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Aspects of the self: An analysis of self reflection, self
presentation and the experiential self within selected
Buddhist blogs

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Abstract

At the heart of this dissertation is an examination of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within three Buddhist blogs: *The Buddhist Blog*, *The American Buddhist* and *ThinkBuddha.org*. Based upon this original research, my thesis contributes to ongoing discussions relating to the self online and to the emerging field of media, religion and culture.

A number of other scholars have already investigated how the internet has provided a new platform in which to engage with online religious communities, participate in rituals and develop religious identity. Up to this point, however, the place of Buddhism online has been largely overlooked or limited to purely descriptive analysis. As I argue in chapter one, this thesis provides a more developed examination of Buddhism on the internet. In chapters two and three, I demonstrate how my analysis and definition of three aspects of the self, namely self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self, within selected Buddhist blogs (online diaries) provides an innovative contribution to the developing area of study related to new media and religion.

In chapter four, I consider my four central research questions and the interdisciplinary approach used which draws from the fields of anthropology, visual cultural studies, media studies, as well as Buddhist studies. In chapter five I present the Buddhist interpretative framework used for the analysis of the experiential self. This focuses on the conceptual issues of the self in early Buddhism as well as the Buddhist Theravada Abhidhamma framework for the analysis of the self (*anatta*), the components of the self (*khandhas*) and the senses and sense spheres (*ayatanas* and *dhatas*).

Through the three ethnographic case studies (chapters six, seven and eight) I demonstrate how the genre of life writing (blogs) is used as a medium for self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self, thus emphasising the experiential aspect of human existence online. In the conclusion (chapter nine), I consider the continuities and discontinuities between the three blogs, and in doing so I illustrate how the detailed examination of Buddhist blogs provides an insight into different aspects of popular culture, of Buddhism on the internet and how new media is being used in the twenty first century.

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Chapter One - Introduction

1) Overview

In this thesis I define and examine three aspects of the self, namely self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within selected Buddhist weblogs (hereafter referred to as blogs)¹. In addition, a number of interconnected themes will be discussed, including religion, culture, technology and the individual². Moreover, this thesis is positioned in and contributes to the ongoing discourse within the evolving field of media, religion and culture,³ although I also acknowledge the tentative contribution to the field of cyberculture studies⁴.

With the introduction, development and increasing popularity of the internet in the late 1980s and 1990s, the discussion of the definition, composition and presentation of the self and identity online has emerged in culture and media studies. This is exemplified by Turkle in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995)⁵, where she concludes that online there are multiple selves or identities. In both the East and the West, the examination of the self has been studied by scholars in a wide range of disciplines and continues to be a significant topic of interest⁶.

¹ The definition for each category of the self is discussed in chapter four and within each of the case studies (chapter six, seven and eight).

² This is discussed in detail within chapter two.

³ See for example Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (1997) and Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (2002). Within chapter two and three I discuss the themes found within the field of Media, Religion and Culture.

⁴ See for example David Bell (2000, 2001, 2007) for a detailed examination of the different dimensions of Cyberculture.

⁵ Zimmerman explains Heidegger's (1889-1976) assertion that technology is found in relation to commodity, production and the self, asserting that technology "has become indispensable to us" (Zimmerman 1990: 219). In *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (2011), Turkle examines how we are using and relating to technology in the twenty-first century.

⁶ See for example Charles C. Taylor (1989) and Jerrold Seigel (2005) for a discussion of the self within the Western context. Within the Eastern context see Susan Hamilton (1996; 2000) and Jeanne Openshaw (2010) who respectively examine Buddhist and Hindu concepts of not-self (*anatta/anatman*) and self (*atman*).

However, there are noticeable differences between Eastern and Western models of the self, specifically in relation to whether or not there is some form of permanent or unchanging self. This difference is brought to the fore in the examination of the self presented in life writing⁷ and is addressed by Openshaw and Eakin, who maintain that the notion of the self is complex (Openshaw 2010: 212) and that the self is a non-fixed entity and a “kind of awareness in process” (Eakin 1999: x). By referring to life writing, I draw a parallel between blogging as a form of life writing; in doing so, I provide examples of the different dimensions of the self presented in the selected Buddhist blogs.

Therefore, the analysis of aspects of the self in selected Buddhist blogs will focus on the concept of the self which is positioned within late-modern society (Giddens 1991; Castells 2001) and is beyond individuality or the ‘I’. It is the composition of different dimensions of the self, including values and a sense of self-awareness (Taylor 1989); identity (Turkle 1995; Giddens 1991; Lovheim 2004); psychological aspects such as memory (Gyatso 1998; Damasio 2000); and the physical body (Damasio 2000; Hamilton 2000). These dimensions equate to a ‘self’ that is not a fixed permanent entity but is something much more complex and elusive. I will use the term ‘self’ throughout the thesis to capture these different aspects, unless I am specifically discussing the Buddhist conceptual issues of the self (as in chapter five) in which case, I will define the self as not-self (*anatta*).

Acknowledging the complexity of the task, an interdisciplinary approach is used to enable a thorough analysis of the three categories of the self within blogs. As the focus is on Buddhist blogs rather than blogs in general, the discussion of self is drawn from the Buddhist ontological and epistemological analysis of self. It is the conceptual issues presented in early Buddhist and the Theravada Abhidhamma scriptures which provide an interpretive framework for the analysis of aspects of the self online, including the analysis of self (not-self, *anatta*), the components of the

⁷ Jeanne Openshaw argues that it is generally accepted that “different cultures have diverse models of

self (*khandhas*) and the senses and sense spheres (*ayatanas* and *dhatas*)⁸. This provides a reference for much of the terminology referred to within the content of the Buddhist blogs and reinforces the need to contextualise the discussion of the self within the framework of Buddhist philosophy. In addition to this approach, theories from anthropology and material and visual cultural studies will be referred to, providing further insights into the discursive significance of aesthetics within blogs.

Drawing on theories in media and communication studies, I argue that the personal-diary style blogs provide a platform whereby the author is embedded in participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, 2009) while at the same time the blogger is likely to be undertaking a personal endeavour to present and to reflect on their personal experiences (de Laat 2008). Although the blog is participatory, there are also similarities in purpose to that of the hand written traditional diary. In sum, both formats of diary or autobiography provide a place where the author presents their thoughts as well as potentially gaining an insight and reflecting on their experiences, religious beliefs and identity⁹. On the other hand, the blog differs from the traditional diary as it is embedded in the participatory and social networking culture of the internet, a significant cultural variation which is discussed within later chapters¹⁰.

The importance of defining this style of blogging within the genre of life writing provides a theoretical basis in which to analyse the self online. In chapter seven, this argument is discussed further and is demonstrated by one of the bloggers who acknowledges that he used to keep a paper diary and now maintains a blog¹¹.

the self, and differing models of life-narration” (2010: 115).

⁸ This is discussed in chapter five.

⁹ Autobiography enables the construction of the self which is explored further in chapter six, seven and eight.

¹⁰ Manuel Castells (2001) and David Lyon (2002) provide a significant contribution to the examination of the network society. Whereas, Walter Ong presents a theory of the development of orality and literacy, commencing with the shift from primary orality (oral culture) to secondary orality (writing and electronic culture) ([1982] 2002).

¹¹ There are different types of blogs, including informative, political and journalistic but for the purpose of this thesis it is the personal-diary style blogs that will be referred to.

Therefore, both the paper and electronic diary (blog) provide a platform in which to examine aspects of the self; however, the blog differs from the traditional diary due to the technological and cultural characteristics associated with blogs. These characteristics can be categorised under three headings. Firstly, the aesthetics and design, which include the use of visual components to supplement the narrative¹²; secondly, the participatory characteristic, as a result of readers leaving comments and re-posting content to their own blog, website or social network page¹³; and lastly the performance aspect of blogs, which is highlighted by Lenhart and Fox, who state that 32% of bloggers state that they write for an audience (2006: 5).

As I have alluded to, the continuities and discontinues of life writing and blogging are many and so a number of other topics will be discussed, including online culture (Rheingold 1993; Castells 2001; Bell 2001), virtual faith and religion (Beaudoin 1998; Lee 2009) and different methodological approaches for the study of cyber culture (Hine 2000; Karaflogka 2002, 2006; Kozinets 2010). The discussion of blogs should be positioned within a cultural context and this is discussed by Hoover, who maintains that a culturalist approach is needed when examining the relationship between media and everyday life in order to understand “how the various elements of that context: media, symbols, social relations, identities, meanings, etc., relate to one another” (2006: 20). Turkle also reflects on the significance of the internet within society, asserting that “the internet emerged as a major cultural presence . . . the internet changed every aspect of life . . . it also changed how we saw ourselves and our relationships” (1995: 287). Therefore, it is within the context of the online culture known as the blogosphere that the relationship between the self, religion (specifically Buddhism), media (blogs) and culture will be examined in order to understand how blogs are used in everyday life and how different aspects of the self

¹² This may also include the use of paralanguage (emoticons) to visually depict emotions (Kozinets 2010: 23; Herring 2004).

¹³ Most blogs permit readers to leave comments against each of the chronological entries, known as posts. There is a relationship, through participation, between popular culture and mass media (which would now include new media) (Jenkins 2006: 180; Campbell 2010b: 9).

are presented and reflected on through using this medium (Certeau 1984; Rettberg 2008; Rosenberg 2009).

In conclusion, I demonstrate that blogs are used as a medium for self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self which emphasises the sensory and experiential aspect of human existence online. It is the examination of Buddhist blogs that provides a greater insight into popular culture, Buddhism on the internet and how new media is being used in the twenty first century. Lastly, I assert that there is a need for further investigation within the online context in relation to Asian religions, material and visual culture, as well as emotions and the senses in order to further elucidate how experience is constructed and expressed on the internet. I start the discussion by outlining the aim and research questions.

2) Aim

The aim of this thesis is to examine three Buddhist blogs in order to ascertain whether the personal-diary style blog can and is being used for self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self¹⁴. In doing so I examine the blog content and design in order to identify certain aspects of each of the bloggers lives, including their identity, political affiliation, religion, values, mental health issues and lived experiences. Accordingly, I demonstrate that blogs are used both in a similar and dissimilar manner to the traditional paper diary.

Furthermore, the examination of the self and Buddhist blogs is positioned within a religious and cultural context, where the religious context is two-fold as it focuses on selected Buddhist blogs as well as the conceptual issues of the self within early Theravada and Abhidhamma Buddhism¹⁵. Significantly, the ontological understanding for human existence is examined within the early Indian Theravada Buddhist framework which includes a reductionist approach for the analysis of the

¹⁴ Definition of each category is presented in chapter four (methodology).

¹⁵ From here forward, the term 'Buddhism' relates to early Indian Buddhism and Theravada Abhidhamma Buddhism, unless otherwise stated.

self, senses and experiences (Hamilton 1996, 2000; Ronkin 2005). The examination of the relationship between the self and experience is also highlighted by Turkle who states that “experiences on the internet . . . can only be understood as part of a larger cultural context” (1995: 10). Therefore, the relationship between technology, religion and culture begins to emerge and so in chapter two, I argue that there is a need to discuss these themes in conjunction.

Moreover, I demonstrate how my analysis of the self in the online genre of blogging provides a contribution to the field of media, religion and culture and in doing so, corroborates Hoover and Clark’s suggestion that religion and media “are meeting on common turf: the everyday world of lived experience” (2002: 2). This conclusion further supports Hamilton’s proposition that the analysis of experience is central to understanding *anatta*, not-self (1996: 198) and that “personal experience is the foundational aspect” of each human being (2000:6)¹⁶.

3) Research Questions

In this thesis I address four research questions. The first three questions pertain to the analysis of the three aspects of the self, blogs and the methodology. The final question focuses on where further research can be undertaken in relation to the study of Buddhism on the internet and this directly addresses the plea made by scholars such as Campbell, who asserts that there is a need for further examination of Asian religions online (2010b: 190). The following discourse sets out each question and provides details of the subsidiary topics discussed and the possible conclusions to be drawn in later chapters.

3.1) Research Question One (Religious Context)

The primary question is, “What are the conceptual issues of self within early Buddhism, specifically in relation to two of the five *khandhas*, namely *vedana* (feeling) and *samkhara* (volition)?” This question provides the religious context for

¹⁶ Susan Hamilton maintains that we need to forget the “issue of self-hood” and instead focus on how we relate in a “dependently originated world of experience” (2000: 23).

the thesis. Chapter five is dedicated to the discussion of the conceptual issues of self within early Buddhism, specifically in relation to reductionism of the individual, *anatta* (not-self), two of the five *khandhas* (components of *anatta*), that is *vedana* (feeling) and *samkhara* (volition and emotion), the senses and experience. I provide an insight into the analysis of the self and the framework for examining human experience. To elucidate further, the rationale, overview of the discussion and caveats are set out below.

The rationale for focusing on the self within Buddhism is first and foremost to acknowledge the importance that the analysis of the self has within Buddhist philosophy (Hamilton 1996, 2000; Siderits 2007); and secondly, to provide continuity and thus emphasising and utilising Buddhist terminology and frameworks to examine Buddhist blogs. As the selected blogs focus on the subject of Buddhism, many of the terms and topics discussed are explained within chapter five and so the discourse not only provides an examination of the conceptual issues of the self within Buddhism but it also provides a reference point for understanding the content discussed within the selected blogs. Without taking this approach the analysis would be incomplete and limited due to the application of a non-Buddhist framework to a Buddhist subject area. To further explain why the Buddhist analysis of the self is crucial to the discourse, I detail below an overview of chapter five.

Chapter five sets out the analysis of the conceptual issues of the self within early Indian Buddhism and the discussion can be summarised under three headings: the history; terminology; and the definition of the self. In relation to the first area, the historical background and the basic principles of Buddhism are presented in order to provide an overview of the historical development of Theravada and Abhidhamma Buddhist concepts, some of which originate from early Indian religion known as Brahmanism.

The second area relates to the specific terminology, including the definition of key terms and a discussion of the metaphorical use of language found in Buddhist scriptures. The importance of defining terminology is examined in relation to the specific components of *anatta* (not-self) known as the *khandhas* and the appropriate

rendering of the English word for ‘emotion’, ‘sensation’ and ‘feeling’. Referring to both Hamilton’s (1996, 2000) and Siderits’ (2007) analysis of two of the five *khandhas*¹⁷, I argue that the term ‘feeling’ is applied to *vedana-khandha* and ‘emotion’ is applied to *samkhara-khandha*, but only in certain conditions. Reference to the *khandhas* is further discussed in each of the case studies, where the category of the experiential self presented within blogs is analysed by using the Abhidhamma framework.

It is within the third area of the discussion that there is a more detailed exploration of reductionism of the self, where I refer to the theory posited by the Buddhist, Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE); the contemporary Western philosopher, Derek Parfit; and the scholar, Mark Siderits. I provide an explanation of reductionism of the individual presented by these individuals to further explain whether the self is comprised of five *khandhas* or whether or not the self is actually a sixth entity. In doing so, I refer to the Buddhist school known as the Pudgalavadins who argue that there is a sixth entity, a ‘self’ (Siderits 2007). Moreover, I accept Siderits’ conclusion that the self is a “conceptual fiction” and is therefore a label for an impermanent and conditioned entity which further emphasises the difficulty of applying the label ‘I’ or ‘self’ when discussing the individual (2007: 76). By clarifying the different components of the ‘self’ (not-self, *anatta*) within Buddhist philosophy, it provides a clearer definition of the attributes of *anatta*. It is these that are then discussed within the Abhidhamma framework and referred to throughout the discussion.

The detailed discussion of *anatta* and the metaphysical Abhidhamma framework includes the relationship between coming into contact (*phassa*) with an object, the senses (*ayatana*), sense spheres (*dhatu*) and cognition, which manifests in pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling (*tisso-vedana*). It is through this process that the person obtains an experience unique to them, and this is what renders the individual different from another person. This also illustrates that there is a developmental process taking place, so the self is not a fixed, unconditional entity labelled ‘self’ or

¹⁷ The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are *rupa* (material), *vedana* (feeling), *sanna* (perception), *samkhara* (volition), *vinnana* (consciousness) and collectively they are the five components comprising the self.

'I' (Hamilton 1996; Ronkin 2005). In addition, it is significant that this framework of sense, object, cognition and resulting experience is also examined within the field of visual culture studies (Pattison 2007). This provides continuity between these different academic fields and further strengthens the proposition that an interdisciplinary approach is needed for the examination of the internet and the self (Hojsggard and Warburg 2005: 9).

Finally, because this thesis is not positioned within the field of Asian Studies, it is necessary to outline three caveats. First, all diacritic marks have been omitted except in citations in order to ease reading. Second, I have deliberately chosen to refer to the Pali or Sanskrit terms where the rendering into English is not satisfactory. In addition, as I have already stated, many of the terms are often referred to in the blogs and therefore the use of Pali and Sanskrit provides a familiarity and a reference point¹⁸. Third, it is not my intention to provide an original translation of Buddhist texts, as this is beyond the scope of this thesis and so secondary sources will be relied upon.

3.2) Research Question Two

The second question focuses on the examination of the self on the internet and asks "How is the self depicted within blogs?" In order to address this question, three categories of the self have been identified and these are defined within chapter four and are then discussed in chapter six, seven and eight. The three ethnographic case studies include the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the three research periods¹⁹ and provide a descriptive analysis of each of the three blogs and bloggers. This includes examples of design, content and narrative to support the hypothesis that the characteristics of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self can be found within blogs.

¹⁸ A glossary of terms can be found in the appendices.

¹⁹ The three research periods are 1 July 2007 – 31 August 2007, 1 October 2007 – 31 January 2008 and 1 October 2008 – 30 November 2008.

It is from this discussion that a number of themes emerge, including life writing, participatory culture, privacy, exhibitionism and religion on the internet. The theme of life writing is important for the understanding of what motivates a person to blog and how blogs are providing an alternative to the traditional diary. A number of scholars are referred to, including Ong ([1982] 2002), Eakin (1999; 2004), Rettberg (2008), Rosenberg (2009) and Openshaw (2010), all of whom provide an insight into life writing. Referring to the arguments presented by these scholars, it is possible to draw conclusions as to the importance of life writing in relation to the development and understanding of the self online.

A secondary theme that emerges is that of exhibitionism and privacy issues. The significance of writing about personal details relating not only to the life of the blogger but also to members of their family or friends can result in moral and ethical issues (de Laat 2008). An element related to exhibitionism is the performance aspect of blogging and the affirmation from readers, as blogs are written with the “expectation of having readers”, which differs from the private act of keeping a paper diary (Rettberg 2008: 58)²⁰. This is further corroborated by the fact that all three blogs have been nominated for or have been awarded a *Blogisattva* award²¹.

The final theme to be tackled is Buddhism on the internet. The three bloggers focus on the subject of Buddhism and so the question arises as to whether or not the blogger uses the blog to affirm their religious identity; or as an instrument for religious practice; or even as a pedagogical tool. Each of the three bloggers focus on their religious identity and their opinion of religion; and I refer to Lee’s (2009) analysis of Won Buddhist monks and nuns who use blogging as a means of religious practice in order to illustrate whether or not the three blogs depict the bloggers’ religiousness, whether the blog is used as a medium for religious practice, or whether the blog is purely informative.

²⁰ I discuss performance further in the concluding chapter and refer to Rosenberg (2009: 238).

²¹ Blogisattva Award, <http://www.blogisattva.org/>, accessed 22 September 2010.

3.3) Research Question Three

The third question relates to the methodology and contains two parts. Firstly, “can an inter-disciplinary approach, including Buddhist philosophy, anthropology, and material and visual culture studies be used for the study of self and blogs?” secondly, “what insights does such a methodology bring to the study of self online?” Both questions are reflected on throughout the thesis and are specifically addressed in chapter four.

The methodology has been singled out as an important area as it is crucial to determine a suitable and robust approach for the study of the self online within a religious context. This is corroborated by Hojsgaard and Warburg who maintain that “religion and the internet will continuously be a topic that needs to be addressed by scholars with very different approaches . . . from different backgrounds and with diverse methodological preferences” (2005: 9).

As there are a number of themes presented within the thesis, I apply a six stage process for the selection and analysis of the blogs. The analysis identifies a number of approaches, including ethnography and theories from Buddhist studies and material and visual culture studies. For example, Morgan (2005) has examined visual and material culture found within a number of religions, including Buddhism, and he provides a definition of aesthetics rendered as sensation rather than the philosophy of the beautiful (2009: 141). This directly contributes to the discourse of defining the terms ‘emotion’, ‘sensation’, and ‘feeling’. Also, I identify some of the parallels between the examination of sense, object and cognition that is identified within the fields of neuroscience (Damasio 2000, 2004), visual culture studies (Pattison 2007) and Abhidhamma Buddhism (Ronkin 2005). This similarity highlights the benefits of applying an interdisciplinary approach²².

²² The examination focuses on the relationship between the eye, object and cognition which results in the unique experience for the individual (Hamilton 1996; 2000; Pattison, 2007: 48). The application of the Buddhist Theravada Abhidhamma framework for the analysis of the self (*anatta*), the components of the self (*khandhas*) and the senses and sense spheres (*ayatanas* and *dhatas*) are used in order to analyse aspects of the self online (Ronkin 2005; Siderits 2007).

3.4) Research Question Four

The concluding question considers, “what further research is required in relation to Buddhism on the internet?” This highlights the potential for further analysis which is beyond the scope of this thesis and directly relates to Dawson’s and Cowan’s plea that “We need studies of the nature and quality of people’s experiences doing religious things online. In this regard we need surveys and interviews of users and case studies of groups, Web sites, or particular activities” (2004: 10). In addition, Ostrowski (2006: 102) and Campbell (2010b: 190) have made the plea that there is a need for further examination, especially in relation to Asian religions online.

Therefore, this thesis directly contributes to but also highlights the areas which have yet to be examined in detail, including Asian religions online, emotions, behaviour and experiences in relation to aspects of the self negotiated offline and online. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine religious experience mediated online; instead I discuss blogging as a medium for expressing religious experience or presenting a religious identity²³. In addition, it is not my intention to discuss whether the religious experience expressed is genuine or whether there is a level of authoritativeness of the blogs examined²⁴ (Hookway 2008). If such an undertaking was to be carried out, it would require a much larger sample of blogs and it would require a very different methodological approach, which would possibly resonate with Campbell’s examination of authority and authoritativeness in Christian blogs (2010a). In answering, the fourth research question I highlight that there is still much that needs to be examined. This needs to be a continual process in order to parallel the pace of growth and change in relation to cyber behaviour and culture (Dawson and Cowan 2004).

²³ In *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*, Stewart Hoover discusses the difference between “mediated religion” and “religious media” (2002: 4).

²⁴ Kaycee Nicole purported to be a cancer patient but this blog exposed her as a hoax. This is a classic example of where the issue of authenticity of identity raises a number of considerations for the examination of the blogging culture as the implied trust has been broken (de Laat 2008; Rosenberg 2009: 236).

4) Structure of the thesis

I have discussed the associated chapters in relation to the research questions but it is useful to provide a clearer outline of the entire structure of the thesis. The thesis is comprised of nine chapters, a glossary of terms, bibliography and a webography. In chapter two there are a number of definitions to ensure clarity in later chapters as well as providing a context for the interconnected themes of culture, religion, technology and the individual. In addition, I introduce the fourth research question and topic of possible future research. I identify that there is a need for further research into the categorisation and typography of different websites²⁵, as well as the mapping of the wider Buddhist cyberspace in order to understand the nuances of Buddhism on the internet²⁶.

The methodology and literature review have each been allocated their own chapter in order to accommodate the different subject areas required for this study. Chapter three provides the literature review which is divided into four main themes, namely self, religion, the internet and culture, thus mirroring the interconnected themes within chapter two. Chapter four outlines the methodology and details my six stage process for identifying, collecting and analysing the blog data. Consideration is also given to the potential ethical issues when examining human subjects.

In chapter five, I examine the conceptual issues of the self in early Buddhism and the Abhidhamma. Significantly, I define the terms ‘emotion’, ‘sensation’ and ‘feeling’, as well as providing an overview of the reductionism of the person posited by Parfit ([1984] 1987), Duerlinger (2003) and Siderits (2007). The concluding section of the chapter presents the Abhidhamma framework for the analysis of the self, the senses and experience. This discussion develops further in chapter six, seven and eight, as the framework is used to examine the category of the experiential self within the selected Buddhist blogs.

²⁵ Reference is made to Karaflogka’s typology of websites (2002, 2006). Anastacia Karaflogka (2002, 2006) provides a typology of websites which includes blogs as a sub category but I think it would be beneficial to drill down into this sub category and produce a typology of blogs.

²⁶ Gary Bunt has undertaken a similar exercise within the Islamic and Muslim cyberspace and presents this in *i-Muslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (2009).

In chapters six, seven and eight I present three ethnographic case studies which address the second question, “how is the self depicted in blogs?” The examination includes the analysis of two hundred and twenty seven posts in order to draw conclusions in relation to the three aspects of the self, that is, self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. Consequently, a number of themes are introduced and discussed, including participatory culture, religious seekership, Generation X and motivations for blogging. In addition to the analysis of the blog content and aesthetics, further insight is gleaned from the email correspondence with each blogger in order to understand why they blog, what they blog about and their use of specific images within the blog.

The ninth and final chapter provides a selective comparative overview of the three bloggers in relation to how they use their blogs to depict the different aspects of the self. The concluding chapter also directly addresses the fourth research question and identifies where further research can and should be carried out in order to contribute to the field of media, religion and culture.

5) The Study of Media, Religion and Culture

There are two strands to the discussion of media, religion and culture. First, there is the relationship between these three themes which is discussed within chapter two; secondly there is the academic field related to the study of these topics, it is this that I now want to briefly focus on²⁷.

As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter as well as in the literature review, there are a number of scholars from a range of disciplines who are examining different aspects of media, religion and culture. Specifically, they are focusing on methodological issues (Karaflogka 2000, 2006; Kozinets 2010) and four themes, namely ritual, community, identity and authority (for example, Campbell 2010b; Baffelli et al. 2011). Consequently, they are answering questions presented by

²⁷ Further discussion of the methodological approach is discussed within chapter four and refers to Hojsgaard’s and Warburg’s statement that due to the complexity of studying the internet an interdisciplinary approach is required (2005: 7).

Dawson and determining why the internet is being used, how it is being used, and what implications or considerations are emerging (in Cowan and Hadden 2000: 26-28).

Although this thesis focuses on media, religion and culture, I also want to briefly discuss the academic study of cyberculture in order to highlight the potential contribution that this thesis provides to this field. Cyberculture theorists examine the online society and behaviour as well as subcultures associated with cyberculture, such as cyborgs and I discuss aspects of this within chapter three. In parallel with the academic study of media, religion and culture, cyberculture studies appeared in the 1990s and includes a range of disciplines which examine how cyberspace is being negotiated and the characteristics of the individual and culture that manifest as a result. Bell and Kennedy argue that “Thinking about cyberculture involves thinking about representations, meanings, images: about the ways in which we assemble particular narratives about how these new technologies have changed, are changing, or will change our lives” (2007: 6). Moreover this introduces the discussion of technological determinism and how technology is being used in everyday lives and so I refer to Castells (2001), Certeau (1984) and others who examine how technology such as blogs are being used (Rettberg 2008; Rosenberg 2009; Turkle 2011).

In conclusion, I illustrate how the examination of the self and Buddhist blogs provides an insight into popular culture, Buddhism on the internet and how new media is being used in the twenty first century. Furthermore, I recognise that this field is still developing and that there are a number of areas which still need to be addressed.

Before leaving this discussion, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the history of the internet and blogs, as well as defining the term ‘new media’ (Campbell, 2010b: 9) in order to understand both the historical and cultural context of blogs.

6) History of the Internet and blogs

A detailed discussion of the history of the internet²⁸ has been provided by many scholars, including Hafner and Lyon (1996) and Castells (2001), both of whom discuss its growth and the way in which it is used and has become part of daily life for many people²⁹. The phenomenal growth is illustrated in the increase in usage, as the number of people accessing the internet has risen from 360,985, 492 on 31 Dec 2000 to 1,966,514,816 on 30 June 2010, resulting in 480.4% growth within the ten years from 2000-2010³⁰. The impact that the internet has had and is having on society has been compared to the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century (Eisenstein 1983: xiii) or the television in twentieth century³¹. For Ong “The shift from orality to literacy and on to electronic processing engages social, economic, political, religious and other structures” (Ong [1982] 2002: 3). These “structures”, especially the social and religious ones, will be discussed throughout the thesis as they are necessary for understanding the correlation between media, religion, culture and the individual.

The internet culture is complex and has many different features but for the purpose of this thesis it is the feature known as blogs that will be analysed, as they have been present for a number of years and the personal-diary style blogs provide a basis in which the self can be presented online³². Blogs first appeared in the late 1990s and

²⁸ The concept of the internet was borne in 1969, when the US military commissioned the creation of a computer network, known as ARPANET. It was not until much later that ARPANET developed and was introduced into the academic and public domain which spawned the first stages of the internet as we know it today.

²⁹ 84% of internet users in Britain stated that “technology is making things better” and 94% stated that “The internet is an efficient means for finding information” (Dutton et al. 2009: 68). The internet is not yet accessible for some of the population. Dutton et al. provides possible reasons for why there is a digital divide within Britain, including social and economic reasons (Dutton et al. 2009: 4)

³⁰ Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed 21 May 2011.

³¹ Elizabeth Eisenstein (1983: xiii) proposes that there was a rise in literacy due to the introduction of the printing press and the printing and distribution of bibles in Western Europe. As a result the relationship between the religious institution and the congregation changed due to the introduction of printing and technology.

³² Different stages of the development of the web can be referred to as web 1.0 (initial stages); web 2.0 where there is an interactive aspect; and the current generation is referred to as web 3.0 which is the use of the internet and includes characteristics such as participatory culture, tagging, intelligent search facilities and personalisation.

can be described as a webpage that enables the blogger (author) to post information (upload information to the internet) on any subject, in chronological order, through the use of blog software. There are a number of specialised blog applications, including Blogger³³ and WordPress³⁴ which are two of the most recognised blog platforms³⁵.

The exponential growth of blogging has been examined by Lenhart and Fox who state that in 2006 there were twelve million Americans keeping a blog and fifty-seven million Americans reading blogs (2006: 11). In Britain, the Oxford Internet Institute stated that in 2007 there were 12% of internet users maintaining a blog; by 2009 this had risen to 22% (Dutton et al. 2009: 28)³⁶. The uptake of blogging is wide spread, which is corroborated by Technorati³⁷ which in November 2010 published an overview of the percentage of bloggers based on geographic location. They stated that 49% were from the US, 29% from the EU and 29% were collectively from Canada, Mexico, APAC and South America³⁸.

In addition to the popularity of blogging, there are also a number of other applications launched on the internet and for mobile technology³⁹, including social

³³ Blogger was launched in 1999 (Rettberg 2008: 27) <https://www.blogger.com/>, last accessed 30 May 2011.

³⁴ Wordpress, <http://wordpress.org/>, accessed 21 May 2010.

³⁵ Technorati in 'State of the Blogosphere 2010' identifies Wordpress and Blogger as the most popular blog applications, <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/how-technology-traffic-and-revenue-day/>, accessed 17 January 2011.

³⁶ It is not possible to directly compare statistics from PEW and the Oxford Internet Institute, as the method of collection and analysis of data varies, however the statistics indicate that there is a simultaneous growth in blogging in both America and Britain.

³⁷ Technorati, <http://technorati.com>, accessed 13 September 2010.

³⁸ Technorati, 'State of the Blogosphere 2010', <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-2010-introduction/>, accessed 17 January 2011.

³⁹ The introduction of mobile technology such as the i-Phone or Blackberry has enabled users to easily upload blog posts or Tweets to Twitter. Consequently, the blogging culture is still strong, as "40% of bloggers who report blogging from their smartphone . . . say that it has changed the way they blog, encouraging shorter and more spontaneous posts" (Technorati, 'State of the Blogosphere 2010'), <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-2010-introduction/>, accessed 17 January 2011.

network sites such as Facebook⁴⁰ and the micro-blogging application known as Twitter⁴¹. Both provide a platform in which people can post short snippets of information in real time⁴². Social networks and micro-blogging are slightly different from the traditional style of blog posts which often require time and a willingness to write the lengthier posts (Lenhart and Fox 2006). On the other hand, Rosenberg argues that applications such as Twitter have not diminished the interest in maintaining blogs; rather it has emphasised that there is still a willingness to discuss experiences and information in lengthy posts and so these new applications will not kill blogging but “patterns of blogging will change” (2009: 334)⁴³. This is also maintained by journalists and bloggers who have suggested that there is not a ‘death of blogging’, rather newer forms of blogging, such as micro-blogging have either superseded the blog or provided an additional platform in which to detail experiences or provide information⁴⁴. This is reinforced by Technorati who highlight that 72% of bloggers use Twitter to promote their blog and as a result there is a link between the traditional blog and the micro-blog⁴⁵. Arguably, it is the uptake of applications as well as the impact of mobile technology that needs to be examined in order to fully capture and comprehend the development of the internet and blog culture⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com>, was launched in February 2004.

⁴¹ Twitter, <http://twitter.com/>, was launched in March 2006.

⁴² A current debate is the use of blogs in journalism and political discussion. The rationale for journalists using blogging as a medium for news is that it provides real time journalism and enables a number of other blogs to re-post or re-tweet the posts, such as those in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attack. Many high profile individuals, including religious and political leaders also post to blogs or Twitter, such as the Dalai Lama and Barak Obama, who both have Twitter accounts.

⁴³ *The Economist* on 24 June 2010, reported that blogs are growing slowly, however there is a rise in specialised blogs, http://www.economist.com/node/16432794?story_id=16432794, accessed 1 September 2010.

⁴⁴ *The Guardian*, ‘Reports of blogging’s death have been greatly exaggerated’, 13 July 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jul/13/cory-doctorow-death-of-blogging-exaggerated>, accessed 17 January 2011.

⁴⁵ Technorati, ‘State of the Blogosphere 2010’, <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/what-topics-and-trends-day-2/page-3/>, accessed 17 January 2011.

⁴⁶ *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* provides a number of articles on the use of new media, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/>, accessed 17 January 2011.

The internet's pace of growth requires redefining existing and introducing new terminology. This is exemplified with the introduction of the term 'new media'. This umbrella term includes blogs and social network sites such as Facebook. Campbell defines 'new media' as the "generation of media which emerges on the contemporary landscape and offers opportunities for social interaction, information sharing, and mediated communication" and that it is "emerging forms of newer digital, networked technologies" (2010b: 9). Therefore, blogs can be defined as 'new media' as they are a social, informational, networked technology and are entrenched in a social and cultural context. The next chapter provides a more detailed look at the relationship between culture, religion, the internet and the individual.

Chapter Two - Defining: Culture, Internet, Religion and the Self

There are a number of definitions presented in this chapter in order to acknowledge and tackle the complexity of the subject matter, as well as providing a context for the examination of aspects of the self within selected Buddhist blogs. The discussion outlines four themes, namely culture, internet, religion and the self. The discourse commences with the largest topic, culture, and is then followed by ‘informational’ which includes a discussion of the internet, cyberspace and modes of online communication. After which, I focus on the definition of religion and religion on the internet and I provide four examples of websites in order to illustrate the challenge of categorising websites. Lastly I discuss the ‘singular’ which includes a definition and examination of both the ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Consequently, the discussion and presentation of the above definitions will provide clarity when discussing these topics in later chapters.

Within the latter part of this chapter I will provide an overview of Buddhism on the internet and as a result this introduces areas for consideration for further research and so directly addresses the fourth research question. One possible area for consideration is a need for a typology in order to classify different types of Buddhist blogs. A second area that I highlight is the need to map out the wider Buddhist cyberspace⁴⁷ in order to tackle the question of who is using the internet, for what and why they are using it. Both propositions address the issues of studying religion and the internet and which are raised by Dawson and Cowan (2004: 10-11) and Campbell (2010b: 190).

Therefore, in this chapter I provide a number of definitions to ensure clarity and context, whilst also encapsulating the intrinsic relationship between these themes.

⁴⁷ Gary Bunt (2009) in *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, has started to map the Muslim and Islamic cyberspace.

The interrelationship of the four main themes will permeate the discussion in later chapters and will further emphasise the importance of discussing blogging within the wider cultural context.

1) Working Definitions

The working definitions are positioned under four headings which are: Culture, Informational, Religion and the Singular. Furthermore, it is under these headings that a number of additional topics are examined including: popular culture, Generation X, visual culture, the internet, cyberspace, online communication, religion online/online religion, self and identity.

By providing meaningful definitions I aim to “provide a useful orientation, or reorientation, of thought, such that an extended unpacking of them [definitions] can be an effective way of developing and controlling a novel line of enquiry” (Geertz [1973] 2000: 90). Furthermore, by providing these definitions it will emphasise why it is important to consider how they relate and interrelate. A visual representation of this is illustrated in the diagram below.

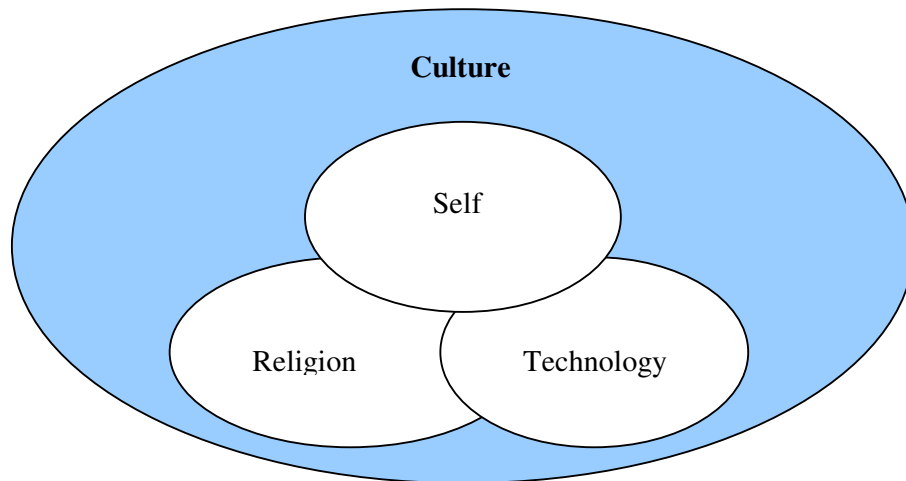


Figure 1 – The relationship between culture, technology, religion, and self

In the above diagram, culture is positioned out with the three interconnected themes as I argue that, culture is influenced by them and also impacts on them. For example there can be a cultural impact *on* religion, self and technology or it can be the position of religion, self and technology *in* culture. The continuity and discontinuity between these factors can result in a sudden or systemic change to the other factors. Generally a cultural change would not be instantaneous. However, other themes, such as technology, may result in a more immediate change or impact and this would likely cause a catalyst for change in the other themes such as self (identity), religion or culture⁴⁸.

An example of technological change impacting on religion and culture is considered by Ostrowski who states that the growth of online Buddhism may change as more people engage with the cybersangha (online Buddhist community), consequently the online community may dissipate the “ethnic and cultural differences” (2006: 102). Ostrowski asserts that further research is needed in order to fully appreciate the relationship between technology, culture and religion (2006: 102) and so it is necessary to continue to examine how these themes are constructed and related to one another.

Therefore, this model provides a visual depiction of the demarcation and also the integration between the different themes within this thesis. It is with reference to this model that I provide a categorisation and analysis of the self (self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self) with the aid of the Buddhist Abhidhamma framework (religion), in order to examine selected Buddhist blogs (technology) set within the online society (culture).

⁴⁸ I identified in chapter one that the introduction of the printing press had an impact on Christianity (Eisenstein 1983: xiii).

2) Culture

I begin the discussion by focusing on the definition of culture as it is complex and “remains one of those words that can be exasperating in its inclusiveness” (Gallagher 2003: 13). It is, therefore, important to provide a definition that will be applicable to the discussion of internet studies and religion and although I start the discussion by focusing on the definition of culture in general, I will also discuss popular culture, Generation X and visual culture. Furthermore, reference will be made to a number of theories within cultural and media studies⁴⁹ and I will highlight points that will be examined further within the methodology chapter and the three case studies.

When considering the definition of culture, the first component that is to be included is behaviour which is highlighted by Castells, who asserts that “[b]y culture I understand a set of values and beliefs informing behaviour” (2001: 36). In addition to behaviour there is the symbolic component, which Geertz states as “the culture concept in which I adhere has neither multiple referents nor, so far as I can see, any unusual ambiguity: it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (Geertz [1973] 2000: 89). Gallagher also acknowledges the relationship between man and culture and focuses on “how culture shapes our self-images and how we shape culture” (2003: 2). From this brief introduction I have outlined three definitions of culture and so it is clear that a number of associated topics are beginning to emerge, such as behaviour, symbols and the individual. In order to explain this further, Geertz ([1973] 2000) discusses the relationship between religion and culture and how they shape one and other.

Geertz examines the Javanese culture of which he provides an anthropological account of Javanese funeral rituals and discusses the relationship between social structure and culture. He focuses on the difference between culture and social

⁴⁹ Cybercultural theory will also be discussed within the methodology chapter.

structures and maintains that culture will be an “ordered system of meaning and symbols”, whereas the social structure exists within the culture and is “the pattern of social interaction” ([1973] 2000: 144). Geertz concludes that the conflict between the Permai and Masjumi⁵⁰ caused unrest and disruption to the funeral procedures based on “an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction, an incongruity due to persistence in an urban environment of a religious symbol system adjusted to peasant social structure” ([1973] 2000: 169). He presents not only the complications arising from a religious political situation but the cultural and individualistic appropriation that religion and symbolism has within a community. To continue the framing of culture and religion but within a western context I now turn to the discussion of popular culture and Generation X.

2.1) Popular Culture and Generation X

Whilst the wider cultural context is important, the discussion of ‘popular culture’ in contemporary society is significant for understanding the sociological aspect of internet studies and as a “context for religious meaning and exploration” (Hoover 2006: 3). Popular culture has explicitly brought religion and spirituality into the secular arena by using different mediums, such as the television or the internet, so that people can express and seek spiritual meaning. Popular culture can be said to have three functions, it can be a “focus for social interaction”, “a means of escapism” and lastly “a means by which people communicate about their ‘real life’ experiences” (Lynch 2002: 66-67). There are other cultural and communication studies theories which are pertinent to the discussion of popular culture, such as the theory of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), examining experience in every day

⁵⁰ Javanese religious tradition “is a composite of Indian, Islamic, and indigenous Southeast Asian elements” ([1973] 2000: 147). The Indian religious component includes both Hinduism and Buddhism. There were two contrasting political/religious groups in Modjokuto, namely Permai which is a combination of indigenous political ideology and religious practice and Masjumi, which was Islamic focused ([1973] 2000).

life (Certeau 1984) and the themes of community, identity and authority (Campbell 2010a)⁵¹.

Before discussing the notion of everyday experience and the search for spiritual meaning, it is important to identify the generation (Beaudoin 1998: 22) or specific attitude (Lynch 2002: 30) of those who are associated with popular culture and specifically the group of individuals known as Generation X. As a result, noticeable parallels emerge in relation to those who are likely to blog about their personal experiences and search for religious meaning.

To explain this point further, it can be said that popular culture is associated with the generation who were born in the 1960s and 1970s, which are sometimes referred to as Generation X or GenX⁵². For this generation, television, media, video games and the internet were influential and provided an alternative source to seek spiritual meaning. Beaudoin maintains that popular culture replaced institutional relationships and provided a “surrogate clergy” (1998: 21) and that there is a “profound symbiosis” between popular culture and this specific group (1998: 22). To understand the characteristics of Generation X, he identifies four traits which are: (i) a “suspicion of religious institutions”, (ii) an “emphasis on the sacred nature of experience”, (iii) “the religious dimension of suffering”, and (iv) “an exploration of faith and ambiguity” (1998: 42-43). Beaudoin positions these four characteristics within the context of the “metatheme” of “virtual religiousness” (1998: 42-42).

His argument that there is a correlation between popular culture, religion, and those born between the 1960s and 1970s, would for the most part, encompass the

⁵¹ Heidi Campbell (2010b) discusses religious community, identity and authority in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and how they negotiate using new media, for example the use of the mobile phone and the internet.

⁵² The 1980s and early 1990s is associated with the ‘latchkey kids’ who took care of themselves as both parents worked, there was more disposable income and religion took on a lesser role than in previous generations (Beaudoin 1998: 21).

demographic of many bloggers and specifically those identified within this thesis⁵³. Lynch disputes Beaudoin's conclusion and he argues that Generation X should not be associated with a "generational cohort" and instead it should be associated with a specific attitude (Lynch 2002: 53)⁵⁴. Lynch states that "Generation X' view of the world is in fact a particular attitude towards this process of making sense of who we are and how we should live in the contemporary world" (Lynch 2002: 30).

He continues his examination of Generation X and Popular Culture in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (2007). It is here that he refers to popular culture in relation to the study of religion and media, arguing "that the study of religion, media and popular culture can make a valuable contribution to the contested debate about the nature of 'religion' by exploring the nature and significance of sacred objects within human cultures" (2007: 4). Significantly, Lynch argues that the term "'popular culture' is useful but perhaps it is time to simply use the term 'culture', as the designation of 'popular' not only results in "the ideologically-loaded binary of high/low culture" but marginalises the importance of the study of "cultures of everyday life" (2007: 162). In addition, he maintains that there is a need for "greater methodological sophistication and rigour" (2007: 125) as "the study of lived, popular cultures can inform our broader concepts of religion and the sacred" and can help us to map religion within modern cultures, as well as examine how media is used to develop religious identities and communities⁵⁵ (2007: 158).

Both Beaudoin and Lynch provide an insight into popular culture and Generation X by referring to the definition and the contextualisation of these topics. I focus on similar concepts and conclusions and I highlight the relationship between 'everyday

⁵³ 54% of bloggers are under the age of thirty (Lenhart & Fox 2006: 5).

⁵⁴ This opposing argument between the 'generational' and 'attitude' definition of Generation X is discussed in more detail in case study one.

⁵⁵ Lynch refers to Geertz's definition of culture, which I have referred to above.

experience', symbols and the individual. This enables a greater understanding of the wider cultural context of how the self is depicted within blogs.

2.2) Culture and Experience

As noted earlier, there are many components in rendering a definition for culture and this includes the human experiential aspect. To explain this point, I outline what is meant by 'experience' in relation to culture by referring to Generation X and their attraction to religious tattooing as well as providing examples of experience set within both a religious and cultural context. It is in section five (The Singular: Self and Identity) that the discussion focuses on experience in relation to the self and this introduces the related topics of 'emotion', 'feeling' and 'consciousness'. In chapter five a more detailed account of these topics are outlined within the context of early Buddhist philosophy (Hamilton, 1996, 2000; Ronkin 2005).

To begin I want to outline what I mean by the relationship between culture and experience and so I refer to Morgan who defines culture as "the set of symbols that register concepts, ideas or feelings generating from the interior of human beings" (2008: xiii). Morgan introduces the concept of human experience and feelings which may or may not be defined as religious experience but it can be defined as lived experience. For the purpose of this thesis it is primarily lived experience that will be focused on, however, there are descriptions of religious experiences presented within the blogs and so I want to briefly outline what is meant by religious experience.

There are two prominent scholars who focus on this topic, namely Rudolph Otto (1958) and William James (1985). Both stress the importance of the religious experience in relation to self discovery; Otto focuses on the transcendent 'Holy', whereas James focuses on the inner human experience. Accordingly, it is the critical terms of 'belief', 'the sacred', 'religion' and also 'experience' that is required when discussing the relationship between religious experience, the individual and culture. Within the religious context, "experience is not something that takes place prior to

cultural practices and expressions, but that religious experience is constructed precisely through engagement with particular cultural practices and resources – whether through popular religious iconography, music, dance or other media. The sacred is encountered in and through culture, not in some privatized, mystical space that is separate from it” (Lynch: 2007, 137).

A number of scholars have identified the importance of material and visual culture in relation to religious experience (see Morgan 2005; 2009) and they have identified objects, whether visual or physical artefacts as significant in the manifestation of religious experience. This has been proposed by scholars in the field of neuropsychology (Damasio 2000), Buddhist Studies (Ronkin 2005), art history (Morgan 2005; 2009) and Religious Studies (Pattison 2007). Later in this chapter, I discuss the importance of visual culture but before doing so, there is a specific example that illustrates the connection between experience and culture.

For some Generation Xers the custom of tattooing has been adopted and has become associated with popular culture⁵⁶. The art of tattooing has not always been so easily accepted and for some it has been despised in both the religious and non-religious community and so attitudes to tattoos frequently change and are culturally contextualised. For some, the tattoo can be used as an identity marker and religious symbol which may or may not be culturally acceptable (Beaudoin 1998; Flory and Miller 2000). For Generation X, the tattoo not only represents cultural and possible religious meaning but it also depicts a lived experience as the act of obtaining a tattoo is a physical experience (Beaudoin 1998:77). An example of the relationship between experience, symbolism and religious meaning is further illustrated in case study one, where the blogger uploads a photograph of his religious tattoo so that his audience can view and comment on it. This particular blogger engages with and communicates with his audience (participatory culture) and it can be argued that it is

⁵⁶ The rationale for acknowledging this as a custom, relates to Beaudoin’s analysis of tattooing as a “rite of passage” in relation to GenXers (1998: 77).

the participatory aspect of popular culture which enables a person to make sense of everyday life (Lynch 2002: 65)

In order to understand what is meant by ‘experience’ I provide other examples of lived experience which are presented within the three blogs. Significantly, it is the everyday experience which is examined in relation to the category of self presentation. Everyday experience is defined in relation to two factors, that is, the characteristics of (popular) culture and the experiential action which can assist with meaning making, such as the formulation of identity or community⁵⁷.

In conjunction with the analysis of everyday experience presented in blogs, I discuss blogs in the genre of life writing and as a medium that assists with this experiential pursuit. It can be argued that the writing process enables reflection and presentation of the self into a wider community, which may or may not be participatory in nature (Jenkins 2006; Rettberg 2008). In addition to the narrative within blogs there is also the visual content and so I refer to the theories presented in visual culture studies in order to examine the importance and relevance of the design and inclusion of images in blogs.

2.3) Visual Culture

Material and visual culture are relatively new fields of study and they provide theories for understanding the relationship between objects, experience, the individual and society, which I introduced earlier in this chapter. Material culture can be defined as the social and cultural use and impact of objects, where “materiality *mediates* belief, that material objects and practices both enable it and enact it” (Morgan 2010: 12). Similar to material culture is visual culture which can be defined as “images as well as the rituals, epistemologies, tastes, sensibilities, and cognitive

⁵⁷ Popular culture includes the use of technology, religious seeking, identity formation, community and communication.

frameworks. . . inform visual experiences [and] help construct the worlds people live in and care about” (Morgan 2005: 25)⁵⁸. Morgan argues that images and objects inform our experiences as “sensation touches on all of these by recording, translating, interpreting, compensating, and transforming what may be ambivalently referred to as ‘experience’” (Morgan 2010: 13). Experience manifesting as a result of engaging with and cognising material and visual objects is one of the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of blogs, as crucially the experiential aspect of human existence is directly related to the sensory engagement with the world (Hamilton 1996, 2000; Damasio 2000; Ronkin 2005; Pattison 2007).

Therefore, understanding visual culture is beneficial, as on the internet the image is just as prevalent if not more so than that found in the offline world. Online, the image compensates for senses which are absent, such as touch, smell and taste and so the visual component is heightened and emphasised, as “images get our attention and maintain a larger portion of it because our memories and feelings are intermingled with the brain’s sensation of sensory stimuli” (Morgan 2005: 39). In the context of religion and visual culture “one gets much further in understanding religion by examining how people combine what they say with what they do and see” (Morgan 2005: 8). Accordingly, the analysis of images online enables us to understand experience, belief systems and the analysis of the self⁵⁹. It is from a material and visual cultural approach that the use of visual images offline can in fact be helpful for interpreting Buddhist images online.

For example, Buddhist imagery offline can be found in a number of locations and environments, including the home, the temple and on the streets. Images can include the Buddha Lion image in Chiang Mai, where the material image of the Buddha is paraded through the streets in the hope that it will bring rain (Swearer 2004: 5).

⁵⁸ My emphasis in brackets.

⁵⁹ David Morgan discusses the concept of belief in relation to material culture and religion and states “Rather than marginalizing belief, we need a more capacious account of it, one that looks to the embodied, material features of lived religion” (2010: 7).

Another visual and tactile ritual⁶⁰ is the ‘opening of the eyes’ of the Buddha, where the eyes of the image are physically opened symbolising life within the image⁶¹. This produces a direct connection between the image, the sense of sight and the participant (Swearer 2004: 5). Within certain schools of Buddhism, the image is integral to the “belief system”, as it is through the relationship with the relics⁶² and images that there is the attainment of merit for the participant (Swearer 2004: 16, 24). The question that arises is whether or not the image online brings the same meritorious benefits for the viewer and if so, this suggests that there is a relationship and negotiation between offline and online culture and religion⁶³.

Drawing from the above discussion (culture, popular culture, Generation X, experience and visual culture), I propose a working definition for ‘culture’ that is intrinsic for understanding the concept of the self - culture can be defined as the social context in which the postmodern definition of self can be defined by and mediated through technology, resulting in experience (religious or otherwise) whereby the individual’s beliefs and identity are developed and expressed⁶⁴.

3) Informational: Internet, Cyberspace and Communication

The second of the four themes is technology and specifically the internet. This theme is presented under the rubric of ‘informational’ which includes the topics of the

⁶⁰ Stephen Pattison in *Seeing Things: deepening relations with visual artefacts* (2007), discusses the importance of haptic vision, which is the relationship between touch and vision.

⁶¹ Diana Eck (1998) discusses the importance of images in South Asian religions in *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*.

⁶² Gregory Schopen has written extensively about the relic cult within Buddhism, the most prominent work being, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (1997).

⁶³ An example of this is the offline and online prayer wheel, which I discuss in the first case study: *The Buddhist Blog*.

⁶⁴ The rationale for stating a ‘postmodern’ rather than a ‘modernist’ definition of self is that it moves the discussion into the realm of the ‘virtual self’ and so could include the discussion of cyborgs and artificial intelligence, as discussed by Turkle (1995). In addition, Burnett and Marshall (2003: 62) discuss cybercultural theory in relation to postmodernism and identity formation and this is reflected within the working definition of culture.

internet, cyberspace and online communication. Notably, the term cyberspace and internet are often used interchangeably albeit they have different connotations and so by exploring the similarities and differences, there will be a clearer understanding and rendering of these terms. Consequently, this will enable an understanding of how the medium is perceived and used. This section does not discuss the information society (Lyon 2002: 21-33)⁶⁵ or cybersociety (Jones 1997) as this extends beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I acknowledge the significance and impact of living in a global information society throughout the thesis.

3.1) Internet

I have already outlined the history of the internet and blogging within chapter one and so at this juncture I will focus on the internet as a tool for communication⁶⁶. The Internet can be said to be a relatively new technology as it has existed since the 1960s but it has only been available to the public since the 1980s (Dawson & Cowan 2004: 5)⁶⁷. Castells states that the “Internet is a communication medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale” (2001: 2). Ultimately, the internet is a platform in which time, space and geography are suspended and whereby there is the creation of a global wide community⁶⁸ and is a tool for communicating and sharing almost anything. Therefore, the Internet can be defined as a global network connected via protocols⁶⁹,

⁶⁵ David Lyons states that “the information society is a construct, a product of imagination, that is used to try to grasp some significant feature of today’s world” (2002: 22).

⁶⁶ See Hafner and Lyon (1998) for a comprehensive history of the internet.

⁶⁷ The term World Wide Web (www) was developed in 1989 by Tim Burners-Lee and Mark Andreessen and can be defined as the pages that can be accessed via software known as a web browser, such as Explorer, Firefox and Opera (Brasher: [2001] 2004: 29).

⁶⁸ The actual number of Internet users is unclear but Castells suggests that there could be as many as two billion users worldwide by 2010 (2001: 3). 1,966,514,816 users were recorded on 30 June 2010, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed 21 May 2011.

⁶⁹ In order for the internet to function and allow computers to talk to each other, there are a number of protocols, such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol), SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) which is used for the transfer of email and TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) which is the protocol that allows computers to talk to each other over the internet.

using browser technology⁷⁰ to access information without the restrictions of time, space or geography and is “above all else, a cultural creation” (Castells 2001: 33).

In contrast it will be shown that while the definition of the internet focuses on the medium as a tool, the definition of cyberspace focuses on an environment or place. This may be a subtle difference but it is one that is important when discussing the distinction between cyber cultures and the creation and development of technology that the cyber culture engages with.

3.2) Cyberspace

Cyberspace was first coined by William Gibson in his novel the *Neuromancer* ([1984] 1993)⁷¹, and he likened cyberspace to an online utopia, which provides people with many opportunities⁷². Another view of cyberspace is the dualistic interpretation referred to by Wertheim (1999). She states that there is the material offline space and then there is the virtual space of the internet and “despite its lack of physicality, cyberspace is a real place. I *am there* – whatever this statement may ultimately turn out to mean” (1999: 229). When discussing the term ‘cyberspace’ it is usually rendered as a space, a location, somewhere to be and this differs to the term ‘internet’ which equates to the actual technology and the platform in which information is shared.

Those who frequent the cyber society are often referred to as ‘netizens’ or ‘netigens’ as they use the technology to surf⁷³ the internet (Burnett and Marshall 2003) build communities (Rheingold [1993] 2000) or to engage with religion (Bunt 2009,

⁷⁰ In October 1994 the first commercial browser was launched by Netscape Communications, known as Netscape. In 1995, Microsoft launched their browser, Explorer (Castells 2001: 16).

⁷¹ Sherry Turkle states that “*Neuromancer* was a cultural landmark” (1995: 42).

⁷² David Morgan asserts that most spaces are encoded with hierarchies and are therefore not universal (Morgan 2010: 15).

⁷³ Robert Burnett and David Marshall argue that the use of the term ‘surfing the internet’ is “derived from its television precursor of channel surfing” (2003: 72).

Campbell 2010b). In relation to popular culture and Generation X, Beaudoin maintains that the importance of cyberspace is with the nuances of communication and the significance it has for a generation and society (1998: 44). He reflects on the relationship between cyberspace and religion and maintains that “cyberspace offers a metaphor for divine-human experiences, those experiences happen concretely through cybercommunities of faith” (Beaudoin 1998:87). Experiences, whether based online or expressed online, provide opportunities to develop and maintain religious identity and community but importantly, the medium provides a location for self reflexivity, religious seeking and meaning⁷⁴ (Roof 1999: 35).

In conclusion, I will use the term internet and cyberspace interchangeably as I will employ a definition which includes a virtual space as well as the technology that enable users to communicate with others, interact or simply browse for information online⁷⁵. In doing so, I encompass the features of the internet as a “communication medium” (Castells 2001: 2), whilst also acknowledging it as a virtual space which is ultimately a “real place” (Wertheim 1999: 39), as well as highlighting the cultural importance of the internet/cyberspace as a means for religiosity and personal reflexivity and presentation. Before leaving the theme of informational, there is one final aspect that must be discussed and defined which takes a prominent place in the examination of self and blogs and that is writing as a mode of communication.

