

Virtual Meditation Cushion (Zafu)

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On Wednesday evening, January 21, 2009, I sat in Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat's *zendo*, a meditation hall filled with semi-circular rows of *zafus* (meditation cushions) laid out in front of a long wooden altar which had been decorated with incense, candles, flowers, and a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha (Fig. 1). Soon after I took my seat, I was joined by roughly twenty other practitioners, and we began to meditate together. Such an interaction could hardly be considered noteworthy; however, the experience was unique because it was not occurring in the actual world. This event took place in the virtual world of Second Life, and the cushions were not physical, but merely pixels on my computer's screen.

What does a virtual meditation cushion tell us about material and visual cultures of religion?



Fig. 1 Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat's Zendo [meditation hall] Second Life Snapshot by Gregory Grieve

As described in my book, *Cyber Zen*, Hoben is a convert Zen Buddhist Community that practices within the domain of Second Life, a three-dimensional, immersive, and interactive virtual world housed in cyberspace and accessed via the Internet. Often labeled Western, Nightstand, or Convert Buddhists, the inhabitants of Hoben typically

come from North America, Europe, or other parts of the developed world, but can also be found in many cosmopolitan centers of developing nations. Convert Buddhism is a diverse and flexible religion, but its practitioners tend to focus on several facets of the tradition: the therapeutic, the non-hierarchical, the non-violent, the ecological, and, most importantly, the meditative.

On the Wednesday in question, I was perplexed about what to do, and I instant messaged (IM'd) one of my chief informants, the Buddhist practitioner BodhiDharma Rosebud. He replied, "Just remain on your cushion without expecting anything." In Second Life, the most prevalent and significant Buddhist practice was, undoubtedly, silent online meditation, which is described as a media practice in which users rest their avatars for twenty to thirty minutes on virtual cushions while they meditate in real life in front of their computer screens.

At first glance, online silent meditation might seem like a contradiction. Virtual worlds are presented as the epitome of mediated and disembodied communication, yet silent meditation offers embodied religious practice and direct spiritual experience. Virtual worlds do not, in fact, lack bodies; rather, what they lack is face-to-face physical interaction through oral communication.

In real life, a *zafu*, often translated in English as a "sewn seat," is a meditation cushion used for *zazen*, or Zen meditation. A *zafu* is typically round in shape, roughly 15 inches across, and packed tight with *kapok*, a silky fiber obtained from the fruit of the silk-cotton tree. My research revealed that, while modeled after real life, Second Life meditation cushions varied greatly, from simple in design and scripted for a single position to intricately sculpted and scripted for many.

For example, the Simple *Zafu* was ubiquitous throughout Second Life's Buddhist community, and can be traced back to the original Japanese Sit Pillow, which was created by well-known builder CrystalShard. CrystalShard initially created the Japanese Sit Pillow as a freebie, to be included with one of the first items she designed, a sushi table created in 2004. Because the cushion was full perm (i.e. free to copy, modify, and transfer), the Japanese Sit Pillow has since become a meme, iterations of which have been customized and modified, and can now be found all over Second Life.

Created by resident Talus Eun "as an aid to your Second Life Meditation Practice [sic]," the Peaceful Warrior *zafu/zabuton* is a more complicated cushion that could be purchased for L\$100 (\$0.73 USD). Eun's cushion offered the sound of "restful breathing" as well as a menu with 512 separate color choices and hundreds of poses. On the "Senshi: Art and Arms" webpage, resident BrokenBridge commented that the Peaceful Warrior cushion is, "By far the best looking *zafu/zabuton* I have found, and I find the subtle breathing very centering."¹

Virtual meditation cushions represent a media practice that bridges the gap between the actual and virtual worlds. Because Convert Buddhism is a material practice as well as a system of beliefs, it depends on objects and space as much as, or more than, ideas and

