

Practice and the Media

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Twenty-five years ago, a random phenomenon of crossed phone lines became the first chatline in my area. As a curious but shy young teenager, I revelled in being able to talk to new people without having to worry about what I looked like, or if I was safe. The others were mostly in their 20s to 40s, and enjoyed sharing and discussing their favourite music to pass a lonely evening.

A decade later, computer chatlines had diversified by area of interest. Stuck in a rural area, my mom was able to continue her postgraduate studies on the internet. By chance she met old friends in environmental studies chatrooms. Real friends had become virtual friends, who then came full circle to become real again when we flew to the reunion.

But in my late 20s, I logged on to virtual chatrooms to escape a life I felt disenchanted with. What I wouldn't have admitted is that you can't get to know someone well online. Via intermittent blips of photos and text we see a small fragment of who they are, leaving plenty of room for constructing a fantasy should we so wish. And how people wish.

With my new “friends” I shared soundtracks, recommendations of favourite places, books and films. One forum had boiled down to the lowest common denominator—instead of

politely introducing themselves, people would bark “age, sex, area?” to newcomers, judging you in a millisecond by your biological basics. In more interesting forums however, people were able to engage in lengthy discussions about political movements and social construction.

It was in one of the latter that I happened upon a clique where a group, in writing at least, gelled. We laughed at each other’s jokes and discussed the same books. Eventually we trusted each other enough to ask for advice about work and personal dilemmas. We came to feel understood and supported. While we would have preferred to meet like-minded people in real life, for whatever reason we hadn’t been able to. Some lived in sparsely populated areas; others had stagnant established social circles that they couldn’t break out of; others had only a spare hour each night to socialise, and there wasn’t enough time to go out or invite people in.

After a year we decided to meet in person at a middle point, which we had calculated to be Chicago. Matching the perception of a person with their physical reality is an interesting thing. The woman who was the most vivacious in writing, was the quietest in person (until she’d had a few drinks, which it turned out is what she did whenever she went online too). The man who had bragged about his exploits came across as shy and sweet. All in all though, there were no surprises—other than a surprise wedding. We knew that the American lawyer and the Dutch community worker had fallen in love after meeting a number of times, and now they’d arranged to get married. Virtual interaction had planted a seed which grew very real consequences. Ten years later, the two are still happily married with three lively kids.

Most of that group are still using the forum to stay in touch. But for several reasons, I moved away from it after beginning to practice Buddhism.

In order to meditate at the monastery, for the first time I had to take long breaks from chatting with friends and using the internet. The compulsion to do it was still strong. For three months it felt like it was this compulsion itself sitting staring at the wall, before it began to wane.

From a distance I saw more clearly that there were three main modes of interaction on the forum: asserting your opinion, and giving or receiving emotional support.

Asserting opinions, on analysis, in this case was not interaction so much as a one-way street. Our motives were generally threefold—to be admired; to be agreed with (thereby making the world into our ideal); and to help others by giving our opinion, having made the assumption that we were right and others were either ignorant or wrong. The fact that all of these attempts were unsuccessful didn't stop us from doing it. On the contrary if somebody disagreed with our opinion, we became upset, garnered support, and made the opinion stronger so it would 'win' over the others.

But 'opinionating' was not all bad. My 'virtual friends' shared their broad and varied life experiences, which I learned a lot from. I came to understand to a greater extent what it must be like to walk in the shoes of a struggling tattoo artist in Minnesota; a chef in New York; a contented housewife in Melbourne; or a lonely academic in Amsterdam. The fact that we were fond of each other and had much to discuss, in itself taught all of us that surface differences to do with culture, gender or age do not

make uncrossable borders. There is a net which connects us all, and communicating with each other, even if we didn't always know how to do it wisely, was our way of learning about and honouring that. On balance and to a point, the forum was more productive than it was unhelpful.

I moved away from it when I learned to retain a measure of emotional autonomy. Whether I felt good or bad, previously I had shared my feelings with others in order to feel better. The standard format was that we shared, congratulated and commiserated accordingly. We believed this to be empathy, selflessness and even love. To some extent, this was true; but I eventually also saw that I was using other people to make myself feel better, and they in turn were using me. I had shared much of my personal self on an open forum, gambling on the reactions and wishing that everyone would reflect myself. If someone didn't make all the right noises about my joy or pain, I ceased to be fond of them. How true then could that love have been? Looked at more clearly, it had been folly to expect a random group of people to safeguard my well-being. We were all ordinary people, fond of each other but struggling to understand ourselves, and making the mistake of simultaneously playing the roles of professional therapists to one another.

I had to learn to rely on my own sense of what was right to do, and stop caring so much about what others thought. I had to carry my own loneliness, pain and confusion, and not lay it at the door of others. I learned to stop meddling in their business, and stopped asking them to meddle in mine.

My new way of seeing things eliminated all my old reasons for going on a social forum. This moving away was not limited to the virtual world; it's the part of the Buddhist's path where

I also found some of the old friends and work falling away. Actions and motivations that were emotionally driven, were no longer given fuel to persist. I was left with a more sparse but also a more genuine way of life.

To my surprise, cutting away unhelpful behaviour did not eliminate the structures which facilitated it. Life can change fundamentally, and yet still look the same from the outside. For example I still work in the media, but for different reasons and a different outcome (and in my case, in a different place for a different boss). The media are simply tools which broadcast human intent, whether that intent is manipulative and greedy, or selfless and informative. The media *themselves*—newspapers, web pages, radiowaves—at their core are neither positive nor negative.

