesterday and they therefore only became my truth, my reality yesterday. And so I try out one last exercise from my mindfulness book – "Measuring your breath by your footsteps" which involves going for a gentle walk and aligning your breath to your steps (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975). It has been a long time since I went for a walk just for the sake of going for a walk and I find myself enjoying being outside on a cold but beautiful day, walking through the Minster gardens (one of my very favourite places in my home of York), and staying in the present because of the focus that counting the breath brings. I return home with a restored sense of inner calm - my body feels strong thanks to all the yoga, my mind feels clearer thanks to my month of Buddhism, and I actually feel a bit like I have been reborn. I am a

completely different person to the one who started this experiment back in November and now feel totally ready – for the first time in many months – to get back in the saddle and tackle life head on once more. Yes, I will have bad days but I also have a new tool bag filled with strategies and exercises which I know will make me stronger, more mindful, calmer, more content and more spiritually balanced. I have four months left to complete my thesis and I'm ready to roll!

Looking back, a brief summary of key moments / experiences / observations from the month follows:

How interior the experience was

What was strange during my offline month was that it was a very solitary experience – I barely spoke to anyone else about anything to do with Buddhism or spirituality and so much of the offline month happened inside my head and was generally triggered by reading (which I did an enormous amount of throughout the experiment!) or doing little bits of meditation. In addition, my journal became a place for exploring my thoughts and was almost a spiritual arena in itself.

How much I learnt about myself

All that solitary contemplation and journal writing produced some truly insightful thoughts and discoveries about myself. Realising that the Dalai Lama's theory that practising forgiveness leads to happiness was actually applicable to me because I am so hard on myself and carry around so much guilt was a true 'light bulb' moment; as was the moment that I, having contemplated the Buddhist idea of impermanence, finally saw that accepting that death is inevitable can actually have an extremely positive effect on the way one lives one's life and conducts one's relationships.

The power of mindfulness

Some of the tools to assist with achieving mindfulness that I learnt from both Thich Nhat Hanh's book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and, bizarrely, from the counsellor that I was seeing at the time will, I suspect, be useful tricks to have at my disposal throughout my life. They weren't always easy to master,

particularly given the state of my health during the offline experiment, but they were worth – and will continue to be worth – persevering with.

How fascinating chores such as washing the dishes and cleaning my shoes can be!

The mindfulness exercises which had the greatest impact on me were those which encouraged greater consciousness when doing everyday chores. Washing up mindfully transformed a dull job into a fascinating and sensory experience – the feel of the water, the beauty of the bubbles, the satisfaction of getting each dish sparklingly clean all became utterly bewitching, and this really taught me that sometimes it is not life that needs changing but rather it is just the way that we approach it that can make all of the difference.

Things that lend themselves to mindfulness

Because I spent so much of the month trying to develop my capacity for mindfulness, I was, by the end, able to identify several situations that lent themselves more easily to achieving mindfulness. These situations were – pain (my least favourite one!), being around babies and children, anything involving the elements (especially water and fire), sensory experiences (such as feeling a nice texture, focusing the gaze on a detail, tasting something nice, etc.), directing and leading theatre workshops, hugs, doing yoga and (somewhat surprisingly!) watching 'Deal or No Deal'. Since mindfulness is clearly so beneficial, one of the big lessons of the month is that I should spend more time doing all of these things (with the possible exception of pain!). Similarly, the things which hinder mindfulness – worry, stress, guilt and doing too many things at once are to be avoided.

How hard it is to fit in offline Buddhism!

Although some of the exercises fit in neatly with daily life, finding the time to do some of the others was a real challenge and I spent a lot of time feeling guilty about my lack of effort rather than just getting on with it! It was especially hard when I was feeling tired or ill (which was quite a lot of the time) and at those times I did long for the simplicity of Second Life. Having said that, I always enjoyed my exercises, meditations and readings once I got started. However, I did have to take a break halfway through the month when my illness became too

intense for me to focus on anything. I had hoped that meditation might help but my counsellor rightly pointed out that it is not necessarily the best activity when you are stressed as it can be really, really frustrating when your mind won't settle.

How much I love yoga

During my darkest moments, and particularly in the break that I took halfway through the month, I rediscovered my love for yoga. I went along to a couple of classes mostly just to try and relax and found that they were incredibly beneficial to my mind and mental state. For the first time I got into yogic philosophy as well (the postures which most westerners understand to be 'yoga' are in fact only one of eight limbs of what is actually a complex system which aims to yoke our minds and bodies , allowing us to tune into our environment and to realise our potential as human beings) and started reading a lot of books about yoga. As the experiment neared its end I found that yoga had become an important spiritual pursuit for me when perfectly complemented my Buddhist endeavours. Indeed, I started to believe that whilst I may never be a fully fledged Buddhist, yoga could definitely be my spiritual calling...

Moments of enlightenment are possible! Especially if you are Captain Kirk!

I was stunned by the glimpse of enlightenment that I had on day twenty-nine during the exercise in which I considered a photo of myself as a baby and I suddenly got a sense of a 'me' beyond my body. Even though I questioned the experience's validity the next day, I couldn't and can't deny that I did have the experience and that it did feel very real indeed.

Guns n' Roses know best!

They are right – nothing lasts forever, even cold November rain... I put that quote at the top of my journal because the offline month started on the first of November and it was only as the experiment neared its end that I realised just how prophetic - or how thoroughly Buddhist! - those words would be.

Motivation

I finally crossed the finishing line, months after starting my offline journey, and I

felt truly invigorated. I was able, for the first time in a very long time, to go back to work with a clear mind and a strong determination to return to my previous form. The yoga had given me a stronger body and a way to calm my mind, the Buddhist exercises had given me a whole tool kit of tricks to keep me mindful and the time I had spent reflecting had given me a much stronger awareness of myself and of my life. Suddenly, I was not just ready to face my life but to embrace it too. And whilst the Buddhist work was not the only factor which contributed to my recovery, it felt like it had played a significant role.

In summary, my offline month was really touch and challenging but was also ultimately quite a profound experience and definitely provided me an opportunity for personal and spiritual contemplation and growth.

9.3 The Differences Between my Online and Offline Months

Below some of the key differences between my online and offline months are detailed:

- Time – my life as a Online Spiritual Tourist was neatly compartmentalised because I only needed to think about spiritual pursuits – and thus working on my PhD - when I switched on my computer. The rest of the time I was free to live however I wished. However, my time as an Offline Spiritual Tourist took over my life because I felt that I ought to be doing it all the time – there was no limit to how involved in it I could become.

- Perhaps because of the lack of time restraints, my offline month was very intensive and felt very real whereas the online month felt like a game that I could opt in and out of and was therefore in control of.

- My online month was very visually driven – it was all about what I saw - and the photos I took tell the story of my experience really well whereas my journal entries are mostly quite brief and descriptive. Meanwhile, the offline month was driven by my mind and by my internal workings. My journal entries for this are much longer and more reflective and show me to go through more of a personal journey.

- My body was a valuable tool during my offline experience – it helped me to get the most of the mindfulness techniques and meditations and it allowed me to have experiences that resonated throughout my whole being. My body was more or less obsolete in Second Life – I joined Maisie in some of the meditations but they didn't really flow through me in the same way. Maisie's body, however, acted as a substitute for my own and I kind of lived through her.

- It was easier to make the time to do my Second Life work – perhaps because it was so simple and so fun. My offline month was harder and required me to have more energy, more motivation and more time. However, as a result my offline work was more rewarding when I did make the time for it, and it did have the advantage of not requiring access to a computer.

- Both experiences turned out to be a lot more profound than I had been expecting. However, the online month revelations were all around my attitude to technology and the big thing it helped me with was my ability to talk to strangers, whilst the offline month revelations were personal and spiritual and the big thing it helped me with was adjusting my attitude to life.

9.4 Conclusion

This experiment yielded more extraordinary results than I could ever have dreamed of. It gave me data to use in terms of my academic research, and it provided me with an enormous opportunity for self-contemplation, for spiritual development and for personal growth. It was fascinating, exciting, entertaining, terrifying, shocking, frustrating, challenging and rewarding – a true adventure. To complete this chapter, I will return to the research questions that I posed at the start of this adventure and attempt to answer them in the light of what I have experienced:

How does Second Life compare with the offline world as an arena for spiritual development?

Second Life was brilliant for providing a visually strong Buddhist environment for

me to explore, something that wasn't possible offline (except in my imagination of course), and for connecting me to other Buddhists (again, very difficult offline). It also allowed me to attend a couple of fascinating and inspiring lectures by a real life Buddhist monk which would also be hard to arrange offline. However, my offline month allowed plenty of scope for self-contemplation and gave me the opportunity to indulge in an intense period of thought and reflection which wouldn't have been possible in the ever-changing Second Life landscape. I think on balance the offline month was the more spiritually rewarding but that the ultimate way to proceed would be to use both for they each bring their own strengths and I think would complement each other quite well.

How important is embodiment in spiritual pursuits? Is its absence a help or a hindrance in Second Life?

This is an infinitely more complex question than I had previously thought. In some ways, Buddhism and other religions are ultimately about the 'soul' (or equivalent term) and the ultimate goal destinations for each whether reaching enlightenment or entering heaven or anything else are really about shedding our earthly bodies. My big 'Captain Kirk' epiphany really clarified for me the notion that our bodies are merely vessels and are not necessarily the essence of us. However, many of the rituals attached to religion are very sensory and therefore embodied – my epiphany wouldn't have been possible without the meditation that proceeded it and meditation is reliant on the body and breath in particular. I think the conclusion that I am coming to is that 'I' am not my body but that my body is integral to my human experience and that I am bound to it in terms of my time as a human being. It is perhaps a bit like a baby who is still in its mother's womb – it is not its mother but it is reliant on her and is bound to her for the duration of the pregnancy. Indeed, the yoga that I have become so dependent on is all about synchronising mind, body and spirit and it this yoking effect that gives it the ability to be so stabilising and calming.

In terms of the question about whether disembodiment is a help or a hindrance in Second Life – naturally it is liberating to be able to move through a world without fear or falling or hurting oneself or any of the other risks that having a body presents us with. It is also freeing in the sense that we don't have to worry that we are being judged on our appearance in the same way that we are offline,

although we are being judged on our avatar's appearance (as my jealousy of some of the other avatars showed). However, Second Life cannot provide a fully sensory experience and whilst our avatars can meditate and do tai chi and all those other things, it is debatable as to whether this has any effect on the human body who is controlling the avatar. However, I did find it calming watching Maisie meditate, etc., and whilst it obviously wasn't the same experience as offline meditation, it did have some merit. So, we could say that disembodiment is both a help and a hindrance in Second Life, but perhaps there is another question – are we really disembodied in Second Life or are we just experiencing a different kind of embodiment? Given the feelings I had towards Maisie, she was arguably an extension of my body and so did at least represent embodiment. If the human body is the vessel for human experience then is an avatar equally the vessel for a online experience? Are our fingers, the keyboard, the computer mouse, etc., just elements of a digital umbilical cord? And if so is our avatar the mother within whom we temporarily reside? Or could it be vice versa?

Is it possible for a Digital Immigrant to become a Digital Native?

Before this experiment my answer would have been "maybe for some people but definitely not for me". Indeed, at the start of my research I wouldn't have even called myself a Digital Immigrant – more like a digital tourist or perhaps even a digital anthropologist (i.e. studying the digital world from a safe physical and / or emotional distance). However, in the space of my month as a Second Life Spiritual Tourist I went from being an enforced Second Life immigrant to truly becoming a Second Life native. As I said at the start of this chapter – I thought I could call myself a native if I managed to master the technology to operate fully in Second Life, if I reached a point where I felt one hundred percent comfortable there and knew my way around my chosen neighbourhoods and, above all, when I was happy to call it home. I feel that I more than achieved this in my month – even finding a specific home (the Zen Retreat), a social life and some new hobbies and pastimes. So my short answer to the question is "yes" in terms of Second Life which means it is a potential "yes" in terms of other digital arenas.