3.3) Online Communication

In chapter one, I highlight the importance of communication and text on the internet (hypertext) which for Ong ([1982] 2002) is defined as secondary orality. However, there are many components of communication on the internet, such as computer

⁷⁴ Wade Clark Roof (1999) defines this as the ‘quest culture’ and this is discussed further within chapter nine of this thesis.

⁷⁵ Unfortunately the internet is still not globally available, as there is still a distinct divide between those who have access to the network and those who do not. In some countries the technology is available but heavily controlled by the government, such as in China and the Middle Eastern countries. BBC report on 23 March 2010 illustrates the control China has over the internet usage, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8582735.stm>, accessed 4 April 2010.

mediated communication (CMC)⁷⁶ which is defined as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring 1996: 1) and is text-based, often in real time and can include the use of paralanguage known as emoticons⁷⁷ (Herring 1996; Kozinets 2010). Another type of communication known as hypertext is defined by Castells as “cross-referred communication” or hypertext which may or may not include hyperlinks to other websites (2001: 202). Therefore, blogging uses hypertext as well as the potential use of emoticons and images to illustrate and provide meaning. In addition, it is through the comments feature that the blog becomes a form of two-way communication and so ultimately blogging could be said to be “cross-referred communication” (Castells 2001: 202) and participatory in nature (Jenkins 2009).

Blogging can also be discussed within the cultural context of life writing (Rettberg 2008: 58), a topic which I introduced within the previous chapter. It is from analysing the narrative of the blog defined as a cultural communication tool which expands our understanding of the relationship between the medium and the user. There are many different types and uses for blogs, such as photo blogs, journalism, corporate blogs but the three examined here are the personal diary-style blog. Consequently the blogger focuses on everyday experiences and on the topic of Buddhism. This does not necessarily mean that the blog is used as a medium for a spiritual quest (Roof 1999: 35) but it does require further consideration as to why the blogger discusses Buddhism and Buddhist belief in the blog. I now turn to the wider discussion of the examination of religion on the internet.

⁷⁶ Cultural theorists have examined CMC in detail, in order to gain a better understanding of who is using the internet, how they are using it, for what, as well as the impact that CMC is having on relationships both offline and online (Herring 1996: 1).

⁷⁷ Emoticons depict emotions through the use of symbols, for example to illustrate a happy emotion the symbol :) would be used. The use of emoticons is discussed further within case study one.

4) Religion, Religion Online and Online Religion

Within the following discussion I will introduce three definitions of religion and then following on from this, I will present Helland's (2000) definition of religion online and online religion in order to further emphasise the relationship between religion and technology. Within this section two areas will be explored, first, whether Buddhism can be defined as a religion and whether this is relevant for this discussion and second, the possible difficulties of using Helland's (2000) classificatory schema.

4.1) Religion

The need to define religion is at the very crux of all religious studies research and there have been many definitions, methodologies and theories of religion put forward by scholars such as Smart⁷⁸ (phenomenology), Geertz⁷⁹ (anthropology), Freud⁸⁰ (psychology) and Eliade⁸¹ (phenomenology and history of religions). The discussion of religion has included various methodological approaches and terminology and yet it is debatable whether there has been a definitive definition that is flexible enough to suit all belief systems. Noticeably, this has been a point of controversy when examining Buddhism as it does not fit the theistic notion of religion. It is necessary to determine whether this concern will impact on the analysis of Buddhist blogs. In order to elucidate further, I will refer to three definitions of religion presented by Gombrich (1988), Southwold (2006) and Cox (2010). Accordingly, I will identify a working definition of religion which is suitable for the discussion of Buddhism within this thesis.

Gombrich concludes that there are two types of religion, firstly a religion can be a "soteriology" and secondly it can be a "communal religion" (Gombrich 1988: 25).

⁷⁸ Ninian Smart (1927-2001) has written many books including *The Phenomenon of Religion* (1973).

⁷⁹ Clifford Geertz (1926 – 2006) has written or contributed to a vast number of publications including *Religion as a Cultural System* (2001).

⁸⁰ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), one of his significant essays is *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

⁸¹ Mercia Eliade (1907-1986), *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion* ([1957] 1987).

He states that “there is no law that in a given culture or society both these kinds of religion must exist, let alone that a given individual must have both” (Gombrich 1988: 27). On the other hand, Southwold provides an in-depth analysis as to whether Buddhism can be defined as a ‘religion’ at all and he argues that “we ought to use the word ‘religion’ just as we do, that is, to designate the polythetic class of all cultural systems that it seems reasonable to call religions” and that we should not overlook and neglect the actual phenomena of the human behaviour and culture⁸² (2006: 376). Similarly, Cox provides a working definition of religion which includes the components: people, identifiable communities, experience and belief⁸³ and his working definition is:

Religion refers to identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and resulting communal experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities on a tradition that they legitimate by appealing to its authoritative transmission from generation to generation⁸⁴ (2010: 21)

In conclusion, it is not my intention to propose a new definition of religion or to quantifiably argue for a definition put forth by one scholar over another but it is necessary to propose a working definition which draws from the definitions and conclusions presented by Gombrich, Southwold and Cox, thus capturing the elements of ‘religion’ that pertain to the current discussion. In doing so, the discussion of whether or not Buddhism should be defined as a ‘religion’ can be overcome or at least put to one side for the time being but more importantly I

⁸² Martin Southwold outlines two further points. Firstly that Durkheim’s theistic definition of religion is not sufficient when discussing Buddhism. Secondly, although there are gods within Buddhism, they are not gods in a theistic sense (2006: 365).

⁸³ David Morgan provides five themes in relation to the study of religion and material culture, which are similar to Cox’s themes, namely “(1) the felt-life of belief; (2) embodiment; (3) space and ritual; (4) performance and practice; and (5) aesthetics” (Morgan 2010: 56).

⁸⁴ James Cox states that his definition is testable and that a phenomenological method can be used (2010: 22). I will briefly refer to the phenomenological method for the study of religion in the Methodology chapter.

acknowledge that the definition of Buddhism as a 'religion' does not directly impact on this analysis. Therefore, the working definition of religion encapsulates the attributes of a belief system which is intrinsically connected to culture and to human existence and although the word 'religion' is contested it will be used when discussing Buddhism. In doing so, this does not detract from the wider discussion within the field of media, religion and culture

4.2) Religion Online, Online Religion

In addition to the definition of religion, there is also the definition of 'religion online' and 'online religion', proposed by Helland (2000). Helland carried out a survey of websites in 1999 and from his analysis he asserts that there is a demarcation between religion online (informational) and online religion (participatory). Since then he has readdressed this categorisation, stating that "at that time there was a clear distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) verses the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online)" (2005: 1).

Helland argues that there is a merging of religion online and online religion and no longer can the content of the internet be clearly categorised as one or the other, often the website will include both the interactive and the informative. He stresses that the definitions are still "applicable, but it too needs to develop to keep pace with the alterations that have occurred on the Internet medium" (Helland 2005: 2). Young (2004) and Dawson and Cowan (2004) provide a similar view to that of Helland's, concluding that there is no longer a clear demarcation of websites into either online religion or religion online, as "an increasing number of Web sites fall somewhere between these extremes, offering their visitors some combination of the two" (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 7). In order to illustrate the difficulties of categorising websites as online religion and religion online, I will provide three examples of Buddhist websites and a mobile phone application.

The first example is the website belonging to the Kagyu Samye Ling monastery which is located in the Scottish borders (see figure 2) which can be defined as ‘religion online’ as it is purely informational⁸⁵. The website provides information on Buddhism, distance learning courses, access to an online shop, details of retreats, activities at the monastery, a donation area and a member login area. The website could be said to be aesthetically modern in its design and it has Buddhist imagery throughout the site⁸⁶. The concepts within the design are also typical of a company website or religious institution, which are exemplified in the branding (logo) option to shop, donate or join their mailing list.



Figure 2 - Kagyu Samye Ling website

The second example is from the online virtual world known as *Second Life* and can be defined as ‘online religion’ as it is interactive and participatory. There are a number of Buddhist virtual temples in *Second Life*, which enable the participant to practice meditation, participate in chanting or group discussions, read scriptures and much more⁸⁷. The active participation in *Second Life*, such as that found at the

⁸⁵ <http://www.samye ling.org/>, accessed 15 Jan 2010.

⁸⁶ The site is designed by Web Integrations Ltd, Aberdeen, <http://www.webintegrations.co.uk/>, accessed 9 May 2010.

⁸⁷ The participant or visitor is known as an avatar. *Second Life*, <http://secondlife.com/>, accessed 6 March 2011

Buddha Center, enables the participant to engage with and practice religion on the internet⁸⁸.

This is demonstrated by an avatar meditating within one of the Buddhist temples in *Second Life* (see figure 3). This particular temple and associated artefacts imitate many features of a Buddhist temple found in real life, including the artefacts of incense, water, a singing bowl, Buddha images and meditation cushions.

Significantly, some of the Buddhist practices at this temple encourage users to negotiate their practice between offline and online environments. For example, while the avatar is meditating online the participant is expected to simultaneously meditate offline. Therefore, the definition of online religion needs further refinement as now, for some, online practice includes the negotiation between offline and online religious practice and environments (Connelly 2010).



Figure 3 – An avatar meditating at the *Buddha Center* in *Second Life* (22 Jan 2010)

In addition to websites and virtual worlds, there are also Buddhist related applications for mobile devices. An example of this is the *iShrine*, which is a virtual Buddhist shrine for the iPhone. The application is downloadable from a website and functions on the iPhone so that users can view a Buddhist shrine and even light virtual candles and incense as well as hear the sound of a singing bowl or drums (see

⁸⁸ In-world address for the Buddha Center, 137, 130, 21. American spelling for ‘center’ is used.

figure 4). This application provides a sensory religious experience, through sight and sound, compensating for the absence of touch, smell and taste. It could be said that the lighting of the incense signifies that there should be the sense of smell when engaging in Buddhist ritual and so the visual depiction provides authenticity as well as an implied sensory experience (Morgan 1998: 207).

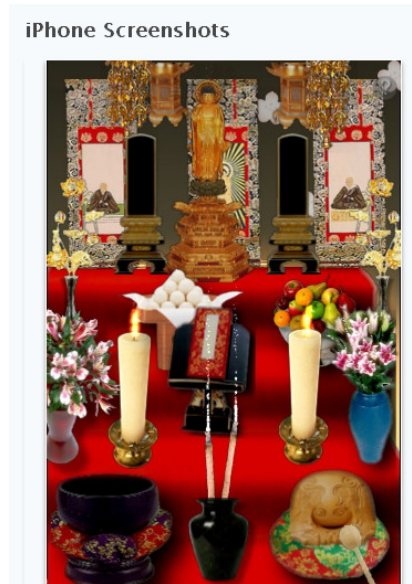


Figure 4 – *iShrine*: Virtual Buddhist Shrine

I have presented a number of existing definitions and considered whether they are suitable for the current discussion, for example, it has been argued that the definition of religion should consider and include the cultural context as well as the human experiential component. In addition, examples of websites have illustrated that the classification of websites as either religion online or online religion is often not feasible. Also, the categorisation needs to be broader in its remit and should consider a third dimension, that of negotiated religion, as there are some online sites where religious practice is no longer purely confined to the internet but takes place simultaneously in the offline and online world (for example in *Second Life*). Consequently, this illustrates the need for further definitions and typologies in order to provide a robust categorisation of Buddhism on the internet.

5) *The Singular: Self and Identity*

The discussion of the self continues to be a focus for debate, and yet there is not a collective agreement of what the self is (Seigel 2005:3). The importance of the subject matter emphasises that understanding the ‘self’ helps us to shape our reality and how we relate to others (Seigel 2005:3). However, it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive analysis of the numerous debates about the self⁸⁹ rather this thesis presents three categories of the self in order to contribute to the debate and to understand the significance of blogging in relation to reflecting on and presenting aspects of the self online⁹⁰. I have chosen to base the analysis on the Eastern understanding of the self (Hamilton 2000; Ronkin 2005) and that presented in life writing, which includes diaries, autobiography and journals (Eakin 1999, 2004). Consequently the self is presented as a non-fixed entity which emphasises the importance of experience for understanding the construction and deconstruction of the self. Furthermore, often the word ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are used interchangeably when discussing a person and yet they have very different meanings. Within this section I want to tease out the differences and assert a working definition of ‘self’ and to a lesser extent a definition of ‘identity’.

5.1) Self

As I have alluded to, the discussion of the self within the Buddhist philosophical context is discussed within chapter five and so it is not my intention to reiterate those findings here, instead, I will outline a more general understanding of the concept of the self. Within this thesis the discussion of the self is set within a philosophical and cultural context and so the “self is understood as an object to be known” (Taylor

⁸⁹ It is out with the thesis remit to include a discussion on the disembodied self, such as that posited by Romero (2003), although, this is a topic that is discussed within the wider discussion of the postmodern self online.

⁹⁰ Jerrold Seigel also presents three categories of the self, which are “bodily or material, the relational and the reflective dimensions” (2005:5). The rationale for providing different categories to Seigel primarily relates to the first category of ‘bodily or material’ not being appropriate, as the physical body is not present online. In addition, the three categories outlined within this thesis correlate with ‘life writing’ and the Buddhist concept of *anatta*, which includes the discussion of the *khandhas*, emotion and feeling.

1989: 49). The self is more than just an identity as it includes the senses, thoughts, values, personal attributes, it is the “agent, the knower, subject of desires, and conscious subject of experience” (Perry 2002: 190). Taylor (1989) provides a description of the self as an agent having self-awareness, values, emotions and language and in doing so provides a depiction of the self that is more than merely the components found within the construct of identity⁹¹.

It can be argued that there is a difference between the *creation* of self and identity and the *presentation* of self and identity and for Lovheim (2004), Lovheim & Linderman (2005) and Turkle (1995) they argue that the internet is a place that provides an opportunity to both - create and present. This is also demonstrated by Lee in his study of the Won Buddhist monks and nuns who use blogs as a reflective space to create as well as develop and understand the self (2009). The internet provides an opportunity to socially engage with others and to use it as a reflective platform, consequently, defining and presenting the self and identity online (Lovheim & Linderman 2005: 134).

I have alluded to the self as a non-fixed entity and while this is applicable to the Buddhist understanding of *anatta* (not-self), it is also referred to by scholars of autobiography and life writing (Eakin 1999). Eakin states that “the definitive article suggests something too fixed and unified . . . I prefer to think of the ‘self’ less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process” (1999: x). He argues that the creation of the self or identity, as a process, takes place without us witnessing it, as it just happens.

Through the course of examining self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within Buddhist blogs, there will be further reference made to understanding the self within the context of philosophy, culture, Buddhist studies and

⁹¹ Taylor’s analysis of the self refers to ‘the person’, I will use the term ‘self’ and not ‘person’ when discussing the human agent (1989: 257).

internet studies. Within chapter five, the experiential aspect of the self which relates to the *khandhas* and incorporates the rendering of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ and ‘sensation’ can be said to be similar to that found in the neuro-scientific approach for the examination of the self⁹². Damasio defines the self in relation to objects and consciousness (2000: 9) and argues that the “autobiographical self depends on systematized memories and situations in which core consciousness was involved” (2000: 17). I would argue that there are parallels between these two disparate but similar theories - neuropsychology and Buddhist philosophy - as they both highlight the importance of examining the self. Before leaving the discussion of the self it is clear that the subject of identity is important for examining aspects of the self and so the following section outlines a definition of identity.

5.2) Identity

Identity is presented as one of the characteristics of the category of self presentation. Identity can include both the individual and communal or collective concept of identity however, for the purpose of the current discussion it is the individual identity that will be focused on.

In the 1990s, Turkle pioneered the study of the online self and focused on ‘multiple identities’ and the portrayal of self in online games such as MUDs (multi-user domains). She argues that the internet enables the individual to play with their identity and create multiple personas through the use of language (1995: 17). Although this may be true to some extent, this concept has now developed further and I would argue that while online identity can be created and there may be different personalities, they all resonate with the single offline person. Therefore, both ‘identity’ and ‘self’ are connected, as they are both “multiple identities” and “aspects of the self” found online and offline (Turkle 1994: 166).

⁹² It is not my intention to provide a thorough neuroscientific or psychological analysis of the self, as this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In conjunction with the creation of multiple identities there is the theme of participatory culture which is acknowledged by Barney who states that “my *identity* is comprised of the *ideas* that others have about me, and the ideas I have about my ‘self’”⁹³ (2004:143). Other examples of the examination of identity online are put forth by Lovheim who analyses the internet and religious identity of a number of teenagers and she maintains that “Identity is a reflexive process” and that our identity is created by our experiences in the world (2004: 59). This is paralleled by Campbell who states that “the Net facilitates individual’s desires to express and establish their identity” (Campbell and Mitchell 1999: 44). Clark also examines identity in relation to popular culture and teenagers and concludes “that the media play an important role in how young people form and articulate their identities” (2003: 15).

It can be said, therefore, that identity is intrinsically connected within a cultural social context and so it is here that one’s identity to a group, belief system, philosophy, religion, etc is defined. It is evident from both Clark’s and Lovheim’s examination of teenagers and their identity construction that the internet does provide an opportunity to explore, challenge and assist with the construction of identity, as on the internet we can think “about identity as multiplicity” (Turkle 1995: 178). However, it is also true that offline we have multiple identities and selves, such as being a mother, daughter, employee, friend, and wife. I argue that the identity online is not separate to the offline identity as the offline world also plays a significant role in identity construction and so both offline and online modes of communication and contextualisation need to be taken into account when examining identity construction⁹⁴. With that said, I do concede that identity construction and different personas can be created online but I would argue that they are an extension of our ‘self’ rather than as a separate entity⁹⁵.

⁹³ Italics are the authors own.

⁹⁴ Mia Lovheim argues that to fully understand identity construction as a “process”, both the online and offline context needs to be examined (2004: 61).

⁹⁵ Different personas may include changing gender or ethnicity or becoming non-human, which is commonly found in the gaming culture.

Identity is a characteristic of the wider subject of the self and for this reason it is discussed within the category of self presentation. It is also within this category that the element of performance and participation is examined in relation to the bloggers presentation of self online. Within the case studies I refer to Barney's (2004) and de Laat's (2008) argument that we present ourselves to others but at the same time we are defined by others. The defining by others and therefore the related factors of performance, audience and participatory culture is crucial for understanding why someone blogs (Jenkins 2006; de Laat 2008) and is identified by Giddens (1991) and Lovheim (2004: 61) as a characteristic of late-modern society.

In conclusion, I propose that for the purposes of the examination of self on the internet, the definition of 'self' online should include the self defined as a process which includes the creation and/or maintenance of identity and experience. Furthermore the online self should be viewed as an extension of the offline self, as both have multiple dimensions and both are created, developed, and presented online and offline.

The previous discussion has introduced a number of themes and presented three definitions which will assist with the examination of aspects of the self online. In the following section I discuss Buddhism on the internet and highlight the importance of undertaking this research.

6) Buddhism on the Internet

The field of media, religion and culture became prominent in the 1990s (Hoover 1997; Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005: 1) and has since been developed within different disciplines by many scholars including; Dawson and Cowan (2004), Campbell (2005, 2010b), Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005), Karaflogka (2006) and Lynch (2007). There is also the emergence of research which examines Buddhism online, such as that presented by Kim (2005), Ostrowski (2006), Lee (2009) and Grieve (2010). Respectively they provide an insight into the Korean Chollian

Buddhist community online; the use of the internet and search for Buddhism in America; the Won Buddhist community and their use of blogs for self reflection; and Zen Buddhism in *Second Life*.

The analysis of Buddhism online and Buddhist websites is still in its infancy⁹⁶ but from the studies to date, they demonstrate that the internet is being used for different purposes and they do not easily conform to Helland's demarcation of religion online or online religion. In an early examination of Buddhism online, Prebish provides examples of the different type of websites that can be found, including chat rooms, mailing lists and online temples (2004). Since this early descriptive narrative of Buddhism online, there has been a more refined and developed methodological approach and examination of Buddhism on the internet, which is presented by Kim (2005), Ostrowski (2006) and Lee (2009) and so I now briefly outline some of their findings.

Kim (2005) analyses the Chollian Buddhist Community (C-BUD)⁹⁷ between 1996 and 1997. The C-BUD community web space provides sermons, meditation, chat rooms, debates and information on offline activities. Kim claims that the success of the site has resulted in the community "develop[ing] into an alternative religious organization that satisfies the multi-pattern needs of contemporary individuals", this is especially true of city-dwellers, who may not be able to visit Buddhist temples, which are still mainly situated in rural areas (2005: 147). Similar to Kim, Ostrowski's (2006) research which is based in America rather than Korea provides a similar conclusion and he states that 32.6% of surfers accessed the internet for information on Buddhism as there was not an opportunity for engagement with offline temples or teachers.

⁹⁶ Lorne Dawson maintains that "the sociology of cyberspace, let alone religion on-line, is still in its infancy" (in Cowan and Hadden 2000: 49).

⁹⁷ Formed 6 Sept 1991 and included many sub-groups. Later they were to form their own site, launched 30 Aug 2001.

Ostrowski's analysis provides an insight into Americans usage of engaging with Buddhism on the internet and she draws three conclusions from those surveyed. She ascertains; i) the demographics of users, ii) the rationale for using the internet and the type of information sourced, and iii) the perception of the community online. She states that the demographics of people accessing Buddhist sources online are "white (72%), have been raised as Catholics (27%) or Protestants (26.1%), and not members of a Buddhist temple or meditation centre (74.5%). Respondents were evenly distributed between 23 and 40 years old" (2006: 97).

She then asks the respondents why they are accessing information online and the main response is a "lack of temples/teachers in the area" (32.6%), with the next highest response relating to the "convenience of the internet" (20.1%). In relation to the type of information being sought online, the majority stated that it related to information on dharma teachings (52%). Respondents also acknowledged that they were concerned that the response from their offline friends would be negative and so the internet provided a medium where they could explore Buddhism without being judged. Her third point highlights that "respondents overwhelmingly expressed the lack of Buddhist community online" (2006: 100), which differs to Kim's results from the study of the Chollian community in Korea. Speculatively, this difference could relate to the cultural differences, the technology being used or the type of Buddhism being sought or practiced. However, it would be speculative at best to conclude why there were differences in the perception of the success of the community online and so further research would be required.

With that said, Ostrowski's research provides a cursory glance at Americans accessing information about Buddhism on the internet and she admits that "This study is not without its limitations", as those surveyed were not necessarily familiar with Buddhism (2006: 101). Although there are limiting factors of the survey, it does provide a basis for further research and more importantly an insight into the type of websites that are being accessed and by whom.

The final study to be discussed here is an ethnographic analysis of the use of blogs within the Won Buddhist tradition, during 2004 (Lee 2009). Lee, who himself was once a Won Buddhist monk concludes that the use of blogs is a form of religious practice, as the practice of finding ‘the self’ is partially undertaken by maintaining a blog; “practicing spirituality habituates spiritual or religious practices such as prayer, meditation, chanting or keeping a diary, timelessly and placelessly in a way to cultivate the self” (2009: 99). Lee claims that blogging enables the monks and nuns to effectively “deterritorialize the intensities of the self” and in doing so enabling them to gain insight into the Buddhist philosophical context of not-self⁹⁸(2009: 100). A secondary outcome of Lee’s research is the identification of the community that has materialised. The community has engaged lay Buddhists and non-Buddhists within Buddhism and “By exploring personal blogs, I learned that Won Buddhist monks and nuns have successfully adopted this new form of communication to foster friendly relationships with existing and potential believers” (Lee 2009: 112).

The above analysis illustrates three points. First, that there is a growing interest and participation of Buddhism online, commencing with user groups in the early 1990s⁹⁹ to the use of blogs as religious practice by monks and nuns in 2004 (Lee 2009). Second, there are a number of themes which need to be addressed when analysing religion and the internet, that is, community, identity, ritual and authority. This thesis will refer to the four themes but it is not my intention to prioritise these in a similar manner to Campbell (2010b). Third, the growth and changing usage of the internet highlights how important it is to continue to record, analyse and research the Buddhist religion both offline and online (Campbell 2010b: 190-191). With that said, there are a number of areas yet to be explored in relation to Buddhism on the internet and so, in order to comprehensively undertake such a task, methodologies need to be developed and refined (Dawson & Cowan 2004: 10; Hojsgaard & Warburg 2005: 9).

⁹⁸ The concept of not-self (*anatta*) is analysed within chapter five.

⁹⁹ Charles Prebish states that the earliest online Buddhist discussion forum was “founded by Yoshiyuki Kawazoe at Tohoku University in Japan.” (in Dawson and Cowen 2004: 137)

6.1) Typologies and Mapping Buddhism on the Internet

Before leaving the discussion of Buddhism on the internet I want to discuss the fourth research question, which focuses on identifying where further research is required in relation to Buddhism on the internet. The following discussion outlines two considerations. The first is the production of a typology for Buddhist websites and the second is to map out the Buddhist cyberspace based on the typology in order to capture the expanse and variety of Buddhist websites¹⁰⁰.

As a starting point for creating a typology, I refer to Karaflogka's typology which contains three main categories, namely 'academic', 'confessional' and 'subjective' (see figure 5) (2002: 285). These categories could be used for the categorisation of Buddhism on the internet as they are broadly generic. However, further refinement and testing would need to be undertaken in order to determine their suitability. Furthermore, although Karaflogka's typology focuses on religious websites, it is limited as it does not include new technology such as mobile devices and so it would need to be expanded to ensure that applications such as *iShrine* (discussed earlier) would also be captured.

¹⁰⁰ Potentially the map of Buddhist cyberspace could be similar to that of Cyber-Islamic Environments (CIEs) (Bunt 2009: 46-47).

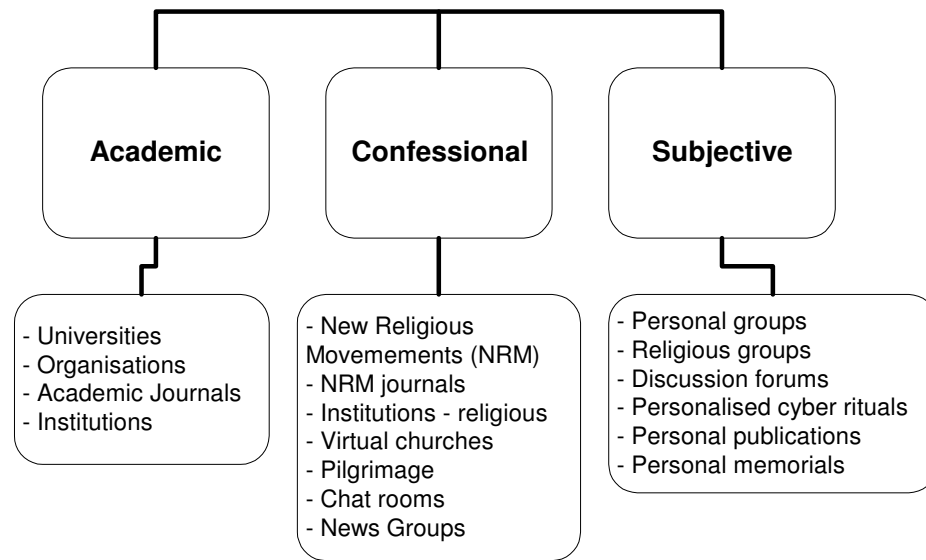


Figure 5 – Categorisation according to Karaflogka's typology (2002: 285)

Another consideration and possible challenge is when a website cannot be clearly demarcated into one category or another and so the typology needs to be structured so that it can capture the categorisation of multi-dimensional websites. As I noted earlier it is not my intention to propose a typology for Buddhist sites, rather I want to emphasise the importance and complexity of the task.

In addition to the creation of a typology it is necessary to map out the Buddhist cyberspace using the typology. This would not only help to refine the typology but would identify the nuances in Buddhism online and crucially how the technology is being used and for what. The mapping of Buddhist cyberspace and introducing a typology would also directly contribute to the six research concerns identified by Dawson and Cowan. These are (i) improved studies on how the internet is being used and by whom, (ii) a study “the nature and quality of people’s experiences”, (iii) understanding the negotiation of religious practice offline and online, (iv) comparative studies, (v) identifying the implications of technology on religion and

(vi) whether one type of religion is more suited to the internet than others¹⁰¹ (2004: 10-11).

It could be said that these two considerations are necessary for understanding the relationship between Buddhism, technology (usage) and culture. It would also address the research concerns of Dawson and Cowan (2004: 10-11), as well as Campbell's plea that there is a need for further research of Asian religions online (2010b: 190).

7) Conclusion

In conclusion I want to refer back to the aims of this chapter which included the setting out of the working definitions for four themes, that is culture, informational, religion, and the singular. In addition to examining a number of associated topics including popular culture, Generation X, visual culture, the internet, cyberspace, communication, religion online/online religion, self and identity. I have highlighted that there is a relationship between culture, religion, technology and the self and it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss these themes in isolation (the relationship is illustrated in figure 1).

The defining of these topics has enabled a basis in which later chapters will draw from in order to examine the categories of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within Buddhist blogs. Significantly, this discussion highlights critical areas for examination such as participatory culture, identity as a component of the self and the importance of experience in relation to understanding and defining the self.

¹⁰¹ Heinz Scheifinger acknowledges point six in his examination of 'Hinduism and Cyberspace' and concludes that while Hinduism is well suited to cyberspace, Hindu's may not invest in the use of the Internet in order to engage with Hinduism (2008)

Also, I have introduced the fourth research question, in order to identify where potential future research should be carried out and why. An example has been provided and I have introduced Karaflogka's typology (2002) in relation to designing a typology for categorising Buddhist websites. As an extension of this there is a larger task of mapping Buddhist websites and as a result a number of benefits have been identified. Moreover, there has been a counter-theme running throughout the discussion and that is the development and refinement of methodologies. In sum, this chapter provides the context in which to position the discussion of Buddhist blogs and the examination of aspects of the self. Within the next chapter, the literature review provides further context for examining media, religion and culture.

Chapter Three - Literature Review

In this chapter I refer to the definitions and themes that I presented in the previous chapter; as well as the theories and arguments put forth by prominent scholars within the field of media, religion and culture, and those in associated fields, such as psychology, anthropology and Buddhist studies. Significantly, I highlight the continual growth in research within the field of media, religion and culture and the surprising dearth of research focusing on Buddhism on the internet. This gap is brought to the fore by Ostrowski who identifies the need for further research of online Buddhist communities (2006: 102) and Campbell's plea that there is a need for further research of Asian religions on the internet (2010b: 190). I commence the discussion by focusing on one of the main themes in this thesis, culture, as it provides the context in which to discuss everyday life, religion, human experiences and technology.

1) Culture

In the previous chapter I presented a working definition for 'culture' and concluded that culture in relation to the self can be defined as the social context in which the postmodern definition of the self can be defined by and mediated through technology, resulting in experience (religious or otherwise) whereby the individual's beliefs and identity are developed and expressed. As I determined in the previous chapter, the discussion of culture is complex and contextualised (Gallagher 2003: 13). In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) the anthropologist Clifford Geertz provides a collection of essays focusing on the theory of culture; the impact and growth of culture; religion and culture; politics and culture; and two case studies, namely *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali* and *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. Geertz's research exemplifies the interconnection between religion and culture and this supports my argument that there is an intrinsic relationship between religion, culture, technology and the self and that these cannot be discussed in isolation. The discussion of everyday life is an aspect that is embedded in each of

these four themes. Consequently a number of scholars, such as Goffman (1969; 1981), Certeau (1984) and Giddens (1991) focus on the relationship between the individual and everyday life.

For Goffman and Certeau, individuals have an awareness of how they present themselves to others, (Goffman 1969: 28-82) with even the mundane intricacies of everyday life having significance, as they result in experiences (Certeau 1984). For Giddens this includes an examination of identity within late-modern society where he focuses on the tension between the individual self positioned in a modern global culture (Giddens 1991: 1). While I have positioned the discussion of the self within late-modernity (Giddens 1991: 3) I have also acknowledged that the self can be considered within a postmodern culture as there are different aspects of the self that we construct and reconstruct (Turkle 1995: 180; Burnett and Marshall 2003: 62). I will not, however, consider this to the extent of discussing the disembodied self or cyborg culture, such as that focused on by Clark in *Natural-Born Cyborgs* (2003)¹⁰². The next section focuses on popular culture and how new media (technology) is being used in the twenty-first century.

1.1) Popular Culture

Popular culture is embedded in and helps us “explore everyday life” (Clark in Lynch 2007: 20) and it can be defined as “those commercially-produced items specifically associated with leisure, the mass media, and lifestyle choices that people consume” as well as things associated with “high culture” such as art and performance (Clark in Lynch 2007: 8). Ultimately popular culture helps us to find meaning in everyday life (Clark in Lynch 2007: 9)¹⁰³.

¹⁰² Andy Clark focuses on a range of cyborg associated subjects, from the microchip to the futuristic dehumanised cyborg (2003).

¹⁰³ The study of popular culture applies an inter-disciplinary approach, similar to the approach for the examination of aspects of the self within selected Buddhist blogs (Clark in Lynch 2007: 5-20).

An area of popular culture that helps us to find meaning is the media, as it helps us define who we are, how we engage with others and how we engage with religion (Hoover and Clark 2002; Hoover 2006; Morgan in Lynch 2007: 21). There are a number of scholars who have focused on the relationship between religion and television, such as Lynn Schofield Clark. In *From Angels to Aliens: Teens, the Media, and Beliefs in the Supernatural* (2003), she argues that there should be further consideration of the “relationship between teens, their beliefs, their role in society, and their love of entertainment media so that together we can better understand this intriguing relationship and work to address some of its implications”¹⁰⁴ (2003: 23). Likewise, Lovheim focuses on how teenagers use the internet in their spiritual quest and how this shapes their identity (2004); as does Beaudoin (1998) and Lynch (2002), who focus on the Generation X culture.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the difference between Beaudoin’s and Lynch’s definition of Generation X (Beaudoin 1998: 42). I argued that Lynch’s discussion of Generation X is associated with a certain attitude (2002: 30) and this is more befitting for the blog culture rather than the definition of Generation X defined as a specific generational group born in the 1960s and 1970s (Beaudoin 1998: 22).

I have drawn from the arguments put forth by Beaudoin (1998), Flory and Miller (2000) and Lynch (2002, 2007) to provide a greater understanding of the use of media within this cultural context. In *Virtual Faith: the Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (1998) Beaudoin refers to the novel *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture* (Coupland 1992) which captures the essence of Generation X in America. Two other prominent contributions to this topic are *Gen X Religion* (Flory and Miller: 2000) and *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the search for meaning* (Lynch: 2002) both of which provide an insight into how media and religion are beginning to share common ground (Hoover and Clark 2002: 2). These studies focus

¹⁰⁴ The implications emerge throughout the book and include socio-economic backgrounds of teens (Clark 2003: 234); the “‘effects’ of the entertainment media on young people” (Clark 2003: 235); and traditional forms of religion in contrast to popular cultural forms of religion.

on religious tattooing, the spiritual or religious search, as well as the cultural impact on religious institutions from technology and the secularisation of society.

Popular culture also captures how we communicate with one another and the emotive quality that this may contain. It helps us to make sense of the world and how we fit into that world (in Lynch 2007: 11). A significant aspect of this is found in stories, myths and images and this is why the examination of blogs is crucial as they provide an important insight into popular culture and how media is being used to facilitate our understanding of ourselves, others and society.

1.2) Cyberculture

Cyberculture can be defined as attributes of culture found in cyberspace or on the internet. Like culture, it is complex and there are various dimensions associated with it, including community¹⁰⁵, identity, post humanism, cyborgs, subcultures¹⁰⁶ and how people engage with and experience cyberspace (Bell and Kennedy 2000: 2-3).

Consequently, the analysis of aspects of the self within selected blogs contributes to the discussion in this field of study as well as the field of media, religion and culture.

One of the earliest and prominent studies on cyberculture is *Cybersociety: computer mediated communication and community*, where Jones sets out a number of definitions and an introduction to the characteristics of the online community (Jones 1995). This has been followed by two other prominent studies: *The Cybercultures Reader* (Bell and Kennedy 2000) which accompanies *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (Bell [2001], 2003). Bell and Kennedy (2007) identify some of the key individuals who examine cyberculture, including Donna Haraway (cyborg

¹⁰⁵ One of the most comprehensive studies of online communities is found within *The Virtual Community* (Rheingold [1993] 2000). In the MIT edition (2000), Rheingold has updated the bibliography and added a concluding chapter, 'Rethinking Virtual Communities', where he reflects on the developments of the internet and technological culture since the 1993 edition.

¹⁰⁶ David Bell identifies subcultures as cyberpunks, gamers, hackers and neo-Luddites (2000: 4).

culture) and Manuel Castells (the network society). They also focus on how experience can be mediated or expressed on the internet and, although I do not analyse how experiences manifest online, I do focus on how experiences are presented in blogs and in doing so, capture the experiential self online. I discuss the ‘self’ later in this chapter but before leaving the topic of culture, I wish to focus on material and visual culture.

1.3) Material and Visual Culture

I have purposefully singled out the field of material and visual culture as it directly contributes to the analysis of the aesthetics of blogs as “visual culture is an attempt to talk about the visual components that are embedded in *everyday life*” (Plate 2002: 8). Again the emphasis is upon everyday life and the study of material culture deals with the artefacts and objects of a culture that derive meaning and symbolism (Morgan 2005; 2008), which can be something as simple and mundane as a chair (Pattison 2007: 2) or as elaborate as a religious ritual (Swearer 2004).

One of the leading scholars in the field of material and visual culture studies is David Morgan. His extensive collection of work on this subject spans more than a decade and covers subjects such as Christianity (in Hoover and Clark 2002: 37-62), theory (Morgan 2005) and the importance of belief (Morgan 2005, 2010). Moreover, he demonstrates “how visual studies can contribute to the scholarly understanding of religion” (2005: 27) as “Visual practices help fabricate the worlds in which people live and therefore present a promising way of deepening our understanding of how religion works” (2000: 51)¹⁰⁷. It is from our understanding of how people ‘see’ objects that helps us to understand human psychology and culture and how new media is being designed and used to engage with others.

¹⁰⁷ Diana Eck provides a thorough account of seeing and being seen by the Hindu deity in *Darsan: seeing the divine image in India*, which Morgan also refers to in *The Sacred Gaze* (2005: 48).

Visual culture studies, provides the theory and the framework for the relationship between emotions, the object and cognition¹⁰⁸. In later chapters, I demonstrate that this framework parallels the similar trinity of sense, object and cognition presented by Hamilton (1996; 2000) and Pattison (2007). Pattison provides a summary of the relationship between the sense of sight and cognition as “It is not the eye that sees, though sight would be impossible without it. It is the eye-brain working together in an integrated system that creates visual perceptions. These complex perceptual representations constitute our knowledge and experience of reality” (2007: 48). Similarly, Plate asserts that “Seeing, in contrast, is what makes vision *meaningful*” and “While the physiological activities of *vision* occur without previous experience, *seeing* cannot occur” (2002: 23).

The theories presented by scholars such as Aumont (1997), Morgan (2005; 2009; 2010) and Pattison (2007) provide an insight into the cultural context of images; why images are used; why design is important; and the relationship between religion and sensory experiences (Meyer 2008)¹⁰⁹. These factors are discussed in each of the case studies in chapters six, seven and eight. I maintain that understanding how virtual religious images and images online are used requires further exploration and in doing so would deepen our understanding of online culture. Up to this point, I have introduced different dimensions of culture which are relevant for the discussion of aspects of self within blogs; the final area of culture that I focus on is the study of media, religion and culture.

1.4) The Study of Media, Religion and Culture

In the past fifteen years there has been an increase in those interested in the academic study of religion and the media and as a result scholars from different disciplines,

¹⁰⁸ Other such as Birgit Meyer (2008), David Morgan (2009), Lynch (1990), Gay (2003), Heim (2003) and Mrozik (2006) examine the role of emotions in relation to religious experience.

¹⁰⁹ Birgit Meyer considers the role of “sensational forms” (media) in relation to experiences and religious practice and mediation (2008: 129).

including psychology, religious studies, anthropology and other fields, have raised a number of questions and have developed and refined existing methodologies. Alongside this, there has been the suggestion of three phases or ‘waves’ of research focusing on the study of religion and the internet. The phases or ‘waves’ can be summarised as, the first wave relates to the utopian or dystopian context of the internet; the second wave provides a more realistic understanding of the internet and religion; and the third wave is just beginning (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005: 8-9).

These phases of research are also reflected in a number of publications, three of which provide a significant contribution to the study of religion online. The first collection, *Religion on the Internet: research prospects and promises, religion and the social order* (Cowan and Hadden 2000), captures the initial stage of research and focuses on the descriptive analysis as well as acknowledging some of the methodological challenges.

The second collection, *Religion Online* (Dawson and Cowan 2004) provides a more refined approach compared to the first phase. It raises a number of questions, such as “how can we study religion on the internet?” and “what impact is religion online having on offline communities?” It is during this phase that the demarcation of religion online and online religion is presented by Helland. He attempts to categorise websites as either informational or participatory (Helland 2000)¹¹⁰. As I have shown in chapter two, there is no longer a clear demarcation into one category or another and so further categorisation and typologies are needed for the examination of religion online. In other words the re-evaluating of theories and approaches is necessary in order to keep pace as “cyberspace never stands still, so neither can the way we think about researching it and researching in it” (Bell and Kennedy 2007: 187). Helland has recognised this and comments on changes to his demarcation between religion online/online religion (2000) as “Despite these changes, the

¹¹⁰ Religion online is defined as informational sites whereas online religion is where websites enable the practice of religion. However, Helland has acknowledged that the distinction can be blurred (Helland 2005: 2).

heuristic framework of online religion and religion online is still applicable, but it too needs to develop to keep pace with the alterations that have occurred on the Internet medium” (2005: 1).

The third and most recent collection, *Religion and Cyberspace* (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005), raises further questions of how the internet is being used and introduces four themes: community, identity, ritual and authority. Furthermore, it is in *When Religion Meets New Media*, that Campbell (2010b) focuses in detail on Islam, Christianity and Judaism in relation to these themes. She argues that there are still “substantive insights” to be gained and she sets out a number of areas that future scholars should consider, including “Buddhist communities’ use of new media” (2010b: 190-191). She also identifies two trends, namely the rise in “new media alternatives”¹¹¹ and the response from “conservative communities” and their use of new media (2010b: 191-193).

It can be argued that the categorisation of the different phases of the study of religion and the internet is certainly useful. The timescale which it covers is short and I question whether such clearly demarcated phases are feasible and whether this will result in many more phases in the coming years. Certainly, it can be said that there has been a growth in religious information and practicing religion online but consideration also needs to be given to the negotiation of religion between the offline and online world and studies on this are only beginning to emerge (Campbell ed. forthcoming 2012).

In addition to the three compilations there are a number of studies that specifically focus on the academic study of media, religion and culture. One of the earliest publications to highlight the interdisciplinary approach is in *Practicing Religion in the age of the Media* edited by Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (2002).

¹¹¹ GodTube is an alternative to YouTube for Christians, <http://www.godtube.com/>, accessed 21 June 2011.

This book is divided into six sections and scholars from the field of communications, sociology and religion provide an insight into the relationship between media, religion and culture. Moreover, a number of dichotomies are highlighted in relation to religion and media, namely public/private, popular/legitimate, mainstream/marginal, explicit/implicit and direct/mediated. Some of these themes have been explored in other works, including *Interactions: Theology meets Film, TV and the Internet* (Campbell ed. 1999), *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (Mitchell ed. 2003) and *When Religion Meets New Media* (Campbell 2010b). In the context of blogging, the dichotomy of public/private is brought to the fore, not only for the researcher but also for the blogger. In the three case studies, I discuss this dichotomy within the paradigm of trust, exhibitionism and privacy (de Laat 2008; Stefanone and Jang 2008).

Importantly, Hoover and Clark acknowledge the need “to build interdisciplinary alliances” (2002: 6), which is also stressed by Jones (1999: x) and Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005: 9). The significance of developing an interdisciplinary approach has been singled out in this thesis and the third research question considers whether an inter-disciplinary approach, including Buddhist philosophy, anthropology, and material and visual culture studies can be used in the study of self and blogs. I also demonstrate what insights and benefits such a methodology brings to the study of self online. In the next section I focus on the internet as a communication and information tool in an attempt to further understand online communication and blogging.

2) Informational

More often than not the term ‘internet’, ‘cyberspace’¹¹² and ‘World Wide Web’ are referred to interchangeably and yet it is only after closer examination that the differences emerge. In order to understand these differences it is necessary to outline

¹¹² The term cyberspace was originally coined by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* (1984).

the history of the internet. In *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (1998) Hafner and Lyon provide a detailed account of the origins and the key individuals in the development of the internet and the World Wide Web. Accordingly, they provide a thorough overview of the historical development and technical stages of the internet, rendering the genre of the book as historical rather than technological.

Others have focused on the cultural, communal and networking aspect of the internet, such as that presented by Castells (2001) and Taylor (2001). Both focus on the cultural context and the impact of technology, specifically how the internet is changing society. Castells, a sociologist and author of a number of books on this subject provides a detailed examination in *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, where he refers to the growth in e-commerce, virtual communities, privacy aspects and the digital divide. He offers a contemporary interpretation “of a significant dimension of our world, and our lives” (2001: 8).

Hine also refers to the social and cultural aspect of the internet and asserts that the internet should be considered as both “where culture is formed and reformed” and as a “cultural artefact” (2000: 9). Hine uses an ethnographic approach to examine the cultural context whereby it leads her to conclude that the internet can be used to interrogate both the online and offline culture. However, she stresses that the ethnographic approach needs to adapt to take into account the difficulties of a virtual space and society and this is highlighted within the third wave of research identified by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005: 9).

The examination of the network society (Castells 2001; Barney 2004) must focus not only on the technology but also how we communicate with one and other and what risks and benefits exist from participating in and using computer mediated communication (CMC) and social media. Jenkins examines these areas in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: media education for the 21st Century* (2009). He identifies a number of themes, including popular culture, performance, forms of self presentation online, the use of new media and the

pedagogical use and benefit of implementing media within the classroom and beyond. Jenkins insight into participatory culture is explored further in the case studies and chapter nine. In the next section I address the second research question of “how is the self depicted in blogs?” as well as introducing the concept of blogs as a form of life writing.

2.1) Online Communication

Online communication includes a number of areas, including hypertext (Ong [1982] 2002; Castells 2001); the use of paralinguage such as emoticons and capitalisation (Herring 1996; Kozinets 2010); as well as performance and participatory culture, as “Bloggers are the minutemen of the digital revolution” (Jenkins 2006: 179). The discussion of computer mediated communication (CMC) also provides an insight into the cultural context of blogging and why blogging can be defined as a form of life writing.

Blogs have many of the same characteristics associated with the genre of life writing (Eakin 1999; Rettberg 2008) as they are a medium in which an individual can present aspects of the ‘self’; or be kept as a memoir; or as a reflective process for self discovery¹¹³. Where they differ from traditional modes of life writing is that they are often participatory in nature and this is discussed by Jenkins in *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture* (2006). In other words, the social and interactive element of blogs is in direct contrast to the characteristics of the traditional personal diary. This in itself opens up the debate to whether the blog should be categorised as public or private (Hookway 2008). Accordingly, this raises a number of challenges for the researcher, including ethical considerations (Hookway 2008; Kozinets 2010). This can also cause problems for the blogger and in later chapters I discuss the issues of voyeurism, privacy and trust which are examined by Viegas (2005), Stefanone and Jang (2008), de Laat (2008) and Rosenberg (2009).

¹¹³ I also discuss the potential contradiction of the self having memories as this implies the self is a fixed entity (Gyatso 1992; 1998).

These challenges are highlighted when answering the second research question “how is the self depicted in blogs?” Consequently, I explore blogs as a medium for religious seekership (Roof 1999) and for religious practice (Cheong et al 2008; Lee 2009). Schneider and Braunstein (2010) examine the relationship between religion and blogs and the themes of authority, identity and community. They conclude that “the future of the religious blogosphere” is about “connectivity” (2010: 40). They consider a number of questions which parallel those presented by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) and Campbell (2010b). Ultimately, these questions result in the same conclusion – further research is needed to truly understand why blogs are used; for what; and what are the implications for religion, individuals and society both offline and online.

3) Religion

The discussion of the religious blogosphere requires a much wider examination of definitions and theories than those presented in the field of religious studies. In chapter two, I proposed a working definition of religion which included the different dimensions relevant to this thesis. Accordingly, I refer to a number of scholars in the field and in *Theories of Religion: A Reader* (Kunin and Miles-Watson 2006) there is a biography and brief outline of scholarly publications of Freud, Otto, Smart, Geertz, James and others¹¹⁴. I draw from Geertz’s definition of religion along with Cox’s working definition of religion which is presented in *An introduction to the phenomenology of religion* (2010). This book contains nine chapters, one of which focuses on the discussion of the definition of religion. His definition includes a descriptive nine step model, illustrating the “phenomenological method as applied to the study of religion”, which captures the stages of phenomenology that can be applied to religion, whilst emphasising the need for revision and testing in order to truly undertake a phenomenological approach (2010: 71).

Noticeably, the discussion of religion includes the contested issue of whether or not Buddhism can be defined as a religion and so I examine the arguments put forth by Gombrich (1988) and Southwold (2006). I align my argument with Southwold who states that Buddhism should be defined as a religion (2006: 376). Thus, I set the thesis within a religious and cultural context and in the next section I specifically discuss religion on the internet.

3.1) Religion Online

There are three facets to the study of religion online these are the methodology, theories, and the empirical study¹¹⁵. As the field is still developing the methodologies are not yet fixed but the general consensus is that the methodology needs to be interdisciplinary (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005). In relation to the methodological areas there are four prominent studies which I referred to earlier; *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (Jones 1999), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (Cowan and Hadden 2000), *Virtual Ethnography* (Hine 2000), and *Netography: doing ethnographic research online* (Kozinets 2010).

One of the key texts for examining Buddhist blogs is Kozinets', *Netography: doing ethnographic research online*, as the "book aims to provide a set of methodological guidelines, a disciplined approach to the culturally-oriented study of that ethnographically-mediated social interaction that occurs through the Internet and related information and communications technologies" (2010: 3).

¹¹⁴ The book is divided into six sections, including an overview of the ancestors of religion, and the phenomenological, anthropological, sociological, feminist and psychological approaches to the study of religion.

¹¹⁵ Lorne Dawson identifies three categories that require further exploration, including "identification and measurement", a "systematic study of the key substantive concerns" and "theoretical and empirical exploration" (Dawson in Cowan and Hadden 2000: 26).

Kozinets examines the culture and communities online; argues for fixed and adaptable methodologies; and acknowledges the challenges of undertaking research on the internet, including ethical matters, the transient nature of sites and authenticity, all of which I discuss in the next chapter. He emphasises that there is a growing academic interest in virtual studies and that there is also a requirement to standardise and bring credibility to this field of research.

Arguably, the majority of research has focused on “identification and measurement” (Dawson in Cowan and Hadden 2000: 26), such as the research undertaken by the PEW American Life Project (Larson 2001; Lenhart et al. 2004; Hoover, Clark and Rainie 2004; Rainie 2005). These studies have focused on how Americans engage with technology and yet up to this point there has not been a British resource equivalent. Albeit Ofcom (2008) and the Oxford Internet Institute (Dutton: 2009) have provided a glimpse into the use of the internet in Britain.

There are also examples of prominent theoretical and empirical studies within the field, including studies on Islam (Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009), Christianity (Campbell 1999, 2005, 2010b), Paganism (Cowan 2005) and Japanese New Religious Movements (Baffelli 2008, 2011). Of the empirical work to date, Bunt’s¹¹⁶ research on Islam and Muslims on the internet provides a thorough account of virtual Islam, including the applications used, the purpose for its usage and the impact on the Islamic community. Karaflogka criticises Bunt’s “lack of deeper theoretical knowledge of ICT’s” (2006, 42) found in *Virtually Islamic Computer Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2000), as Bunt uses terminology interchangeably and does not fully explicate his methodology. Whereas, in *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (2009) he does discuss his methodological approach and theoretical perspective in relation to the study of Islam online as well as the Muslim usage of the internet. Therefore, Karaflogka’s criticism of Bunt’s earlier

¹¹⁶ Gary Bunt’s blog and website provide a frequent and up to date addition to his books. Virtually Islamic, <http://www.virtuallyislamic.com/>, accessed 15 April 2010. Virtually Islamic Blog, <http://virtuallyislamic.blogspot.com/>, accessed 15 April 2010.

work may have been justified but this is not the case in his most recent analysis of Islam online. Bunt, Cowan and Campbell have focused on specific religions online but there is still a significant gap in the examination of Buddhism online and it is this that I discuss next.

3.2) Buddhism Online

Up until this point, there has been little written about Buddhism online and what has been written primarily focuses on Buddhist communities on the internet (Prebish 2004; Kim 2005; Ostrowski 2006). One of the earliest introductions to the study of Buddhism online is found in *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Prebish 1999) and *The Cybersangha: Buddhism on the Internet* (in Dawson & Cowan 2004) where Prebish describes the origins of the cybersangha¹¹⁷ and provides a chronological assessment of some of the different Buddhist communities online, including forums, journals and real life communities.

Others who have undertaken research into Buddhism online include Kim (2005), Ostrowski (2006) and Lee (2009) and more recently Connelly (2010) and Grieve (2010). Nonetheless, in comparison to the analysis of Christianity or theology online (Wertheim 1999; Campbell 2010a) there is still much to be examined. For those who have examined Buddhism online, the focus has been on the use of the internet in America (Ostrowski 2006) whereas Kim (2005) and Lee (2009) both undertake research into the Korean Buddhist community online. The “dearth of theory on Buddhist communities online” (Ostrowski 2006: 95) requires further research to be carried out in line with the research themes identified by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) and Campbell (2010b).

In the previous chapter, I argue that there is a need for a typology of Buddhist websites as well as the need to map out the Buddhist cyberspace. This would be

¹¹⁷ Charles Prebish states this phrase was first coined by Gary Ray in 1991 (1999: 203)

similar to the research undertaken by Bunt on the Muslim/Islamic cyberspace (2009: 46-47). It would also identify whether the internet is suitable for Buddhism and Buddhists and how it is being used, for what and by whom. It may also raise possible questions similar to Schiefinger, who maintains that “Hinduism is well suited to cyberspace” but this doesn’t necessarily mean that Hindus will engage with cyberspace (2008: 247)¹¹⁸. I conclude that there is still much scope for further research in relation to Buddhism on the internet and in this thesis a number of these areas are identified.

4) The Singular: Self and Identity

As I have outlined in chapter one, I focus on a concept of the self which is positioned within late-modernity (Giddens 1991; Castells 2001) and is beyond individuality or the ‘I’. It is the composition of different dimensions of the self, including values and a sense of self-awareness (Taylor 1989); identity (Turkle 1995; Giddens 1991; Lovheim 2004); psychological aspects such as memory (Gyatso 1998; Damasio 2000); and the physical body (Damasio 2000; Hamilton 2000). The following discussion will not reiterate what has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis instead I will expand on the arguments put forth by Turkle (1995), Hamilton (1996; 2000) and Ronkin (2005). Thus, emphasising that the discussion of the self spans not only centuries but also religions and geography, asserting that there are “interconnections” on a “wider canvas” which could enhance the study of this topic (Sorabji 2006: 3)¹¹⁹. The following discussion is split into two sections, that is, the concept of self and identity in society and cyberspace; and the concept of self in Buddhism.

¹¹⁸ Heinz Scheifinger examination of cyberspace focuses on *darshan* (the act of seeing and being seen by the religious image), *puja* (worship) and whether modifications to the Hindu religion would be required within cyberspace.

¹¹⁹ In part VII, Sorabji defines these “interconnections” in his discussion of reincarnation found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Platonism (2006: 302). Other scholars who focus on the subject of the self are Jerrold Seigel. He positions his discussion in accordance with the “three dimensions of corporeality, relationality, and reflectivity” (2005: 651) and in doing so provides an insight into the subject of the ‘self’ in Western Europe since the seventeenth century.

4.1) Self and Identity in Society and Cyberspace

Turkle's valuable contribution to the examination of the self is found in *Life on the Screen* (1995), where she explores related themes that other scholars have also focused on, including virtual reality and cyborgs (Bell and Kennedy 2000; 2007; Clark 2003), self and identity creation (Lovheim 2004; 2005), community and religion (Campbell 2010b) and identity and chat rooms (Romero 2003). Rheingold refers to Turkle's examination of the relationship between technology and humans and he argues that there is still significant work to be undertaken in order to understand "human behaviour in social cyberspaces" (Rheingold [1993] 2000: 391). This is not dissimilar to Sorabji's statement noted earlier that there is still much to be explored (Sorabji 2006: 3).

Turkle's examination of the internet primarily focuses on computer mediated communication (CMC) and role-playing games (1995). From a series of interviews with gamers, she determines how identity is constructed online. For Turkle, the self online is constructed (1995: 184) and is fragmented, multiple (1995: 185) and enables a freedom to be whoever you want to be. This explanation of the self online is not wholly suitable for examining the self in blogs as the construction of identity that Turkle refers to is specifically contextualised within fantasy role playing games. That is not to say, that there is not an element of performance within blogs (de Laat 2008) but it is much more about an extension of the offline self rather than multiplicity and the creation of selves in a fantasy world¹²⁰.

Turkle's background as a psychologist enables her to question whether gaming provides a type of "therapy" (1995: 196-200). This is not dissimilar to the conclusion that I draw in later chapters, where I focus on blogging as a type of 'secular therapy'. It is evident that the internet does provide a type of 'therapy' for some people and this in itself raises a number of concerns about how the internet is being used,

¹²⁰ Some blogs are fictional and in this example there may be an element of the 'constructed' self that Turkle identifies in role playing games.

specifically in relation to ethics (consequences), authenticity and trust. The discussion of how we use the internet is examined further in *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (Turkle 2011). Turkle asserts that online “these are all places to be yourself. At the other end of the spectrum, there are places where one constructs an avatar – from games to virtual communities – where people go to find themselves, or to lose themselves, or to explore aspects of themselves” (2011: 209).

Furthermore, in chapter twelve she discusses confession sites and questions “how much performance am I watching?” (2011: 204). Arguably, the sense of ‘performance’ is inevitable within a participatory context but does this reduce the authenticity of the confession? Do we not embellish stories so that they will be entertaining for the listener or in this case (blogs) to the reader? Turkle raises this point in her earlier work and questions whether there can be slippages between the ‘real’ person and the online persona (1995: 185). She examines how technology, specifically the internet, is being used; what it is being used for; and the impact that this is having on society and the individual. She acknowledges that this is an area that needs further exploration.

Along with Rheingold ([1993] 2000), Clark (2003), Lovheim (2004), Lovheim and Linderman (2005), Hoover (2006), and Campbell (2010a, 2010b), Turkle provides an insight into what the internet is being used for and who is using it. Significantly, her research spans more than fifteen years and she has moved from a semi-utopian and excited view of engaging with the internet to having a cautionary outlook of how the internet is impacting on the individual and society. She argues that the internet is not yet mature and so there is still time to address the arising issues (2011: 294), including the issue of privacy (2011: 296). Similar to Turkle, I argue that it is from examining aspects of the self within selected Buddhist blogs that a number of questions and concerns have arisen but these pave the way for further research and will enable a greater understanding of how the internet is being used in the twenty-first century.

