

Mechanization, Technology and Humanity

IMAGINATION #1

It is the year 2100. The ancient spiritual dream of heaven on earth, Shambhala, where all Beings are loving, caring and enlightened has unfolded. A sense of interconnectedness lives throughout humanity. Close friendships have developed between people from diverse cultures and countries. This great development was accelerated through technology, especially the Internet.

Through seeing natural and political disasters in real time, our compassion is awakened. All beings, human and other, become our family. Even in remote villages access to all the scientific and spiritual wisdom that exists on this planet is immediately available. After millennia of relative isolation, where our caring only extended to family, tribe and friends, we finally have reached the land of brotherly and sisterly love known as Philadelphia (philos=love, adelphos=brotherly). The Internet was the means for weaving us all together.

IMAGINATION #2

It is the year 2100. The science fiction picture of mechanized humanity has become real. Saturated with information, actual authentic connectedness is rare. Humans prefer the safety of electronic images to the uncertainty of direct contact. Looking at screens is interpreted as interchangeable with being body to body in the same location. Listening to lectures over the internet is considered indistinguishable from sharing physical space with the speaker. Cyber-sex has become more appealing and less threatening than true intimacy. Virtual reality machines create the feeling of authentic experiences. Even vacations in which all your senses are immersed in a substitute world are the norm.

Gift or Curse?

I am very grateful that I can write these words, press a button and so many people can share these thoughts. Certainly, this interconnecting has great potential for life on earth.

Yet...

Have you ever felt addicted to checking your email, surfing the web, watching television or otherwise giving yourself an electronic dose of quasi- reality?

Did you know that the 'beep' that sounds when an email arrives elicits the same response in the brain's pleasure centers as chocolate or sexual imagery?

Just as native people were frightened that a camera could steal their soul, perhaps something similar is happening to humanity. Are we using these media or are they beginning to control us?

How can we use technology without getting used by it? This is the question we are exploring. This issue is central for all of us. In subtle, nefarious ways we become entranced. I see it in myself. How easily I can be drawn, in compulsive ways, to the cyber-universe even though I am a person who loves nature, direct human connecting and quiet times without external stimulation.

From my point of view, we are in grave danger unless we mobilize the consciousness and will-forces to navigate this new stage of evolution. The internet is exquisite for information sharing, can save lives and radically impact the world in helpful ways. Hearing music from around the world, seeing sporting and cultural events can enhance our lives greatly. Yet, all of these have a potentially great cost. Substitute worlds seem real. Electronic images seem interchangeable with

that which is living. The uncertainty that comes with authentic, embodied living seems messy compared to an airbrushed reality. Although subtle, can you sense our collective trance?

I am especially concerned about young people. Just the other day my wife and I were in a restaurant enjoying a lovely meal. We noticed a family with two children, each with IPADS that were keeping them entertained. We felt disturbed as we noticed the glazed, disconnected look in their eyes. Even when their parents spoke to them there was little contact. Who chose the machines? Does this choice encourage human freedom and connectedness?

Children have not developed the neurological capacity to differentiate electronic imagery from the real. Their brains are defenseless against the seduction of the lights, sounds and images that stimulate their pleasure centers. Just as we protect them from running onto a busy street, we need the same sense of urgency to protect them from the electronic world.

I observe young adults, people raised on these machines, where the norm seems to include almost constant electronic "dosing". Each instance is not damaging in itself and at times can be a fine choice. These technological "advances" can be used positively. It is the addiction, the trance inducing, brain-altering potential that is of tremendous concern.

Adults also must be wary of an inflated sense of autonomy and self-control. Our capacity for genuine freedom is on the line here! It is very difficult to discern when one is in a trance, so easy for the seduced brain to fool itself. We need practices, teachers and communities of fellow seekers to help us wake up! I am grateful that my life is filled with so many opportunities to spend time with other people who are committed to growing awareness and a path of awakening.

In the last few years, I have had more and more students who are addicted to surfing the web whether for news, shopping or pornography. Many families are in the habit of leaving television on even when no one is watching. Conversation and interconnecting begins to feel tiresome and just watching something seems the most relaxing. It is challenging yet extremely important to question our own habits and to find the right balance for our lives.

Some spiritual traditions speak of dark forces that seek to entrap humankind. Their goal is to eliminate free will. I do not know if these are actual entities with a conscious plan. I do know that the mechanization of the human being that can come through unconscious use of technology would be the ideal means for such a venture. When I see people walking down the street or through airports completely isolated in their own world, absorbed in their earphones or tiny screens with little connection to others I wonder if we are becoming collectively enslaved. Driving through suburbia at night and seeing these blue lights of televisions emanating from almost every house sends shivers up my spine. What is happening to us?

Again, how can we use technology without getting used by it? Clearly the answer is not to go retrograde and swear off all media, this is regressive. There is too much positive potential here. Besides, going backward is not an option when on an evolutionary trajectory. What are the antidotes?

ANTIDOTES

I have painted a pretty grim picture. Still, I have tremendous faith in the capacity of human beings. We are drawn toward greater awareness, love and freedom. Even more, I sense that the evolution of life has an intrinsic orientation toward Shambhala and Philadelphia.

Some suggestions:

Develop practices that help you to grow your capacity for embodied awareness in general.

Be conscious each time you choose to use electronic media (internet, smart phone, email, television, movies, radio):

PAUSE to make conscious your decision to check the email, send a message, make the call or watch that show, etc.

PAUSE to collect yourself in an embodied way. This means to sense your breathing, your connection to the ground, and contact with the space around you. Feel into the living moment and reconnect consciously every 15 minutes. Simply sensing a whole breath, taking your eyes off the screen, checking in with your inner life is enough to interrupt the unconsciousness. As you do this, it becomes a "bodily habit" that requires little effort.

If your children are watching electronic shows, interact with them, bringing human connecting into the experience.

When possible shut down your "devices" except when expecting a message so that you can choose when to check.

Be aware of the unconscious act of checking simply out of boredom or habit.

When communicating something personal handwrite a note.

For important, remote conversations use telephone or Skype rather than texting so that the sound of the voice and possibly the gestures are part of the interaction.

Spend time "wired down" and if possible connect with nature everyday. In cities visit the parks or just sense the air. Nature is always there!

Get into water either a bath or extended shower, sense into the element of water and let it soothe you.

Most important, stay alive to the question, "am I choosing in freedom or acting from compulsion when using any electronic media?" Becoming conscious of a compulsive action, even if you do not change it, is a big help!

Do we have the capacity to use these great and expanding opportunities for interconnecting without getting lost? I am not sure. I, for one, am committed to doing my best to stay alert. Navigating these issues effectively will bring us many steps closer to the world we hope to create. Please reflect on these things and forward this newsletter to others.