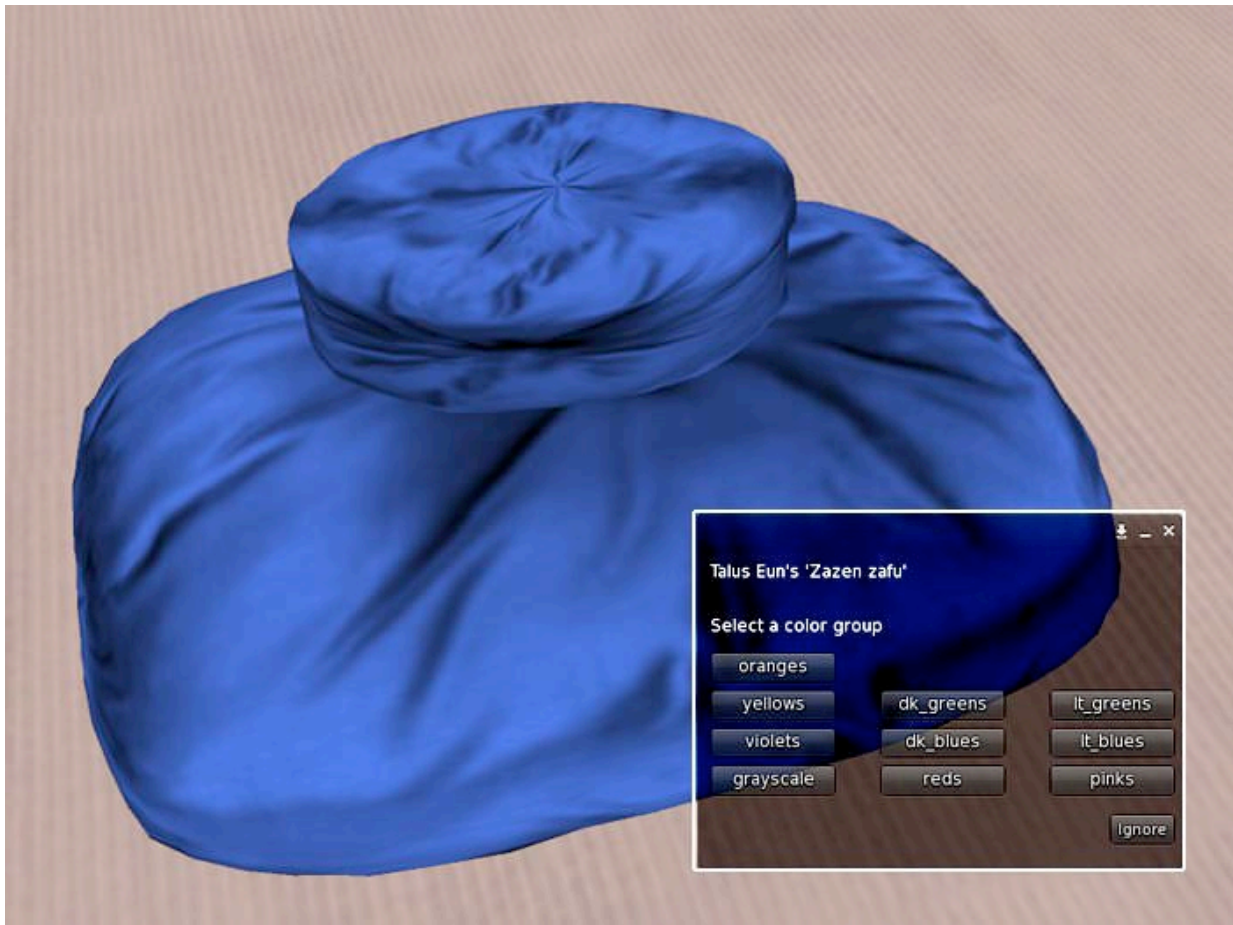


Fig. 2 The Peaceful Warrior Zafu and Zabuton created by the resident Talus Eun

doctrine. Virtual meditation cushions are crucial to virtual meditation practice because they pragmatically determine how practitioners ritualize online silent communication. The cushion, whether virtual or actual, is important because it illustrates that Convert Buddhism is more than images of the Buddha, particular scriptures, and even statements of belief such as the Four Noble Truths. At its heart, Convert Buddhist understands itself as a practice, and because meditation cushions both signify and enable the enactment of silent seated meditation, they indicate the “marrow” of the tradition.

Virtual cushions are significant because they reveal that, to some extent, online silent meditation communicates information about Buddhist teachings; however, what is crucial is the online ritual component. Unlike film, which shows bodies, or print and radio, which tell about bodies, virtual worlds offer actual embodiment. This is not to suggest that, like in the movie *Tron* (1982), a person takes their physical body with them when logging in to the virtual world; rather, logging on extends users into the virtual world by merging their real life body with that of their avatar. In the simplest sense, a virtual body is one that inhabits a virtual world. In the most general sense, embodiment signifies the experience of being in one’s body and challenges the assumptions that subjectivity can be reduced to mind and that media practices merely convey disembodied information.

Beyond understanding virtual worlds and Buddhist practice, virtual meditation cushions in Hoben demonstrate that bodies are not natural. To assume that actual-world embodiment is the only authentic embodiment imputes a naturalist and romantic notion of an unmediated encounter with the world. Human beings may have no choice regarding the biological body they are given, but bodies never exist outside of material and visual cultures. Religious embodiment, paradoxically, is not just about physical manifestations of the body, but rather deals with how the body is re-enacted by media practices, both in the real world and in Second Life.

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Citation Guide

1. Gregory Price Grieve, "Virtual Meditation Cushion (Zafu)," Object Narrative, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2016), doi:10.22332/con.obj.2016.3

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Notes

1. Second Life Market Place (marketplace.Secondlife.com) (accessed January 1, 2013).