4.2) Self and Buddhism

I have chosen to analyse the self within a Buddhist religious context as the discussion of the self or rather not-self (*anatta*) is one of the central components of Buddhist philosophy and is therefore a fundamental reference point for the examination of self within Buddhist blogs. While I will briefly refer to the historical and cultural milieu of early India, I have chosen to focus the discussion on the conceptual representation of ‘self’ within the Nikaya and Abhidhamma textual tradition and so I draw from the arguments put forth by Hamilton (1996: 2000) and Ronkin (2005)¹²¹, both of whom focus on the composition of *anatta* as a central area of their discussion.

Consequently, the analysis of not-self (*anatta*) is examined in great detail, providing a framework which I discuss further in chapter five and the case studies.

I focus on the analysis of the self put forth by Parfit ([1984] 1987: 274-275), Collins (1997), Sorabji (2005: 266), Ronkin (2005) and Hamilton (1996, 2000). It is Ronkin and Hamilton who provide a cogent analysis of the relationship between the ‘self’ and ‘experience’ and which supports my hypothesis of the ‘experiential self’ found online. Hamilton argues that Buddhist ontology should not solely focus on self or indeed not-self, as this would be a “mistake”, rather the focus should be on the continuum of fleeting events (1996: 195). This is further discussed by Sorabji (2006) in relation to Vasubandhu’s analysis of the self¹²². Ronkin (2005) also refers to “fleeting events” in her examination of the doctrine of momentariness, where all events are part of a continuum (2005: 59). I mention this in relation to agency and memory and argue that experiences are but a series of “fleeting events” unique to the individual.

Ronkin’s thorough examination of this is found in *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (2005), where she focuses on the Abhidhamma,

¹²¹ The collection of five books from the second section of the Pali Canon (Tripitaka) is known as the Sutta Pitaka. The Abhidhamma is a scholastic school. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is the final set of scriptures in the Pali Canon, comprising of seven books (Nyanatiloka 1957; Nyanaponika 1999; Bodhi: 2000).

the dhamma process¹²³ and the *khandhas* in order to provide a thorough understanding of the metaphysical framework found within the Abhidhamma textual tradition. Consequently, Ronkin comments on Hamilton's examination of "human existence" asserting that "Since the Buddha's teaching is primarily concerned with lived, sentient experience, the *Abhidhamma*'s philosophical rendering of the *Dhamma* attempts to provide a systematic and comprehensive account of the constitution of experience" (Ronkin 2005: 1).

Hamilton's examination of human existence is the focus of *Early Buddhism: A New Approach, The I of the Beholder* (2000) where she provides a discussion on the wider context of self, identity, and experience within early Buddhism. Unapologetically she sets out her methods, caveats and sources early on, asserting that the argument will not get bogged down in translation issues as she finds these "frustrating" and "pedantry" both as an author and as a reader (2000: 11). Her discussion includes an overview of the context, proceeding with the discussion proper of the *khandhas*, experience and the concept of dependent origination (cause and effect) in relation to experience. She maintains that "The status of the world, then, is in every sense not one that is understandable in any terms which relate to existence or non-existence. Rather, it is dependently originated" (2000: 198). It is this depth of analysis that renders the discussion of self to be greater than the superficial discussion of not-self (*anatta*) and ultimately provides the examination of self within blogs to be related to human existence and the experience of the social and cultural dimension of the world – both online and offline.

5) Conclusion

I have demonstrated that there are four themes concerning this thesis; culture, religion, informational and the singular (self and identity), consequently, the interconnectedness has been brought to the fore in this chapter. Moreover, this has

¹²² Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE).

¹²³ Noa Ronkin explains that *dhammas* are like atoms.

emphasised the need for and the benefits of applying an interdisciplinary approach for the examination of the self online, including methods, theories and discussions from the fields of Buddhist studies, religious studies, anthropology, media studies and cultural studies (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005).

I have also illustrated that there is limited research available relating to Buddhism online, which is confirmed by Campbell's plea for further analysis of Buddhism on the internet (2010b: 191). While some research is emerging in relation to Buddhism, such as that put forth by Kim (2005), Ostrowski (2006), Lee (2009) and Grieve (2010), this is a small contribution in comparison to the research available addressing other religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity online¹²⁴.

Lastly, I have also highlighted that there are a number of questions left unanswered which are beyond the scope of this thesis but which provide an opportunity for further research and therefore, directly address the fourth research question which is to identify where further research can and should be carried out in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion in the field of media, religion and culture.

¹²⁴ There is also a small number of articles focusing on Hinduism online (Scheifinger 2008; Radde-Antweiler 2008).

Chapter Four - Methodology

In this chapter I directly address the third research question which is in two parts. Firstly, “can an inter-disciplinary approach, including Buddhist philosophy, anthropology, and material and visual culture studies be used for the analysis of self and blogs?” and secondly, “what insights does such a methodology bring to the study of self online within the context of life writing¹²⁵, Buddhism and the internet?”¹²⁶.

Before commencing with the discussion, it is pertinent to rationalise why an inter-disciplinary approach has been applied. There are three reasons for this. First and foremost, this is necessary due to the scale and complexity of the discussion of the concept of self in both Buddhist philosophy and internet and cultural studies. Secondly, it is recognised by scholars of religion and cyber studies that a range of methods are needed in order to provide a thorough examination (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005; Campbell 2010b). Thirdly, this approach will address the challenges posed by a constantly changing medium, including the transient nature of websites, changes in technology, authoritativeness of content, and the ethical issues, all of which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter. The inter-disciplinary approach taken for the examination of aspects of the self within Buddhist blogs parallels to that noted by Hojsgaard and Warburg who state that “religion and the internet will continuously be a topic that needs to be addressed by scholars with very different approaches. In the light of that, a *bricolage* of scholarship coming from different backgrounds and with diverse methodological preferences” is required (2005: 9)¹²⁷.

¹²⁵ The term life writing is both a critical practice and an all encompassing genre that includes biography, autobiography, journal and diaries. A fuller explanation and definition will be provided later within this chapter (Kadar 1992: 3).

¹²⁶ The autobiographical style of blogs being examined can be categorised under the rubric of ‘life writing’, which is discussed in more detail in chapters six, seven and eight.

¹²⁷ Jones also states that there needs to be new methodologies for the study of the internet asserting “simply applying existing theories and methods to the study of Internet-related phenomena is not a satisfactory way to build our knowledge of the Internet as a social medium” (1999: x).

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the stages of the research and includes my six stage model which encompasses the steps taken to collect the data and the theories applied to analyse the blogs. The latter point includes an in-depth discussion of why certain theories and approaches have been applied. The second section provides an insight into a number of challenges encountered in undertaking the examination of the self within Buddhist blogs, such as the level of authoritativeness, the transient nature of the blogs, changes in technology and lastly the ethical considerations. In the conclusion, I reflect and comment on the approach taken in order to ascertain whether the third research question has been answered.

1) Stages of the Research

The aim of this thesis is to analyse three Buddhist blogs and in doing so, prove the hypothesis that a blog can be used as a medium for self presentation, self reflection and the experiential self. In addition, the thesis identifies and discusses four research questions which have already been outlined within the introductory chapter but in order to defend the use of the following methodology, I will briefly reiterate them here. The first question focuses on the religious context for the discourse and raises the question “what are the conceptual issues of self within early Buddhism, specifically in relation to two of the five *khandhas*, namely *vedana* (feeling) and *samkhara* (volition)?” The second question focuses on aspects of the self within blogs and the question asked is “how is the self is depicted in blogs?” and it is here that the three categories are defined as self presentation, self reflection and the experiential self. The third question, which I mention in the introduction of this chapter, focuses on the inter-disciplinary approach applied in order to answer these questions as well as position the discussion within the field of media, religion and culture. The concluding question identifies where further research could be carried out in relation to Buddhism and the analysis of the self online. It is from answering these questions that I will identify where there are opportunities for further research and possible refinement of methodologies. The next section identifies the methodology and refers to the literature review.

1.1) Literature Review

The literature review presented in the previous chapter has provided an insight into the different theories and I have teased out some of the main themes, arguments and conclusions which I have presented as four interconnected themes, specifically culture, informational, religion and the singular (identity and self).

In tandem with the third and fourth research questions, the literature review highlights three facets which are reiterated throughout this thesis. Firstly, that there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach in order to address the complexity of the topic and to ensure that the four interconnected themes are discussed in relation to examination of the self within Buddhist blogs (Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005: 9). Secondly, that there is a scarcity of research regarding Buddhism on the internet which highlights the significance of this contribution (Ostrowski 2006: 95; Campbell, 2010b: 190). Thirdly, that it is important to expand the discussion of the subject of ‘self’ on the internet, to include the examination of new applications such as blogging, thus enabling a broader understanding of the self online and in tandem, modern styles of life writing (Rettberg 2008; Rosenberg 2009). In sum, the literature review highlights the breadth and depth of this discussion and contributes to the overall aim of this thesis. I now turn to the discussion of the methods and theories applied and begin with an overview of my six stage model.

2) The six stage model

Before I commence the discussion of my six stage model it is necessary to briefly outline the reasons for selecting blogs rather than websites or other internet formats. Most importantly, the autobiographical and diary-like nature of some blogs¹²⁸ provides a platform that presents a personal expose of the self, therefore, providing an opportunity to prove the hypothesis of self presentation (Stefanone and Jang 2008; Hookway 2008), reflection (Lee 2009) and the experiential self (Lenhart and Fox

¹²⁸ I am focusing on diary-style blogs and not political or informational blogs.

2006). In addition, when this research commenced in 2005, blogs were in their infancy. Since then, there have been a number of studies on blogs and blogging practice but the medium is still continuing to be used and uptake is growing¹²⁹, accordingly this thesis provides further insight into the blogging culture. Lastly, unlike some social network sites or email user-groups, most blogs do not require registration and so this reduces potential ethical and ethnographic issues such as the likelihood of disrupting or influencing an established online culture¹³⁰.

By creating a six stage model, it provides a clear approach for identifying blogs, data collection, the analysis process and the presentation of findings. Consideration was given to other models such as Sudweeks and Simoff's model, as shown in figure 6 (in Jones 1999: 39). However, two areas of concern materialised when considering the use of this model. Firstly, the model uses language that is more relevant for the analysis of websites, which is illustrated in the title of the first stage, 'domain identification'¹³¹. The difficulty arises when a blog is embedded within a main website as the blog web address would not be distinguishable from the 'domain' or the host website. Secondly, the dating of the model predates the introduction of blogging application software and so does not adequately encapsulate the relevant stages required for the examination of blogs or the explanation of each of the stages, as discussed by Sudweek and Simoff (in Jones 1999).

It could be argued that this model does have some commonalities with my six stage model, as both provide a quantitative and qualitative approach, however, I have chosen to provide a more transparent process for the examination of blogs, as illustrated in figure 7. This approach also ensures that future research could undertake a similar examination of the self even if referring to different applications,

¹²⁹ This is particularly evident with the introduction of the micro-blogging application known as Twitter, <http://www.twitter.com/>, accessed 10 March 2011.

¹³⁰ Robert Kozinets acknowledges this issue in *Netography* (2010).

¹³¹ A 'domain' can be defined as the website address.

such as websites or social network sites. The following discourse provides a more detailed explanation of each of the stages (see figure 7).

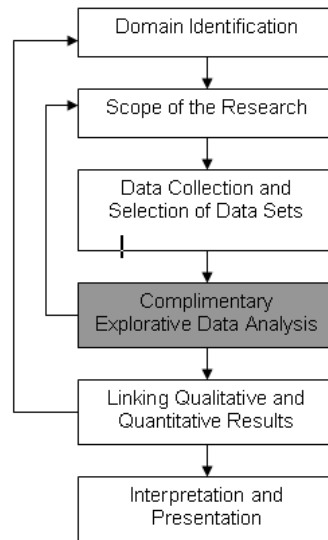


Figure 6 - Model: Internet Research (Sudweeks and Simoff in Jones 1999: 39)

2.1) Stage 1 – Selection of the Blogs

The first stage is the selection of the blogs which was carried out using the search engine Google¹³² and the Google blog search¹³³. The rationale for using Google rather than the specific blog search engine known as Technorati¹³⁴ was to ensure a more general search which would replicate a likely search scenario undertaken by an internet user¹³⁵. Furthermore, the simultaneous use of both Google and Technorati

¹³² Google, <http://www.google.co.uk>, last accessed 10 June 2011.

¹³³ Google Blog search, <http://www.google.co.uk/blogsearch>, last accessed 10 June 2011.

¹³⁴ Technorati is a specific blog search engine, <http://technorati.com/>, last accessed 10 June 2011.

¹³⁵ Internet users may not be aware of specific blog search engines such as Technorati.

was deliberately avoided as they use different algorithms¹³⁶ which would have caused a difficult and falsifiable selection process¹³⁷.

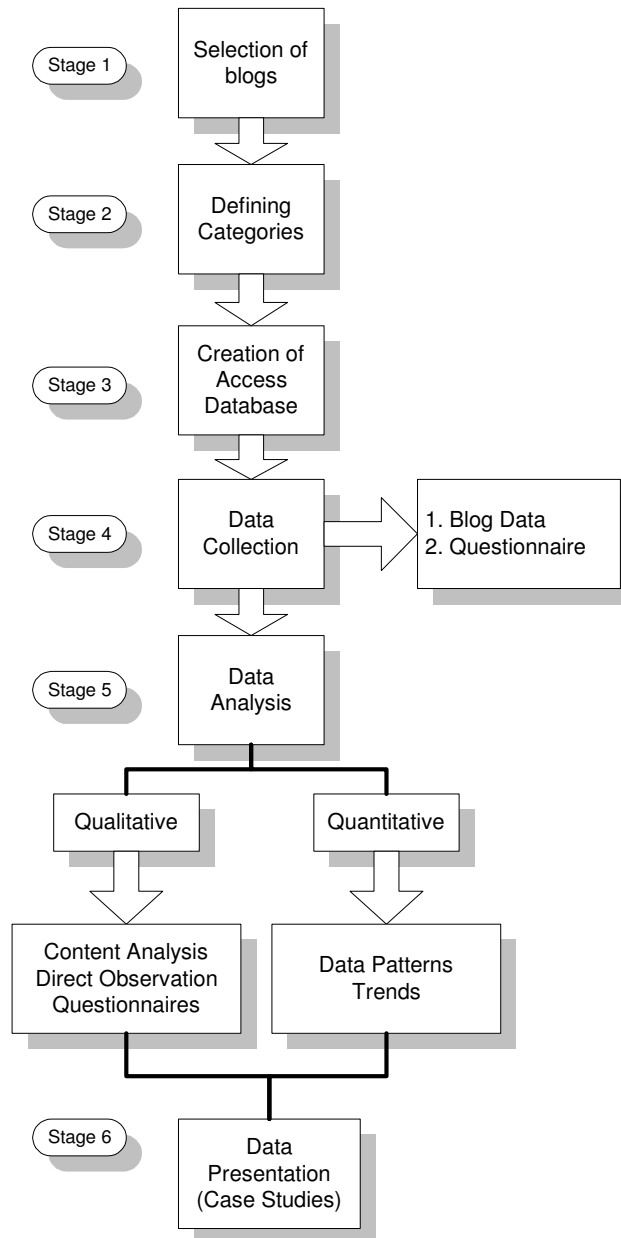


Figure 7 –The six stage model

¹³⁶ Google only uses the specific terminology entered in the search, <http://www.google.co.uk/technology/whyuse.html>, accessed 27 May 2010. Technorati uses the specific terminology but can also filter by the level of authority (popularity) that the blog has.

¹³⁷ If a significant number of blogs were to be analysed then a more complex search with more than one search engine would have been used.

There were three terms used in the search process; ‘Buddhism blogs’, ‘Buddhist blogs’, and ‘Buddhism and blog’. Consideration was given to the inclusion of other terminology or more complex methods for identifying blogs but the simplicity of the approach and of the search terminology provided a natural starting point from which to commence the blog selection stage¹³⁸. Using the aforementioned search terms, *The Buddhist Blog* <http://thebuddhistblog.blogspot.com/> was ranked in the top five¹³⁹, primarily because it contains all the search terms within its title. Consequently, *The Buddhist Blog* became the source from which to select the other blogs. The rationale for using this blog as a primary blog was due to the aesthetics, the frequency of posts and the extensive linking to other blogs, known as a blogroll¹⁴⁰. Over the course of the monitoring period, which was between 2006 and 2007, it became evident that there was often a reciprocal link from the blogs in the blogroll, indicating that this particular blog was a ‘hub’ for many bloggers¹⁴¹ (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 7). The focus during 2006 and the beginning of 2007 included the reading of this blog and nine other blogs listed on the blogroll, which are listed below.

Lotus in the Mud	http://lotusinthemud.typepad.com/sujatin/
The Invisible Cat ¹⁴²	http://gamerdinger.blogspot.com/
Think Buddha	http://www.thinkbuddha.org/
Blogmandu ¹⁴³	http://www.zenunbound.com/blog/
Green Clouds ¹⁴⁴	http://www.green-clouds.com

¹³⁸ Heidi Campbell’s methodology focused on the examination of one hundred blogs and she used the Blogger search engine as well as the statistical package, SPSS. This methodology reflects the complexity of criteria in relation to the large number of blogs being analysed (2010a: 255).

¹³⁹ The search was carried out on 24 May 2010 and *The Buddhist Blog* continues to be ranked in the top five based on these search terms in Google and Google Blog.

¹⁴⁰ Two in five bloggers have a blogroll (41%) (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 38)

¹⁴¹ This indicated that there was a small community centred round this blog. The same authors left comments on each others blogs. The analysis of the blog community is tangential to the discussion at hand but it does highlight future research opportunities.

¹⁴² No longer a blog on Buddhism, accessed 24 May 2011

¹⁴³ Abandoned March 2009, accessed 24 May 2011.

¹⁴⁴ No date attached to posts, accessed 10 June 2011

Dharmasattva ¹⁴⁵	http://dharmasattva8.blogspot.com/
Luminous Emptiness ¹⁴⁶	http://purelandetchings.blogspot.com/
American Buddhist	http://americanbuddhist.blogspot.com/
Bikkhu's blog ¹⁴⁷	http://bhikkhublog.blogspot.com/
Awakening the Buddha in us ¹⁴⁸	http://buddha-inside.blogspot.com/

After ten months of monitoring these blogs, it became apparent that it was not feasible to examine all of these blogs. Therefore, from 1 July 2007, only five blogs continued to be read (listed below):

The Buddhist Blog	http://thebuddhistblog.blogspot.com/
American Buddhist	http://americanbuddhist.blogspot.com/
Awakening the Buddha in us	http://buddha-inside.blogspot.com/
Think Buddha	http://www.thinkbuddha.org
Bikkhu's blog	http://bhikkhublog.blogspot.com/

In July 2007, three blogs were then selected for a more in depth examination. The three blogs that are the focus of the case studies are *The Buddhist Blog*, *Think Buddha* and *The American Buddhist*. These blogs were chosen based on four factors. The primary consideration related to the likelihood that the blogger would continue to post regularly which was based on the evidence from the monitoring period. Secondly, the length of the post and the variety of posts indicated that there would be sufficient content for analysis. Thirdly, the content of the blog posts clearly indicated that the blog could be categorised as a diary rather than an informational or political

¹⁴⁵ Blog name has changed to i-Dharma's Meditations and last post is 15 February 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Blog name has changed to Pure Land Etchings and last post, 5 October 2009, accessed 24 May 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Last post, 9 January 2010, accessed 24 May 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Last post, 17 December 2010, accessed 24 May 2011.

or other genre of blog¹⁴⁹. Lastly, the aesthetic of these blogs provides a number of different visual and auditory features for analysis, including video, photographs, graphics, religious and non religious imagery. All of these factors indicated that the three blogs would provide a variety of features for the analysis of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within selected Buddhist blogs.

2.2) Stage 2 – Defining Categories

The second stage in the model identifies the defining of two sets of categories. The first set of categories includes the definitions of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. The second set defines the specific features of the blog that will be captured within the database (stage three).

The definition of the category of self reflection is when the blogger uses the blog as a means of questioning the existence of the self; or where he/she reflects on his/her life; or where the blog is used as a medium to aid self discovery or remembering¹⁵⁰ and it can be with or without a religious context. Furthermore it is within this category that I focus on blogging as a form of life writing (Rettberg 2009: 111). The significant shift from keeping a self reflexive traditional diary to keeping an electronic blog provides further insight into the cultural aspect of blogging (Renov 2002: 280-291)¹⁵¹, how new media engages with others (audience), and how media helps to construct identity (Lovheim 2004: 62).

The second aspect of the self, that is, self presentation can be defined as the presentation of the self both explicitly and implicitly. Aspects of the self within this category can include identity, employment and areas of the bloggers life that are not

¹⁴⁹ Scott Rosenberg (2009) in *Say everything: how blogging began*, what it's becoming, and why it matters, provides an insight into the different types of blogs.

¹⁵⁰ The discussion of remembering in relation to Tibetan autobiography is discussed by Janet Gyatso (1992) and this is referred to in chapter eight.

¹⁵¹ Michael Renov provides an insight into the cultural significance of personal websites as a form of autobiography, in Campbell and Harbord (2002: 280-291).

reflective but could be said to define who the blogger is and what they do in everyday life. The demarcation between the self and identity has been discussed in chapter two and it is Giddens' (1991) and Turkle's (1995) definition of identity that I refer to in order to categorise a post as self presentation. The features analysed include selected images, graphics, aesthetics and the content of the post¹⁵². This category also includes the performance and participatory aspect (Jenkins 2006, 2009; Rettberg 2009) and is likely to include the intentional publicising of aspects of daily life to an anticipated audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5).

The last category, the experiential self, is defined when the blogger states explicitly any words or phrases related to the senses and experience, or where he/she provides a depiction of an experience via a sound or visual aid such as a photograph, song, literature and is, therefore, depicting or expressing an experience. The experiential aspect of the self is crucial for understanding the human condition and the continual process of relating to and experiencing the world. For Hamilton and Siderits, this is what makes one person unique from another (Hamilton 1996:198; Siderits 2007: 25).

In order to analyse this aspect of the self, it is the early Buddhist conceptual understanding of the self and the Theravada Abhidhamma framework that is used (Hamilton 1996, 2000; Ronkin 2005). The Buddhist Abhidhamma framework provides a detailed examination and explanation of the relationship between the components of the self (*khandhas*), the senses, sense spheres, awarenesses (*ayatanas* and *dhatas*) and contact (*phassa*) with objects¹⁵³. Hamilton and Ronkin maintain that this encapsulates the sensory and experiential individual (Hamilton, 1996, 2000; Ronkin 2005). Later in this chapter, this is discussed further and a detailed explanation is provided in chapter five.

¹⁵² See David Morgan for a definition of aesthetics (2009: 141).

¹⁵³ The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are *rupa* (material), *vedana* (feeling), *sanna* (perception), *samkhara* (volition), *vinnana* (consciousness) and collectively they are the five components comprising the self.

In addition to the interpretative framework found in Buddhism, figure 8 below details the different aspects of the blog and a description and how the feature is recorded on the database. The database enables a standardised platform in which to collect the data; to ensure ease of filtering and extracting data, for example by providing date parameters; and to easily correlate and present the data. The output from the database will predominantly aid the quantitative analysis, although the field 'content/text' will significantly assist with the qualitative analysis and provide an insight into the blogger's characteristics and uniqueness in order to answer the question "how is the self is depicted in blogs?"

Category	Description
Blog Name	The name of the blog
Date of post	For analysis purposes e.g. to identify number of posts within a period
Length of post	The length of post can indicate whether the blog is used as a means of self reflection/journaling and is categorised under three headings i) Short = less than one paragraph, ii) Medium = two-four paragraphs and, iii) Long = more than five paragraphs
Hyperlink	Link to other websites or blogs of interest or related to the content of the post
Content/Text	The content of the post will be discussed in detail within each of the case studies
Image within the post	Indication of whether a photograph, graphic or drawing within the content of the post
Self	The content of the post discusses the self within a general context
Discusses Buddhism	In order to determine whether or not the blog adhered to its title of being 'Buddhist'
Record of the days activities	Whereby the post provides details of what the blogger has done that day. Possibly discussing his feeling, emotion or experience and therefore indicating one of the three main categories of the self
Recent News/Events	Provides details/comments on news/events.

Figure 8 - Features of the blog captured in the Database

2.3) Stage 3 – Creation of an Access Database

The third stage of six is the creation of a Microsoft Access database. The rationale for using an access database as opposed to an excel spreadsheet or some other method for recording data is primarily due to the functionality which includes the capacity to set defaults within fields¹⁵⁴, to configure fields in date format or as drop-down lists¹⁵⁵ and significantly it enables data to be easily extracted and presented. The database also provides a means of tabulating additional data at a later stage; cross referencing it within specific time periods; or exporting the data into more sophisticated analysis packages such as SPSS¹⁵⁶. The use of a database also enables a means of comparing and analysing the data. The database inputting form is shown below.

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Access form with a light blue background. At the top, there is a menu bar with 'File', 'Edit', 'View', 'Insert', 'Format', 'Records', 'Tools', 'Window', and 'Help'. Below the menu bar, there is a toolbar with various icons. The form is divided into several sections:

- Main Form (Light Blue):**
 - ID:** (AutoNumber) field.
 - Blog Name:** text field.
 - Date Accessed:** date field.
 - Date of Post:** date field.
 - Time of Post:** time field.
 - length of post:** dropdown menu.
 - Title of Post:** text field.
 - image:** checkbox.
 - Snapshot of Image:** text field.
 - Number of Hits:** text field with value '0'.
 - Buddhist Categories:** a group of checkboxes including 'Self', 'Emptiness', 'About Buddhism', 'Links to another blog', 'Quotes used', 'Recent News/Events', and 'Has a hyperlink'.
 - Record of the Days Activities:** checkbox.
 - Discusses the Self:** checkbox.
 - Description of Post:** a large text area.
 - Comments:** a section with 'Comments Logged Date' field, 'Number of Comments' field (value '0'), 'Comments from the author' field (value '0'), and three sets of 'Name of comment' and 'Comments Left' fields.
 - Add Record:** a button.
- Subform (Purple background):**
 - ID:** (AutoNumber) field.
 - BlogName:** text field.
 - Profile:** checkbox.
 - URL:** text field.
 - Bloggers Name:** text field.
 - Date Blog Created:** date field.
 - Bloggers Email Address:** text field.
 - Type of Buddhism:** text field.
 - Blog Link 1:** text field.
 - Blog Link 2:** text field.
 - Blog Link 3:** text field.
 - Add Record:** a button.

Figure 9 - Database screen layout (form)

¹⁵⁴ A field holds a specific type of information.

¹⁵⁵ The use of standardised lists ensures an accurate data collection, categorisation and recording tool.

¹⁵⁶ SPSS is software designed for statistical analysis.

The development of the database included a number of stages: the design, formatting of the fields, the development of the inputting form (shown above) and the creation of queries and reports¹⁵⁷. On completion of building the database, sample data was input into the form and extracted using the report function to identify any problems with the design. This testing stage is crucial in order to determine whether the database is fit for purpose, ensuring its suitability for collecting data from the three blogs during different periods of time¹⁵⁸.

2.4) Stage 4 – Data Collection

After the creation of the database, the data was collected and recorded using the database inputting form (see figure 9). The data collection took place over three separate periods, from 1 July 2007 to 31 August 2007, 1 October 2007 to 31 January 2008 and 1 October 2008 to 30 November 2008. The first two time periods were selected to ensure that the timeframe was relatively close together, mitigating the risk of an incomplete data set from abandoned blogs. Notably, this risk factor was reduced significantly due to the longitudinal monitoring phase undertaken prior to the data collection stage (during 2006-2007). In addition, by allocating the specific time constraints it enabled a structured and analytical approach for prospective research, thus ensuring that future data could be comparable. The final phase of data collection was deliberately set one year later, from 1 October 2008 – 30 November 2008. This third time period provided an opportunity to identify if the blog was still active; if there were any significant changes or patterns within each of the three blogs; to provide a greater insight into who the blogger is and how the blog was being used; and potentially to draw a comparison from the data collected from the first time period in 2007 to the lapsed period in 2008.

¹⁵⁷ The database form captures more data than is required at this stage but this would meet the needs of future research.

¹⁵⁸ This was also necessary due to the volume of posts that the database would contain.

Along side the data collected, each blogger was contacted via email and they were asked a number of questions in relation to their blog. The email communication aimed to provide an insight into their motives, thoughts and inspiration for maintaining a blog as well as characteristics of their blogging practice. Email contact was made between March and October 2010. The time scale for undertaking the email enquiry was intentionally later than the data collection phase, ensuring that the collection of data was complete, so that any questions raised would not potentially influence their blogging practice. The time lapse also provided an opportunity to reflect on the collected data and in doing so, compile relevant and specific questions for each blogger. Consequently, the comments from the blogger would confirm or dispute conclusions drawn from the observational analysis. As there was uncertainty as to whether the blogger would respond to the email questions, a completed questionnaire could not be relied upon as a crucial element of the methodology¹⁵⁹ and so the ethnographic and direct observation approach played a greater role than the results from the email communication.

In sum, the stages for the data collection phase included both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to gather the appropriate data with which to answer the research questions. The next stage of the methodology is the data analysis (stage five) and the presentation of the findings within the three case studies (stage six).

2.5) Stage 5 – Data Analysis

The following discussion identifies the theories and methods applied to the examination of the self within blogs. The discussion is arranged in order of importance in relation to the theory and methods applied to this research, that is the;

¹⁵⁹ This would not have been such a significant issue if there were a larger number of blogs being analysed, as a poor response to emails and questions would still have provided enough data for analysis, whereas, the analysis of only three blogs required a more holistic approach to ensure an effective outcome.

Buddhist Studies (religious context), anthropology, cultural and media studies and psychology and phenomenology.

2.5.1) Buddhist Studies

The religious context focuses on early Indian Buddhism and the Buddhist Theravada interpretative framework. I do not intend to provide a thorough overview of the conceptual issues of the self within early Buddhism here, as this is provided within chapter five and so at this point, I will simply reiterate the key points in relation to the framework for analysis. The central doctrine of Buddhism¹⁶⁰ is that all conditioned entities are defined as not-self (*anatta*), are impermanent (*annica*) and are, therefore, subject to suffering (*dukkha*). *Anatta* is comprised of five aggregates (*khandhas*) and within both the Nikaya and Abhidhamma textual tradition, the discussion of the *khandhas* includes the discussion of emotion, feeling and experience which arise as a result of the senses coming into contact (*phassa*) with an object (Hamilton, 2000; Ronkin, 2005).

Constraints have been imposed on the discussion and so only two of the five components of the self (*khandhas*) will be analysed. Primarily, this decision is due to the limitations imposed by the technology as the internet does not enable all five *khandhas* or six senses to be present, as there is no physical body or sense of touch, taste or smell online. Although, that is not to say that future technological developments will not be able to accommodate for this. In addition, two of the five *khandhas*, *vedana* and *samkhara* are pivotal within the understanding of the human experience and the uniqueness of one individual from another (Hamilton 1996: 198). This framework of the *khandhas*, senses and the awareness are presented in table 10 below and are discussed in detail in chapter five. Those highlighted in bold text are the four main areas for discussion, namely the senses related to the eye and ear and the *khandhas* *vedana* and *samkhara*.

¹⁶⁰ There are different schools of Buddhism and so there are variations within the tenets of Buddhist philosophy, but primarily, these three components are the foundation within all Buddhist schools.

<i>Khandhas</i>	<i>Ayatana</i> (six senses)	Objects (six sense objects)	Awareness	
<i>Rupa</i> (material)	Eye	Colour-form	Sight	Physical
<i>Vedanā</i> (feeling)	Ear	Sound	Aural	
<i>Sanna</i> (perception)	Nose	Fragrance	Smell	
<i>Samkhara</i> (volition, emotion)	Tongue	Flavour	Taste	
<i>Vinnana</i> (consciousness)	Body	Touch	Tactile	Mental
	Mind	Phenomenon	Mental	

Figure 10 - Abhidhamma structure (*khandha*, senses, sense objects, awarenesses)

By presenting this thesis within a religious context and including a Buddhist interpretive framework to analyse aspects of the self, this approach not only assists with answering the second research question but it provides a resource to explain many of the Buddhist terms within the blogs (see appendix 1 for a glossary of Buddhist terms).

Furthermore, by referring to Buddhist conceptual understanding of the self, I acknowledge the possible contradiction of writing about and presenting a ‘self’, as Buddhism states that there should be non-attachment to a permanent self or ‘I’. Therefore, to write about the self, where the self is potentially described as a permanent concept presented within the diary, directly opposes the central components of Buddhism, that is, *anatta* (no-self), *anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha* (suffering). Gyatso argues that it is possible to write about the self; “And so it is not at all clear that Buddhism, despite its continuing affirmation of the doctrine of anātman, or ‘no-self,’ throughout most of its history, presents Buddhists with a view of the self that would preclude the ways of thinking and acting that are germane to

the writing of autobiography” (1998: 230). Gyatso’s examination of life writing, Buddhism and memory provides a greater insight into the complexity of the topic and I discuss this further in chapter eight.

In sum, the religious context for the analysis of the Buddhist blogs will pertain to the examination of the *khandhas*, senses, feeling, emotions and experience as depicted within the early Buddhist and Theravada Abhidhamma textual tradition. The discussion will also extend to the wider components of the Buddhist understanding of the self, including dependent origination (cause and effect), dhammas¹⁶¹ and the theory of momentariness, thus illustrating the impermanency of the self and the potential predicament of a permanent self depicted within cyberspace.

The Buddhist conceptual understanding of the self, along with the sociological analysis of identity and the presentation of self, such as that proposed by Goffman (1981: 373), does provide a parallel to this research, albeit it does not provide an all-inclusive approach for the examination of the nuances of the online self¹⁶². For this reason, I have drawn from other fields such as anthropology.

2.5.2) Anthropology and Ethnography

For the purpose of this discussion, I have chosen to group anthropology and ethnography together as they are concerned with the study of everyday life. The methods and theories for the examination of culture, behaviour and human interaction within society is needed, however, the difficulty arises in applying such methods and theories to the online world. For example, ethnography is more

¹⁶¹ The dhamma process is whereby entities can be reduced to the definitive level. A dhamma can be rendered as an atom or the smallest reducible component (Ronkin 2005: 170).

¹⁶² In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman critically addresses how a person presents and engages with others. Goffman provides an insight into performance in everyday life and specifically how the audience is a component of the performance. As I noted earlier (chapter one), the examination audience perception and participation has not been a focus of this research but it would be considered in future research (1969).

commonly undertaken in the offline world but it can be extended to and perhaps modified for the online environment. Online, this approach includes an examination of online behaviour and culture and determines how the internet is being used, by who and for what purpose (Dawson in Cowan and Hadden 2000: 28). This is also illustrated by Kendell who maintains that “Reaching understandings of participants’ sense of self and of the meanings they give to their on-line participation requires spending time with participants to observe what they do on-line as well as what they say about what they do” (In Jones 1999: 62) There are, however, some difficulties in studying an online community and applying traditional offline methodologies but the methodologies can be adapted (Hine 2000: 37).

One of the difficulties which can be experienced when undertaking ethnographic research in the online world relates to the unknown quantity of lurkers. A lurker can be defined as someone who joins a community but who does not participate or make themselves known and so in effect, they are invisible. Fortunately, this problem is not acute in the discussion of blogging, as the requirement to participate is not as great as that found in an online community such as a forum or virtual world.

The transference of an anthropological approach to the virtual space needs to take into account what cannot be studied as well as what can be; as this provides an insight into the practice and structure of the whole virtual community and not just those that are visible (Hine 2000: 24). Therefore, in the context of blogging there may be a number of people who take advice or use the blog as a source of information as well as those who actively engage and post comments. Where future research is concerned this should include the examination of authoritativeness and authority of Buddhist blogs, parallel to Campbell’s research (2010a). This would provide a greater insight into how blogs are being used and for what and would increase our understanding of the religious blogosphere.

For the purpose of addressing the second research question, that is “how is the self is depicted in blogs?” I will use the anthropological approach of ethnography and direct

observation (Bainbridge in Cowan & Hadden 2000: 57)¹⁶³. The need to adapt methodologies for the online context has been identified and presented in a recent publication. Kozinets has redefined ethnography online and designated it as ‘netography’ (Kozinets, 2010)¹⁶⁴. He highlights the issues of applying an ethnographic method to the internet which is also discussed by Hine who states that an ethnographic approach can “be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it”¹⁶⁵ (Hine 2000: 8). Hine captures both the technological and cultural aspect of using an ethnographic methodology and both these aspects are drawn out in the discussion of the self within the blog culture and have been highlighted in chapter two. I argue that virtual ethnography includes the studies of culture, people, beliefs and behaviours in order to draw conclusions, in a similar way to an ethnographer within the offline world.

A noticeable deviation from the traditional anthropological approach of examining scriptures and texts is the examination of hypertext as “Now, with the explosion of interest in the Internet, researchers have to include hypertextual features and graphical elements (even cartoons) in the paradigms of texts” (Sosnoski in Jones 1999: 129). Karaflogka states that hypertext can indicate “connectedness, association and/or co-operation and, on the other hand, of disapproval, criticism and condemnation” (2006: 189). Accordingly, for the purpose of this examination, it is the analysis of hypertext which highlights the multi-dimensional and non-linear nature of the text on the screen, alongside other features of the blog such as video clips, graphics, images or audio files. This is a challenge when examining blog culture but it also provides an insight into how the online culture has adapted in the absence of three of the five senses.

¹⁶³ Bainbridge provides an overview of observation ethnography.

¹⁶⁴ The designation of ethnography online as ‘netography’ provides credibility to the study of culture and behaviour online. However, it should not be completely disassociated from the root discipline of anthropology.

¹⁶⁵ Additional benefits included the lack of constraint relating to travel and time as the internet is available twenty four hours a day and there are no geographical boundaries.

In relation to computer mediated communication (CMC) and the experiential component of the internet it is the use and analysis of paralanguage, such as emoticons¹⁶⁶, intentional misspellings, abbreviations (e.g. LOL is laugh out loud) and capitalisation which is examined (Kozinets 2010: 23; Herring 2004). The use of emoticons to express emotions without the use of text is often found in blogs. Significantly, emoticons have also been created to depict religious expressions, such as the emoticon for hands in thanks/prayer _^_¹⁶⁷, which is frequently used at the end of a post within *The Buddhist Blog*.

As I have shown, the examination of online text and communication can be challenging and so traditional methods and theories need to be adapted. This has been addressed by communication and media studies and theories such as that presented by Herring et al. in *Computer-mediated communication: linguistic, social, and cross-cultural perspectives, Pragmatics & beyond* (2004) and Nillson in *The Function of Language to facilitate and Maintain Social networks in Research Weblogs* (2003). The complexity of applying an anthropological and ethnographic approach is being addressed by scholars such as Kozinets and Hine. The benefits of direct observation and textual analysis (content of posts), including the use of paralanguage, images and aesthetics in the blog, may help to identify and determine patterns of behaviours and culture both online and offline.

2.5.3) Cultural Studies

From the above discussion, it is evident that the cultural aspect is important for the examination of blogs, as a cultural studies method applies an anthropological approach which focuses on the experiences of everyday life¹⁶⁸ (Hoover 2006: 16). The cultural approach is paramount for internet studies as it considers the changes in

¹⁶⁶ Emoticons are graphical depictions of emotions or phrases such as the emoticons known as smilies which depict emotional facial expressions such as smiling, crying and embarrassment.

¹⁶⁷ This emoticon is often used in Buddhist practice in the online virtual world *Second Life*.

¹⁶⁸ I focus on an anthropological examination of feeling and especially emotion, as “ethnography captures emotional experiences in naturally occurring situations” (LeVine in Wulff 2007: 398).

society due to technology; the human relationship with technology, as well as capturing a snapshot of this virtual community (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995, 2011). For the purpose of this examination, the focus is on the blogger rather than the blog community known as the blogosphere and so I will focus on the use of specific language, images and content which represent the historical and cultural era in which they are positioned.

The importance of the cultural aspect of blogging is twofold. Firstly, the engagement with the internet as a medium for communication is positioned within a cultural context, specifically the use of narrative in late-modern society (Giddens 1991; Hoover 2006). Secondly, the examination of visual aspects of blogs provides a greater insight into the use of media in relation to the senses. In particular, within the case studies I set out the relationship between the senses and aesthetics (Pattison 2007; Morgan 2010) as well as why Buddhist religious imagery is or is not portrayed within blogs (Swearer 2004). The discussion of the visual component of the blog also captures the intrinsic characteristic of media – the audience. Images are significant for attracting an audience and a notable 32% of bloggers expect their blog to be read by an audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5). As I have noted elsewhere, it is not my intention to examine audience reception, although I do mention this in the case studies, rather, I acknowledge this as an area for consideration in future research.

2.5.4) Psychology, Phenomenology and Cognitive Science

Understanding why someone blogs is important for understanding how new media is impacting on social and cultural norms, how identity creation is being developed, as well as refining our understanding of the public/private dichotomy. I do not intend to provide a psychological analysis of each blogger, however the theories presented in the field of psychology, phenomenology, neuroscience and associated disciplines are parallel to similar theories found in visual culture studies and Buddhist studies. An example of this is the similar framework found in visual culture studies, Buddhist psychology and western psychology to explicate the relationship between seeing an

object and cognising the object (Hamilton 1996: 47; Damasio 2004: 37; Pattison 2007: 48).

Furthermore, recent developments are beginning to see the application of theories found within the cognitive sciences and applying these to a non-theological examination of religion and so “the cognitive science of religion may merge with phenomenology of religion to produce the next advances in the academic study of religion” (Cox 2010: 166). Similar to Cox, Kozinets states that a phenomenological examination of the self provides “a detailed subjective understanding of the lived experience of the online community participants (what is called a ‘phenomenological’ understanding)” (Kozinets 2010: 47). The objectivity derived from a phenomenological approach, coupled with theories from the fields of psychology and neurosciences, provides an understanding of how the self is depicted in blogs. It also highlights the similarities found within each of these disciplines. I now turn to the final stage of the model and explain how the data will be presented.

2.6) Stage 6 – Presentation and Analysis

The final stage of the model is the analysis and presentation of findings within three separate case studies. The purpose of each case study is to provide an interpretation of each blog and blogger in order to answer the research question of “how is the self depicted within blogs?” The case study commences with an overview of the blogger and blog, followed by an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, which applies the theories and frameworks described above. I will present a number of comparisons to illustrate the commonalities between the three blogs and bloggers, in order to identify the different aspects of the self presented within blogs. In doing so, this will demonstrate how new media is being used in the twenty first century. In the following section I outline the challenges that are encountered when examining blogs and how these have been overcome.

3) Challenges

Within this section I will discuss four challenges in relation to the analysis of Buddhism and different aspects of the self on the internet. The four challenges are i) authoritativeness of the sites; ii) the transient nature of the sites; iii) the development of applications; iv) and ethical considerations.

3.1) Authoritativeness

By authoritativeness I mean a blog that contains information that would be considered trustworthy or the blogger is a figure of authority. This is particularly important when examining blogs within a religious context. Nonetheless, this can be difficult to define, as blogs are often a mixture of both fact and personal insight or opinion. The blogger may proclaim to be affiliated with or to follow a certain Buddhist tradition or they may simply write about Buddhism as a personal interest. A blog may be popular but the popularity may not necessarily result from the content being authoritative and so the analysis of blogs in a religious context includes a number of issues, such as the misrepresentation of religion.

When dealing with diary-style blogs, such as the case here, this can be a noticeable challenge. Moreover, I consider the religious authority and religious identity of the bloggers, although not in the depth that Campbell does (2010a)¹⁶⁹. She analyses one hundred Christian focused blogs to determine whether the content is authoritative and also whether the blogger is challenging religious authority. Her examination focuses on three research questions, namely i) “is the content authoritative?”, ii) “does the blogger challenge the religious authority?”, and iii) “how is religious authority framed online?” Campbell concludes that some bloggers do use their blogs to challenge religious authority but the majority of bloggers use their blogs to affirm their beliefs and share the same religious authority as the offline religion (2010a: 272). The relationship between the offline and online world is considered within each

¹⁶⁹ Heidi Campbell categorises the content of the blogs as roles, structures, beliefs and texts and how these are being presented in the blogs (2010a: 352)

of the case studies, as this encompasses Giddens' (1991) and Turkle's (1995) understanding of the self and identity in modern society. Significantly, is it the use of CMC and new media which results in the challenge of dealing with transient sites.

3.2) Transient nature of sites

Websites, blogs and social network pages can be abandoned, deleted or moved to another website address (URL¹⁷⁰) at any time¹⁷¹. Blog abandonment can be due to a number of factors, including the ease in which blogging technology allows someone to set up a blog and therefore making it easy to abandon. In addition to this, blogs are generally a hobby and so time away from other hobbies or work is required in order to maintain them. Lenhart and Fox state that 83% of blogs are maintained from the home (2006: 28), 40% of blogs are maintained as a hobby (2006: 19) and that 59% of bloggers will typically spend only one to two hours per week maintaining the blog (2006: 27). The lifespan of a blog varies and while 82% of bloggers believe they will be blogging twelve months later, 3% said that they had already stopped blogging and 4% were not sure if they would be blogging a year later (2006: 31). This specific problem of abandonment arose at the beginning of the research stage and so it emphasises the benefit of carrying out a longitudinal study which includes a monitoring period prior to selecting the blogs for the case studies.

A further aspect of the transient nature of blogs is the frequency or rather infrequency of posts. The frequency with which the blogger will post will depend not on the technology but on the willingness of the particular blogger. This is identified by Lenhart and Fox who state that only 13% post new material every day (2006: 19)

¹⁷⁰ URL is the uniform resource locator or more commonly known as the 'web address' for a site.

¹⁷¹ A more serious challenge is when the software owners of such sites sell or abandon the application, resulting in all users (which can be a significant number) having to deal with this disruption or abandonment and which is completely out with their control. This type of event has been recently highlighted with AOL announcing that they may sell or close the Bebo social networking site, which will affect a significant number of users. 'AOL set for loss on plans to jettison Bebo', The Times Online, 7 April 2010, accessed 7 April 2010, http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/technology/article7089774.ece

and that seven in ten bloggers only “post when inspiration strikes” (2006: 26)¹⁷². As a result, when accessing the three blogs on a regular basis, I often found that the blogger had not posted anything. In order to capture this, the date of the post is recorded on the database and a report on the volume of posts within a specific timescale can be accessed, clearly indicating where there is a lapse between posts.

Furthermore, the introduction of new applications, such as the micro-blogging application known as Twitter, which was launched in July 2006¹⁷³ has provided bloggers with a quick way to blog and so many of the blogs set up via *Blogger* software are being abandoned in favour of micro-blogging.

3.3) Development of applications and changes in technology

Over the past twenty years developments in the internet have included the introduction of applications and software that enables people to easily create personal websites (home pages); participate in online games and virtual worlds (e.g. *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*); create blogs; use social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Bebo, MySpace); and micro-blog (Twitter). With the introduction of more and more sophisticated and easy to use applications, the increased speed of broadband connections and the likelihood of the internet being in the workplace as well as the home, this has resulted in an increase in the number of users engaging with the different aspects of the internet¹⁷⁴. In Britain, there is a noticeable trend in the use of technology and the statistics for this includes in “2005, 13% made VoIP phone calls while in 2009, 23% did this” and in 2007 only 17% stated that they had updated or

¹⁷² Data is primarily sourced from PEW American Life Project, as there is limited comparable data for Britain, however in *The Internet in Britain 2009*, Dutton et al. provides a cursory insight into internet use in Britain (2009).

¹⁷³ Crunch Base, <http://www.crunchbase.com/company/twitter>, accessed 7 April 2010

¹⁷⁴ The introduction of technology is not without controversy and this is discussed by Heidegger, who argues that technology may make tasks quicker or easier to complete, however, as a result, there is the expectation for an increase in productivity (Zimmerman 1990: 208). Heidegger’s argument depicts the relationship between technology, existence, being and time, consequently his insight into the relationship between technology and the person can be illustrated in our current relationship with the use of the internet; as the more we use it, the more we rely on it and the more it is developed.

used a social networking site, which increased to 49% in 2009 (Dutton et al: 2009: 5).

There is an increase in the number of users accessing the internet for religious information, including religious texts, access to chat rooms and the participation in online religious practice. This is corroborated by Larson in the report *Cyberfaith*, where she states that three million Americans access the internet on a daily basis for religious information and 25% have accessed the internet for religious information at some point (2001: 2). Larson also maintains that 44% of the respondents believed that it is easier to get access to prayer and religious material online (2001: 4). In a later report, Hoover et al. outlines the different activities undertaken online, including sending/receiving emails with religious content; (38%) sending/receiving online greeting cards related to religious holidays (35%); and accessing information about religious news (32%) (2004: i).

In relation to the religious blogosphere, Schneider and Braunstein provide an examination of the eclectic religious blogosphere and consider why blogs matter and how they are influencing or contributing to an online religious community (2010). The blog provides a prime medium for the dissemination of religious information and for internet users to easily find other similar blogs via the blogroll. This approach was undertaken in stage one of this methodology whereby a number of similar blogs were sourced via the blogroll on *The Buddhist Blog*. The final challenge of undertaking this research relates to ethics.

3.4) Ethics

A notable challenge is a lack of ethical guidelines for examining an online medium and the “question of the adequacy of ‘offline’ ethical guidance” for online research is arguably problematic (Hookway 2008: 105). Over the past ten years there has been a recognised increase in the discussion of ethics in relation to the growth in research being undertaken in cyberspace. Sharf states that “Although formation of such rules

of conduct and ethical inquiries into the communicative use of the computer are still at an early stage of development, analogous guidelines for encouraging ethical practices in the conduct of on-line research are only now being discussed” (in Jones, 1999: 345). Since this statement there have been numerous discussions and although the basic principles of sound ethical research applies especially in relation to the study of human subjects, there are still questions surrounding the application of ethical guidelines for the virtual sphere. Scholars who have contributed to the discussion include; Hine (2000), Bell ([2001] 2003), Hookway (2008) and Kozinets (2010). To understand the issues, solutions and to address the potential ethical issues within this thesis, I outline below some of the findings from the aforementioned scholars.

There is a common acceptance and agreement that ethical research should comply with the principles provided by ethical research boards. Aspects of ethical consideration such as “privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and appropriation of others personal stories” is very valid for the examination of human subjects but it proves problematic in the examination of blogs, as the blogger has overtly waived the right to privacy and voluntarily provides details of their personal lives (Sharf in Jones 1999: 345).

The discussion of people’s right to privacy relates to the discussion of what is defined as ‘public’ or ‘private’ (Bell [2001] 2003; Hookway 2008). Kozinets argues that the internet can be defined as a public space or as a text, both of which have very different ethical issues. He concludes that “The models governing our codes of ethics need to be more flexible in the computer-mediated communications – and perhaps adopt other metaphors as they are pertinent and useful” (2010: 141). Furthermore, he concludes that while online participants may not realise that their comments could be read by those outside their community, this is not the case for bloggers. Bloggers specifically write so that others can read their blog. I maintain that a distinction needs to be drawn between the different types of sites and the related ethical guidelines, as one set of guidelines will not suit all. In addition, the guidelines need to be flexible

enough to adapt to the constant advances and changes of technology and the associated usage of that technology. A typology of sites has been discussed in a previous chapter and this may go some way to align the ethical guidelines with different types of sites, although this is beyond the scope of this study.

In relation to the ethical challenge in determining whether blogs are positioned within a 'public' or 'private' sphere and for Hookway, blogs are in the public sphere:

Blogs are firmly located in the public domain and for this reason it can be argued that the necessity for consent should be waived. Further, blogs are public not only in the sense of being publicly accessible . . . but also in how they are defined by users. Blogging is a public act of writing for an implicit audience. The exception proves the rule: blogs that are interpreted by bloggers as 'private' are made 'friends only'. Thus, accessible blogs may be personal but they are not private (2008: 105).

In addition to the above issue of public/private there is the legal aspect of internet research and so "Perhaps the most pragmatic position for the qualitative researcher is to accept that legal and ethical issues intertwine, often in complex ways" (Mann and Stewart 2000: 40). In Britain and the United States there is an automatic copyright on the content of blogs. There is, however, a clause in the copyright act that permits 'fair use' and so "researchers are relatively unrestricted" when studying blogs (Hookway 2008: 105). The three blogs being examined are based in the United States and Britain and are therefore governed by the above law and its 'fair use' clause.

The approach that I have taken is to apply Hookway's (2008) and Kozinets' (2010) conclusion, that is, blogs are within the 'public' category and would therefore not require consent for being researched. Despite this, each blogger has been contacted

as part of the six stage method. Furthermore I have abided by the research standards set out by the University of Edinburgh and I have completed an ethics assessment form which was subsequently approved.

The decision to define blogs as public and therefore available for research, without consent, was not a decision I made lightly. Whilst there is agreement that consent is not required, the speed in which the internet has developed and as a result the potential naivety of internet users and their actions does not eliminate the need for ethical consideration. After all, we would not read a persons diary without consent. Consequently, every possible step has been taken to consider the ethical implications for this research.

4) Conclusion

In conclusion, I have highlighted a number of topics and introduced emerging themes for the examination of aspects of the self online. It is within stage five (data analysis) that a number of approaches have been identified in order to deal with the complexities and challenges of examining the virtual environment and these findings are set out in the three case studies (stage six). This approach also supports the argument put forth by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005), Campbell (2010b) and Kozinets (2010), that a flexible and interdisciplinary approach is required for the examination of the online world.

In order to answer the research question, “how is the self depicted within blogs?” a number of theories, structures and models are needed to tackle the different elements and subject matters associated with this topic. The significance and importance of selecting an appropriate methodology is highlighted in the third research question which considers whether an interdisciplinary approach can be applied and what benefits will be obtained as a result.

The six stage model provides a controlled approach for the selection of blogs, data collection, analysis and presentation of the findings. The model is flexible and functional for the study of blogs but also for other media such as social network sites. The model includes the defining of categories (stage two), where the definitions of the three categories of self are made clear, as well as the definitions and format of the various fields within the database, thus ensuring an accurate data collection process (stage four).

The analysis of blogs has not been without challenges, specifically in relation to the ethical issues. I have determined that blogs should be positioned in the public domain and therefore do not require consent from the blogger, albeit in this instance, this was obtained. Other challenges, such as the abandonment of blogs could have impacted on the research but due to the monitoring stage, prior to collecting data, this was overcome.

In conclusion, the third research question of whether an inter-disciplinary approach can be used for the examination of self in blogs, as well as identifying the benefits of applying such an approach is demonstrably answered. The approach taken provides two significant benefits. First, the use of interdisciplinary approach is flexible, adaptable and robust. Second, the method can be applied to the examination of other applications on the internet, such as social network sites, virtual worlds or websites and is therefore useful for comparative or additional research in the future. In sum, the examination of self in Buddhist blogs directly contributes to the discussion within the emerging field of media, religion and culture.

Chapter Five - Feelings and Experience in Early Buddhism: An Overview of the Conceptual Issues

This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual issues relating to the self and in doing so I will examine the philosophical framework found in early Buddhism, and Theravada Abhidhamma scriptures¹⁷⁵. This interpretive framework will be used to analyse aspects of the self in blogs, significantly the category of the experiential self.

This thesis is positioned within the field of media, religion and culture rather than Asian studies and so there are two points to note. Firstly, I will set out the basic principles of Buddhism, so that those who may not have a familiarity with the philosophy and history of Buddhism will have an overview of the basic components¹⁷⁶. Secondly, it is not my intention to set forth a new hypothesis for the analysis of the self within Buddhist philosophy; rather I will provide an overview of the conceptual issues relating to the self in order to facilitate the analysis of the person online.

Furthermore, reference will be made to a number of primary Buddhist texts in order to define the *khandhas*¹⁷⁷, although, it is not my intention to undertake any original translation of the texts rather I will rely solely on secondary sources. In addition, the analysis of Buddhist texts is quite recent and the translation and dating of some of the scriptures have proven problematic and divisive for scholars. Gombrich states that scholars are trying to create a “textus receptus” (received text), or a common understanding of key texts including the dating of those texts, based on what the

¹⁷⁵ The Abhidhamma/Abhidharma is a collection of scriptures within the Pali Canon. The Abhidhamma scriptures primarily focus on the metaphysical analysis of reality. The Pali Canon is comprised of three sets of scriptures, the Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka.

¹⁷⁶ In order to assist the reader, diacritic marks will only be used where I am citing from other sources. In addition there is a glossary of Buddhist terms in the appendices.

¹⁷⁷ The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are *rupa* (material), *vedana* (feeling), *sanna* (perception), *samkhara* (volition), *vinnana* (consciousness) and collectively they are the five components comprising the self.

original commentators read “by comparing Pali manuscripts from Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia” (1996: 9). Therefore, while historical dating¹⁷⁸ and analysis of texts are not the primary focus of this thesis, it should be noted that uncertainties of mapping what was initially an oral and subsequently a written tradition, and also texts written in different languages result in a number of difficulties for the investigation of the *khandhas*. Due to this and also to maintain a level of consistency, the conclusions drawn within this chapter will primarily draw upon the arguments put forth by scholars such as Gombrich (1988, 1996), Hamilton (1996, 2000), Collins (1997), Duerlinger (2003), Ronkin (2005), Sorabji (2006), Siderits (2007) and Shulman (2008).

The discussion of not-self (*anatta*) within Buddhism has many facets and so I intend to focus primarily on the aspect of *anatta* known as the aggregates or *khandhas* (Skt. *skandha*), thus providing a reductionist interpretation of the self that can be utilised in the analysis of the self online. The discussion of *anatta* focuses on two of the five *khandhas*, *vedana* and *samkhara*. *Vedana* is the second of the five aggregates and this is translated as ‘feeling’, whereas the fourth aggregate, *samkhara*, is usually defined as ‘volition’. As the discussion unfolds, it will become apparent, however, that the definition of these two *khandhas* is not without controversy.

In order to comprehend fully the definition of the *khandhas*, I also provide a definition of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ and ‘sensation’ found within the Nikaya¹⁷⁹ and Abhidhamma literature¹⁸⁰. To supplement the definitions found within the textual tradition I also discuss the arguments put forth by historical individuals such as the

¹⁷⁸ The dating of the Buddha has been as problematic as the dating of the early textual tradition. The commonly accepted dating of the Buddha is 563-483 BCE. For a recent summary of scholarly views see Prebish (2008).

¹⁷⁹ The Nikaya are the five books within the Sutta Pitaka, which are the second grouping of texts within the Pali Canon.

¹⁸⁰ The analysis of the self is found within many of the scriptures. Nyanatiloka asserts that comparisons can be drawn between the language found within the Anguttara Nikaya (in the Sutta Pitaka) and that of the Puggala-Panatti, which is the fourth book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka (Nyanatiloka 1957: 5).

Buddhist Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE). Through undertaking this analysis there will emerge a clear understanding of the relationship between the individual and the sensory experience of ‘feeling’, ‘emotion’ and ‘sensation’, as “Feelings and perceptions are our most immediate connections to that world. They respond to it and take their cues from it in ways that produce religion and moral urgency, tenderness, and compassion” (Heim 2003: 552).

