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Aesthetics

and the Dimensions
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HINDU EMBODIMENT AND THE INTERNET

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Introduction

Starting with the recognition that Hinduism is a fully embodied religion, in this article I consider issues concerning Hindu religious activity in cyberspace – an environment where, to an extent, a 'visitor' undergoes disembodiment. I will begin with a discussion of cyberspace and the notion of disembodiment and then briefly give examples of Hindu religious activity online. Following this I will demonstrate that embodiment is of central importance in Hinduism. The nature of the body in Hinduism will be examined and will then be discussed in the light of Hindu activity in cyberspace. The traditional Hindu *puja* ceremony will then be considered and compared with its online manifestation. A *puja* is a form of "'worship' [which] involves the presentation of 'honour offerings' to the deity."[1] The ritual is a central aspect of most forms of Hinduism and traditionally necessitates full embodiment. The comparison allows me to further assess whether the practising of Hinduism in cyberspace is compatible with the notion of embodiment in Hinduism.

Cyberspace and Disembodiment

Some are reluctant to even acknowledge the existence of cyberspace, seeing the Internet (the network consisting of hardware and software that connects millions of computers) as merely being a tool which enables, for example, the dissemination of knowledge or ease of communication.[2] However, it does seem that the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) (the huge number of interconnected websites) have actually resulted in some sort of new 'environment' where things occur. This appears to have first been suggested by Mark Poster in 1995.[3] Cathryn Vasseleu refers

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[1]   See Eck 1985, 89.
[2]   See for example in Dawson 2001; Brasher 2004, 114.
[3]   See Brasher 2004, ix.

to cyberspace as a space "within the electronic network of computers"[4] and Michele Willson[5] and Pramod Nayar[6] also see cyberspace in similar terms.

It is difficult to pin down cyberspace yet it does seem undeniable that it constitutes a new environment. For example, people meet 'there', they perform various activities 'there', and the various websites appear to have some existence somewhere 'out there'. As Gwilym Beckerlegge[7] points out, people talk of 'visiting' websites, and it does seem reasonable to couch web activity in these terms. Furthermore, Christine Hine argues that "the success of ethnographers in claiming the Internet[8] as a field site attests to acceptance that the Internet is a form of social space."[9] Even Douglas Cowan, who criticises the hyperbole surrounding cyberspace, admits that there is some sort of new environment when he remarks that "cyberspace may exist alongside real space."[10] I am also of the opinion that cyberspace constitutes a distinct environment. However, my conception of this environment is far from that advocated by those whose comments Cowan dismisses as being hyperbole – such as those of a Neo-Pagan who believes that "once we enter cyberspace, we are no longer in the physical plane."[11]

The existence of cyberspace raises questions concerning embodiment such as 'Where or what is the body in cyberspace?'. For example, what happens to the body when an embodied individual enters cyberspace? Does disembodiment occur?[12]

I do not believe that *full* disembodiment takes place when someone temporarily enters cyberspace. The main reason for this is that the body is still subject to pain during cyberspace activity (e.g. neck and wrist ache etc.), and activities in cyberspace are still limited by the body.[13] For example, someone entering cyberspace still needs to eat, defecate and sleep,[14] while Allucquère Stone[15] points out that having a disembodied presence in cyberspace will not slow the death of somebody with AIDS. Allison Muri similarly argues against the notion of full disembodiment brought about by technology by emphasising that "human consciousness is inalienably enmeshed

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4   See Vasseleu 1997, 46.
5   See Willson 2000, 647.
6   See Nayar 2004, 68.
7   See Beckerlegge 2001b, 222, 257.
8   In this quote Hine erroneously uses the term 'Internet' to refer to cyberspace.
9   See Hine 2005, 109.
10   See Cowan 2005, 262.
11   Cited in Cowan 2005, 258.
12   See for example Bell 2000, 3; Poster cited in Beck 2000, 102.
13   See for example Cowan 2005, 262.
14   See for example Shilling 1997, 747.
15   See Stone 2000, 524.

with its corporeality."[16] The argument that full disembodiment does not occur in cyberspace is strengthened if it is accepted that experiences in cyberspace at least partly arise out of characteristics that are found in embodied offline social relations.[17] It appears prudent to accept such a view despite opposition by those such as Lanier who assert that online experiences are freed from "race or class distinctions or any other form of pretense."[18] Nevertheless, it is clear that in some sense disembodiment does occur when an individual partakes in activities in cyberspace.[19] This is the case despite the fact that the computer user is subject to bodily experiences and requires the body to mediate between the offline world and the online experience (by, for example, physically using a mouse or typing on a keyboard). In cyberspace, reference to the body is minimal and an individual does not need to travel to a physical location in order to undertake activities.