Is time in Second Life wasted time? Does it damage or limit our potential in our offline world? Or can the two live alongside each other?

I certainly didn't feel that my time in Second Life was wasted time – it was visually and intellectually stimulating, it gave me a really interesting arena in which to explore Buddhism, and it allowed me to meet like-minded people and to engage in conversation in a much more free manner than my shyness normally permits. However, I believe that time outside in fresh air, time spent exercising, time spent in the physical company of others, and time spent in self-contemplation are all more important than anything that Second Life can offer. So if one's time in Second Life is compromising these things than it is certainly potentially damaging, but if one has time for both then it is definitely, for me, a worthwhile use of my time in terms of complementing the others things that I fill my life with.

How far does the analogy between theatre and Second life hold true? And is it possible that Second Life might be able to serve a similar function as theatre – i.e. to provide a safe space in which to explore issues and then apply what we have learnt in our offline lives?

Certainly theatre and Second Life are both safe spaces in which we can play, explore and experiment. However, there are major differences – theatre is an art form which allows artists to collaboratively create products which are carefully and deliberately constructed with a purpose in mind and which audiences experience collectively within a certain time framework, whereas Second Life is a very loose and free arena in which each individual must seek out their own adventure and work hard to find meaning in their experiences which are potentially infinite. As it happens, my time in Second Life did allow me the chance to talk to strangers in a non intimidating way and this did genuinely enhance my offline communication. Nonetheless, my feeling is that theatre provides a much more culturally enriching and artistically satisfying method of exploration.

Is Second Life as real as the offline world and if so – is it viable as an alternative?

This question is a huge question which really requires the engagement of some complex philosophical thinking around the topic of 'reality' as a whole if one is to answer it fully. My feeling is that Second Life is no more real or unreal than the Matrix is (in the context of the film) and that they are both as real as one wants

them to be because reality, according to Morpheus, is "simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain" (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). In this sense everything that we 'experience' is 'real', a sentiment which is also suggested in the following Buddha quote:

> We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we create our world. (cited by Anani, 2010)

So – our thoughts are therefore the building blocks which form the world (which, of course, supports up the theory that positive thinking can have a truly powerful effect on us by literally providing 'better' building blocks from which to develop our lives). But what both Morpheus's and the Buddha's words also elude to is that 'reality' as we know it is constructed in our minds and is therefore not truly real. This idea is frightening (or perhaps exciting depending on how you look at things) because it suggests an ultimate truth which is as yet unknown to us – it is no wonder that so many people in *The Matrix* take the blue pill and so head back to blissful ignorance, for as Baudrillard says:

> Illusion, being *par excellence* the art of appearing, of emerging out of nothing, protects us from *being*. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 10)

– but it also, by questioning the reality of the offline world, puts both the online and the offline world in the same category – they are both constructed and are therefore as real or as unreal as each other. Indeed, they become part of the same great illusion – an idea which is picked up on by Baudrillard who says:

> There is no equivalent of the world. That might even be said to be its definition – or lack of it. No equivalent, no double, no representation, no mirror. Any mirror whatsoever would still be part of the world. There is not enough room both for the world and its double. So there can be no verifying of the world. This is, indeed, why 'reality' is an imposture. Being without possible verification, the world is a fundamental illusion. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 3)

So, in this sense we can see Second Life, and theatre, and the Matrix, and

Disneyland, and any other 'alternative reality' one can imagine, as being mirrors and so certainly part of the world, but we can also see that these things are, like all the world, an illusion.

How possible it is to see Second Life in the same light as Baudrillard sees Disneyland – as another simulacrum which masks the futility and phoniness of our lives offline (Baudrillard, 1981)? And are both Second Life and Disneyland examples of the idea that our Godless times have created a desire to build worlds which we can take full responsibility for, and which we can do with what we will?

I think there are definite similarities between Second Life and Disneyland, and I agree that both could be defined as simulacra given that they are both copies of an offline world which is arguably empty and meaningless itself for a lot of the time. However, I also thought Second Life and my experiment as a whole helped to expose the potential of our offline lives and to shine a light on the things that are important – namely reconnecting with nature, appreciating what we have, and spending time engaging in self-reflection and mindful self-awareness.

It is really fascinating that Baudrillard saw our obsession with creating new worlds as being related to the fact that we are living in a post-God society (Baudrillard, 1981) given that I deliberately went into virtual reality to explore my spirituality. I think the core of Baudrillard's argument is that as human beings we search for meaning – whether through religion, through creating new worlds, through doing some introspective soul-searching, or through art, and this has been at the heart of my experiment too. However, the experiment - particularly the online portion of it - was also about having adventures and fun and this is something that Second Life, 'first' life and Disneyland all offer. So perhaps it is worth dropping the critical eye and just enjoying the things that our world, whether genuine or a mere illusion, throw up. When all is said and done, Disneyland may be a hollow simulacrum but it is also a great day out, Second Life may be a limited copy of a flawed world but it is also, like theatre, an incredible arena for exploring and experiencing new things, the Matrix may not be real but then what is?, and as for life as a whole – well, perhaps we should all consider taking a blue pill, plugging ourselves in and enjoying the ride...

10 CONCLUSION

10.1 Nine Years of Change

Writing this thesis over nine years has been an incredible adventure but it is has also been enormously challenging. The internet has changed beyond all recognition in this time - indeed it has gone from being known as 'the Internet' to being known as 'the internet' which, whilst subtle, shows how totally it has been absorbed into our culture, our language and our understanding of the world. Furthermore, I have changed beyond all recognition in this time – and this is significant because I have chosen to write an autoethnography and so 'I' have needed to be very present throughout. I am not quite certain to what extent my research has contributed to the changes in me (I will attempt to tackle this question in my creative conclusion at the very end of the thesis) but they have certainly helped shape the work that I have presented. The other challenges in terms of the time-scale of my work were to do with keeping up with the technology and the writing around the technology, staying focused as my attitudes and priorities changed, and dealing with the fact that each chapter became historical rather than current even before I could write it up. However, all these challenges were also linked to the advantages of writing over nine years – it enabled me to have a really rich & transformative journey, it allowed me to apply a chronological approach to my work which meant that my research developed at the same pace as the technology, it meant I could conduct month long experiments easily, and above all it meant that I could present my work as a series of Bauman-esque snapshots (Bauman, 2000) which each represented a moment in my journey and in the history of the internet. Hopefully, when viewed as a chronological 'exhibition', these snapshots can begin to tell the story of my thesis.

And so, nine years on, the time has finally come to tie up my thesis, to make sense of my findings, to make concluding statements and to summarise my years of work. I will do this in three ways – firstly, by looking back on each of my key chapters (or 'snapshots') and summarising the findings of each; secondly, by looking back at the research questions that I set myself and attempting to answer them from what I hope is now a position of experience and knowledge; and finally – because this is an autoethnography – by presenting a creative

conclusion which will take the form of a script of dialogue between Maisie, my avatar, and myself.

10.2 Key Findings

Below I will summarise my key findings and conclusions from each of my main chapters.

In Chapter Two - 'Identity in the Liquid Internet Age' – I began to outline, and expand upon, the theoretical position which I argued is at the very centre of this thesis. By exploring Bauman's notion of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) – particular with regards to its effect on identity and its relationship to the internet - I suggested that (1) the emergence of a liquid society provides the social conditions fostering the need for greater self-creation of identity, (2) this process of reflexivity and creation of subjectivity/self is facilitated by new media (especially the internet), (3) this process also has a dark side whereby uncertainty produces anxieties, and (4) all this may lead to greater spiritual tourism through the internet as both reflexivity leads to search for self and religion has to adapt to meeting those needs in new (consumerist) ways. In Chapter Two, then, I was already addressing my first key research question - *does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* - and starting to provide evidence that supports my first hypothesis that the internet may open up opportunities for spiritual tourism. Chapter Two was also an opportunity for me to establish a basic assumption of this thesis which is that the internet is a place where physicality is compromised and where disembodiment, both in the sense of our human bodies, and in the sense of the 'bodies' of places we visit online, is inevitable. And with this established, I moved on to examining what forms of identity are possible in the internet age, and what each form of identity means in terms of our spiritual identity. As well as liquid identity – I also introduced solid identity, fragmented/multiple identity, cyborg identity, and collective identity, all of which I suggested could be models for the ways that we engage with online spirituality.

Chapter Three - 'Putting Me in My Work – Autoethnography' – explored autoethnography – and, to a lesser extent, PSS – in some detail because

the use of such methodologies is still both somewhat novel and relatively underdeveloped in the discipline of sociology and so – I argued – my thesis provides a valuable opportunity to critically explore autoethnography as a potential tool for sociological investigation. Having analysed the methodology, including the potential ethical issues that it raises, I then created a set of rules that I would follow during my research. I will be examining whether I adhered to these and whether my thesis benefited from its autoethnographic framework later on in this conclusion; and this will then allow me to tackle my third key research question - *what are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?* For me one of the most important elements of my chapter on autoethnography was that it presented the methodology as being the most natural choice in a liquid era. I offered many examples of academics talking about it dissolving the barriers between art and science – this was perhaps most clearly illustrated in Ellis' "Chart of Impressionist and Realist Ethnography" (Ellis, 2004) which put art and science on a series of liquid continuums rather than labelling them as black and white. Autoethnography, then, is about challenging traditional models of sociology and about melting creativity and personal experience and academia together to hopefully unearth something which is greater than its parts. The chapter finished with a short autoethnographic play which I believe proved this point by clearly summarising the chapter in a succinct, digestible, entertaining way – a technique that I hope to repeat with the creative conclusion that will end my thesis.

Chapter Four - 'The Personal Challenge of Internet Research' - was a way of giving both the reader and myself a sense of how I was going to approach my internet research, with a particular nod to the ethics of online research. As with Chapter Three, after exploring the issues surrounding internet research, I created a list of rules to guide my own research for the remainder of the chapter. As it turned out, they were a pretty solid set of rules which I adhered to quite – if I can use this expression - religiously throughout my research period. One of the most challenging rule was the one that stated "'real' is a subjective term that should be used cautiously" as the question about what constitutes 'reality' ended up being right at the very heart of my thesis. In retrospect, one of the most pertinent rules was the one regarding seeing online personae as being as worthy

of study as their offline creators despite the fact they may have fundamental differences. This was theoretical at the time, but now, at the end of my research, makes real sense. Again, in an age of liquidity we can seamlessly *flow* from an offline persona to an online one (or even several online ones) and back again whenever we want. The personae may be different but they are both, or all, part of our liquid identity which allows us to be whoever we want to be, wherever we want to be. This concept is potentially dangerous – a paedophile can masquerade as a 12 year old girl for example – but it is also liberating – a person with a physical disability can become a running, dancing, flying avatar. The chapter finished with an illustration of the impermanence of the internet – the autoethnographic description of my horror at not being able to find a Buddhist group that I had grown to depend on can be seen as a metaphor for the Buddhist notion that until we let go of our sense of forever we will be unhappy. This notion is one that I dealt with again in Chapter Nine when the Buddhist temple I loved in Second Life vanishes. Indeed, the fleeting nature of much of the internet's content is arguably one of the things which makes it so irresistible. The internet cannot stay still – it is liquid, it flows on and on, it changes - and this allows it to become a training programme that, like the games of peek-a-boo we learn from as babies, teaches us to accept change, absence and impermanence.