In the final section of this chapter I examine a different aspect of emotion found in Indian culture, namely the *rasas*; the eight types of emotion that can be induced via the experience found in performance art. Consequently, the definition of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ and ‘sensation’ found within Buddhist philosophy provides a framework for investigating the relationship between the person and experience, thus providing an innovative approach to the understanding of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within blogs. The following section provides an overview of the development of Buddhism in early India.

1) Historical Background

The cultural milieu of early India provided a setting for the development of Buddhist philosophy, opposing the Brahmanical ideology. Brahmanism promulgated a soteriological philosophy whereby the knowledge that the self (*atman*) was one with the ultimate reality known as Brahman would bring salvation (*moksa*) from the perpetual cycle of rebirths (*samsara*). The Chandogya Upanisad (6.8.7) encapsulates this belief¹⁸¹:

¹⁸¹ The two oldest Upanisads are the Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya and they can be dated to approximately seventh or sixth centuries BCE. The other Upanisads date before the last few centuries BCE/early CE (Olivelle 1996: xxxvi).

The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how you are, Svetaketu¹⁸² (Olivelle 1996: 152).

The Chandogya Upanisad states that everything, including the self, is part of the ultimate reality or the whole known as Brahman. Hamilton argues that if a person recognises that the *atman* (self) is equated with Brahman (ultimate reality), this will result in liberation (*moksa*) and freedom from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) (1996: xxiii).

The importance of the Upanisads within India at that time was central to the development of Buddhism, as “the central teachings of the Buddha came as a response to the central teachings of the old Upanisads, notably the *Brhadāranyaka*” (Gombrich 1996: 31). The language and symbolism found within Brahmanism is also found in Buddhism, albeit the language and symbolism is infused with an alternative meaning¹⁸³. Through the use of language and symbolism there are descriptions of the sacrificial fire¹⁸⁴. In the Brahmanical tradition the sacrificial fire is synonymous with the fire of the sun as both relate to the cycle of life; as the fire of the sun breathes life into the living, similarly the sacrificial fire enables an individual to obtain *karma* to break free from the cycle of rebirth¹⁸⁵ (Collins 1997: 50). The external fire ritual and symbolism found in Brahmanism became internalised within Buddhism and became known as the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion (Gombrich 1996: 66). The fire symbolism is also found in the translation of nirvana, which literally means ‘blowing out’ or “the extinction of the three fires” (Ronkin

¹⁸² Svetaketu is a character mentioned in the Upanisads (scriptures).

¹⁸³ For a detailed examination of the use of analogy and metaphor within Buddhism, see Richard Gombrich (1996) and David McMahan (2002).

¹⁸⁴ The sacrificial fire known as *agni* is also the name given to the god *Agni*, “it is through the medium of the fire that the gods partake of the sacrificial offerings” (Olivelle 1996: xiii)

¹⁸⁵ Karma can be defined as action. This can be both good or bad action and the results of which are accumulated over past, present and future lifetimes in order to determine the attributes for life and rebirth.

2005: 175). Furthermore, the later Mahayana tradition digressed from the original meaning and so the three fires became known as the three poisons (Gombrich 1996: 66). Gombrich argues that the use of Brahmanical language and concepts were infused into the Buddhist understanding of the relationship between the sacrificial fire metaphor and the epistemological argument of the self and time¹⁸⁶. Later in this chapter, I discuss the fire metaphor in the relationship between the *khandhas* and *upadana* (grasping).

Buddhism used the language of the Brahmanical tradition and provided an alternative soteriology, one of liberation from suffering (*dukkha*), expounding that at the root of suffering (*dukkha*) is attachment. Buddhist epistemology is found within the Four Noble Truths¹⁸⁷ and the eight fold path¹⁸⁸ and Gombrich argues that the Buddha did not confuse “epistemology with ontology” (Gombrich 1996: 43). He qualifies this by stating that “I do not assume *a priori* that the Buddha had worked out or consistent position” relating to matters of the imagination or consciousness (Gombrich 1996: 87). The Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path provide the basis in which to comprehend the Buddhist understanding of reality.

2) Teachings of the Buddha: The Four Noble Truths

After the Buddha became enlightened he ‘proclaimed a middle path’ and delivered his sermon on the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are defined as *dukkha* (suffering), *samudaya* (cause of suffering), *nirodha* (cessation of suffering) and

¹⁸⁶ Richard Gombrich argues that the early Buddhists have two notions of time; cosmic and experiential time (every day time) which mirrored the Brahmanical cosmology, however, unlike Buddhism which denounced sacrifice, the Brahmanical tradition provides continuity between the two notions of time through sacrifice (1996: 87-88).

¹⁸⁷ The four Noble Truths are expounded by the Buddha and explain life as suffering and they provide a path for liberation from suffering.

¹⁸⁸ The eightfold path is found in the last of the four Noble Truths and they are; right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation (Keown 2004: 84).

magga (the eight fold path). The following discourse provides an overview of each Noble Truth.

The first Noble Truth is *dukkha* and is generally translated as ‘suffering’, although Harvey (1990: 48) and Hamilton (2000: 12, 63) translate it as ‘unsatisfactoriness’, which does not contain the same negative connotations as ‘suffering’. Harvey describes *dukkha* as “... both ‘suffering’ and the general ‘unsatisfactoriness’ of life” (1990: 48) which Hamilton states “It is thus as ‘unsatisfactoriness’ that *dukkha* is nowadays usually translated” (2000: 63). Throughout the discourse the term ‘suffering’ and ‘unsatisfactoriness’ will be used interchangeably.

The second Noble Truth is *samudaya* which is the origin of *dukkha* and is the cause of suffering. The cause is often translated as ‘attachment’, ‘craving’ or ‘desire’, which traps the individual in the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). It is through attachment that unsatisfactoriness is maintained “because we are always wanting things in one way or another, ranging from all sorts of sensual pleasures to the desire either to live forever or not to live at all, that we are perpetuating the experience of unsatisfactoriness, because even if we get what we want it does not last and we have other wants” (Hamilton 2000: 63).

It is within the second Noble Truth that the Buddha’s interpretation of *karma* is found, which can be defined as all actions, intentional or unintentional and which can have a bearing on the individual’s existence in the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). The discussion of karma in relation to the moral and ethical attributes of an individual is an important component in Buddhist ontology, but one that is beyond the scope of this discussion, accordingly I only provide a cursory look at ethics in relation to the definition of a person as a moral agent¹⁸⁹. Also found within the second Noble Truth is the explanation and discussion of attachment to a permanent entity of the self

¹⁸⁹ Damien Keown has written extensively about ethics and Buddhism in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992)

which will result in suffering¹⁹⁰. The discussion of the self and the five aggregates (*khandhas*) is a central theme in early Buddhism which develops further in later Buddhist philosophy, such as the *Abhidhamma*¹⁹¹ and the *Madhyamaka*¹⁹².

The third Noble Truth, *nirodha*, is the cessation of *dukkha*, which is realising the cause of suffering. This directly relates to the first Noble Truth which identifies the cause of suffering, and so, “as *dukkha* is explained in terms of the *khandhas* in the first Noble Truth, the cessation of the *khandhas* is the same as the cessation of *dukkha*” and this provides an explanation of *dukkha* and how it can be stopped (Hamilton 2000: 97).

The fourth Noble Truth, *magga*, is commonly known as the eightfold path. The eight stages of the path are described as ‘right’: understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration¹⁹³. The path illustrates both the ethical and mindfulness dimension of Buddhist philosophy. The eightfold path provides instruction for eliminating suffering, including that of wrong views (*micchaditthi*) and maintaining right views (*sammaditthi*), including the view that a person should not be attached to the view of a permanent ‘self’ or ‘I’. Further explanation of *ditthi* is found in the *Sammāditthi Sutta* which provides a list of the right views including that of the knowledge of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths (Collins 1997: 90). Therefore, a person who follows the path, over

¹⁹⁰ The Buddha discussed the issue of not-self in his second sermon (Gombrich 1988: 63)

¹⁹¹ The *Abhidhamma* text, the *Puggala-Pannatti* (Designation of Human Types) is the shortest of the seven books of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* and details the self as a real entity or substance. This differs from the general Buddhist understanding that the self is without real entity or substance.

¹⁹² The founder of the *Madhyamaka* school is Nagarjuna (second century CE), who argued that all entities are empty as they lack inherent existence. It is within chapter 18 of Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika* that a detailed discussion of the self and the aggregates takes place. Garfield summarises Nagarjuna’s argument: “When one stops grasping the aggregates and the self as independent entities or as the possessions of independent entities, one recognizes one’s own lack of inherent existence. One also recognizes the lack of inherent existence of the aggregates” (Garfield 1995: 247). Nagarjuna states that the terms ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ are conventional terms or language used in an everyday context as a means to label entities, which is similar to Siderits (2007) argument that I discuss later in this chapter.

¹⁹³ Both Harvey (1990) and Hamilton (2000) use this wording and in this order.

many lifetimes, will realise the cause of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and how to overcome it, thus breaking free from *samsara*.

It is within the four Noble Truths that an understanding for the term *anatta* begins to emerge. Accordingly, the attachment, or clinging, to the notion of a permanent ‘self’ or ‘I’ will result in suffering. The attachment can be mental or physical, and so attachment to the material world as well as attachment to mental states (for example, emotions) will result in suffering.

The ensuing discussion focuses on the components of the individual and the intrinsic nature of the three marks of existence relating to the experiential world, namely not-self (*anatta*), impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*), as “The doctrines of egolessness (*anatta*), and of transience (*anicca*), along with that of suffering (*dukkha*), form the central base of the philosophy of the human person in Buddhism” (de Silva 1991: 83) and so the three marks of existence are the basis in which to position the discussion of *anatta* and the *khandhas*.

3) *Anatta and the khandhas*

This section focuses on the definition of *anatta* and the *khandhas* as well as exploring the subject of reductionism posited by the Buddhist, Vasubandhu and the philosopher, Derek Parfit. In addition, the potentially problematic topic of memory will be examined to determine whether memory can exist where an agent (self) doesn’t. Consequently, the discussion of memory is further examined within the category of self reflection in chapter eight.

As mentioned earlier, *anatta* is one of the three marks of existence and is identified as a central ontological component within Buddhism. *Anatta* applies not only to human beings but to all conditioned objects, as they are all impermanent (*anicca*). A person’s attachment to the impermanent physicality or the concept of a permanent

self will result in suffering (*dukkha*). This analysis therefore encapsulates a rudimentary understanding of human existence.

To consider what it means to be a ‘person’, ‘human being’ or ‘self’, I provide a reductionist account of the person presented by Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE) and Parfit ([1984] 1987) as well as drawing from the arguments posited by Duerlinger (2003), Sorabji (2006), and Siderits (2007). Furthermore, I examine the components of *anatta* known as the *khandhas* which are “causally conditioned and impermanent phenomena” and are therefore claimed by some scholars as ultimately unreal (Duerlinger 2003: 17). This should not be interpreted as a nihilistic denial of the self. Rather the self is essentially ‘not-self’ and therefore the word ‘self’ is merely used as a conventional label (Siderits 2007).

It would be inaccurate to conclude that this is nihilistic, even if “the doctrine of *anatta* appears to convey an overriding concern to make ontological denials, I suggest that if one takes this term at face value it can act as something of a red herring in one’s attempt to understand the constitution of the human being” (Hamilton 1996: 196). Within the Buddhist context, it is by applying the label of ‘self’ that there is an understanding that this is conventionally ‘real’ but ultimately ‘unreal’ as ultimately there is not-self (*anatta*). If the self is rendered as not-self (*anatta*), can people be held accountable for their actions and how can memory and remembrance be explained?¹⁹⁴ To answer these questions I refer to Siderits and Gyatso.

3.1) The Essence of a Person: Fleeting Events

Siderits maintains that the definition of the person is “a separately existing entity, distinct from the person’s brain and body, and their experiences” (2007: 17). He

¹⁹⁴ William Pietz acknowledges this problem and asserts that Buddhism has been charged with “moral nihilism” (2005: 195).

states that the Buddhist understanding of self relates to the ‘essence’ or ‘part’ that defines the entity conventionally named the ‘self’; “by ‘the self’ what Buddhists mean is the essence of a person – the one part whose continued existence is required for that person to continue to exist” (2007: 32). There has been much debate regarding what exactly the ‘essence’ is that enables a person to exist. The deduction is that it is a continuum of events that enables the ‘essence’ of a person to have a stream-like existence and come into being from one existence to the next and indeed from moment to moment. Vasubandhu affirms this in his *Refutation of the Theory of the Self* where he refers to the self as “bundles of fleeting events”¹⁹⁵ (Sorabji 2006: 280). However, if there is a continuum of ‘fleeting events’ can we say that we have memories?

3.2) Memory

The act of remembering and the ownership of memories raises an important question, namely how can memories be owned when a person is not a permanent entity?

Vasubandhu states that it is not the person who remembers, neither is there a memory per se; in actuality there is a continuum that “causes an act of remembering” (Sorabji 2006: 282) as “there are only streams of psychological and physical events” (Sorabji 2006: 12). Therefore, there is not a substantive entity or memories per se. Rather there is a stream of fleeting events resulting in the use of the conventional label of both the ‘self’ and the act of ‘remembering’¹⁹⁶. Gyatso also refers to Vasubandhu’s discussion of memory and argues that the “occurrence of memory” does not conclude that there is a permanent self (1992: 11)¹⁹⁷. This brief discussion further emphasises the extent in which the concept of self is analysed within Buddhist philosophy. Moreover, the discussion of the Buddhist understanding of memory will be applied when focusing on the category of self reflection and life writing (blogs).

¹⁹⁵ Vasubandhu wrote the *Abhidharmakosa* (Treasury of Knowledge) and the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* (Commentary on the Treasury of Knowledge), with *The Refutation of the Theory of the Self* as the ninth book of the *Abhidharmakosabhasya*.

¹⁹⁶ The discussion of memory within Buddhism is thoroughly examined, *In the mirror of memory: reflections on mindfulness and remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* by Janet Gyatso (1992).

3.3) Reductionism and Vasubandhu

Before I discuss Parfit's, Siderits' and Vasubandhu's definition of the self, it is helpful to refer to Duerlinger's interpretation of selflessness in Indian philosophy. First, that "we are not other than collections of aggregates", as we are not a separate substance; we are conditioned and impermanent (2003: 27). Second, the interpretation posited by the Pudgalavādins¹⁹⁸, Vasubandhu and Candrakirti¹⁹⁹ is "that we do not possess any attributes apart from being conceived in dependence upon collections of aggregates" (Duerlinger 2003: 27)²⁰⁰. Vasubandhu's position is that we cannot be separated from the aggregates as we cannot be defined except by referencing the aggregates, since we exist in relation to them. However, the Pudgalavadins do not fully corroborate Vasubandhu's concept of the self, which I will discuss further in due course.

Siderits definition of the self uses the term 'convenient designator' and summarises Vasubandhu's understanding of selflessness of the person as "a mere convenient designator for a complex causal series of impermanent, impersonal psychological elements. That is, ultimately there are no persons, only physical objects, feelings, perceptions, volitions and consciousnesses" (2007: 24). The 'convenient designator' or the 'conceptual fiction' refers to the name given to the entity or the 'self', but in fact this 'convenient designator' is unreal, as the only entity that is conventionally real is the conventional use of the term 'self'²⁰¹. Therefore, it is the naming of

¹⁹⁷ Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa* provides an explanation of memory.

¹⁹⁸ There are a number of Pudgalavadin Buddhist schools including, Vatsiputriya, Dharmottariya, Bhadrayaniya, Sammitiya and Sannagarika (Buswell 2004: 692).

¹⁹⁹ Candrakirti (c. seventh century CE) is a Madhyamaka Buddhist philosopher (Keown 2004: 49).

²⁰⁰ Vasubandhu, the Pudgalavādins and Candrakirti disputed this view in its entirety as Candrakirti did not agree "that when we conceive ourselves, we naturally appear to be independently identifiable" and therefore this appearance causes us to continually suffer in the samsaric cycle (Duerlinger 2003: 28).

²⁰¹ Within Buddhism there is often reference made to the conventional and ultimate reality. This is found in many works accredited to Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna.

objects that is unreal or false, as the object itself is illusory and it is comprised of components, which the Abhidharma²⁰² refers to as *dhammas*²⁰³.

Siderits maintains that the conventional and ultimate reality theory helped “to solve an exegetical problem” and to some extent served to overcome and address the contradictions or inconsistencies with Buddhist philosophy (2007: 58). He concludes his discussion by stating that “the term ‘person’ is our convenient way of referring to a series of causally connected sets of contiguous psychophysical elements”, concluding that the “psychophysical elements [are] in a causal relation” (2007: 25). Therefore the continuous stream of events and experiences had by a person will belong to them rather than to another person and although the person is not the same from moment to moment, the stream results in the person having experiences causally linked and being unique to only them.

In addition to Siderits’ analysis, Vasubandhu and Parfit also elucidate on this topic. It is from Vasubandhu’s study of the *Abhidharma* commentaries that he produced his prominent work the *Abhidharmakosa*²⁰⁴ (Treasury of Knowledge) and his commentary, the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* (Commentary on the Treasury of Knowledge)²⁰⁵. *The Refutation of the Theory of the Self* is the ninth book of the *Abhidharmakosabhasya*²⁰⁶ and it is here that Vasubandhu responds to various theories of the person (*pudgala*) expounded by the Pudgalavadins²⁰⁷ and Nyaya-

²⁰² When discussing Vasubandhu, the Sanskrit spelling of Abhidharma is used, so that it parallels with the spelling in his texts.

²⁰³ Ronkin states that there are four categories of dhammas, “consciousness (*citta*), mentalities (*cetasika*), materiality (*rupa*), and nirvana” (Ronkin in Edelglass and Garfield 2009: 18)

²⁰⁴ Dated fourth or fifth century CE (Duerlinger 2003).

²⁰⁵ The *Vibhāsā* is the Abhidharma commentary that Vasubandhu critiques.

²⁰⁶ Duerlinger states that it is likely that this work was written independently and added later as the ninth chapter of the *Abhidharmakosa* (*Treasury of Knowledge*) or to the commentary of the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* (2003: 4).

²⁰⁷ Vasubandhu named the Pudgalavadins the Vatsiputriyas, after their founder, who is likely to have been Vatsiputra. Pudgalavadins, sometimes referred to as the Personalists were anti-Reductionist (Siderits 2007: 89).

Vaisesikas²⁰⁸. Vasubandhu discusses the theory of the person (*pudgala*) and rejects both the views of the Pudgalavadins and the Nyaya-Vaisesikas, as well as rejecting Nagarjuna's²⁰⁹ thesis that everything lacks inherent existence, including the person (Duerlinger 2003: viii).

In contrast to Vasubandhu's conclusion, the Pudgalavadins and the Nyaya-Vaisesikas discussion focuses on the 'realness' of the person and consequently a number of different statements are made about the self. The Pudgalavadins state that the person is separate from the five aggregates and the person becomes a sixth entity whereas Vasubandhu states that the person cannot be discussed as separate from the aggregates (Ganeri 2007: 164). Vasubandhu draws the following conclusion in relation to the aggregates and the self in section 3.10 of the *Refutation of the Theory of the Self*:

Therefore a tumour of false theories [concerning the existence of a person] has grown within [the body of] the teaching [of the Buddha]. Some, [the Pudgalavādins,] cling to [the existence of] the [inexplicable] person, [and so accept the eternal transcendence extreme]. Others, [the followers of Nāgārjuna, who deny that the aggregates themselves exist, undermine the only foundation upon which persons can be said to exist. Hence, since they] cling to the non-existence of everything, [they accept nihilism extreme. Therefore, our view, that a person is real by way of a conception and yet is a collection of aggregates, is the true middle way.]

(Duerlinger 2003: 95)

²⁰⁸ The Nyaya-Vaisesikas are actually two separate schools but are often grouped together. Their key texts are Kanada's Vaisesika Sutras and Gotama's Nyaya Sutras. The Nyaya-Vaisesikas argued that there is a permanent self (Duerlinger 2003: 14).

²⁰⁹ The Madhyamaka philosopher Nagarjuna (second century CE) argued that all entities are empty as they lack inherent existence.

From the above passage, it can be concluded that Vasubandhu disputes the view of the Pudgalavadins and the view of the Madhyamaka, as the latter define the person as empty of inherent existence, which Vasubandhu declares as nihilistic²¹⁰.

Accordingly, he believes that persons are conventionally real and ultimately exist in relation to the *khandhas*, but he refutes the “Pudgalavadins’ thesis that persons, who are conventionally real and ultimately exist are inexplicable phenomena” (Duerlinger 2003: 21). Duerlinger speculates that the Pudgalavadins meant ‘inexplicable phenomena’ to be defined as the person ultimately exists by virtue of possessing substantial reality and exist in an ‘ultimate way’ but this is different to that posited by other Buddhist schools (2003: 21)²¹¹. In sum, Vasubandhu’s definition is that the person is comprised of the *khandhas* and exists only in relation to them in a similar but not identical manner to the definition proposed by Parfit. Parfit’s discourse on the concept of the self provides a Western interpretation and in doing so a number of parallels emerge between Buddhist philosophy and Western philosophy.

3.4) Reductionism and Parfit

Derek Parfit provides a number of complex arguments in *Reasons and Persons* ([1984] 1987) in order to identify a reductionist or non-reductionist account of the person²¹². He rejects the non-reductionist account according to which a person is a separately existing entity, distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences. He positions his analysis of the person in a reductionist context ([1984] 1987: 274). Consequently, he makes reference to Buddhism, stating that “I find the Buddha’s claim to be true” (Parfit [1984] 1987: 280). Although he makes this claim, there

²¹⁰ Tillemans, draws a comparison between the Mahayana and Hinayana debate on the subject of the aggregates of the selfless person. He concludes that the Hinayana states that there is not a self and everything is reducible to elements which are in a constant state of flux. He argues that these reducible elements are real. In contrast to the Hinayana, the Madhyamaka school states that both the self and the elements are unreal as both are within the conventional conditioned reality and therefore lack inherent existence (1996: 839).

²¹¹ It is not possible to know what the Pudgalavadins meant.

²¹² An example of a non-reductionist account is the Cartesian split between the mind and body, posited by Rene Descartes (1596-1650).

appears to be some difference between Parfit's account of reductionism and that found within Buddhism, as Siderits illustrates:

One significant difference between the Buddhist formulation of Reductionism and Parfit's is that the former involves the explicit endorsement of the claim that wholes (partite entities) are ultimately unreal, while the latter takes no position on the question whether wholes other than persons are just as real as the parts of which they are constituted. The Buddhist Reductionist argues that since all wholes are conceptual constructions, the person, as a causal series of sets of psychophysical elements (that is, a whole made up of spatially and temporally distributed parts), must likewise be a mere conceptual fiction. (2007: 76)

The difference between the form of reductionism advocated by Parfit and that of the Buddhists primarily relates to 'ownership'. For both Buddhists and Parfit, a person is a stream of psycho-physical events, however, Parfit disputes that the owner of the experiences can also be reduced. Sorabji refers to the concept of ownership and asserts that there does not need to be a subject when discussing such experiences, as "we could fully describe our experiences and the connexion between them, without claiming that they are had by a subject of experiences" (Sorabji 2006: 266). Sorabji contends that this causes a problem when discussing "agency and ethics" and he argues that Parfit is not taking into account the complexity of the situation nor is he including all the potential relationships between the agent and their actions (2006: 270). Sorabji concludes his argument, stating that he does not believe that reference to causal streams can replace the idea of an agent or an owner (2006: 272)²¹³. Similarly, Collins also refers to Parfit's discussion of agent and streams and concludes that "we clearly cannot describe the world completely without referring to persons" (1997: 479). Furthermore, Collins refers to the Buddhist two level of truth

²¹³ Richard Sorabji states that the historical background to the discussion of self, streams of consciousness and ethics needs to be considered as a justification for the arguments put forth (2006: 277).

theory (conventional and ultimate) and simply states that “Parfit was wrong” in claiming that we can completely omit persons from existence (1997: 480). The implications of whether or not there is a fixed entity which ‘owns’ experiences (and memories) is significant for the discussion of the self within blogs. If there is a fixed entity, what is this entity and how can it be identified?

To explicate this point further, Parfit continues his discussion of a ‘subject’ in the physical context, providing an analogy of a person being transported through time, from one location to another through the use of a teletransporter and he queries whether the person is the same person after teletransportation²¹⁴. It is within this argument that he surrenders the continuity of the material body (Sorabji 2006: 78) because “he thinks personal identity unimportant, provided the right *psychological* connections are maintained” (Sorabji 2006: 79). Collins argues that Parfit is more concerned with psychological continuity and survival than the implications this would have on the social aspects of producing replicas of a person (1997: 482). Therefore, Parfit’s reductionism of the person as a continuous stream of events is similar to that of Buddhism but he aligns himself more with the Pudgalavadins and asserts that the physical continuity doesn’t matter, thus designating the physical ‘self’ as separate to the stream of psychological events²¹⁵. Therefore, “Parfit wants to argue that what matters is not sameness of person, but a certain psychological connectedness and continuity, which can be enjoyed in the absence of personal identity” (Sorabji 2006: 87)

In other words, for Parfit the self can be said to exist as an entity but also reduces to components, drawing a similar conclusion to that found in certain schools of Buddhism (Tillemans 1996: 842). Parfit argues that the self can be reduced to

²¹⁴ The question that arises is “whether a person who is teletransported to another world, is the same person who left the previous place?” as the person has been completely broken down and transported through space and time. (Parfit [1984] 1987: 467-477).

²¹⁵ The Pudgalavadins are a Buddhist school who promulgated that there is a sixth entity, a ‘real’ self (pudgala) (Keown 2004: 224).

components but he also claims that the self is separate from the components, “a person is distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences” (Parfit [1984] 1987: 275). In doing so he provides a similar view to that of the Pudgalavadins, who are likely to have claimed selflessness but retained a type of *pudgala*²¹⁶. Therefore, Parfit’s interpretation can be summarised as that of reducing the self to elements while retaining a self, which could be encapsulated as “qualified selflessness” (Tillemans 1996: 844).

It is within chapters six, seven and eight that I present a ‘self’ which could be said to align with Vasubandhu’s conclusion rather than Parfit’s conclusion. I make reference to the stream of psycho-physical events but the self can only be defined in relation to these and is therefore not independent or a separate entity. Moreover, the discussion of life writing and the neuroscientific rendering of the self (which includes emotions) further supports this proposition that the self is a continual process (Eakin 1999: x; Damasio 2004).

3.5) Analysis of *anatta* and the *khandhas*

Buddhist texts such as the canonical scriptures of the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikaya*, discuss *anatta* and provide a comprehensive analysis of the *khandhas*, for example in the *Khandha Vagga* (Book of Aggregates) of the *Samyutta Nikaya* which reads:

And what, monks, are the five aggregates? Whatever matter, sensation, recognition, karmic activities, and consciousness, be it past, present, or future, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, these are called matter, sensation, recognition, karmic activities and consciousness aggregates. ...And what, monks, are the five

²¹⁶ Scholars are not certain what the Pudgalavadins stated. There are only accounts of what they are purported to have stated.

clinging aggregates? Whatever matter, sensation, recognition, karmic activities, and consciousness, be it past, present, or future, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, that are subject to cankers [*āsava: biases*], subject to clinging, these are called matter, sensation, recognition, karmic activities and consciousness clinging aggregates. (Boisvert 1995: 21)

It is within the Sutta on the Simile of the Snake (*Alagaddupama Sutta*), in the *Majjhima Nikaya I*, that there can be found a discussion of the self reduced to components while retaining a self of some description. The simile from which this sutta derives its title analyses the Buddha's comparison between someone who grasps a poisonous snake and someone who incorrectly grasps the Buddha's truth, as both will result in a detrimental effect on the person (Ganeri 2007: 43; Gethin 2008: 156-167).

The use of language to portray the "truth" is further examined in the *Milindapanha* (The Questions of Milinda)²¹⁷. This work dates from the first century BCE²¹⁸ and provides an analogy of the self and specifically the interconnectedness of the *khandhas*. The *Milindapanha* details the conversation between King Milinda²¹⁹ and the Buddhist monk Nagasena. King Milinda asks Nagasena a number of questions in relation to aspects of Buddhism, which he finds contradictory. One of the questions relates to *anatta* and so Nagasena provides a comparison to explain. Nagasena asks King Milinda if he believes that the components of a chariot, such as the axle, wheels and so on, could independently be named the chariot. Nagasena explains that it is only the collective components of the chariot that enable it to be named a chariot. This he states is similar to the components or aggregates of the self; collectively they are the 'I' or "person" but they do not exist independently of each other.

²¹⁷ It is not certain whether the conversation between Milinda and Nagasena actually took place (Sorabji 2006: 280).

²¹⁸ Peter Harvey in Garfield and Edelglass 2009: 272.

²¹⁹ Milinda is likely to have been the Greek King of Bactria.

In the above section I have provided examples of texts and those who have analysed the ‘person’ or ‘self’ but I have yet to discuss the components of the *anatta* known as the *khandhas* and so it is this I now turn to. The *khandhas* can be translated as ‘aggregates’, ‘components’ or, as Siderits states, ‘bundles’. There are five bundles, which collectively constitute the human individual (Siderits 2007: 35). The five *khandhas* are *rupa* (material), *vedana* (feeling), *sanna* (perception), *samkhara* (mental formation), and *vinnana* (consciousness)²²⁰. Collectively the five *khandhas* are known as *pancakkandha* and can be split into one material *khandha*, *rupa*, and four mental *khandhas*, *arupa*, all of which are in a constant state of flux and are therefore impermanent (*anicca*).

The five *khandhas* are very much a totality, although it is my intention to focus primarily on the second *khandha*, *vedana* and only refer to the fourth *khandha*, *samkhara* where it is related to *vedana*. I have chosen to do this for four reasons. Firstly, there is little written about specific *khandhas* and I want to provide an understanding of *vedana* and subsequently *samkhara*. Secondly, I have chosen the *khandha* that is most relevant to an explanation of experience in relation to the person. Thirdly, by referring to the framework found within the Abhidhamma literature this will enable an analysis of the representation of *vedana* and *samkhara* within blogs. Fourthly, the interpretation of these specific *khandhas* resonates with western psychology and the examination of feeling and emotion (Damasio 2004). Furthermore, the Buddhist explanation of suffering (*dukkha*) includes the attachment to ‘feeling’, ‘emotion’, and ‘sensation’ and therefore, these attributes correlate with specific *khandhas* and the cyclic existence of birth, death and rebirth. To explain further, I refer to the subject of the *khandhas* and *upadanakhandha* which translates as grasping (*upadana*).

²²⁰ Hamilton states that the particular order of the *khandhas* is nearly always the same and there is little explanation for this (Hamilton 1996: xxix).

4) *Upadanakhandha* and Dependent Origination

In order to understand fully *vedana-khandha* it is pertinent to explore the meaning of *upadanakhandha* and *upadana*. As a result, this will lead the discussion onto a more detailed explanation of the *khandhas* and *upadana* as found in the Abhidhamma (Gethin 1986: 38).

4.1) *Upadanakhandha*

As shown in the passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, quoted earlier, there are a number of factors to consider when analysing the *khandhas* including the aspect of clinging or grasping to the aggregates, known as *upadanakhandha*. Gombrich states that this translation has lost its metaphorical meaning, as *upadanakhandha* can be translated as both grasping and “a bundle of fuel” (1996: 67). Similarly, Gethin states that within the *Khandha Samyutta*²²¹ “the *khandhas* are to be considered *upādānakkhandhas* only when they are with *āsava* (*sāsava*) and subject to grasping (*upādāniya*)” (1986: 37). To provide an explanation of what ‘grasping’ means, he refers to the metaphor of fire, stating that “when we die Enlightened, we have no more potential for experience; we have run out of fuel” (1996: 69)²²². The use of specific language provides a symbolic analysis of the connection between fuel and fire, which are akin to the connection between the causal streams and the person. As with the fuel and fire metaphor, there is a relationship between self and the *khandhas* since neither is independent of one another²²³. To elucidate further, I will now focus on *upadana* and *upadanakhandha* in relation to the aggregates and grasping.

²²¹ *Khandha Samyutta* III 47, 48 (Bodhi 2000: 885)

²²² It is within the *Samyutta Nikaya* SN III, 71, that the *upadanakhandha* is metaphorically called a bundle of fuel and that the five *khandhas* are on fire (*aditta*).

²²³ Another example is *upadaya*, which can be translated as “taking to oneself, assuming” which is discussed in the context of the fuel metaphor by Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavadins (Ganeri 2007: 165).

Upadanakhandha can be interpreted as referring to the five aggregates of attachment and intrinsically connects the aggregates to *samsara* and *dukkha*. The inherent connection between *anatta*, *dukkha* and *samsara* is found within the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths, as "the *khandhas* are presented as one way of defining what is *dukkha*" (Gethin 1986: 41). Hamilton provides a similar explanation of *dukkha* in relation to the *khandhas*, arguing it "is first that we take *dukkha* to be referring to experience, and then note that experience is further explained by the Buddha in terms of the five *khandhas*" (2000: 69). Specifically, this explanation of *dukkha* is found within the first Noble Truth where it is stated that grasping or clinging to the aggregates will bring about suffering (*dukkha*) and will bind the person to *samsara*, as illustrated in the *Khandha-Samyutta* S III 47. Gethin argues that "A *khandha-samyutta* passage states that the *khandhas* are to be considered *upādānakhandhas* only when they are with *āsavas* (*sāsava*) and subject to grasping (*upādāniya*)" (Gethin 1986: 38).

4.2) *Upadana*

The term *upadana* can be defined as fuel or "grasping, clinging, addiction, attachment" (Ganeri 2007: 165). *Upadana* is not separate from the five *khandhas* but neither is it the same as the five *khandhas* (Gethin 1986: 38). The *khandhas* are "in some measure the products of *upādāna*" and it is only present in certain conditions, that is, when the *khandhas* are subject to grasping. There are three states of grasping described in the Abhidhamma literature; grasping (*upadana*), subject to grasping (*upadaniya*), and the product of grasping (*upadinna*), all of which relate to the *khandhas* (Gethin 1986: 38). What is not clear is how *upadana* differs to *upadanakhandha*. Gethin states that "clearly the *nikāyas* understand *upādāna* as some form of attachment that falls within the general compass of the *khandhas*" which is further developed in the Abhidhamma texts (Gethin 1986: 38). In relation to the discussion of *vedana* and *samkhara* it is the *samkhara-khandha* that *upadana*

is primarily related to, although it can relate to other *khandhas* also²²⁴. Significantly, this discussion highlights the Buddhist interpretation of the self in relation to attachment or grasping (*upadana*) which includes attachment to sensory experiences. Attachment to or craving is defined and explained in the twelve links of causal connection known as dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*).

4.3) Dependent Origination

Dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) summarises the Buddhist teaching of causation and is defined by Siderits as “the relation between the effect and its causes and conditions. Where the relation holds, the effect will arise when the causes and conditions obtain, and the effect will not occur when the causes and conditions do not” (2007: 42). *Patichcasamuppada* includes both *upadana* and *vedana* and they are found within the twelve links which are: 1. ignorance, 2. compositional factors (*samskara*), 3. consciousness, 4. name and form (*nama-rupa*), 5. six sense spheres, 6. contact, 7. feelings (*vedana*), 8. craving, 9. grasping (*upadana*), 10. becoming (*bhava*), 11. birth (*jati*), 12. old age and death (Keown 2004: 221). *Upadana* comes into being “after the seventh and eighth links, *vedana* and *tanha*, and before the tenth and eleventh links of becoming (*bhava*) and birth (*jati*)”. Arguably, there is a direct correlation between *upadana* and the coming into being (birth) of the individual, as the *upadana* (or greed) results in the individual being reborn within the cycle of *samsara* (Gethin 1986: 39).

The original definition of *paticcasamuppada* can be attributed to the Brahmanical understanding of the relationship between *atman* (self) and its experiential relationship to the cosmos (Shulman 2008: 315). *Patichcasamuppada* is a fundamental component of Buddhist philosophy and relates both mental and physical phenomena, as “nothing exists on its own, no-thing possesses independent identity”

²²⁴ Further evidence of *upadana* and the *khandhas* can be found in the *Dhammasangani*. The *Dhammasangani* being one of the seven treatises found in the *Abhidhamma-Pitaka*, the other six are *Vibhanga*, *Dhatukatha*, *Puggalapannatti*, *Kathavatthu*, *Yamaka*, *Patthana* (Ronkin 2005: 28).

(Shulman 2008: 298). Shulman argues that the understanding of dependent origination has transformed from the original definition that of “the workings of the mind alone” to physical and mental (Shulman 2008: 299). He concludes that although *paticcasamuppada* has ontological implications, it was not intended to be an ontology and to his knowledge the causal links relate to mental and not physical causes and so the current understanding of *paticcasamuppada* as both mental and physical is “a result of later doctrinal developments” (Shulman 2008: 315).

Similarly, Siderits’ maintains that the later doctrinal understanding of cause and effect is central to the understanding of *anatta* as all entities causally arise and are impermanent (2007), as “the aggregates come into being in relation to clinging, and are therefore characterized as dependently-arisen” (Shulman 2008: 309). This includes the individual, “as such, any self-hood one may have, of whatever kind, cannot be permanent and unchanging as independence would be a pre-requisite of such qualities” (Hamilton 2000: 22). Therefore, the interpretation of *anatta*, the *khandhas* and *paticcasamuppada* further illustrate the Buddhist ontological and epistemological understanding of the self.

Furthermore, it is from discussing *paticcasamuppada* that the *khandhas* are explicitly shown to be connected to the causal process, as *samkhara* is the second link and *vedana* is the seventh. Holder maintains that “the Pāli texts single out *vedana* as the key link (*nidāna*) in the twelve-fold formula of dependent arising (*paticcasamuppāda*)” (2004: 4). He also argues that *vedana* is viewed as an important link since it is the arising of feeling through experience that causes suffering to arise and that “the texts make it clear that a comprehensive understanding of feeling is a crucial step toward liberation” (Holder 2004: 4). Moreover, this understanding of *paticcasamuppada* emphasises that without a true grasp of the teaching of *anatta* there will be continual rebirth and “pain is generated” (Shulman 2008: 305). In conclusion, I argue that any human being must be regarded

as unique as a result of their individual experiences and it is precisely this experiential uniqueness that will be analysed in blogs.

5) Definition of feeling, sensation and emotion

Before discussing *vedana* in more detail, I want to provide a clear definition of ‘feeling’, ‘sensation’ and ‘emotion’, as there is some dispute as to whether or not *vedana-khandha* can be said to include moods or emotions or whether this would be found within *samkhara-khandha*. Importantly, by defining ‘sensation’, ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ I will identify whether one or two of the five *khandhas* should be analysed within blogs.

5.1) Feeling

The primary issue when defining the term ‘feeling’ is that it is often used when describing an emotional state, such as to ‘feel angry’, when in actual fact the ‘feeling’ is in response to an experience which results in the manifestation of the emotion of anger. This difficulty is illustrated by Lynch who states that “In the English language the verb ‘to feel’ is so intimately linked to understanding emotion that one can scarcely imagine the Other without it” (1990: 11). However, the reverse is not true. An emotion cannot be defined by a feeling, for example the emotion of anger would not necessarily indicate the physical feeling as a result of being physically attacked but the physical feeling from being attacked may result in the person feeling the emotion of anger or terror. Therefore, feeling can be defined as a physical or psychological reaction to an experience and this may or may not result in an emotional component. It can be said that “a feeling is the perception of an emotional state” but an emotional state does not necessarily correlate with a specific mental or physical feeling (Damasio 2004: 52).

5.2) Sensation

Sensation can be defined in relation to the five senses of sight, touch, taste, hearing or smell and their connection with the brain which processes the sensation.

Therefore, it can be said that sensations relate to the sense which are part of the material body, and the mind processes the sensation, enabling a sensory experience.

The term ‘sensation’ is similar to the definition of ‘feeling’ as both can be physical or mental reactions. Later in this chapter, I discuss the senses and their relationship to the self as explicated in the Abhidhamma texts. In doing so, it will become apparent that both the term ‘feeling’ and ‘sensation’ could be used to define *vedana* as it is intrinsically connected to the senses. Arguably, it might also be tempting to translate the term *vedana* as ‘emotion’ and so I will now discuss the definition of emotion to clarify this.

5.3) Emotion

Emotion can be rendered as the psychological states manifested as a result of an experience²²⁵. In addition, emotions are subjective and “can be said to be unreasonable, unjustified, or inappropriate in a way that sensations or feelings cannot” (Lynch 1990: 11). As I have argued above, emotions will manifest as a result of a physical or mental feeling or sensation and so are intrinsically experiential.

Trainor argues that the discussion of emotion has been given little attention in Buddhism (2003: 524). Similarly, Eckman et al. state that “the traditional languages of Buddhism, such as Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, have no word for ‘emotion’ as such” (Eckman 2005: 59). Arguably, there is a difficulty of applying a western definition onto an eastern term. Therefore, I refer to the aforementioned discussion, and I define *vedana* as having an element of emotion and a relationship with the cognitive processes, as cognition cannot be separated. de Silva illustrates this point:

²²⁵ *The Emotions: a cultural reader* (Wulff 2007) provides a number of inter-disciplinary articles on the subject of emotions.

While ‘contact’ is merely a reaction to stimuli, the emergence of the hedonic tone only appears at the level of feeling. With emergence of craving and grasping we discern the transition from the state of feeling into the experience of an emotion. While feeling (*vedana*) comes under the standard psychological categories of Buddhism, there is no generic term for emotion. (De Silva: 1979. 1991, 40)

Although Eckman et al. and de Silva state that there is no specific word for emotion within Buddhism, carefully chosen language is used within the early textual tradition to induce emotional experiences of the reader or viewer. Gay identifies seven basic emotions, namely fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt (Gay 2003: 606). Heim, on the other hand, provides a list of eight emotions, which are love, mirth, grief, anger, exertion, terror, disgust, and wonder (Heim 2003: 543). Such descriptions of emotion can be found in the *Milindapanha*, where the description of Vessantara²²⁶ and his giving away of his children triggers an earthquake as a result of his extraordinary selflessness. The text details the emotional state of those who witness the selfless gift and it raises feelings of fright and surprise. Further descriptions of emotion in the *Milindapanha* are described through the physical characteristic of “his hair stood on end”, indicating a frightening experience.

It is, therefore, not unusual to find reference to feelings and emotions within Buddhist texts, albeit this contradicts the fundamental aim of Buddhism which is the removal of all attachments, including attachment to mental states especially emotion. This contradiction contributes to the difficulty of defining the *khandhas*. Hamilton defines *vedana* as both bodily and mentally arising feeling or sensation, which could be said to include emotion. On the other hand, Siderits does not agree with this conclusion and states that it is a mistake to expand the definition of *vedana* to include

²²⁶ The story of Prince Vessantara can be found within the Jataka’s (Buddha’s birth stories). Margaret Cone and Richard Gombrich provide a detailed analysis in *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic* (1977)

emotions or moods as “the second *skandha*, feeling, refers only to the three kinds of hedonic sensation: pleasure, pain and indifference (neither pleasure nor pain). It does not include most of the things that are often called ‘feelings’, such as the emotions of anger and jealousy. Those emotions go under the very different *skandha* of volition” (Siderits 2007: 36). Siderits’ definition highlights the difficulty in defining *vedana* solely as ‘emotion’, ‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’. Nonetheless, it is important to come to a consensus in order to categorise *vedana* in blogs.

6) Samkhara

I will accordingly proceed to discuss *samkhara-khandha* in more detail in order to assess whether Siderits’ conclusion is correct. *Samkhara* is the *khandha* of volition and is located as the second link in *paticcasamuppada*. Within the *Khandha Samyutta*, *samkhara* relates to the six volitional activities of the six senses and their six correlating sense objects²²⁷. *Samkhara* corresponds to ‘will’ or the actions that bind one to the cycle of *samsara*, “the individual’s will determines his or her future *samsāric* existence: one’s volitions are the instrumental factor in the coming-to-be of the entire human being” (Hamilton 1996: 71). As with *vedana*, *samkhara* has been problematic to define and this is confirmed by Hamilton who states that *samkhara* “occurs in many different contexts in the *Nikāyas*, and has been notoriously difficult to explain and understand” and so this has contributed to the confusion as to which *khandha* includes emotion (Hamilton 1996; 2001: 66)²²⁸.

It is from this discussion on the relationship between *samkhara* and *vedana* that it becomes apparent which *khandha* relates to emotion. There are a number of relationships to note, but the primary one is the association that the individual has in relation to the contact with a sense object and then cognising that object which results in the arising of *vedana*. Therefore, on some occasions both feeling and emotion are present and “The feeling can be agreeable, disagreeable or neutral, but

²²⁷ There is said to be six senses, the five senses plus the mind.

²²⁸ Susan Hamilton examines *samkhara* within three contexts: in the *tilakhana*; in the *paticcasamuppada*; and as the *samkharakhandha* (1996: 2001). The *tilakhana* is the three marks of existence: *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anatta*.

the *samkharakhandā* is only involved if there is a concomitant volition concerning the feeling: if it is an agreeable feeling, a concomitant volition might be to desire it; if it is a disagreeable feeling, one might be revolted by it” (Hamilton 1996: 72).

According to Hamilton (1996: 46, 72), *samkhara* has an emotional component but this is only when in relation to some of the other *khandhas*. I conclude, therefore, that *samkhara* relates to volition more so than emotion and as such the emotional element only arises when *samkhara* and *vedana* are connected²²⁹, which further affirms Hamilton’s statement that only when there is a relationship between object and volition, can there arise an associated feeling and emotion.

Consequently *vedana* can be translated as ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’ and in certain contexts it can be rendered as ‘emotion’. The use of the term ‘sensation’ can relate to both a physical and a mental element, as the physical senses will cognise and produce a mental sensation, whereas the definition of ‘emotion’ relates to a purely mental state, although this emotional state may or may not be a product of a physical experience. I argue that it is more accurate to refer to ‘feeling’ when defining *vedana*, as it has a broader definition than ‘emotion’ although this is not to say that emotion is not an attribute of feeling. The problem of translation is illustrated by Heim, who states that “the word for feeling (*vedana*) is broader than the English word *emotion*, in that it includes physical sensations that originate from the body and from forces outside one’s control in the external world” (2003: 532). Within this thesis I will adhere to the aforementioned conclusion and will accordingly define *vedana* as ‘feeling’ unless the discussion pertains to *samkhara*, in which case the definition will extend to include ‘emotion’. In relation to the analysis of self presentation, self reflection and the experiential self within blogs, I discuss both feeling and emotion.

²²⁹ *Majjhima Nikaya* I.III (Hamilton 1996: 80 n24)

7) Vedana and Phassa

As the previous discussion includes the analysis of the definition of ‘feeling’, ‘sensation’ and ‘emotion’, I will now clarify why I have chosen to translate *vedana* as ‘feeling’ whilst not completely ruling out the association of ‘sensation’ or ‘emotion’. The rationale for this is twofold. Firstly, this is the general translation used by Hamilton, Collins, Gethin and also by Siderits. Secondly, Hamilton’s rather more convincing argument draws the conclusion that “*vedana* has a cognitive dimension which is conveyed by the word ‘feeling’ but not by ‘sensation’” (Hamilton 1996: 45). Collins’ definition of ‘feeling’ has both a physical and emotional attribute and this correlates with *vedana* being experienced both bodily (*kāyika*) or mentally (*cetasika*) (Collins 1997). Although the majority of people will experience *vedana* both physically and mentally, it is the enlightened or trained person who will experience physical feeling but control the mental feeling. The enlightened person is in control of both mental feeling, including emotions, as the controlled mind will endeavour to attain non-attachment both of physical and mental states that result in wrong views. This relates to the earlier discussion regarding the ‘right view’ (*ditthi*) and breaking free from the karmic cycle of *samsara*.

Throughout the Pali Canon *vedana* is commonly discussed as threefold (*tisso vedana*); agreeable (*sukha*), disagreeable (*dukkha*) or neutral feelings (*adukkhamasukha*). In contrast, de Silva argues that *vedana* can be comprised of “five types of possible feelings: bodily agreeable feelings, bodily painful feelings, mentally agreeable feelings, mentally painful feelings and feelings of indifference” (de Silva 1991: 40). However, three types of feeling are commonly referred to and so I defer to Hamilton and Gethin on this matter.

In addition, Gethin clarifies the relationship between *tisso vedana*²³⁰ and experience thus, “the significance of the three kinds of *vedana* seems to lie in their being seen as three basic reactions to experience which possess a certain potential to influence and govern an individual’s subsequent responses to either skilful or unskilful ways” (Gethin 1986: 36). It is the attachment to *vedana* that binds the individual to *samsara* as ‘feeling’ is also subject to impermanence. Therefore, “when one disengages from the pleasant stimulus” the pleasure will also dissipate (Eckman et al. 2005: 60).

I now turn to a specific aspect of *vedana* that of the role of contact (*phassa*). *Phassa* (Skt. *sparsa*) is designated as ‘contact’ between the sense organ, such as the eye, and the object. Within the *paticcasamuppada*, *phassa* is the sixth link, as it is from the union between contact, sense organ and consciousness that *vedana* arises. The *Brahmajala Sutta* I.125 defines contact, sense organ and *vedana* as the three interconnecting factors. Although this does not mean that the object and sense organ have to literally connect (Hamilton 1996: 47). Hamilton also draws a similarity between the type of feeling and the type of contact as they will be either agreeable, disagreeable or neutral. Hamilton concludes that *vedana* is therefore “part of the cognitive process as a whole” and this is illustrated in the *Samyutta Nikaya* IV.68, where it is stated that the contact with, for example, the visual component (eye) in relation to the object and consciousness results in a feeling (1996: 47).

This trinity is also found in the *Majjhima Nikaya* where *phassa* is discussed in relation to; “eye, (visible) object and consciousness” (Hamilton 1996: 47). Contact (*phassa*), whether mental or physical is required for the arising of *vedana* and it is the arising and ceasing of *phassa* that generates pleasant, unpleasant or neutral *vedana*. The arising of the different types of *vedana* relates to the understanding of

²³⁰ The three types of *vedana* can be experienced bodily (*kayika*) or mentally (*cetasika*) and it is within the *Samyutta Nikaya* IV.204 that further classifications of *vedana* are detailed namely the five moods, six kinds relating to the six senses, eighteen kinds, thirty six kinds relating to the senses and worldly and renunciatory life and lastly there are one hundred and eight types of feeling which relate to past, present and future (Hamilton 1996: 43).

‘right’ thought and the control of ‘right’ thought. It is here that the enlightened person can control the mental states.

Experiences are the underlying fundamental factor that differentiates the feelings of one person from the feelings of another. Hamilton has written extensively about the self and experience and she concludes that the role of experience is fundamental to the understanding of the individuation of the self (Hamilton 1996, 1999, 1999b, 2000). Gethin also acknowledges the role of the *khandhas* in relation to the human experience:

Thus at the most general level *rūpa*, *vedana*, *sannā*, *samkharas* and *vinnāna* are presented as five aspects of an individual being’s experience of the world; each *khandha* is seen as representing a complex class of phenomena that is continuously arising and falling away in response to processes of consciousness based on the six spheres of sense. (1986: 49)

Furthermore, Holder states that the arising of feeling is the active participation and experience of the person and object. It is this connection between an object and feeling that produces the experience for the individual, as “feeling is thus *not* a purely *subjective* event, as it is usually thought to be. Rather, it links the experiencing subject and the experienced object in a single process, a functional unity . . . Feeling is an indication of intimate participation, in a more or less active way, in the events of the world” (2004: 10). Significantly, it is the sensory interaction within the world that is discussed in relation to blogs.

Thus far I have outlined two topics: firstly, *phassa* and *paticcasamuppada*, as *phassa* is the sixth link in the twelve links of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) and is required within a causal sequence of events. Secondly, I have identified the relationship between *vedana* and experience as a cognitive process, as it is the

relationship between the sense organ, consciousness and the arising of *vedana* that provides the individual with the experience of the world around them²³¹. Summarised by Hamilton thus “*phassa*, which is defined as the contact which takes place when *vinnana*, sense organ and sense object come together, as a conscious sensory event” (1996: 48). It is this latter point that is of utmost importance for the discussion of the self online, as this structure will provide a method for analysing aspects of the self within blogs.

8) Abhidhamma literature and Vedana

Having assessed the *khandhas* and specifically *vedana*, the discussion will now focus on the Abhidhamma literature, as this basis of texts provides a comprehensive analysis of the five *khandhas*²³². Therein occurs the detailed analysis and framework which will assist with the analysis of the senses and the experiential self depicted within blogs.

The Abhidhamma texts built a metaphysical analysis of the world, as the existing philosophies of the Nikayas lacked detailed answers to the questions that the Abhidhamma posed. In doing so, the Abhidhamma “set out criteria for determining what any given *dhamma*²³³ that may possibly occur in one’s consciousness” could be (Ronkin 2005: 49). A *dhamma* can be defined as an element reduced to its smallest component or “a distinct psycho-physical, short-lived event of which dimension is not fixed – with the doctrines of *sabhāva* and of momentariness” (Ronkin 2005: 170). A *dhamma*, therefore, provides a metaphysical analysis of the experiential world “as particulars – distinct, evanescent constituents of experience - and were gradually assigned a growing metaphysical dimension in the form of their *sabhāva*”

²³¹ Susan Hamilton notes another definition of *phassa* described in the *Cūlavaddalla Sutta*, which relates to meditative practice (Hamilton 1996: 48).

²³² The *Abhidhamma* Pitaka is the third basket/set of scriptures of the Pali Canon and provides a metaphysical teaching that extends beyond the Buddha’s teachings and the monastic rules.

²³³ The *Dhammasangani* provides a detailed list of the *dhammas* in relation to how the mind works (Ronkin 2005: 144).

(Ronkin: 2005, 132). As each *dhamma* comes into existence, endures and then disbands so it is *sabhāva* (own nature) that provides the *dhamma* with its individuality and function²³⁴. Ronkin defines *sabhāva* as “the principle and cause of the *dhamma*’s individual nature” and the *dhamma* has four features; “characteristic (*lakkhana*), manifestation (*paccupatthāna*), immediate cause (*padatthāna*) and function (*rasa*)” (2005: 170).

As a result of the Abhidhamma theorising, a detailed metaphysical account of human experience emerged. The Abhidhamma metaphysics sets out a number of *dhamma* theories in order to explain “the dynamics of sentient, cyclic experience in *samsāra*” such as the doctrine of momentariness (Ronkin 2005: 42). The doctrine of momentariness developed out of the earlier analysis of *anicca* and as such the doctrine extends the understanding of impermanence arguing that; “as one event is exhausted, it conditions a new event of its kind that proceeds immediately afterwards. The result is an uninterrupted, flowing continuum (*santāna*) of causally connected momentary events” (Ronkin 2005: 59). It is the constant flow of conditioned events that is the coming into being (*uppāda*), enduring and the dissolution (*vaya*) of the *dhamma* that encapsulates existence. A moment (*khanna*) is defined as the smallest unit of time, although several Buddhist schools have defined *khanna* slightly differently, applying it to their doctrine of momentariness. For the purposes of this study a “*dhamma* occurs in the first sub-moment, endures in the second sub-moment and perishes in the third one” (Ronkin 2005: 62). The constituent parts further emphasise the ability to reduce the individual to their components.

A problem that arises with the analysis of *dhammas* and the doctrine of momentariness is the question which runs contrary to the earlier discussion of

²³⁴ This is as a result of later discussions in the *Abhidhamma* commentaries as previous statements still posed the question “what is a *dhamma*?”

impermanence (*anicca*), where nothing endures. Buddhaghosa and Buddhadatta²³⁵ state that this is not contradictory and they refer to the theory of own nature (*sabhava*) to explain the disparity. The *dhamma* does not have any substance to it, rather it is part of a process and so the arising and dissolution of the *dhamma* is “the loss of newness (*navabhāvāpagama*) of a *dhamma*, and not the loss of its intrinsic nature (*sabhāvānapagama*)” (Ronkin 2005: 64). It is *sabhava* that provides the *dhamma* with its function and, therefore, this dilutes the contradiction between the doctrine of momentariness and that of enduring existence.

As a result of the shift in doctrinal perspective of that found in the Nikaya to that in the Abhidhamma literature, there resulted a more detailed analysis of the *khandhas* in relation to the *ayatanas* (sense spheres) and *dhatu*s (eighteen elements of cognition). As a result the threefold formula of *khandha*, *ayatana* and *dhatu*, emerges as a classification scheme for human experience and an interpretative framework for the analysis of the self within blogs, specifically the category of the experiential self.

The classification of *vedana* falls into the categories of all conditioned entities which are the five *khandhas*, twelve *ayatanas* and eighteen *dhatu*s. The *ayatana* are the six senses or perceptions, namely sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and the mind. It is through the *ayatana* (sense fields) that everything can be experienced. The *dhatu*s are the eighteen elements of cognition and are formed by replacing the *ayatana* and adding the six sense spheres to the corresponding six objects and awarenesses. The table below (figure 11) illustrates the six sense perceptions, their corresponding six awarenesses and the six objects, which ultimately provides an analysis of the person in terms of sensory experience.

The triad, *khandha-ayatana-dhatu*, is found throughout the Abhidhamma textual tradition (as well as non-Abhidhamma texts), reinforcing the interconnectedness of

²³⁵ Buddhaghosa and Buddhadatta are key figures within Buddhism and are likely to have lived around the fifth century.

the three as “each of the three represents a standpoint from which sentient experience is analysed in its entirety down to its final constituents” (Ronkin 2005: 42). In relation to *vedana* the triad further illuminates the relationship between the senses, contact (*phassa*) with the object and the resulting feeling (*vedana*), defining the analysis of *anatta* as experiential, as Ronkin argues:

This taxonomy is intended to facilitate direct insight into not-self by showing that the final analysis of personal identity is but a continuous sensory and cognitive process, of which any given element always refers to a distinct sphere of experience: a visual object is experientially distinct from an auditory object, from the faculty of sight, from cognitive awareness of sight; pleasant bodily feeling is distinct from unpleasant bodily feeling, from neutral bodily feeling, etc. (Cousins in Ronkin 2005: 44)

<i>Khandhas</i>	<i>Ayatana</i> (six senses)	Objects (six sense objects)	Awareness	
<i>Rupa</i> (material)	Eye	Colour-form	Sight	Physical
<i>Vedanā</i> (feeling)	Ear	Sound	Aural	
<i>Sanna</i> (perception)	Nose	Fragrance	Smell	
<i>Samkhara</i> (volition, emotion)	Tongue	Flavour	Taste	
<i>Vinnana</i> (consciousness)	Body	Touch	Tactile	Mental
	Mind	Phenomenon	Mental	

Figure 11 – *khandhas*, *ayatana*s and *dhatu*s²³⁶

²³⁶ Adapted from, Keown 2004: 76.

This taxonomy is further discussed in the *Vibhanga*, within the Abhidhamma Pitaka. The *Vibhanga* categorises the *khandhas* as past, present, or future and also as internal or external. This analysis relates to the various stages of the *paticcasamuppada* and the conclusion that “one’s own *khandhas* are internal, while those of other beings are external” (Ronkin 2005: 44). In sum, the *dhammas* are categorised in relation to the five *khandhas* and so providing a comprehensive analysis of human existence.

