

Meditating Online ‘Alone Together’: Two Case Studies of Digital Buddhist Practice

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Abstract: As a wide array of social and religious activities have moved online in recent decades, Buddhist communities and individuals have had to make choices about the nature of their digital presence. This article will compare the online meditation and community practices of two different Buddhist groups who show that meditation and religious practice can be effective online: one, a saṅgha in a virtual world, exists only online, while the other is a saṅgha that primarily functions in person and has only recently extended itself into the digital sphere. Based on several years of ethnographic research with both communities, this piece discusses the particular contours of the digital Buddhist practices embraced by these subcultures, as well as the ways that technology has served to both expand and constrain participation in the Buddhist meditations, rituals, and teachings they offer.

Keywords: digital Buddhism, virtual Buddhism, online religion, Soto Zen, nonheritage Buddhism

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.07.01.01>

Digital Buddhisms have received increased attention from academics over the past few decades, including both treatments of the use of digital tools for Buddhist studies¹ and studies of the ways that Buddhists are utilizing new platforms for practice. This latter category is inclusive of everything from studies of video transmissions of teachings and initiations² and new standalone meditation apps,³ to star Buddhist teachers on social media⁴ and active chat groups on social media sites,⁵ and even chatbot tools such as the AI interface that allows Xian'er the robot to 'chat' with devotees on WeChat.⁶ In the midst of this rush of Buddhist technologies, I have focused most of my own research attention on digital Buddhism on worship and meditation with saṅghas online, and thus, this paper will explore two disparate Buddhist communities—the Buddha Center in Second Life (SL) and the Daifukuji Soto Mission in Hawai'i—and show how each saṅgha has used digital outreach to build community capacity for online practice.

The two communities discussed in this paper are very different—the Buddha Center, a cybersangha, only exists in a virtual world, while the other, Daifukuji, is a hundred-year-old actual life (AL) temple with increasing digital engagement. Still, they both offer opportunities for community members to participate in online meditative ritual, prayer, and memorialization. Daifukuji is reaching more of its saṅgha by making their services and zazen sessions hybrid in some way. They are bridging the gap between members who live locally and those who do not, but they are also making it easier for locals who would prefer not to drive in the pre-dawn darkness, especially if they live farther away. The Buddha Center in Second Life is

¹ For example, see Bazarov, Rinchinov, and Bazarov, 'Digital Transformation'. Also, Veidlinger, ed., *Digital Humanities*.

² Ostrovskaya et al., 'Russian-Speaking Digital Buddhism'.

³ See McGuire, 'Buddhist-Inspired Self-Tracking Apps'; Tarocco, 'On the Market'; and, Wagner and Accardo, 'Buddhist Apps'.

⁴ Falcone, 'A Transnational Tulku'; Tarocco, 'Technologies of Salvation'.

⁵ Ostrowski, 'Buddha Browsing'.

⁶ Travagnin, 'From Online Buddha Halls'.

similarly accessible and even more inviting, as it is open to the public and not just to members.

Following in the footsteps of other religious studies scholars working in Second Life,⁷ I have published several pieces about my research with Buddhists in Second Life,⁸ but in this paper, I will extend those pieces to put the virtual practices of Buddhism in SL into constructive juxtaposition with a second form of virtual worship to better illustrate the breadth of digital religious phenomena. Based on years of ethnographic work with both communities,⁹ I look at the opportunities and limitations of online meditation with Buddhist saṅghas through an anthropological lens. Furthermore, since I did substantial fieldwork with these two groups before, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis, I will also discuss the extent to which the closure of in-person services during quarantine periods impacted digital Buddhist worship in both communities.

⁷ See Connelly 'Virtual Buddhism: An Analysis' and *idem*, 'Virtual Buddhism: Buddhist Ritual'. Also, Grieve, 'Virtually Embodying' and *idem*, *Cyber Zen*.

⁸ Falcone 'Our Virtual Materials'; *idem*, 'Sacred realms in virtual worlds'; *idem*, 'No-longer-places in Virtual Worlds'; and *idem*, 'Virtual Ruination'.

⁹ I did two years of regular research on the Buddha Center in SL from 2010–2012, and then after a lengthy absence, I returned for follow-up work from 2018–2020. As I worked on this article, I returned for one final stint in SL for several months through the spring and summer of 2023. I have been working intermittently at Daifukuji as a researcher and practitioner since 2015; over the intervening years, I have spent over nine months in person at the temple and followed them closely online when I am back on the mainland. I have not changed the names of the Buddhist institutions themselves or the public-facing leadership (founders or religious leaders), as they are easily discerned through a Google search. However, I have changed the proper names (or blurred their names in photos) of all non-public-facing interlocutors to protect their privacy. I received Institutional Review Board certification from Kansas State University for both projects in advance of beginning each of these fieldwork projects.

Spiritual Engagement in a Virtual World

I found Buddhism in Second Life because it was the only game in town, so to speak. When I moved to a college town in the middle of Kansas in 2010 to become an assistant professor of Anthropology at Kansas State University, it was the first time in my adult life that I was living in a place without a Buddhist temple or centre.¹⁰ As a practitioner, and scholar of, Buddhism, this was a challenging situation. So, when I stumbled across a YouTube video of a digital simulation of Buddhist pilgrimage places in which a person recorded their avatar walking around a Buddhist place (the Bodhi Sim) in a virtual world called Second Life, I resolved to begin exploring my virtual Buddhist options. I soon discovered that people around the United States (and indeed, around the world) were meeting and practicing their religions online in this virtual world.

Second Life was founded by Linden Lab in 2003 as a platform that hosts user-generated content. Users have built spaces for work, business, gaming, dancing, shopping, sex work, art and creativity, and education, in addition to many, many spaces for religion. While the SL platform itself can be fairly described as past its prime, surviving twenty years is no small feat in the fast-paced tech world where start-ups may boom and bust spectacularly quickly. Second Life persists, and so do some of the Buddhist spaces carefully built there. There were several Buddhist spaces active during my fieldwork period, but as is common in anthropology, I engaged lightly with several of these groups but really focused my attention on one case study, the Buddha Center.

Since 2010, I have watched the Buddha Center change, grow, and finally downsize with a move from one particular corner of the sprawling world to an even smaller corner. Like SL itself, the Buddha Center is past its heyday, but it persists resiliently for those who value it. Ethnographic research in a virtual world means going into the world and donning an avatar, and then proceeding with a

¹⁰ To be fair, there were a few nonheritage Buddhists who held meditation sessions together, but there was not a full scale community, nor an actual temple or centre.

typical participant observation methodology.¹¹ As an avatar, I could move around, teleport to various places, fly across built landscapes, and seat myself on meditation cushions to attend Buddhist events like dharma talks and facilitated meditation sessions. I have attended countless of these scheduled sessions over the past decade. As I got to know certain teachers, facilitators, devotees, and students, I would sometimes solicit formal interviews. I conducted over three dozen formal interviews in SL by phone, and later through Zoom, and many other informal interviews. In-world interviews using 'voice' meant that two avatars could sit down face-to-face and have a conversation: envision an interview with avatars sitting on colourful bolsters in a digital tea house on a cliff above piercingly blue, shimmering water; as we talk using our AL voices, our avatars sip on pixelated tea, their animated bodies occasionally shifting positions to mimic natural movement.¹² I have done follow-up emails and interviews with many key interlocutors so that I could get a sense of their virtual Buddhist trajectory over time. I have taken the position offered by anthropologist Tom Boellstorff that it is unnecessary to meet with interlocutors in AL in addition to SL.¹³

¹¹ Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography in Virtual Worlds*.

