



Dharma Practice in an Age of Technological Dystopia

BY
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Photo by Ryōji Iwata

Guo Gu first learned meditation in 1972 when he was four years old, studying with a respected Chinese meditation master in Taiwan, Master Guangqin (1892–1986). In 1980, he began learning meditation from Master Sheng Yen, who was residing in New York at the time. In 1991, after college, Guo Gu was ordained as a monk and became Master Sheng Yen’s personal attendant. In 1995, he had his first Chan experience, and was given permission by the master to teach Chan independently. In 2000, Guo Gu left monasticism and re-entered the world. He received his PhD in Buddhist Studies from Princeton University in 2008 and began teaching Buddhism and East Asian religions as an Assistant Professor at Florida State University. In 2009, he founded the Tallahassee Chan Center, where he is the guiding teacher. This article was edited by Sandra Fiegehen.



WE ALLOW TECHNOLOGIES such as smartphones, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and other social media to take over our lives. The commonality of these technologies is the way they cater to and manipulate our deepest needs to be seen, heard, and loved. A very strong addiction underlies these needs, which are fortified by past experiences and strengthened by the illusion that technological devices fulfill them. Our addiction to technology is a form of being controlled where we are being subjected to the world of cyber dystopia. We need to expose this addiction, accept its true nature, and work with it in order to free ourselves and regain our humanity.

The Imagined Dystopia

Dystopia is the opposite of utopia, and it refers to an *imagined* world where we are dehumanized and our human potential for freedom deteriorates. Technology, in a certain sense, lessens our humanity. We create digital personas, façades, and personalities. We create an imagined world. We usually understand the word *imagined* as something

unreal or insubstantial. But that’s not the meaning here. In fact, all of us share an imagined society, an imagined world. We have always done this. We share an imagined or agreed-upon consensus of normalcy through social practices, in the way we dress, walk, love, and greet each other.

Twenty years ago, if I were to greet you by raising my arm and pushing my fist out toward you, you might have taken it as a hostile gesture. Today this is called a “fist pump” and it just means “(Hey), what’s up?” This is a shared social practice. Such conventions exemplify our socially constructed, consensually imagined world. So imagination is not just fantasy – it has that element – but it is a shared belief and practice of what is normal.

Technology has created a dystopia. App designers invent applications and platforms that target our needs. Even notifications and displays are carefully crafted to grab our attention and to lure us to come back for more, and more, and more. Advertising and casino gambling strategies are operative here. Marketers, designers, promotional strategists and all of us users create, incorporate, and reinforce a socially constructed imagined reality.

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When people constantly share details of their social lives with others, those who are not included may feel left out. FOMO, the Fear of Missing Out, is a recent addition to our language. If people receive an alert on a social media platform or text and they are not able to respond, they experience anxiety. They want to be seen, heard, and don't want to be missing from the conversation. So whenever an alert comes, they feel compelled to respond, perhaps with an emoji, a thumbs up, a "Like" or some other way that expresses that they are in on it, that they are part of whatever is going on.

We are social beings in a society which, paradoxically, favors individualism. However, in the absence of social support and strong family ties, we experience estrangement, isolation, a deep sense of lack. This is the unfortunate flip side of individualism. In premodern times, societies were founded on social

networks of family, neighbourhood and village, and the self was embedded in a connectedness within these structures. By contrast, the modern self is conditioned to feel estranged and anxious; more socially mobile but ever more isolated – hence, our attraction to being seen, heard, and loved in this imagined, technological dystopia.

The Hook

In every context of our life, from our nine-to-five job to school, transitioning from home to college to a new work place, our need to be seen, heard, and loved is greatly exploited by technologies that purport to meet those needs. We are told that we must be "connected." We can't not be connected! Advertisements stress our desire to be connected and offer a particular product as a solution to this

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"problem" of disconnect. These ads work because we feel isolated. We feel alone and estranged in a fast-paced world.

The programs that are developed to make us feel connected provide a substitute connection, but this is not the real thing even though the neurological pathways involved may be the same. When we are part of a cyber-community, when we are recognized and when we are seen, when people click a "Like" on Facebook or respond positively to our Snapchat posting, our brain activity is the same as when we interact with each other in real life.

The imagined cyber dystopia caters to our need for instant gratification and that has a detrimental effect on who we are. Because of neuroplasticity, our brain constantly adapts to circumstances as we learn to restructure ourselves. We rewire ourselves, gradually and imperceptibly. Reading a book and taking notes with a pen on paper is a very different experience than swiping and tapping bits of information. Different parts of the brain become activated. There's a tactile sensation, there's a time lapse, and neurological processes have time to register information and lay down patterns. When we are on our apps and social media feeds, we merely glance over information and type short messages – typically 150 words or less – and consequently and inadvertently, we train our brain in a different way. The more we repeat these actions, the more these neurological pathways strengthen. These are pathways that favor speed over nuance, simplicity over depth in our reading and our thinking, and fragmentation over narrative coherence.