9) Rasa

The following section provides a brief overview of another area within Indian culture and religion where an emotional response is found and categorised²³⁷. This type of emotional response is called *rasa* and is defined as taste, essence or flavour and brings together sound, taste, image and rhythm. *Rasa* is often associated with food, but it can also describe the flavour or mood engendered through experiencing the participation (active or passive) in the performance and the performance can include sound, taste, image and rhythm. There are eight distinct emotions (*bhava*) with corresponding eight moods (*rasa*), namely “erotic, comic, compassionate, cruel, valorous, terrible, abhorrent, and miraculous”, all of which arise under the correct conditions (Heim 2003: 543). Schwartz states that the word *rasa* “is used to describe the primary goals of performing arts in India in all the major literary, philosophical, and aesthetic texts, and provides the cornerstone of the oral traditions of transmission” (2004: 5). For Trainor, emotions “are cultivated through communal relationships, through contact with aesthetically charged ritual environments, and through interactions with authoritative texts” all of which are found within the performance (Trainor 2003: 526).

A performance, such as dance, can result in *rasa* for both the dancer and the spectator and there is a cultural acceptance that certain actions will result in specific emotions

²³⁷ The theory of emotional experience through art was stipulated by Bharata in the *Treaty on Dramaturgy (Natyasastra)*, approximately 200 BCE (Lynch 1990: 17).

and this is the goal of the performance²³⁸. Fundamentally as “all humans have these emotional experiences, their capacity for appreciating *rasa* is inherent” (Heim 2003: 543). It is from the emotional experience that the individuals experience beyond normal everyday existence as Schwartz states “performance thus has special status, not only within but also beyond the boundaries of religious observance. It is through performative modes that the sacred becomes palpable in India” (2004: 6). The performer and viewer engage in an action that evokes *rasa* which manifests itself as devotion and therefore the action and experience is related to the religious path of the individual. Trainor illustrates this point with reference to Buddhist texts, as the texts “represent material presences, whether encountered through the eyes or ears that engage the physical senses” and as a result induce emotional responses that assist with the progression along the spiritual path (2003: 526)

Buddhism advocates non-attachment to any permanent entity including emotions as it will result in desire and suffering and thus trapping the individual in the samsaric cycle. However, contrary to the depiction of non-attachment found in Buddhist philosophy, the performance awakens senses and encourages an emotional experience.

In conclusion, the discussion of ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ can be found both within the textual tradition as well as in performance and yet the emphasis is very different. On the other hand, there is a common feature of the definition of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’ in both the texts and performance and that is that they all directly relate to experience and the explanation of human identity and existence.

It is by using the aforementioned definitions that I will analyse the experiential self which will include the characteristics of ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’. Blogs are a medium which incorporate text, sound (through music) and visual imagery (through pictures

²³⁸ *Rasa* was later reinterpreted as devotion and the emotional experience known as *bhakti* which can be found in Vaishnavite sects (Lynch 1990: 18).

and video clips), all of which could be said to have similarities to the composition of a performance and so “Emotional experience can be reproduced by dramatic gestures and language” (Heim 2003: 543). It can tentatively be concluded that the depiction of emotion, feeling and experience will be identified in the analysis of the experiential self within blogs and will also extend to the discussion of performance and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006).

10) Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the conceptual issues relating to the self and in doing so I have highlighted relevant approaches located in the philosophical framework of early Buddhism, specifically the Theravadin Abhidhamma. I have discussed various topics, such as reductionism, the *khandhas*, *paticcasamuppada*, *phassa* and *rasa*, all of which will assist with the analysis of self presentation, self reflection and specifically the experiential self found within blogs.

The early Buddhist intellectual writings, to which I have referred, provide a comprehensive understanding of *anatta* and the five interconnected *khandhas*. This is exemplified in the *Milindapanha*, where the analogy of a chariot is used to explain that the five aggregates are not a totality in and of themselves but are components of the individual.

Furthermore, the discussion has illustrated that the focus should not be on the discussion of self per se rather it should be on the experiential nature of human existence (Hamilton 1999: 121). Therefore the discussion centres around the process in which the *khandhas* are an integral part of the experiential nature of existence (Hamilton 1999: 126). Accordingly, I have focused specifically on the *khandha vedana* as it directly relates to the experiential aspect of the person and in doing so I have demonstrated that there is some uncertainty as to the definition of *vedana* and whether it can relate to ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ or only to ‘feeling’. In order to conclude a definition of *vedana* I have outlined Siderits’ deduction that ‘emotion’

can be found in *samkhara-khandha* but not *vedana-khandha*. As a result I have drawn the conclusion that there manifestly exists an emotional component in *vedana-khandha* but only when it occurs in conjunction with *samkhara-khandha*, otherwise *vedana* should be categorised as ‘feeling’.

In the second half of this chapter I focused on the definition of the self and *anatta* found within the Abhidhamma, where there is a detailed analysis and a metaphysical framework of *dhammas* and the triad *khandha-ayatana-dhatu*. The Abhidhamma draw a distinction between the conventional reality of naming a constant flow of *dhammas* and the ultimate reality of *dhammas*; in other words the label ‘self’ is a convenient designator but in reality the ‘self’ is a constant stream of bundles, as “‘Self’, ‘person’ or ‘being’ are mental constructs; conventional labels for what in reality is a mass of constantly changing, conditionally originated psycho-physical processes” (Ronkin 2005: 246).

The *khandha-ayatana-dhatu* framework provides a sensory based structure necessary to analyse the connection between object, contact (*phassa*) and *vedana*, as well as *samkhara* in certain contexts. The *khandha-ayatana-dhatu* triad affirms that the individual can only be analysed in relation to experiences. The Abhidhamma “schema dissects sentient experience, bringing it within our linguistic and conceptual framework” and provides answers to how the individual experiences the world, thus providing an ontological analysis (Ronkin 2005: 249).

In conclusion an analysis of ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ as sensory experiences can define one individual as being unique from another. The product of ‘feeling’ and possible element of ‘emotion’ may be as a result of manifesting experience through contact with an object, performance (as shown with *rasa*) or through literature. Additionally, the relational process of feeling (*vedana*), perception and then reflection will be illustrated in blogs (Heim 2003: 532). It is the Abhidhamma framework and definitions set out within Buddhist philosophy that will provide an

interpretative model of sensory experience of the individual found within blogs. This will be explored further in chapter six which is the first of the three case studies.

Chapter 6 – *The Buddhist Blog* (case study 1)

Within this chapter I provide an ethnographic case study of *The Buddhist Blog* and I address the second research question which is “how is the self depicted within blogs?” The following discussion provides an insight into who the blogger is, why he blogs and what he blogs about, which provides a greater understanding of how media is used in everyday life (Hoover and Clark 2002; Turkle 1995, 2011). In addition, I provide an overview of the cultural context of blogging as a form of life writing (Eakin 1999, 2004; Rosenberg 2009) and whether Buddhism can be and is being used as a form of therapy (Gehart and Pare 2008).

The methodological approach for examining *The Buddhist Blog* draws from the data collected during the three research periods between 2007 and 2008²³⁹ and this includes the analysis of eighty three blog posts. In addition, I contacted the blogger, James Ure, in March 2010 and the email correspondence with James enabled a number of specific questions to be asked and consequently his response provides further insight into his blogging practice and how new media is being used in the twenty-first century (Campbell 2010b). The following discussion focuses on a number of topics presented in *The Buddhist Blog*, including religious beliefs, values, identity and psychological aspects such as mental health issues.

A number of themes emerge, including popular culture, visual culture, religious identity and I discuss these within the context of the three categories of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. Before doing so, I commence with an overview of the blogger and an outline of the aesthetics of the blog, illustrating the importance of visual culture. Ultimately, in this case study, I aim to demonstrate that there is a relationship between culture, technology, religion and the self²⁴⁰.

²³⁹ *The Buddhist Blog* was monitored between 2005 and 2009.

²⁴⁰ This is discussed in chapter two.

1) Overview

On many blogs, especially those created with the blog application known as Blogger²⁴¹, there will be the bloggers' profile which provides information about the blogger. This feature is automatically built into the blog template, however, the blogger can be selective about the information they want to include in their profile. James' profile is quite extensive and provides an insight into who he is, where he lives, his educational achievements and some of his beliefs (see figure 12). The profile states that James categorises himself as a Western Zen Buddhist and follows the teaching of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. He lives in Colorado, United States and graduated with a degree in US history (emphasis in African history) and a minor in Geography and he is thirty four years old. It could be said that James is a typical blogger, as bloggers are commonly male (57%), have college degrees (39%) and have been online for six years or more (82%)²⁴² (Rainie 2005: 2).

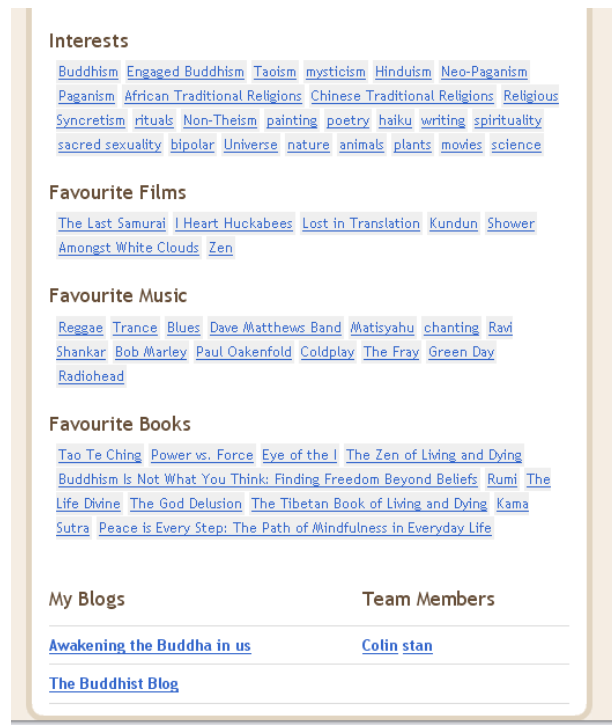


Figure 12 - Profile Page

²⁴¹ Blogger, www.blogger.com, accessed 27 June 2010.

²⁴² As James is an American, statistics are reflective of that demographic.

In the ‘view my complete profile’ feature there is further information about James which includes his interests; favourite films; favourite books; favourite music; and a link to a co-authored blog, *Awakening the Buddha in us* (see figure 12). James has provided a significant amount of information on his comprehensive profile page, for example, within the sub-section called ‘About Me’, James not only provides details of his religious beliefs but also his medical condition (schizo-affective disorder), a topic that he frequently comments on in his posts and which I discuss in due course. The ‘About Me’ section provides an overview of James’ eclectic belief structure, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Secular Humanism which resonates with Roof’s discussion of religious seekership and I will discuss this further when examining James’ religious identity and the category of self presentation (1999: 35).

In addition to the profile page, James provides an insight into why the blog is named *The Buddhist Blog* and he stresses that it is not meant to indicate that this blog is a definitive blog on Buddhism. Furthermore, he asks his readers to follow his blog, where he will journal about his life, stating “This blog is a journal of my humble travels as I try to follow the middle path of Buddhism. Take my hand and walk with me for a while”. This statement illustrates, that for James, there is a similarity between a journal and a blog. This supports my proposition that blogs can be categorised as ‘life writing’, as they have the characteristics of an autobiography or a diary and so the narrative presents a ‘self’ that is a process of awareness (Giddens 1991: 53; Eakin 1999: x), as “In autobiography, we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world” (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001: 25).

James also includes a profile picture on his blog. Originally this was a photograph of a Buddha (2006), then a portrait photograph of James (2008) and recently this was changed again to a picture of a Buddha (2010) (see figure 13)²⁴³. Arguably, the choice of image provides a representation of the self that James wants to depict to his audience, which he affirms in his email correspondence: “I select images that best

²⁴³ The current picture (as of 19 June 2011) is a photograph of James wearing a blue hooded jacket, sitting on rocks (possibly on a mountain).

reflect how I want to represent a certain idea, cause or belief. I select them according to which ones would catch the attention easiest of my readers”²⁴⁴. It is from this statement that there are the first signs that *The Buddhist Blog* is not written purely as a personal diary rather it is written for a wider audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5; Rettberg 2008).



Figure 13 - profile pictures from 2006, 2008 and 2010

Furthermore, the profile page identifies that the blog was founded in March 2005 and by 19 October 2008 James' profile had been viewed 6,384 times, by 21 June 2010 had been viewed 9,824 times and by 19 June 2011 the profile page had been viewed 12,530 times. It could be said that these figures indicate the popularity of this blog, which is further corroborated by James in the post of 21 October 2007, where he thanks his readers and acknowledges that there have been 100,000 hits. Twelve months later, in the post of the 28 October 2008, James announces that the blog counter topped 200,000 hits.

In addition to the increase in the number of hits, *The Buddhist Blog* has been nominated for and won a *Blogisattva* award²⁴⁵. This award is given to English language Buddhist blogs and there are twenty two nomination categories²⁴⁶. Nominations are made via an online voting form and in relation to *The Buddhist Blog*

²⁴⁴ Extracted form email, 2 March 2010.

²⁴⁵ The Blogisattva Awards, <http://www.blogisattva.org/>, accessed 22 June 2010.

²⁴⁶ The award commenced in 2006 and continued yearly with the exception of 2009, due to administrative difficulties.

there have been a number of nominations and triumphs for the blog in each year. In 2006, *The Buddhist Blog* won in the category of ‘Best Achievement in Kind and Compassionate Blogging’ and was nominated in the category of ‘Blogger Best Demonstrating a Multiplicity of Talents’. In 2007, *The Buddhist Blog* won in the category for ‘Best Achievement for Use of Quotations within a Blog’²⁴⁷ and was nominated in the categories of ‘Best Achievement in Kind and Compassionate Blogging’ and ‘Best Achievement Blogging Opinion Pieces or About Political Issues’²⁴⁸. In 2008, the blog was nominated in the categories of ‘Best Achievement in a Post about Life’²⁴⁹ and ‘Best Achievement in Kind and Compassionate Blogging’.

In sum, the profile captures James’ religious affiliation, interests and presents to his readers a snapshot of who he is, or at least aspects of his self and identity that he wants to share with his readers. Another feature of *The Buddhist Blog* which is prominent is the use of images, photographs and the management of the design, so it is by referring to the field of visual cultural studies that I examine the aesthetics of this blog, thus determining the importance of images and the design of blogs.

2) Blog Aesthetics

Within the eighteenth century, the term ‘aesthetic’ was commonly used to define a philosophical movement interested in beauty but the term originally relates to “Aristotle’s use of the Greek word *aisthesis* which means perception or sensation” (Morgan 2009: 141). It could be said that the aesthetics in blogs pertains more to the relationship between the use of the medium and the arising of sensations than it relates to the philosophical analysis of the beautiful and so I will refer to the original definition.

²⁴⁷ During the research period 43% of posts contained one or more quotes.

²⁴⁸ Blogisattava Awards 2007, <http://www.blogisattva.org/2007/02/announcement-2007-blogisattva-award.html#links>, accessed 22 June 2010.

²⁴⁹ Relates to the post 22 August 2007, ‘An Epiphany: My Spiritual Awakening and Path Toward Forgiveness’.

The aesthetics of the blog can include the overall design (layout, colour etc); the banner; a blogroll²⁵⁰; and images. The blogger design is based on a template which dictates many of the features, including the background colour, the position of the profile page and the text colour and so there are limitations imposed on the blogger; albeit more imaginative or experienced bloggers can influence the design of the blog quite significantly.

Throughout the research period this blog has had a black background, white text and the profile has been positioned in the top right of the screen. The text within the post is often highlighted to emphasise important words or phrases, which is common in computer mediated communication (Herring 1996: 57). Examples of this can be found in some of the posts during 2007, where the emphasised font is usually in a bold and red typeset, whereas in the posts during 2008, the emphasised font is primarily blue and bold²⁵¹. Consequently, James is intentionally drawing the eye of the reader to the main points of the post and he regularly considers how his blog is perceived by others.

2.1) Design Change

The Buddhist Blog has had a number of design changes over past five years and most noticeably is the change to the top banner. A banner usually includes the blog name and possibly a 'strap line'. The original blog, prior to 2008, had the strap line 'I follow in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh and Master Linji of Ancient China'. In January 2008 James had a custom banner created for his blog which no longer included a strap line. Instead, there are various images and only the title of the blog. The images in the banner are photographs of a number of Buddhas, a Zen garden and a pagoda, all of which visually depict iconography from Asia. Aumont argues that the semiology of images in advertising "are overloaded with cultural codes" and the

²⁵⁰ A blogroll is the list of other blogs.

²⁵¹ For example, this is found in the posts of 13 November 2007, 'Buddhism and Secular Humanism', as well as the post from 9 October 2008, 'The Science of Meditation'.

interpretation of iconography “is even more important when the image itself is regarded as valuable”, which could be said to resonate with the selected images within the banner of *The Buddhist Blog* (1997: 189). In the post of 10 January 2008, James provides an explanation for the design change, stating that he wanted to “spice the blog up a bit” and that he thinks it “has a nice, classy appearance” (the change in the design is shown in figure 14 and 15).



Figure 14 - Design at February 2006



Figure 15 – New design after 10 January 2008

2.2) Blogroll

Other main features of a blog include a blogroll and this is found on right hand frame of the blog, along with archived posts and other information. For James “The right hand column acts as a kind of visual table of contents of the blog. You can get a

pretty good idea of the blogs angle and my passions by just scanning them. It might help people better decide if they want to read what I have to say . . . Interaction is one of my main goals with the blog and if imagery helps spur that by keeping people attracted to the blog then I have done my job”²⁵². For this blogger, the use of images and the design of the blog are important for attracting an audience. Studies indicate that audience participation and reception are intrinsic for our understanding of how media is being used (Hoover and Lundby 1997; Hoover 2006).

On *The Buddhist Blog* there is a significant list of links to websites and to other blogs (blogroll), which have been alphabetically ordered and collectively there are over one hundred and forty hyperlinks to other websites and blogs²⁵³. This feature is not unique as “41% of bloggers say that they have a blogroll or friends list on their blog” (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 7). Arguably, it is the large number of links that indicate the dedication and commitment to maintaining and developing this blog (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 37). James states that he devotes on average ten hours a week to blogging and that he wants to make his blog into “a career of sorts and that requires a lot of time to develop your blog to be attractive to readers. It is important to keep the material fresh and frequent to maintain readers”²⁵⁴.

The extensive blogroll also indicates that he is likely to be an avid reader of other blogs and these blogs are likely to reciprocate a link back to *The Buddhist Blog*. This hypothesis is corroborated by Lenhart and Fox who state that “Readership may also be suggested – though not necessarily guaranteed – by linking from one blog to another on a blogroll (2006: 34). The right hand frame is also host to a number of images which can be analysed in relation to the three categories of the self.

²⁵² Extracted from email, 2 March 2010.

²⁵³ 55 links and 93 blogs listed in the blogroll, accessed 21 June 2010.

²⁵⁴ Extracted from email, 2 March 2010.

2.3) Visual Content (Images)

Many websites and blogs use images and during the research period, James posted 83 times and 81 of these posts included images which equates to 98% of his posts containing one or more graphics or photographs. James reflects on how important images are, stating:

The image and design of the blog is important to me because it makes the blog look more professional and attractive to readers. Imagery can convey so much because it is instantly processed by the brain rather than just reading. This doesn't mean that I don't think writing is important because that is my main mode of communication on the blog but I think imagery is kind of like the period at the end of the sentence. It enhances the words²⁵⁵.

One of the more noticeable images is the visitor locations map at the foot of the page and this highlights that there has been a significant number of visitors to the blog²⁵⁶. This demonstrates the global scale of the internet (Castells 2001: 2) and so, the interpretation of the images, are likely to be globally dependent. Within this specific blog there are sixty (72%) of posts containing more than five paragraphs and so James includes a large amount of text to accompany the image (Aumont 1997: 189). In the first of the three categories of the self (self reflection), I explore how James uses the different features of his blog to aid self reflection.

3) Self Reflection

The category of self reflection is identified when the blogger uses the blog as a means of questioning the existence of the self; or where he/she reflects on his/her life; or where the blog is used as a medium to aid self discovery. In addition, the definition of self reflection can be with or without a religious context. The following

²⁵⁵ Extracted from email, 2 March 2010.

²⁵⁶ 276,585 visitors have marked themselves on the visitor map, between 24 July 2007 and 7 June 2010, <http://www3.clustrmaps.com/counter/maps.php?url=http://www.thebuddhistblog.blogspot.com>, accessed 27 June 2010.

discussion refers to a number of posts where James reflects on his religious beliefs²⁵⁷ and I identify six themes, namely James' reflection on his Mormon faith; his Buddhist faith; his Humanist faith; meditation; his illness; and life and death. Accordingly, the discussion provides evidence to support the hypothesis that blogs can be used as a medium for self reflection and can, therefore, be defined under the rubric of 'life writing',²⁵⁸ (Rettberg 2008; Rosenberg 2009), as "Just as we study ourselves in a mirror, shaping our features so our reflections please us, so we create a reflection of ourselves in a weblog" (Rettberg 2008: 120).

3.1) Reflecting on his Mormon faith

The first topic to be discussed is James' reflection on his Mormon faith and in the post on 22 August 2007, 'An Epiphany: My Spiritual Awakening and Path Toward Forgiveness', James provides an insight into his belief of the Mormon faith and how Buddhism helped him deal with his mental illness. The eight paragraph post contains a photograph of mist shrouded temples in Myanmar. The text is not highlighted with any bold or red coloured text instead it is a very descriptive analysis of his epiphany.

James commences the discussion by stating that he thought he should write about his epiphany and he reflects on his Mormon upbringing, stating that while he did have some "wonderful spiritual moments growing up" he needed to be true to himself and that he "had to leave if my integrity meant anything to me". He explains that he was part of a Mormon Mission to Africa but on his return he began to question his faith and alongside this his mental well-being was beginning to deteriorate. His mental illness included symptoms of having negative and destructive thoughts, hallucinations and hearing voices, all of which he maintains were being exacerbated by his negative feeling towards his religion.

²⁵⁷ As a caveat, it should be noted that some posts will include topics or characteristics that can be defined within more than one category and where there is not a clear demarcation, an argument will be made as to why the post is being discussed in a particular section.

²⁵⁸ Jeanne Openshaw provides a definition of life writing within an Eastern context (2010: x).

James goes on to state that it was while at university, that he was introduced by a fellow student to Dr David R. Hawkins books and Buddhism. He claims that this introduction alongside finding the correct medication and a psychiatrist greatly helped him. He concludes that he is more engaged with Buddhist philosophy than Mormonism and details his epiphany as: “I knew that from that point onward I would be a totally different person and I wasn't scared--I was relieved”. James ends the post on a positive note, although he still questions the Mormon faith, maintaining “Now, I try to see the good in all religions and I often succeed but I still struggle with the Mormon faith”.

This post highlights a number of stages and experiences in his life, including his childhood, his mental illness and how his life has changed and in essence it provides a narrative and biography of his life (Giddens 1991: 53; Hoover 2006: 92). The candour of the post raises a number of questions and issues with blogging as a communication tool. First, it assumes a level of trust and intimacy between the reader and the author (Stefanone and Jang 2008: 128; de Laat 2008). Second, it provides a medium for memories, in this example they relate to his childhood and university life. The online diary (blog) becomes a journal for capturing and interpreting memories from the past. Consequently, the blog becomes a type of performance and provides a story for the audience to read (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5).

3.2) Reflecting on his Buddhist faith

Similar to the previous discussion, James reflects on his understanding of Buddhism and his Buddhist faith in relation to his everyday life. An example of this is found in the post from the 4 August 2007, ‘Meditation with the Buddha Within’, which contains eleven paragraphs and includes a graphic of an abstract image of a Buddha floating in a blue sky surrounded by clouds.

In this post James describes his discussion with his therapist about his nightmares and not being able to sleep. He proceeds to describe his meditation practice in order to aid sleep as well as describing a dream in great detail. He states that the dream included meeting various Buddhas and he states that “Interestingly enough, one was

a barrel chested man with a long, wirery grey beard and tattoos down his arms and legs--my kind of Buddha!!”,²⁵⁹ and so “We were looking at our True Natures!!!”, as “From what I can remember however, these were direct one-on-one meditations sessions with your inner self--my inner Buddha. The old tattooed guy with a long, stringy grey bread”. In the penultimate paragraph James discusses Buddha-nature²⁶⁰ and asserts “May we all remember and feel that Oneness so that we can awaken from our samsaric slumber and help each other awaken as well--and remain awake. In order that we realize our Buddha Nature that was always there and always will be”. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, there are a number of Buddhist terms discussed within the blogs and this is an example where knowledge of these terms helps to interpret the post. This post also illustrates how James uses his understanding of Buddhism to interpret his everyday life.

3.3) Reflecting on his Humanist faith

James’ eclectic religious belief structure is noticeable in the profile, where he defines himself as Buddhist who is also a humanist. This is further illustrated in the post of the 13 November 2007, ‘Buddhism and Secular Humanism’²⁶¹, which contains sixteen paragraphs and much of the text is emphasised and highlighted in bold and red font. The image that accompanies this post is the black and white humanist logo which provides a visual representation to accompany the narrative and so the image reinforces or signifies the message in the text (Aumont 1997: 189).

The above post opens with the declaration that James is both a secular Humanist and a Buddhist and he provides an interpretation of how the two are connected. He refers to the Buddhist teachings of the *Kalama Sutra*²⁶² and he states that he does not

²⁵⁹ Spelling mistake is in original.

²⁶⁰ Buddha-nature or Buddhahood is believed to be possible for all sentient beings. In certain Buddhist schools of Japan and China, it is argued that even non-sentient beings can have Buddha-nature and become enlightened (Keown 2004: 44).

²⁶¹ Secular Humanism can be defined as a belief structure that uses reason above faith.

²⁶² The *Kalama Sutra* (Pali, *Sutta*) is found in the *Anguttara Nikaya* and details the Buddha’s sermon on how to recognise the true *dharma*, truth (Pali, *Dhamma*) and to avoid unfounded teachings or rumour (Keown 2004: 134).

believe in the supernatural and magical attributes of the Bodhisattvas²⁶³. Moreover, he draws the conclusion that both Humanist and Buddhists believe “that there is no separable soul within sentient beings” and he prefers to “contemplate and ponder the essence of the teachings from these sutras rather than focus on the magical nature of some of their accounts”. He closes the post by reflecting on his beliefs in relation to his upbringing and his belief in Buddhism, maintaining that his deduction is “merely the result and conclusions that I came to from following the Buddha's advice in the Kalama Sutra”. James openly announces to his readers why he has come to believe what he does but this also highlights some of the characteristics of what Roof calls the “quest culture” (1999: 35, 39), especially the therapeutic characteristics and the “religio-cultural developments”²⁶⁴ (1999: 59).

3.4) Reflecting on meditation

The theme of therapy or self help is discussed by James and he focuses on his practice of meditation as an aid for self discovery and a support system to deal with his illness (which I discuss in the next section). There are thirty four posts (41%) where the word meditation is mentioned or where meditation is discussed and there are three posts which prominently focus on this topic.

The first post is on 1 October 2007, ‘Meditation and Nausea with an Update on the situation in Burma’, James discusses the use of meditation to self heal, specifically to overcome the effects of nausea and he describes how his body feels unwell and how meditation helped to restore the balance as “meditation is a great medicine for so many conditions and states of mind”. In the final comment of this section, James acknowledges the Buddhist philosophical depiction of mind, body and the four elements and in doing so reflects on how important Buddhism is to him in order to maintain balance in his life²⁶⁵. I would argue that he views Buddhism as a form of therapy.

²⁶³ A *Bodhisattva* is an enlightened being who is found in Mahayana Buddhism.

²⁶⁴ Wade Clark Roof identifies five “religio-cultural developments” as “(1) modernity and discontents, (2) the meaning of religion in the United States, (3) the rise of the expansive self, (4) the role of the media, and (5) global influences” (1999: 59).

²⁶⁵ The four elements are earth wind, water and fire.

Up to this point, the discussion on meditation includes the discussion of James' Buddhist belief as well as his illness however, in the post of the 31 January 2008, 'Meditation Posture' James provides a less positive examination of his meditation practice. The post provides a description of his battle with meditation and how he felt a failure when he couldn't succeed in the practice. Consequently, he describes his trials of finding the right meditation cushion and posture and he urges his readers to persevere with their practice of meditation. Again, the interaction with the readers emphasises the participatory aspect of *The Buddhist Blog* (Rettberg 2008: 155).

The concluding part of the post is an addendum, where he states "I felt like I needed to add something to this post to clarify some things that have been mentioned in the comment section. I didn't mean to come off as an ordained teacher. I was just offering up some tips that I have found useful in my humble practice". Arguably, James has reflected on the post and the twenty three comments from readers, some of which are critical of the post and James' insight into meditation. In one of the comments James states that "I don't claim to be a 'guru' or any kind of teacher, just another traveler on the path and I posted this post to maybe help those who are just getting started and who are worried they can't do the more formal, difficult postures of meditating"²⁶⁶.

Although the above post was not necessarily well received by all readers, it is within the post on the 9 October 2008 that James writes a very lengthy account focusing on 'The Science of Meditation'. Certain sentences are highlighted in bold blue text, such as the statement: "suggesting that meditation may have a neuro-protective effect". James maintains that this is why Buddhist monks live so long as it's due to the practice of meditation. He then continues his discussion, reflecting on the benefits of meditation in relation to his mental illness and his condition of attention deficit disorder (A.D.D.). A.D.D. causes heightened awareness and poor concentration and he describes the symptoms of this condition and how meditation benefits him as he finds "it much easier to deal with external stimuli. I think part of it is being able to close my eyes to eliminate all the visual distractions that often distract me as I'm very

²⁶⁶ Spelling mistake is in the original post.

sensitive to colors and images”. He also states that by concentrating on the sound of the breath, he focuses his mind and maintains that his concentration is improved. The introduction of meditation into Western culture as a type of therapy, has resulted in a number of followers.

3.5) Reflecting on his illness

I have already alluded to James illness, including schizo-affective disorder and A.D.D., however I now want to focus on this in more detail, specifically in two posts from 2008. The first post is on the 8 January 2008, ‘We All Contribute to the Beauty and Prosperity of the World’ and contains a quote from the Dalai Lama and a graphic of six people holding hands. James commences by admitting to his illness and he questions what he has to contribute to the world. He reflects on what his life might have been like if he was not frequently confined to his house due to his illness. He also reflects on the good that has come out of his illness, including the ability and time to blog as “Through this blog I have touched many and helped people feel a greater importance in their lives”. He concludes the post stressing that “It is o.k. to be proud of yourself sometimes because it helps you remember your Buddha Nature, your true importance to the big picture” and “We just don't know what impact we have on others. So don't give up, you are adding value to this world and many lives whether you realize it or not”. James’ candid discussion of worth, his contribution to society, his beliefs and his experiences are shared with his audience through his online diary. On the other hand it could be said that the post depicts a person who is narcissistic or arrogant and this has been identified by de Laat (2008) and Giddens (1991: 172) in their examination of media and culture.

The second example is from the post of the 1 October 2008, ‘Buddhism and Depersonalization’, which focuses on the discussion of the relationship between James’ Buddhist belief and his mental illness. The six paragraph post includes a colour photograph which depicts fields in the background and in the foreground there are two outstretched disembodied hands. The intentional selection of this specific image further emphasises the importance between the visual image and the content of the post, in this case, depersonalization.

This post describes the symptoms of his illness, including “one of the symptoms of my mental disorder, Schizoaffective disorder is depersonalisation”. James describes the depersonalisation as an out of body experience and likens it to the character in the film *Being John Malcovich* (1999). He states that:

In these moments I feel as though I'm viewing a movie that has me playing a role. I talk but I don't feel like the words are my own but just a computer program that is simulating a conversation” and “It's stressful because it feels like I am watching a copy of myself but not a happy copy but one who seems to want to cause me trauma. This all said, I have found Buddhism to be like another psychiatrist who has a tried and true prescription for emotional stress—meditation.

James describes a number of physical actions that help him to focus and so “from time to time” he touches the ground and he wears Buddhist mala prayer beads, so that each time he touches them “It is comforting to feel a fabricated object touch my skin because it helps me remember that my body is in fact real”. He concludes the post with a recommendation that those who have a mental disorder should follow Buddhism as it will help to be a “potential foundation to anchor your body and mind”²⁶⁷. James’ understanding that Buddhism can be a kind of therapy is not only considered by lay people but also by professionals.

An example of Buddhism as therapy is identified by Gehart and Pare (2008) who discuss Buddhist psychology as a therapy to enhance existing Western therapies and therefore “engaging persons around their relationships with suffering” (2008: 301). They also discuss narrative therapy²⁶⁸ which refers to the no-self concept, “as there is no conception of a singular, fixed core self” (2008: 307). Gehart and Pare have demonstrated that there are Western therapists and individuals who are using the concepts found within Buddhism as a type of therapy and for James this approach highlights his understanding of how he believes Buddhism (specifically meditation) can be an aid to control his mental health. Moreover, for Giddens, therapy can be

²⁶⁷ In relation to James’ comments regarding physical touch and mindfulness, it is within the category of the experiential self that this will be analysed further.

²⁶⁸ This is explained as the letting go of experience, whereas in the West, narrative therapy would advocate for obtaining experiences (Gehart and Pare 2008: 307-308).

defined as ‘secular confession’ in the understanding of the ‘self’ within late-modernity (1991: 34). Giddens proposition is paralleled by James’ statement that “I have found blogging to be a great way to vent and make sense of life and the thoughts in my mind. Writing is therapeutic for me”²⁶⁹. While the discussion of Buddhism and therapy is interesting and provides an insight into Eastern concepts permeating Western culture, as well as a type of ‘confession’, it is not my intention to discuss this in detail, nonetheless it provides another avenue where further research could be considered.

3.6) Reflecting on life and death

The final aspect of self reflection that I want to focus on is the theme of life and death. The rumination on life and death is found within three posts. The first example is the post from the 3 December 2007 is four paragraphs long and has an image of a brain with visible arteries. The image is representative of the subject matter and is titled ‘My Father’s Stroke Emergency’. The opening sentence describes James as being “shaken” and in the next sentence he states that he is “on the verge of tears” at the news of his father having a mini-stroke. In the following paragraphs James describes how his mother had found his father unwell. In order to deal with the trauma, he discusses how meditation has helped him to focus and he ends the post by stating that he should be more aware of the impermanence of life and he encourages his readers to give time to loved ones as “We have no assurances that there will be a tomorrow”. Similar to the other posts he engages with the audience by offering advice and so I maintain that *The Buddhist Blog* is participatory and not a private personal diary (Jenkins 2006).

In a later post from the same month on the 17 December 2007, titled ‘New Jersey Abolishes the Death Penalty’, James posts his thoughts on the death penalty which highlights the cultural context of this post, as it relates to a specific time and location (America in the twenty first century) as the death penalty is not a universal feature of justice systems. James reflects on what he would do or believe if a member of his family were to be murdered. He considers the aspect of non-violence in Buddhism

²⁶⁹ Extracted from email, 2 March 2010.

and declares that he is opposed to the death penalty and welcomes the news of the abolished death penalty in New Jersey. Furthermore he considers what it would be like to be the executioner and states “I can't imagine having to be the executioner and face the terrible dreams that must come with the job”. James maintains that he has discussed the death penalty with his family and has gone as far as considering what justice he would like if he were to be murdered. His conviction against the death penalty and his belief in Buddhism is further advocated in this post:

I hope that I never have to face such a terrible choice but I would hope that through meditating upon compassion and forgiveness that I would be able to let go of such horrible anger and pain. I have told my family that should I be killed that I do not want them to advocate the death penalty for the criminal.

The discussion of life and death has indicated that James uses his blog as a reflective tool as well as to communicate his beliefs, values and experiences of everyday life to his audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 4-5).

3.7) Summary - Self Reflection

I have demonstrated, that for James, he uses the blog to reflect on aspects of his life; as a means to aid self discovery, through the process of writing; and to advise and engage with his audience. This reflects the findings put forward by Giddens (1991), Lovheim (2004) and Lovheim and Linderman (2005) who maintain that media is being used to deconstruct and reconstruct the self (and identity) within society. Using the blog for reflection is corroborated by James' comments in his email of 2 March 2010, where he states:

I process information easier and deal with difficult issues best when expressing them outwardly such as through talking or writing. I can make better sense of the jumbled up thoughts in my head this way because the mind is such a chaotic place to put your thoughts together. I find that putting them down into writing forces the brain to work in a more structured process than just chaotic thinking. It's easy to get lost in the mind.

The quantitative data also supports this conclusion, as there are fifty three posts which include a discussion of the self and twenty six posts that can be definitively categorised as self reflection (31%). While it is clear that this blog can be used for self reflection, this does not necessarily mean that it can be used for presenting aspects of the self and so I now turn to the examination of self presentation.

4) Self Presentation

This category is defined as the presentation of the self both explicitly and implicitly. Aspects of the self within this category can include identity, employment and areas of the bloggers life that are not reflective but could be said to define who the blogger is and what they do in everyday life. This is denoted by the use of images, aesthetics and the content of the post. A number of topics emerge in this discussion, including identity, popular culture and participatory culture. These topics have already been discussed in chapter two and to some extent within the methodology chapter however, this section will refer to them specifically in relation to *The Buddhist Blog*.

As I have noted elsewhere, a blogger writes with the expectation of having an audience and so “Blogs are a social genre. Bloggers don’t simply write their ‘Dear Diary’, they write into the world with the clear expectation of having readers. That readership does not necessarily need to be very large” (Rettberg, 2008: 57). The type of writing within a blog may be autobiographical or informational and in *The Buddhist Blog* there are both types of posts. To support this proposition, thirty two posts (42%) discuss recent events or news, thirty five posts (42%) discuss daily activities, forty eight posts (58%) contain one or more hyperlinks to another website or blog and twenty two posts (27%) can be definitively classified as self presentation based on the definition above.

In order to analyse this category within *The Buddhist Blog*, James’ beliefs; identity; and his values are examined. Consequently, the analysis includes a discussion of how James presents himself within *The Buddhist Blog* including how his identity is

projected “in a social space (the blogosphere)” (Nabeth 2005: 6)²⁷⁰. Moreover, Barney argues that “In relation to human beings, identity is the word we use to denote our consciousness of who we are, our sense of our most significant or defining attributes . . . my *identity* is comprised of the *ideas* that others have about me, and the ideas I have about my ‘self’” (2004: 145. italics in original). Barney continues his discussion on identity and hypothesises whether a person can choose their identity or if it is socially constructed. Similarly, Lovheim considers identity as a social construction by engaging with others (2004) and for Kember identity is a transformative process in relation to the internet and culture (2002: 254)²⁷¹.

4.1) Political Beliefs and Identity

The first area to be discussed is James’ political beliefs. Thirty two posts (42%) highlight recent news stories or events, thus giving him an opportunity to express his opinion and so it is not surprising that James discusses his political views. On the other hand, James openly declares “I try to limit political talk here on this blog, I have another one for that stuff”²⁷² and so he restricts his political discussion except for in a small number of posts²⁷³. In particular, there are three posts where he is very expressive about his views, these include a post about Dick Cheney and a further two posts about Barack Obama.

The first post on the 14 August 2007, ‘Dick Cheney the Unpatriotic Liberal’, includes a YouTube link of Cheney discussing the Iraq war²⁷⁴. Unusually, this post is very short and James clearly expresses his disapproval for Cheney’s explanation of the Iraq war, stating “Yep, he is still beating that long dead (now decomposing) horse

²⁷⁰ Chapter two provides an overview of the difference between self and identity.

²⁷¹ Manuel Castells discusses the relationship between identity, community and the internet in *The Internet Galaxy: reflections on the internet, business, and society* (2001: 118-119). Additionally, Sherry Turkle discusses identity, role playing and the internet in *Life on the Screen: identity in the age of the internet* (1995).

²⁷² Taken from the post 28 January 2008, ‘Barack Obama: An Inspiration to the World’. There is no link to the other blog and so it is not clear which blog he is referring to.

²⁷³ James states in the email, 2 March 2010 that he started to blog about politics in 2004. At the time of this research, James political blog could not be sourced.

²⁷⁴ YouTube link is no longer available, accessed 19 June 2011.

that Saddam had something to do with those horrible attacks. And I'm sure he'll be dragging the picked clean, parched bones with him to his grave". James' clear contempt for Cheney is in contrast to his support for Obama in the posts on the 28 January 2008 and 5 November 2008.

The first one which is titled 'Barack Obama: An Inspiration to the World' is a twelve paragraph post, accompanied by a colour photograph of Obama. This post provides a gushing appraisal for Obama and James asserts that "He is the first politician that upon hearing them speak, I felt chills of inspiration throughout my body". In keeping with the theme of the blog, James draws a parallel with two of the stages in the Buddhist eightfold path²⁷⁵ to Obama's work ethic; "In dedicating his life to serving others he is a great example of Right Livelihood" and "He tries to adhere to Right Speech when he speaks because he uses his words to uplift rather than destroy, to heal instead of hurt". Concluding that "he lives many of the teachings of the Dharma". Whilst, James clearly indicates his political affiliation with Obama and is discussing his political beliefs, he applies a Buddhist interpretation to Obama's actions and whether intentionally or not James interprets the world within a Buddhist construct.

In the post of the 5 November 2008, titled 'Obama, Buddhism, and Taxes', there is a further interpretation based on Buddhist concepts. Unlike the previous post, the photograph accompanying this post is a black and white portrait of Obama, a much more sombre image. The selection of this formal photograph could be attributed to the subject of taxes and poverty. In the seven paragraph post, James states that the actions of Obama are Buddhist as "He may not know of the Buddhist teaching of interdependence but that is exactly what he has cultivated" and that "His domestic vision is nothing short of an understanding of the interdependence of suchness". James explains this point by stating that Obama strives for fairness for all and a more ethical approach for the distribution of wealth. Additionally, it is through these three posts that James has overtly presented his political affiliation and therefore an aspect of his identity. I contend that it is significant that James has imposed his belief

²⁷⁵ The eightfold path is found in the fourth Noble Truth.

structure onto others and used it as a framework for explaining American politics, as it could indicate a non-inclusive interpretation of everyday life.

4.2) Religious Beliefs and Identity

The presentation of James' religious beliefs is explicit in the blog title, the banner, the images, the slogans and the content of many of the posts and while the discussion of Buddhist faith has already been undertaken in the category of self reflection, this section will focus on how James presents his belief and affiliation with Buddhism as part of his identity.

Not only does James present his religious identity to his readers, he also communicates and is developing a religious community via his blog, as the sharing of his experiences “help cultivate an online sangha that helps those who can't physically or mentally make it to physical sanghas. Or those who just don't like the feeling of a physical sangha—those who feel it is too organized much like organized religion such as going to church, which many western Buddhists rejected”²⁷⁶. The creation of an online sangha is discussed by Prebish (2004) and also Ostrowski (2006). Ostrowski's research attempts to identify why American Buddhists are using the internet and for what purpose (2006) and one of her interviewees states that a type of Buddhist community can form online (2006: 98).

To further illustrate how James presents his Buddhist identity online, he posts a photograph of his tattoo on the 30 July 2007²⁷⁷. The tattoo itself includes the image of a Buddha and a yin yang symbol (see figure 16) and the photograph also shows Buddhist mala beads wrapped around his wrist and the wearing of a wedding ring. There are two points of interest in relation to this image, first, the cultural context of

²⁷⁶ Extracted from email, 2 March 2010.

²⁷⁷ In a more recent post on 5 June 2011, 'Getting a Buddhist Tattoo', James provides a personal insight into tattooing and specifically getting a Buddhist tattoo, <http://thebuddhistblog.blogspot.com/2011/06/getting-buddhist-tattoo.html>, accessed 18 June 2011.

tattoos, especially religious tattoos and second, the importance of the various symbols captured in the photograph.



Figure 16 - James' tattoo

In relation to the first point, religious tattoos are not a new phenomenon and can be found in a number of cultures and can be said to provide “a mark of identity and belonging to the group, a symbol of common belief and practice” (Flory and Miller 2000: 22). On the other hand, there can be a stigma surrounding tattoos, especially in the West. Arguably this perception is beginning to dissipate with the introduction of popular television shows such as *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink* and *London Ink*, where the notoriety and popularity of tattooing is presented as an acceptable form of art.

Flory and Miller provide an insight into the subject of religious tattoos and evangelical Christianity and they conclude that tattooing is perhaps another “example of material Christianity” and “As a symbol of identity and individuality . . . religious tattooing . . . provides a tangible, permanent means of expressing an intangible, transcendent faith” (2000: 28). Beaudoin also refers to religious tattoos and as discussed in chapter two, he associates tattooing with popular culture and Generation X (1998). James would certainly fit the “generational cohort” (Lynch 2002: 53) of Beaudoin’s definition of Generation X (those born between 1960ss and 1970s). I would argue that the emphasis is on the religious meaning of the tattoo and this would resonate with Roof’s definition of “quest culture” and spiritual seeking (1999: 35) as well as providing an example of popular culture.

Furthermore, tattoos provide an example of material culture which is suggested by James, who reflects on the tattoo in a comment to a reader, stating “I’m glad that you like it. It brings me much peace when I am out and about in the hustle and bustle of the world”. In addition, when asked what the tattoo meant to him he stated “I am a very visual person and symbols give me . . . an aid that can encompass all of Buddha’s teachings. They flood into my mind by just simply looking upon the tattoo. The ‘Ying and Yang’ symbol reminds me to always seek balance in all things and remind me of other wonderful teachings in the Tao Te Ching, which is an important aspect of my Zen practice”. For James, the tattoo provides a physical and visual presentation of his eclectic belief structure.

Not only does the tattoo symbolise his religious identity, it also provides a talking point in which to engage with his readers. By uploading this image to the blog, James wants the audience to appreciate how he uses the image in the offline world and he states “I posted a photograph of it because I think it is beautiful art and wanted to share it with others—especially those who also enjoy body art”. The photograph of the religious tattoo provides an example of both popular and material culture within the West (Beaudoin 1998). The image of the tattoo also crosses the boundary of offline/online, physical/virtual, time/space, as it captures a moment in time in the offline world and is uploaded to the online world.

The second point that I wish to focus on is the symbols within the tattoo which include the various aspects stated within James’ profile: “A Zen Buddhist who follows in the tradition of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh but I enjoy teachings from all Buddhist traditions. In addition, I am greatly influenced by Taoism, some Hindu beliefs and Secular Humanism. I am also a Neo-Pagan nature lover interested in Religious Pluralism but my main emphasis is Buddhism”. The photograph depicts the elements mentioned in his profile including; the Buddha, the lotus flower, representing both nature and Buddhism; and the yin yang symbol of Taoism. In addition to this, the photograph also captures James holding mala beads which is an object used in Buddhist meditation, as well as the wearing of a wedding

ring. The religious symbols provide a visual as well as a haptic²⁷⁸ tool, capturing the significance of the object in relation to sight and the meaning of the symbol within society (Pattison 2007: 10). I will discuss the physical body and virtual touch within the category of the experiential self but at this juncture I want to stress the importance of presenting his religious beliefs to his readers via the photograph rather than using only text.

4.3) Values – Human Rights

Another prominent theme found on *The Buddhist Blog* is human rights issues. There are a number of slogans and hyperlinks on the blog including the Human Rights Watch²⁷⁹, Human Rights Campaign²⁸⁰, Free Burma!²⁸¹, and Free Tibet²⁸², as well as in a number of posts such as that of 17 December 2007, where he talks about New Jersey abolishing the death penalty and that he feels “great sadness for the families who have lost loved ones...I have compassion for their suffering and cry with them”. I have already discussed this post in the category of self reflection but it is another example of James’ belief system.

In the 10 October 2007, titled ‘Boycott the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, James discusses and requests boycott action against China and he advocates that the games should be moved elsewhere or cancelled altogether as “something MUST BE DONE. We can not let this injustice go forward any longer”. He concludes the post justifying the boycotting and asking others to join him, stating: “I am adding my voice to the boycott Beijing movement, will you join me?” The use of the capital letters in an online context depicts shouting and emphasises James frustration (Herring 1996: 57) but interestingly it is the request for others to join him, that typifies the characteristic of social media as a community. By referring to human

²⁷⁸ Haptic is from the Greek verb, *haptein*, meaning to touch or grasp (Pattison, 2007: 42).

²⁷⁹ <http://www.hrw.org/>, accessed 5 December 2008

²⁸⁰ <http://www.hrc.org/>, accessed 5 December 2008

²⁸¹ <http://www2.free-burma.org/index.php>, accessed 5 December 2008

²⁸² <http://www.freetibet.org/>, accessed 5 December 2008

rights issues within his profile, via slogans, images and in the content of the posts, James presents a specific identity to his readers.

4.4) Values - being vegetarian

James is a vegetarian and he declares his love for animals in a number of posts and via images, including slogans found on the right hand frame of the blog (see figure 17).



Figure 17 – Image relating to vegetarian values

An example of a post which discusses James' ethics of being a vegetarian is on the 27 November 2007, titled 'Reflection on Meat by a Buddhist Vegetarian' which includes a colourful photograph of vegetables. The five paragraph post provides an expose as to why James is a vegetarian and he states "The main reason that I decided to become vegetarian was from an immense love of animals and compassion for their suffering. I feel a very deep connection and bond to all sentient beings and feel that eating them is no different then eating my mother". He continues his discussion, acknowledging that he does not judge others who do eat meat, as this would be unskilful and not Buddhist. Similar to other posts, James discusses this within a Buddhist context and he refers to the teachings in the *Kalama Sutra*²⁸³.

The discussion of vegetarianism also appears in a post almost twelve months later on the 21 November 2008. The post titled 'Sarah Palin and the Slaughtered Turkey' is five paragraphs long and contains a photograph of Sarah Palin sitting on a sofa with a bear rug positioned on the back of the seat. In addition to the photograph there is a

²⁸³ This was also discussed in an earlier post of the 13 November 2007.

link to a YouTube interview with Sarah Palin. The interview shows her standing in front of a man who is slaughtering turkeys. Ironically, this is after she has participated in the ceremony of pardoning a turkey for Thanksgiving. James questions whether people should eat meat if they cannot bear the thought of watching it being killed. He concludes that people should consider becoming vegetarian and provides a quote from Gandhi: “*The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated*”²⁸⁴. By requesting others to consider being vegetarian, James is not only presenting an aspect of the self but is also suggesting that others consider having the same values as he does. This illustrates how new media is being used as a platform to share values, beliefs and opinions (Taylor 1989) but it also raises potential dangers such as exposure, privacy issues and authority (Rettberg 2008; de Laat 2008; Campbell 2010a).

4.5) Summary - Self Presentation

The discussion of self presentation has covered three areas including beliefs, identity and values and in doing so I have presented an image of James as a vegetarian, humanitarian and political Buddhist. Indirectly it has also identified that James compartmentalises himself and presents different aspects of his identity and self within different blogs including a Buddhist, political and art blog. The conscious presentation of different aspects of the self further proves the hypothesis that blogs are used as a medium for self presentation and parallels with Turkle’s theory of multiple identities (1995: 17). In addition it highlights the fragmented self which is presented in a fragmented narrative of short stories (posts) and collectively “the posts create a larger story” (Rettberg 2008: 111). In this sense, the blog differs to an autobiography as there is no end point and so in the blog there are only fragmented narratives which collectively can present a cohesive self.

5) The Experiential Self

The final category to be examined is the experiential self and here I explore the subject of emotions, senses and experiences. The methodological approach to enable

²⁸⁴ Italics are in the original post.

this examination is based on the conceptual issues and framework found in early Buddhism and Theravada Abhidhamma Buddhism. This approach provides a reductionist account whereby the components of the self (*khandhas*) and the senses, sense spheres and awarenesses, are discussed (*dhatu and ayatana*s) in relation to objects, cognition and the resulting experience. Thus, I draw from Hamilton and I depict human existence as an experiential process where the *khandhas* are rendered an integral part of the experiential nature of existence (1999: 126).

To reiterate the findings from chapter five, the *khandhas* that are being focused on are *samkhara-khandha* (volition and emotion) and *vedana-khandha* (feeling). The category of experiential self is defined when the blogger states explicitly any words or phrases related to the senses and experience; or where he provides a depiction of an experience via a sound or visual aid such as a photograph, song, or literature and therefore depicts or expresses an experience.

The following discourse will also identify how and why blogs are used, which is addressed by Lenhart and Fox, who state that 37% of blogs are about life and experiences (2006: 4). Similarly, Ni Xiaochuan et al claim that blogs can be informational, affective or both, defining affective blogs as those that are diaries about personal activities or those which discuss the bloggers feelings or emotions (2007: 283). The discussion will commence with an analysis of affective posts whereby James discusses his emotions and so I introduce the framework of the different senses, the *khandhas* and contact (*phassa*) with an object.

5.1) Emotions - fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt

Emotions are not universally defined or expressed (Wulff 2007: 1) and so the discussion will focus on the seven emotions referred to by Gay and these are: fear,

anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt (2003: 606). Four of the seven emotions will be discussed that is, fear, sadness, anger and happiness²⁸⁵.

Referring to the findings in chapter five, one of the most important aspects of the expression of emotions is the process in which the emotion has arisen. Unlike feeling, which can be without emotion, emotion cannot be without a psychological or physical feeling and moreover, it is a reflective process. In sum, “Feeling is thus *not* a purely *subjective* event, as it is usually thought to be. Rather, it links the experiencing subject and the experienced object in a single process, a functional unity.....Feeling is an indication of intimate participation, in a more or less active way, in the events of the world” (Holder 2004: 10). Holder’s argument is similar to that presented by Hamilton, who states that feeling and emotion connects the person with the experiential world in which they live (Hamilton 1999: 121). As I have discussed in an earlier chapter it is the contact (*phassa*) with an object that results in feeling (*vedana*) and the possible manifestation of emotion (*samkhara*), resulting in a unique experience for the individual. To explicate further I now examine four emotions discussed within *The Buddhist Blog*.

5.1.1) Fear and Sadness

There are a number of posts where James explicitly expresses his emotional state and some of these have already been discussed, such as the post of the 3 December 2007, where James describes his father’s stroke and that he is “shaken” and “on the verge of tears” after hearing the news in a phone call from his mother. Therefore, the aural contact with the voice of his mother, results in James experiencing unpleasant feelings as well as the emotions of fear and sadness. In this situation both *vedana* and *samkhara* are present as “*samkharakhandā* is only involved if there is a concomitant volition concerning the feeling: if it is an agreeable feeling, a concomitant volition might be to desire it; if it is a disagreeable feeling, one might be revolted by it” (Hamilton, 1996: 72). James’ depiction of fear and sadness provides an insight into

²⁸⁵ Helena Wulff identifies seven emotions, namely fear “anger, disgust, sadness, joy, shame and guilt” and she positions the discussion of emotions within a cultural context and so many of the chapters within the edited edition focus on an anthropological study of emotions (2007: 5, 12).

his everyday experiences but it also identifies how the blog can be used as a tool to express feelings and to share these with an audience.

5.1.2) Anger

There are a number of other posts where James discusses emotion, such as anger which is discussed in the post on the 30 October 2007, 'My Teachers, The Leaves'. James describes the reaction that his new medication is having and states "I have been quick to anger while taking it, to the point of being enraged over the littlest things" and later in the discussion he uses the phrases "uncontrolled rage" and "scared me". James concludes his post by explaining his experience of being in physical contact with the autumn leaves and that this experience helped him to return to a state of happiness and he ends the post by stating "What a beautiful world we are blessed to live in!!" This is a lengthy post and contains two centrally positioned colour photographs. The first depicting a child jumping into a pile of autumn leaves and the second depicts a dog poking its head out from under the leaves.

The blog narrative and images capture James' unique experience as an emotional rollercoaster and therefore depicts the experiential self via the narrative and the visual images. In addition to this, the post depicts both pleasant and unpleasant feelings, as well as prominently depicting two of the five *khandhas* (*vedana-khandha* and *samkhara-khandha*). The feeling and emotion manifest due to the physical (*rupa-khandha*), contact (*phassa*) with medication and nature. While the focus of this discussion is primarily on *vedana-khandha* and *samkhara-khandha* this example clearly demonstrates that the *khandhas* are never found in isolation and that "feelings arise as part of a process" and *rupa-khandha* (material) as well as *vinnana-khandha* (consciousness) are also present (Hamilton 1996: 46).

5.1.3) Happiness

In direct contrast to the emotion of anger is the emotion of happiness. James discusses his state of happiness in the post of the 3 January 2008, where he describes a recent experience with his nephew that left him witnessing his nephew's happiness

as well as acknowledging his own happiness. He ends the post, referring to his love for his nephew by stating “I love you buddy”. The post includes two photographs, the first is of a smiling James holding his nephew and the second is of his nephew playing with toys. The photographs reflect the experience described in the text by capturing the joy on James’ face. Interestingly, the post also discusses the concept of applying labels to everything and so James discusses his nephew’s lack of awareness of labelling, maintaining “He still hasn’t grasped the whole duality delusion and so it is beautiful to watch a pure being like himself who hasn’t made the distinction between his name, himself and the world around him yet”. The application of naming the ‘self’, ‘I’, ‘person’ is discussed in an earlier chapter but this post provides a reminder that the “conceptual fiction” of labelling the ‘self’ will be referred to in the concluding chapter (Siderits 2007: 76).

5.2) Experiences – the physical body

It is not my intention to discuss the disembodied self associated with cybercultural studies, instead the focus is on the description of an experience had by the physical body and then written about in the blog and so the following section will enhance our understanding of how we engage with and use technology (Turkle 1995, 2011).

To further understand how the experiential self relates to the physical body this is depicted in the post from the 1 October 2007 where James describes his feeling of nausea and how his physical body made him feel sick. In another post from the 1 October 2008, James describes how his illness makes him feel separated from his physical body. Interestingly, it is the description of his contact with physical objects such as the mala beads or his experiences in the offline world that are depicted in a number of photographs, such as the photograph of his tattoo or with his nephew and it is these that illustrate the relationship between the physical body and the experience.

Not only does James use narrative to express his experiences and emotions, he also uses paralanguage such as emoticons²⁸⁶. Within both the posts and the comments section he often uses the emoticon for smiling ‘:)’ and an example of this is found in his comment relating to the post on the 28 October 2008 and the 20 November 2008.

In addition, his readers also use emoticons which are shown in a number of comments relating to the posts on the 21 January 2008, 25 January 2008, and the 28 October 2008. Not only does the use of this paralanguage express a pleasant feeling (*sukha-vedana*), implied by a physical or psychological event, it also depicts the psychological state and the emotion of happiness. The use of symbols exemplifies the commonality and acceptability of using the emoticon to express an emotion or feeling within the online culture (Kozinets 2010: 23). The emoticon alludes to a physical action, such as clasped hands in prayer, ‘_/_’ and this represents the physical act to be expressed easily to his readers. The emoticon ‘_/_’ is found at the end of the post on 21 October 2007 and is copied by others in their comments back to James.