In Chapter Five – 'Buddhism – an Overview' – I briefly explored Buddhism in terms of its philosophy, history and entry into the west. I also looked at some of the benefits of online Buddhism – namely that it allows people who are not geographically near other Buddhists to access information and communicate with fellow believers, it provides a space (albeit virtual) for practitioners to form a community, or cybersangha, and it allows people to express their spirituality in their own time and in their own ways by 'picking and choosing' from the information available on the internet. I pointed out that this final benefit may also be seen as a disadvantage of online Buddhism because it may suggest that the internet is encouraging a ‘watering down’ and blurring of traditional Buddhist values, and because it puts new pressure on the online Buddhist to be discerning – particularly as the internet is allowing 'user-generated' spiritualities to flourish. I also alluded to a final challenge of online Buddhism – the absence of personal contact with other Buddhists, whether they be teachers or peers.

In Chapters Six to Nine I presented my main case studies which consisted of a mixture of academia, personal journals and experiences, and interactions with other people on and offline. All four of these chapters were very focused on answering my first and second key research questions - *does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?* And *how does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?* Because all these chapters also made use of autoethnographical material they were also all contributing to my final key question - *what are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?*

In Chapter Six – 'The First Snapshot – 2006 – Online v Offline Rituals' – I looked at on and offline versions of what Durkheim term the "cult" of Buddhism (Durkheim, 1912). Looking back at this chapter, which was written in 2006, it is clear that I definitely preferred my embodied offline experiences of chanting, meditation and prayer wheels – they were much richer and fuller and more spiritually authentic than their online equivalents. However, this is partly due to the rather basic technology that I was dealing with at that time, and partly due to the fact that I was very biased against technology back then. One of the key theories I looked at in the chapter was Benjamin's work on mechanical reproduction and the authenticity of the original (Benjamin, 1955). I used this theory to defend my preference for the offline rituals but later conceded that the rituals, whether online or offline, were not the essence of the religion, merely an expression of it and so it would not necessarily be a bad thing if the "cult" of Buddhism did indeed "periodically recreate itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) as the essence of the Buddhism would not be affected. This point became particularly apparent when looking at Tibetan Buddhism and prayer wheels – I found that Tibetan Buddhists were very open to digital prayer wheels, and online religion as a whole, and I realised that this was in part due to the fact that they have had to live as a diaspora for so long and so are willing to express their religion in whatever ways are open to them. This was humbling and enlightening and made me realise that the internet really does free us and allow us to do things that we cannot do offline. However, having said that, one of the most

important things I discovered during my research for Chapter Six was that being in the presence of 'real' offline Buddhists was really exciting and accelerated my Buddhism studies more quickly that anything I did online.

In Chapter Seven – 'The Second Snapshot – 2007 / 2008 – MySpace, Buddhism & Identity' – I introduced MySpace and then analysed a small sample of MySpace profiles all of which were members of the 'Buddhism' group on the site. Again, Bauman's work on fluid identity (Bauman, 2000) was important as I found that a large portion (approximately two thirds) of the sample members expressed some degree of fluidity in terms of their spiritual identity, i.e. their profiles indicated an interest in more than one religion. This seemed to support my hypothesis that *the internet may open up opportunities for spiritual tourism*. I also used my findings to analyse my own MySpace profile and found that it was a perfect snapshot of my spiritual identity in 2007 – it showed me to be someone who was interested in Buddhism but open to other religions and who was actively honing her spiritual identity – in other words: a spiritual tourist.

Chapter Eight – 'The Third Snapshot – 2009 – Online v Offline Spiritual Journeys' – was a leap forward. Not only was I dealing with a much more technologically advanced website in Second Life, but I was also approaching my research with a much more open attitude. Nonetheless, I was expecting my offline ‘pilgrimage’ to be much more rewarding than my online one and was astonished when this wasn't the case. One of the key issues that came out of this chapter was MacWilliams' assertion that virtual reality is nothing new in religion (MacWilliams, 2002). He pointed out that something like the Eucharist, in which bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ, is itself virtual reality and this reinforces the idea I introduced in Chapter Six – that the cult of a religion is not the essence of a religion but is merely a way of expressing it. This is one of my major findings during my research and has allowed me to become much more open to technology. I did benefit from the fully sensory experience that my offline ‘pilgrimage’ afforded me but my online ‘pilgrimage’ packed quite a punch too. Indeed, by the time I had finished researching Chapter Eight my research was starting to cast doubt over the validity of my second hypothesis *that the internet cannot hope to provide a viable alternative to embodied spirituality*.

If Chapter Eight was a leap forward then Chapter Nine – 'The Fourth Snapshot – 2009 / 2010 – Online v Offline Spiritual Life' was a whole new world. Spending a whole month as a spiritual tourist (with a particular interest in Buddhism) firstly in Second Life and secondly in my 'first' life was extremely intense – I learnt a lot about myself and about my topic, I survived some horrible experiences in my personal life, and I tackled some of the most complex theories that I looked at during my research. By comparing Second Life to the Matrix in the film of the same name, to theatre, and to Disneyland, I unearthed a lot of very interesting issues. The comparison with *The Matrix* threw up a lot of questions about the nature of reality including – "if we believe something is real then is it real?" The people who chose to plug themselves back into the Matrix in the film decided to accept it as their reality and whilst this had sinister connotations it also made the point that reality is a lot about belief and is in itself a construct. This theory allowed me to feel less worried about the fact that I started to believe in the world of Second Life and to see it as another home. Second Life had its limits but it also allowed me to transcend some of the boundaries of my offline existence and so the two balanced each other out to a certain extent.

The comparison to theatre was also very interesting – as a theatre practitioner I see theatre as a safe space in which to explore themes and issues and Second Life, whilst obviously not being an art form, serves a similar function. In Second Life it is much easier to talk to strangers – perhaps because their name is displayed so they don't feel like strangers, perhaps because communication with new people is one of the purposes of Second Life, perhaps because you can hide behind your avatar and/or your online personality – and for me, someone who is shy with new people, this was very liberating, particularly as I started to feel more able to talk to new people offline too.

The comparison with Disneyland was a result of work by Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1981) who sees the theme park as an empty place designed to conceal the emptiness of the world beyond it. Baudrillard also suggests that our desire to create new artificial worlds (which Disneyland, Second Life, the Matrix, and the theatre might all be seen as) comes from the fact that we now live in a Godless society and wish to exchange it for an alternative, man-made one in order to feel

that we don't have to answer to anyone (Baudrillard, 2001). Seen through Baudrillard's eyes – Second Life might therefore be said to be an attempt to escape our flawed world and create a new one which we can truly be the masters of. The problem with this, I concluded in the chapter, is that people are using Second Life to pursue religious pursuits and so for them Second Life is merely another cult of religion, rather than a move to escape it. Meanwhile, back in the 'real' world my month as an offline spiritual tourist was unexpectedly solitary compared to my Second Life experience but this did allow me to do some fairly intensive self-reflection, meditation and soul searching and meant that the month ultimately had a very profound effect on me. In fact the month I spent as a Second Life 'Buddhist' transformed my attitudes to technology, but it was my offline month that really transformed me spiritually. By the end of the month I felt, oddly enough, like I had melted and therefore become more flexible and more open to travelling in whatever direction the tide might take me...

Water is one of the greatest forces on our planet – it is our master (we cannot fight deep seas, tsunamis and terrible floods) but it is also our life force. We are made from water, we need water every day, we are interchangeable with water. Water, it might be possible to argue, is a form of *prana*, and certainly it figures in many religious rites (being christened, bathing in the Ganges, etc.). It was also one of the few tools which unlocked true mindfulness during my personal research. In terms of my thesis, water represents inevitability, flexibility and collectivity - all things that are an integral part of our liquid internet age, and all things that we all – I suggest – need to embrace. Bauman's work on liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) proved, as my research progressed, to be a very apt metaphor for contemporary society because the theme of liquidity ran through my thesis. Postmodernity as a whole - and the internet specifically - encourages a *melting pot* of culture and identity, enables a *fluid* approach to modern identity and spirituality, *dissolves* the differences between man and machine (to create Haraway's cyborg – Haraway, 1991), with them we can only ever – as with liquid - analyse a moment-in-time *snapshot* because they are ever-changing, and they encourage a collective identity which sees us all become, to use a Buddhist notion, *drops in an ocean*.

10.3 Some Answers

1. Does the 'liquid internet age' influence the way that individuals engage with religion and spirituality through the emergence of spiritual tourism?

At the start of this thesis I established that the liquid age as presented by Bauman is defined by an impermanence which was caused by what Bauman refers to as "time/space compression" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2). This phenomenon has arguably led to the decline of the traditional frameworks – organised religion being a key example – which once glued society together. The result of this is the creation of a new society of individuals who are free to flow towards whatever belief or interest might appeal to them at any given moment – but also to flow away again as soon as something else catches their attention. This has allowed consumerism to flourish – everyone is a potential consumer of everything in the liquid world - but it has also caused the fear that comes with an absence of certainty to rise and rise. As a result many people may now be searching for meaning in their lives and so begin to be drawn back towards spirituality but in a new, more liquid way. I also argued that the internet is the ultimate symbol of liquid modernity because it both illustrates and facilitates our newly fluid lives.

As the thesis proceeded, my case studies revealed the ways that the liquid internet age is affecting how we interact with religion and spirituality – and some of these ways are detailed below:

1) It discourages traditional or formalised religion
2) It encourages a more fluid approach to religion & spirituality
3) It encourages a more individualised, self-reflexive approach to religion & spirituality
4) It allows us to access religious and spiritual resources easily and conveniently
5) It allows us to interact with religious/spiritual communities who are comprised of members who may be geographically far from us
6) It encourages us to explore a wide range of religious/spiritual beliefs and practices which may lead to us becoming more knowledgeable and/or more experimental in our own beliefs and practices

7) It provides spiritual experiences which might be considered to be disembodied in that they do not involve face-to-face contact or tangible objects and places, and compromise our ability to utilise our full sensory range
8) It puts more pressure on the individual to be discerning about who and what they trust, or accept as being authentic – which may lead to anxieties or uncertainties
9) It arguably takes power away from religious leaders/formal organisations, and instead encourages a more 'user-generated' breed of spirituality which in turn leads to more consumerism as religious organisations try to 'sell' their 'product' to individuals

In other words, *the liquid internet age does indeed open up opportunities for spiritual tourism*, and we can say that Durkheim appears to be right in his assertion that the "cult" of religion "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312). Of course, we can question whether this is a 'good' thing – i.e. whether we should accept and embrace the changes that this thesis suggests are afoot. However, Durkheim does not question whether the cult of religion should recreates itself, he just points out that it does (Durkheim, 1912). Similarly, the Tibetan Buddhists probably didn't spend a long time pondering whether they should become more accepting of digital prayer wheels, it was just a natural response to their change in circumstances. To some extent, then, the way we *express* our religion/spirituality will naturally evolve as we do, and arguably isn't something we need to question as long as it doesn't impact upon the *essence* of our religion/spirituality.

2. How does the practice of virtual spiritual tourism on the internet compare with organised religion as a viable and authentic environment in which to explore and express our spirituality?

