

# BUDDHIST ENLIGHTENMENT & THE INTERNET



by David W. Chappell

An electronic Jesus graces a computer screen on the cover of Time on 16 December 1996. And Jim Dator noted in flight on 30 January 1997 that Time is using the Jesus cove to advertise its magazine with the phrase, "Our Father, Who are online...." "Across the Internet," Robert Wright tells us, "believers are reexamining their idea of faith, religion and spirituality." This reexamination, according to Wright, has the character of a "high-speed spiritual bazaar." Almost everyone, it seems, is getting in on the action--not only pagans, shamans, Gnostics and pantheists but a broad spectrum of Christians from Amish to the Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II. Robert Wright notes that an ecumenically "environmentalist ethic" crosscuts otherwise diverse Internet-based religious activity. And, "for all its seeming newness," he comments, "the marriage between technology and religiosity is an ancient one." People "have always used state-of-the art technology to convey," Wright continues, one's "deepest thoughts."

A competing perspective on the quality of cybernetic religiosity is that of Professor David W. Chappell. He distinguishes one's ability to connect to discrete "billions of pieces of information" from the kind of "intimacy" required for "enlightenment." Moreover, for Dr. Chappell, communication on the Internet militates against (or at least, does not provide) the kind of "solitariness" requisite for one's spiritual "renewal." David Chappell's reflections are summarized from "Bodhisattva in the Twenty-First Century," his well-attended lecture in the "Futures Discussion Group colloquium series at the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, University of Hawaii, on 6 December 1996 and another presentation at Wahiawa Honpa Hongwanji Temple on 8 December 1996 at the combined service for Central Oahu to celebrate Bodhiday. Dr. Chappell teaches in the Department of Religion, University of Hawai'i at Manoa--v.k.p.

Although biologically people today are very similar to people at the time of the Buddha, modern communication devices that relay information instantaneously to us make modern society very different from that of the Buddha. Whereas in the past people around the world gradually heard the message of the Buddha mostly through the medium of small group discussion, today our lives are increasingly lived in terms of the new electronic communication devices rather than through interpersonal communication. The claim by Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message raises the issue about how the enlightenment of the Buddha relates to the information highway and to the new social reality shaped by this modern media.

## SOLITARY ENLIGHTENMENT vs. MASS MEDIA

Every October millions of people around the world enjoy watching baseball's World Series, while every December people around the world celebrate another event, the enlightenment of the Buddha. While the World Series is a mass media event watched on television by millions of people and then read about and analyzed in newspapers and on the Internet, the enlightenment of the Buddha happened alone and was reported to others for centuries only by word of mouth.

The strange thing is that in spite of all the press coverage of the '96 World Series, it is now old news--there are no more celebrations. But the achievement of enlightenment by Sakyamuni Buddha that no one knew about when it was happening, and very few understood what happened even after learning about it, is being celebrated today all around the world. Does this mean that the new multimedia trivializes its subject in contrast to interpersonal communication so that people soon lose interest, or does the media do its job so well that it saturates its topic so that people need not return to the subject again? Or is the difference based upon the

content of the message in spite of the different media?

## INTERNET versus INTIMACY

How did the Buddha communicate and what was his message? Certainly during the lifetime of the Buddha, the power of his personality seems to have played an important role, so that after meeting him and hearing his message, many people changed the direction of their whole lives. Since meeting the Buddha in the flesh is no longer an option, what about the message and medium used for later Buddhist followers? Although many changes have evolved in content and methods of Buddhism, two key elements have endured: the personal meeting between a teacher and student, and the practice of personal morality and meditation as a means to fully understand and embody enlightenment.

Inherent in these two elements is a quality that is notably lacking in electronic communication, namely, intimacy. Robert Aitken, who is sometimes called the "dean" of American Zen masters, has often said that a key feature of enlightenment is the increased capacity of people to be intimate with the varied phenomena of life at each moment. The interpersonal interaction between master and student emphasized in the Zen is necessary for the transmission of enlightenment "mind to mind" or "heart to heart." For Zen students, this is then tested in the dokusan encounter with their master. No electronic medium is adequate for this degree of intimacy.