Although a physical body is absent from the blog, James presents various examples of experiences of physical body in the offline context. The technology also enables a depiction of a physical gesture of hands in prayer as well as the experiences had by James through the use of photographs and so therefore “the fact that images are generally in the domain of the symbolic . . . means that they are points of mediation between the spectator and reality” (Aumont 1997: 54) and for Edwards “the photograph marks the inevitable absence of the body it also points to the presence (life) of the spirit” (Edwards in Classen 2005: 424). It is by using emoticons and photographs and text that the blogger can express a physical or mental experience had offline. It is not my intention to identify how experiences are manifested in the online context but I do think it is important to highlight the impact of only having two of the five senses present in the online context, as potentially this can limit the presentation of the experiential self.

²⁸⁶ Emoticons are graphical depictions of emotions or phrases such as the emoticons known as smilies which depict emotional facial expressions such as smiling, crying and embarrassment.

5.3) Experiences - Visual

Arguably the most important sense online is the sense of sight. Without sight the narrative and images cannot be adequately portrayed and can lose their meaning²⁸⁷. It could be said that *The Buddhist Blog* is visually stimulating and for James “The image and design of the blog is important to me because it makes the blog look more professional and attractive to readers. Plus, again being an artist I like to express things visually. I don’t know if it’s important to my readers but I personally am more attracted to the blogs with a lot of visual imagery”. The recognition and the importance of the visual sense as well as how to engage with readers via sense fields is expressed by James²⁸⁸.

There are a number of posts where James uses images to express his feeling, emotion and experience, such as the post on the 2 August 2007, where James includes various photographs of lotus flowers that he found on a trip to the Rocky Mountains. James comments on the photographs by stating “I really enjoy how you can see ripples along the edges of the lily pads”. In doing so James has shown that his contact with the photograph, through sight, has resulted in pleasant feeling, which reinforces the physical experience he had taking the photograph and seeing the flowers first hand. The photograph also triggers a memory of the experience and as I discuss in the next chapter, the memory is a fundamental component related to the experiential self and for understanding life writing.

It is clear that James remembers an experience by looking at the photograph and there are also comments from readers which indicate they too have had a pleasant feeling (*sukha-vedana*) and a positive experience from looking at the photograph. Therefore, “the photograph particularly satisfies the scopic drive because it provides not only something to be seen (a reality that has been, literally placed on the scene,

²⁸⁷ There are applications to assist those who are visually impaired but it is unclear whether the experience is the same as someone who can see the image or text. This would require further investigation and is out with the scope of this thesis.

²⁸⁸ The sense fields (*ayatana*s) are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind and added to this list is the six sense awarenesses (sight, aural, smell, taste, tactile, mental) and the six objects (colour-form, sound, fragrance, flavour, touch and phenomenon (*dhatu*s) in order to explain the human sensory condition (Ronkin 2005: 42).

but also something to be looked at (something purely photographic which provokes *me*, the viewer . . . and engages me to derive joy from the photograph)” (Aumont 1997: 92). The viewers’ response to images on the blog has not been the primary focus of this thesis but research concerning this would provide further insight into how blogs are used and why they are used.

In addition to the use of slogans, photographs and the design of the blog, which have been discussed in detail throughout this chapter, there is a prominent image displayed in the top right hand corner of the blog, which is the constantly spinning Buddhist prayer wheel. Typically the prayer wheel is found within Tibetan Buddhism and is used as a means for devotees to recite sacred texts²⁸⁹. By physically touching and turning the prayer wheel the devotee gains merit, resulting in good karma, epitomising the soteriological and ritualistic dimension of Buddhism. The prayer wheel can be hand held or larger ones are found within temples, monasteries and near stupas. Both types of prayer wheel require the devotee to touch and spin it. Therefore, the physical offline prayer wheel relates both to the sense of touch and sight but more predominantly touch.

Whereas online, there is no physical contact with the virtual prayer wheel. There are different types of prayer wheels offered in cyberspace, all of which purport to have the same meritorious power as the physical offline prayer wheel²⁹⁰. The main difference of the virtual prayer wheel is that it does not require touch to spin it. It is therefore perpetually spinning and is without the constraints of the physical sense, thus compensating for a sense that is not possible on the internet. On the other hand, there is the possibility of using the mouse as a tool for touch but the creators of this prayer wheel have chosen to produce a symbol whereby touch of any kind is not

²⁸⁹ The wheel is also symbolic of the first sermon given by the Buddha, known as the ‘setting the wheel of the law in motion’ (dharma). The most common text to be included within a prayer wheel is ‘Om mani padme hum’, which can be crudely translated as ‘praise to the Buddha’.

²⁹⁰ Different online prayer wheels - <http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm#Overview>, accessed 1 March 2010

required²⁹¹. Instead, the visual sense is evoked immediately, as the virtual prayer wheel is perpetually spinning.

The prominent position of the prayer wheel is significant and intentional, as James states he placed it on his blog “as a symbol of welcoming to my readers. As well as a symbol to go in peace when they leave the blog”²⁹². For James, the act of seeing the prayer wheel is a meaningful religious symbol and so it could be said that the act of “Seeing is part of the embodied experience of feeling, and therefore is properly understood as a fundamental part of many religious practices” (Morgan 2009: 133). Morgan also states that “Sacred objects and devout viewers engage with one another in a variety of felt relations” (Morgan 2009: 134). This is possibly true for many who read *The Buddhist Blog* as they are likely to recognise the meaning of the religious iconography and imagery, including the prayer wheel.

5.4) Experiences – sound

By referring to the framework for the analysis of the self, specifically the ear (*ayatana*), the object of sound and the aural awareness, there are a number of examples of sound in the blog, including the embedding of YouTube clips. For example, on the 25 January 2008, there is a link to a song and James states that the song makes him feel happy and comments to his readers that “I hope you enjoy this video/song as much as I do”.

In addition to the YouTube clips, it is on the right hand side of the page, that there is a link called ‘Audio Dharma’. This links to audio mp3 files of Buddhist sermons and the website provides mp3 files and podcasts about Zen Buddhism²⁹³. This feature has

²⁹¹ This is not same in other online environments. For example the prayer wheels in the online world, *Second Life* require the avatar to touch the prayer wheel in order for it to spin, imitating the offline physical action and ritual (Connelly 2010).

²⁹² Email, 2 March 2010.

²⁹³ Deer park dharma cast <http://www.dpcast.org/>, no longer available, accessed 27 June 2010. Dharma talks <http://www.dhammatalks.org.uk/index2.htm>, no longer available, accessed 27 June 2010. Shasta Abbey <http://shastaabbey.org/dharma1.htm>, accessed 27 June 2010.

recently been removed from *The Buddhist Blog* and some of the podcasts and audio files can be accessed by clicking on the relevant link in the blogroll and links section. The inclusion of audio files and podcasts is not as prevalent as the use of visual imagery on *The Buddhist Blog*. Nonetheless the specific selection of sound components further illustrates the inclusion and depiction of different senses and sensory experiences online which are presented to the reader and discussed by the blogger.

5.5) Experiences – smell

The sense of smell and taste is completely absent from the internet, however the blog narrative can describe an experience as a result of a smell and taste offline and in doing so the blog depicts a complete sensory experience for the individual. An example of where this is evident is in the post of the 4 October 2008. The post titled ‘The Health Benefits of Incense’ includes a colour photograph of incense burning at a Buddhist temple²⁹⁴. The nine paragraph post provides a detailed explanation of the benefits of incense and how James uses it in a religious context, stating “I use incense to show my gratitude to Buddha for bringing us the Dharma but I also use it because I too have found it to be very relaxing, tranquil and thus conducive to meditation as now proven by science”. In addition to this claim he states “I have noticed that when I close my eyes in meditation that the scent of the incense stands out more in my mind. This is probably similar to how when some go blind that their other senses are heightened”. He then reflects on experiences he has had in the past and that the incense reminds him of these pleasant feelings, as the “wood reminds me of smells that I enjoyed in Africa, which was a very happy time in my life”. For James, the sense of smell clearly resonates with memories and so there are a number of *khandhas* present, including *vinnana-khandha* (cognition/consciousness). I argue that this exemplifies the presentation of the experiential self in this blog and that while the actual smell of the incense cannot be obtained via the blog, James remembers and reflects on these experiences and this includes the associated feeling (*vedana*) and emotion (*samkhara*) through being in contact (*phassa*) with incense.

²⁹⁴ *The Buddhist Blog* has a Google news section and includes an article about incense rituals ‘Tibetans take part in Incense-burning Festival of Tibetan Buddhism’, accessed 27 June 2010.

5.6) Summary - the Experiential Self

The Buddhist Blog includes images, sound and narrative, all of which provide a description of James' feelings, emotions and experiences and in doing so, engaging with the readers which on occasion has resulted in the readers expressing their own feelings. It has been shown that there is a relationship between the object, one or more of the senses, resulting in a feeling (*vedana-khandha*) and possible emotion (*samkhara-khandha*). I have demonstrated that blogs can be used as a medium to depict the experiential self. Moreover by providing a reductionist account of the self by referring to the Buddhist Abhidhamma framework there is an explanation of aspects of the self in relation to human experience (Hamilton 1999: 126). Crucially it is by understanding human experience that there is an understanding of the 'self'.

6) Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed *The Buddhist Blog* and the blogger, James Ure, in order to address the second research question: "how is the self depicted in blogs?" The discussion has drawn from a number of disciplines including, anthropology, visual culture studies and Buddhist studies. Notably, the experiential self has been examined by referring to the Buddhist conceptual issues of the self and specifically the triad, *khandha-ayatana-dhatu*. The *khandhas vedana* and *samkhara* have been referred to in relation to the threefold *tisso-vedana* (agreeable, disagreeable and neutral feeling) and the cognitive process of the individual coming into contact (*phassa*) with an object and thus, resulting in an experience. I have also tentatively focused on the relationship between memory and experience but this will be acknowledged in the second case study, as this further dimension highlights the complexity of analysing and understanding aspects of the self online.

Furthermore, I have demonstrated that the narrative of the blog and the medium can be defined as a tool in which the blogger can reflect on his/her experiences, everyday life, emotions and beliefs. It can be argued that "The format of blogs means that narratives – whether fictional or authentic – are structured in certain ways that are different from the ways narratives are organized in movies or novels. Blogs primarily tell the story of a life or lives" (Rettberg 2008: 111). Rettberg's argument is paralleled by the statement from James:

I started The Buddhist Blog . . . as a log of my personal thoughts on Buddhism and as an outlet to express my understanding, questions and general thoughts. I really am pleased to see it become a place where ideas are freely exchanged” and “I have a feeling that blogging about Buddhism is becoming the easiest way to express Buddhist ideas with others. It offers instant interaction no matter what time of day or where in the world you live²⁹⁵.

I have shown that *The Buddhist Blog* provides a medium whereby it is a tool and a platform for self reflection, self presentation and the depiction of the experiential self. Examples have been provided which illustrate how James engages with new media (Campbell 2010b) and consequently, a number of additional themes have emerged including the participatory aspect of blogging which is not found in traditional autobiography or diary writing (Rettberg 2008: 155). The discussion has enabled the conclusion to be drawn that blogs provide a medium whereby enabling a reflective process to take place, as suggested by Lee (2009) and the blog also presents an identity of the blogger as maintained by Nabeth (2005: 6). Furthermore, the blog enables the sharing of experiences and in doing so captures and preserves this, “As the writing progresses, the blogger’s personality is unveiled through his or her use of language” (Nilsson 2003: 14).

The complexity of identifying and analysing the elusive ‘self’ has been highlighted and while this case study has provided an in-depth examination of James and his blogging practice, it is in chapter nine that I will identify the similarities and differences between the three selected blogs, specifically in relation to the quantitative categorisation of the posts as self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. This will provide a greater insight into how the self is depicted within blogs and how blogs are being used. With reference to *The Buddhist Blog*, respectively there are 31%, 27% and 51% of posts categorised under these headings. This indicates that there are a greater number of posts in the category of the experiential self, suggesting that the discussion of the self is primarily about an experiential process (Hamilton 1996; 2000) and the examination of the self as an impermanent, subjective entity, whereby the label of ‘self’ or ‘I’ is used solely as a “convenient designator” (Siderits 2007: 24; Ronkin 2005: 146). This concept of the

²⁹⁵ Email from James 2 March 2010.

self has also been adhered to when discussing the autobiographical self as a continual process (Eakin 1999: x; Giddens 1991: 53). What has also emerged from this discussion is the importance of the religious context in relation to how media is being used and for what purpose (Hoover 2006; Ostrowski 2006; Lee 2009).

Chapter 7 - *The American Buddhist* (case study 2)

In this chapter I examine two blogs, *The American Buddhist*²⁹⁶ and *The American Buddhist in England*²⁹⁷ both authored by the American blogger, Justin Whitaker. The examination of Justin's blogs demonstrates how the personal-diary style blogs²⁹⁸ are used to depict self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. Therefore, the following discourse will address the second research question and will provide examples for answering the question: "how is the self depicted in blogs?". In order to analyse the two blogs an inter-disciplinary approach is employed and this directly addresses the third research question which is in two parts and includes, "can an inter-disciplinary methodology, including approaches taken from the field of Buddhist studies, anthropology, and material and visual cultural studies be used for the analysis of self and blogs?" and "what insights does such a methodology bring to the study of self online?" within the context of life writing²⁹⁹, Buddhism and the internet.

This chapter is divided into five sections including an overview of the blog and blogger; an examination of the blog aesthetics; and the remaining three sections focus on the categories of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. In addition, reference is made to the cultural context of blogging, as "Network technology, in its various manifestations, infringes on culture in a variety of ways" (Barney 2004: 171). The cultural context of blogging can be defined as a postmodern adaptation of the traditional diary which ultimately is found in late modern society (Giddens 1991) and highlights the significance that new media³⁰⁰ (blogs) can have on

²⁹⁶ *The American Buddhist* blog, <http://americanbuddhist.blogspot.com/>, last accessed 10 August 2010.

²⁹⁷ *American Buddhist in England* blog, <http://justininengland.blogspot.com/>, last accessed 10 August 2010.

²⁹⁸ Justin's blogs are categorised as personal-diaries rather than political or journalistic blogs which is discussed by Rebecca Blood (2002).

²⁹⁹ The term life writing is both a critical practice and an all encompassing genre that includes biography, autobiography, journal and diaries. A fuller explanation and definition will be provided later within this chapter (Kadar 1992: 3).

³⁰⁰ The definition of new media is outlined in chapter one (Campbell 2010b: 9).

the individual and potentially the wider society. The findings from this case study further corroborate my proposition that there is an inter-dependent relationship between technology, culture, religion and the self, which is presented in chapter two. The following section provides an overview of this particular blog and blogger.

1) Overview

As outlined in the methodology, this blog was monitored between 2005 and 2009 and data was collected during the three research periods between 2007 and 2008³⁰¹. Notably, Justin's two blogs are associated with specific research periods and so it is during the first and last research period that the data pertains to a discussion of *The American Buddhist* (AB) blog and the second research period solely relates to *The American Buddhist in England* (ABE) blog³⁰². A possible explanation for the discrepancy in posts between the two blogs is that Justin is a student in London who returns home to America during vacation time and so the university semesters and Justin's habitation between America and London coincidentally align with the research periods. In addition to the data collected from the two blogs, Justin was contacted by email in July 2010 and he was asked a number of questions in relation to his blog and blogging practice. His answers shed further insight on a number of areas that will be discussed in this chapter. In order to examine these specific areas, I begin by providing a background to both blogs, including an overview of Justin's blog profile.

1.1) Profile

The first post on the AB blog is on 9 August 2004, whereas on the ABE blog it is on 18 November 2004. Together they share the same profile details and collectively the profile has had 7,775 viewings, which could indicate the popularity of Justin's blogs³⁰³. On the other hand this could simply be a small number of visitors who have

³⁰¹ The research dates are from 1 July 2007 to 31 August 2007, 1 October 2007 to 31 January 2008 and 1 October 2008 to 30 November 2008.

³⁰² To ease reading, I will refer to both blogs as the 'American Buddhist' or where I am referring to a specific blog I will use AB and ABE.

³⁰³ Last accessed 23 July 2010.

accessed Justin's profile on more than one occasion, as the figure does not indicate whether these are unique viewings.

In an attempt to understand who Justin is or rather who he attempts to present to the readers, the profile needs to be examined in more detail and this includes the text, profile portrait or image used and whether or not personal information is listed. It is not my intention to provide a psychological analysis of the blog profile instead I will demonstrate that it is the profile that provides the first glimpse of the various aspects of the self depicted in a blog.

One of the features is the profile picture which provides the first visual representation of the blogger. The image can be a portrait, some other image of choice or indeed no image at all. In relation to Justin's profile, the picture is a full colour photograph and this has changed infrequently throughout the five year study. In 2007 there was a photograph of Justin and in 2008 this changed to a different photograph, which remains the current profile picture in June 2011. It is from various blog posts and the profile narrative that I determine that both photographs are captured during walking and photography expeditions (see figure 18).

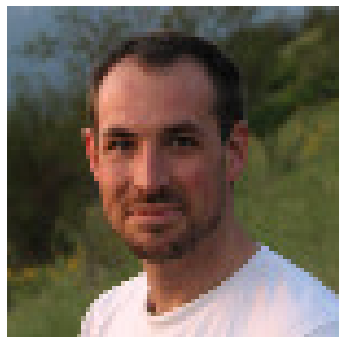


Figure 18 - Profile Pictures - 29 Sept 2007 (Mount Sementinel, Montana) and August 2008 (Glacier National Park, Montana)³⁰⁴

The short but dense profile extract provides an overview of who Justin is and possibly how he wants to be known. The profile includes where the profile picture

³⁰⁴ On the blog the quality of photographs are poor.

was taken (“The picture is of me in Glacier National Park, MT, Aug 2008”), details of his homeland (Montana), his religious beliefs (“baptized Catholic; an ardent Atheist; a practicing Buddhist; a lover of Wisdom”), aspects of his personality (what he loves and admires) and ends with his academic achievements (a BA and almost an MA in (Western) Philosophy, an MA in Buddhist Studies, and am working on a Ph.D. in Buddhist Ethics at the U of London”). It is within this short description that he provides a vast amount of information in relation to different aspects of his personality, identity and what he does. It could be said that this exposure operates as a marketing strategy to engage with readers³⁰⁵. The short profile can be expanded in order to read a more comprehensive description which includes details of Justin’s other blogs³⁰⁶, blogs that he follows, favourite films, music, books and his interests (see figure 19). This public presentation highlights a feature which is examined in cyberculture and media and communication studies and that is the subject of trust, privacy and risk (de Laat 2008; Giddens 1991). Madden et al. maintain that there is a cultural acceptance of publicly providing personal information and that “60% of internet users are not worried about how much information is available about them online” (2007: ii). I will discuss these issues, in detail, later in the chapter. Before discussing this I will provide a brief overview of the quantitative data collected in order to draw from these statistics throughout the discussion.

³⁰⁵ I do not intend to examine marketing strategies or how blogs can be used as a source of income as this is tangential to the current discussion. The use of blogs as a means of revenue is discussed by Robert Scoble et al. in Rosenberg (2009: 164-197).

³⁰⁶ According to Lenhart and Fox, only 26% of bloggers maintain three or more blogs (2006: 23).

Interests

[Philosophy](#) [Religion](#) [Sociology](#) [History](#) [Science](#) [Yoga](#) [Buddhism](#) [Christianity](#)
[Ethics](#) [Metaphysics](#) [Ontology](#) [Phenomenology](#) [Geluk](#) [Gelug](#) [Dalai Lama](#)
[Geshe Michael Roach](#) [Friends of the Western Buddhist Order](#) [American](#)
[Buddhism](#) [American Buddhists](#) [Western Buddhism](#) [Modern Buddhism](#) [Tibetan](#)
[Buddhism](#) [Montana](#) [History](#) [America](#) [Europe](#) [The World](#)

Favourite Films

[Waking Life](#) [A Beautiful Mind](#) [Life is Beautiful](#) [Swingers](#) [The Wall](#) [Kundun](#)
[Little Buddha](#) [The Princess Bride](#) [What the Bleep do we know](#) [Derrida](#)

Favourite Music

[Beethoven](#) [Bach](#) [Tarkio](#) [Greg Brown](#) [Jude](#) [Faithless](#) [A3](#) [Keb' Mo'](#) [Moby](#)
[Miles Davis](#) [Norah Jones](#) [R.E.M.](#) [Peter Gabriel](#) [Rufus Wainwright](#) [Van](#)
[Morrison](#)

Figure 19 - Section from the Profile page

1.2) Overview of Quantitative Data

The *AB* blog had a total of fifty four posts during the research period, whereas the *ABE* blog had a total of forty two posts. Collectively, the posts consist of fifteen (16%) short posts (one paragraph), sixteen (17%) medium posts (2-4 paragraphs) and sixty five (68%) long posts (5+ paragraphs). The significant disparity between the post length is likely due to the subject matter discussed within the posts as many of the posts include a discussion on philosophical quandaries or lengthy insights into Justin's PhD progress and so qualify as a 'long post'. There were a total of forty four (46%) posts containing one or more images of which I will discuss in more detail within the following section on aesthetics, as well as more than two hundred and sixty five comments. 69% of the posts contained one or more hyperlinks.

In order to provide further insight into Justin's blogging practice I will now refer to the aesthetics of the blog and draw from the field of visual culture studies. Accordingly I analyse the use of images and design as well as highlighting Justin's consideration of the images used and the impact this may have on the audience.

2) *Aesthetics*

Both blogs are designed using the free blogging application known as *Blogger* and they share similar characteristics including the profile page, as discussed above, the banner, a blogroll³⁰⁷ and a list of archived posts. As the focus is on two blogs and the design and aesthetics are different for each, I will discuss the *AB* blog first and then *ABE* blog unless the argument relates to both blogs.

2.1) Design

AB blog continues to be the blog that is updated most frequently in comparison to the *ABE* blog which was last updated on 1 March 2008 and has not been updated since. This is likely to indicate that this blog is now abandoned³⁰⁸. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been more attention given to the design of the *AB* blog which has included changes to the banner design and background colour as well as adding additional links and features.

In 2007, the *AB* blog originally used the typical *Blogger* template design which is a black and yellow background and a blue banner. This design is also found on the *ABE* blog which has never been changed. In 2008, the *AB* blog underwent a design change and the background and banner was custom designed (see figure 20). The new design includes a black background with white writing and there are a number of images prominently displayed in the banner and on either side of the banner. Predominantly the images are of nature and there is only one Buddhist-related image. Justin explains in his email that “The header image was put together somewhat haphazardly as a collage of interests in my life: nature's beauty, Buddhist teachings, and travels (the ship/weathervane is from Bristol, UK)”³⁰⁹.

While the images do not necessarily indicate a Buddhist affiliated blog the title and strap line does. The title of the blog is ‘American Buddhist Perspective’ and the

³⁰⁷ A blogroll is a list of other blogs.

³⁰⁸ Last accessed 30 May 2011.

³⁰⁹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

subtitle states ‘Buddhism. Philosophy. Ecology. Life. Teaching. & Politics’, with a further statement ‘May All Beings Be Free From Suffering’. The careful selection and use of specific words identifies Justin’s nationality as an American and also highlights the topics that are likely to be discussed within the blog. In addition to this, he uses language commonly associated within Buddhism, such as the reference to ‘suffering’, which is known as *dukkha*³¹⁰. The importance and prominence of these statements provide an expectation and possibly marketing tactic to attract a specific audience and to potentially provide a level of authenticity to the blog (Hoover 2006: 67). Justin acknowledges the issue of audience attraction and is aware of having readers follow his blog, stating “over time I began to realize that other people were reading it, many regularly. . . Over the years it has morphed into being a far more socially aware blog. By that I mean I write with far more awareness of who is (potentially) reading”³¹¹. Justin is not dissimilar to other bloggers who also recognise that they are potentially writing for an audience, as Lenhart and Fox maintain that 32% of bloggers write for an audience (2006: 5), however it is practically impossible to determine who the audience is (2006: 33).

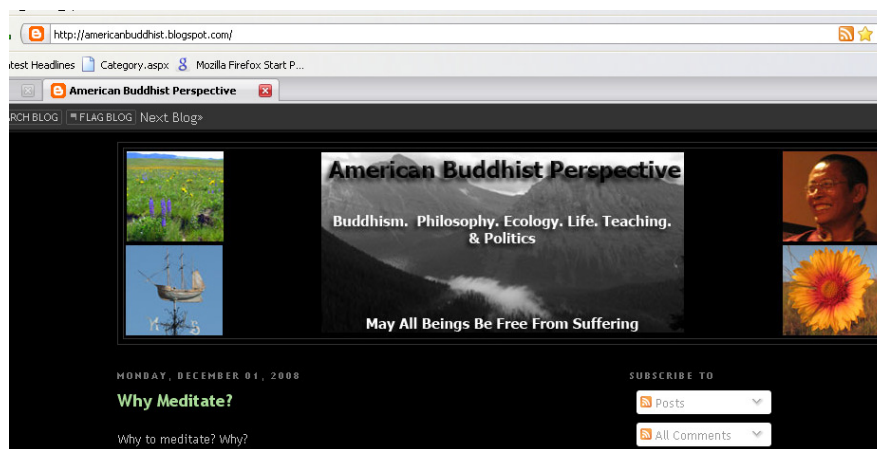


Figure 20 – *The American Buddhist* blog (accessed 2 Dec 2008)

³¹⁰ Freedom from suffering is the soteriological aspiration for all Buddhists and culminates in the desired result of release from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). *Dukkha* is discussed within the Four Noble Truths and is outlined in chapter five.

³¹¹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

In addition to this, it is within our email correspondence that he mentions there is a further design change. The new and current design is a yellow background and Justin explains that “A friend informed me that many people have difficulty reading light text on a dark background. So I switched and played with shades of yellow until I found one that fit[s]” (see figure 21). It could be argued that the design of the blog is not only created to be aesthetically pleasing but also as a functional tool to be appreciated by the audience. However, this is speculative at best and I do not intend to analyse audience engagement, although scholars in visual culture studies (Walker and Chaplin 1997) and media studies (Hoover 2006) have. I suggest that this should be recognised within the wider discourse on blogging but this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In relation to *ABE* blog, the design is very basic and there are no images except those within the posts. The strap line states “My life in England en route to a PhD in Buddhist Ethics. With banter on London, Buddhism, and whatever else comes to mind”. The purpose of this blog is very much about living in London, university life and questions arising from Justin’s PhD research. The England based blog is created for a specific purpose, time and context and as such it is only updated during a set period in Justin’s life, whereas the *AB* blog has been updated more frequently and includes a wider variety of topics.

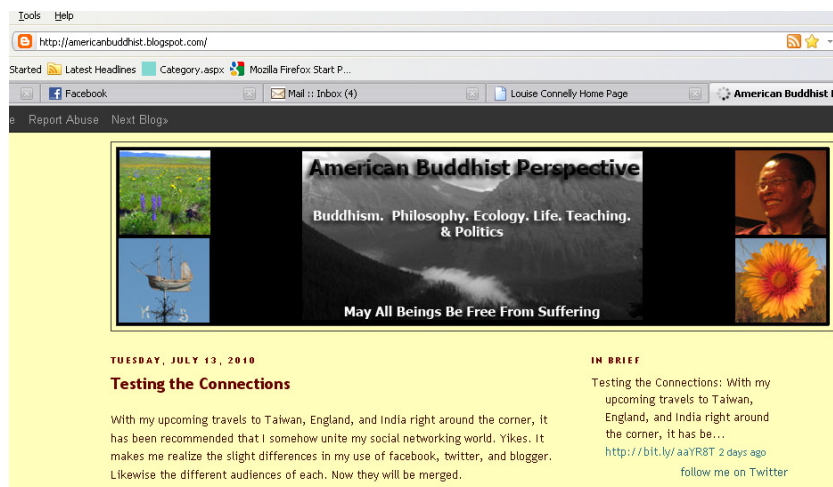


Figure 21 - *The American Buddhist* blog (accessed 16 July 2010)

2.2) Images and the Written Word

Justin does include images on his blogs and collectively there are forty four posts containing one or more images during the research period. However, this equates to only 46% of posts containing images and therefore, for these specific blogs, the role of the image takes a lesser place than the written word. The images predominantly include photographs from travelling or from recent activities rather than images relating to Buddhism which could be said to parallel his remit for the blog. Justin comments on his use of images and states that there aren't many Buddhist images and that the images included are "just a reflection of my life. Though I like them, I'm not overly entranced by Buddhist images and most of the beauty in my life is that of nature"³¹². Justin's love of nature is further illustrated with a number of photographs which were taken on a trip to Glacier in Montana and are included in the post dated 15 October 2008 and 24 November 2008.

In relation to the analysis of images in the blogs, Badger provides an insight into the cultural position of images as "We live in an image-hungry society – screens are embedded into aeroplane chairs, phones double as cameras. Images compel us to look at them and their message is instant, unlike text which requires some time and effort on our part" (2004). It could be argued that not only do we expect to be visually stimulated and engaged but the blogger will intentionally include images because of this very expectation.

Badger maintains that the image is easier to translate than text, however there is another dimension of text online and that is the communal and interactive component of text. This is referred to by Ong who maintains that secondary orality, the written electronic text, "has generated a strong group sense"³¹³ ([1982] 2002: 134). Ong not only discusses the communal aspect associated with technology but he also refers to the intertextuality which is a non-fixed form of writing and is unlike the printed text on paper. The difference between the electronic and printed text is at the forefront of this discussion, as the evolution of orality illustrates the correlation between writing

³¹² Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

³¹³ Primary orality is defined as a culture without writing or print (Ong [1982] 2002: 11).

and consciousness. Ong maintains that “Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising” ([1982] 2002: 175). Significantly, it is the development of orality within culture and the raising of consciousness and therefore self awareness and reflexivity (Taylor 1989) that is epitomised within the online diary genre (blogs) and it is this that will be further explicated within the section on self reflection. The communal dimension of blogs can also be defined as participatory and this is discussed further in the next section (Jenkins 2006; Rettberg 2008).

2.3) Participatory Culture

Participatory culture “uses many-to-many communication” which differs from mass media communication, where traditionally it was one to many (Rettberg 2008: 31). Blogging can be categorised as participatory. This is exemplified in the *AB* blog post from 24 November 2008 where Justin asks his readers “Let me know if you have any favourites”. The interactivity in blogs is also present in the comments feature and this is significantly used in Justin’s two blogs, where collectively there were two hundred and sixty five comments left during the research period. The communal and interactive aspect is not necessarily present in all blogs but it does appear to be a feature on Justin’s blogs.

Related to the interactive and communal aspect of Justin’s blogs is the development of an online Buddhist community and this development has been suggested by Ostrowski who maintains that online there is the development of ‘cybersanghas’, Buddhist communities (2006: 93). I anticipate that these blogs are becoming part of this wider information community and are not isolated within the wider blogosphere³¹⁴. As I have discussed in chapter two, further investigation is required in order to map out the components related to the use of blogs and the Buddhist community online so that there is a greater understanding of the breadth and depth of

³¹⁴ Joonseong Lee (2009) and Pauline Cheong et al (2008) discuss community formation through blogging.

Buddhism on the internet and in doing so this would also address the research areas presented by Cowan and Hadden (2000: 26-28).

In addition to the comments feature there are a number of other standard features of a blog, including the right hand frame where there are links to other blogs, websites, awards, images and blog applets³¹⁵. On both blogs there a number of grouped links, some of which link to other blogs but some relate to resources which are likely to be used as a reference point for Justin's academic studies, for example, the Pali dictionary and a number of links to resources on Tibetan Buddhism. Similar to *The Buddhist Blog* (case study one), the *AB* blog has a Blogisattva award positioned on the right hand frame. The awards are for the 'Best Philosophical Blog' (2006), 'Political or Opinion Post'³¹⁶ (2008) and 'Philosophy and Psychology' blog (2008). Interestingly, these awards are not shown on the *ABE* blog even although one of the awards relates to a post from this blog. Speculatively, this is due to the main blog receiving more attention and maintenance whereas little investment has been made in relation to design modifications or marketing of the *ABE* blog.

According to Justin, both blogs have been designed to consider the preferences of the audience as Justin maintains that "My aesthetic sense is probably best characterized as utilitarian: pretty is good, but useful is better. The design should facilitate reading and thinking for the readers, that's all"³¹⁷. In addition, sixty six (69%) posts contain a hyperlink, which enables the reader to interact as well as enabling a non-linear communication process via the post. What I mean by this is that the reader is not confined to only this blog and through the process of clicking on hyperlinks, the reader can move between different websites.

³¹⁵ Blog applets or applications can include trackback features to determine who is reading the blog, cluster maps to show where visitors live around the world and google adverts.

³¹⁶ The award was for the post on 20 December 2007, titled 'Politics: towards a Buddhist immigration policy', <http://justininengland.blogspot.com/2007/12/politics-toward-buddhist-imigration.html>, accessed 26 July 2010.

³¹⁷ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

The maintenance of two blogs indicates Justin's commitment to blogging and he states that he spends on average "about an hour a day. A post often takes 2+ hours, but usually I'm only posting 2 or 3 times a week. My other blogs get much less attention"³¹⁸. Justin's commitment to blogging is in excess of the majority of bloggers as 59% "spend just one or two hours per week tending their blog" (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5). However, Lenhart and Fox also state that bloggers who have a number of blogs will spend on average more hours per week maintaining them (2006: 23). Based on these statistics it can be said that Justin is spending an average number of hours maintaining his blogs. I now turn to the discussion of self reflection to further illustrate how Justin uses his blog to depict aspects of the self.

3) Self Reflection

I have already alluded to the possibility of writing as an enabler for self reflection (Eakin 1999; Lee 2009) and so within this section I will examine Justin's blogs and determine whether he uses them for this. As discussed within the methodology chapter, self reflection can be identified when the blogger uses the blog as a means of questioning the existence of the self; or where he/she reflects on his/her life; or where the blog is used as a medium to aid self discovery. In addition, the definition of self reflection can include a religious context and is discussed in relation to religious belief and religious seeking (Roof 1999) rather than religious identity which I discuss within the category of self presentation.

In order to determine whether Justin uses his blog for self reflection, the analysis will focus on four areas, namely the gratitude journal, why Justin blogs, Justin's childhood and his reflections on his illness. These areas have been selected in order to align with similar areas in the other two case studies and so that a comparison can be drawn within the concluding chapter.

³¹⁸ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

3.1) Gratitude journal

On two occasions Justin uses the *AB* blog as a gratitude journal. There are other posts out with the research period such as 17 August 2008 and 25 November 2009 which also includes an entry titled 'gratitude journal'. Within the gratitude posts he describes what he is thankful for and in the post of 26 October 2008 he mentions his family, prosperity, travel, spirituality, service and love. The lengthy ten paragraph post sets out six points of gratitude and he states "**In vision-boarding and gratitude-building, it is essential to touch on one's core values.** It may be difficult to discern just what those are, and they may even change somewhat as one matures, but these are the bright lights that will guide us through our dark nights and keep us humble in the limelight"³¹⁹.

In a similar post on 28 November 2008, containing the same title and which includes a photograph of coloured paperclips arranged in what can only be described as a squiggle, certain sentences within the content of the post are again emphasised in bold text including the second sentence "Sigh... **Thanksgiving has come and gone and I am again reminded of the sheer beauty and joy living in every moment of our lives**". In this post, Justin refers to his thanksgiving celebrations with his girlfriend and family and focuses on five points of gratitude, namely family, non-commercialism, safety and security, moving on, and Obama's election. Justin's reflection on his life is further emphasised in the category 'moving on', where he states "I'm not great at it, but I'm pretty sure I'm 'moving on' from recent personal difficulties. I want to hold on to the good, to the potential for a good ending . . . But that also means holding on to the not good things. **Letting go** of both brings room for new wonders and adventures, new presence in the beauties of *this* moment. And that's something to smile about".

This post provides an example of a monologue and Justin's musings on different areas of his life which he identifies as important. Nonetheless, it is not possible to determine what level of self awareness Justin has. Moreover, as blogs can be defined as participatory, it is surprising that there are no comments left against these posts.

³¹⁹ Bold text is found in the original post.

On the other hand, this could be due to topic of the post which identifies the post as a gratitude journal and in doing so it deters readers from commenting on what is traditionally a personal undertaking.

Both examples highlight the use of text as a medium for communication which provides cues to the reader, such as the tone of the message (Herring 1996: 227) and level of “mediated interaction” (Lyon 2002: 30). The cues may include capitalisation (to imitate shouting and emotions of anger or frustration), emoticons (to depict various emotions) or through bold or coloured text to emphasise key points (Herring 1996: 57, 227). Therefore, the use of bold in Justin’s text emphasises what he deems important and he highlights this to the reader.

3.2) Why Justin blogs

Bloggers may use a blog for different purposes, although Lenhart and Fox state that 76% of bloggers publish to a blog to “document their personal experiences and share them with others” (2006: 20). This appears to be the case for Justin, as he states that he uses blogs as a medium to aid self reflection, as an information sharing platform, a memoir, as well as presenting himself to the world.

3.2.1) Reflection and confession

The first area to be explored relates to reflection and confession. It is in the post of 19 August 2007, titled ‘Why I blog’, that Justin states that he “began blogging at the suggestion of a friend” and it could be said that this was a natural progression as he “kept a paper journal” since he was in high school. In Justin’s email to me he states:

Blogging, like any writing practice, helps facilitate deep thought and self reflection. It is hopefully a pathway into seeing more clearly both the 'self' that processes the world around me and the world around me itself. The two are really quite interconnected after all. So I come to see more clearly how the world is shaping me, from consumerism to relationships to natural beauty and Buddhist ideas. And in return I see

how my perspective colors the world around me, as a counterculture, lefty, nature-loving Buddhist academic.

Justin identifies a blog as a medium for self reflection or as a tool for confession and reflection which is also a theory presented by Rettberg (2008: 1). Furthermore, Eakin maintains that the writing of autobiography can be defined as a cultural narrative about the “I” (Eakin 1999: 4) and so the self is positioned within a specific context.

3.2.2) Memoir

The second research area to be examined is blogging classified as a memoir. It is in the aforementioned post that Justin describes another motivation for blogging and that is as an aid to remember as “So many of those old blog posts hold little nuggets of the beautiful, amazing life I am blessed to be walking through”. Giddens maintains that “language and memory are intrinsically connected” and so the act of blogging provides a medium in which to capture memories (Giddens 1991: 23)³²⁰. The use of writing supersedes the constructed memory as writing is permanent and accessible and so the blog becomes a memoir for others to read (Eakin 1999: 106-107). Unlike other social network sites such as Facebook³²¹, blogs provide an archive of posts and in some cases these can be searchable or are simply kept as a chronological archive for both the blogger and reader to access. This in itself raises a number of issues relating to permanency and the inability to detract what has been publicly declared and published in cyberspace (Rettberg 2008: 78). Consideration to the long term implications of what appears to be an intimate narrative can be potentially damaging for the blogger or those who he/she mentions in the blog. This can also manifest as voyeuristic and exhibitionist tendencies.

³²⁰ The discussion of self-hood in relation to autobiography raises some significant questions in relation to self-awareness and permanence of a self. A comprehensive analysis of these factors can be found in Janet Gyatso’s analysis of the Tibetan autobiography of Jigme Lingpa (1730-1798) in *Apparitions of the Self: The secret autobiographies of a Tibetan visionary* (1998).

³²¹ Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/>, accessed 15 January 2010.

3.2.3) Voyeurism and Exhibitionism

A third possible reason for blogging is voyeurism and exhibitionism. In the above analysis I have identified two reasons for blogging, first, as a personal journal and second as a memoir, both of which could be said to be a creative act of story-telling or indeed on occasion, involving a two way discussion through the use of the comments feature. In relation to the first aspect, the diary-style blog exemplifies a medium in which self reflection is expected. The expectation is held by the readers of the blog and this is highlighted by de Laat who maintains that “On the one hand, diaries involve personal project centred on the self: the blog is a means of self-clarification and self-validation. By sustained writing about events, thoughts, and emotions of one’s life, one is able to discover and develop who one ‘is’”. De Laat also recognises that the public diary (blog) is published to an audience and so “there is a need to get to know others, to develop a community of sympathizers. Otherwise there would be no point in publishing one’s diary in the open” (2008: 60). Therefore, the blog has a dual purpose, as a tool for self-reflection for the blogger but also as a voyeuristic mechanism whereby readers are entertained by someone else’s life. This co-dependent relationship is highlighted by Lenhart and Fox who state that 39% of internet users (57 million Americans) read blogs, implying that bloggers write with the expectation that there is an audience to read them (2006: 33).

De Laat maintains that blogs results in voyeurism and exhibitionism as “we are able to understand the phenomenon of online diaristic blogging as a cultural life form. These web diarists are exhibitionists exposing intimate details of their lives on purpose; correspondingly, their readers are engaged in voyeurism of a kind” (2008: 63). The remit of this thesis does not extend to the analysis of exhibitionism and voyeurism per se as it would require a greater number of blogs to draw conclusions in relation to de Laat’s proposition. Nonetheless, the implication of voyeurism and exhibitionism is present but I would argue that there is a spectrum in which this exists and so further research is required in order to determine the breadth and depth of voyeurism and exhibitionism in relation to the blog culture.

3.2.4) Sharing Information and Having a Conversation

Lastly, Justin also maintains that he keeps a blog in order to share information as he states that “teaching and writing to be gifts I can use to help humankind, and so here I am”. . . “Over the years it has morphed into being a far more socially aware blog. By that I mean I write with far more awareness of who is (potentially) reading. I also try to be responsive to current events and the writings of other bloggers”³²². Although Justin claims to be aware of who he is writing for, he does experience some issues in relation to what he writes and this will be discussed in more detail at a later juncture.

In addition, he maintains “At its best, the blog is like a good conversation with friends over coffee or beer. Ideas are presented, discussed, examined, sometimes undermined. We grow in understanding ourselves, over the great limitations of our perspectives or the unhelpful knee-jerk responses we have to things. At its worst it's empty narcissistic rambling in hope for affirmation”³²³. It could be argued that on occasion the blog is not “like a good conversation” but is in fact a monologue and stream of consciousness, presented to the world. Justin uses the word “narcissistic” and for Giddens this is defined as a “constant search for self-identity, but this is a search which remains frustrated” (1991: 170) and there is a lack of “full engagement with others, [as] the narcissist depends on continual infusion of admiration and approval to bolster an uncertain sense of self-worth” (1991: 172). Giddens insight into the characteristics of the narcissistic personality could be said to be true of many bloggers but by Justin’s own admission, blogging may provide an affirmation and so this brief glimpse of why Justin blogs provides an insight into the psychological underpinning of self reflection and the use of new media (blogs).

3.3) Justin’s Childhood

In the previous section the subject of memory and self reflection is introduced and so there are a number of examples of posts where Justin focuses on previous

³²² Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

³²³ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

experiences. For example, in the lengthy post of 14 July 2007, titled 'Philosophy: Foundations of Happiness' that Justin reflects on his upbringing and the experiences in his life which changed and developed him as a person, stating "In my own experience I can look to my parents for great foundations for lovingly getting through tough times, for making personal sacrifices for the sake of a partner, family, and friends, and so on". He also divulges the ethnic backgrounds of his parents, as well as other struggles and experiences he has had in his life. He concludes by reflecting on what he believes to be the true meaning of happiness and how he wants to pass this onto his children, maintaining "Few, if any, of us are blessed with the full gamut of solid foundations from our upbringing. These are things we need to work on as adults, often with the hope of passing on firmer foundations to our own children. And that, perhaps, is the true source of happiness: searching to know ourselves, loving and supporting those who join us in that journey, and realizing that you've been acting for the sake of others all along".

This example provides a cursory glance at Justin's use of blogging as a means of reflecting on not only his own upbringing, his parents' ethnicity but also considering his children's upbringing. Blogging can also be used to discuss other areas of everyday life, such as living with illnesses.

3.4) Illness

The final theme in this category is illness. Justin suffers from mental illness and this is on occasion discussed within his blog such as the post of 27 October 2008, titled 'Supplements, or the redemptive quality of love (in a pill)'. Here, he discusses his battle with depression and anxiety stating that "Almost five years ago I went off prescription antidepressants for good, after nearly seven years of near-constant reliance on them". The tone and language used within this post emphasise the distress and aspiration to get better. Justin ends the post by stating that he is trying to help himself by taking vitamins and practicing meditation. As I have discussed in case study one, the use of meditation as a therapy has become increasingly popular within the West.

Another illness, fatigue syndrome, is discussed in the *ABE* blog in the post of 31 Jan 2008, titled 'Back on and in search of Buddhist Ethics'. The post does not include a picture but it is a lengthy post detailing the symptoms related to fatigue syndrome. Justin believes that he has had this illness and presents his symptoms in bold text to indicate the symptoms he has suffered from³²⁴. It could be argued that Justin is depicting a neurotic personality but I am reluctant to draw a comparison between blogging practice and psychological illness as this would require an in-depth analysis and this is out with the field of media, religion and culture. With that said, Guadagno et al (2008) maintain that there is a relationship between blogging, the presentation and reflection on the self and certain personality traits³²⁵.

3.5) Summary - Self Reflection

Four areas have been discussed in relation to the category of self reflection including blogs as a gratitude journal, why Justin blogs, reflections on his childhood and reflections on his illness. Collectively there are 17 posts (18%) categorised as self reflection. It is from this discussion that a number of related aspects have been raised including, exhibitionism, voyeurism and audience participation. Moreover, it is evident that the openly reflective posts indicate that there is an ongoing element of trust between Justin and his readers and this characteristic is highlighted by de Laat who states that "Blogging is not a one-time display of trust but a continuing one" (2008: 61). Unlike the paper diary or journal which is private, the online diary or journal is public and arguably it is this contrast that causes controversy in defining whether blogs are within the public or private sphere (Hookway 2008). I have chosen to define blogs as a private medium for self reflection which is publicly presented and in doing so draws from de Laats' conclusion that "Voyeurism combined with exhibitionism are the defining characteristics of our current media experiences" (2008: 68). I now turn to the category of self presentation in order to provide further evidence for answering the second research question.

³²⁴ Susan Herring maintains that bold text is used as a communication cue (1996: 57).

³²⁵ Rosanna Guadagno et al (2008) provide an insight into the possible relationship between bloggers and personality characteristics.

4) Self Presentation

This category is defined as the presentation of the self, explicitly and implicitly. Aspects of the self within this category can include identity, employment and areas of the bloggers life that are not reflective but could be said to define who the blogger is and what they do in everyday life. This is denoted by the use of images, graphics, aesthetics and the content of the post. The discussion of aesthetics (Morgan 2009: 141), design and the profile page has been discussed earlier in this chapter and so the following section provides examples of Justin's presentation of himself as a student, his nationality and his Buddhist identity.

The creation and presentation of identity in conjunction with religiosity is discussed by Roof (1999) and Hoover (2006) and it can be said that "identity construction . . . is an articulation between the context of individual experience and broader contexts of social and cultural life" (Hoover 2006: 39). Ultimately this highlights the relationship between everyday life and how experiences are interpreted by the individual and others (Certeau 1984).

The type of writing within a blog may be autobiographical or informational and relate to everyday experience of the world of the blogger. In the *AB* blog there are fifteen posts (28%) discussing recent events or news, twenty eight posts (52%) discussing daily activities and thirty two posts (59%) containing one or more hyperlinks to another website or blog. However, these statistics do not quantify whether the post is defined as self presentation or not, and so, there are collectively a total of 17 posts (18%) that can be definitively classified as self presentation. In relation to the *ABE* blog there are thirty two posts (33%) discussing recent events or news, twenty five posts (60%) discussing daily activities and thirty four posts (81%) containing one or more hyperlinks to another website or blog and so there are a total of nine posts (21%) that can be definitively classified as self presentation. To further illustrate how Justin presents who he is the following discussion focuses on Justin as a student, his nationality and his Buddhist identity.

4.1) Justin as a Student

The *ABE* blog focuses on Justin as a PhD student of Buddhist ethics in London, although this blog appears to be disbanded in March 2008 and after this date the posts relating to student life are found in the *AB* blog. The following examination will relate to the *ABE* blog during the second research period, as this is the blog that was intentionally created to record Justin's life as a student in London.

In many of the posts such as that of 3 October 2007, titled 'B-Ethics – meeting the great man', Justin describes his meeting with his supervisor Damien Keown³²⁶. Justin provides notes on the positive first meeting and in the post of 9 October 2007, titled 'Buddhist Ethics: One week on' he provides a summary of his meeting and explains "that to successfully finish a doctorate one must write, write, write" although he does indicate that he writes more on the blog than the thesis. Typically, Justin presents himself as a knowledgeable person on his chosen academic subject of Buddhism. This is noticeable in the post of 13 October 2007 in which he presents an argument in relation to the subject of nirvana. In this post and in others he provides a lengthy argument and a literature review on various Buddhist subjects including the aforementioned nirvana, karma (post of 30 October 2007), rebirth (post of 19 December 2007) and ethics (post of 3 January 2008).

Significantly it is the creation of a specific blog devoted to capturing his life as a student in London which emphasises his intention of presenting this aspect of the self to his readers and he comments on this in a post on 27 September 2007 (see figure 22). Interestingly, this blog is disbanded in March 2008 and thereafter discussions about being a student are found on the *AB* blog (see figure 23). There is no explanation for this, speculatively this could be to reduce the time and maintain only one blog instead of two. Alternatively it could be that this aspect of Justin's self-presentation diminishes with time and so captures the fragmented self at that moment of Justin's life (Giddens 1991: 100).

³²⁶ Damien Keown is a Professor of Buddhist ethics at Goldsmiths University of London.



Figure 22 - American Buddhist blog (29 Sept 2007)

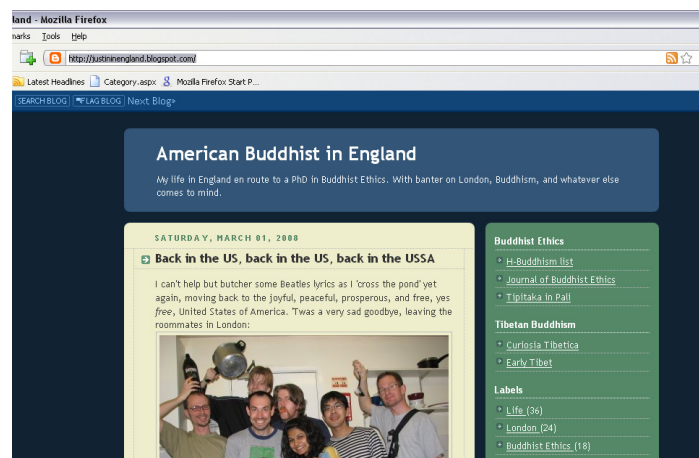


Figure 23 - American Buddhist in England blog (1 Mar 2008)

4.2) Identity and Nationality

In chapter two I discuss the concept of identity by referring to Turkle’s theory of “multiple identities” (1995: 17) and I conclude that identity is only one aspect of the self, therefore the term identity can include the characteristics that make a person identifiable including nationality, gender, beliefs, values and other characteristics that define the person. For Justin, this is presented in his different blogs. Arguably, Justin demarcates his thoughts into different online forums and in doing so focuses solely on a specific topic per blog. When asked why he does this he states “Too many interests! I’ve even been pushed to start a strictly photography blog. I like the idea of having each blog maintain a consistent flow of thought; perhaps because that is the kind of blog that I prefer to read. I’ve obviously played around with this a bit

over the years but never quite managed to figure it out. I imagine that I might weed out some blogs over the next year or so. But then again, I might add some too!”³²⁷

Justin is not unique in maintaining a number of blogs which cover different topics as Lenhart and Fox assert that “Nearly two-thirds of bloggers (64%) say they blog on a lot of different topics” (2006: 21) and “Of bloggers who report having more than one blog, more than half (61%) say they have three or more blogs” (2006: 23).

In relation to the presentation of self and Justin’s presentation of identity, there are a number of posts in which he discusses his nationality including being of Irish decent (14 July 2007) and an American (11 October 2007). The post from 11 October 2007 is titled ‘the glorious inequalities of life’, where he comments on a recent news story in the LA Times and states in bold text **“Living in England now I sometimes feel very sad to be an American, other times I am defensive of what I still think is a pretty great nation”**³²⁸. The post is five paragraphs long and Justin uses coloured text to demarcate between text extracted from the newspaper article and Justin’s views.

It is the post from later the same month on 26 October 2007, titled ‘Un-American, not Deep, and Un-Buddhist’ that Justin discusses his identity and commences the post by emphasising in bold text **“Here in the UK I really have no desire to meet, talk with, stand near, or otherwise relate to other Americans”**. Justin explains that the reason he feels this way while living in London is that during various conversations with friends he “learned that my lack of ketchup consumption and use of the word ‘cool’ have rendered me ‘un-American’”. The post continues to detail why he may also be categorised as un-Buddhist and shallow. The tone of the post is self-mocking but the fact that Justin feels the need to draw attention to his nationality emphasises the need to present his identity and this is also illustrated in the discussion of his Buddhist identity.

³²⁷ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

³²⁸ The bold text is in the original post.

4.3) Buddhist identity

As noted earlier in this chapter, there is a distinct lack of Buddhist imagery on Justin's blog but there is prominent use of text and so many of the posts have lengthy discussions about Buddhism and his Buddhist identity. On the one hand this is of little surprise as many of the posts discuss academic problems or queries relating to Justin's PhD studies in Buddhist ethics. On the other hand, Justin reflects on occasion about being a Buddhist but he does not affiliate with any particular school and states, "If pressed, I typically say I'm Theravadin, but I've practiced so many other kinds and hold no formal affiliation"³²⁹.

Although Justin maintains that he does not affiliate with a particular strand of Buddhism he does comment on his Buddhist practice at the Dharma study group he attends (20 November 2008), as well as details of the talk he gave to a group of local Buddhists (14 November 2008). I argue that unlike the findings presented in Cheong et al.'s (2008) and Lee's (2009) examination of bloggers, Justin does not blog as a means of religious practice and instead it is very much about presenting an aspect of the self, that is the Buddhist identity and perhaps also as an indication of religious seeking (Roof 1999).

In the post of 14 July 2007 he states that "I veered into the exciting and boundless (yet also practically rootless) fields of free-thought. With free-thought[t] I found myself only opposed to all things religious, because I saw even the good of religion to be tainted by its associated dogma, exclusivism, and ultimately intolerance". It could be argued that Justin has an eclectic and anti-authoritarian approach to religion. Although he defines himself as a Buddhist he has no strict affiliation and although he does participate in Buddhist religious practice offline, it could be said that he presents a conflicted understanding of religiosity and an acceptance of religion. It is this eclectic and selective approach to religion that Roof argues is a result of modernity and the generation of baby boomers and Generation X culture (1999: 124). The acceptance of non-affiliation or "spirituality in flux" epitomises the

³²⁹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

American culture and that of the identity presented within the American Buddhist blog (1999: 126).

4.4) Summary - Self Presentation

Three areas have been discussed in relation to self presentation including Justin as a student, Justin's identity and nationality, and lastly his Buddhist identity. There are a number of other posts which capture different features of the category of self presentation but it is by focusing on these three areas that a greater understanding of who Justin is and how he presents himself is highlighted. Significantly, it also provides further insight into the cultural context of blogging as a medium for self presentation. In the final category of the self (experiential self) I refer to the Abhidhamma Buddhist framework for the analysis of experience and senses.

5) *The Experiential Self*

The final category of experiential self explores the topic of emotions, senses and experiences and can be identified when the blogger states explicitly any words or phrases related to the senses and experience; or where he provides a depiction of an experience via a sound or visual aid such as a photograph, song, or literature.

Lenhart and Fox maintain that "Bloggers are inspired, for the most part, by things that happen to them, or something they read or observe. More than three-quarters of bloggers (78%) say that a personal experience has inspired them to post and only 12% have said that they have never posted about a personal experience" (2006: 22). In the following discourse I specifically focus on the emotions of happiness and sadness in relation to Justin's romantic interests³³⁰, as well as how Justin uses visual aids to express or illustrate an experience.

³³⁰ I am differentiating romantic love from other categories of love such as religious devotion.

The methodological approach for this examination is taken from the field of visual culture studies, cognitive neuroscience³³¹ and Buddhist studies, with emphasis on the latter. Early Buddhism and Theravada Abhidhamma Buddhism provides a reductionist interpretation (Ganeri 2007: 185) whereby the components of the self (*khandhas*), the senses, sense spheres and awarenesses are discussed (*dhatu and ayatanas*) in relation to objects, cognition and the resulting experience (Ronkin 2005).

It is not my intention to provide a Buddhist interpretation of romantic love whereby clinging (*upadana*) and craving/desire (*tanha*) results in suffering (*dukkha*)³³². Nor will I define experience in relation to *dhammas* and the process theory (outlined in chapter five), although this will be acknowledged in the concluding chapter. Therefore, the following discussion will identify whether the blog provides a platform for depicting human existence as an experiential process based on the metaphysical framework of the early Buddhists and Abhidhamma (Hamilton 1999: 126).

5.1) Emotions - fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt

There are seven emotions identified by Gay, which are fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt (2003:66), whereas Damasio identifies six emotions, that is, happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise or disgust (2004: 50). I will examine two of the seven emotions, namely happiness and sadness (Gay 2003: 66). Primarily, these emotions will be discussed within the context of Justin's romantic encounters but before doing so, I outline the relationship between emotion and cognition.

³³¹ Cognitive neuroscience examines the relationship between vision, memory and language (Damasio 2004: 13).

³³² See Padmasiri de Silva for an analysis of love, sexuality and the psychology of craving (1991: 58-63).

5.1.1) Emotion and Cognition

The examination of emotion cannot be separated from consciousness (Damasio 2004: 16), as the examination of emotions as a cognitive feeling is derived from either a physical or mental experience and so *samkhara-khandha* is present³³³. Within chapter five, *samkhara-khandha* is rendered as the *khandha* relating to volition and emotion and *vedana-khandha* is defined as ‘feeling’. For the purpose of this discussion, I will avoid discussing the origins of consciousness or the finer intricacies of biological mechanics of emotions and instead, I propose a paralleled approach drawing from Buddhist studies and neuroscience in an attempt explain emotion in relation to experience.

In chapter five, the discussion of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’ and ‘sensation’ is positioned within the wider discourse of the Theravada Abhidhamma framework of *khandha-dhatu-ayatana*. The discussion includes an examination of the relationship between contact (*phassa*) with an object, cognition and the resulting experience (de Silva 1991: 22). This is similar to the argument presented by Damasio, who maintains that “human emotion and feeling pivot on consciousness”³³⁴ (2004: 37). Furthermore, Pattison asserts that “It is not the eye that sees, though sight would be impossible without it. It is the eye-brain working together in an integrated system that creates visual perceptions. These complex perceptual representations constitute our knowledge and experience of reality” (2007: 48). Therefore the classification of six sense spheres (*atayanas*), six corresponding objects and adding these to the six cognitive awarenesses (collectively the eighteen *dhatas*), as well as the components of the self (five *khandhas*) provide an analysis of sentient experience (Ronkin 2005: 42). To elucidate further, I refer to the discussion of happiness and sadness.

³³³ The other four *khandhas* are not completely disassociated from this process.

³³⁴ Antonio Damasio’s definition of ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ differ to that presented in chapter five, as he states that feeling is a personal emotion, whereas emotion is a public display of feeling (2004: 42). I provide a more detailed rendering of ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ in relation to the Buddhist framework.

