

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Socially Networked in Buddhism

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Thursday, August 4th, 2011



I have five email accounts, Google+, Facebook (and Fan Page), at least 4 blog sites. I text. I have Google Alerts. I anticipate Tweeting soon. I do draw the line at Foursquare because I just don't think anyone needs (or wants) to know when I go to the grocery store. I am not a celebrity. I am not a CEO, world leader or even a super-star academic. I have all of this because (almost) everyone else has all of this. Lots of people have much more.

In order to keep up with everyone else, we each have to keep increasing our online presence. And then we have to check that our online presence is being noted by other people online (hence Google Alerts and doing Google searches of one's own name). Of course, there is always room for improvement so we then spend even more time Tweeting, blogging, begging people on Facebook to "like" us. And the result? Are we happy, content, joyful, at peace? Or do we have to chase ever-increasing numbers of "reads," re-posts and comments, never satisfied that enough is, in fact, enough?

I was raised in a Buddhist community. A central tenet of Buddhism is the need to let go of ego. Enlightenment happens when one ceases to exist as an individual and becomes one with all. Note this from the biography of Zen Master [Seung Sahn](#): "Finally it was the hundredth day [of his retreat]. Soen-sa [Seung Sahn's original name] was outside chanting and hitting the moktak. All at once his body disappeared, and he was in infinite space. From far away he could hear the moktak beating, and the sound of his own voice. He remained in this state for some time. When he returned to his body, he understood. The rocks, the river, everything he could see, everything he could hear, all this was his true self. All things are exactly as they are. The truth is just like this."

Compare that with the narcissism that drives much of our online lives. It is all about us. More precisely, I think it's all about me and you think it's all about you. Even *Time* magazine [agreed](#). In 2006 it named "You" as the person of the year. They specifically noted the rise of the World Wide Web and sites such as YouTube and MySpace (which has now been supplanted by Facebook, which may be supplanted by Google+, which may then be supplanted by something currently being developed by a pre-pubescent computer whiz). Lest we think the 2006 pick was just a fluke, in 2010 *Time* picked [Mark Zuckerberg](#) as its person of the year. They have celebrated the people online and one of the men who makes being online so seductive. And we have celebrated him by seeing the film *The Social Network* and helping him to amass a fortune of at least [\\$13.5 billion](#).

According to that 2006 *Time* magazine article, the Internet offers us unprecedented choices and

chances. *Time* wrote: “It’s a chance for people to look at a computer screen and really, genuinely wonder who’s out there looking back at them. Go on. Tell us you’re not just a little bit curious.” What has our curiosity gotten us? According to the [National Institutes of Health](#), more than 20 million Americans suffer from depression. Our interconnected Internet world is supposed to make us feel closer to those around us. It is supposed to make it easier for like-minded individuals to find each other. So why are we so depressed? OK, yes, we are still in a recession. We are at war. But isn’t the Internet supposed to make it easier to find and apply for jobs? Isn’t it supposed to help us stay in touch with loved ones no matter where they are on the planet? Isn’t it supposed to empower us by allowing us to create online profiles, online personas, online lives? In short, isn’t it supposed to help us “become one with all”?

Here’s what I remember about Zen Master Seung Sahn: he was always happy. Always. Smiling. Laughing. Joking. His talks and poems are now online but, unlike so many of us, he remained seemingly immune to the lure of the Internet and the narcissism it breeds. From a [talk](#) in 2000: “If you do tight practicing then it’s possible to take away your mind: your thinking, your situation, your condition, your problem. Then you can attain your True Self and save all beings...Human beings come into this world empty handed and go empty handed...Life is like a floating cloud which appears; death is like a floating cloud which disappears. The floating cloud itself originally does not exist. Coming, going, life and death are the same as a floating cloud. If you attain that, then you attain what it means to be a human being.”

How many of us – as we text, Tweet, Google, Facebook, Foursquare, IM, etc. – think of this? Or perhaps it is precisely the transience of life (and our fear of death) that pulls us into this online world from which, we are told, nothing – and no one – ever disappears?

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