Hindu Religious Activity in Cyberspace

The *puja* ceremony, which will be looked at in detail below, is a good example of a Hindu religious practice that is occurring in cyberspace.[20] As it is highly unlikely that someone conducting an online *puja* would feel like they were at the deity's sacred site, online *pujas* do not seem to involve telepresence. Nonetheless, the participant does to some extent leave his or her body. This is because devotees are able to perform some of the *puja* processes without reference to the body, and they are able to perform an activity which normally requires a physical presence at a venue. Performing the activity online means that the traditional embodied religious experience is unobtainable. The same can be said concerning Hindu festivals that are broadcast online[21] which allow some degree of participation without requiring an embodied presence at the festival site. For example, Beckerlegge (citing Bannerjee, 1998) reveals that the broadcasting of the 1998 *Durga Puja* festival in Calcutta "was not mere reporting but a means to facilitate 'cyberworship'."[22] Similarly, Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt refer to a website which broadcast the 2001 *Kumbh Mela* festival in Allahabad which they claim offers to a devotee the opportunity to engage in a 'virtual pilgrimage'.[23] The

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[16] See Muri 2003, 77.
[17] See Green 1997, 59; Hardey 2002, 570-581.
[18] See Green 1997, 61.
[19] See for example Bell 2000, 3.
[20] See Brasher 2004, 3-5; Kapoor 2003.
[21] See Dawson & Cowan 2004, 3; Beckerlegge 2001b, 229-231.
[22] See Beckerlegge 2001b, 229.
[23] See Vásquez & Marquardt 2003, 92.

facility for relatives of the deceased to 'attend' a funeral online is also available via the website of the *Shree Saraswati Muktidham Trust*[24] which offers webcasts of cremations.[25] In all these cases Hindu religious activity is occurring in cyberspace where a devotee does not experience full embodiment. As I will now demonstrate though, traditionally, embodiment is of paramount importance in Hinduism.

The Nature of the Body in Hinduism

Hinduism is often considered to be otherworldly and therefore unconcerned with the body, but this view is misleading.[26] It is certainly true that to detach from the body "is the goal of most Hindu philosophical systems"[27] but the body is still important. The prevalent non-dual[28] *Vedantic* philosophy has given rise to the generally accepted view of the nature of the body in Hinduism. It holds that an individual must realise[29] that everything that is impermanent is unreal and that the only thing that is changeless and hence real is their pure consciousness (the *atman*). Before this is realised this consciousness is known as the *jiva* and is present in successive physical incarnations. However, realisation results in the merging[30] of the *atman* with the formless *Absolute* (*Brahman*)[31] which usually entails the end of embodiment.[32] This is known as *moksha* or liberation. Although the body is essentially unreal because it is impermanent, if an individual does not realise that consciousness is the unchanging *atman* and they still believe that consciousness is related to the notion of an individual identity, the body is to all intents and purposes, real.[33] It cannot be emphasised enough that although *Vedantic* philosophy advocates that one should aim to become pure disembodied consciousness, it holds a completely different view of the body from that of

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[24] *Shree Saraswati Muktidham Trust*, http://www.muktidham.org/. Retrieved 9 July 2008
[25] See *IANS* 2003; Rao 2003.
[26] See Eck 1985, 11-12; 1993, 306; Coward 1989a, 2.
[27] See Doniger 1997, 183.
[28] In this sense, non-dual refers to the philosophy that there is no duality between humans and 'God', i.e. the *Absolute*. See below.
[29] This type of realisation differs from the usual usage and refers to perfect understanding on an experiential level.
[30] The use of the word 'merging' should not give the impression that there is actually a duality at any stage between the *atman* and *Brahman*.
[31] By its very nature, the *Absolute* cannot be sufficiently defined. However, it is often referred to as being "undifferentiated existence, consciousness and bliss" (Krishnananda 1994, 102).
[32] Dualistic traditions which believe in the separation between humans and a God with attributes, and thus do not have a conception of the *Absolute*, also see the body as impermanent and still require that eventually the soul be freed from the physical body (see for example Prabhupāda 1989, 24-25, 421, 721).
[33] See Cross 1994, 59.