¹² Occasionally, when someone preferred a text exchange, we could sit our avatars down next to each other in a place with privacy and type out our questions and answers for a chat-based interview. Some SL denizens do not want to use the speech function. For more on the resistance by some to the integration of voice onto the platform, see Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*.

¹³ Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*. I am only interested in their SL personas and practices, but as with AL interviewees, I trust that they are being relatively straight with me. I triangulated data where possible, especially as it pertains to social groups in world, rather than demographic data in AL. The Buddha Center did investigate the AL backgrounds of its SL teachers and facilitators, so I can be sure of their demographic and Buddhist bona fides. However, I did not check informant identities, so it is fair enough if a reader prefers to take their self-identified information with a grain of salt. That is, while a reader may prefer to be unsure that a self-identified woman on SL is actually a woman in AL, I submit that it does not impact the broad strokes of analysis here.



FIG. 1 Main meditation hall of Buddha Center. Gathering before a meditation session in March 2020. Photo by author.

The Buddha Center in SL was founded in 2008 by two friends—Zino did most of the building and Delani did more of the early teaching—as they sought to collect legitimate, externally-vetted teachers from any sect of Buddhism. What does the Buddha Center look like? The buildings in Zino’s built environment tend to have an Asian architectural quality, echoing Buddhism’s heritagescapes. The buildings and statues are set into a space dotted with natural beauty such as calm, sparkling seas, lush-green trees, picturesque waterfalls, calm lotus-filled ponds, and bright flowers in full bloom (see Figure 1). The statues in places of worship, such as the main shrine hall and the Deer Park meeting space are modelled on real life antecedents.¹⁴ The Buddha Center, both in its pre- and post-downsizing versions, was built by its leaders to evoke a classical rendering of Buddhist space and not a fantastical one. Both its religious spaces and social spaces are designed to copy and simulate AL places, though I recall a tree on a bridge that had leaves shaped like little red hearts, so it is not a space that is devoid of creative whimsy.

¹⁴ Deer Park in present day Sarnath, India, is where the historical Buddha gave his first sermon over two thousand years ago.



FIG. 2 Teaching in Deer Park at the previous iteration of the Buddha Center in March 2020. Photo by author.

Users must pay Linden Lab a rental fee for utilizing in-world space, so the Buddha Center raised funds for its rent through soliciting donations as well as running a Buddhist gift and art shop (all SL items for SL use). It grew from its infancy as a small space to its heyday in which it took up the entirety of an SL island's worth of digital space. However, the rental cost became difficult to maintain over time, so the Buddha Center downsized substantially in late 2020. The 2020 remodel of the Buddha Center moved the place entirely to a smaller plot of virtual land and maintained some key pieces of the earlier version while downsizing their footprint substantially. In addition to their Welcome Center, where information and schedules can be accessed, key areas for worship and ritual remain today, in addition to a few areas for socializing: a central chapel with a large Buddha statue; a Deer Park-inspired outdoor meditation and teaching space with little digital does quietly nibbling on the grass at the outskirts (see Figure 2); a dreamy meditation cushion facing a large Buddha statue in a waterfall; a memorial stūpa for departed members (two formerly separate stūpas were merged into one); some relaxing places to quietly meditate solo or talk with other community members (envision: pillows, soft-looking chairs, a hammock). The downsized Buddha Center maintained a similar

aesthetic as the original and continued in the vein of replication over fantastical innovations.

What does Buddhist worship look like in such a virtual space? From the outset, the Buddha Center was an eclectic, ecumenical Buddhist space with teachers and meditation facilitators who were from various traditions: Tibetan Mahayana and Vajrayana, Zen Mahayana, Thai Theravada, and Chinese Pure Land, among others. Unlike some of their predecessor spaces, the Buddha Center administrators placed a premium on ensuring that any monastics teaching in their spaces were verified in actual life. That is, the admins would check someone's credentials in AL before allowing them to teach as a monastic in the virtual spaces. One of the reasons they prioritized vetting is that there were some early Buddhist spaces on SL where people could cosplay as monks and spout faux dharma teachings without students knowing anything about their dubious backgrounds in AL. The Buddha Center founders felt that there needed to be more transparency and higher standards when it came to student-teacher dynamics in SL. There is no essential difference between the Buddhism taught at the Buddha Center and the Buddhism that might be taught at any relatively nonheritage, ecumenical Buddhist centre in the United States.

In October of 2010, I teleported my avatar into the Buddha Center's Deer Park teaching space just before a scheduled talk. I clicked a button and my avatar prostrated before the central statue that rose up behind the teacher's dais. Then, I right clicked on a digital cushion, which sat my avatar down where she/I could respectfully listen according to acceptable AL/SL proxemics. There were about twelve of us in attendance, and the avatar of the teacher in monk's robes enabled the 'voice' function so that he could speak to us. The rest of us were quiet, but some people used the chat function throughout to ask questions or to note when they did not understand this or that, and the monk checked the chat periodically. The teacher, Rev D, a White, nonheritage Buddhist from North America, had been ordained in a Burmese tradition nine years previously. I approached him after his talk and we set up an interview for another day. As a nonheritage Buddhist, Rev D was like most other teachers at the Buddha Center. However, he was one of only a few venerables that

had taken monastic vows in AL. Most teachers and facilitators at the Buddha Center were nonheritage, lay Buddhists, like Delani.

During our first formal interview Rev D expressed his view that his experience teaching on the Second Life platform had been quite positive overall. He said, '[students] are always looking forward to the teachings. They can't get this in their own community. They are thankful for it. Always little problems—no different than teaching in real life.' He acknowledged that there was a concern that some students would occasionally drift away, or 'they may not take it as seriously'. He told me,

It's as if it's Buddha radio. Students have the ability to tune in and gain the teaching. There is nothing wrong with using this format. It is better than recorded talks and books. It has been quite powerful for people, although it's nothing compared to an intensive meditation course in person. I am setting them on the path. In general, in Second Life, there are a lot of people quite serious about the practice. In the beginning I thought it wouldn't be serious. There is sincerity here. It was a surprise. I thought it would be more superficial.

He found that he would gather a tight-knit group of students who became regulars, and then there would be those who were attending more casually. He said that, just as in AL, some casual folks would come and go, but he felt that the regulars were often quite diligent Buddhist students. He told me in a later interview that he even began meeting some of his SL students on different platforms, such as Discord, or having one-on-one meetings with them in virtual spaces. For him, SL was just one more place to connect to potential students, offer teachings, and broaden the network of his global saṅgha. Rev D's experience was similar to other teachers that I interviewed in that few of them taught only in SL and they saw it as a place that could be a launching point for people into deeper engagements with Buddhism (with them or with others). Of the teachers I talked to one-on-one, none of them perceived an essential difference in the content of what they would teach in SL and in AL, however, they did note that ritual work could be different depending on the type, as material culture is different in virtual spaces.¹⁵

Digital Conveniences

In general, over the years, the weekly schedule at the Buddha Center included several sessions each day, all on SL time (Pacific Standard Time). The schedule was posted on a digital bulletin board in the Welcome Center, and for several years it was also posted on a community-managed website (now defunct). There would be meditation sessions (for thirty, forty-five, or sixty minutes), and various teachings, readings, or workshops. Overall, across the past decade, I found that most teaching and dharma sessions tended to have ten to twenty people, although the meditation-only sessions were sometimes smaller.