Based on the unconventional wisdom of Buddhism and this face-to-face encounter, the degree of openness and intimacy needed to practice enlightenment is unusually high, and may have been one of the reasons that the scriptures reported that the Buddha after his enlightenment doubted if he had anything to say to people that they could receive and understand. However, the scriptures say that he was persuaded by the god Brahma that some people did have the capacity to hear his message and be helped. Accordingly, the Buddha began to teach others and to send out his disciples alone to do the same:

Go forth, monks, on your own way for the profit and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit, gain, and happiness of gods and people. Let no two go together.

Teach, monks, the Teaching (dhamma) that is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its ending, in the spirit and in the letter, and propagate the perfectly pure holy life. There are beings whose eyes have little dust on them, who will perish if they do not hear the teaching. But if they hear the teaching, they will gain liberation.--Mahavagga of Vinaya 1.11.1

Enlightenment is no information highway available to everyone based on a common set of program commands, but is liberation from individualized confusion and attachments that requires individualized attention and guidance. Alvin Toffler sees the Internet as reflecting a new stage in civilization that facilitates an increasing range of special interests that he calls the third wave in contrast to the second wave of mass production and mass entertainment. But even though these specialized interests can be accessed by the individual hacker, they still do not respond to, reveal, and liberate the inner personal entanglements of the person at the computer. Personal motives are not challenged, personal conduct is not at stake, and interpersonal empathy with others is not an issue.

## CONNECTIONS at another LEVEL

One of the startling achievements of the Internet is the new capacity to network with all kinds of diverse people around the globe. But at what level of contact? The World Series was a culmination of many years of effort, organization and training that we enjoyed vicariously, but that few of us actually practice: rather, it is a spectator sport played for mass entertainment. Since baseball is simple and slow enough that many people can

understand it and enjoy watching it, even though they might not play, watching it is a safe distraction to give people some relief from the complexities of their personal lives. It is enjoyable because it is both simple and separate. Computer and video games play similar roles.

The Buddha began with a quest that is shared by us all, namely, why do we suffer and how can we be happy? According to some of the early records, his enlightenment came when he discovered (1) the attitudes and motives that made him what he was, and also (2) the attitudes and ideas that made others develop as they did. Having discovered how he and others had come to be as they are, his fears and needs fell away, and he found the peace of nirvana. This second achievement is often neglected, namely, that the Buddha discovered what motivated and affected the direction and quality not only of his own life, but also what affected and guided the lives and happiness of others. Only then did he experience a sense of relief and peace as he felt the fears and pressures of his life fall away. In summary, the Buddha was enlightened when he experienced:

1. how he came to be who he was;
2. how others came to be as they are;
3. the falling away of his compulsions, anxieties, and pain.

It is this claim to understand the plight of others, and the compassion that arose when he was able to understand their plight, that made his life and message relevant to society and was the basis of his public communication:

Monks, there is one individual who arose and came to be for the welfare of the multitudes, for the happiness of the multitudes, out of sympathy [anukampâ, Chinese min] for the world; for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans. Who is that one individual? The Harmonious One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.

The content of enlightenment consists of understanding not only how I came to be as I now am, but also how others come to be. This journey of self-discovery and other-discovery is based on interaction between myself and others, as well as on self-reflection. Whereas the information available from the Internet may be life enhancing, the Internet as a tool does not develop the personal processes necessary for enlightenment, especially meditation and morality. Instead, in many instances it may distract us from the self-reflection and the interpersonal communication that is necessary for enlightenment.