On social media, we can join the conversation in the middle and we can leave before the end. We condition the mind to de-contextualize and oversimplify our understanding and to favor impulse over responses that are measured or tempered. The conversations continue, and most people feel little

incentive to be responsible for it. We come simply to "post" our own projections and further our own agenda. Like potluck, we bring our own meals to these cyber conversations.

Twitter posts are increasingly simple, impulsive and uncivil. This is a whole new way of processing information. Because we don't experience real people, we dehumanize others as mere screen names. We are changing how our brain relates to others. This shift in how we interact with each other has profound implications not only on individual relationships and social relationships but even on our political life. Technology changes the way news is conveyed to us and the way we are absorbing it. Tweets are often shocking, sensational and attention-grabbing but they are not informed or contextualized analyses of important events.

The Deep Tones of Emotions

We as Dharma practitioners must expose the illusion of our deep-seated emotions, beneath our discursive thinking. The feelings of isolation, separateness, and lack do not define us. Living in a world of technological dystopia is not the solution. When we practice in the context of worldly life and expose the ways in which we are conditioned and controlled, we naturally aspire to free ourselves from this imagined dystopia of our own making.

The point of technology is to use technology and not be used by it. Our humanity cannot be swapped for it. The first step to recovering our humanness is to expose our addiction to our imagined dystopia. The Buddha didn't speak about "dystopia." He used a very simple word: "dream." That is, an imagined world, a shared reality of samsara that we continually participate in, create, and fortify. Great technological advances have occurred as a result of our imagination. I am not advocating social regression. What I am

advocating is that we endeavor to not cede control to our technologies. We are much more than that.

“Exposing” is my way of expressing the Buddha’s teaching for waking up from the dream of saṃsāra; it is insight into seeing how things truly are. We have to see the dream, see how we actually create the dystopia, perpetuate stories and imaginary projections of who we are and should be. This imagined dystopia is only run by having and lacking, gaining and losing, success and failure, victim and perpetrator. Exposing these binary ways of experiencing things is humbling. Actually, the more we expose these dualistic habit patterns, the more we are free. We realize that we have more options and choices; we are much more than our addictions.



Exposing is not a cerebral or psychoanalytic process. It is to directly change the subtle tones of emotions. It does not work to simply see what’s happening and then command ourselves to let go. Body and mind are inseparable. When we have certain perceptions, our body responds in a certain way – chemicals are being released throughout the body because of our reactive states. So when we are working through compulsions or addictions, we must direct our attention to the tones of emotions and learn to relax our body, harmonize the breath. Exposing is an embodied practice.

According to Buddhist psychology, there are five factors of mind that are always present in both waking and sleeping life. They are: sensory contact, sensation, intention, conception, and attention. Sensory contact is always present in one way or another – this is a given. When there’s contact, there’s always sensation, of which there can only be three: pleasure, pain, or neutrality. They can be very subtle and in any given moment only one of these three feelings is present. On the basis of these subtle sensations or emotions, we create karma. This is intention, our impulse to act. Conception furthers our intention through discrimination, which is either correct or mistaken. Attention is our ability to focus. For

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example, once we are karmically and conceptually lured by smartphone devices, our attention keeps us addicted. All the apps need to do is to create the platform for our need to be seen, heard, and loved, then we do the rest to keep ourselves locked in the technological dystopia.

Practice in an Age of Dystopia

What is important is to expose the presence of subtle tones of emotions in our addiction. Are we feeling attraction, repulsion, or neutral? It is the subtle, undercurrent tones of emotions or moods that shape our experience in this moment. Even as you read these words now, you are experiencing different emotional tones – some of which might be carried over from before you started reading, or may have arisen when you came across one particular passage in this article. You might be experiencing engagement, receptivity, openness, or, if you disagree, you might experience an emotional closing, a subtle aversion or suspicion, perhaps doubt. Most people are not aware of this level of subtle mental continuum. It is the presence of the emotions that shape our experience from one moment to another.

For practitioners, once the body is relaxed, the breath will be harmonized and the mind clear; wandering thoughts diminish. But this type of clarity is not sufficient. We need to be aware of the undercurrent of feelings within us in this moment.

I’ll give you a simple example. When you are in a good mood and someone texts you an annoying message, you feel fine, no problem. But if you are in a bad mood and they text you the same message, you may immediately become aggravated. The text is the same, but your attitude is different, and you give rise to a particular intention (karma) accompanied by some stories about this person (conception), and then you fixate on that (attention).

If we are not clear about our present emotions, our attitudes, we may be practicing what I call spiritual substitution or suppression. For example, even though we practice Buddhadharma, little things may still annoy us. The difference is just that now we have collected a whole bunch of Buddhist ideas, like “compassion” and “lovingkindness” but we’re not really exposing the undercurrent of our feelings in this moment. Because we’re not exposing the undercurrent, we cannot see its true nature and cannot embrace it, and we definitely cannot work with it. Our dystopia, then, continues.

Freedom

Once we expose the undercurrent tones of our emotions or attitudes in the present, we work on accepting them. Of course, there is a history to our emotions and attitudes and there are reasons why we feel the way we do. But now you can accept them and choose not to get caught up with or repress them. We see their true nature. This process is not linear. The more we expose, the more we embrace and accept. The more we accept, the more we expose other aspects of ourselves. And the more we expose, the more we are able to work our way out of this dystopia.