Most SL practitioners and students, like their teachers, were non-heritage Buddhists from the United States. If they did not self-identify as ‘Buddhist’ at the time of the interview, most would say they are spiritual, Buddhist-leaning searchers. While there were people in SL from around the world, Buddhists in Asia did not really seem to gravitate to Buddhist spaces in SL, perhaps due to accessibility in person and the fact that their relatively heritage institutions were quite different than the relatively nonheritage ecumenical Buddhist

¹⁵ There is a unique complexity to virtual Buddhist objects, which I have explored and elaborated on in publications before. See Falcone ‘Our Virtual Materials’ and *idem*, ‘Sacred realms in virtual worlds’. For example, in my early months in SL, I remember wondering alongside interlocutors whether Buddhist objects in SL had to be cared for in a special way. That is, to what extent did the sacredness of ritual objects translate into pixelation when they were non-material, digital, and unconsecrated? There was not complete agreement about this, but in general, interviewees indicated that ritual objects in SL should be respected and treated well, as it shows the ethical and religious intentions of the person behind the avatar. However, an unconsecrated ritual object in SL was not deemed as being as sacred as a similar object in AL. Still, the question of making and removing sacred objects and space in digital contexts was a provocative topic of interest to Buddha Center community members. That is, a pixelated platform comes with its own unique set of social issues that had to be sorted through by the Buddha Center’s leadership.

practices of the Buddha Center. Some newcomers to Buddhism from outside Asia found SL practice to be an easy way to explore and learn about a new religion that they had been curious about, but had had no access to in AL. Second Life provided a safe, accessible gateway to the Buddhism-curious. Even devoted Buddhists can find themselves living in one of the many Buddhist 'deserts' in the United States where there are not accessible means to practice with others, so for Buddhists that prefer active saṅghas and meditating with others, an unfortunate lack of AL options can be mitigated by digital practices online. I spoke to at least a dozen other SL practitioners that, like me, had limited institutionalized local alternatives. As a nonheritage Buddhist who had converted in person but later found myself without a nearby saṅgha, my story was not unusual. Raised in a family of non-practicing Catholics, I had become interested in Buddhism in college and began studying it both academically and with an eye toward practice. I converted to Buddhism in 1998 in a Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but like many nonheritage Buddhists, by virtue of non-enculturation into any single tradition, I felt freer to pick and choose practices than the typical heritage Buddhist.¹⁶ I later focused my graduate work on contemporary Buddhist subcultures in India and amongst transnational nonheritage converts. So, in 2010, as I mentioned earlier, when I suddenly found myself living in a town with no active, stable saṅgha to speak of, it was quite a shock, both as a Buddhist and as a scholar of Buddhism. Second Life Buddhism enabled me to have a saṅgha when there was no other option. I met many other Buddhists and seekers in Second Life who also lived in rural or semi-rural areas in North America with no saṅgha within driving distance.

However, not all of my SL interlocutors lived in Buddhist deserts. Some simply found the convenience irresistible. When interviewees could access an in-person saṅgha, some simply explained that they found the flexibility of digital Buddhist practice to be useful when

¹⁶ In Falcone, 'Battling the Buddha of Love', I discuss the characteristics of nonheritage Buddhist practitioners, many of whom have a more ecumenical set of practices.

faced with the perpetually busy days of late-stage global capitalism. For example, one Buddha Center student (who also occasionally meditated at another SL saṅgha), whose username was Mansbridge Neuron, told me that he and his wife both worked flexible hour jobs and traded off childcare duties; thus, it was a boon for him that he could be at home with his kids and still meditate with us, even though he was occasionally distracted by the odd aggrieved shriek from the other room. He told me that he felt that he had successful online SL meditations most of the time, and for him it was far better than doing it himself with a timed app, which he had also tried: ‘I need the schedule, the other people, the sense of meditating with other people. The meditation apps don’t give me a sense of saṅgha, but the Buddha Center is a real saṅgha.’ Mansbridge Neuron said that he had in-person AL options, but they were inconvenient, and he doubted that he would meditate at all if not for his SL options.

In 2015, another regular, Norse Pumpkins, told me that she liked (preferred, even) to go to in-person meditations, but she lived far enough away from the local, relatively nonheritage Tibetan Buddhist temple in her city that it would usually take an hour in traffic to get there, and just a little less time to get home after (if she was lucky). Instead, she told me, she could stay in her pajamas, and just log onto SL and meditate. Her perspective was that she was essentially getting the same thing at the Buddha Center as her AL center, but it took ten times the energy, effort, and time to make it to the latter. She tended to go to her chosen AL center for Long Life Pujas for her ‘root teacher’, and for special events, but for meditation, she had gotten into the habit of doing them almost exclusively online (at the Buddha Center, or sometimes on a meditation app). Norse Pumpkins’ story is a good example of a person who engaged with the Buddha Center as just one Buddhist place of several in her life. I also recall that although she used meditation apps, she did not find them to be effective for her. She once told me something to the effect of, ‘I am too lazy to regularly meditate on my own. This way [in SL] I have people around me and we are doing it together. We are meditating alone together.’

Those who practice online, such as Norse Pumpkins, Mansbridge

Neurons, and most of my other SL interlocutors, tend to see its value as equal to, or nearly equal to, that of in-person meditation. For example, in Xiao Han's work on a Chinese meditation group on WeChat in the early months of COVID-19, his interlocutors saw no essential distinction between meditation online and offline: 'Unlike Christian Eucharist red wine and bread symbolizing blood and flesh (transubstantiation), which would be hard to have a virtual substitution online, Buddhist meditation, as a ritual, can be easily performed regardless of its location, online or offline. Some responses of participants emerged out of the question as to "whether you consider your online meditation experience as an authentic one compared with offline meditation?" To my surprise, the interlocutors share quite the same opinions. They all described their online meditation practices as being essentially no different from offline...'¹⁷ My interviewees were in agreement with Han's: meditation online just meant that one's body is not at a temple or centre; the inner work being done is similar and the meditation itself, whether it is done with attentiveness or seriousness or not, hinges entirely on the intentions and mentality of the meditator, regardless of the format or setting. Of course, these are self-selected practices, so those who see little value in these digital Buddhist places were not found there, and hence not interviewed.

I logged on during the early COVID times—during quarantine, pre-vaccine, when global health practitioners routinely emphasized that in-person contact with those outside your household was dangerous—and saw that some SL places were experiencing a significant bump in activity and interest. It was a place to safely interact when it was impossible to leave our AL homes. The Buddha Center community was there for people during the great quarantine of 2020. We may not have been able to meet others in person, but virtual words provided a conduit for sociality, spiritual and otherwise.

