

## Mindful Social Networking

*Social networking—is it helpful or harmful? [Ethan Nichtern](#) offers suggestions for how we can go online without losing our minds.*

The Social Network is an amazing phenomenon, an amazing opportunity to see the truth of interdependence, that none of our lives occur in an isolated vacuum. Social networking is also, possibly, the most widespread addiction on our planet right now, sucking billions of hours we'll never get back again.

On a recent meditation retreat, I asked assembled students to share their favorite "evasive maneuvers" from the present moment, the ways we all hide out from having to be here with the direct simplicity of right now. People said all kinds of funny and not so funny things. In a discussion group later in the weekend, one student wondered why nobody had brought up Twitter and Facebook. Another student joked "Ethan asked us what our individual evasive maneuvers were, not our shared ones. Everyone's addicted to Facebook. That just goes without saying at this point."

The best framework to analyze social networking is a concept called "coemergence." Coemergence refers to the ability of any particular phenomenon or experience to manifest as either wisdom or confusion, helpful or harmful, a weapon or a prison. From this standpoint (which is sometimes considered an advanced framework for working with meditation practice), phenomena are in themselves neither positive nor negative, but they only become helpful or harmful according to how the mind attends to them and fixates upon them. Enter the social network. Is it the greatest tool for connection and camaraderie the world has ever seen? Or is it a dangerous time-suck, isolating us in bubbles of anxious voyeurism? Well, it's both.

What make the distinction? Whether or not you view your time online as a practice or an escape makes all the difference in the world. At the same time, recognizing the truth of coemergence is a great way to develop compassion and overcome guilt about our actions. Even Mark Zuckerberg himself seems like quite the coemergent dude.

As a Buddhist teacher who uses both Facebook and Twitter to connect with friends, students, and like-minded community builders, I struggle mightily with making my time online mindful and beneficial for myself and others. Below are some very simple guidelines that have been helpful to me.

### Before You Go Online

1. Do all your social networking at a desk (this is the corollary to Michael Pollan's excellent advice to do all your eating at a table). The people around you will get mad at you if you are on your handheld device all the time. Consider a desk the appropriate space to connect with the Internet, the meditation cushion or yoga mat of the Internet. It's a very bad idea to tweet and walk at the same time.

2. Limit your sessions. Choose a maximum number of times you can be on Facebook or Twitter in a given day, say three or less. Also limit your total amount of time on Facebook or Twitter to a reasonable amount -- say less than an hour total daily. If you go over these, take a non-judgmental attitude, but realize that you are online a lot, and may want to find ways to cut back.
3. Take time away from being online. Each month, take a short "Internet cleanse," say three days where you are completely unplugged. Set up an autoresponder and don't check a thing. The cleanses can be difficult, but they are also amazing. My next one is coming up this weekend.

### **Doing a Mindful Session Online**

1. Set your intention. Before opening your browser, contemplate the truth of interdependence and raise a compassionate intention toward everyone in your network you are about to connect with (yes this may be thousands or millions of people). You could contemplate a traditional phrase such as "may we all be at ease." Whatever you do, notice if you've logged on before you are even aware you did it. Setting an intention slows down the pace of our mental chatter and makes our efforts much more effective. Whatever you do online touches many many other people. To put it bluntly, slowing down and being aware are the keys to not peeing in the pool.
2. Practice Appropriate Speech. If you are going to post something, Before pressing "Tweet" or "Share" on anything, take three deep breaths. Then ask four questions associated with the practice of responsible speech: A) Is this True? B) Is this Helpful? C) Is this an appropriate time to share this? D) I am an appropriate person to share it?  
If the answers to all four questions is yes, then feel good about hitting "share." When contemplating these questions, cut yourself some slack. Something doesn't have to be monumentally helpful to be shared, but at least this contemplation will help us stop spreading harmful cynicism and mindless gossip.
3. Dedicate the benefits. When it's time to log off, log off. If it's past time to log off and you notice you are still on, just notice that fact, and aspire to having a more structured, mindful session the next time. As you log off, offer the benefits of connecting with your network to your friends and colleagues to further connectedness and mindfulness. You might even seal your session with the thought, "May all my friends, followees, and followers be at peace and free from harm today."

It's said that anything can become a mindfulness practice with the right intention, that we can actually cultivate our minds and hearts 24/7/365. So for all of us who spend too many hours online, here's our chance.

Peace, and see you soon in the mindful social network.

**Ethan Nichtern is the author of *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence* (Wisdom Publications) and the founding director of the Interdependence Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to meditation and philosophy, integral activism, mindful arts, and meaningful media. Visit his website at [ethannichtern.com](http://ethannichtern.com)**