There is little use in arguing whether on balance the media are helpful or not, but it is useful to be aware that we vote with our feet. Using a TV or buying a newspaper is what keeps them alive; it may be anonymous, but attention and/or money is a direct endorsement. Each view is chalked up by a sales team, which reports it to the editor, who is under pressure to tell the journalists to make more of whatever it is that we purchase the most. The media is therefore not an amorphous mass, but an instrument which pivots on each individual choice *we* make with our morning coffee or TV supper. It would be counter-productive to generalise and complain about the deleterious effects of tabloid gossip; particularly if we thrive on some form of gossip ourselves.

As Buddhists we will already have given a lot of thought to what media are helpful to our own practice. Most of us read or listen to the news, but choose as objective sources as possible,

try to stay mindful of our own reactions, and limit the amount of time doing it, so as not to take on more of the pain of the world than we can handle.

In terms of social media, it's difficult to get away from it nowadays. I joined Facebook because a friend moved to a new job in Palestine, and used Facebook to keep in touch with her friends at home. We discussed her photos and experiences together, almost as if we were sharing tales over the dinner table. Of course it would have been preferable to catch up in person, but meeting online was the next best thing.

I sometimes use Twitter because others use it as a 'thought-provoker.' Since its output is limited to very short statements and is popular for gossip, I'm not fond of it. But to not take part would be to avoid an extremely popular public discussion. I've chosen a social life and line of work which engages with people in general, and so I feel that I should go where they do, and use whatever tools that work for them. As with any dialogue it is possible to engage on my own terms, by writing mindfully and not using it as distraction or for the sake of amplifying emotions or opinions.

Many readers appreciate the sound of mindfulness in what can otherwise sound like a cage of chattering monkeys. Monks write blogs, or answer spiritual questions emailed via a 'cyber-monk' link from the monastic website. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Pema Chodron all have Twitter and Facebook pages, where their administrators help to post quotes and news updates. Some observers may scoff "what good will a trainee get from a feel-good quote?" but these teachers' presence helps remind internet users, in the midst of the office lunch or emails of an evening, of practice. It is not intended to take

the place of practice, instead it reaches out and points to it from wherever people may be.

These Buddhist reminders in the cyberworld, left like crumbs on a forest path, have attracted many new Buddhists in their 20s and 30s. The popular social news site ‘Reddit’ now has a page dedicated to Buddhism which they call ‘Buddhit’ (www.reddit.com/r/buddhism). Lay practitioners from different schools and countries go there to exchange questions, inspirations and suggestions. They get tips on how to find a good teacher, or discuss what Buddhism means in practice in their daily lives. A potential difficulty is that when people at a vulnerable stage of practice ask a question publicly, they can’t know if the answers they receive are coming from experienced practitioners whom they can trust. The community is fairly self-regulating, however, and the most intelligent and thought-through posts tend to be given prominence via the open ‘upvoting’ system. My experience has been that open communities can be trusted to have a generally good and discerning collective instinct. Without it I wonder whether we would have an economy, education or government at all.

Any group will also find the occasional mischief-maker, but such instances are usually self-correcting through discussion with other members. With solid guidelines and an administrator, “trolling” (posting inflammatory remarks) is rarely a problem.

Much of social media betrays its users’ impatience. My parents met via snail mail in the early 1960s, when their schools arranged a letter exchange for their students to practice English. They laboured over each letter and home-made photograph, which took 3 weeks to make its way door-to-door from

one continent to another, if it even made it at all. Had they been of the millennium generation, perhaps they would have met online instead, and perhaps they would have been just as happy together as they are now. But those of us who remember the slow old arts lament the loss of qualities that we learned along with them: patience; care; a sense of value. These qualities still exist, but we need to choose to develop them, because our quick-fire lines of communication no longer demand them.

The pared-down format of shorter messages does have the advantage of teaching us to think more carefully about what we want to say, in order to be able to communicate in fewer words. Brevity does not necessarily take away from poignancy; it can even improve the quality of a message, in the same way that you might boil down a watery stock. In addition, literacy skills have a broader mass appeal today than ever before. While I sometimes cynically wish that it were less popular to wear one's heart on a blogging sleeve, I can't help but admire the work and dedication that has gone into each writer young and old wishing to express herself, to share, and to make contact across the continents. Social media is a modern manifestation of a relational world, but we find ourselves facing all the same kōans online as we did offline.

In May 2011 some of the lay sangha informally created an OBC Facebook group, open to any OBC trainees already on Facebook. We've agreed to speak with care and follow the precepts, and it was tagged by one member as "the virtual lay common room". It may be virtual, but it feels to me like it's helping to strengthen a very real Sangha network. We share and discuss links to Buddhist ideas and events, and the thoughtful

comments have the particular flavour of our shared training in Serene Reflection Meditation. When I log on to Facebook most days to keep in touch with friends and family anyway, it warms my heart to be reminded that I am not practising alone. The analogy of the blind men and the elephant comes to mind: each man discovers a different part of an elephant. One man thinks it is a wall; another a pipe; a third, a pillar. If we didn't come together and share our experiences once in a while, how would we ever find out what this whole creature is?

Having said that, I think tools like Facebook or Twitter work best within their pre-existing social context. Different forms of socialising are like different languages. If you already know a language, then it makes sense to explore practice with it. Learning a whole new language purely for the sake of talking about practice is less likely to be successful.

Notes

It is hoped that there will be a variety of ways of sharing information and Dharma within the Sangha that will fit the different contexts within which we train.

Working groups set up through the OBC interim board are currently looking at redeveloping [the www.obcon.org](http://www.obcon.org) website and expanding the www.brightmoon.org site. For up-to-date information register on www.brightmoon.org, and see the www.obcinterimboard.org website.

The OBC facebook group is open to anyone on Facebook who is training within the OBC. It can be found at www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_203011309722348, alternatively search for Order of Buddhist Contemplatives on Facebook.