This question firstly necessitates an exploration of the differences between an online spiritual experience and an offline spiritual experience. Clearly an offline experience is an embodied experience and will therefore have properties that an online experience will not – namely the presence of physical elements such as the body, proximity to others, and tangible spaces (such as temples) and props (such as prayer wheels). At the start of my research I felt

sure that this would disqualify online spiritual pursuits from ever being considered 'genuine' – indeed my second hypothesis was that *the internet cannot hope to provide a viable alternative to embodied spirituality* for this reason. Of course defining what constitutes a 'genuine' spiritual experience may in itself be a tricky task - and it is possible that this too is something that, to use Durkheim's words again, "periodically recreates itself" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 312) – but it is possible that it has something to do with *prana*. However, *prana* remains a difficult concept to measure and so can only really be spoken about in a fairly subjective manner. I can talk about when I felt *prana* and when I didn't during my research, but I cannot prove that any of my experiences did or didn't contain it. Therefore, what follows is a short autoethnographic section which explores my own feelings about *prana* during my research...

Prana – an autoethnographical mini-conclusion

Prana *is, I started to believe during my research period, in some ways elemental – it is water, wind, air, fire, earth; it is the way the elements run through us; it is our breath. These things are products of an offline world and so in this sense are not possible in a virtual space. For me,* prana *is also about the feeling of a place – it is the walls of a church, the smell of incense in a temple, the echo of a hymn in an ancient place of worship. Again, these things are products of a tangible environment and so are not possible in a virtual space. However, it is also a feeling and can therefore be generated by anything which we approach truthfully and with belief. Most of the moments that I felt contained* prana *during my research were all embodied offline experiences (mostly during my mindfulness exercises) but I also felt what I perceived to be* prana *at the Zen Retreat in Second Life – the information about the place told me that it had been created in the hope that it would help someone see differently and it did do just that for me. In fact, by opening my mind in the Zen Retreat I found that my prejudices about online worlds melted away, and I began to feel that I was somewhere truly magical. So – I believe that I have learnt that* prana *is most at home in the human body and riding the elements, but it can be found almost anywhere if we just open our minds a little...*

My personal discoveries about *prana*, therefore, suggest that my hypothesis was not necessarily correct and that the internet does have the potential to provide

authentic spiritual experiences if we are willing to open our minds. However, let us now look at the question of whether the internet is a viable and authentic arena in which to explore and express our spirituality in more detail.

Firstly, my research has certainly shown that it is possible to explore and express our spirituality online. The question about whether these explorations and expressions can be considered to be 'viable' and 'authentic' is more complicated and probably more subjective. Something is viable if it works and I certainly met people for whom online spirituality does – for example the people who listened to the monk talking in Second Life and thanked him, saying they were grateful to have access to his lectures online as they couldn't find such things offline. However, the monk himself expressed doubts about whether Second Life could play a valuable part in a Buddhist practise. For him, the internet doesn't allow us the stillness and the concentration that an embodied practise does and I would have to agree with him – I didn't manage to really lose myself in Buddhism whilst online because I was too conscious of my research, and my mind wouldn't still in a world where it is too tempting to click away and do something else, be something else, learn something else. If the internet is reducing attention spans then this can only be a bad thing for a thoughtful spiritual practise. However, in terms of meeting Buddhists, discussing Buddhism, reading about Buddhism, and visiting beautiful temples and spiritually rich grounds, the internet actually proved a better option than the offline world so is certainly capable of contributing to a Buddhist practise.

The question of authenticity was tested most strenuously by my work on Gohonzons. For the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, the online Gohonzons were definitely not authentic as they were unauthorised copies, whereas the Gohonzons that they kept in their homes were authentic as they were hand-crafted, blessed and earned. In other words they saw their Gohonzons as originals. However, in actual fact these were only replicas themselves of the original in the temple at Mount Fuji, and even the original – the Dai-Gohonzon - is arguably only a representation of the essence of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. It is, in a way, a virtual reality, just as the Eucharist is for MacWilliams (MacWilliams, 2002). In fact all the cults of Buddhism, whether online or offline, are just representations and so it is possibly somewhat irrelevant to deem some

as 'authentic' and some as 'not authentic'. During my research for Chapter Seven laystudent responded to my post about the authenticity of online meditation by saying “As for how authentic your Zazen is, only you can know what you are doing on your cushion”. In other words, an experience is made authentic by – to borrow another Buddhist term – right intention. I felt bad for chanting in front of an online Gohonzon but it was actually a very powerful experience because I approached it with an open and truthful attitude. If we explore and express our spirituality with an air of sincerity and belief then – again - perhaps any method or medium will do.

3. What are the pros and cons of using autoethnography as a methodology for exploring online/offline spiritual tourism?

It has certainly been a wonderfully creative, freeing and enlightening experience using autoethnography to tackle the subject of spiritual tourism in the liquid internet age. However, I also believe that working autoethnographically has enabled me to analyse my topic in a deeper and more meaningful way – and hopefully this has, in turn, created a thesis which is rich and resonant for the reader. One of the biggest challenges of using autoethnography as a methodology is perhaps that it is very easy to drift into potentially self-indulgent and / or unnecessary waffle - and therefore away from the topic at hand - whilst writing. I have certainly felt this starting to happen at several points during my research but, because I have remained mindful of this danger, I believe I have ultimately avoided drifting too far in the wrong direction. Another challenge is working with the knowledge of the slight academic risk that one is taking by using autoethnography whilst it is still an emerging methodology. I do feel that I have shown that autoethnography can be a very useful and rewarding way of tackling sociological questions, and that my hypothesis that *an autoethnographic approach is a valuable and effective way of studying modern spirituality* is correct. However, I will now interrogate this belief by attempting to objectively review my work using the questions that Etherington poses in her adaptation of Laurel Richardson's list of criteria for judging social science papers (Etherington, 2004, p. 148):

Q: Does the work make a substantive contribution to my understanding of social life?

A: I believe that I have tackled questions and issues that everyone in the developed world can relate to and that I have grounded my work in the theories of academics such as Bauman, Benjamin and Baudrillard so I would hope that is does indeed make some sort of contribution to our understanding of contemporary social life and the way that spirituality manifests in the liquid internet age.

Q: Does the work have aesthetic merit?
A: I believe I have made my thesis aesthetically satisfying. I have written creatively in order to draw the reader in and invite them to engage with the issues that I am exploring so I do feel that – assuming that this tactic has been at least moderately successful - my method has merit.

Q: Is the work reflexive enough to make the author sufficiently visible for me to make judgements about the point of view?
A: I am aware that I have been very open and honest throughout my research, certainly telling the reader more about myself than one would normally expect from a social scientist. However, I hope that I have reflected on my own experiences in a sufficiently analytical way and that I have therefore illuminated the wider issues too.

Q: What is the impact of this work on me?
A: My hope is that this thesis will produce both an emotional and an intellectual response in its readers, and that it will encourage them to think about their own lives in terms of their relationship to technology, to spirituality and to their modern existence as a whole. I hope too that the work will entertain, inform, and perhaps spark off a little debate.

Q: Does the work provide me with a sense of 'lived experience'?
A: I have written from the heart, and as a genuine part of the phenomenon that I have been studying, and so I hope that this will shine through and that the work will feel authentic to those who read it. I hope too that my story will have a little resonance for everyone – and that it will make a tiny, tiny, tiny drop-sized contribution to the ocean of human stories which together provide a snapshot of our lives as they were between 2003 and 2012...

As well as believing that my thesis has indeed passed Etherington's test, I also believe that I have delivered in terms of the statement of intent that I gave in my chapter on autoethnography. I certainly became a part of the communities that I researched (whether that meant I was a genuine member of the group of people who have a liquid religious identity or that I became a bona fide Second Life citizen), I did remain aware that I was telling my story in order to help illuminate the issues rather than for its own sake most of the time (and when I occasionally forgot I was self-reflexive enough to be able to pull myself back into the thesis), I did only share personal details and anecdotes which I felt contributed to the wider story that I was trying to tell (I debated taking certain elements out – such as my mental illness during Chapter Nine - but in the end I felt they illustrated my story and were therefore necessary), I did fairly represent the views and theories of others throughout, I believe I did give academic and artistic values equal weighting, and I do feel that I practised an appropriate degree of self-reflexivity.

However, the autoethnographic journey is not quite over yet. In my chapter on autoethnography I said that the final element of my process would be the presentation of a creative piece of work that would act as a summary of my findings, and of the thesis as a whole. That piece of work follows and takes the form of a scripted fictional encounter between myself and my Second Life avatar, Maisie. I won't say too much about this piece because the intention is that it just washes over the reader and allows them to receive the information that it contains in a creative and non-conventional way, but I will say that it summarises the personal journey that I have made during these incredible nine years, and endeavours to answer one of my research sub-questions – *what might a satisfying, authentic & viable spiritual practice for me – and for others like me – going forward?*

11 THE FINAL SNAPSHOT – 2010 - MY AVATAR, MYSELF

A conversation appears on a laptop...

Madeleine: Hi Maisie.

Maisie: What?

Madeleine: Hi Maisie.

Maisie: Who's that? Am I going mad?

Madeleine: No, don't worry. I'm Madeleine.

Maisie: Who?

Madeleine: Of course! You don't know me, do you?

Maisie: No – but you seem familiar somehow. What's your name, again?

Madeleine: Madeleine.

Maisie: I've always loved that name.

Madeleine: Really? That's strange.

Maisie: Why?

Madeleine: I've always loved yours too.

Maisie: Why can't I see you?

Madeleine: I'm not from your world.

Maisie: Who are you?

Madeleine: I – well, I created you.

Maisie: Are you my god?

Madeleine: No, no. Well, I don't know. No. It's not so much that I created you. It's more that you are a part of me.

Maisie: I don't understand.

Madeleine: No, I'm sorry, I'm not being very clear. You see, I wanted to explore Second Life but I needed an avatar to act as my body.

Maisie: Isn't an avatar an earthly manifestation of a god?

Madeleine: Um, kind of. I suppose so, yes.

Maisie: Did you create me in your own image?

Madeleine: No – you look how I wished I looked.

Maisie: How so?

Madeleine: Well, you're really slim and you can walk in heels... And I've always wanted to dye my hair magenta but I've never been brave enough.

Maisie: What's your hair like?

Madeleine: It's long and blondish...

Maisie: I wish I had hair like that.

Madeleine: Well you kind of do – through me!

(They laugh)

Maisie: Tell me about your world.

Madeleine: It's – god – it's hard to describe. It's full. And noisy. And sometimes there is so much going on all around you that it's hard to concentrate on anything. But it's beautiful too – and you can find stillness if you work at it. I've learnt that recently.

Maisie: It sounds incredible. Kind of the opposite of here. Sometimes I am still for months on end and it gets so frustrating.

Madeleine: But how can you... oh, that must be what happens when I'm not logged in.

Maisie: What? What does that mean?

Madeleine: "Logged in" means I am connected to your world and that I am sort of controlling you.

Maisie: Controlling me?

Madeleine: No, no – that's not really right. It's when I sort of flow into you and kind of become you.

Maisie: I think I understand. But you still sound a bit like a god.

Madeleine: No, it's more like we are twins or sisters or two versions of the same person. Yes, that's it – we are the same person, just in different incarnations.

Maisie: Do you have a god in your world?

Madeleine: People believe in different gods...

Maisie: What do you believe in?

Madeleine: Well, that's a question I have been thinking about a lot in the last few years. In fact, I've been writing a PhD about it. I came to Second Life partly to try and do some research.

Maisie: Why Second Life?

Madeleine: Because it's online and so it's finite. Because it's peaceful. Because it is beautiful. Because it is easy to move around in. Because through you I can be fearless.

Maisie: Why can't you be fearless in your world?

Madeleine: Because human bodies are fragile and mortal, and because in my world actions carry consequences.

Maisie: What does mortal mean?

Madeleine: That you will only be alive for a limited period of time before you die.

Maisie: What happens to you when you die?

Madeleine: No one really knows.

Maisie: But what happens to your body?

Madeleine: It decomposes and kind of becomes part of the planet again.

Maisie: That sounds lovely. You get to be a part of your world forever.

