Z E N
AND THE ART OF AVATAR MAINTENANCE

The web is changing the way people around the world experience religion. Dr. Gregory Grieve examines this realm with both thousand-mile journeys and the use of his smartphone.

In 2014, the professor of religious studies attended a Buddhist festival at the foot of the Himalayas. Organizers were busily streaming the full two weeks of ceremonies to Buddhists far and wide. A sick research associate took in the festival from various angles via the web. Visitors snapped shots of their spiritual journey to share across the world on their Instagram accounts.

Welcome to religion in the cyber age.

This intersection of the web, social media, and religion — particularly Buddhism — is Grieve's research nexus.

He also focuses on how religion plays out in gaming, a booming industry in America and across the world.

In 2014, he co-edited the book "Religion in Play: Finding Religion in Digital Gaming," published by Indiana University Press.

There *is* religion in video games, he stresses. Studying religion in gaming, he says, is essential to examining perceptions of religion in popular culture.

He probes deeper in his most recent book, "Cyber Zen," ethnographically exploring Buddhist practices in the online virtual world of Second Life. Among the questions his book poses: Does typing at a keyboard and moving your avatar around the screen count as real Buddhism?

"Online Buddhist practices have at best only a family resemblance to canonical Asian traditions," he explains. "If, however, they are judged existentially — by how they enable users to respond to the suffering generated by living in a highly mediated consumer society — then Second Life Buddhism consists of authentic spiritual practices."

In his recent co-edited monograph "Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus," he more broadly explores Buddhist practices and teachings in our digital era. The internet is essential for many religious individuals; according to a Pew survey, 25 percent of Americans have searched the internet for religious purposes.

Grieve's next project will focus on online Buddhist rituals. At the center of his study is the current Dalai Lama. Many people know him and his teachings primarily through their smartphone or laptop.

"His widespread popularity has no doubt been enabled by the processes of global digital communication — which have accelerated the international spread of Tibetan Buddhism," Grieve says.

What happened to going to a place of worship? Of standing shoulder to shoulder with other believers?

"People are looking in different places."

They're looking for community, for a deeper meaning, for identity formation, he explains. But what earlier generations found through their jobs, their houses of worship, their civic clubs, and close proximity to extended family, they're now searching for through their video screens.

For Grieve, it's a rich, ever-evolving realm of research.

By Mike Harris • Photography by Mike Dickens, inset photo by Gregory Grieve • Learn more at http://rel.uncg.edu

CYBER ZEN Grieve (left photo) is interested in how religion intersects with the modern world. In 2014, the head of the Department of Religious Studies traveled to Ladakh at the foot of the Himalayas (above), to observe the Dalai Lama address the masses — those physically present and those livestreaming the event.