Even after the vaccines were made available, everything reopened and most people resumed their normal lives as best they could, the SL community soldiered on as before. COVID times and a new

¹⁷ Han, 'Digital Merit', 186.

online boom meant that some new people had found SL, and the Buddha Center by extension. But the online boom of the COVID quarantine era also meant that many people in our society spent untold extra hours in front of their computer screens than they had in the before times, and this has had some implications for virtual world denizens. Recently, I touched base with a few acquaintances who had stopped going to the Buddha Center and/or SL altogether, and they all said variations of the same thing: it was there when they needed it, but they've moved on. Specifically, post-COVID, some people are especially burned out from being online all the time; more than one former SL regular expressed something in email or on Facebook to the effect that when Zoom became a central part of their work and family communications, their time in SL began to effectively take them over the digital over-saturation point. That is, in Zoom boom times, for some people, digital places like SL ceased to feel less like retreat and recreation than before, so COVID times both boosted and frustrated SL participation in turn.

I visited the Buddha Center several times in the summer of 2023 and have noticed that the schedule is a little less packed than it once was ten years ago (and attendance is lighter), but it still offers scheduled events nearly every day (except Saturday). On a weekly basis in summer 2023, it hosted three silent meditation sessions, two tonglen-style guided meditations, three teaching and/or dharma discussions, and one reading from Buddhist texts. Some of the people that I knew from my earlier fieldwork stints were still there, including some of the teachers that I had gotten to know. The space is still a lively, and lovely, Buddhist practice space for those who have been drawn in by its gravitational pull.

The Buddha Center as a Real Community—For Those Who Choose It—in a Virtual Place

For a core group of students, admins, and leaders at the Buddha Center, the social relationships that developed were meaningful and important to them. One Buddha Center teacher explained that people in the core got to know each other and talked about their lives (in

AL and SL both).¹⁸ While newbies can hide behind their avatars like masks, when he sees those people in the core, he doesn't gloss them as flat, unknown avatars: 'I know them'. But he was not attentive and open with everyone. I agreed with him that there were various levels of commitment to the community, and it was hard to invest too much time into those who might flit in and out. When people settled into the SL community, they made deep social connections with others in the saṅgha and they say they built true friendships with people that they would lean on emotionally in good times and bad. Teachers who developed rapport with certain students that would spill into other venues (a personal Discord server, or Zooms, for example) would even occasionally meet those students in person when possible.

On the other hand, the peripheral folks who drifted in and out, or just blinked in for sessions and then left immediately, may have been part of the community writ large, but they were not actively community building. Like the Buddhist SL community that Gregory Price Grieve studied, which he deemed a 'cloud community',¹⁹ it is easy to come and go. There is no commitment required, nor membership fee requested, and so it is low stakes to participate, and easy to forego the community kernel at the centre of things, if one has no desire to engage with it. In an informal conversation that I had with a handful of stragglers leaving a meditation session in early 2011, one person, Oatsmill Rambler, typed into the chat that they had been coming to the Buddha Center on and off for more than a year, saying that while they considered themselves a 'regular' they didn't know anyone. I pressed Oatsmill Rambler about this, as did another person standing with us outside the meditation hall who summarily gave them suggestions

¹⁸ SL lives are varied, but some people at the Buddha Center had homes in the virtual world, partners, and 'adopted' families (yes, some adults participate in SL as children to be parented while some others agreed to parent these 'children'). That is to say that the Buddha Center might only be one of many places that SL denizens spent their time. Therefore, when my interlocutors talked about getting to know others in-world, they did not only mean learning, or sharing, about their AL lives and experiences.

¹⁹ Grieve, 'Virtually Embodying', 44.



FIG. 3 Main meditation hall of the new Buddha Center in October 2020. Photo by author.

about how to get to know people better, but Oatsmill Rambler seemed quite content with the situation. They typed in something to the effect of, ‘I come for meditation. Only meditation. That’s enough for me’. It was a good reminder to me that some of the regulars chose to engage more deeply in Buddha Center relationships, while others eschewed it. So the Buddha Center can be thought of a space that gives people a choice whether to engage in one of two ways: 1. taking advantage only its offered content (that is, Buddhist meditation, Buddhist reading, or Buddhist lectures); 2. or, to also engage in the community’s organizational discussions or impromptu social gatherings (a meeting or party in someone’s SL house) or off-platform conversations that percolated backstage. It was the latter denizens who formed the overlapping core groups that really held the place together. But both core and peripheral Buddha Center members made donations to the group and argued for its value as a religious space. Even though deeper relationships and connections did sometimes form among the SL saṅgha, it became clear to me over time that it took substantially more effort to make and maintain those personal connections in SL than it tends to in AL.²⁰

²⁰ As an aside, those academics who teach online might recognize this extra

In sum, for those only hoping for accountability in their Buddhist practice, the online sessions offered by the Buddha Center sometimes worked well. The online meditations were convenient and easy to access, and attracted many people who might not practice otherwise. For those looking for connection with a teacher and other dharma practitioners, this was possible in Second Life, but it was much more challenging than in actual life due to the fact that one has to work harder to seek out those backstage spaces and connections. To conclude the overview of the Buddha Center's social and religious landscapes, Buddhist practice in the virtual world of Second Life does not work for everyone, but it is a valuable, treasured place for those who continue to count themselves among its saṅgha.

A Brick-and-Mortar Temple Embraces the Digital

The Daifukuji Soto Mission was founded in 1914 on the Big Island of Hawai'i as a Buddhist temple for Japanese heritage farming families living along the Kona coffee corridor. For many decades it was the home of a Japanese-only heritage saṅgha, but in the past several decades, it has increasingly welcomed larger numbers of non-Japanese devotees. The saṅgha is now peopled by those of Japanese ancestry, as well as other Asian backgrounds, in addition to an energetic minority of White devotees, making it a Buddhist community in a time of transition. I am writing a book about the holistic in person religious and social world of Daifukuji Soto Mission today, but this article will focus entirely on its digital extensions.

When I started in-person fieldwork at the Daifukuji Zen temple in 2015, there was very little in the way of an online presence: they had a website, and had just initiated a Facebook page a year earlier (in spring 2014). Daifukuji had no need to try to harness technology for their own use; it was a classic Soto Zen temple in the diaspora, and

online effort and the burden it represents; we tend to get to know students better in face-to-face classes, and while it's not impossible to do, it is famously harder to build rapport and community in online classes than in in-person courses.

in-person practice and sociality was all that was needed and expected by its saṅgha, especially since most members were senior citizens, some of whom had a tenuous grasp of internet technologies at best. Digital engagements like Zoom meetings or meditations would have been seen as superfluous in the ‘before times’, but the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 changed all of that. The COVID crisis required quick adaptation to a whole new world of digital mediums.

On March 17, 2020, an email announced to members that the Daifukuji Board had decided to cancel upcoming events and close the temple completely. While the temple was to be officially closed, the only exceptions would be that the reverend was to remain available for pastoral care, counselling, and *makuragyō* services upon death (even then, within reasonable, safe limitations).²¹ While everyone was sad to see the temple close—it was a core community hub to most of its members—the saṅgha was overwhelmingly supportive of the decision. The state of Hawai‘i, arguably a little slow to react to the pandemic according to many locals, did not issue a stay-at-home order until over a week later. During the stay-at-home quarantine period, Daifukuji members hunkered down, shared tips via text about where to buy toilet paper, what was (or what was not) in stock at Costco, and how to sew cloth masks. For some members, the Facebook page would soon become a newly important direct line to connect with their Daifukuji community.