Cartesian dualism. Cartesian dualism holds that mind and body are distinct and has become the generally accepted view in the West.[34] Mind is not regarded as being separate from consciousness. However, in *Vedantic* Hinduism a distinction is made between mind and consciousness. Although it is at a very subtle level, mind is considered to be physical and therefore part of the physical body.[35] Therefore, in Hinduism the individual is regarded as being fully embodied.

Furthermore, because it changes, the body can help an individual to understand that everything that is not the *atman* is unreal. This understanding can arise through direct experience and/or meditation upon the body's nature. Therefore, texts which emphasise the undesirability of the body in order to stress that it is impermanent, still affirm its importance. Examples include the *Maitrī Upanishad* and the later *Manusamhita*. The *Maitrī Upanishad* contains the following description of the body:

> … it comes forth through the urinary passage. It is built up with bones, smeared over with flesh, covered with skin, filled with faeces, urine, bile, phlegm, marrow, fat, grease and also with many diseases like a treasure house full of wealth.[36]

In the *Manusamhita*, the author Manu asserts that

> [A man] should abandon this foul-smelling, tormented, impermanent dwelling place of living beings, filled with urine and excrement, pervaded by old age and sorrow, infested by illness, and polluted by passion, with bones for beams, sinews for cords, flesh and blood for plaster, and skin for the roof.[37]

The importance of the body in this regard is shown in the story of Prajapati, who fully understands that the truth is the unchanging *atman* and declares that this is the only thing worth knowing, and Indra, who seeks this knowledge. It is Indra's understanding that the body is subject to disease and decay that eventually leads him to the truth regarding the *atman*.[38] In the *Vishnu Purana* text the

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[34]   See Synott 1991, 70 cited in Mellor and Shilling 1997, 5-6; Fisher 1992, 100; Midgley 1997, 53.
[35]   See for example Cross 1994, 66-67.
[36]   See cited in Coward 1989b, 15.
[37]   See Manu 6, 76-77 cited in Doniger 1997, 169.
[38]   See Panikkar *et al.* 1977, 466.

body's importance is emphasised in a different way. Here, it is explicitly revealed that the body is the dwelling place of the *atman*:

> The knowledge that this spirit, which is essentially one, is in one's own and in all other bodies, is the great end, or true wisdom, of one who knows the unity and the true principle of things.[39]

The importance of the body can also be seen in early Hindu texts that are not very philosophical. For example, in the *Atharva Veda* the body is seen as something that should be protected and cured from illness, and there is an overall concern with the minimisation of suffering and the achievement of longevity.[40]

Jivanmukti: The Case of Ramana Maharshi

According to the *Upanishads* (important Hindu philosophical texts), though rare, it is possible that a person can still remain embodied after realising that consciousness is the *atman*. In this case an individual does not achieve *moksha* but instead attains the state of *jivanmukti* or 'liberation-while-living'.[41] An example of such a person who is believed to have obtained this state is Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950).[42] After his enlightenment in his early life he remained in a meditative state in an underground chamber that was permanently damp and dark. Lal tells us that: "Here ants, mosquitoes and other vermin attacked him, leaving lifelong marks on his legs. But he continued to sit in meditation unperturbed."[43] In his later life when he interacted with the devotees who had now sprung up around him, Lal remarks that "as indifferent to his own body, its pains, its comforts, so was he thoughtful and caring about all those who came into contact with him."[44] He was also so concerned with non-human life that one day he managed to distract a dog that was chasing a squirrel and, although in the process he slipped and broke his collar bone, he didn't seem to mind. A

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[39] See cited in Cross 1994, preface.
[40] See Panikkar *et al*. 1977, 462-465.
[41] See Krishnananda 1994, 181.
[42] Ramana Maharshi was born into a *Brahmin* (the highest category in the Hindu social hierarchy) family. As a child he was fascinated with the word 'Arunachala' (the mountain in South India sacred to *Shiva*) and experienced realisation without undergoing any austerities. Afterwards he lost interest in his studies and instinctively travelled to Arunachala where he lived for the rest of his life (See Lal 2002, 8-20).
[43] See Lal 2002, 15.
[44] See Lal 2002, 41

more serious situation arises towards the end of Ramana Maharshi's life when his body is subject to terminal cancer. Although the physical pain would have been immense, Lal notes how he was completely indifferent to this, and this in itself can be considered to be a teaching that the body is impermanent. For example, Lal notes that

