

Religion Experts Column

*This is the response to this week's question for the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature of the Sunday Ottawa Citizen. Questions are provided by the editor. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday , January 9, 2011

Q : Have social networks like Twitter and Facebook changed things for religious adherents?

A : As with things Internet, social networking gives with one hand, and takes with the other. For faith organizations, these technologies provide exciting ways to connect within and between themselves. New alliances, particularly those directed at faith-activated social interventions, such as environmental and peace initiatives, now have cheap and effective ways of communicating and acting. Recently, a non-Buddhist leader I know, who is active in peace and environment issues, described for me his expectation for social networking. He believes we are on the threshold of how these will transform social movements. As people shift from up-the-chain conventional political action to across-the-network modes, faith-driven social change will no longer simply aspire to influence political processes, they will side-step them entirely, creating new impacts for which governments can only play catch-up. Online lobby-organizing applications like Avaaz are only the tip of that iceberg.

As a metaphor, social networks can represent an appreciation for the central Buddhist teaching of "dependent origination", that is, the truth that all beings are intimately and mutually implicated in each others' lives. Buddhists created the idea of a network model of existence, "The Jewel Net of Indra",

millennia before an Internet appeared.

On the down-side, social networking continues the commodification of relationships. As Buddhist social commentator, Peter Hershock advises, they give us endless "variety" but deny us an appreciation for "diversity". We can "friend" or "de-friend" thousands of humans without ever knowing anything important about them. It is not accidental that "MySpace" was an early networking brand. The worst of social networking is just more and more self-valorizing, revelling in me-me-me all the time. In a truly telling way, it constructs us as "users", cheapening the meaning of relationship into whatever serves me and my momentary needs. We have instant access but no appreciation for inter-dependence or inter-responsibility. We are yet to experience the impact on social relationships and society when, 10-20 years from now, generations of young people who construct their relationships this way become the adults of the nation.

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