Reverend Jiko and Amy Jikai—the temple’s Japanese American female reverend, and her deaconess daughter—would soon begin experimenting with Facebook Live in order to offer members shortened livestreamed services in lieu of the cancelled services. Amy and Jiko soon began to post on Facebook regularly, and eventually posted many

²¹ The Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i are mostly third or fourth generation by now. Thus, I have made the editorial decision to not add the Japanese kanji, since Japanese is not regularly spoken (and certainly not written/read) by the large majority of the Daifukuji Soto Mission saṅgha. As a primarily English-speaking, majority Asian American community, the saṅgha may chant a sūtra in Japanese, but these texts are most often transliterated into English characters and not written in the original kanji.

of the videos to their new YouTube channel. Throughout the course of the Great Lockdown, these Facebook services or events were held once or twice every week or so. Amy and Jiko began to film and post Buddhist story skits for the youth saṅgha. Reverend Jiko continued to reach out to her community through phone and emails, but the videos were said to be very comforting to those who accessed them.

One member said that in retrospect the reverend had become a niche 'media star' and broadened the impact and reach of the saṅgha more generally. Some of their videos got a few hundred views, but others went viral by Buddhist clergy standards, hitting views in the thousands. For example, one objectively adorable video of Reverend Jiko teaching people to make mochi at home during the first New Year of the pandemic hit nearly ten thousand views. She also got many hundreds of views on her videos that teach students to sit zazen in a step-by-step manner: the 'Try Sit' series.²²

Many of the temple's clubs and groups began meeting over Zoom during the pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, Reverend Jiko started a monthly 'Sangha Social' group on Zoom (often circulating topics ahead of time), so that people could 'talk story' (a local term for socializing and catching up that is commonly used in Hawai'i) with one another, but these were not accessible to everyone. While some members could join Zoom meetings and watch online services, there were other members with no internet and/or no email addresses at all. Of those who had the option to e-socialize, some found fellowship and a sense of camaraderie online, while others found that the online gatherings offered them no sense of true togetherness and opted out entirely. This is to emphasize that, as with the first case study, the people who found value in digital fellowship, whether of the religious or social variety, were self-selecting.

Rules and regulatory precautions for gathering changed as COVID waves came and went. During the winter 2022 omicron wave, I watched a Nehan-e service on Facebook live; there seemed to be a limited number of people present and everyone was masked. The fact that a dozen of us logged in to watch that particular service

²² Daifukuji Soto Zen, 'Try Sit Meditation Series'.

meant that it was not accessed by many of the people who would have attended in person in normal times; it was low attendance overall, even with in person and digital attendance combined, but the e-accessibility was a boost. Some of us watching were local and some of us were located so far away that we would have not been able to attend at all without the stream. While the majority of the technological glitches of the streams and videos and Zooms had largely been ironed out by this time, the added steps and complexities of the tech caused headaches from time to time. On this February day, the Nehan-e service stream was interrupted and restarted three times, and those of us watching seemed to dwindle with each flub. I will elaborate further on the costs of technology to these experiences in a later section, but suffice to say that the temple was doing their best to meet the needs of their saṅgha in persistently difficult times.

After the worst waves of the pandemic subsided, Daifukuji transitioned into a new normal by the beginning of 2023. By that January, masks were no longer required, and most of the congregation was vaccinated (and/or had gotten the virus already). The federal pandemic response ended in May 2023, and COVID became known as endemic. The new normal at Daifukuji had meant that all groups began meeting in person again, unless there were reasons of convenience not to (for example, a board member lived too far to easily commute to each meeting). However, two key virtual entanglements that began during peak COVID times remain to this day: services are livestreamed and/or posted on YouTube; and the twice weekly zazen sessions are Zoomed to enable people to meditate with their saṅgha from afar.

Zoom Zazen

Zazen begins promptly at 6 a.m. local Hawai'i time, which meant they started for me at 11 a.m. CST in middle America. So, while the sun was high in the sky in Kansas, I would be admitted to the Zoom and settle in by watching the temple feed of a dark candlelit chapel space. I could often hear the twitter of Hawaiian birds welcoming the dawn. Given that I had done in-person zazen in that very Kannon chapel countless times, it was a much more visual and

visceral experience than meditating 'alone together' with others in Second Life. I was bringing my firsthand experience to bear, which intensified the feeling of presence. Also, I had meditated at Daifukuji in person in January and February, so I was acquainted with everyone in the room. These were not just figures on a screen; I knew them well. While some of the SL teachers and core members may have felt that as they looked out at an assemblage of people, I only very occasionally felt that I knew most of the assemblage at a Buddha Center gathering. From my perspective—and this has been articulated by my interlocutors as well—a digital community that is an extension of an in-person community is likely more closely knit. Although there are a few examples of previously-unconnected people asking for, and receiving, the Zoom link from Reverend Jiko, the zazen sits were essentially amongst community.

In general, the attendance of the zazen is usually a bit larger in person, but sometimes it is equal parts in person and online. For example, on May 5, 2023, there were seven people in the room (including the reverend), and three people online. But on June 9, 2023, there were four people in the room (including the reverend), and four people online. So, the Zoom contingent tends to add a quarter to a half of the participants on any given day of zazen. In terms of heritage composition of the group, the zazenkai at Daifukuji, unlike the entirety of the membership body of predominantly heritage Buddhist Japanese Americans, is majority nonheritage Buddhist converts (with a smattering of semiheritage and heritage adherents). The fact that most Zoom zazen participants are nonheritage Buddhists is just a microcosm of the general composition of the zazenkai body, which tends to be less popular with the heritage Buddhists who grew up at the temple.

I am not the only member who lives much or most of the time away from Hawai'i. Many new members are nonheritage Buddhist, and many of us are not just newer arrivals to Buddhism, but newer arrivals to Hawai'i. Daifukuji, in contrast to the other seven or eight Soto Zen missions on the Hawaiian island chain, has a larger percentage of active nonheritage members. This is in part because they were one of the first centres to hire a local reverend, raised in Hawai'i, instead of hiring a mission priest directly from Japan. Reverend Jiko,

aside from being famously warm and welcoming, is well-positioned by virtue of language and culture to expand the saṅgha beyond its heritage members. Therefore, perhaps it should not be a surprise that Daifukuji, alone in its sect in Hawai‘i, continues to provide extensive digital services. Nonheritage members tend to spend more time on the mainland with family or in second homes, so we found ourselves laughing together as the zazen Zoomers waved at our in-person counterparts at the end of the service saying, ‘hi from California!’, ‘hi from Colorado!’, ‘hi from Las Vegas!’, and of course, ‘hi from Kansas!’.

One of the in-person devotees is tasked with managing the livestream and admitting us into the Zoom individually from the ‘waiting room’. When all goes according to plan, this is the rough sequence of events for the zazen meditation sessions: twenty-five minutes of silent zazen; ten minutes of walking meditation; fifteen minutes of silent zazen with a five-minute reading toward the end (often, in recent years, from the *Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book*); a ten to twenty-minute morning service (although it is abbreviated on Fridays); and finally several minutes of post-service welcomes, hellos, and announcements.