> in his serene submission to the long months of pain and suffering he showed that such serenity was possible for those who had anchored in the true Self [and he would also say that] 'I am not going away. Where could I go? I am here'.[45]

Although Ramana Maharshi recognises that his body is unimportant, he believes that his embodiment can help others to also understand this and thus aid their spiritual development. This further emphasises the importance of the body in Hinduism. The hagiographies of Ramana Maharshi reveal that he did not undergo any practices in order to realise that the body was impermanent, and that instead, his enlightenment came suddenly.[46] This is a very rare occurrence, and for most people this could occur only after years of spiritual practice.

Yoga

A consideration of the *yoga* traditions further emphasises the importance of embodiment and provides more details regarding the actual nature of the body in Hinduism. Ramana Maharshi encouraged people to direct their spiritual efforts by way of *Jnana yoga*.[47] This involves intellectual enquiry as to the nature of the body and the Self in order to bring about realisation, and does not involve any overtly physical practices. However, other yoga traditions actually use the body in order to attempt to achieve liberation. *Raja yoga* emphasises the importance of controlling the 'life force' through various breathing techniques (*pranayama*) while *Hatha yoga* emphasises the importance of *asanas* or postures. In the quest for spiritual advancement, the *Raja yoga* advocate Swami Vivekananda says of the body: "it is the best instrument you have."[48] Similarly, B.K.S.

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[45] See Lal 2002, 64.
[46] See for example Lal 2002, 10.
[47] See Sharma 1986, 226.
[48] See Vivekananda 1998, 32.

Iyengar, a leading authority on *Hatha yoga*, "believes that the body is the gateway to the soul."[49] Benjamin Smith also emphasises the importance of embodiment when talking of the practising of *asanas* in *Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga* (a form of *yoga* influenced by *Raja yoga* and *Hatha yoga*). For example, he notes that the practice of *yoga* allows for "the experience of aspects of our embodiment that might otherwise have remained predominantly conceptual."[50]

The *yoga* traditions mentioned here share basically the same view of the nature of the human body. They see it as impermanent and accept the general views concerning consciousness and the physical mind-body combination explained above. For example, Vivekananda writes that: "As we proceed [with *yoga*] we shall find how intimately the mind is connected with the body". He adds that because of this connection it is obvious that "if the body becomes sick, the mind becomes sick also"[51] and therefore it is essential to keep the body in good health.[52] These traditions are also more directly concerned with details of the physical nature of the body. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* which reveal these details are taken as the foundation of their philosophies. Patanjali talks of the three *gunas* (*rajas, tamas* and *sattva*) that are present in the human body – an idea that has passed into the mainstream of Hindu thought.[53] Together the three *gunas* make up *Prakriti*, which, in the *yoga* tradition, is seen as being material nature.[54] Stephen Cross explains what these *gunas* are:

> modes of being, tendencies of existence, and in varying combinations they pervade everything that is. *Rajas* is the principle of activity, *tamas* that which restrains and obstructs, and *sattva* that of harmony and clarity.[55]

In addition to behaving in certain ways, physical techniques (such as breathing exercises and internal cleaning procedures) are advocated in order to "purify the *tamas* and *rajas* from one's material nature (*Prakriti*) until one becomes virtually pure *sattva*".[56] Therefore, because the *gunas* are part of the material body, the *guna* theory sees purity and impurity as being physically real.[57] If

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[49] See Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 318.
[50] See Smith 2007, 41.
[51] See Vivekananda 1998, 11.
[52] See Vivekananda 1998, 22-23.
[53] See Cross 1994, 48.
[54] See Coward 1989a, 3; Coward 1989b, 22; Smith 2003, 156.
[55] See Cross 1994, 49.
[56] See Coward 1989a, 3.
[57] See Coward 1989b, 32.

through purification practices one can achieve a state of *sattva* alone, then the body is left behind and *moksha* is achieved.[58]

Tantric Yoga

Tantric yoga differs significantly from the other *yoga* traditions which use the body. In addition to the material features of the body identified in *Vedantic* philosophy and in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, other physical features of the body which are essential in order to achieve realisation are identified. *Tantric* philosophy asserts that the body contains *nadis*.