Madeleine: Yes, sort of...

Maisie: I don't think you should be frightened of that. In a way it means that you are intrinsically connected to everyone and everything. Like a drop in an ocean.

Madeleine: You know, for an avatar you're very wise.

Maisie: But we're the same person so you must be wise too.

Madeleine: Maybe...

Maisie: I wish I could see you.

Madeleine: Yes, I'm sorry. I have an unfair advantage. But really, you don't want to see me. I'm like an imperfect you.

Maisie: I bet you aren't. And besides – your life sounds much more exciting than mine. I wish I could live in your world.

Madeleine: You do in a way. *(Pause)* Maisie?

Maisie: Yes?

Madeleine: Do you ever feel *prana*?

Maisie: What's *prana*?

Madeleine: It's kind of a life-force, an energy that soars through you and which seems to connect you to everything around you...

Maisie: Yes, I do feel it in that case. I feel it when I have been still for some time and then I start moving again. I guess when you 'log in'. Do I get the *prana* from you?

Madeleine: Maybe. God, that's weird.

Maisie: Why do you ask? Do you feel *prana* in your world?

Madeleine: Yes. Sometimes. When I wash my hands, when I look at a flame, when the wind moves through my hair, when my bare feet touch grass. When I breathe. When I play with children. When I create theatre. When I do yoga. When I suddenly realise obvious truths or have brilliant ideas.

Maisie: Do you feel it in Second Life?

Madeleine: Sometimes – when I – you - we visit the Zen Retreat for example. But mostly no.

Maisie: That must be because you pass it to me when you log in so that I can stop being still.

Madeleine: Yes. That makes sense! But what about the Zen Retreat?

Maisie: I guess some places have enough *prana* for the both of us!

(They laugh and pause to contemplate this.)

So did Second Life give you the answer to your question?

Madeleine: What question?

Maisie: The one about what you believe in.

Madeleine: Sort of. It helped. You've helped. I didn't think I'd ever find something to believe in online but I believe in you.

Maisie: I'm not a fairy!

Madeleine: Shut up you or I'll give you a pair of wings!

Maisie: You're sounding like my god again!

Madeleine: *(after a pause)* I need to go soon.

Maisie: Where will you go?

Madeleine: Back to my body. It's kind of still when I'm here, just like yours is when I'm not. Not great for finishing PhDs. But I don't want to leave you in an enforced state of stillness...

Maisie: You know those things you described when you were telling me about some of the times that you feel *prana*? Well, they sound like things that are worth believing in to me. I think you should go back to your world and finish your PhD and then fill your life with them. You don't need Second Life. You've got a first life.

Madeleine: What about you?

Maisie: I'm just a projection. Just a drop in the ocean of your mind. But I could stay here in the Zen Retreat. Then a part of you would always be here. That might be good to know when things get tough.

Madeleine: Oh, Maisie...

Maisie: Go. Go finish your work. Go live your life. Go. We'll meet again. And for god's sake just dye your hair if you want to!

Madeleine: OK, OK. Goodbye, Maisie. Namaste. *(no response)* Maisie?

The laptop screen suddenly goes black. The conversation is over.

APPENDIX ONE – Transcripts of my conversations on Beliefnet re online Gohonzons

Genevra **1 out of 11**

10/31/2006 5:49 AM

Hi,

I am a PhD student studying Buddhist experiences in cyberspace and am considering online Gohonzons at the moment. I would be interested to hear what people think of online Gohonzons - are they 'authentic'? Can one chant before an online Gohonzon? What do you think of the people who are downloading Gohonzons onto the net for all to see?

All comments would be very welcome.

Many thanks.

Engyo **2 out of 11**

10/31/2006 7:57 AM

Hello, Genevra -

Respectfully, from your question's phrasing I would guess that your experience with Nichiren Buddhism encompasses either Nichiren Shoshu, Soka Gakkai, or both. I say this because most other Nichiren Buddhist groups have a somewhat different viewpoint/outlook on the Omandala image and on what appropriate and respectful treatment and usage of that image can be.

My understanding has evolved to the point that I view the Omandala image as an expedient means; akin to a signpost pointing us to the Assembly in the Sky in the Lotus Sutra. Chanting before such an image is meant to help us visualize attending the Assembly ourselves, as we symbolically do when

we offer service every day.

Whether one uses a letter mandala to do this, or a statuary arrangement, or some combination of both, or even a pictorial mandala, is immaterial. It doesn't change the ultimate goal, which is to aid the believer to practice kanjin, or observation of the mind, through chanting meditation.

If the Omandala is viewed as something sacred in and of itself, rather than as an aid or tool to help us attain insight/understanding, then we (in my humble opinion) are guilty of "looking outside ourselves" for the Treasure Tower. Of course this is just my own opinion, and I am sure that others will have different ones.

Namaste, Engyo

Engyo **3 out of 11**

10/31/2006 8:57 AM

Since my first post didn't actually answer your questions, here goes:

"I would be interested to hear what people think of online Gohonzons - are they 'authentic'?"

Of course they are authentic, if one is discussing the imagery. I guess it all depends on what "authentic" means in the context of the question. Who authenticates, or decides on an images' authenticity? Why should an Omandala image originally inscribed by Nichiren be any less "authentic" than one originally inscribed by someone else?

"Can one chant before an online Gohonzon?"

Certainly one can do so; whether someone would want to is another story. If you mean "would it work", in my opinion yes. 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.

"What do you think of the people who are downloading Gohonzons onto the net for all to see?"

Respectfully, the phrase "for all to see" implies something shameful or embarrassing, doesn't it? I don't feel that is an appropriate characterization at all. Personally I think that Don Ross performed a great service when he posted the gallery of original Nichiren Omandala images to the web. This has helped to dispel a layer of mystery and secrecy that (imho) hasn't served Nichiren Buddhism as a tradition well at all.

Again, just my own personal opinion; I am sure others will have differing opinions.

Namaste, Engyo

Genevra **4 out of 11**

10/31/2006 11:26 AM

Thank you for taking the time to give me such considered responses to my post.

You are right in your guess that my experience has been with Nichiren Shoshu groups, and with individuals who have been outraged by the presence of online Gohonzons, so please accept my apologies for any offence I may have inadvertently caused with the way I phrased my questions - the more I continue with my research,the more I realise that I know very little!

Again - thank you for your insights.

Genevra

Engyo **5 out of 11**

10/31/2006 2:03 PM

I wasn't offended in the least, and I apologize if it came off that way. I began my practice of Nichiren Buddhism with NSA, and so I have experience with that viewpoint. I just wanted to share a different one.

Again, you did not offend at all.....

Namaste, Engyo

---

etoro **6 out of 11**

10/31/2006 9:14 PM

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 practised, it must be properly transmitted. Nichiren did not intend for Gohonzon's to be so frivolously distributed. The distortions in the message and meanings presently plaguing the modern spread of Nichiren Buddhism derives from individuals with over weening pride who have no idea what kind of effort and devotion to the way it takes to bring about the kosen Rufu of the Buddha Dharma.

Sorry if I offended any one here. But this must be said.

Engyo **7 out of 11**

10/31/2006 10:12 PM

Etoro -

Would you be interested in being more specific? I am curious, because I have also changed my understanding of what "widely declaring and spreading" Nichiren's Buddhism means, and how it can be accomplished.

Do you believe that this is something that can or will be done by one single organization or group of people to the exclusion of all others? I no longer

do.

I think it will take multiple,different groups of people with multiple, different ways of implementing and applying Nichiren's teachings; all working together towards a shared vision, a common overall goal. I no longer believe any one single group can be all things to all people, or that one size can be stretched far enough to fit all. I think we need different flavors, different "feels" or "vibes"; I think there needs to be a selection of different options, just as people today have within Christianity here in the US. I think it's great if my group is growing, but I also think it's great that your group is growing, too. We really are working towards the same goal, unless you believe it is something that cannot be shared between groups.

I think Nichiren Buddhism is bigger than any one single interpretation; I think that the USA in particular needs different choices if this philosophy is to really take hold and have a chance to change our country and society for the better. We are too diverse a people (or group of peoples), and far too individualistic, for a single approach to be truly effective in the numbers required. That can work in a relatively homogeneous society like Japan's but it won't here, IMHO.

I am sure that many will disagree, and that's OK. I am just offering my own viewpoint, for whatever it's worth.

Namaste, Engyo

---

etoro **8 out of 11**

11/2/2006 6:02 PM

Engyo, easy to say, difficult to do. The fact is the issue itself is quite complex as you well know. Which is why I suspect your stance derives more from political expediency rather than the Buddha's ultimate truth.

Nichiren states, *All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the spirit of many in body but one in mind,*

transcending all differences among themselves to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death. Herein lies the true goal of Nichiren's propagation. When you are so united, even the great desire for widespread propagation can be fulfilled. But if any of Nichiren's disciples disrupt the unity of many in body but one in mind, they would be like warriors who destroy their own castle from within.

The Kosen Rufu of the Law can not come about through political expediency. It is only through sharing in the bonds of awakening in the Buddha's ultimate truth.

Engyo **9 out of 11**

11/2/2006 6:46 PM

Etoro -

Respectfully, I can't see anywhere in there that Nichiren said anything about belonging to any one particular organization. "All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren" can be interpreted narrowly, as in "one organization alone is practising correctly"; or it can be interpreted more broadly, as in "ALL disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren (regardless of affiliation)". Is the choice of the broader versus the narrower political expediency? I think that is a choice each individual must make.

Personally, I believe that "sharing in the bonds of awakening in the Buddha's ultimate truth" doesn't require membership in any one given organization. Others may feel it does require such specific membership. Your mileage may vary.

Namaste, Engyo

---

etoro **10 out of 11**

11/2/2006 10:37 PM

Engyo,

This view of "organization" is a self imposed delusion. Your argument is contrived. The Buddha wisdom is not ensconced in concepts like "organizations". Buddhism is a life to life, heart to heart transmission. The arising up of a so called organization is simply a bi-product of the many gathering together amidst a unified purpose among intelligent people who determine what must be done in order to bring the benefit of the Buddha wisdom to the world of human beings.

That members encounter difficult challenges in the course of practice can never be avoided. This is the karma of the world anyway and derives from possessing a wrong view of life. Your argument is wrong headed.

Engyo **11 out of 11**

11/3/2006 1:25 PM

Etoro -

OK, either I misunderstood your original post in this thread, or some other miscommunication has occurred.

Could you please explain your vision of the unfolding of "widely declaring and spreading" Nichiren Buddhism? I am interested in your views on how this is occurring, and who the players are that are 1) aiding and assisting this process, and 2) slowing and delaying this process; as well as how each is doing this.

Based on your original post, I took you to be saying that providing different Gohonzon images online was a bad thing. I would like to understand more clearly just exactly what you find objectionable about this information being available, and why; if you don't mind explaining, of course.

Namaste, Engyo

APPENDIX TWO – Transcripts of my conversations on Beliefnet re Daily Zen & online meditation

Genevra **1 out of 9**

10/31/2006 5:43 AM

Hi,

I am a PhD student looking at ways that Buddhism appears online and am interested to know whether anyone has tried meditating in the online zendo at http://www.dailyzen.com/meditation.asp and, if so, whether it is as authentic an experience as meditating in the 'real world'.

I would also welcome any other comments about the authenticity of online meditation.

Many thanks.

Genevra

laystudent **2 out of 9**

10/31/2006 6:44 AM

Is cute Genevra. Does the bell ring at the end of the period? Do you know who the monkess is?