5.1.2) Happiness and Sadness

There are a number of posts providing an insight into Justin's experiential self in relation to love. Collectively there are 25% of posts defined as expressing 'happiness' and 8% defined as expressing 'sadness', although, notably not all of these directly relate to the emotion of love³³⁵. There are three identifiable relationships discussed within the *AB* blog and these relate to Ana, Kelly and Julie.

Justin openly divulges his feelings and relationship status and this overt public declaration eventually results in his recognition that discretion would be a better option which he states in the post of 26 October 2008: "*love*. A new sense of discretion prevents me from saying much about the current romance in my life, but we can say that **all is well here - simple, slow-moving, and normal**. I'm sure I will always be a romantic at heart, a believer in true love and life-long bonds, but for now lets just say I am being pragmatic, in-the-moment, happy, and grateful"³³⁶.

Prior to this admission, Justin discusses his relationship with Ana in the post of 6 July 2007, titled 'Life: is good' and it is only two days later on 8 July 2007, 'Life: Celebration of Love', he provides a lengthy post discussing his breakup with Ana and asserting that "I neither doubt the depth of my love for Ana nor feel the slightest sense that this is a rebound". The July 2007 posts are not unique and perhaps his most significant expression of romantic love relates to his relationship with Kelly which he discusses in a number of posts.

For example, it is in the post of 25 August 2007, 'Life: Adventures of a Buddhist in love and on the road', in which he describes his initial meeting and feelings for Kelly and he divulges various details about who Kelly is and how he met her. In the post on 10 October 2007, 'Who do ya love?' Justin declares his love for Kelly and it is by 1 November 2007 that he announces Kelly is to be his fiancé. In early 2008 the mood

³³⁵ The analysis of posts relating to happiness and sadness is based on the use of language. However there is an element of subjectivity in categorising them. In order to quantifiably define posts, this would require an in-depth linguistic analysis and this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

³³⁶ Spelling mistake and formatting are in the original post.

and tone of the posts change and in the post of 28 January 2008, Justin discusses the quarrels between himself and Kelly, postulating that these are due to stress and the wedding plans. Kelly publicly comments on the post, stating that the quarrels are due to the distance between both of them, as Justin is in London and she is in America. However, the wedding never materialises and by 31 December 2008 in a post titled ‘Reflections on 08’, Justin reflects on the failed relationship with Kelly stating “**The lesson: keep eyes wide open, even in love, to not be seduced by a future that might never come.** And take it slow. Life is not a race”³³⁷. In the concluding statement he cautiously refers to his new girlfriend Julie but he avoids publicly releasing any detailed information about her and he uses bold text as a means of communicating and emphasising this point (Herring 1996: 227).

The aforementioned posts include the disclosure of personal information which raises the issue of trust and privacy, as well as the theme of exhibitionism. As I have already discussed, the subject of trust, privacy and exhibitionism is discussed in detail by de Laat who maintains that “many bloggers are aware of the risks of being fully ‘open’ cyberspace. Relatives or friends may start to quarrel about intimacies revealed. . . Why is it, then, that online diarists dare entrust the intimacies of their daily lives to the world out there?” (2008: 61). He concludes that one reason for revealing such personal information is what he describes as “mediated exhibitionism” and it is conversely that readers display “mediated voyeurism” (2008: 62). Arguably, the *AB* blog illustrates both exhibitionism and voyeurism.

It can be concluded that Justin reflects on his experiences and while he does not completely avoid discussing the subject of love within his blog, he does censor the details and thus reduces his mediated exhibitionism. In doing so, he also reduces the voyeuristic ability of his readers (de Laat 2008).

Romantic love, happiness and sadness are not the only emotions expressed within Justin’s blogs but this example prominently highlights the depiction of the emotional aspect of the experiential self and therefore, illustrates the components of *anatta* including *vedana-khandha* and *samkhara-khandha* as he not only expresses a

³³⁷ Bold text is in the original post.

physical feeling but this in turn incurs a mental feeling and emotion. The relationship between objects and contact (*phassa*) are demonstrated in the use of photos as well as the act of writing about the experience, and reflecting on the memory and thus the associated experience.

I now turn to another aspect of the experiential self which focuses specifically on the *ayatanas* (sense spheres) namely the eye and ear and the associated awarenesses (*dhatas*³³⁸) of hearing and sight which enable us to engage with “our conscious experience in the world, [where] we are consistently feeling and reacting to stimuli” (Heim 2008: 20).

5.2) Experiences – Aural and Visual

As there is a notable absence of three of the five senses online, that is smell, taste and touch, the focus of the discussion is on the aural and visual component of blogs and based on the PEW 2006 survey of bloggers, 80% post text, 72% post images and only 30% post audio files to their blog (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 29-30). In line with these statistics, the audio aspect of Justin’s blogs is notably absent and on the rare occasion that there is sound embedded files, these relate to YouTube clips such as those included in the posts 6 Oct 2008, titled ‘A Bizarre Ceremony in Thailand’³³⁹. Another example of using sound is in the post of 27 October 2008, where a mood is contextualised in relation to the video clip of Joe Cocker’s video on YouTube for the song ‘With a Little Help from My Friends’. Justin states in relation to his illness that “I should note that many of my wonderful friends/family helped tremendously in this time (cue Joe Cocker)”. Therefore, by integrating audio into the blog, Justin can further express himself and use the audio aspect to set a mood, tone or emotional component within the post. In doing so, the aural helps to express the experience in which Justin is writing about.

³³⁸ The *dhatas* are the eighteen elements of cognition and are formed by replacing the *ayatana* and adding the six sense spheres to the corresponding six objects and awarenesses, see chapter five for further explanation.

³³⁹ The YouTube clip, which is no longer available, provides an insight into a Buddhist ritual in Thailand relating to what some people would deem as unorthodox traditional Buddhist practice.

Arguably, the predominant sense found online is the sense of sight and so the visual component is heavily relied upon in order to depict a message or experience to the reader. Therefore, the object of a photograph coming into contact with the sense organ of the eye and the recognition and cognising of this object results in the *khandhas* of feeling (*vedana*) and possibly an emotion (*samskara*) (de Silva 1991: 39)³⁴⁰. The experiential aspect of this process is likely to be discussed within the narrative of the blog or perhaps presented as the object itself (photograph).

It is within Justin's email correspondence that he states and reflects on an image to refer to his girlfriend's 'beauty'. This could also be associated with the concept of an agreeable feeling (*sukha vedana*) and possibly an emotion (*samkhara-khandha*) via the cognitive process (memory) due to facial recognition. He states that "Sometimes I have pictures handy to go with what I'm writing. Sometimes not. I appreciate the beauty and story that images can provide, so whenever I can, I put them in". The intentional correlation of presenting his experience in an image to his audience emphasises the importance of the visual component for Justin. To illustrate this, it is in the post of 12 October 2007 that there is a short narrative, poem and photographs of his girlfriend Kelly. Within the text Justin expresses "Joy! What more can I say? . . . I just have to see this face and recall how deeply, happily, enthusiastically in LOVE I am". The expression of the emotion of happiness (joy and love) and especially the use of capitalisation to express his love undoubtedly provides a clear message to his readers (Herring 2004: 57). The narrative expresses agreeable feelings (*sukha vedana*) and the emotion of happiness (*samkhara-khandha* is present) in relation to seeing his girlfriend and also seeing the image of his girlfriend in the photograph. Pattison argues that a photograph captures time, space and the material object and so the "biographical details contribute to the relationship that photographs have with their producers, owners and viewers" (2007: 194)³⁴¹.

³⁴⁰ This is not to say that other *khandhas* are not present.

³⁴¹ Pattison also discusses the social component of photographs in relation to giving and receiving as well as the materiality of the photograph and its uses, such as those displayed or worn (2007: 194-195).

In sum, this example illustrates the experiential components including the tangible physical offline experience captured in the material object of the photograph which is uploaded to the blog. The narrative and photograph also depict Justin's feeling (*vedana-khandha*) and emotion (*samkhara-khandha*) through the cognitive process (*vinnana-khandha*) and contact (*phassa*) with the object³⁴². Moreover the experience is captured and can be reflected on by Justin at a later time, corroborating the argument that blogs can be used as a memoir, as discussed in the category of self reflection. Significantly, the experiences expressed and obtained are unique to Justin and although this discussion has focused on only two of the five *khandhas* it is the unique individual experience that defines one person from the other (Hamilton 2000: 6-7).

5.3) Summary - Experiential Self

The discussion of the experiential self within blogs has focused on the use of language and image in order to depict an experience, as well as referring to the posts as a means for capturing a memory. Understanding emotion and feeling as well as the relationship that the senses have in the cognitive process has provided further insight into how blogs are used to present an experience and therefore, the experiential self to an audience. This has been achieved with reference to theories and frameworks from the field of neuroscience and specifically Buddhist studies, as the "basic principle of Abhidhamma analysis is to search for the roots and underlying causes of experience" (Heim 2008: 21).

The experiential aspect of human existence has been shown in relation to the example of the photograph within the blog post. It is here that the offline experience is captured in the photograph and therefore the *khandha-ayatana-dhatu* triad is present as the sense, sensory awareness and coming into contact with the object results in the *khandhas* related to feeling (*vedana-khandha*) and possibly emotion (*samkhara-khandha*). The field of visual and material culture has also provided a theoretical insight into how the photograph captures the experience and provides a relationship between the producer and viewer (Pattison 2007: 194).

³⁴² Three of the five *khandhas* are noticeably present.

6) Conclusion

The second research question focuses on “how is the self depicted in blogs?” and it is through the course of this discussion that a number of examples from Justin’s two blogs have provided an insight into who he is, why he blogs and what he blogs about.

In addition, a number of themes have emerged including voyeurism, exhibitionism, and writing as a cultural construct and communication tool. Castells states that culture “is virtual because it is constructed primarily through electronically based, virtual processes of communication. It is real (and not imaginary) because it is our fundamental reality, the material basis on which we live our existence, construct our systems of representation, practice our work, link up with other people, retrieve information, form our opinions, act in politics, and nurture our dreams” (2001: 203). Three points can be extracted from Castells argument, first, that the mode of communication, namely the act of blogging is achieved through the development of blogging technology. Secondly, it is through this electronic mode of communication that there is a presentation and depiction of the self and lived experience. Thirdly, there is the communal and social interactive nature of blogging technology, enabling the blogger to engage with people from different geographic and social backgrounds. Therefore, the act of blogging is a significant cultural process which uses current technology.

I argue that the examination of blogging and aspects of the self cannot be separated from the cultural and technological context. Moreover, the examination of this particular blogger and his blogs has provided an understanding of the postmodern self as a fragmented self, as well as the cultural positioning of the self in late-modern society (Giddens 1991). Furthermore, it has highlighted how this particular blogger perceives himself and to some extent how others perceive him (via the comments and through direct observation).

Finally, it is from applying an interdisciplinary approach that a number of continuities between the different disciplines have been exposed, such as those in visual culture studies, Buddhist studies and neuroscience. However, there are a number of limitations and the scope of this thesis is restricted, so I argue that further

examination is needed in relation to understanding audience participation and blogging (Hoover 2006); the manifestation of emotions expressed on and via the internet; as well as seeking religious meaning (specifically Buddhism) via the internet (Roof 1999).

Chapter 8 - *Think Buddha* (case study 3)

Will Buckingham is the author of the blog called *thinkBuddha.org: wayward thoughts on the Buddhist way*, hereafter referred to as *thinkBuddha.org*. He has a number of blogs but *thinkBuddha.org* has been selected for examination as it provides an insight into his everyday life, academic career³⁴³, being a professional writer and also his thoughts on Buddhism.

Think Buddha.org was monitored between 2005 and 2009 and data was collected during the three research periods between 2007 and 2008³⁴⁴ and in a similar format to the other case studies, this chapter is divided into five sections, which are: a general overview, followed by a discussion of aesthetics and the categories of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. It is within the following discourse that a number of related topics are examined including; blogs defined as life writing, the scarcity of images, participatory culture and the introduction of the term 'Buddhish'. It will become apparent that there are significant differences between this blog and the other two blogs. I speculate that *thinkBuddha.org* is dissimilar to the other two blogs due to the purpose of the blog and the personality of this particular blogger.

1) Overview

While undertaking a PhD, Will Buckingham set up *thinkBuddha.org* in July 2005 and first posted on 1 August 2005. The blog is predominantly monochrome except for images within the specific posts and it has four main navigation tabs at the top of the screen which are labelled; 'Home', 'About', 'Archives' and 'Contact' as circled in figure 24.

³⁴³ Will Buckingham is a lecturer in English and Creative Writing at De Montfort University, Leicester.

³⁴⁴ The research dates are from 1 July 2007 to 31 August 2007, 1 October 2007 to 31 January 2008 and 1 October 2008 to 30 November 2008.



Figure 24 - options for navigation

It is within the ‘About’ tab that Will provides an overview of the blog including the purpose of the blog, why he started the blog and what the blog is not, as illustrated below:

Welcome to *thinkBuddha.org*, a peaceful little quarter of cyberspace for wayward reflections upon things related to literature, science, religion, society and the various traditions of Buddhism. . . .

. . . I started *thinkBuddha.org* some time around the July of 2005 as a means of thinking out loud as I tried to reflect more deeply on questions that cropped up in my practice as a meditator, as a philosopher and as a writer. . .

. . . This site, then, is not an academic site, nor is it a site that aims to advocate Buddhism or preserve some idea of the purity of Buddhist doctrine. Rather it is part of an on-going tussle with the traditions of Buddhism (and with various other things) in the hope that, out of the confusion, some kind of clarity might eventually arise... or at least the confusion itself might be fruitful.³⁴⁵

He explains that the site is not academic or pedagogical in nature. He also highlights this in his email correspondence with me (18 October 2010), where he states “I certainly don’t see *thinkBuddha.org* as having any kind of pedagogical function. This is important, I think: some Buddhist blogs have the distinct feel of being ways of passing down higher wisdom. I don’t think that this is what I’m trying to do.”³⁴⁶

While, the blog may not be pedagogical per se, many of the posts do provide an educational function. Nonetheless, the majority of posts are personal in content and

³⁴⁵ *Think Buddha*, <http://www.thinkBuddha.org/about>, accessed 9 October 2010.

³⁴⁶ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

so I have categorised this blog as a diary-style blog rather than informational or educational.

The narrative and content of the blog as well as the comments in his email to me, provides further insight into why he blogs; his blogging style; and how he uses the blog. In addition to understanding the specifics of blogging practice I focus on the visual aspect of the blog and so I draw from the theories of visual culture studies (Walker and Chaplin 1997) and communication studies (Herring 1996) in order to examine aesthetics, design, images and the participatory component of this blog (Jenkins 2009).

2) Aesthetics

The style or template of a blog is normally dictated by the application being used, with that said, there is still an element of choice for the blogger, as they can include slogans, advertising, images and to some extent they can modify the overall design. In the case of *thinkBuddha.org*, this element of choice is limited in some respects as it is created with the software application known as Textpattern version 4.2.0³⁴⁷. This application is not as flexible as the Blogger application and template used by the other two bloggers³⁴⁸. This may be one of the contributing factors for the noticeable lack of images, advertising and the simplicity of the design found on *thinkBuddha.org*. To elucidate further, the following discourse will focus on three areas, namely the design, the functionality in relation to participatory culture and the use of images. In doing so, I determine whether the aesthetics of this blog are intentional or not.

³⁴⁷ The blogger acknowledges this in the post 'A Bit of Behind-the-Scenes Tweaking', 10 September 2009.

³⁴⁸ Blogger, www.blogger.com, accessed 26 February 2011.

2.1) Design

The first point is concerned with the overall design of the blog. This blog could be described as very sparse and colourless compared to some other blogs. The background is white with black text and the blog title is positioned at the top of the page with a black bare tree branch situated beside the title (see figure 24). Arguably, this could impact on attracting an audience, although audience interaction is not an area that is examined here, as it is beyond the scope of the thesis³⁴⁹.

Furthermore, the blog contains a number of typical blog features such as the right hand frame containing a blogroll³⁵⁰ which lists only eight blogs and websites. Other features include an integrated feed from Will's Twitter posts³⁵¹, a search facility, list of recent comments, as well as an RSS feed for readers³⁵². However, what is not typical is the lack of images and colour on this blog and so this inconsistency was highlighted to the blogger and the question asked was whether this was intentional and what the rationale was for the design? He responded by stating "Yes. This is deliberate. I don't like advertising. It is not what people come to the blog for. And there is too little space in the world that is free of advertising. I do want *thinkBuddha.org* to be a space for reflection. Being told that coco-pops make a tasty breakfast for all the family is not something conducive to reflection. Or not, at least, to the kind of reflection that I want to engage in on the site"³⁵³.

The design of this blog alongside Will's comments (noted above) highlight that advertising can be a distraction and this would detract from the purpose of this blog. Will does use images, including photographs, within the post. This is possibly to supplement the text (Aumont 1997: 189) which is also noted by Berger who maintains that "the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually

³⁴⁹ Stewart Hoover provides an insight in *Religion in the Media Age* and examines the relationship between audience and culture but he also highlights the difficulties of researching media audiences (2006: 13, 84).

³⁵⁰ A blogroll is a list of other blogs.

³⁵¹ Will Buckingham on Twitter, @willbuckingham

³⁵² Really Simple Syndication (RSS) enables a reader to collate a number of websites and read updates within one location through the use of an RSS reader.

³⁵³ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

supply it” (2002: 50). Furthermore the scarcity of images out with the post and abundance of text could indicate that *thinkBuddha.org* imitates the printed text rather than the electronic text³⁵⁴ (Ong [1982] 2002). In the next section I focus on the functionality of the blog and how this demonstrates an intentionality to aid participation via the comments function.

2.2) Functionality and Participatory Culture

I have discussed participatory culture in relation to the other case studies and this feature of social media (blogs) is also found in relation to *thinkBuddha.org*. Jenkins defines participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (Jenkins 2009: xi). By referring to this definition, it can be argued that these characteristics are present in blogs.

Blogging can be defined as participatory as they are “digitally mediated social networks” (Rettberg 2009: 64). They can facilitate participation and conversation but this does not take place in real time (for example, in chat room or in online games³⁵⁵) and so they emphasise a distance between the blogger and the reader. However, unlike the real time discussions taking place in other mediums, there is durability and a level of persistence with the blog discussion (Rettberg 2009: 66) and this is obtained via the archive feature which is found on many blogs.

The participatory functionality of *thinkBuddha.org* is found in the comments section and this is intentionally redesigned and maintained to aid discussion, as illustrated in the post from 23 November 2007, titled ‘Comments List Updated’ and the post from 8 February 2008, titled ‘Site Update’. In both posts there is an explanation for the changes and why he feels it necessary to make the changes, concluding that the site

³⁵⁴ I discuss the evolutionary development from orality to the printed text and onto the electronic text within other chapters but it is worth acknowledging this concept here (Ong [1982] 2002).

³⁵⁵ Many conversations in *Second Life* are beginning to incorporate and use voice rather than text but the norm is a text narrative, especially for avatars who are using a text/language translation tool.

will be “much more usable”. Therefore, although there is simplicity in the design the functionality related to the communal and discursive aspect of *thinkBuddha.org* is important to Will as well as the readers, which is demonstrated by the 138 comments received during the research period.

2.3) Images

In addition to the functionality is the selection and use of images. The following discourse identifies the rationale for including images in posts but not in other areas of the blog and I will also examine the type of images used in the posts to determine if they have a specific purpose or resonance.

During the research period one hundred percent of the forty eight posts contained an image. The blog application software requires an image and so the choice to include an image within the post is out with the control of the blogger. Moreover, this restriction has not deterred Will from continuing to use this application for the design of his blog, although, as stated earlier, he deliberately avoids certain types of images, such as advertising.

The inclusion of images can play an important role as “they aim to establish a relation to the world” (Aumont 1997: 54). Aumont argues that there are three categories of images relating to the world, namely symbolic, epistemic and aesthetic (1997: 55)³⁵⁶. Within *thinkBuddha.org* it could be argued that all three categories are presented. This blogger maintains that he chooses “images quite carefully. The website template is fairly inflexible: it demands an image for each post, and for visual clarity all images are 180px wide. . . It is very easy to think, ‘Ah, I’ve mentioned compassion. Let’s stick up an image of Avalokiteshvara³⁵⁷.’ And of course, an image of Avalokiteshvara may be an image that works; but other images may work better – as visual puns, or simply because they are attractive”³⁵⁸. I would

³⁵⁶ Symbolic relates to the sacred, epistemic conveys information and aesthetic are images pleasing to the viewer.

³⁵⁷ Avalokiteshvara is the Bodhisattva of compassion (saint-like figure) in Mahayana Buddhism.

³⁵⁸ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

argue that there is a distinctive style of images included on *thinkBuddha.org* including paintings, photographs and other types of art, although there is a distinct lack of Buddhist images, which is surprising due to the subject matter of the blog.

Many of the images could be considered unconventional for a blog and they range from paintings (see figures 25 and 26), drawings (see figures 27 and 28), or even photographs (see figures 29 and 30). Will acknowledges that he uses a range of images some of which specifically captures his interest in art: “I probably use far too many images from medieval manuscripts, and so forth. I studied late medieval and early Renaissance art for my first degree, and I absolutely love images from this period. But these images also fit with the form as well – they sit well with text, I think”³⁵⁹. His reflection on why certain images are needed to supplement the narrative, substantiates the claim that pictures are “worth a thousand words”, as the image contributes to the meaning of the text or in some instances replaces the narrative altogether (Levinson 2001: 42).



Figure 25 – The School of Athens fresco by Raphael (1509-1510), posted on 1 August 2007



Figure 26 – *The Conjuror* by Hieronymus Bosch (est. 1475-1505), posted 19 November 2007

³⁵⁹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

This point is further demonstrated when each image is considered in relation to the text. For example the image from 10 January 2008 relates to the post titled ‘studying happiness’ which includes a photograph of a smiling flower hot air balloon and so captures the emotion of happiness (see figure 29). Another example is *The Conjurer* by Hieronymus Bosch which is used to illustrate the topic of magic (see figure 26) in the post of 19 November 2007, titled ‘Real Magic’ and the discussion focuses on the use of magic in different cultures.

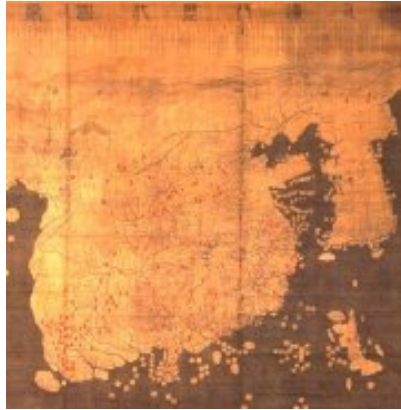


Figure 27 – Fifteen century Korean map (Wikipedia Commons), posted on 7 February 2008



Figure 28 – Unknown source, randomly obtained from the web, posted on 26 October 2008



Figure 29 – Hot air balloon, posted on 10 January 2008³⁶⁰



Figure 30 – Unknown source, randomly obtained from the web, posted on 29 July 2008

³⁶⁰ Available from <http://somadjinn.deviantart.com/art/Smiling-Daisy-38623847>, accessed 10 June 2011.

In conclusion, the insertion of images on *thinkBuddha.org* is partially controlled and restrained by the blog technology but there is also intentionality in the choice of the images (Aumont 1997; Berger 2002). Where *thinkBuddha.org* differs from the typical style of blogs is that there is no profile page or image, advertising or features such as word tags or other widgets, this may be partially due to the application software but it is also partially due to the intentionality of the blogger³⁶¹. In effect, the blog is perhaps more representative of a personal website or a diary rather than a blog and I discuss this further in the following section.

3) Self Reflection

The first of the three aspects of the self is self reflection which can be identified when the blogger uses the blog as a means of questioning the existence of the self; or where he reflects on his life; or where the blog is used as a medium to aid self discovery. In addition, the definition of self reflection can be with or without a religious context which includes the discussion of religious belief and religious seeking (Roof 1999) or as a medium for religious practice (Lee 2009). I commence the discussion by focusing on the religious context and I examine the Bloggers reflections on Buddhism and how he uses the medium for religious practice. After which I focus on blogging as a form of life writing and lastly blogging as an aid for remembrance, thus providing an insight into the fifty percent of the overall number of posts categorised as self reflection.

3.1) Being Buddhist

The first aspect of self reflection to be discussed is Will's reflection on being a Buddhist. Noticeably the strap line, 'wayward thoughts on the Buddhist way', announces to the reader that he is going to discuss Buddhism and implies that he may be a Buddhist (see figure 31).

³⁶¹ A widget can be defined as a piece of software or an application that enables a simple task, action or outcome, for example the hit/visitor counter on a website.



Figure 31 - *thinkBuddha.org* strap line

In addition to the strap line it is in the post from the 1 August 2007, titled ‘Thinking Aloud’ that Will reflects on his Buddhist beliefs and identity. He also explains how this transcribes into the subject of his blog and he states “So it’s two years now since I decided to blog on the subject, very loosely, of Buddhism without Buddhism, and it’s been a highly pleasurable ride. Perhaps these days I am less inclined to identify myself as Buddhist, or even as Buddhish, and the blog has perhaps become less saffron-tinged and more wide ranging in its philosophical interests”. The choice of using the word, ‘Buddhish’, indicates that there is a deviation from traditional or institutional Buddhism and this is further illustrated in the post from 16 October 2008.

In the post, titled ‘An afternoon in Gateshead, or The Idol in the Desert’, there is a reflection on his transition from being Buddhist to what he calls ‘Buddhish’, which he concludes is based on his belief that ‘packaged religion’ is not necessarily the right approach. This declaration (below) resonates with Roof’s discussion of “quest culture” and the seeking of spiritual meaning as it highlights the dissatisfaction with institutional religion as well as the ability to freely choose aspects of religion (1999: 126).

In the early days when I was more Buddhist than Buddhish, I came across a great many ideas that seemed to be rather good and useful, but I was continually frustrated by the insistence that they mattered not because they were good and useful, but because they were *Buddhist* and, not only this, that one could not really make use of them unless one signed up to a whole raft of other ideas that seemed, to me at least, to be somewhat less good and somewhat less useful. One risks, then, turning people who don’t want the whole package off the

good ideas, and inculcating bad ideas in those who do want the whole package. Neither is desirable. Religions, seething with ideas both good and bad, are often presented to us in this way as packages that we are asked to sign up to. But this does not seem the right approach.

Because the good ideas in religion, in the end, are the ones that can set free from their religious parentage, and that can make their own way in the world, that can stand not on claims to revelatory authority, but on their own merits.

In a later post of 27 October 2008, he announces “One of the reasons that I avoid identifying myself as being ‘Buddhist’ these days is that I have become increasingly uncertain as to what this term might actually indicate”. His reflections are further detailed within the email correspondence, where he summarises his Buddhist belief and not being affiliated with Buddhism: “I started my formal Buddhist life as a member of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and at one stage was intending to become a member of the order. For various reasons, in the end I decided not to go ahead with this, although I still have a great many good friends in the Order (now the Triratna Buddhist Order). After that, for a few years, I became a regular visitor to Gaia House, and this has been valuable. But these days, I’m fairly happy with my unaffiliated status”³⁶². The announcement that he was about to enter a Buddhist order and now he describes himself as “Buddhish” and without affiliation, resonates with the fragmented self and fluidity of identity found in popular culture and Generation X (Beaudoin 1998: 137).

On the other hand, *thinkBuddha.org* is used to reflect about Buddhist belief and the transition from being Buddhist to “Buddhish” which is publicly reflected on and presented in the blog. I would argue, therefore, that the blog provides a medium in which not only can this transition be described and presented but to a certain extent assists with the thought process, as writing enables “reflexive self-awareness” (Eakin

³⁶² Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

1999: 104). Closely related to this subject is the use of blogs as a means of religious practice³⁶³.

3.2) Blogging as Religious Practice

Blogging as a form of religious practice has been discussed by Cheong et al. (2008) and Lee (2009) but as of yet there are few studies which focus on this. Cheong et al. highlight this, stating that “Blogs have emerged as a popular genre of online communication and have been utilized for religious expression, but scarce attention has been paid to understanding emergent blogging practices, particularly blogging as a religious practice” (2008: 107). It is for this reason that I explore blogging as a religious practice and identify whether *thinkBuddha.org* provides an example of a blog being used to facilitate religious practice.

The feature of a blog that enables it to be used for religious practice is the ability to communicate and therefore mediate a form of religious expression. The communicative aspect is via the narrative and so drawing from Cheong et al.’s study: “Several bloggers emphasized their role as ‘online scribes’ who chronicle their ‘spiritual journey via blogging’. A few bloggers said they were particularly motivated to write about religious experiences in their daily lives. They stressed that they provided unique viewpoints from the ‘intersection of religious faith and the culture at large’ as they ‘write about whatever is going on’ and everyday occurrences” (2008: 122). There are two features of blogging that contribute to blogs being used for religious practice, firstly, the communication aspect and secondly, the documenting of the religious or spiritual path.

In relation to the first point regarding communication, Will has intentionally set out to communicate to others via his blog. He does this through his opinion and review of Buddhist books for example in the post ‘slippery truths’ on 10 December 2008

³⁶³ Since the research period, *thinkBuddha.org* has been transformed and is no longer a diary-style blog instead it is used as a means of exploring ideas and presenting academic writing. This may have been attributed to the blogger being contacted but he acknowledges that he had thought about making this change prior to being contacted about this research. Nevertheless, this highlights the problem and potential influence that the researcher has on human subjects and communities.

where he reviews *Empty Persons: Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* by Mark Siderits (2003). As well as providing an insight into his understanding of Buddhist belief, such as in the post ‘The view from the chariot’ on 30 January 2008, where he discusses Buddhist psychology and the concept of suffering (*dukkha*). Although he maintains he does not use the blog as a pedagogical tool, he does provide an academic discussion on Buddhism.

The second point is the documenting of the religious or spiritual path and it is in a post prior to the research period on 27 September 2005, titled ‘Blogging as Practice’ that Will discusses blogging as religious practice³⁶⁴. It is in this post that he asks his readers ‘And so the question I want to ask is this: could blogging be *useful* as a part of Buddhist practice?’ (see figure 32).

Blogging as Practice
Tuesday September 27, 2005

Why blog? Is blogging an idle pursuit, an endless process of self-revelation and exhibitionism, marked by an inescapable vanity; or is there something more potentially valuable going on? Now that thinkBuddha – a project I embarked upon after several months of false starts, and with some degree of trepidation – has been underway for several months, I am beginning to appreciate the value of sitting down every few days to write something about Buddhism in relation to my everyday concerns. And so the question I want to ask is this: could blogging be *useful* as a part of Buddhist practice?



Figure 32 - ‘Blogging as Practice’

Interestingly, in this post he identifies a number of reasons for blogging, including exhibitionism, a process for self-revelation or possibly writing as an element of religious practice which Cheong et al. define as “a writing space to diminish stress”

³⁶⁴ I have chosen to discuss this post even although it is out with the research period as it is pertinent to the current discussion.

and “an avenue for connecting to others” via the religious practice of writing (2008: 123-124)³⁶⁵.

While this post (2005) focuses on the question of blogging as religious practice, later posts provide further evidence that this blog is used as a medium for religious practice. This is noticeably found in the documenting of his transition from being Buddhist to ‘Buddhish’ as well as discussing various aspects of his life in the context of his Buddhist belief. That is not to say that this is undertaken in the explicit way that the Korean Won Buddhist monks and nuns have done, whereby they use blogging in order to cultivate and understand the self (Lee 2009).

I argue that Will does use his blog as a means for religious practice, as he communicates with others and uses it as a medium to express and reflect on his religious beliefs and thoughts (as well as other areas of his life). Therefore, Will produces a narrative which provides an insight and a developmental journey from being identified as Buddhist to ‘Buddhish’. The religious practice within *thinkBuddha.org* is not explicitly about transcending the corporeal body or finding enlightenment, rather it is about religious self reflection and a practice, namely writing, which will enable spiritual growth³⁶⁶. Furthermore, there are 38% of posts which discuss Buddhism and 50% are categorised as self reflection and so, for Will, the process of writing and reflecting on his Buddhist beliefs is presented in a fragmented story. Collectively these fragments illustrate his transition.

3.3) Blogging as Life Writing and an Aid for Remembrance

The third and final theme of self reflection relates to the diary-style genre and specifically a form of autobiography or life writing, where the intention is to discuss the self. I introduced the theme of blogs as life writing in earlier chapters and I

³⁶⁵ I argue that the process of writing enables thinking, although Heidegger would dispute this proposition. He stated that “word processing” diminishes the act of thinking (Zimmerman 1990: 206).

³⁶⁶ Margaret Wertheim discusses this in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, where she addresses William Gibson’s cyberpunk concept of transcending the body with the paradox of desiring physical pleasure (1999: 257-259).

defined the term life writing as a critical practice and an all encompassing genre that includes biography, autobiography, journal and diaries (Kadar 1992: 3) and is positioned within a cultural context (Rettberg 2008: 58). In addition, there is the premise that the autobiographical self is a process and the self is a non-fixed entity (Eakin 1999: x), similar to that found in Buddhism (Gethin 1986: 49; Ronkin 2005: 246).

Life writing and the definition of an autobiography is not definitive and so I refer to Eakin who states that they focus on the story of lived experience and a “real person” (1999: 2)³⁶⁷. Arguably, the autobiography is different to a diary as the definition of a diary is defined as a personal expression of thought, whereas the autobiography has the intention of being written for and read by others. Therefore, I argue that a blog can be both an autobiography and a diary as it is both a personal expression and is written for others. Moreover, Herring et al. states that “Recent years have seen a growing interest in the identification of genres on the World Wide Web” (2004: 2) and concludes that “the journal blog can be seen to have off-line antecedents” (2004: 10)³⁶⁸. It is within this section that I explore whether *thinkBuddha.org* can be defined as life writing, as well as examining life writing as an aid for remembrance. This introduces the contentious issue of discussing autobiographical writing within the Buddhist context, as there is no permanent ‘self’ and so how can one write about the self? (Gyatso 1998).

3.3.1) *thinkBuddha.org* as life writing

There are only forty eight posts during the research period which is significantly less (almost fifty percent less) compared to the other two case studies and so this blogger cannot be said to be a prolific blogger. On the other hand, a significant number of the *thinkBuddha.org* posts (67%) are five or more paragraphs long, which demonstrates a significant time commitment. Will states that on average he spends two to three

³⁶⁷ The discussion of the conceptual self and autobiography also draws from the cultural situation in which the self is formed (Eakin 1999: 35).

³⁶⁸ Herring et al. (2004) discusses a number of different types of blogs and their characteristics. For the purpose of this discussion I have deliberately extracted findings related purely to journal/diary blogs.

hours per week blogging and he spends “far more time than sometimes seems reasonable selecting images to go with blog posts”³⁶⁹. His dedication to blogging is similar to that identified by Lenhart and Fox, who state “59% of bloggers spend just one or two hours per week tending their blog. One in ten bloggers spend ten or more hours per week on their blog” (2006: 5) and so this blogger is marginally above the average.

When considering whether blogs can be defined as life writing, specifically autobiography, there are noticeable differences. For example, the traditional autobiography has an end point, whereas a blog has a continuous number of posts until the blogger, for whatever reason, stops posting. Consequently, the blogger never provides the whole self, which is also true of traditional life writing as “we cannot say for sure where the ‘I’ begins and ends?” (Eakin 1999: 181). This further emphasises why it is necessary to discuss different aspects of the self in order to encapsulate the fragmented ‘self’ presented in online life writing. As a result; “Most blogging is to some extent self-representational, and as such a form of life-writing or autobiography” (Rettberg 2009: 111).

Moreover, the discussion of the ‘self’ within *thinkBuddha.org* is found within thirty four of the forty eight posts (71%) and so the blog is heavily focused on writing about the self and lived experiences. This statistic is not corroborated by Will’s perception of his blogging practice as he states “My own blogging practice on *thinkBuddha.org* is not particularly diary-like, and tends to shy away from the personal. I see it as more essayistic in the traditional sense of “essaying” or testing things out”³⁷⁰. To some extent, Will’s statement is true, his blog does include a number of essays, book reviews and more academic pieces of writing. However, it is during the course of these ‘essays’ that he often reflects on his personal experience and interjects the argument with opinion and as a result publishes a blog that captures

³⁶⁹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

³⁷⁰ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

his lived experiences and different aspects of himself, similar to that found in a diary or autobiography³⁷¹.

I argue, therefore, that *thinkBuddha.org* can be defined as a form of life writing as the blog provides an insight into who he is and his everyday experiences. An example of this is his description of travelling to different countries, such as the posts on 25 July 2007 where he details his travels to Romania and the post of 31 July 2007 where he discusses his travels in Bulgaria. Travel is also discussed in the post of 25 August 2008, where he redirects the reader to another blog and states “I’ve been blogging a lot about my travels over at my personal site and you can’t blog all the time”³⁷². This statement indicates that he compartmentalises the different aspects of his life both on *thinkBuddha.org* and on his personal website. Although, he also provides a link between them, providing continuity between the different aspects of the self online as “The personal website is a home page for my work and publications, whilst *thinkBuddha.org* is focused more on a particular kind of exploration of a particular kind of enquiry”³⁷³.

I have demonstrated that *thinkBuddha.org* can be defined as life writing as it shares the characteristics of both a diary and an autobiography which includes details of the experiences, opinions and thoughts of a ‘real person’ which is published to an audience. Therefore, “The main reasons for keeping a blog are creative expression and sharing personal experiences” (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5), as well as providing a platform to facilitate self reflection; and so I conclude that this particular blog and potentially other personal-diary-style blogs can be defined as life writing. In addition, the genre of life writing provides not only a place for reflection but for remembrance and it is this that I now focus on.

³⁷¹ This is also found in the fleeting comments which Will posts on Twitter, http://twitter.com/Will_Buckingham, accessed 31 October 2010.

³⁷² Other blogs includes his personal homepage, <http://www.willbuckingham.com/>, accessed 30 October 2010.

³⁷³ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

3.3.2) Remembrance and the Self

Eakin defines the “autobiographical memory” or episodic memory as that which helps the individual to prepare for future experiences and this is “socially and culturally constructed” (1999: 108-110)³⁷⁴. While the psychological analysis of memory is useful, it is the Buddhist interpretation of memory in relation to the person that I focus on here. The act of remembrance highlights the potential conflict of writing about and reflecting on the concept of the ‘self’ (Gyatso 1998: xiv). The act of remembrance is intrinsic to life writing but in order to remember, does there not need to be an agent who undertakes the act of remembering? If there is an agent is this not problematic and potentially in conflict with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (no-self)?

In chapter five I refer to Vasubandhu’s argument that there is not a memory per se and that memories do not conclude that there is a permanent self, rather there is a continuous stream of experiences which are perceived as a fixed agent remembering (Sorabji 2006: 282; Gyatso 1992: 11). The self is an impermanent continuous process of psychological events in which there is a perception of memory (Siderits 2007). In the context of life writing, the perception of memory and agency is not problematic when the above definition is applied.

Regarding the second quandary, I refer to Gyatso’s examination of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of biography and autobiography. She acknowledges this contradictory aspect of writing about the ‘self’ and concludes “In short, Buddhism does not maintain that there are no individuals with subjectivity and agency, but only that such subjective agents are not permanent or unconditioned” (1998: 230).

Gyatso’s argument is similar to that posited by Siderits who states that the label ‘self’ or ‘I’ is useful in day to day functioning but this should not be confused with prescribing a permanent and unconditioned state to the ‘self’ or ‘I’ (2007: 24). In this

³⁷⁴ Paul John Eakin provides an explanation based on developmental psychologists understanding of memory, childhood and having an understanding of the extended self (1999: 113). A.R. Damasio also discusses the “autobiographical memory” (2000: 17-18).

context, therefore, the writing of a diary or autobiography is not in conflict with the doctrine of *anatta*, indeed the diary provides a means in which to develop and proceed along a spiritual path with the intention of gaining enlightenment and thus non-attachment to the view of a permanent ‘self’³⁷⁵.

3.4) Summary - Self Reflection

I have discussed three areas in relation to self reflection, namely Buddhist belief, blogging as a religious practice and lastly the discussion of blogs as life writing. I argue that *thinkBuddha.org* is used for religious reflection and religious practice, albeit the structure of the religious practice differs to that presented by Lee (2009). Instead, Will writes about his spiritual journey and transition from being Buddhist to ‘Buddhish’ and he states it is “a kind of practice, although like all of my practice, it is less disciplined and more *ad hoc* than would perhaps be ideal”³⁷⁶.

It is from this examination of the relationship between life writing and memory that difficulties arise in relation to defining the self as a process, agency and permanency. Eakin states that the self is not so much an entity but a process of awareness and he concludes that we don’t “pay much attention to this process, not only because we want to get on with the business of living our lives, but also because identity formation is not available for conscious inspection as it happens” (1999: x)³⁷⁷. Similarly, Siderits proposes that the ‘self’ or ‘I’ is a label or conceptual fiction (Siderits 2007: 24) and so the definition of the self encompasses the bodiless subject discussed within autobiography (Eakin 1999: 8)³⁷⁸. This is not to render the self

³⁷⁵ Jeanne Openshaw also examines life writing in relation to a Bengali Guru and refers to Gyatso’s analysis of life writing and the concept of self within the Indian tradition (2010: 103-105). She argues that in Asia, biography and hagiography are a very different genre to autobiography, albeit both are defined as life writing (2010: 105).

³⁷⁶ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

³⁷⁷ Paul John Eakin discusses self-experience, defined as the process of becoming the self rather than the ‘experiential self’, which is my focus here. Nonetheless, both provide an insight into aspects of the self. Eakin’s methodology draws from a variety of fields including neurology, cognitive science and psychology in order to examine autobiography and the self (1999: xi).

³⁷⁸ Paul John Eakin details the problem of discussing the ‘subject’ and I would argue that the Buddhist analysis of *anatta* overcomes this problem.

without body, as after all, there is a physical person who is typing while positioned in front of the computer (Romero 2003: 89)

If we agree that there is no agent who remembers, only a continual stream of psychological events (Sorabji 2006; Siderits 2007), it is this that renders the person unique from another person. This does not negate individuality; instead it provides a psychological understanding of the self according to Buddhist philosophy and autobiography scholars, such as Eakin (1999). Similar to Gyatso, I argue that the concept of the self in relation to memories and experiences is not as contradictory as first perceived (Gyatso 1998: xiv). Within the next section I explore the category of self presentation in order to further demonstrate how the self is depicted in blogs as well as how blogs are used.

4) Self Presentation

This category is defined as the presentation of the self, explicitly and implicitly. Dimensions of the self within this category can include identity, employment and areas of his/her life that are not reflective but could be said to define who he/she is. Self presentation is denoted by the use of images, graphics, aesthetics and the content of the post. The discussion of aesthetics and images has been explored earlier in this chapter and so the following section will discuss two areas, these are Will's academic persona and as a professional writer. There are 40% of posts which can be defined as self presentation and 85% discuss daily activities. This indicates that a significant number of posts focus on the presentation of the self within everyday life, so I commence the discussion by focusing on Will's academic identity.

4.1) Academic Identity

Initially *thinkBuddha.org* was launched when Will was a PhD student of philosophy and later it has been maintained while he is a professional academic employed at De Montfort University, Leicester. The following discussion focuses on these two areas of identity and how they are presented to his readers.

Probably one of the most significant stages for a PhD student is the viva and Will discusses this in the post of 11 July 2007, titled ‘That’s Dr. *thinkBuddha.org* to you’ and it could be said that by making this statement he is prominently presenting his academic identity to his readers. Accompanying the text is a photo of a green badge with the words ‘Trust me, I’m a Doctor’. This unusually short post containing two paragraphs states “O, happy philosopher! Yesterday I had my viva examination . . . and I’m very happy to report that all went well”. Within the post he announces what he might do with the PhD thesis and contemplates publishing aspects of it but in the meantime he is working on his second novel, which he discusses in the post of 25 July 2007³⁷⁹.

In addition to his student identity he also discusses his life as a lecturer of English and Creative Writing. In the post of 21 January 2008 he states “I’m throwing myself back into teaching” and he acknowledges that blogging on *thinkBuddha.org* has taken a lesser place in his life. While he discusses his teaching, attendance at conferences (25 January 2008) and life as an academic, there is a significant number of book reviews and essays published on the blog, and in doing so he presents himself as a professional and an academic writer. Examples of such posts include, ‘New Review: the Sutras of Abu Ghraib on 30 October 2007 and ‘Texts, Bones and Early Buddhists’ on 27 October 2008, where he provides an overview of *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks* by Gregory Schopen (1997).

As there are a number of posts which focus on student and academic life, I propose that this is an important aspect of self presentation and he presents this to his readers. What cannot be determined is whether or not presenting this aspect of his identity to the audience provides him with an accepted authority, especially in relation to his discussions on Buddhism³⁸⁰. In order to determine whether readers “rely on the authority of their particular authors” (Schneider and Braunstein 2010: 5) this would require further research into audience engagement (Hoover 2006: 67) which has been out with the scope of this thesis. Undertaking an examination into audience

³⁷⁹ In the post he states he is undertaking research in Romania and Bulgaria for his second novel.

³⁸⁰ Heidi Campbell discusses authority and authoritativeness in relation to Christian blogs (2010a).

engagement would be a consideration for future research as it would provide further insight into how blogs are used.

4.2) Professional Writer

Will is a professional writer and novelist and he has written two novels which he promotes and discusses on *thinkBuddha.org* (see figure 33). His first novel *Cargo Fever* (2007)³⁸¹ was launched in Waterstones in Birmingham, UK on 29th March 2007 and this is discussed in the post 9 March 2007 and in the post of 19 October 2007, titled ‘Cargo Fever hits the States’ he announces “For all you readers in the States”, which demonstrates how the internet has become a global community (Castells 2001).

The network society or global community has been examined by a number of scholars including Castells (2001), Lyon (2002) and Bell (2001, 2007). Bell describes the internet as “glocal” as it is both local and global (2007: 78) and this includes the blogosphere and resonates with my original definition of the internet from chapter two: the Internet can be defined as *a global network connected via protocols³⁸², using browser technology³⁸³ to access information without the restrictions of time, space or geography and is “above all else, a cultural creation”* (Castells 2001: 33). The blogosphere (community of blogs) is part of this wider global information network.

³⁸¹ *Cargo Fever* is an adventure novel set in Jakarta and Australia. It tells the story of the trials and tribulations of the character Sam Rivers. Cargo Fever website, www.cargofever.com, is no longer available, accessed 26 February 2011.

³⁸² In order for the internet to function and allow computers to talk to each other, there are a number of protocols, such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol), SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) which is used for the transfer of email and TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) which is the protocol that allows computers to talk to each other over the internet.

³⁸³ In October 1994 the first commercial browser was launched by Netscape Communications, known as Netscape. In 1995, Microsoft launched their browser, Explorer (Castells 2001: 16)

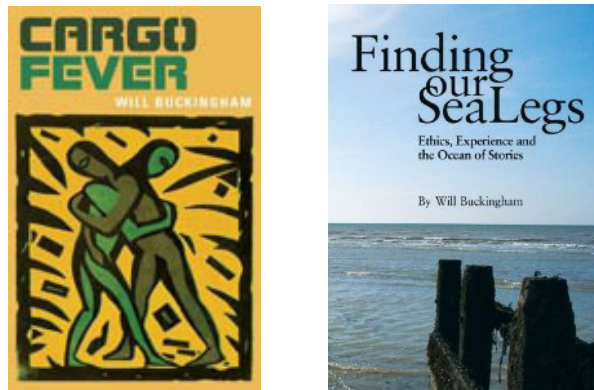


Figure 33 – Book Covers (novels by Will Buckingham)

His second novel *Finding our Sea Legs* (2009)³⁸⁴, published in October 2009, was prominently positioned in the top right hand corner of the blog for a number of weeks in order to promote the novel to the readers and to provide a link to Amazon³⁸⁵. It is not my intention to analyse Will’s writing style or critique his novels rather I want to emphasise that writing is a significant aspect of Will’s life and indeed his identity and so whether it is writing a blog or novels or even conference papers, this is presented as an aspect of the self on *thinkBuddha.org*.

On the other hand, he states that he is not sure if he does present this aspect of himself online and he maintains “My writing style/persona is a curious and mixed thing. In some ways . . . I’m not sure I have such a thing as a fixed or stable identity that I try to project. . . And as am actively writing fiction, blogs, children’s books and philosophy all at the same time, I’m not sure what this all adds up to, or where the coherence lies. I have a vague hope that the patterns will increasingly appear in retrospect”³⁸⁶. So while, he does not agree that he depicts an identity as a writer, he does agree that there is a consistency in his blog writing: “Perhaps my blogging style has remained more consistent than my writing elsewhere; and there is also perhaps a kind of persona here. But there have been some changes”³⁸⁷. The discussion of his identity as a professional writer also raises two themes which have been discussed

³⁸⁴ *Finding our Sea Legs* (2009) explores ethics through philosophy and storytelling.

³⁸⁵ Amazon, www.amazon.co.uk, accessed 26 February 2011.

³⁸⁶ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

³⁸⁷ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

elsewhere in this chapter and in earlier chapters, that is, writing for an audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5) and participatory culture (Jenkins 2009: xi). For Will, there is an element of promoting his writing via his blog and so not only does he write for an audience both online and offline, he also engages in discussion with his readers via the comments feature on the blog and so this blog is part of participatory culture as defined by Jenkins (2009: xi).

4.3) Summary - Self Presentation

Two areas have been discussed in relation to the category of self presentation, namely the academic persona and novelist. Eakin's assertion that "Models of identity may be central to lives and life writing, but the attention they have received from students of autobiography leaves a good deal to be desired" (1999: 47) and so perhaps this cursory examination will contribute to the ongoing discussion of life writing but positioned within a postmodern context, as it captures the fragmented self or multiplicity that Turkle highlights (1995).

5) The Experiential Self

The experiential self can be identified when the blogger states explicitly any words or phrases related to the senses and experience; or where he provides a depiction of an experience via a sound or visual aid such as a photograph, song, or literature and therefore depicts or expresses an experience. The hypothesis that the experiential self is depicted within blogs is referred to by Lenhart and Fox, who state that 37% of bloggers discuss experiences (2006: 4). Furthermore, Nardi et al. examine American bloggers and they identify one of the motivations for blogging is to express "deeply felt emotions" (2004: 43). In the context of this particular blog there are seventeen posts (35%) that have been categorised as containing content exemplifying the features of this category.

In order to determine whether this particular blog is used to depict the experiential self, I focus on the analysis of emotions and experiences discussed within selected posts. In order to examine this within *thinkBuddha.org*, the following discussion

applies the early Buddhist and Theravada Abhidhamma interpretative framework that I presented in chapter five. Therefore, I refer to the *khandha-ayatana-dhatu* triad³⁸⁸, which provides a typology for the analysis of human experience (Heim 2008: 20). Ronkin defines the Abhidhamma classificatory framework as a taxonomy “intended to facilitate direct insight into not-self by showing that in the final analysis personal identity is but a continuous sensory and cognitive process, of which any given element always refers to a distinct sphere of experience” (2005: 44). In addition to the framework I refer back to an earlier section of this chapter and acknowledge the relationship between memory, experience and the act of writing, as they are intrinsic for the understanding of experience (Gyatso 1992).

I outlined, previously, that there is a potential contradiction when discussing memory if applied to the premise of a non-fixed self (*anatta*) but in chapter five I overcome this by referring to Vasubandhu’s conclusion that there is not a memory per se³⁸⁹ (Sorabji 2006: 282). Similarly, Eakin refers to the Western concept of memory and the self and in doing so infers a continuous entity or what has previously been described as a continuous process: “Does memory indeed provide a basis for continuous identity, uniting us to our act, our experiences, our earlier selves?”³⁹⁰ (Eakin 1999: 95). In sum, the discussion of memory is significant for understanding the experiential self and specifically feelings and emotions (Damasio 2000).

In order to examine the experiential self presented in *thinkBuddha.org*, I focus on the emotions of happiness and horror. To ensure consistency between the three case studies, I will refer to Gay’s list of seven emotions (2003: 606), although

³⁸⁸ Susan Hamilton asserts that *ayatana* does not necessarily mean that a sense organ is involved (1996: 17). *Dhātu Samyutta* describes *dhatu* in relation to the senses (Hamilton 1996: 18).

³⁸⁹ Vasubandhu provides an intricate argument on the relationship between *anatta* and memory in section four of the *Refutation of the Theory of the Self* (Duerlinger 2003: 238-250). Here, he disputes the Nyaya-Vaisesika’s argument that the perceiver of an object and the owner of the memory of an object belong to the same person as this would imply that there is a ‘self’. To overcome this problem the Abhidhamma/Abhidharma provides the theory of momentariness to explain the continuity (Deurlinger: 2003: 240-241; Ronkin 2005).

³⁹⁰ Eakin states that the relationship between the memory and the self can be found in Locke’s writings (1999: 19).

acknowledging that there are others proposed, such as those identified by De Silva³⁹¹ (1991: 35-79). Furthermore, I acknowledge that emotion is not universally homogenous and the discussion of emotions does not extend to the readers response to the posts rather the focus is on the narrative and the blogger. I commence the discussion with the analysis of happiness and as a result pleasant feelings (*sukha vedana*).

5.1) Happiness

The first example is taken from the post of 1 January 2008 where Will acknowledges a pleasant feeling (*sukha vedana*) and the emotion of happiness through reflecting on his blogging practice during 2007, as well as the community who follow his blog. He thanks his readers and he uses the word “pleasure” to acknowledge his happiness. He also acknowledges his expectations for the future and states “I look forward to your company in 2008”. This post therefore reflects on the past and also looks to the future and in doing so illustrates where memory plays a role in the experiential process as well as capturing the space/time dichotomy associated with memory. What I mean by this is that the memory is relative to the time and space that it occupies, both in the past and in the current moment. However, I disagree with Damasio who applies a Western scientific definition of a permanent agent and instead I argue for the Abhidhamma theory of momentariness that I discussed in chapter five (Damasio 2000: 145; Duerlinger 2003; Ronkin 2005). Similarly, Giddens, maintains that time is a “series of discrete moments” in which experiences manifest (1991: 53).

With regards to the blog post, it can be said that the feeling is a mental feeling with an associated emotion, rather than a physical feeling. This is an important differentiation within the Abhidhamma structure as “Pleasure . . . is a feeling, a reaction to pleasing stimuli” and so “pleasure is the relishing of an enjoyable experience” (Heim 2008: 23). In addition, it is the public announcement of this

³⁹¹ The seven emotions are fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust and contempt (Gay 2003:66) or six provided by Damasio as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise or disgust (2004: 50). De Silva identifies emotions in relation to motivation as fear, anxiety, hatred, grief and sorrow, love, compassion (1991: 35-79).

feeling (*vedana*) and related emotion (*samkhara*) that upholds Damasio's definition that "*emotion* should be used to designate the collection of responses, many of which are publicly observable"³⁹² (2004: 42). I have argued elsewhere that I am not restricting the designation of 'emotion' to the public sphere, although, it is significant that the online diary (blog) is publicly available, therefore, so are any emotions expressed in the blog and so in this circumstance, Damasio's definition of 'emotion' is applicable.

Another example depicting the emotion 'happiness' is in the post from 10 January 2008, 'Studying Happiness', where he discusses his course and teachings on happiness and he states "The thing is, studying happiness cheers you up. Or so it seems". He also reflects on his experience of being on a retreat and studying the Buddhist understanding of *metta* which can be crudely translated as happiness. He acknowledges that studying happiness is difficult as "we are not used to thinking this way" but he "wanted to experience positive emotions" and although the meditation practice was difficult to begin with he did succeed and he concludes the post by stating "I experienced it. Happiness. Positive emotion". This post provides an insight into his everyday life, his emotions and how this relates to his Buddhist practice and his understanding of Buddhist psychology.

This brief outline of the emotion of happiness (pleasure) indicates the complexity as well as the subtlety of the various degrees of emotions. The Abhidhamma framework as a metaphysical rendering of everything to the smallest constituent (*dhamma*) provides an approach for studying this complexity (Heim 2008: 23; Ronkin 2005). To elucidate further, the first example provides a purely cognitive state without a bodily feeling (*vedana-khandha*), but there is also an emotional component and so *vedana-khandha* is present along with *samkhara-khandha* (volition and emotion).

In the second example, there is reference to both a physical experience (meditation) as well as a mental experience which is referenced by the action of meditation. This experience refers to both pleasant and unpleasant feelings, which are two of the three

³⁹² Italics are in original.

types of feeling (*tisso-vedana*). What cannot be determined from the narrative is the likelihood that a number of senses are involved in the experiential process and so from this short description it is not possible to conclusively state which of the *ayatanas* (sense spheres) and *dhatas* (cognitive awareness) are present. At least three of the five *khandhas* have been explicitly illustrated, *vedana-khandha*, *samkhara-khandha*, and *vinnana-khandha*, the latter providing the cognitive element. Further in-depth analysis could describe the process in relation to the *dhamma* theory of the Abhidhamma and to illustrate how this could be done, the *Dhammasangani*³⁹³ “reads: ‘The five physical sense spheres comprise sense data (*rūpa*) that are recognized by mental cognitive awareness (*manovinnāna*), but all sense data [i.e. *manas* and *dhammas* inclusive] are cognized by the element of mental cognitive awareness” (Ronkin 2005: 41). Ronkin’s argument illustrates the complexity and detail in defining the experiential self and why a framework is needed for the examination of this aspect of the self.

5.2) Disgust (Horror)

Another example of emotion discussed in *thinkBuddha.org* is disgust which is defined as ‘horror’. In the post from 1 Oct 2007, Will discusses Burma and states “as I have been watching events in Burma unfolding, I have been hoping alongside many others that out of the horror some good might eventually come. But I have also been wondering if perhaps the truly important political question – in Burma as well as everywhere else – is not that of how to counter greed, or hatred, or delusion, but how to counter the fear that trembles beneath it”. Within this post he uses the word ‘horror’ and he also interjects the post with Buddhist terminology, known as the three delusions or fires, namely greed, hatred and delusion³⁹⁴.

Although this post highlights his disgust (horror) at the situation, it is also a reflective post as he acknowledges how the situation has helped him consider his life within the constructs of Buddhism. Heim acknowledges that this is a common practice as “the

³⁹³ *Dhammasangani*, 132, 229, 178 (Ronkin 2005: 80). Susan Hamilton states that the *Dhammasangani* provides a “theory of sense” (1996: 3).

³⁹⁴ This has been discussed within chapter five.

power of other's stories . . . help us interpret and manage our own emotions" (Heim 2008: 28). Similarly Ronkin states that "the very concept of a self . . . can be discovered by reflection" (2005: 246). In contrast, this conclusion is not drawn by the blogger, who states that "the blog is not so much self-reflection as it is reflection about the world more broadly . . . to understand selves, I think we also need to understand the world of which these selves are a part"³⁹⁵. It could be argued that while Will's comments do not directly correlate with Ronkin's argument, they do resonate with Hamilton's conclusion that the world of experience is dependently originated (2000: 23).

5.3) Summary - the Experiential Self

The examination of the experiential self has included three themes, including memory (Gyatso 1992); the components of the self (*khandhas*), the senses, sense awarenesses and sense objects (*ayatanas* and *dhatas*); in order to emphasize that the experiential aspect of the self is about living in the world (Hamilton 1996; Heim 2008). Hamilton asserts that "What has to be guarded is in fact one's reaction to what one experiences by means of the senses" (1996: 19). In *thinkBuddha.org*, the category of experiential self is not expressed to the same extent as the category of self reflection or self presentation, as only 35% of the posts are definitively categorised as self reflection and I postulate as to why this is case in the final chapter.