These are

> subtle channels of power having their ends or outlets in the openings of the body [and] the aim of the yoga practice is to purify these channels so that the breath or *prana* can pass through them freely.[59]

In addition to other aspects, the *yoga* practice consists of a large number of *asanas* and cleansing procedures, and when the *nadis* become purified as a result of these activities, the practice of *pranayama* can then allow the dormant *kundalini* power to pass through the body, which results in liberation.[60] Furthermore, while even in the other yoga traditions which involve physical practices and point to the value of the body, the body is usually ultimately left behind, in *Tantric yoga* the body is completely affirmed and it is normal for embodiment to continue after liberation. The aim is for "a perfectly purified divine body."[61] The importance of the body in *Tantric* theory is also demonstrated by the belief that the embodied individual is a microcosm of the universe.[62]

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[58] See Coward 1989b, 15, 23, 25.
[59] See Coward 1989b, 28.
[60] See Coward 1989b, 28; Saraswati 1996.
[61] See Coward 1989b, 28.
[62] See for example Cross 1994, 98.

The Nature of the Body in Hinduism and Online Disembodiment

Now that I have considered beliefs concerning the body in Hinduism, I am able to consider the extent to which Hinduism is compatible with the disembodied character of activity in cyberspace. As I have demonstrated, the general view is that one should distance oneself from the body; the *Tantric* view is a minority one. Therefore, it might at first seem that activity in cyberspace is a good thing because it results in some sort of felt or actual detachment from the body. However, any detachment that someone will experience is between mind and body and, as I have emphasised, in Hinduism the mind is not separate from the body. Therefore, if Internet use encourages detachment of mind from body it would undermine the specific notion of embodiment in Hinduism.

Furthermore, if Internet use was prolonged, then the detachment between mind and body could contribute to a lack of concern with the gross physical body. This means that bodily experiences that can help towards a realisation of impermanence are likely to be fewer or to become less noticeable. Therefore, when the nature of the body in Hinduism is considered, the online environment appears problematic for Hinduism. This is further confirmed when specific examples of embodiment in Hinduism are considered. For example, in the *yoga* traditions that emphasise physical practices, the implications of widespread Hindu activity online are very damaging if they lead practitioners away from these practices which, in these traditions, are seen as being essential for spiritual progress. This is especially so in the case of *Tantric yoga* because not only is the body essential for the carrying out of the practices, the body itself is also considered as being divine. In addition to this, if cyberspace were to become a widespread and popular arena for Hindu activity, those individuals such as Ramana Maharshi who have achieved the state of *jivanmukti* and have traditionally inspired others who have come into contact with them, may have less influence within Hinduism. This will result in fewer people following a spiritual path after having been inspired as a result of embodied interaction with these individuals.

Reincarnation

The important Hindu concept of reincarnation,[63] which is inextricably related to the nature of the body, is also at odds with online disembodiment. In her brief consideration of reincarnation in

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[63] See Hamilton 1998, 59.

Hinduism, Margaret Wertheim (1999) points out that Pythagoras thought that the soul was essentially mathematical, and that this idea is shared by those (e.g. members of the 'Extropians') who believe that one day the essence of humans will be able to be downloaded into cyberspace. However, Wertheim goes on to argue that Pythagoras "believed that the soul was continually reincarnated",[64] and then mentions that although this also happens in cyber-fiction fantasies, Pythagoras believed that there is an ethical context. This ethical context is absent in cyber-fiction fantasies but is an essential aspect of the Hindu concept of reincarnation.[65] Therefore, Wertheim concludes that reincarnation in Hinduism is incompatible with cyberspace.

I am in agreement with Wertheim in this regard. The prevalent view in Hinduism is that the soul becomes disembodied after the death of the physical body before being reincarnated in another physical body, and the ultimate aim is usually to transcend the recurring embodied existence altogether. However, it is fair to say that ideas about disembodied souls in cyberspace are incompatible with central philosophical ideas concerning reincarnation in which the notion of morality is of prime importance. Furthermore, in the disembodied existence talked about by those who wish to download human souls into cyberspace, individual identity persists. However, this is anathema to the common Hindu view which asserts that the *atman* is not linked in any way with any notion of individual self in the Western sense.[66]

Pujas

My consideration of the nature of the body in Hinduism has led me to the conclusion that Hinduism appears unsuited to widespread online religious activity. Despite this, online Hindu activity is occurring. I will now consider online *pujas* which provide a good example of such activity. A traditional *puja* which requires full embodiment will first be described and this will be followed by a description of an online *puja*.[67] This comparison allows me to assess the extent to which the *puja* ceremony has altered in its online manifestation and the extent to which embodiment remains important. I will consider a traditional *mandir* (Hindu 'temple') *puja* and not private *pujas*