The common ground of the Internet is based on electronic connections, whereas the common ground discovered by enlightenment is based on a heart connection. The word "kindness" is related to the meaning of "the same kind" and for Buddhism it involves not an emotion, but an insight into our shared nature. According to the scriptures, both the Pali texts and the Lotus Sutra, after the Buddha's enlightenment, he was uncertain about what to do, at which point the Brahma gods came to him and persuaded him to begin teaching others based on his human sympathy (ai-min) for them (T 9.23b7, 23b25, 24b20, 24b28). The Internet involves a shared process, but not the affirmation of the shared human worth and caring developed in enlightenment. Many politicians use the Internet, but few would have the capacity of the Tibetan Dalai Lama to affirm that the Chinese who attack and torture them have the same worth and nature as they do.

The Internet allows us to ease our solitude by getting access to things that are compatible with our own interests. However, Buddhism considers that the achievement of enlightenment involves being able to be compatible and have empathy even with things that may seem foreign or offensive or a threat to us by seeing them as connected with and similar to ourselves. This involves not just new information, or a new perspective on things, but a new understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others at a level that touches what is beyond rational expression and manipulation.

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.

All great religions teach the need for solitariness as the basis for our renewal. Whether we call it prayer or meditation or nembutsu does not matter. Basically it involves being alone, at a time and in a place where you can come to terms with things. Being alone, even as a result of pain or sickness, is an opportunity to re-evaluate life and priorities, and to learn how our inner processes of perception, interpretation, and reaction shape our psychological world, our attitudes, and our happiness. Tibetan Buddhism particularly emphasizes those moments when our rational thought is broken (the experience of a gap, called bardo)--such as when we sneeze, or die, or are about to fall asleep, or when we have orgasm--as important opportunities to experience reality free from our rational interpretations. Solitude and sensitivity to how we inwardly experience things is crucial to this process. This seems to be a fundamentally different focus from the solitude that is occupied with attention to information on a computer screen.

Knowing that we can connect to billions of pieces of information is a different task from letting go a false but cherished self-image, or finding together. Both encourage a larger global awareness. Both are based on the interconnectedness of life. Both have enriched culture by creating new communities among like-minded people. Both enhance information and are gender neutral. Both are pluralistic, practical, and avoid fighting over dogma.

Jeremy Rifkin, founding director of the Institute for Economic Trends and the author of the book, *The End of Work*, has said that even though all of us are being affected by the new technology and the information highway, it is the source of financial wealth for very few of us. On the contrary, many of us are being replaced by it. With government downsizing and businesses downsizing based on the efficiency of computers and robots, jobs are shrinking. But at the core of American life has not been government, nor the market economy, but volunteerism and caring for others. One half of the adult population of America (89 million) spend four hours each week on volunteer work. In this cause, computers have greatly enhanced the power of individuals and volunteer work. And in this task the Internet shares a common effort with Buddhist groups.

In turn, Buddhists have learned much from the Internet, not only about other Buddhists, but also about what is involved with saving other living beings in the environment and in other countries of the world. Moreover, the new communication media has made clear that meditation is not enough, but that there are many practical things that are required of Buddhists if they are to be helpful.

However, Buddhism also shows that the Internet has its shortcomings. The information highway can enhance social life, or it can be a tool to exploit others. Like the Internet, Buddhism encourages inner calm through its many quiet activities, but adds that our efforts will produce suffering if we focus only on external information to the point of neglecting our inner awareness of how our minds and hearts are interpreting and using the new information. Instead, we also need to give attention to our inner processes of awareness, our inner attitudes, and our way of interpreting each event if we are to escape egotism and conflicts that are based on greed and anger.

Like the Internet, Buddhism encourages learning about others, but adds that we should also discover the transparency of each experience, the connections which constitute our common ground with others, and through this to develop compassion that takes responsibility for others. Unlike the Internet, Buddhism is not just a tool for increasing information and contact, but is also an agent for personal and interpersonal transformation and liberation. For these religious tasks of inner change, freedom, and compassion that are characteristic of Buddhism, electronic communication must be based on personal awareness and human contact. Even in the age of the Internet, the final medium for communicating Buddhist truths will remain the mind, and the ultimate connection will be made not electronically but by the heart.

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