---

laystudent **3 out of 9**

10/31/2006 6:54 AM

As for the issue of the authenticity of on line meditation, I am all for anything that gets people to meditate. Thing is though that it is important to make a distinction here. In Zen, we do Zazen and prefer to call it such because it is a very specific form and the word meditation is more of a catch all so, in the interest of authenticity, lets start there.

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.

Still, I think it is nice that someone is helping people like this. I am a little concerned though about how obvious the commercial aspect of the site is though. People so easily get attached to that in our society. It tends to drown out so much of our true nature.

One final thought; I would prefer it if the site encouraged people to get instruction from an authentic teacher before they attempt to jump into Zazen any where for that matter.

Genevra **4 out of 9**

10/31/2006 11:43 AM

Thanks for your comments laystudent,

I agree with you that people should be taught the correct techniques of zazen - I learnt myself as part of my research and a website was certainly no substitute for the person-to-person lesson.

However - what do you think of the idea that people all over the world could potentially be meditating/doing zazen in front of one image in unison? Do you think there's any value in that concept?

Thanks again,
Genevra

zenmonk_genryu **5 out of 9**

10/31/2006 2:45 PM

Just to jump in here. My answer would be no. It's useless.

---

termite **6 out of 9**

10/31/2006 7:51 PM

And it might cause the Earth to wobble on its axis.

---

laystudent **7 out of 9**
10/31/2006 8:14 PM

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 people.

---

nnn123 **8 out of 9**
11/5/2006 6:27 AM

well sure, it is a nice idea and all...

nothing wrong with trying to help.

But sometimes there is a choice of time..either we are taking time to interact in the real world with live human beings or we are taking time to interact through a limited medium like the internet. It is not that the internet is so bad, it is that we are not devoting time to creating communities in the real world. In that sense, our devotion to the internet seems to be usurping real human interactions.

In small town USA kinds of experiences, where people from the town attend one big Fourth of July party and these kinds of things...there is a format for all sorts of spirituality to be shared...kindness, friendship, etc. etc. etc. I think these are integral to our experiences of love for others, compassion for others and etc.

I don't think that interactions by machine can replace these.

I have hopes that the internet will soon go beyond mostly text to being fully audio and video so that the interactions change dramatically in tone. I think that will help solve some of these concerns.

Genevra **9 out of 9**

11/8/2006 11:16 AM

Hi,

Thanks for your extremely useful comments.

I hope none of you will object if I use your responses in my paper?

Best wishes,

Genevra

APPENDIX THREE – Transcripts of my conversations on the Virtual Tibetan Buddhist Sangha group (MySpace) forum re online Prayer Wheels

Genevra
F/31
Instant Message
Posted: 18 Oct 2006, 14:51

Hi everyone,

I am a PhD student focusing on ways that Buddhism operates in cyberspace and am just wondering whether anyone could help me out with any of the following questions:

1) What, if anything, is the personal significance of prayer/mani wheels in your practice?

2) Does anyone make genuine use of any of the online/digital prayer wheels that are now available?

3) Does anyone have any thoughts regarding the use and validity of virtual prayer wheels versus the actual act of spinning prayer wheels out there in the real world?

All comments would be extremely welcome.

Many thanks.

Sam
M/20
Boulder,
COLORADO

Instant Message
Posted: 18 Oct 2006, 21:30

I believe that digital prayer wheels, and actual hand held etc. prayer wheels, are all very beneficial. You may be interested in this site, it has many digital prayer wheels:

http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=72406526&MyToken=3080c719-ae8b-46c4-8203-cdd0a0ddf30e

Genevra
F/31
Instant Message
Posted: 24 Oct 2006, 19:30

Many thanks for your comments and links.

If anyone has any further thoughts about whether someone can have religious or spiritual experiences online I'd be very interested to hear them.

Thanks again.

APPENDIX FOUR – Transcripts of my conversations in Second Life during my month as a Second Life Buddhist

Transcript of Second Life Conversation 1/09/09 – One of Two

-- Instant message logging enabled --

[14:00] mikcl Martian: hello

[14:02] mikcl Martian: hi maisie

[14:02] mikcl Martian: can i help you

[14:03] Maisie Fonda: Hello. Thank you. I was looking for the Buddhist temple that was here but I've just learned it's gone!

[14:04] mikcl Martian: yes, it is not longer here

[14:06] Maisie Fonda: Such a shame. Was lovely. Still beautiful round here though...

[14:06] mikcl Martian: thank you, it is nice

[14:07] mikcl Martian: ok, see you later

[14:08] Maisie Fonda: See you - take care.

Transcript of Second Life Conversation 1/09/09 – Two of Two

-- Instant message logging enabled --

[13:58] Beccca Baxton: are u lost

[13:59] Maisie Fonda: Hi. Yes, looking for the Buddhist temple...

[14:01] Beccca Baxton: its gone the sim has a new owner and been redone

[14:01] Beccca Baxton: and i saw u at my house i own that land and i have my orbs on

[14:02] Maisie Fonda: Oh no! I loved the temple. Am sorry for trespassing - don't quite know what I'm doingyet!

[14:03] Beccca Baxton: uve been on sl since 2007 and u dont know what your doing

[14:03] Beccca Baxton: ??

[14:04] Maisie Fonda: I only come on occasionally to visit Buddhist sites - normally just teleport straight to them...

[14:10] Maisie Fonda: Thanks for your help though. You live in a beautiful place.

Transcript of Second Life Conversation (abridged) 3/09/09

[13:57] Eliza Madrigal: Hi Maisie
[13:57] Maisie Fonda: Hello. May I sit with you?
[13:57] Storm Nordwind chuckles
[13:57] Wol Euler: please do
[13:57] Pema Pera: Hi Maisie!
[13:57] Wol Euler: hello ara
[13:57] Storm Nordwind: Oh course Maisie
[13:58] arabella Ella: Hiya
[13:58] Maisie Fonda: What are you all doing in this beautiful place?

[13:59] Pema Pera: we are chatting, Maisie, about many things -- including the nature of reality :)
[13:59] Pema Pera: Hi Adams!
[13:59] Wol Euler: Maisie, we are meditation and discussion group called Pay as Being
[13:59] Storm Nordwind: Play as Being! ;)
[13:59] Pema Pera: hehehe
[13:59] Wol Euler: heheheheh
[13:59] Eliza Madrigal: :)
[13:59] Pema Pera: pay as you be
[13:59] Adams Rubble: :)
[13:59] Pema Pera: rather than pay as you go
[13:59] Eliza Madrigal: hah
[13:59] Wol Euler: that notecard tells you a little about us.
[13:59] Pema Pera: a novel economic concept!
[13:59] Storm Nordwind: It's free though Maisie
[13:59] Wol Euler: hello adams
[14:00] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Conversations here are recorded when ON AIR. Please see http://playasbeing.wik.is/
[14:00] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Please observe 90 seconds of silence.
[14:00] Wol Euler gave you PaB Information.

[14:02] Maisie Fonda: Looks like I have missed the meeting. Thanks for the welcome though!
[14:03] Wol Euler: bad timing :)

[14:03] Adams Rubble: nice to meet you Maisie :)
[14:03] Wol Euler: we meet here four tiems a day, at 1am 7am 1pm 7pm
[14:03] Storm Nordwind: Please drop by again though
[14:03] Bertram Jacobus: 4 times every day maisie ! ... :-)
[14:03] Maisie Fonda: Nice to meet you all. I will try to come again - I am intrigued!
[14:03] Wol Euler smiles
[14:04] Wol Euler: hello eos
[14:04] Eos Amaterasu: Hi all!
[14:04] Adams Rubble: hello Eos :)
[14:04] Bertram Jacobus: very nice maisie. and only the main time seems to be around one hour each. sometimes it goes much longer ... :-)
[14:04] Bertram Jacobus: and hy eos :-)
[14:05] Eos Amaterasu: Hi Bert, Wol, Adams, Strom, Maisie
[14:06] Storm Nordwind: By now, Maisie, the discussion has either run out of steam, or we're all very animated... or we're just enjoying the silence! :)

[14:18] Maisie Fonda: May I ask what the retreat was? It sounds exciting...
[14:18] Storm Nordwind: Sounds wonderful Eos!
[14:18] Eos Amaterasu: I think it's really that this kind of "practice" actually works - all you have to do is do it
[14:18] Eos Amaterasu: and we got a chance to do it more
[14:18] Eos Amaterasu: :-)
[14:18] Storm Nordwind: Yes... that's always the case Eos
[14:18] Eos Amaterasu: I'm realizing now also expecially in the times and spaces between the formal sessions
[14:19] Eos Amaterasu: although those were powerful as well
[14:19] Wol Euler: Maisie, Storm and Eos (and a few others) just returned from a week-long group meeting in RL
[14:19] Wol Euler: a meditation and discussion retreat inCalifornia
[14:19] Storm Nordwind: Maisie, this Play as Being thing that we do... we usually speak about it here and we practice individually. Last week was the first time we got together in real life to practice and discuss together
[14:19] Eos Amaterasu: kind of entering new terrritory as well, in spite of having done many buddhist retreats, group and solo

[14:20] Maisie Fonda: How incredible. How was it meeting up for the first time?
[14:20] Storm Nordwind: Play as Being is very powerful Eos. Anything that brings the "result into the path" can have dramatic effects!
[14:20] Storm Nordwind: Wonderful Maisie!
[14:21] Wol Euler smiles
[14:21] Eos Amaterasu: Maybe that was part of it - making a connection between SL and RL through the group
[14:21] Eos Amaterasu: somehow makes it more powerful on both sides
[14:21] Storm Nordwind nods
[14:22] Maisie Fonda: Is the group Budhhist?
[14:22] Eos Amaterasu: this group isn't
[14:22] Storm Nordwind: No not specially Maisie. We do have Buddhists (like me) in the group
[14:22] Storm Nordwind: And Christians... and people without any commited religion
[14:22] Eos Amaterasu: although it draws on buddhist experience, practice, theory
[14:23] Wol Euler nods. Lots of "unaffiliated"
[14:23] Wol Euler: though also great affinities :)
[14:23] Storm Nordwind smiles at Wol!
[14:23] Eos Amaterasu: as well as other threads, such as phenomenology, etc.
[14:24] Maisie Fonda: It sonds fantastic. I am actually writing a PhD which looks at online Buddhism versus offline Buddhism.
[14:24] Wol Euler: oh wow
[14:24] Eos Amaterasu: Cool!
[14:24] Storm Nordwind: That's really interesting :)
[14:25] Storm Nordwind: You will find many interesting people in Play as Being whom you can talk to about things you may find relevant to that
[14:25] Wol Euler: definitely.
[14:25] Maisie Fonda: I am so excited to have found the group!
[14:25] Storm Nordwind: We do have some practitioners and (dare I say) a teacher or two
[14:26] Storm Nordwind: And a few philosophers too
[14:26] Eos Amaterasu: some here have had decades of buddhist practice, study