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[64] See Wertheim 1999, 268.
[65] See Wertheim 1999, 267-269.
[66] See Walter 2001, 23.
[67] Online *pujas* should not be confused with *puja* services offered on websites, which involve a *puja* being carried out (for a fee) on behalf of a devotee at a *mandir* (Hindu 'temple') of their choosing. In such a *puja*, although a devotee does not need to physically travel to a sacred site, someone must be present there.

undertaken by individuals because the latter have no standard form and thus cannot provide a benchmark for comparison.

It is commonly accepted that there are sixteen important processes involved in a traditional *mandir puja* (each one known as an *upachara*).[68] There are differences in opinion regarding the nature of these sixteen processes as *puja* is not fully standardised. However, unlike private *pujas* performed in the home, there is some degree of standardisation. For example, Christopher Fuller writes that although, according to the texts, there is "an ordered sequence of offerings and services", there are variations but "their overall sequence is always much the same."[69] Therefore, it is not necessary to be concerned with specific differences. One sequence is provided by Swami Krishnananda:

1.   *Dhyana* – contemplation of the form of the deity

2. *Avahana* – mentally investing the symbol of worship with the glorious presence

3.   *Asana* – enthroning the deity

4.   *Padya* – washing the feet of the deity

5.   *Arghya* – offering of respectful libations and glorification

6.   *Snana* – arrangement for ablutions

7.   *Vastra* – presentation of dress or clothing

8.   *Yajnopavita* – investiture of the sacred thread

9.   *Gandha* – offering of perfumes or sandal paste

10. *Pushpa* – offering of flowers

11. *Dhupa* – burning of incense

12. *Dipa* – waving of lamps

13. *Naivedya* – offering of food

14. *Tambula* – offering of betel leaves

15. *Nirajana* – burning of camphor before the deity

16. *Suvarnapushpa* – offering of a gift[70]

Krishnananda adds that in larger *mandirs,* these processes are often combined with a number of practices. These include the chanting of *mantras,* dance and music, and hand gestures called

[68]   See Eck 1985, 47; Fuller 1992, 67.
[69]   See Fuller 1992, 67.
[70]   See adapted from Krishnananda 1994, 158-159.

mudras. A further important practice is that of *Nyasa*. This ritual involves the "placing of the different limbs of the deity in the corresponding parts of [the devotee's] own body" and this aids in "the attuning of oneself to the form of the deity."[71] At the end of a *puja*, *prasad* is distributed to devotees. This consists of consecrated substances and is seen as being imbued with divine power and grace. The most common form of *prasad* consists of food, and it is believed that its consumption can result in the internalization of the deity's power and grace.[72]

It is clear that the body is central to a conventional offline *puja* for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is instrumental to the actual carrying out of the *upacharas* (apart from *Dhyana* and *Avahana*) and other important practices. Secondly, reference to the body itself (the practice of *Nyasa*) by a worshipper can be an aid to worship. Thirdly, the entire human sensorium is stimulated in the *puja*[73] as the senses of sight (e.g. via *darshan*), hearing (e.g. via *mantras* and music), smell (e.g. via incense), touch (e.g. via physically presenting offerings) and taste (e.g. via *prasad*) are all exercised. In his account of a *mandir puja*, James Preston emphasises the importance of the body and indicates the extent to which the senses of a devotee are stimulated:[74]

> There is a profusion of colours, sweet incense, garlands of tropical flowers, the smell of sweetmeats in preparation … Drums, bells, conches, horns and prayers fill the temple with variegated sounds. The whole human body is exercised as individuals genuflect, sing and prostrate themselves on the ground.[75]

Online pujas

The extent to which embodiment is important in a traditional offline *puja* can be contrasted with the online *puja* where embodiment is far less important.

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[71] See Krishnananda 1994, 159.
[72] See Fuller 1992, 74.
[73] See for example Eck 1985, 11-12, 49; Brasher 2004, 4.
[74] Embodiment is also important in a *puja* performed at home, although "the ritual is usually more restrained" (See Fuller 1992, 57).
[75] See Preston 1980, 49-50.