How to change our attitude? Be gentle. Just look at our need for gratification and accept it without necessarily following or rejecting it. If we can relax and be present, then all it takes is a gentle shift in attitude. The source of the problem is really not technology or anything else. It is identifying with feelings, our attitudes. All the Buddhist teachings on virtues can be used to make that shift. Gently bring up gratitude, or contentment, or loving-kindness, or contrition. If we’re relaxed and present to what’s there, the tones of our emotions are freed from an owner, a self. The sense of lack or whatever we may

feel easily shifts into gratitude and contentment. This freedom and fluidity is our humanity.

The moment-by-moment present liberates. When we expose, embrace, and work through our deep-seated feelings by shifting negative emotions to wholesome factors, we come to personally experience the fluid nature of our mind. This is a testimony of our intrinsic freedom. *Being* in this way is freedom, is becoming human, becoming buddha.

With regard to dealing with the dystopia of modern life, we need to expose our addictions and recognize the ways in which we participate in those technologies that feed our addictions and perpetuate our habit patterns. We need to expose our fears and the ways in which our needs are shaped and manipulated. Our lives need no longer be driven by “If I do this, I will get more ‘Likes.’” Our need to be seen, heard, and loved, through the system of intermittent rewards is no different from a compulsion to gamble on a slot machine. Expose our fears and habit patterns and we are freed. Our tendency to see things in opposition, in duality, dissolves.

The twelfth-century Chan master, Hongzhi once said “Multi-task amidst chaos.” He didn’t say when faced with the complexity of life, “Move to the mountain!” He said:

*Multi-task amidst chaos. Manifest in full in places of encounter. No situations exist outside your mind. The two primaries of heaven and earth have the same root. The myriad forms are of a single body. Adapting to changes, you can transform freely without being coaxed or manipulated by brown-nosers. This is to realize great freedom. Travel like the wind, illuminate like the moon. You may encounter things but they are not obstructions. Then you may rest and retreat but still shoulder your responsibilities.**

Change is freedom. It is being human, being alive. There is no need to run away from chaos or the world. There are two lessons in Hongzhi’s teaching above. First, nothing exists outside you. Second, take up responsibility. The manner in which we normally experience the world is dualistic. We think that the culprit behind our problems is outside: “It is *those people* who are doing this to me! It is the technology that is at fault. I am the victim; the smartphone designers are the perpetrators.”

From Chan perspective, nothing exists outside of you. We create our imagined world of dystopia and live in it. Our emotions, feelings, thoughts and reactions are completely ours. This imagined dystopia is what binds us and frees us. With no seed of addiction, a feeling of FOMO would be impossible. If we didn’t have addiction, we wouldn’t have to engage in practice to be free. Nothing exists outside our mind. Yet everything we encounter can be our source of freedom.

We must shoulder our responsibilities. Don’t blame others or the world. If we try to correct the world while we ourselves are filled with angst, aggression, or sorrow – if we don’t expose these emotions within – we are not going to correct anything. We are only going to perpetuate the imagined dystopia, our samsaric dream. So we must completely engage with the world yet maintain our mind at ease. Hongzhi says “Travel like the wind, illuminate like the moon. You may encounter things but they are not obstructions.” This is not to take up an attitude of passivity, nor to follow our tendency to always correct things, control others, and change situations based on our own opinions. That would be self-attachment.

Nothing obstructs. Everything reveals Buddhadharmā. Everything reveals how the world of dystopia works. This world is our arena, our path. Exposing our deep-seated emotions yet refraining



Photo by Larisa Birta

from identifying with them, we “travel like the wind.” Wind does not obstruct. Wherever we go, we are like a spring breeze.

“Illuminate like the moon,” not like the blazing sun – cool yet brilliant. Flowing with change, transforming freely without being fixed in rigid ways. When we can respond in this way, we won’t be “coaxed, controlled or manipulated by brown-nosers.” We stop living in our own stories and stop living in other people’s dreams. At the same time, fully being in the world. What freedom!

With regard to our relationship to our devices, do we need to cut ourselves off from them? No. We don’t need to stop using them, but we do need to expose the habit patterns that have developed around their use. We cannot be seduced and manipulated by them and our feelings of wellbeing cannot be dependent on how many “Likes” we get on Facebook. We need

no longer perpetuate the dystopia. Nonetheless, we continue to participate in it.

To do that, we need to practice. Dharma practice is not an intellectual, cerebral exercise. It is an embodied practice that requires a level of mastery over the body and mind. The depth of our practice depends on our ability to expose, embrace, work through, and set ourselves free. We can engage with the world, utilize technologies, but not be defined by them. Once in a while, we have to engage in intensive retreats where we are unplugged, temporarily. One day, three days, five, seven days. Then, we return to the world with greater clarity to free ourselves and others. ☯

* *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu* 宏智禪師廣錄 (*The Extended Record of Chan Master Hongzhi*), fascicle 6, Taisho no. 2001, 48:6, 74a22.