[14:26] Wol Euler: mmhmm
[14:26] Storm Nordwind nods
[14:27] Eos Amaterasu: students of Heraclitus :-)
[14:27] Storm Nordwind: Second Life has many pure Buddhist groups too
[14:27] Storm Nordwind: (and many impure practitioners!) ;)
[14:27] Wol Euler: heheheheh
[14:27] Eos Amaterasu: :-)
[14:27] Maisie Fonda: This is really great. I hope you will consider letting me eavesdrop over the next few weeks...
[14:27] Wol Euler: and plenty of jokes good and bad.
[14:27] Storm Nordwind chuckles
[14:28] Wol Euler: there is one thing we must say if you will be coming back.
[14:28] Storm Nordwind: You are very welcome Maisie
[14:28] Wol Euler: we record and publish these sessions on our website, the URL is in that notecard.
[14:28] Storm Nordwind: Can I suggest you also drop in on the Kira Cafe - right now
[14:28] Wol Euler: may we have your permission to include your name and comments?
[14:29] Eos Amaterasu is leaving for supper
[14:29] Storm Nordwind: There is a workshop on "Ways of Knowing" right now at the Cafe - I'll bet you'd find that interesting too
[14:29] Maisie Fonda: You may. Would you also consider allowing me to quote some of our conversations?
[14:29] Wol Euler: sure :)
[14:29] Eos Amaterasu: Bye Maisie, Wol, Storm
[14:29] Wol Euler: bye eos, take care
[14:29] Storm Nordwind: Bye Eos
[14:29] Wol Euler: the website (wiki) has records going back a year, of the sessions held here.
[14:30] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Conversations here are recorded when ON AIR. Please see http://playasbeing.wik.is/
[14:30] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Please observe 90 seconds of silence.
[14:30] Maisie Fonda: Fantastic.
[14:30] Wol Euler: there is a built-in search engine, but frankly it's crap. Use

google instead :)
[14:30] Storm Nordwind: Have you been to the Kira Cafe Maisie? You'll meet many other people you'd be interested in there?
[14:30] Wol Euler: yes, that's true. Stim's workshop is relevant.
[14:31] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Thank you.
[14:31] Maisie Fonda: Thanks Wol. You read my mind. I will head to the cafe now. I will see you again soon I'm sure!
[14:32] Wol Euler gave you Kira Cafe, BaikUn (247, 94, 251).
[14:32] Wol Euler: :)
[14:32] Storm Nordwind: You have a landmark?
[14:32] Wol Euler: just gave her one :)
[14:32] Storm Nordwind: Great. Time to go then :)
[14:32] Wol Euler: bye for now, Maisie. have fun.
[14:32] Maisie Fonda: Wol just gave me one. Many thanks both of you. Good bye!
[14:32] Storm Nordwind: Bye for now!
[14:32] Storm Nordwind waves

- Instant message logging enabled --
[14:37] Storm Nordwind: You teleported without standing!
[14:37] Storm Nordwind: But the Cafe is ahead of you :)
[14:49] Maisie Fonda: Thank you - haven't quite got the hang of SL etiquette! But thanks for all the tips...
[14:50] Storm Nordwind: No problem. Welcome to Second Life. Have a great time here! :)
[14:51] Maisie Fonda: Thank you. I shall - tonight has certainly been enlightening!
[14:51] Storm Nordwind: great!
[14:51] Maisie Fonda: See you again soon.
[14:51] Storm Nordwind: I'll look forward to it :)

Transcript of Second Life Conversation 4/09/09

[12:28] Serenity Clarence: Hi maisie....
[12:28] Maisie Fonda: Hi - how are you?
[12:28] Serenity Clarence: Im doing ok thankyou...yourself...?

[12:28] Maisie Fonda: Yes, very good, thanks! Enjoying the beautiful view...
[12:29] Serenity Clarence smiles
[12:29] Maisie Fonda: Have you been here before?
[12:30] Serenity Clarence: once once b4...but never really looked around properly...
[12:30] Serenity Clarence: do u come here alot...?
[12:30] Maisie Fonda: Just discovered it a few days ago - it's my new favourite SL place!
[12:31] Serenity Clarence: u ever been to chakryn Forest....?
[12:31] Serenity Clarence: thats another beautiful place...
[12:32] Maisie Fonda: I haven't - but I will visit, thank you...
[12:32] Serenity Clarence: very welcome..
[12:32] Serenity Clarence: ill let u enjoy ur view...be well...:)
[12:33] Maisie Fonda: You too. Good to meet you - enjoy the gardens!
[12:33] Serenity Clarence: :))

Transcript of Second Life Conversation 15/09/09 – One of Two

[12:39] Jeni Luik: Hi Maisie
[12:39] Maisie Fonda: Hi Jeni
[12:40] Jeni Luik: I am building a buddhist dancefloor lol
[12:40] Maisie Fonda: Wow! What will it be like?
[12:41] Jeni Luik: pretty much just this plain floor but with dance animations
[12:41] Jeni Luik: I am running low on prims
[12:41] Jeni Luik: but want a place where buddhist like minded people can enjoy themselves
[12:42] Maisie Fonda: Do you own this place? It's certainly beautiful.
[12:42] Jeni Luik: Yes
[12:42] Jeni Luik: I own some of it
[12:42] Jeni Luik: most of what is to my right
[12:42] Jeni Luik: the zendo, the tea house, and pagoda
[12:43] Maisie Fonda: I hope you don't mind me being here? It is my favourite place that I've found in SL...
[12:43] Jeni Luik: I it open to all people 24/7
[12:43] Jeni Luik: At 6 pm sl time we have a 20 minute meditation
[12:43] Jeni Luik: weekdays

[12:43] Jeni Luik: and sunday
[12:43] Jeni Luik: please feel free to join in
[12:44] Maisie Fonda: Oh, I'd love to do that, thank you. It's pretty late my time but will definitely come when I am being a night owl...
[12:44] Jeni Luik: great
[12:44] Jeni Luik: enjoy
[12:45] Maisie Fonda: Thank you! See you again.
[12:45] Jeni Luik: Bye
[12:45] Maisie Fonda: Take care.

Transcript of Second Life Conversation (abridged) 15/09/09 – Two of Two

[13:04] Mickorod Renard: Hiya
[13:04] Yakuzza Lethecus: hey mick :)
[13:04] Bertram Jacobus: hello maisie and mick ! ... :-)
[13:04] Yakuzza Lethecus: and maisie
[13:04] Maisie Fonda: Hi everyone.
[13:05] Mickorod Renard: Hi Maisie
[13:05] doug Sosa: hi:)
[13:05] Mickorod Renard: hi Doug
[13:06] Mickorod Renard: everyone have a good day?

[13:10] Mickorod Renard: and what have you been up to today Maisie?
[13:11] Yakuzza Lethecus: http://berkeleymonastery.org/steven/fall07.asp
[13:11] Yakuzza Lethecus: did you download them ?
[13:11] Mickorod Renard: thanks Yaku,,I will try again
[13:11] Mickorod Renard: yes. I tried
[13:11] Yakuzza Lethecus: are you using firefox ?
[13:11] Mickorod Renard: no
[13:11] Maisie Fonda: Sadly not too much Mickorod - am off work sick with a virus!
[13:11] Mickorod Renard: oh noooo
[13:12] Mickorod Renard: I hope you are better soon
[13:12] Maisie Fonda: Thank you. It is nice to escape my flat and into SL for now!

[13:12] Mickorod Renard: yes
[13:13] Mickorod Renard: may I ask where /which part of the world you are from?
[13:13] Bertram Jacobus: hey wol ! :-)
[13:13] Mickorod Renard: Hi Wol
[13:13] Maisie Fonda: York in England. How about you all?
[13:13] Wol Euler: hello everyone
[13:13] Wol Euler: maisie, nice to see you again.
[13:13] Maisie Fonda: Hi Wol! You too.
[13:13] Mickorod Renard: I am from Warwickshire UK
[13:13] Yakuzza Lethecus: germany/sauerland :)
[13:14] Maisie Fonda: I was in Warwickshire at the weekend!
[13:14] Mickorod Renard: wow,,hope you didnt get your virus from us
[13:14] Mickorod Renard: he he
[13:15] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Conversations here are recorded when ON AIR. Please see http://playasbeing.wik.is/
[13:15] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Please observe 90 seconds of silence.
[13:16] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Thank you.
[13:16] Maisie Fonda: Well, I was at a first birthday party!
[13:16] Wol Euler: nice
[13:16] Maisie Fonda: Very rock and roll!
[13:17] Mickorod Renard: great
[13:17] Maisie Fonda: How are you, Wol?
[13:17] Wol Euler: but little kids are full of germs!
[13:18] Wol Euler is also full of germs. alas.
[13:18] Mickorod Renard: yes
[13:18] Mickorod Renard: I work in a school, so I am exposed to them all the time
[13:18] Maisie Fonda: Hopefully we are safe from these things in virtual reality!
[13:19] Wol Euler: right, so you are pretty well immune, I would think.
[13:19] Mickorod Renard: I hope so
[13:19] Maisie Fonda: What ages do you work with Mickorod?
[13:19] Mickorod Renard: 11/12 to 18
[13:20] Maisie Fonda: Do you teach?
[13:20] Wol Euler: brb

[13:20] Mickorod Renard: yes, design and technology
[13:20] Mickorod Renard: I am on the technology side though
[13:21] Maisie Fonda: Do you ever talk toyour students about SL?
[13:21] Mickorod Renard: no
[13:21] Mickorod Renard: grin
[13:21] Mickorod Renard: although I am sre the design tools here for builing stuff would be excelent
[13:22] Maisie Fonda: Yeah, nice to have a place of escape though!
[13:22] Mickorod Renard: excuse my missing letters,,my keyboard is nackered
[13:22] Mickorod Renard: yes,,more of an escape from family though
[13:22] Mickorod Renard: he he he
[13:22] Maisie Fonda: Ah!
[13:23] Mickorod Renard: work is also an escape for me,,I really enjoy it
[13:23] Maisie Fonda: That's great, so few people love what they do.
[13:23] Wol Euler: back
[13:23] Maisie Fonda: Hi again Wol
[13:23] Wol Euler: ty
[13:23] Mickorod Renard: well I have all the big boy tools and equipment a man could wish for
[13:24] Mickorod Renard: so work is like play
[13:24] Maisie Fonda: I work in theatre so work is also like play for me.
[13:24] Wol Euler: nice
[13:25] Mickorod Renard: wow,,fantastic..I dont live far from Stratford of course
[13:25] Maisie Fonda: Indeed - have you seen anything good there of late?
[13:26] Mickorod Renard: no not recently..but will soon, I hope
[13:26] Mickorod Renard: last I saw was lord of the rings (theatre) in London
[13:26] Maisie Fonda: Ooh, how was it?
[13:26] Mickorod Renard: it was excelent
[13:27] Mickorod Renard: actually last I saw was an outdoor shakespear
[13:27] Maisie Fonda: Yeah?
[13:27] Mickorod Renard: The Tempest
[13:28] Maisie Fonda: Good?
[13:28] Mickorod Renard: I have to familiarise myself first, with the plot, because my hearing isnt up to it

[13:28] Mickorod Renard: yes, it was ok,,the ambiance was best though
[13:29] Maisie Fonda: Always a challenge with Shakespeare!
[13:29] Mickorod Renard: yes,
[13:29] Mickorod Renard: Do you get many plays and theatre in Germany?
[13:29] Wol Euler: yes, there's quite a bit of culture in Stuttgart and most other large cities
[13:30] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Conversations here are recorded when ON AIR. Please see http://playasbeing.wik.is/
[13:30] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Please observe 90 seconds of silence.
[13:31] Play as Being 15 minute bell: Thank you.
[13:31] Wol Euler: but to be honest I seldom go, less often than when I lived in London
[13:31] Mickorod Renard: I think its a good way to learn about life,,,many taboo's are covered in plays
[13:32] Mickorod Renard: what many people wouldnt like to ask about in RL
[13:32] Maisie Fonda: Agreed.
[13:33] Maisie Fonda: How long were you in London, Wol?
[13:33] Mickorod Renard: Rape, Murder, incest..plotting etc.
[13:33] Wol Euler: 17 years :)
[13:33] Maisie Fonda: Wow. How did you find it?
[13:33] Wol Euler: hard to explain.
[13:33] Wol Euler: I love it, and am always glad to go
[13:34] Wol Euler: but I am even more glad each time to leave.
[13:34] Mickorod Renard: he he he
[13:34] Wol Euler: it's just too big, too dirty, too crowded...
[13:34] Wol Euler: as a tourist? unbeatable. But it's not a place to live.
[13:34] Maisie Fonda: Yes, exactly, I love visiting London but am not sure I could live there...
[13:34] Wol Euler nods
[13:35] Wol Euler: same as Manhattan, for me. Wonderful but please let me back out!
[13:35] Mickorod Renard: grin
[13:35] Maisie Fonda: Must disagree there, I would really love to live in New York!
[13:35] Wol Euler: well :)