In the beginning, the camera is set up on a tripod with a zoomed-out perspective so that the Zoomers can see most of the still-dark room. This wider view serves to settle us into the space with those in the room. After the bells chime to signal the end of the first session of zazen, we all begin walking meditation, whether we are in the room or not. After the walking meditation, the person in charge of the camera moves the tripod forward to fill the whole frame with the Hawai‘i Kannon statue and shrine (see Figure 4). During the second meditation, if our eyes flit open, it is the whole lit altar before us, not the widescreen frame with some of the saṅgha. After the meditation, and after the robe verse is chanted, and then, after the service ends, in the announcement portion where Rev Jiko says hello and welcomes everyone individually with a big smile (see Figure 5), the Zoom operator gets up from their meditation cushion and tells the in-person saṅgha who is on the Zoom.²³ The folks in the room wave at the

²³ It is not uncommon for a person or two to silently log off before the end

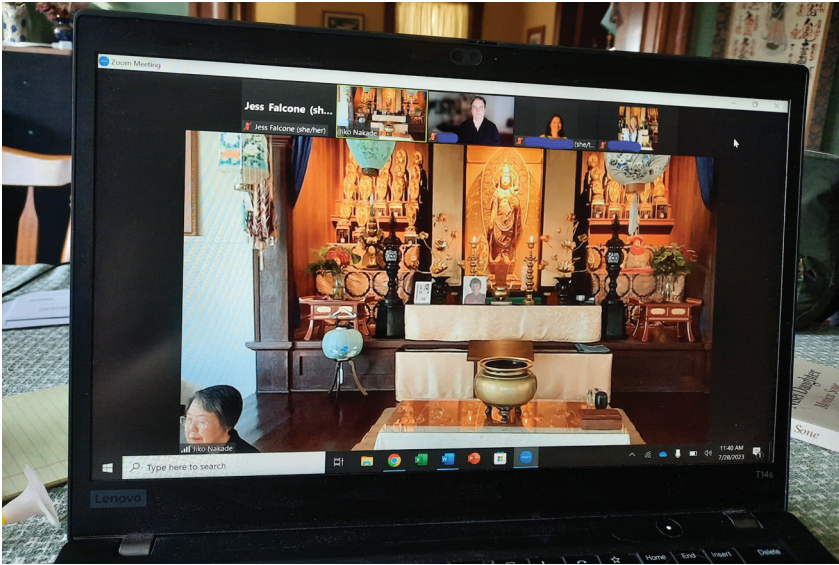


FIG. 4 The second half of the Zoom Zazen with a close-up view of the Kannon altar. Photo by author.

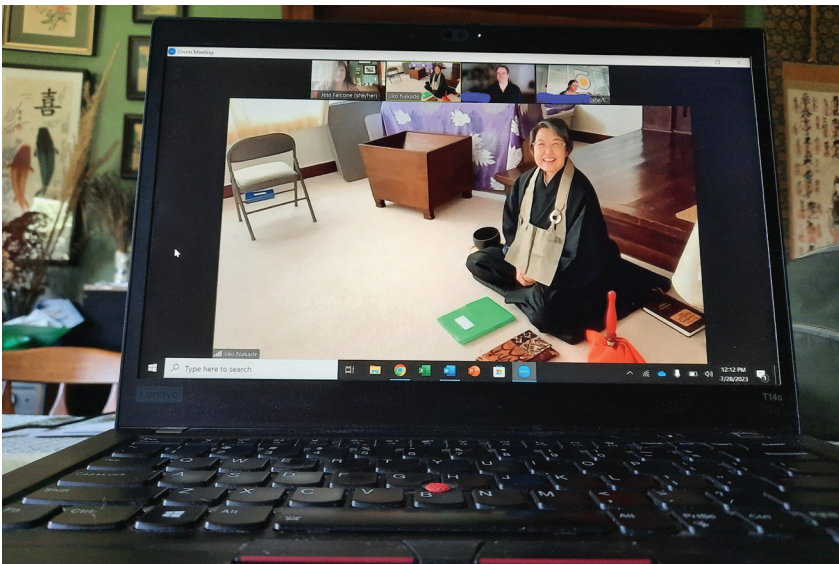


FIG. 5 The in-person meditators greet the Zoomers. Daifukuji Zoom zazen in July 2023.

screen. At this point, if Zoomer cameras were off (some folks keep them on for the duration) we are to turn them on and wave back. With this set of gestures and returned greetings, Zoomers make a visual connection with our far away in-person saṅgha and vice versa.

That face-to-face acknowledgement between Zooming meditators and in-person meditators is light and breezy, and yet, simultaneously, bears a certain gravitas. The Daifukuji Zoomers are generally not strangers to one another—they tend to build relationships in person, and only meet online when they must. The difficulty of forging relationships online was discussed by Ostrowski in her research on Buddhists on the internet in the United States, when she noted that ‘Not everyone agreed that Buddhism online offered a spiritual connection to others. One respondent said that they only felt community online as they would with the rest of the world and that the Internet was for information and not communion. Another respondent said “I feel a sense of community when I look into one’s eyes.”’²⁴ The exchange of hellos and the waves of Zooming meditators to in-person meditators and vice versa provides the piece that was missing for Ostrowski’s interlocutors: at the end of zoom zazen, we see each other’s eyes, wave, and smile at our saṅgha.

I remember how hard I took it when I once seemingly missed the cues for this moment of social fellowship and failed to join them in time. My camera was not working—I just needed to restart my computer (my university-dispensed laptop is periodically fussy), but if I had left the Zoom, I would not have been able to get back in. So, as everyone else on the feed waved and connected with the in-person saṅgha, I unsuccessfully wrestled with the camera and fretted. Since the reverend and my saṅgha just saw my persistent photo icon, I worried that my lack of responsiveness would be taken for lack of care or even rudeness, as if I had wandered off instead of paying attention. I felt unsettled by that glitch and the way it

due to competing appointments, etc. The conventional wisdom is that some zazen is better than none, and it’s not disruptive to just log out without explanation or excuses offered.

²⁴ Ostrowski, ‘Buddha Browsing’, 99.

could have been read by my interlocutors as inattentiveness or lack of care, which essentially illustrates the significance of the post-zazen communion. This anecdote also shows that the technology, both when it works and when it does not, does affect the religious and social experience of digital religion, so I will think through the difficulties of the glitch, and the ways that it impacts both case studies, in the next section.

Digital Inconveniences

The movement of some communities into online spaces means convenient accessibility for some, but lack of access for others. Users of these sites need a computer at home with the capacity for internet connections, which is simply not a socioeconomically feasible universal. For those with tech capacity, both the users and the leadership, things came up regularly: bad internet, a broken camera, and voice or audio not working. Both sites, the Buddha Center and Daifukuji, were forced to deal with the kind of occasional difficulties that plague online social gatherings. The Buddha Center had tech challenges that were specific to them, but also faced site-wide frustrations, such as trolling. The Buddha Center struggled with its new technologies, both in terms of learning them and finding the human capital to manage them.