The setting for a typical online *puja*[76] simply consists of an image of a deity (which may be a universal deity or a deity specific to a certain location) on the screen. Occasionally there will also be *bhajans* or devotional hymns playing. Icons will also be present, and a worshipper clicks on these icons in turn in order to produce corresponding effects which constitute the *upacharas* of the *puja*[77] and other practices. Empirically, this is all that is involved. The technology is not very advanced compared to other virtual reality environments such as those of some computer games.

I will now describe in more detail a typical online *puja*. A *puja* to the goddess *Mahalakshmi* (accessed via the website of *Shreekarveernivasini*[78] – a website hosted by the larger *Blessings on the Net.com*[79]) will be used as an example. The *puja* involves looking at *Mahalakshmi* who is the recipient of the *puja*, and using a mouse or similar navigation device to click on various icons to perform a number of acts. The first icon is a bell which moves from side to side and produces an authentic sound; as they enter *mandirs*, worshippers traditionally ring a bell to announce their presence. The second icon is a flower, and clicking on this produces flowers that drop and settle in front of the goddess. This represents the *Pushpa upachara*. The third icon is incense. Clicking on this will cause simulated burning incense to appear in front of the image of the deity which represents the *Dhupa upachara*. To complete the *puja* the devotee can click on the icon of the *aarti* lamp in order to perform the *aarti* rite which, in the offline world, involves waving a lamp before the deity. On the screen a lamp appears in front of *Mahalakshmi* and moves from side to side.

The online *pujas* offered by different companies display only minor differences, and like the *puja* described above, involve clicking on icons to produce effects which represent offline practices. For example, the online *pujas* offered on the website of the D/FW Hindu Temple Society have icons representing a bell, incense, the *aarti* lamp and flowers. There is also an icon representing *sindhur* (powder used in the ritual) and clicking on this allows the *Gandha upachara* to be represented. The icons are identical for every *puja*, as is the online shrine that the image of the deity is placed inside.

I have argued above that even though a computer user is obviously still reliant upon their body, when entering cyberspace some form of disembodiment occurs. This is because in cyberspace

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[76] A number of websites offer online *pujas*. Examples include those of the D/FW Hindu Temple Society, http://www.dfwhindutemple.org. Retrieved 9 July 2008; Rudra Centre, http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com. Retrieved 9 July 2008; Bangalinet, http://bangalinet.com. Retrieved 9 July 2008.

[77] As will be seen below, only a few of the *upacharas* are represented in the online *pujas*.

[78] *Shreekarveernivasini*, http://www.shreekarveernivasini.com/. Retrieved 9 July 2008. To access the online *puja* described click on 'Flash' (on the right side of the webpage).

[79] *Blessings on the Net.com*, http://www.blessingsonthenet.com. Retrieved 9 July 2008.

reference to the body is minimal and attendance at a physical site is unnecessary in order to carry out activities. However, embodiment clearly does come into play in an online *puja* (over and above the mere use of a mouse – which does not give rise to a corresponding sense of touch when, for example, it is used to pick up simulated flowers). This is through the experience of *seeing*. This is the central aspect of *darshan* which is an essential part of the *puja* ceremony.

Darshan

Darshan is of paramount importance in most traditions within Hinduism and is so crucial that, although it forms part of a *puja*, it can also be a religious practice in its own right which requires no further rites.[80] During the experience of *darshan* a devotee gazes into the eyes of the deity. However, *darshan* is more than this as it actually involves "seeing the divine in an image."[81] As Beckerlegge puts it:

> *Darshan* … means 'sight', and it implies both beholding the deity and being seen by the deity. An exchange takes place through the eyes, and devotees may feel that they have been granted a vision of the deity or have experienced the divine, favoured glance.[82]

It is *darshan* which provides the link between the fully embodied traditional *puja* experience and the online *puja* experience. Although empirically, a devotee undertaking an online *puja* only performs simple actions; they are able to experience *darshan* (the screen does not provide a barrier to *darshan*[83]). As mentioned, the full complex of the senses is utilised in Hinduism. However, because of *darshan*, it is clear that sight is by far the most important sense. There can be no disputing Beckerlegge's statement that in Hinduism

> What unites worshippers from the most ardent to the most pragmatic is the belief in the need to stand in the presence of the deity or deities [and] to have the *darshan* of the deity.[84]

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[80] See Chakrabarti 1984, 67.
[81] See Eck 1985.
[82] See Beckerlegge 2001a, 62.
[83] See Beckerlegge 2001a, 92.
[84] See Beckerlegge 2001a, 62.