[13:36] Mickorod Renard: I have never been there
[13:37] Maisie Fonda: It's a really exciting place and has such a nice feel about it.
[13:38] Maisie Fonda: My partner has just applied for a job there, kind of blue sky thinking but you never know!
[13:38] Mickorod Renard: I hope it all works out for you both
[13:38] Wol Euler: wow, well good luck.
[13:39] Maisie Fonda: Thanks!
[13:39] Wol Euler: I agree, it's a marvellously exciting city. You should see it, Mick. take a standby flight and a change of underwear
[13:39] Mickorod Renard: I lived away for eight years,,but the pull back home was too much for me to resist
[13:39] Maisie Fonda: Whereabouts were you?
[13:40] Mickorod Renard: I will go commando,,its even lighter
[13:40] Wol Euler: :)
[13:40] Mickorod Renard: France
[13:40] Maisie Fonda: Lovely.
[13:40] Mickorod Renard: maybe
[13:40] Wol Euler: maybe france?
[13:40] Mickorod Renard: maybe nice
[13:41] Mickorod Renard: but not home
[13:41] Wol Euler: ah :)
[13:41] Maisie Fonda: Are you back home now Wol?
[13:42] Wol Euler: depends what you mean by "home" :)
[13:42] Wol Euler: I am in the city where I've lived for 15 years.
[13:42] Mickorod Renard: some brits go to newyork to do shopping,,cos it was cheap for clothes
[13:42] Wol Euler: and no longer at work :)
[13:42] Mickorod Renard: no?
[13:42] Mickorod Renard: surely not retired Wol?
[13:42] Wol Euler: ah, no, finished for today I mean.
[13:42] Mickorod Renard: ahhhh..the convent
[13:43] Mickorod Renard: ohh..I see
[13:43] Wol Euler: I thought 10.5 hours was enough for one day.
[13:43] Maisie Fonda: More than enough!

[13:43] Maisie Fonda: What work do you do?
[13:43] Wol Euler: I'm an architect, working on a sport complex ATM
[13:44] Maisie Fonda: Sounds great

[13:51] Mickorod Renard: Masie..do you get really involved in characters you play?

[14:03] Wol Euler: maisie, when you wake up: we are going to a workshop at the Kira Cafe, a discussion of dreams and dreamlike-states

Transcript of Second Life Conversation 22/09/09

N.B. Yuttadhammo Darwinian, the monk,'s words are missing as they were audio.

[12:28] Abbis Salamander: _/!_
[12:46] Diggum Graves: ty Yutta
[12:46] Jeroen Foss: thank you :-)
[12:46] Fael Illyar: It's been great :) Thank you.
[12:46] Delhi Shuffle: in the idea of karmic law
[12:46] Abbis Salamander: _/!_ namaste
[12:46] Delhi Shuffle: is it something that happens internally?
[12:46] Vital Tigerpaw: Thank you
[12:46] Vendy Walpole: thank you
[12:47] Lust Landar: Thank you _/!_
[12:48] Delhi Shuffle: thank you
[12:49] Maisie Fonda: Thanks for the wonderful talk. What function do you think SL can play in Buddhist practise?
[12:50] Fael Illyar: aren't the diversions kind of like pain as it comes to meditation?
[12:50] Delani Gabardini: or im'ing
[12:51] Delani Gabardini: LOL
[12:51] Faith Wunderland: lol
[12:51] Vital Tigerpaw: heh
[12:51] Lust Landar: ^_^
[12:51] Vital Tigerpaw: ok thanks again i really need to go _/!_
[12:51] Delhi Shuffle: you mentioned sl as a sort of model of reality in an

earlier talk
[12:51] Maisie Fonda: Thank you
[12:51] Faith Wunderland: Ty Yutta
[12:52] Delani Gabardini: working on it
[12:52] Delhi Shuffle: lol
[12:52] Delani Gabardini: close ur eyes
[12:53] Delani Gabardini: meditating
[12:53] Delani Gabardini: working on that
[12:53] Fael Illyar: in second life, there's not much more but your mind to observe...
[12:54] Delani Gabardini: without a doubt the teachings are so beneficial
[12:54] Fael Illyar: not necessarily beautiful ;)
[12:54] Kim Jestyr: isn't it good to keep an open mind about SL? And candy?
[12:54] Fael Illyar points at the frog on her head.
[12:54] Fael Illyar smiles.
[12:54] mikcl Martian is Offline
[12:55] Delani Gabardini: well ty venerable this has certainly been beneficial
[12:55] Diggum Graves: Great as always :)
[12:55] Jillian Vayandar: I believe I can be mindful of the breath in sl and RL
[12:55] Abbis Salamander: If a buddhist see suffering, what shall she or he do?
[12:55] Thorn Robespear: ty
[12:55] Jeroen Foss: thank you :-0
[12:56] Vendy Walpole: thank you _/!_
[12:56] Abbis Salamander: right, or in their minds
[12:57] Abbis Salamander: so a real buddhist is not only seeing but also acting
[12:57] Jillian Vayandar: TY for the lovely dharma talk!
[12:58] Abbis Salamander: _/!_
[12:59] Delhi Shuffle: you are freer to help too if you are free from your own suffering
[13:00] Abbis Salamander: thank you, those things have been going on my mind a long time
[13:01] Kim Jestyr: _/_ Thankyou for giving buddhism to those who can only know it through the computer and don't have the opportunity in RL to meet with others of like mind
[13:01] Delhi Shuffle: thank you again, and goodbye

[13:01] Delhi Shuffle: oh, haha

[13:01] Delhi Shuffle puts down pen

[13:01] Yuttadhammo Darwinian: thebuddhacenter.org

[13:01] Delhi Shuffle: that sounds easy enough to remember

[13:02] Delhi Shuffle: :)

[13:02] Fael Illyar: (some other groups as well but...)

[13:03] Maisie Fonda: Thank you so much . See you all again.

APPENDIX FIVE – 'Snapshots' from my month as a Second Life Spiritual Tourist

Figure A.1 – Day One: meditating at the Buddha Center

Figure A.2 – Day Two: meditating at the Zen Retreat

Figure A.3 – Day Three: washing at the Zen Retreat

Figure A.4 – Day Four: happily wandering amongst the cherry blossom trees at the Zen Retreat

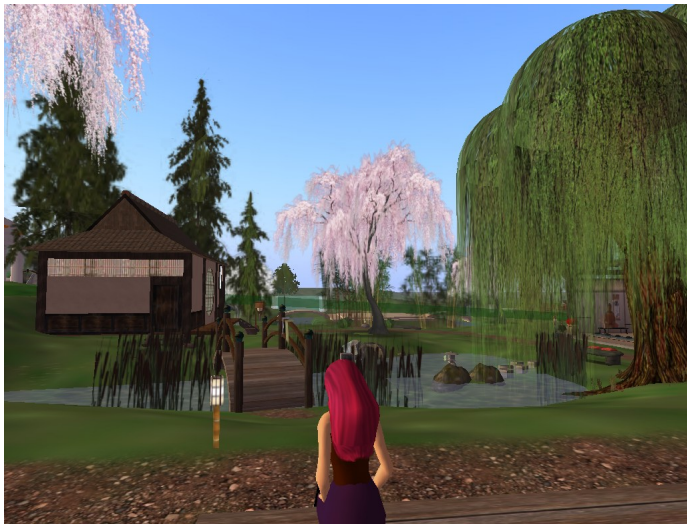


Figure A.5 – Day Six: in front of the strange human statue in the Chakryn Forest

Figure A.6 – Day Seven: meditating in the 'fake forest orb'

Figure A.7 – Day Eight: watching the sunset

Figure A.8 – Day Nine: meditating under the willow tree at the Nirvana Path Garden

Figure A.9 – Day Ten: at the Tibetan Heart of Brightness temple

Figure A.10 – Day Twelve: doing tai chi at the Heart of Brightness temple

Figure A.11 – Day Fourteen: a Japanese tea ceremony

Figure A.12 – Day Fifteen: floating at the Zen Retreat

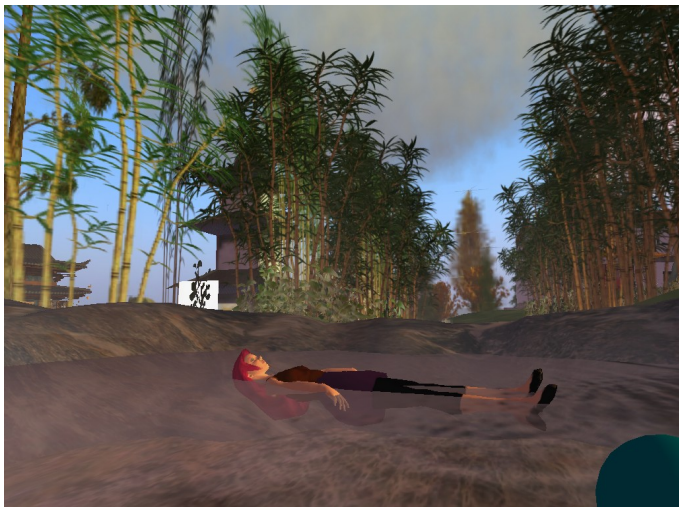


Figure A.13 – Day Sixteen: a night time meditation with a fellow avatar

Figure A.14 – Day Seventeen: a group meditation at the Peacemaker Institute with a group of very glamorous avatars!

Figure A.15 – Day Eighteen: the beautiful rainbow sunset at the Kannonji Zen Retreat

Figure A.16 – Day Nineteen: with a fellow meditator by the sea at the Buddha Center

Figure A.17 – Day Twenty-Two: listening to a RL monk talk at the Buddha Center with dozens of other students

Figure A.18 – Day Twenty-Four: another talk at the Buddha Center

Figure A.19 – Day Twenty-Six: at the temple with the bookcase...

Figure A.20 – Day Twenty-Eight: an evening meditation at the Zen Retreat

Figure A.21 – Day Twenty-Nine: a final float in the pool at the Zen Retreat

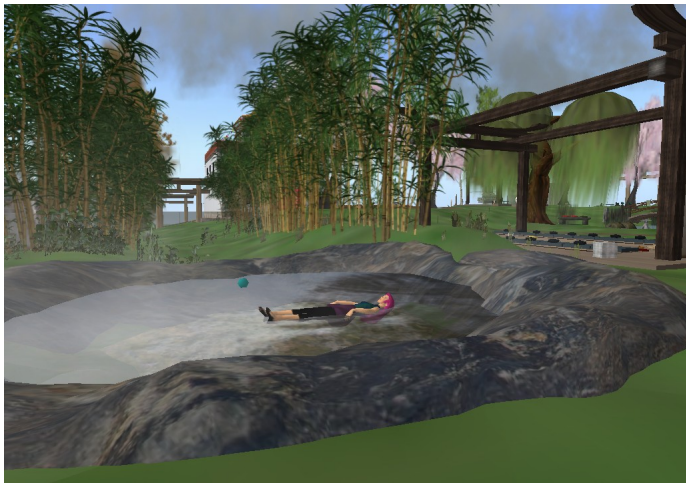


Figure A.22 – Day Thirty: contemplating the Heart Sutra during my final visit to the Zen Retreat

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