Second Life's technological realities require that users download the platform onto computers with relatively recent operating systems and fairly robust computer memory, graphics abilities, and screen resolution. Furthermore, a user's internet has to be fast or SL won't work. SL acknowledges that even as a free platform, it is not for everyone. For those that join, some pop into the Buddha Center with intentionality, others with curiosity, and still others with disruptive intent. The platform lends itself to exploration, but it must be noted that there were occasional trolling or 'griefing' behaviours suffered by the community, such as someone yelling or talking or even furiously chatting in text in the middle of silent meditations, or someone streaking through an event with a naked avatar. Some users like to defy social conventions and disrupt social gatherings, and since the

Buddha Center was open to any SL participant who sought to teleport in, there was an open door to poorly-behaved griefers as well as well-behaved believers.

While some newcomers were disruptive by design, others were distracting by accident. I recall several sessions of meditation that were interrupted as a curious person dropped their avatar into the meditation hall while we were meditating. Sometimes they would get the hint that they had interrupted a silent session in progress, but several times a clueless newbie would start asking questions about what we were doing and why. My sense is that participants saw these occasional disruptions as part and parcel of the platform. They would share stories about them with me, and with one another, but they were not deal-breaking frustrations that would chase them away from Buddhist practice in SL altogether. Not all tech issues faced by SL Buddhists were intentionally caused by griefers or newbies, as some were classic failures of equipment or internet. I recall incidents when someone's tech issues mangled their participation and harmed the flow of a talk or an event.

While Daifukuji does not have to suffer trolls and griefers at meditation sessions—the Zoom link for their zazen meditation is shared only to members at their request, and not publicly posted—occasional tech glitches and complications are a part of the cost (borne by both organizers and participants) of making them religious offerings more available to those online. Add this set of issues to the extra labour burden of enabling digital access—making sure that things are set up properly, streaming accurately, and/or effectively posted—and it seemed by no means certain that Daifukuji would continue its boosted virtual presence when their pandemic-era precautions expired in early 2023. I interviewed a reverend at a Soto temple in Honolulu who had been tasked with doing this work for the *betsuin* (the sect headquarters of Hawai'i), and he said that once the pandemic ebbed, they had immediately ceased livestreaming or video-ing all of their events. It was too much work, he said. The Taishoji Soto temple in Hilo stopped streaming their services in October 2022, again reporting an unsustainable workload. But so far Daifukuji has gone a different way and held fast to digital Buddhist practice appendages to their saṅgha's body.

But technological issues did change the experience of religious engagements. The tech problems recorded in my notes about zazen online described a mix of problems with internet-stability, and some Zoom-platform issues. An example of internet stability issues: one day there was such heavy rain in Kona that their Wi-Fi was badly affected and slowed down. Those of us online weren't kicked off, but the audio seemed strained and spotty; since we couldn't hear the bells that directed us to go from one thing to the next, we had to rely on our eyes and occasional peeking to get cues about when to stop and start the various stages. When audio issues happen, as with that day, the Zoomers could not hear the reading that happens during the second meditation.

When Zoomers don't mute themselves, it can cause sound issues, and not just when there are unexpected noises from participant feeds. For example, when one online participant turned on her mic during the chanting, the sound ricocheted back and forth, and the feed jumped from her audio to Daifukuji's audio willy-nilly. The rest of us cringed as the tempo and flow of chants was disrupted time after time, because the Zoom didn't know which audio to project to us. I only recall this happening once, but it was memorably problematic. Even if participant sound is muted by the host, the sound quality can be muddled. This happened in streamed services sometimes too: when the mic struggled to randomly project sound, it sometimes focused on just one voice and drowned out the others. It made it difficult to hear the entirety of a song or follow along. When I talked to other Zoomers about these things, we would shrug, smile, and just resolve to shake it off. In one conversation a Zoomer said that she was okay getting the gist of the thing, but she knew that attending digitally could not give one the full experience. The high that one feels listening to a good song and enjoying it, as you would in person, is often foreclosed by the amateur quality of the tech at hand.²⁵ In some ways, digital engagements are flawed copies. Zoom zazen is like an

²⁵ No disrespect intended by myself or other Zoomers as we discuss the limitations of Zooms and live video feeds. No one expects professional technology expertise from the temple!

experience with a somewhat garbled translation that simultaneously necessitates patience for what is lost, even as one is grateful for what one can comprehend.

But as I learned the hard way myself several times, glitchy digital interactions, for many people, are far better than nothing. A bad translation of an event is better than none at all. My interlocutors say that they would rather view a service through a set of obscurations than not to be able to attend at all. I agreed with members who felt that a partially seamless zazen online was preferable to no Zoom zazen at all, as this write-up of my fieldnotes can attest:

May 12, 2023 (fieldnotes):

The email invitations with the link tell us clearly that we can only be admitted to the Zoom until 5:55 HST, but today I dawdled a bit too long and then my computer started up painfully slowly. I watched the minutes tick by, and I entered the Zoom waiting room at 5:57 HST with fingers firmly crossed. I thought to myself, ‘Hmm, maybe I will be lucky and someone will check for late-comers before 6am. I’ve slipped in late before.’ So I waited, but to no avail; the magic portal from my Kansas living room to the Kannon shrine in Kona remained firmly shut.

I resolved to meditate with them anyway, but alone in my house without the Zoom to follow. I set my alarm for the first round of meditation, and then tried to settle in, but I couldn’t focus. I wanted to be anchored to practice through collective e-presence, but instead I felt hopelessly untethered. I know people meditate alone without a saṅgha every day, but I can’t. I have always needed the accountability and company of a saṅgha.

Eventually, I gave up. My saṅgha was probably bowing to each other and about to sit together again for the second round of silent meditation at that point, but I just wandered away, unmoored, discouraged. Meditating alone—really alone—for me, felt somewhat sad. As I moved into the kitchen to make myself tea, I scolded myself for arriving late and missing my chance. For me, Zoom zazen is leaps and

bounds better than no zazen at all.

As with Buddhist devotees in Second Life, people are drawn to the mediums that work for them. There are those Daifukuji meditators who would never join online because they like in-person practice only. For those of us who feel comfortable with the medium, we Zoom because we can or because we must. This is to say that while there are certainly costs and imperfections associated with virtual engagements, for those who choose this route, the experience is well worth it anyway.

Virtual Memorializing: Online Expressions of Loss

All things are impermanent—as a central tenet of Buddhism this truism is especially interesting to mull over in digital spaces, which as I have written about elsewhere,²⁶ can be famously prone to change, morphing, and disappearance—whether we speak of institutions, social norms, or people. In this section, I will focus not on ‘no-longer-spaces’,²⁷ but rather on the loss of community members in extant digital venues. Both the Buddha Center as a cybersangha in SL and Daifukuji in its hybrid manner have been incorporating prayers for the terminally ill and memorialization for the deceased into their set of digital saṅgha practices.

One might expect that in a cybersangha with almost 100% of its social life unfolding in a virtual space, there would be no real attention paid to those who pass away, but that is not always true. It is likely that someone on the periphery—a member who blinks in and out of the communal worship spaces irregularly—who ultimately disappears may be assumed to have left Second Life rather than this mortal coil. For those that drift away from the outskirts of the community, there is usually no follow-up or check-ins. SL communities and relationships can be a little precarious that way. However, for

²⁶ Falcone, ‘No-longer-places in Virtual Worlds’ and *idem*, ‘Virtual Ruination’.