The attitude of the devotee is of paramount importance when conducting a conventional *puja*, and this is also the case when conducting the ritual online. In fact, it is likely that in the absence of full embodiment combined with the absence of any real feeling of telepresence, this is more important when worshipping in cyberspace. This is demonstrated by the fact that certain features of a traditional *mandir* itself are designed to aid a devotee in fostering a devotional attitude suitable for conducting worship[85] and that the traditional *puja* ceremony which stimulates the full human sensorium is designed to give rise to a spiritual experience. Because these elements are largely absent online, a prior physical presence at a *mandir puja* would doubtless be helpful to a devotee engaging in an online *puja*. It would help them to imagine the *mandir* environment and the ritual which encourage a devotional attitude. Therefore, although I have argued that the lack of full embodiment in the online *puja* ceremony does not mean that the ritual is necessarily adversely affected,[86] it is highly likely that prior physical presence at a traditional *mandir puja* contributes to the online ritual experience.

Aside from the act of seeing, there is further evidence to suggest that embodiment remains important in an online *puja* despite its apparent disembodied nature. As has been demonstrated, online *pujas* necessitate the use of icons and other images, and it is not intended that a worshipper handles physical props. The absence of material objects required for the undertaking of an offline *puja* is unproblematic. This is because, by virtue of the very fact that the *puja* ritual (like any other ritual) is a symbolic act, its performance only requires signifiers to represent the actual props conventionally used because these props are themselves symbolic signifiers.[87] Although the purely symbolic representations used in the online *pujas* may be familiar and attractive visually and aurally, any signifier would theoretically be sufficient to maintain the efficacy of the ritual (for example the practitioner could type 'ring bell' and 'light incense', and so on). Therefore, physical props can be overlooked without any detrimental effect if the practitioner approaches worship sincerely and in the right frame of mind. In fact, Hinduism specifically condones *pujas* that do not utilise physical props (such a *puja* is known as a *manasa puja*). Krishnananda reveals that spiritually advanced people can conduct a *puja* by imagining the [form of the] deity and the

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[85] See Preston 1980, 48; Krishnananda 1994, 155; Kanitkar & Cole 1995, 19; Yocum 1996, 78-80.

[86] The fact that the ritual is abbreviated is unproblematic. For example, Fuller claims that "ritual abbreviation and simplification are ubiquitous procedures that are allowed by the texts themselves" (See Fuller 1992, 68). He also confirms the prevalence of abbreviated *pujas* when he writes that it is common for *puja* to be "reduced to no more than the showing of a one-flame camphor lamp with a plantain on the side as a food offering" and that this use of the lamp known as *aarti* has actually become "a synonym for *puja*" (See Fuller 1992, 68).

[87] Nevertheless, many Catholics would disagree that all rituals are symbolic and would maintain that in the Eucharist there is no separation between the signifier and signified (See O'Leary 2005, 45).

arrangement of the various props and the carrying out of the sixteen *upacharas*.[88] David Smith also talks of such a *puja* where

> the physical form [of the deity] is carefully mentally reconstructed, with such rituals as libations and flower offerings being exactly performed in the virtual reality inside the head.[89]

In the highest forms of worship, the deity, props and the sixteen processes do not even need to be imagined.[90] Therefore, because in Hinduism mind and body are related, embodiment is clearly still important in any *puja* (including an online *puja*) where reference is not made to the external physical body.

Conclusion

Hinduism is a fully embodied religion yet it is being practised online where some degree of disembodiment occurs. This at first suggests that the online environment is unsuitable for the carrying out of Hindu religious activity. There *are* reasons to suggest that widespread online religious activity is not compatible with Hinduism – for example it can undermine an actor's relationship with their external physical body and this can get in the way of an avenue to enlightenment. However, even in the practising of Hindu religious activity in cyberspace, embodiment does come into play. This is clearly demonstrated through *darshan* which involves seeing. Furthermore, because Hinduism is a fully embodied religion in that mind and body are inextricably related, the symbolic aspect of online rituals (which does not require the physical external body) still entails embodiment. Therefore, ironically, the very fact that Hinduism is a fully embodied religion means that cyberspace – where a form of disembodiment occurs – can ultimately provide a suitable environment for Hindu
religious activity.

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[88] See Krishnananda 1994, 159-160.
[89] See Smith 2003, 144.
[90] See Krishnananda 1994, 160.

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