Moreover, Buddhist psychology expounds that this understanding directly relates to the soteriological implications for the individual, as the reaction to sensory experience results in the continual struggle for liberation (Hamilton 1996: 19). It is not my intention to extend this discussion beyond the confines of the category of the experiential self but by referring to the subject of Buddhist soteriology, there is an understanding of how the doctrine of *anatta* is positioned within the wider discourse.

³⁹⁵ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 18 October 2010.

6) Conclusion

In conclusion there have been a number of areas explored in this chapter including aspects of the self; memory; and the genre of life writing. This discussion has included reflections on being Buddhist, blogging as religious practice and defining blogs as life writing. In the category of self presentation identity was examined and I explored whether Will identifies his blogging practice as a medium for the presentation of identity. In the last category I discuss the emotions of happiness and disgust and refer to the Abhidhamma framework as a method for explaining the relationship between the senses, emotions, cognition and ultimately experience.

In addition, there has been an emphasis on defining blogs under the rubric of life writing³⁹⁶. Life writing is an overarching term which includes biography, autobiography, diaries, life-stories and so I argue it should also include blogs. Blogs differ from traditional modes of life writing as they can be participatory although they also facilitate self reflection and the presentation of self. Blogging continues to attract both authors and readers and they provide an opportunity for “ordinary people to self-express publicly” (Herring et al. 2004: 11). “The emergence of blogs also raises important questions about story-telling and self-representation, motivations for media use, and the building of community online” (Cheong et al. 2008: 108) and so the discussion needs to expand to include the themes of community, authority, identity and ritual (Campbell 2010b). In sum, there are a significant number of areas to examine and be aware of when analysing aspects of the self in blogs. It is in the final chapter that I provide an overview of the similarities and differences between the three blogs, as well as addressing the fourth research question in order to identify possible areas for future research.

³⁹⁶ Eakin discusses the use of the label ‘life stories’ to “be as expansive and inclusive as possible” (1999: 99 n.1).

Chapter Nine - Conclusion

In chapter one I set out the four research questions and the aim of this thesis, in order to analyse aspects of the self, namely self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self within selected Buddhist blogs. An interdisciplinary approach has been used which draws from the fields of Buddhist studies, religious studies, material and visual culture studies, anthropology, psychology and communication studies. This approach parallels with Hojsgaard and Warburg's statement that there needs to be an interdisciplinary approach to examine "religion and the internet" (2005: 9). Hine (2000), Helland (2005) and Karaflogka (2006) also identify the importance of using an interdisciplinary approach in order to create and refine existing theories and methodologies.

The exponential growth of the internet and the rise in the development and use of new media³⁹⁷ requires considered theories and methodologies in order to examine religion, identity, and the global information community (Castells 2001; Bell 2001; Lyon 2002; Barney 2004; Campbell 2010b). The topic is complex and challenging but by analysing dimensions of religion on the internet, there is a greater understanding of how the individual and culture are being effected by technology and so highlighting the possibility that the "internet is changing the face of religion worldwide" (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 1).

This thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion within the field of media, religion and culture, specifically, it is in chapter two that I present the interconnected themes of culture, religion, informational (technology and communication) and the singular (self and identity); and I provide a number of definitions and refer to these throughout the thesis. In doing so I highlight that there is a merging of boundaries between media and religion in everyday life (Hoover and Clark 2002: 2; Hoover 2006).

³⁹⁷ The term 'new media' is defined by Campbell (2010b: 9) and discussed in chapter one of this thesis.

I have focused on a number of themes, including blogs as a form of life writing, participatory culture (Jenkins 2006; 2009), and identity and religious seekership (Eakin 1999; Turkle 1995; 2011; Roof 1999). The first of these themes has been given considerable attention and I have referred to scholars such as Kadar (1992)³⁹⁸, Eakin (1999), and Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001) in order to illustrate how blogs are similar and dissimilar to traditional forms of life writing³⁹⁹. One significant difference between these two styles of diary is the shift from the private to the public sphere, where the authors of the online diary often expect an audience and potentially to participate with readers (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5). These changes have resulted in a number of unexpected outcomes, challenges and unique attributes of the online diary, including the issue of privacy and exhibitionism (Stefanone and Jang 2008; de Laat 2008), authenticity and authoritativeness (Campbell 2010a), creation and development of identity (Giddens 1991; Turkle 1995; Lee 2009) and blogging as a means of religious practice (Cheong et al. 2008; Lee 2009). I have shown that the online diary provides a rich and prominent example of a medium for self reflection, self presentation and for depicting the experiential self.

In this chapter, I present a summary of findings for each of the four research questions as well as providing a selective comparative analysis of the three bloggers in relation to some of the main themes identified in this thesis. I will conclude by focusing on three areas where further research could be considered, including the Buddhist blog culture; new media and religious practice; and emotions and experience on the internet.

1) Research Question One (Religious Context)

The primary question is “what are the conceptual issues of self within early Buddhism, specifically in relation to two of the five *khandhas*, namely *vedana* (feeling) and *samkhara* (volition)?” This question provides the religious context, the

³⁹⁸ Marlene Kadar uses the term ‘life writing’ as it is more inclusive (Kadar 1992: 4).

³⁹⁹ For Walter Ong, there is the evolution from orality and literacy to the printed text and then onto electronic text ([1982] 2002) and this evolutionary process has been highlighted by the blogger Justin, as he has moved from the paper diary to the electronic diary of a blogs.

interpretative framework for analysing the experiential self, as well as a reference point for the terminology used in the Buddhist blogs. There are a number of topics explored within chapter five and beyond and these include an overview of reductionism of the self posited by the early Buddhists, the Pudgalavadins⁴⁰⁰, Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE) and the philosopher Derek Parfit (Duerlinger 2003; Siderits 2003, 2007). In addition, I focus on the Theravada Abhidhamma framework in which to examine the self (Hamilton 1996, 2000; Ronkin 2005); and the rendering of ‘emotion’, ‘feeling’, ‘sensation’ (Damasio 2000; Gay 2003; Heim 2003); as well as a discussion of the performance arts and literature where an emotion or mood is expressed or an experience is induced for the viewer, known as *rasa* (Lynch 1990; Schwartz 2004).

I do not wish to reiterate what has been written elsewhere in this thesis but it is necessary to outline the Buddhist interpretative framework and the similarities that this has with theories in other fields such as psychology (Damasio 2000) and visual culture studies (Pattison 2007). Consequently, I want to emphasise that the interdisciplinary approach provides a holistic and paralleled examination of a complex and nuanced culture online. I begin by outlining the Buddhist philosophical rendering of *anatta* (not-self), then the interpretive framework and lastly the importance of having an awareness of Buddhist terminology for the examination of Buddhism on the internet.

1.1) Buddhist philosophy: *anatta* (not-self)

As I have shown, the self or rather not-self (*anatta*), *anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness or suffering) are the three central principles of Buddhism and which are discussed within the four Noble Truths. Therefore, it is not surprising that different schools of Buddhism have examined *anatta* and have drawn various conclusions. For example, the Pudgalavadins expound that the person is comprised of the five aggregates (*khandhas*) and there is a sixth aggregate, the person (Tillemans 1996; Duerlinger 2003).

⁴⁰⁰ There are a number of Pudgalavadin Buddhist schools including, Vatsiputriya, Dharmottariya, Bhadrayaniya, Sammitiya and Sannagarika (Buswell 2004: 692).

Parfit provides a definition of the self which is similar to that of the Pudgalavadins and he proposes a reductionist account of the individual in so far as the person can be reduced to components (Sorabji 2005: 266). Although he reduces the individual to a causal stream of events he separates the physical self from the psychological self, which results in reductionism while maintaining a type of self (Parfit [1984] 1987: 275). Therefore, there are similarities between Parfit's and the Pudgalavadin's argument regarding the reductionism of the person. This illustrates the difficulty and necessity of identifying the different arguments relating to the subject of the self.

In contrast, Vasubandhu (c. fourth/fifth century CE) argues in the *Abhidharmakosabhasya*⁴⁰¹ that the person cannot be discussed separately from the *khandhas*⁴⁰² as a person exists in relation to them (Ganeri 2007: 164). It can be said that the self is not a fixed entity and that the 'self' is a label or a "conceptual fiction" (Siderits 2007: 24). Siderits argues that there is a series of causally conditioned elements which are in a continual stream of events and experiences and it is this that defines a person as being unique but remains as an impermanent entity (Siderits 2007: 25). For Parfit and the Pudgalavadins, there is a sixth entity, a person, which for Siderits is rendered as a 'conventional fiction' and is therefore impermanent.

The discussion of the *khandhas* is crucial for understanding experience and the human composition. I have specifically focused on two of the five *khandhas*, accordingly, determining which *khandha* can be defined as 'feeling', 'sensation' and 'emotion'. The justification for focusing on *vedana-khandha* and *samkhara-khandha* is that they relate to the sensory and experiential aspects of human existence⁴⁰³ (Hamilton 1996: 46). Hamilton emphasises that it is not the *khandhas* that are of primary importance rather it is the process in which they are involved and she asserts

⁴⁰¹ This is the commentary to the *Abhidharmakosa* (Treasury of Knowledge) and it is in the ninth book, *Refutation of the Theory of the Self* in the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* that Vasubandhu discusses his theory of the self (Duerlinger 2003: 95).

⁴⁰² The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are *rupa* (material), *vedana* (feeling), *sanna* (perception), *samkhara* (volition), *vinnana* (consciousness) and collectively they are the five components comprising the self.

⁴⁰³ This does not necessarily exclude the other aggregates from the process.

that “it is not the *khandhas qua khandhas* that is being referred to, but that what they represent is the process by which one is having one’s experience. And it is this process that one needs to understand” (Hamilton 2000: 30).

I argue, that *vedana-khandha* can be defined as ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’ but not ‘emotion’ and so it is *samkhara-khandha* that can be rendered as ‘volition’ and in certain conditions can include ‘emotion’ (Hamilton 1996: 42; 2001: 66). I have also provided examples of the physical and mental conditions in which one or both of these *khandhas* would be present. I determined that an experience may include various *khandhas* but an emotion would only arise when there is a feeling (*vedana*). In sum, emotion and feeling are often connected but emotion (*samkhara-khandha*) will usually not arise without an associated physical or mental feeling (*vedana-khandha*). Moreover, three types of feeling have been identified, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral and this is known as *tisso-vedana*. Depending on the nature of the experience, one of the three categories of feeling will arise and of course dissipate as a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling cannot last indefinitely (Gethin 1986: 36).

I have demonstrated that when examining the experiential self within Buddhist blogs these *khandhas* and *tisso-vedana* can be identified. Therefore, “Personal identity derives from the continuity and causal connections between the aggregates within a single stream of experience, not from a persistent self or soul at its core”⁴⁰⁴ (Nyanaponika 1999: 11). By categorising different aspects of the self presented within the Buddhist blogs it becomes apparent that different aspects of the self are presented and can be examined.

1.2) Buddhist Interpretative Framework

One of the main areas to be discussed in chapter five is a number of structured lists and frameworks which are found in Buddhist philosophy including the twelve links of *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination) and the triad *khandha-ayatana-*

⁴⁰⁴ Nyanaponika is referring to the Angutarra Nikaya scripture.

*dhatu*⁴⁰⁵. These frameworks illustrate the relationship between causality, experience and the *khandhas* (Shulman 2008: 309). Dependent origination, a central doctrine of Buddhism is discussed in order to illustrate the relationship between clinging (*upadana*) and suffering (*dukkha*) and as a result demonstrates the soteriological implications of clinging to a permanent entity or notion of ‘self’ (Gethin 1986: 39).

However, it is the Theravada Abhidhamma framework which enables a more in-depth and structured analysis of the self and it is this that has been used to interpret selected aspects of the self within blogs. The framework includes the *dhamma* theory which enables a metaphysical analysis of the experiential world, as *dhammas* can be rendered as the smallest reducible component (Ronkin 2005: 170). The *dhamma* theory contributes to the doctrine of momentariness and Ronkin maintains this extends from the early analysis of impermanence (*anicca*) (2005: 42).

In addition, it is the *khandha-ayatana-dhatu* framework which presents the relationship between contact (*phassa*) with an object, the sense spheres (*ayatanas*), elements of cognition (*dhatu*s), and the resulting experience. Significantly, it is the experiential aspect that renders an individual unique, not a fixed permanent notion of a ‘self’ (Ronkin 2005: 42). This experiential process is illustrated in the *Majjhima Nikaya*⁴⁰⁶ where “phassa is said to be the combination of three things: eye, (visible) object and consciousness” (Hamilton 1996: 47)⁴⁰⁷. Also, Hamilton’s research on the *Sutta Pitaka*⁴⁰⁸ identifies “the centrality of personal experience” and that “personal experience is the foundational aspect of common-human-being-ness between all people” (Hamilton 2000: 6). In sum, the triad provides an integrated classificatory scheme for human existence. Moreover, this metaphysical framework resembles that posited by Damasio (2000) and Pattison (2007) and so theories taken from

⁴⁰⁵ In chapter five I discuss this triad in detail - *Khandhas* (aggregates of the person), *ayatana* (sense spheres), *dhatu* (elements of cognition).

⁴⁰⁶ The canonical scriptures of the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikaya*, discuss *anatta* and provide a comprehensive analysis of the *khandhas*.

⁴⁰⁷ *Phassa* is also the sixth link of *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination).

⁴⁰⁸ The *Sutta Pitaka* is the second section of the *Pali Canon* (scriptures) and contains the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikaya*.

neuroscience, visual culture studies and Buddhism can be discussed in conjunction and contribute to the interdisciplinary approach used in this thesis.

1.3) Buddhist Terminology

By positioning this thesis within a religious context, it includes the Buddhist terminology and philosophy not only for the interpretative framework but also as a reference point when examining the content discussed within the blog posts. The discussion of the historical background and the development and rise of Buddhism as well as the basic principles of the philosophy, including: the four noble truths, *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination), *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (not-self), the *khandhas* (components of the self), *dukkha* (suffering) and *dharmas* (smallest component, atom) provides an insight into the complexity of these related components. In addition, when such topics are discussed within blogs it could be argued that this provides the blog with an element of authenticity or the blogger as an authority on the subject. The discussion of authenticity and authoritativeness has not been examined as it is beyond the scope of this thesis however, Campbell examines this within Christian blogs and so perhaps a similar examination should be undertaken with Buddhist blogs (2010a).

2) Research Question Two – Comparative Analysis

The discussion of James', Justin's and Will's blogs has resulted in the examination of two hundred and twenty seven posts (see figure 34) and the reading of nine hundred and eighty two comments over three research periods between mid-2007 and the end of 2008⁴⁰⁹.

In each of the ethnographic case studies there has been an examination of the three aspects of the self: self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self. Accordingly, I have examined narrative, photographs, images and design in order to illustrate how the three bloggers use blogs as a medium for self reflection; an aid to

⁴⁰⁹ The three research periods are 1 July 2007 – 31 August 2007, 1 October 2007 – 31 January 2008 and 1 October 2008 – 30 November 2008.

remember; presentation of who they are, identifying their values; what they do in everyday life; as well as discussing their experiences.

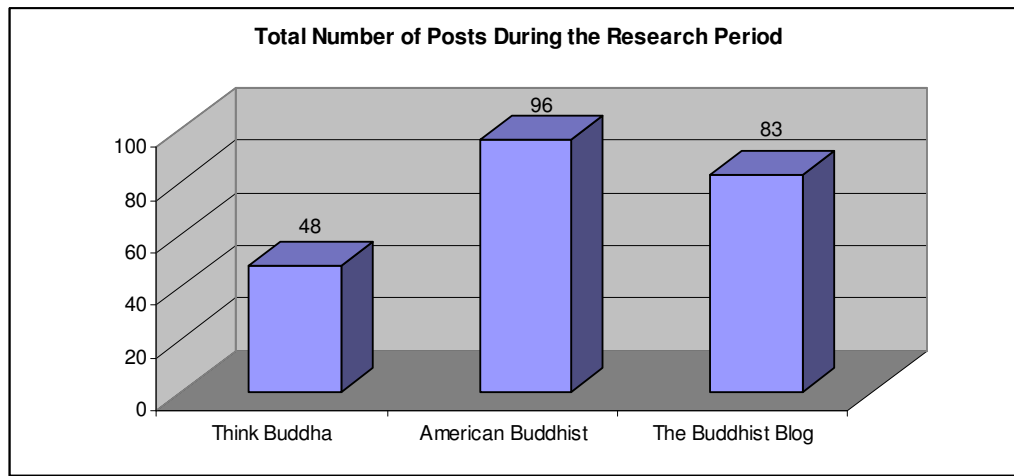


Figure 34 - Total number of posts per blog

While an interdisciplinary approach has been used, the Buddhist interpretative framework has been used to examine the category of the experiential self and in doing so I refer to Heim's classification of eight emotions (2003: 543) and Gay's classification of seven emotions (2003: 606). The discussion of emotion, feeling and sensation directly relates to the triad of *khandha-dhatu-ayatana* and identifies the corresponding senses with their objects and awarenesses that result in an experience and thus a feeling (*vedana*) and possible emotion (*samkhara*). An example of this is found in the post of 1 November 2008 on *The American Buddhist* blog, where Justin states "Sometimes we can look into a dew drop or a blade of grass and see how small and interconnected the world is". In addition, there are many posts which include photos from visiting different places such as Chicago (9 November 2008, 'Chicago in Pictures') and the Glacier (24 November 2008, 'Choices: Photos for the Show'). Justin's narrative and photos provide an example of a visual sensory experience, a cognitive process and a resulting feeling which he shares with his readers⁴¹⁰.

⁴¹⁰ Stephen Pattison (2007) and Damasio (2000) mention this three step process of sense, cognition and feeling.

The quantitative data illustrates that there is a significant number of posts focusing on the experiential aspect of the self. Both American based bloggers, Justin and James, have at least half of their posts containing an experiential element, whereas the British blogger, Will, has only 35% of posts containing an experiential element. The disparity between the American and British blogs could be due to cultural differences, topic, style or purpose for blogging.

Significantly *thinkBuddha.org* has the highest percentage of self reflective posts (50%) and self presentation posts (40%) (see figure 35). On the other hand, it has the lowest percentage posts categorised as experiential self (35%)⁴¹¹. I would argue that this could be attributed to a number of reasons, although further analysis of the three bloggers in addition to other blogs would be needed in order to satisfactorily draw conclusions. I hypothesise that there are possibly two factors to consider. First, that *thinkBuddha.org* is maintained by a published academic and writer and this appears to have a bearing on the type of posts written, as many are book reviews or narratives from travelling but they do not use emotive language or focus on experiences had by the author. Second, *thinkBuddha.org* does not include additional visual features out with the post itself and so the category of experiential self is curtailed primarily to the narrative.

⁴¹¹ Posts can be categorised in more than one category.

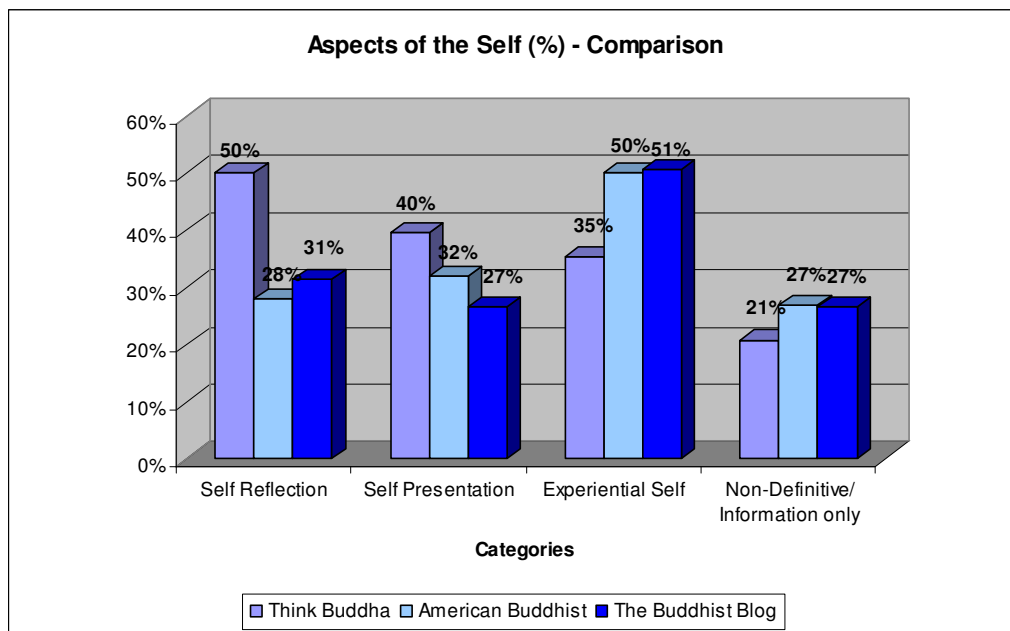


Figure 35 - Total Percentage of Posts - Aspects of the Self

In addition to this, there is a noticeable comparison with the length of posts for each blogger, the majority of posts for all three blogs relate to the category containing five or more paragraphs (long post – see figure 36). Figure thirty six may be misleading as it provides a representation of number of posts rather than a percentage, so figure thirty seven provides a more accurate depiction of this and shows that the number of long posts were very similar with *thinkBuddha.org* 67% , *American Buddhist* 68% and *The Buddhist Blog* 70%. It could be said that this is not a surprising result as the popularity of these three blogs perhaps drives the blogger to write lengthier posts. I would also argue, as previously stated in case study two (*American Buddhist*) that the subject of the blogs including aspects of Buddhism, ethics and philosophy will inevitably result in a lengthier post. I think it is also worth noting that posts on other new media platforms such as Facebook and micro-blogging sites (Twitter) are curtailed by the software, whereas the traditional blog is not and so the authors are inclined to write lengthier posts.

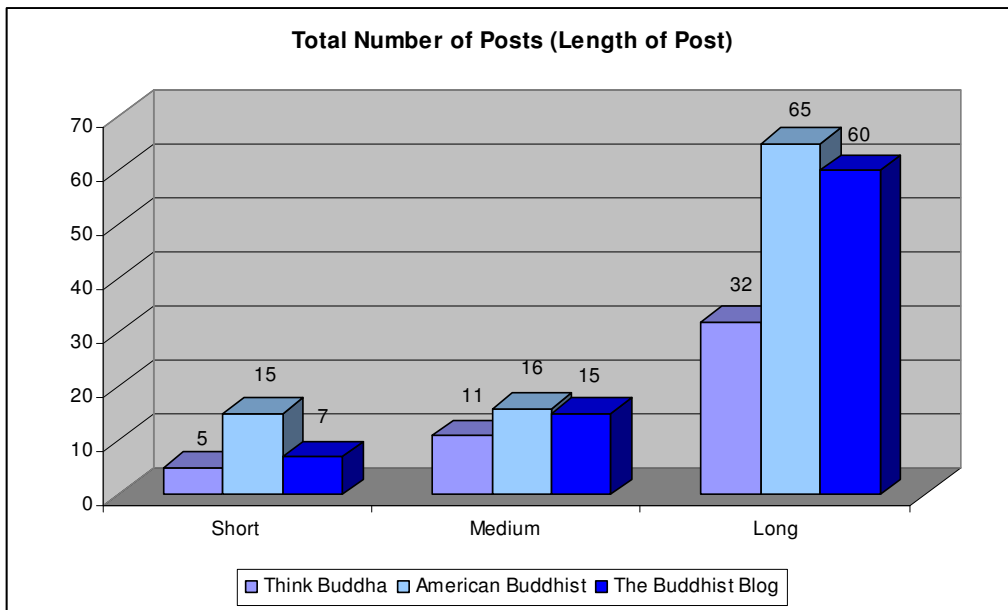


Figure 36 - Total Number of Posts (Length of Post)

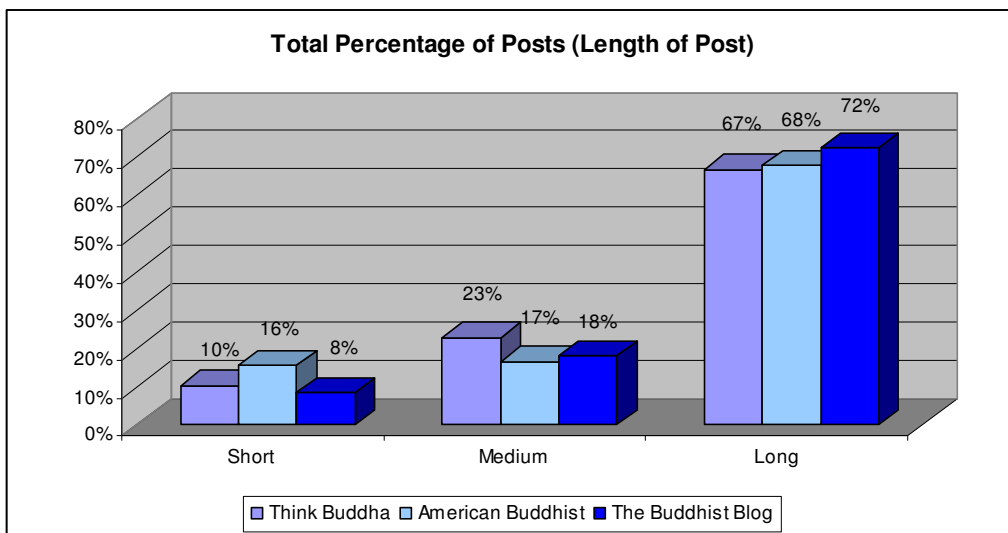


Figure 37- Total Percentage of Posts (Length of Post)

The quantitative data has provided an insight into the similarities and differences between the three blogs but I want to provide a more thorough understanding of the blogging culture. Five themes have emerged in this thesis, specifically, the rationale for keeping a blog (Rainie 2005; Lenhart and Fox 2006); the importance of aesthetics in the online environment (Kozinets 2010); participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, 2009; Rettberg 2008; Rosenberg 2009); the issues in relation to exhibitionism and

privacy (de Laat 2008; Stefanone and Jang 2008); and blogging as a means of religious practice (Cheong et al. 2008; Lee 2009). In the following section, I provide a comparative analysis in relation to these themes, thus providing a greater insight into Buddhism on the internet and how new media is being used in the twenty-first century.

2.1) Why keep a blog?

There are a number of reasons why someone keeps a blog and I have outlined these in each of the case studies but what I want to do here is identify similarities and differences between the three bloggers. For Jung et al., the motivation for blogging includes “entertainment, information, social interaction, self-expression, passing time, and new trend” (2007: 26). Some of these categories are identified as motivations for the three bloggers and I argue that they blog as a means for self reflection, self presentation and as a tool to communicate; and so using Jung et al.’s terminology this would include information, social interaction, self-expression and passing time.

In the case studies, I have stated that blogging can be considered within the genre of life writing and so I refer to the propositions put forth by Eakin (1999), Gyatso (1998) and Rosenberg (2009). I argue that the self is defined as a continual process and is therefore similar to that posited by Eakin (1999) and Ronkin (2005). Moreover, life writing is culturally contextualised and “Over the past decade, confessional autobiography has become a popular literary trend, and as a result the bookstores are filled with examples” (Rosenberg 2009: 43). Similarly, the increase in popularity of autobiography has paralleled the trend for examples of autobiography on the web (Renov 2002). For each blogger their rationale for blogging can be summarised as follows.

During the research period James (*The Buddhist Blog*) posted eighty three times which consisted of 72% being more than five paragraphs long. The posts provide a detailed expose of many aspects of his life including his struggle with mental illness and his religious and political views. He summarises his reason for blogging as “a

more structured process that just chaotic thinking”⁴¹². James’ blogging practice is also communal, as his blog contained a significantly higher percentage of comments than the other two blogs; a total of 579 comments were exchanged between James and his readers. James’ blogging practice indicates that it is both a medium for reflection (31% of posts) but it is also as a communication tool to engage with his readers (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5). James also uses his blog to present different dimensions of himself (27% of posts are categorised as self presentation) but also to be influenced by others. In this respect I do not think Rosenberg’s definition of a blog and a social network site can be so clearly demarcated: “A blog let’s you define yourself, whereas on a social network you are more likely to be defined by others” (Rosenberg 2009: 336)

Justin (*The American Buddhist*) blogs for a number of reasons including to present himself to his audience, as a memoir and significantly for him it is a natural progression from keeping a paper diary when he was at high school. Accordingly, this corroborates Ong’s theory of an evolutionary process from paper to electronic writing (Ong [1982] 2002). What does differ to the paper diary is the ability to keep many blogs, focusing on different subjects/areas of his life/aspects of the self. In some respects this resonates with Turkle’s definition of the ‘fragmented self’ and ‘multiple identities’ (1995: 258). I have shown that Justin’s compartmentalisation of different subjects/areas of his life/aspects of the self on different blogs, is no different to the role and identities that a person has offline, as a father, brother, colleague, partner etc.

I have also shown that Justin’s blogging has resulted in privacy, exhibitionist and trust issues with some of his romantic relationships (de Laat 2008). This is illustrated in the post of 26 October 2008 where he comments on the issues that have arisen from divulging too much about his personal life and so he states “a new sense of discretion prevents me from saying much”⁴¹³. These issues are associated with the public/private dichotomy and whether blogs are indeed recognised as public or

⁴¹² Extracted from email correspondence, dated 2 March 2010.

⁴¹³ Spelling mistake is in the original post.

private (Hine 2000; Hoover and Clark 2002; Kozinets 2010). For the purpose of this thesis, I have applied Hookway's definition that bloggers may write about private/personal matters but they are located within the public sphere of cyberspace (2008: 105).

Furthermore, it is in Justin's email correspondence with me that he provides an insight into why he blogs stating "Blogging, like any writing practice, helps facilitate deeper thought and self reflection. It is hopefully a pathway into seeing more clearly both the 'self' that processes the world around me and the world around me"⁴¹⁴. Justin's motivation to blog is defined by him as a reflective practice and one where he expresses himself rather than for engaging with others or as a means of entertainment. This is contrary to the categorisation of posts which indicate that he presents an experiential self (50% of posts) and self presentation (32% of posts) more so than self reflection (28% of posts).

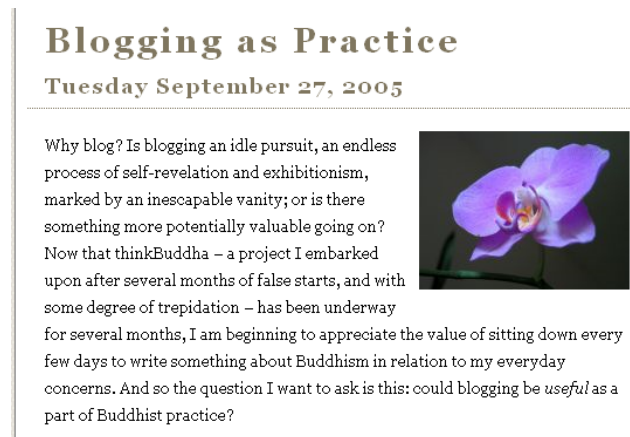


Figure 38 – *thinkBuddha.org* - Blogging as Practice, 27 September 2005

The final case study provides an insight into Will's blogging practice and it is in the post of 27 September 2005⁴¹⁵ (figure 38) that he discusses this and interestingly queries whether it is a means of self-revelation and exhibitionism. He reflects on

⁴¹⁴ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

⁴¹⁵ Although this post is out with the research period is provided an excellent example and so I felt it necessary to include it within the discussion.

others who have kept written dairies and he concludes that he feels the exercise of blogging is a “worthwhile and worthy enterprise”.

Will, is a professional writer and academic and he uses his blog as a platform to present his writing and so affirming Rosenberg’s statement that “A blog lets you raise your voice without asking anyone’s permission and no one is in a position to tell you to shut up” (Rosenberg 2009: 336). The motivation as to why he blogs is highlighted in the post titled ‘Zen, Brains and Making Friends With Your Own Head’ on 10 November 2008, where he states “When I write this blog, it is not often with a clear idea of where I am heading. Often I find myself writing because I feel that there might be some interesting thoughts to be had in a particular direction, and so I set up to see where these thoughts want to lead me”. It can be said that his motivation for blogging is about communicating his thoughts but he does censor these, as he notes later in the same post “The thought, that is to say, emerges in the writing, and if it doesn’t emerge, I save the article as a draft”. This last point potentially indicates that Will considers what he publishes and so Rettberg’s argument that “savvy bloggers, are aware that their audience may be greater than they imagine, and they know that they cannot control who is reading. That presumably changes the way we write” is accurate in this case (Rettberg 2008: 42). Will’s blogging practice is primarily reflective but he also carefully presents his posts and this is supported by the quantitative data. The categorisation of posts for thinkBuddha.org primarily contains posts related to self reflection (50%) and self presentation (40%).

In sum, the reasons why these three bloggers keep a blog vary but there are also similarities as all feel a need to express themselves and in doing so, the blog enables them to ‘think out loud’. For some, there have been consequences as a result of this which have included Justin’s public acknowledgement of the breakdown of his romantic relationships and James’ reflection on comments he made about his meditation practice in the post of 31 January 2008. In the next section, I focus on the second comparative area to be analysed which is the importance of the visual component of blogs.

2.2) The importance of aesthetics online

The visual element has been given a prominent place within this discourse as the visual stimuli is important online, especially as a result of the absence of three of the five senses, namely touch, taste and hearing. In addition, Pattison (2007), Morgan (2005, 2010) and Plate (2002) have discussed the importance of images in relation to mediated belief and experience (Morgan 2010: 12) and this can be useful for understanding how religious images are used online in blogs.

Different visual characteristics have been examined, including the overall design; the use of images in both the post and in the blog; whether this is a prominent feature of the blog; and whether Buddhist images are used. As a result, *thinkBuddha.org* (case study three) has a minimal approach to images and colour in the overall design of the blog. On the other hand, 100% of the analysed posts contained an image. It transpired that this was a default requirement of the blog software. *The American Buddhist* (case study two) blog had only 46% of posts containing an image. In contrast to *thinkBuddha.org*, *The American Buddhist* blog does contain a number of Buddhist images both in the banner and on the right hand frame. In comparison to both these blogs, it is *The Buddhist Blog* (case study one) which contains a significant number of images within the posts (98%) as well as a number of Buddhist images and other graphics in the banner and on the right hand frame. Nonetheless, all three blogs do use images to some extent but each blogger applies a different level of importance, for example James maintains, “images can convey so much” and “the image and design of the blog is important to me”⁴¹⁶. James’ comment is representative of the high volume of images in *The Buddhist Blog*.

The choice to include images and specific images can influence the readership of the blog, especially where the image is considered iconic or culturally valuable (Aumont 1997: 189). The inclusion of images can also attract an audience and encouragement them to participate. An example of this is in the post of 24 November 2008, where Justin asks his readers to comment on which photograph they like best (I will discuss

⁴¹⁶ Quote extracted from email 2 March 2010.

the participatory aspect of blogs in the next section). One area where there is a noticeable difference in the use of images is in the bloggers profile.

Both James and Justin have a profile and provide a portrait photograph whereas Will does not have a prominent profile and he does not include a portrait photograph. As I have discussed, this partially relates to the specific blog application software used but it is also a preference as the design of *thinkBuddha.org* is one of simplicity⁴¹⁷. The preference for using images, art and photographs rather than or other types of slogans or graphics are found in all three blogs. This could support Castells theory that “Art, increasingly a hybrid expression of virtual and physical materials, may be a fundamental cultural bridge between the Net and the self” (Castells 2001: 205).

In addition to the inclusion or absence of images, all three bloggers have modified and redesigned their blogs during the research period. There have been a number of reasons given but the general consensus is to increase usability and to attract an audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006; Rettberg 2008). Furthermore, this indicates that unlike the traditional form of life writing, bloggers don’t blog solely for themselves, they blog for others (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5), even although it is practically impossible to determine who the audience is (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 33).

2.3) Participatory Culture

As I have shown in each of the case studies, blogging can be defined as participatory (Rettberg 2009: 64, 155), as “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement” (Jenkins 2009: 6). The community involvement includes affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving and circulation (Jenkins 2009: 9). Blogging can include these characteristics via the different features, including comments, a blogroll, the ability to repost to Twitter or another blog and RSS feeds. Noticeably, it is where the blogger interacts with the readers through the comments feature or the possible reciprocation of links due to the

⁴¹⁷ Rebecca Blood discusses the importance of design and the differences as a result of using different applications (2002: 57)

blogroll that provides elements of participation (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 7, 34). An example of how important the comments feature is has been highlighted in chapter eight; as Will takes considerable care to ensure that the comments feature on *thinkBuddha.org* is maintained and functional (23 November 2007, 'Comments List Updated').

Blogging defined as participatory enables a greater understanding of how identity creation and maintenance is possibly achieved, as "new media provides powerful new ways of representing and manipulating information" (Jenkins 2009: 43). The sharing of information (personal or not) and possible collaboration highlights the shift in boundaries from a personalised home page or blog to "socialized or communalized media that is central to the culture of media convergence" (Jenkins 2009: 73). Blogs provide an example of how new media can be used reflexively, collaboratively, communally, or even as a medium for performance (Turkle 1995: 241-242; Bell 2007: 113-136).

2.4) Ethics, Trust, Exhibitionism and Privacy

There are two strands to this discussion, the first relates to the ethical implications of studying a private dialogue within a public sphere and the second is the issue of the expectation of privacy and trust and the potential exhibitionist qualities found in many blogs (de Laat 2008)⁴¹⁸. The first aspect, ethics, is discussed in detail within the methodology chapter and so I do not want to labour the point here but I do want to summarise the conclusion.

There has to be an ethical approach when studying human subjects however the traditional approach is not necessarily suitable for the online environment and so further guidance is needed on how to undertake ethical research online, possibly with the development of specific methodological and ethical guidelines (Hine 2000;

⁴¹⁸ The analysis of privacy is not curtailed to blogging, and has been discussed in relation to Youtube where there are two categories of privacy that is 'publicly private and privately public'. The publicly private is where the identity would be revealed but the content was not distributed widely. On the other hand the privately public content was where the identity was minimal but the content was shared widely with others (de Laat 2008: 361).

Kozinets 2010: 141). Arguably, online the information can be of a personal nature but it is presented in a public sphere and so this raises an issue of informed consent for the researcher. The conclusion drawn refers both to Hookway's (2008) and to Kozinets' (2010) proposition that bloggers write with the intention of having an audience and in doing so are waving their right to privacy and so "blogs may be personal but they are not private" (Hookway 2008: 105).

This is not to say that other areas of the internet would result in the same approach, for example when examining individuals in online worlds. Therefore, further typologies and guidelines are needed in order to protect both the researcher and those online. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this thesis the ethical guidelines have been adhered to and consent has been obtained from the bloggers, albeit according to Hookway (2008: 105) and Kozinets (2010: 105) this is not required⁴¹⁹.

The second strand of this discourse is that of trust, privacy and exhibitionism which has been discussed by de Laat (2008) and Rosenberg (2009). These issues and characteristics are unique to new media and specifically the blog genre as the public dialogue may include not only aspects of the bloggers' life but possibly that of his family, friends or others. This has resulted in many realising that the practice of blogging is not curtailed to a private dialogue and as a result the implied or assumed trust has been broken (de Laat 2008: 59). The discourse on trust also includes the question of privacy and although many bloggers write with the expectation of an audience (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5), there is still a naivety by some who "may assume readers to be worthy of their intimacies – but not all of them conform to this assumption" (de Laat 2008: 67)⁴²⁰. I argue that there is still a naivety regarding the use of the internet and that what is uploaded to the internet is not always considered to be public and so people often do not realise that the information can be read by anyone including family, friends or even potential employers.

⁴¹⁹ An ethics assessment form was completed and approved by the University of Edinburgh.

⁴²⁰ The issue of privacy is more prominent in social network such as Facebook, where it is the responsibility of the user to ensure that the privacy settings have been set. Issues have arisen where this has not been undertaken and consequences have resulted, examples of which have been set out by Horn & Hughes in 'Facebook and Online Privacy: Attitudes, Behaviours, and Unintended Consequences', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (2009).

On the other hand there are bloggers who intentionally portray exhibitionist qualities and in doing so provide a medium for others to share experiences of someone's 'real life'. Drawing again from de Laat, it is important to acknowledge that exhibitionism correlates with voyeurism and in today's culture of reality television, blogs mediate exhibitionism and voyeurism (2008: 63). Therefore, the blogging culture is more than a mere application for uploading information or photos it too becomes a tool to communicate and potentially a medium for entertainment, thus corroborating Rettberg's assertion that blogging is "participatory media" (2008: 155).

These different characteristics have materialised in the course of this research and as I have discussed above this has been shown in the second case study where Justin discussed his romantic relationships in detail, only to conclude that he should be more careful in what he discusses on his blog as it caused arguments within his girlfriend, who later became the fiancé and who later parted ways with Justin. In relation to the voyeuristic element, this has been prevalent in all three case studies and has been illustrated by the vast number of comments left by readers. A total of nine hundred and eighty two comments were left against the two hundred and twenty seven posts which strongly implies that the dialogue between the reader and the blogger not only demonstrates voyeurism but a community and so this is a significant difference from keeping the normative paper-diary.

Although the subject of voyeurism and exhibitionism has been discussed they have not been examined thoroughly as this would require a greater number of blogs as well as contact with the readers of the blogs. However, the discussion here has corroborated de Laat's (2008) assertion that bloggers and blogging practice has a number of issues that need to be considered in order to understand the culture and practice of blogging. Moreover, Rosenberg questions whether the issue of privacy will be redundant in years to come, claiming that "It's possible, of course, that future generations will simply give up on privacy – that the web user of the future, surrounded by cell-phone snapshots and surveillance cameras, will assume that everything will turn up in the public record anyway. Perhaps everyone else will be equally tarnished by revelations of impropriety, which will evoke dwindling levels of outrage, and no one will worry about hiding anything" (Rosenberg 2009: 44). In a similar pessimistic tone, Rettberg proposes that "Perhaps it is already too late to

worry. We have, in a sense already given up our privacy a long time ago” (2008: 160).

It can be said that the online culture provides a new way to experience and be present in the online world but it can include mistrust and a lack of privacy (de Laat 2008). Since the mid nineties, the “language of liberation and utopian possibility” (Turkle 1995: 246) has been superseded and the internet now includes many of the dimensions found offline, such as “power, discourse, and domination” (Turkle 1995: 248). The change in culture requires cultural theorists and scholars from other disciplines to examine these dimensions, including identity and religion. Specifically, it is important that religious affiliation, seekership and the portrayal of religiousness in blogs is an area that is explored further.

2.5) Blogging as religious practice: “quest culture” and Generation-X

It has been shown that the three bloggers have had exposure to different religions including Mormonism and Humanism (James), Catholicism (Justin) and Buddhism (Will, Justin and James). All three bloggers, sometimes reluctantly, label themselves as Buddhist. Justin states “If pressed, I typically say I’m Theravadin”⁴²¹ and Will uses the word ‘Buddhish’⁴²² stating “Perhaps these days I am less inclined to identify myself as Buddhist, or even as Buddhish”⁴²³ as well as “One of the reasons that I avoid identifying myself as being “Buddhist” these days is that I have become increasingly uncertain as to what this term might actually indicate.”⁴²⁴. Perhaps this reluctance relates to being associated with a Buddhist institution, although all three bloggers depict themselves as adhering (even loosely) to Buddhism, for different reasons. This could be said to be associated with the “quest culture” (Roof 1999). Roof maintains that the quest culture is typified by the baby-boomers culture and that there is a need for spirituality but that they appear to be searching rather than

⁴²¹ Extracted from email correspondence, dated 19 July 2010.

⁴²² ‘Are you Buddhish?’ 10 March 2007, Will discusses whether he is Buddhist or Buddhish. This post is out with the research period but is a precursor to the posts noted above.

⁴²³ ‘Thinking Out Loud’, 1 August 2007.

⁴²⁴ ‘Texts, Bones, and Early Buddhists’, 27 October 2008.

necessarily finding⁴²⁵. The seeking of something ‘Other’ is also highlighted by Lovheim, who states that “through relating human life to something ‘sacred’ or transcendent, religion also makes sense of existential experiences of a more profound nature, such as confronting death, suffering, and the purpose of life” (2004: 60). For Hoover and Clark, the ‘sacred’ is about “the ordering of existence” and to provide meaning in everyday life (2002: 17).

The typical demographics of bloggers, includes 54% being under the age of thirty years old, 60% are white, (Lenhart and Fox 2006: 5) 57% are male, 39% have college degrees and 82% have been online for six years or more (Rainie 2005: 2). This indicates that a typical blogger is not in fact of the baby-boom generation but are from the generation known as Generation-X⁴²⁶. While some argue that Generation-X are those who are born in the 1960s and 1970s, Lynch suggests that Generation-X should be about the particular attitude “towards this process of making sense of who we are and how we should live in the contemporary world” rather than when the person was born⁴²⁷. With that said, there are similarities in the quest for spiritual answers in both the ‘quest culture’ and Generation-X as both focus on the ‘self’ or the ‘individual’ and so “In a very fundamental sense, what is at stake is a viable conception of the ‘self’” (Roof 1999: 35).

Therefore, the three bloggers reflection and presentation of their religiousness and religious experiences may not conform to institutionalised Buddhism or mainstream Buddhism but the bloggers demonstrate that they are affiliated with Buddhism, even if this is tentatively or non-conformist. It is from the examination of aspects of the self in relation to Buddhism that I determine that the self is actually the analysis of human experience. It is this that renders an individual unique and not the notion of a fixed entity called the ‘self’ and so “in understanding experience one also

⁴²⁵ Baby-boomers generally grew up in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Roof states that they have an emphasis on “self understanding and self reflexivity” and a “deep hunger for a self-transformation” (1999: 9).

⁴²⁶ *Gen X Religion*, provides an insight into the Generation-X culture and religion and this was discussed within the first case study in relation to James’ religious tattoo (Flory and Miller 2000).

⁴²⁷ Douglas Coupland, *Generation-A* (2009), provides a satirical look at popular culture and mixes optimism with paranoia in a world where bees are extinct and the youth live in a digital world of the twenty first century. This follows his novel *Generation-X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture* (1996).

understands the world” (Hamilton 1996: 198). Furthermore, the correlation between blogging and religious practice provides a greater understanding of the ‘self’ and how new media is being used (Lee 2009).

3) Research Question Three

The third research question focuses on the methodology and the use of an interdisciplinary approach. Accordingly chapter four provides an overview of the methodology and the theories applied, including the implementation of a six stage process for selecting and analysing the Buddhist blogs, an outline of the quantitative and qualitative analysis and the fields in which the theoretical insights and methods will be drawn from, namely Buddhist studies, anthropology and visual culture studies. The interdisciplinary approach has enabled a holistic analysis of the different aspects of the self within the online medium. For Hojsgaard and Warburg, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary (2005: 9) and for Kozinets, there is a requirement for specific methodologies and guidelines for the examination of the internet (2010).

In addition, I have argued that there is a need for typologies, categorisation, definitions and theories in order to examine and comparatively examine different aspects of online and offline culture, specifically religious practice (Karaflogka 2002, 2006). This has been outlined and discussed in chapter four and I argued that there needs to be a Buddhist typology for the categorisation of Buddhist websites as well as mapping the Buddhist cyberspace. In doing so, a greater understanding of how technology is shaping and being shaped by culture and the individual can be identified (Turkle 2011).

Moreover, the definitions, typologies and approach applied within this thesis are flexible and can be applied to other areas of the internet including websites, social networks and micro-blogging in order to provide a more detailed analysis of Buddhism online. With that said, there will be a continual requirement to adapt and change methodologies in order to keep abreast of a constantly changing medium (Hine 2000; Karaflogka 2002, 2006; Kozinets, 2010).

Regarding the benefits of this approach, there are many including the ability to capture information on a relatively new medium. For some the fear of new media has resulted in a negative adoption and in doing so there has been concern surrounding the dangers of social networking or the impact that it has on society, however Rosenberg argues that bloggers “Far from wrecking culture, they will help preserve it” (2009: 344). Importantly, blogs unlike social network sites or micro-blogs have the facility to archive previous posts and so they can historically capture themes and discussion topics in a chronological archive that can be retrieved at a later date. On the other hand, there is the challenge of examining blogs as bloggers have the ability to permanently delete blog posts and censor comments, which although within their rights may deem to “violate some primal taboo of Web behaviour” (Rosenberg 2009: 226). It could be argued that a continual examination into all aspects of the ephemeral internet is needed in order to gather snapshots of the online culture so as to reflect and dissect it against future research.

4) Research Question Four

Throughout the discussion a number of areas for further examination have been raised including the use of new media in relation to religious practice; the examination of Buddhism online; as well as the examination of emotions and experiences both manifested and expressed online. It is not my intention to draw conclusions to these topics but I do want to outline some of the potential benefits for exploring these topics further.

4.1) Blog Culture

As I have already stated, the exploration of blog culture and the mapping and developing of typologies is crucial in order to capture what may result in a fleeting application but on the other hand the application has dramatically changed the way news is published and where we potentially go for current information. Fox et al. identify that “In the emerging era of the blog, experts believe the internet will bring yet more dramatic change to the news and publishing worlds. They predict the least amount of change to religion” (2005: ii). I would argue that since this article was published religious blogging is changing religion and is changing how some practice

religion, which is evident from Cheong et al. (2008) and Lee's (2009) studies, both of which provide an insight into blogging as a means of religious practice.

The exploration of blog culture extends beyond usage and also addresses marketing, other technologies and so "Future researchers need to study weblog services and Web page space providers for factors that influence weblog design and composition decision since different weblog service providers use different strategies to gain a market share" (Jung et al. 2007: 31). As an extension to this, religious blogs could be examined in a commercial context and questions surrounding how they attract a market share, how religions are engaging with online audiences, how religions are merging offline and online practice and potentially how are religious institutions using the web and blog technology as a means of income through e-commerce – all of which need to be explored⁴²⁸.

4.2) New Media and religious practice

The examination of new media and religion will continually change depending on the newest application and so it is important to analyse the growth of religious new media. It is for this reason that categorisation (Karaflogka 2006) and a typology for capturing different aspects of Buddhist new media would compliment the work carried out by Bunt in relation to his map of the Islamic Internet (2009: 46-47). In particular, the mapping of Buddhist websites would provide further evidence of how both lay and monastic blogs are used and this would corroborate Schneider & Braunstein's proposition that "Because of their ease of publication and use, blogs have changed the shape of public discourse in society as a whole and around religious questions in particular. . . blogging is a powerful and flexible medium, one uniquely suited to providing the space for vibrant, diverse, and productive discussions about religion" (2010: 8).

⁴²⁸ Maria Einstein analyses religion and marketing in *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*(2008).

This thesis provides a longitudinal ethnographic examination of lay Buddhist blogs, however there are still questions needing answered, including “why and how are these blogs being used by both lay and monastic individuals?” and “how are they received by readers and what are the changes, if any, to traditional Buddhist practice?”. These questions can be categorised under three themes; usage, reception and impact on religion⁴²⁹. It is under these themes that a number of other areas would be included, such as, authoritativeness, privacy, trust, exhibitionism, marketing and identifying the different types of self presented in the blogs. In answering these questions it would further contribute to Lee’s exploration of monastic blogging practice where he maintains that “the degree of self cultivation varies contingent upon the given conditions and the technologies that the priests practice to interact with them” (2009: 97). Lee concludes that his study “has the potential to further the exploration of the interaction of cyberspace and the inner self, expanding the boundary beyond all religious practice. When the self and cyberspace are understood . . . the range of study about the engagement of the self in the new media can be brought into light” (2009: 113).

4.3) Emotions, Experience and the Internet

Through the course of undertaking this research a number of topics have emerged including the experiential and emotional aspect of the individual. Whilst this examination did not endeavour to analyse how the internet results in an emotional or experiential outcome for the individual, it did focus on the bloggers’ experience presented in the posts. Some research is beginning to emerge in this area including a number of articles presented in the *Online – Heidelberg Religions on the Internet* 2010 special edition which focuses on aesthetics, senses and religious practice online (Connelly 2010; Grieve 2010). As early as 1995, Turkle highlighted that further work is needed in order to understand how the internet can be used and what are the quantifiable experiences had by the participants. Of course this will incur a number of challenges including the ethical issues and the obtaining of consent but in doing so it will widen the discussion and potentially identify trends, as well as possible

⁴²⁹ Cheong et al. provides a similar categorisation including “understanding the nature of blogs, the motivations behind blog use for religious expression, and the implications fro religious community building” (2008: 108).

changes and how the internet can be used to enrich the lives of the individual and the community (Turkle 1995: 269; 2011).

5) Conclusion

In conclusion the aim of this thesis was to analyse aspects of the self within selected Buddhist blogs. I have demonstrated that by examining the categories of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self it provides an insight into the “important questions about storytelling and self-presentation, motivations for media use, and the building of community online” (Cheong et al. 2008: 108).

Blogs like home pages on the web provide a medium for different aspects of the self, including identity (found within the category of self presentation), but these aspects remain coherent. It is no longer a question of “what is the authentic or true self?” (Turkle 1995: 261), instead it is the identification of different dimensions of the self that are presented and reflected on within the online environment.

In this discourse I have not focused on the categories of religion online or online religion (Helland 2000) rather the focus has been on the self mediated through a religious or quasi-religious Buddhist blog. With that said, I have shown that it is sometimes difficult to discuss religion, self, technology and culture in isolation and so these subjects have been discussed in tandem in order to provide a holistic argument. As a consequence a number of areas have emerged which require further examination including the need for a typology of Buddhist blogs, authenticity and authoritativeness, blogging as a means of Buddhist religious practice and a sociological analysis of using new media and blogging defined as life writing.

The aim of this thesis and the subsequent discussions directly contributes to answering some of the questions put forth by Dawson and Cowan which can be summarised under the headings of using the internet for religious purpose, quantifying experience, online/offline religious experience, comparative analysis, implications of using the internet, and the suitability of internet use for certain religions over others (2004: 10). It could be argued that Dawson & Cowan’s

questions do not take into account the need for identifying suitable methodologies and typologies (Schneider and Braunstein, 2010: 19) in order to adequately analyse the relationship between the internet and religion (Karaflogka 2002, 2006; Kozinets 2010).

Blogging provides a new form of global communication which can facilitate religious practice, identity development, experiences, promotion and marketing⁴³⁰. Consequently, it is important to understand how religion is possibly changing; the developments in new technology; how we communicate and interact; how we experience; why we use the internet in certain ways; all of which will assist with identifying trends and more importantly the consequences and benefits of using the internet as part of everyday life (Certeau 1984; Turkle 2011).

In this thesis, I have provided an ethnographic examination of three Buddhist and quasi-Buddhist bloggers in their intentional or unintentional pursuit of self reflection, self presentation and the experiential self via their online diary. In order to analyse aspects of the self within the blogs, I have drawn from different disciplines, including Buddhist studies, anthropology, visual culture studies and media studies. In addition, the religious context has provided a resource for understanding the Buddhist terminology presented in the context of the blog posts. Furthermore, the discussion has included the different related aspects of blog culture. I have stressed the importance that new media and religious practice cannot be examined in isolation but must be considered within the wider cultural context. This exploration should also take into account the four themes of ritual, authority, identity and community (Campbell 2010b, Campbell ed. 2012); as well as the wider context of cyber religious behaviour (Campbell and Connelly 2011).

Furthermore, there are a number of new areas of research which are beginning to be explored, such as religious practice in the online world of *Second Life*. The virtual worlds provide a rich environment for understanding how religion is negotiated between the offline and online world. This is exemplified by Grieve (2010) and

⁴³⁰ Maria Einstein (2008) discusses marketing religion.

Connelly (2010, 2012) who examine the practice of virtual Buddhist meditation. These studies show that there is an expectation that while the avatar is meditating online, the person is practicing meditation offline. Accordingly, the religious practice facilitated online provides a sense of community, identity, authority and participation in ritual both offline and online (Connelly 2012).

I have demonstrated that there are many interconnected themes that need to be considered when examining aspects of the self within Buddhist blogs in order to truly understand how new media is being used in the twenty-first century. Yet, there are many questions still to be answered and so it is necessary to refine and develop methodologies and theories to address the complex and ever changing online culture (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 1; Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005: 9; Kozinets 2010). The analysis of Buddhism on the internet is still in its infancy but this thesis provides an insight into Buddhism online and directly contributes to the emerging discussion within the field of media, religion and culture.

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Appendix 1

Glossary – Buddhist terms⁴³²

Abhidhamma/ Abhidharma	Third basket of the Pali Canon. Focuses on metaphysical analysis of existence
Anatta	No-self/Not-self, selflessness
Bodhisattva	A being who aims to liberate all from suffering. Commonly found in Mahayana Buddhism
Dharma/ Dhamma	Teaching of the Buddha. The ‘truth’
dhammas/ dharmas	Individual, momentary factors that are discussed in the Abhidhamma
Dukkha	Suffering, unsatisfactoriness, Described by the Buddha in the first Noble Truth
Karma	Action that results in consequences – good and bad
Khandha	The elements, aggregates or components of the self of which there are five
Madhyamika	School which focuses on the doctrine of emptiness. Founder is Nagarjuna (second century CE)
Mahayana	‘The Great Vehicle’, school of Buddhism, developed doctrine of emptiness
Moksa	Liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (samsara)
Paticcasamuppada	Dependent origination contains twelve links
Pudgalavada	Buddhist school which expounded the existence of a person (puggala)
Rupa	The first of the five components/aggregates of <i>anatta</i> , and

⁴³² Diacritic marks have been removed to ease reading and to maintain consistency

	can be defined as material
Samkhara	The fourth of the five components/aggregates of <i>anatta</i> , and can be defined as volition (where emotion resides)
Samsara	Cycle of birth, death and rebirth
Sanna	The third of the five components/aggregates of <i>anatta</i> , and can be defined as perception
Sukha	Bliss, pleasant and can be discussed in relation to feeling – <i>sukha vedana</i>
Sutta/ sutra	A Buddhist text
Theravada	Origins of Indian Buddhism
Upadana	Clinging or grasping
Upadana-khandha	The five aggregates of attachment
Vedana	The second of the five components/aggregates of <i>anatta</i> , and can be defined as feeling
Vinanna	The fifth of the five components/aggregates of <i>anatta</i> , and can be defined as consciousness or ‘awareness’
Vasubandhu	Buddhist in the late fourth or early fifth century CE

Appendix 2

Glossary – Media/Technology terms

Arpanet	The network developed by the US Department of Defence
Avatar	A graphic visual representation of a person found in online worlds and games
Cyberspace	The online environment
Emoticons	A combination of letters or symbols to represent an emotion or phrase e.g. LOL is 'laugh out loud' or ':)' is a smile
Hyperlink	A clickable link that enables the person to move to another page or website
Hypertext	Nonlinear text found on the internet
Internet	The tool or medium, connected globally via protocols in order to share information
Lurking	Users who do not publicly announce themselves in participatory environments e.g. chat rooms
Post	Messages or discussions found on new groups or blogs
Protocols	Enables computers to connect to each other