²⁷ Falcone, ‘No-longer-places in Virtual Worlds’.

those in the community core, or for who have sustained relationships with the Buddha Center's core membership, there can be real attention to one's illness and/or death in AL.

The Buddha Center has held special sessions, complete with digital candles and other offerings, to pray for the well-being of sick or dying members. For those whose conditions are known—that is, for those who care to make their dire illnesses known—there is often an outpouring of care and attention. Messages are circulated about health updates, and shared through messages, emails, and word of mouth.

When a beloved member passes away, the Buddha Center may hold services or prayers in SL,²⁸ so that their SL peers can honour and remember them. There were multiple memorial stūpas in the Buddha Center's earlier iteration. The stūpas were not anonymous. Rather they were dedicated to the memory of specific deceased members whose names and pictures are part of the virtual build. These were built as places for the living to engage in acts of commemoration or to reflect upon the phenomenon of impermanence. In its current downsized instantiation, the Buddha Center's memorial stūpas were scaled down and combined into a single stūpa (see Figure 6). As of summer 2023, there were cushions placed in front of the memorial stūpa so that saṅgha members could sit their avatars down as they contemplated loss and remembered their departed colleagues. While the Buddha Center's daily practices of meditation and dharma teachings are their central focus, the institution is committed to serving the community in their times of need and grief, as would a brick-and-mortar temple.

For their part, Daifukuji has also felt compelled to expand digital access beyond regular zazens and annual services, like Hanamatsuri and Ohigan, to now include the religious work of praying for the sick and deceased. Daifukuji has begun offering Zoom sessions to pray for the health and wellness of those wrestling with serious

²⁸ There are usually AL services too, but these are typically for non-SL friends and family. I have not heard about someone being mourned only at the Buddha Center, and not in AL.

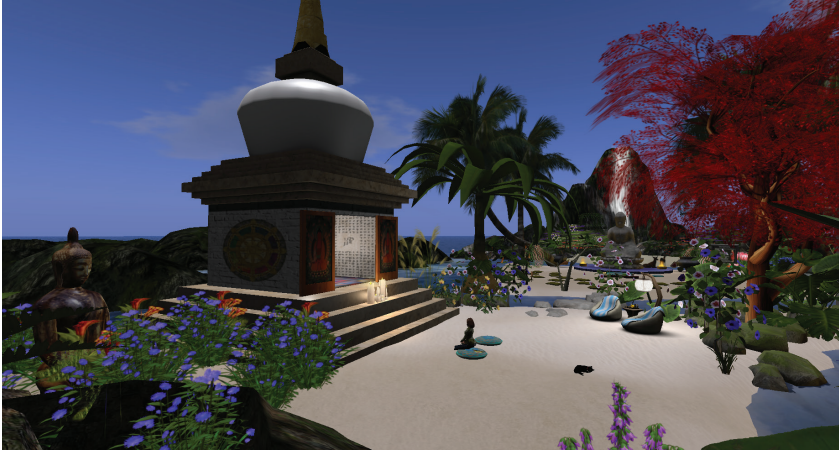


FIG. 6 Memorial stūpa at the new Buddha Center in October 2020. Photo by author.

illness. On a Sunday afternoon in July of 2023, Reverend Jiko ran a ‘Sengan Shingyo’— a thousand recitations of the *Hannya Shingyo* [Heart Sūtra]—service at Daifukuji for a temple member who had been fighting cancer for years. The in-person temple was full, but there were several dozen people on the Zoom as well, including the ill member, who was out of Kona staying with family on the mainland. The complexity of audio lag and feed instability made it hard for those of us on Zoom to chant along seamlessly, but it was clear that the Zoomers added a layer of care. The link had been shared with family friends in Hawai‘i and on the West Coast, and they showed up, whether Buddhist or not, to support the effort, and to hold space for their dear friend.

At Daifukuji, funeral services are sometimes open on Zoom as well; this is decided in conversation between the family and the deceased saṅgha member. In August 2023, a different saṅgha member—a very active nonheritage member, Kira, who had recently died of cancer—was mourned at a memorial service at the temple that was simultaneously livestreamed on Zoom. Like all deceased members, Kira will be deeply missed. Since I was in Kansas when she died, I was relieved that the family had consented to a streamed service. It was a boon to those living far from Daifukuji that we could be

present, albeit remotely, to also say goodbye to her. The temple was full of dozens of members and mourners, including some members of Kira's family who had come from the West Coast, and there were about a dozen people who joined the service on Zoom. Daifukuji is expanding its online access to some temple events because more members are on the move and want the opportunity to be included in acts of support for ailing or deceased saṅgha members. For a temple that was once a 'local temple' for people within walking distance, Daifukuji has adapted to its current identity as a diverse temple with a saṅgha and extended saṅgha that reaches across oceans: it makes quite a bit of sense that in our jet-set age, with the technological options at hand, people are worshipping and mourning online as well as in person.

Conclusion

COVID times did two things for online Buddhist practices: it made practitioners more aware of what digital practices were already available, and it grew more robust digital practices where they did not exist already. Kai Shmushko, who has worked on Chinese Buddhist practitioners using Weibo during COVID times asked, can COVID times digitalization be seen as 'the New Normal or the Old Normal Accelerated?'²⁹ In terms of the Buddha Center, a prototypical cyber-saṅgha, the temporary bump in activity and engagement can be seen as an 'old normal accelerated', but only for the first several months of the pandemic, after which it returned to its previous contours. In terms of the Daifukuji, some of the digital growth that occurred during COVID times has been embraced as a 'new normal', because it fills a need for their diverse saṅgha. Daifukuji's decision to stick with Zoom is best contextualized by the fact that other Soto Missions in Hawai'i have chosen to return to full face-to-face services without streaming services or meditations. For the other Hawaiian temples of the sect, the COVID transition to a hybrid saṅgha was

²⁹ Shmushko, 'Digital Footprints', 66.

a temporary 'new normal', and not a long-term one. Daifukuji is unique in adopting a hybrid norm for the long haul.

Daifukuji and the Buddha Center—and many other online saṅghas out there today—are expanding the dynamics of Buddhist meditation and practice in contemporary contexts. Digital Buddhism in SL is often a means to an end: a convenient and accessible way for Buddhists scattered to the four winds to practice together in a virtual space. Digital Buddhist endeavours at Daifukuji extend access to their message and bolster opportunities for participation in zazen. For both Buddhist communities discussed in this article, meditation, dharma teachings, and services could effectively be engaged with online.

It would be wrong to suggest that digital Buddhism is the same as in-person Buddhism, however, as both communities did have to wrestle with glitches and other online challenges. For example, online sociality—connection between saṅgha members or between devotees and teachers—can be hampered by digital engagement, or at least made quite a bit harder in online spaces. And at Daifukuji, while the online zazen is a useful extension of religious services, it is not as a holistic substitute for in-person interactions and practice, which is why Zoom zazen links are only offered to its membership. Daifukuji builds community in person, and then offers their community members some online opportunities to stay active and involved. Both case studies speak to the merits of digital practice, but they also demonstrate that there is certainly something lost for those of us online. Still, for many Buddhists who choose to meditate or pray with a remote saṅgha, a digital engagement—even as an imperfect copy—is far better than none at all. For better or for worse, in many contexts, digital Buddhist meditation, prayer, and memorialization are here to stay.

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