

# Can God-vision and Television Go Together?

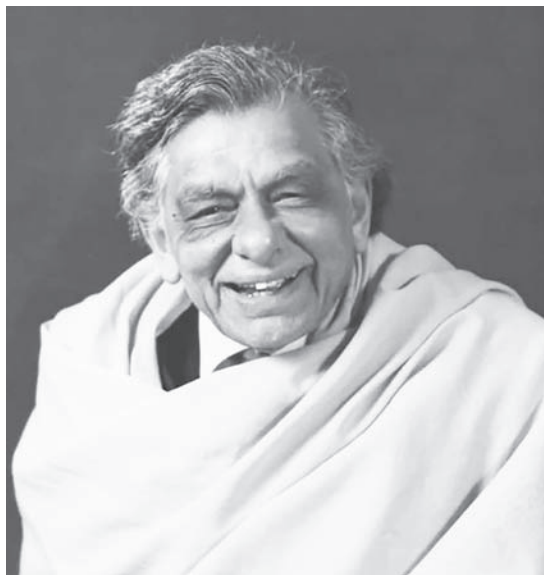
Swami Chidekananda

**G**od vision and television do not go together — Swami Aseshananda, an enlightened monk and the last living monastic disciple of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, used to say this often. If the Swami were alive today, he would probably warn of the dangers of the internet, social media, and the smartphone. So does this mean that we should avoid the internet altogether? No. The internet has undoubtedly helped countless spiritual seekers during the ongoing pandemic, providing virtual *sadhu-sangha* (holy company) in the form of lucid lectures on Vedanta, interactive classes and seminars, uplifting bhajans, and most importantly, personal interactions with like-minded monks and devotees. There are other innumerable benefits to the internet. Researchers all over the world, for example, can now easily access resources in the best universities in the world in the blink of an eye, to gain new insights and produce novel results in their research. In addition, it may be said that the human mind in general has become more resourceful in finding solutions to problems.

That being said, it is a known fact that whenever any new type of technology is introduced into our lives, there will be positive as well as negative consequences. Marshall McLuhan, author of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, says:

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Swami Aseshananda (1899–1996)

The boons [of the net] are real...[t]hey supply the thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.<sup>1</sup>

As spiritual aspirants, it is important to understand how the internet may adversely affect us. By doing so, we will be able to take effective corrective measures to counter these negative influences.

### I. Addressing Some Common Objections

Technological determinism is the view that technology shapes and influences both society as well as individuals. My view is that the internet is compromising our cognitive abilities and substantially impairing our ability to function effectively in the world. At the same time, we have the freedom to minimise the detrimental effects of the internet by changing our reading habits and practising greater mindfulness in the virtual world.

Instrumentalism is the view that technology is merely a neutral tool that is 'entirely subservient to the conscious wishes of their users' (ibid., 46). *Instrumentalists*<sup>2</sup> claim that the internet—like all other inventions—is simply an inert tool and that human beings can control their use of it. In contrast, technological determinists argue that technology shapes and influences society as well as the individuals.

Let us look at some of the common objections which are made by instrumentalists and replies to them.

**Objection:** *Is this not the same type of overreaction—that the world will come to an end—which takes place whenever any new type of technology is invented and used? Did people not say the same thing about the television, microwave, and other inventions?*

No. Researcher and author Nicholas Carr explains that there are four types of inventions that either 'supplement or amplify our native capacities'<sup>3</sup>: (1) some technologies increase our physical capabilities like the fighter jet, exoskeleton suit, and so on; (2) inventions that 'extend the range of our senses' (ibid.) like microscopes, telescopes, and amplifiers; (3) technologies that enable us to reshape nature to better serve our needs and desires like the reservoir, genetically modified food products, birth control, and desalinisation of the ocean;

(4) the fourth type is called 'intellectual technologies'. These help us to support or extend our mental powers. These include instruments that help us to comprehend the written word like dictionaries, to find and classify information like the Dewey Decimal System, to formulate and articulate ideas, to take measurements and perform calculations, and finally to expand the capacity of our memory. Intellectual technologies include the map, mechanical clock, printing press, calculator, computer, mobile phone, and now the internet.

Among these four types of inventions, experts find that 'intellectual inventions' exert the greatest influence over us because 'they are our most *intimate tools ... for self-expression, for shaping personal and public identity, and for cultivating relations with others*' (ibid., emphasis added).

In other words, these tools become an extension of our body-mind complex. Reading this, we cannot help but recall the genius of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple. He successfully built products—like the laptop, iPad pro, and iPhone—which became like an additional appendage or limb for its users.

*How did the printing press, developed in 1492, help to cultivate the 'linear literary mind'?*

### II. The Effect of the Printing Press on the Human Mind

Carr defines the '*linear literary mind*' as the mind which developed after the invention of the printing press in 1492:

Ever since Gutenberg's printing press made book reading a popular pursuit, the linear, literary mind has been at the centre of art, science, and society. As supple as it is subtle, it's been the imaginative mind of the Renaissance, the rational mind of the Enlightenment, the inventive mind of the Industrial Revolution, even the subversive mind of Modernism (ibid.).

The reading of printed books over the past five centuries helped humankind to develop that type of mind which can shut out external distractions and focus uninterruptedly on the words of the printed page. To better understand the effect of the printing press on the individual mind, it is necessary to compare the general mind of the people—before the printing press was invented—with the general mind which developed afterwards. Carr explains that the

natural state of the human brain, like that of the brains of most of our relatives in the animal kingdom, is one of distractedness ... to shift our gaze, and hence our attention, from one object to another. ... *To read a book was to practise an unnatural process of thought, one that demanded sustained, unbroken attention to a single, static object. They had to forge or strengthen the neural links needed to counter their instinctive distractedness* (ibid., 63–64; emphasis added).

Vaughan Bell, a research psychologist at King's College, London, further adds that 'the ability to focus on a single task, relatively uninterrupted', represents a 'strange anomaly in the history of our psychological development'.<sup>4</sup>

If we walk into a zoo and see the different animals, they will most likely be in varying states of 'instinctive distractedness' or shifting their attention from one object to another. By engaging in book reading, we learn to counter this natural animal instinct because it forces us to shut out external distractions and attempt to keep our attention and concentrate on the printed words. Hence, we slowly refine and evolve our minds from animalhood to humanhood.

Swami Vivekananda also placed a great deal of importance on the reading habit. In this regard, we may recall Swamiji's ability to read and master large volumes like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He emphasises that the faculty of

concentration should be cultivated through education as well as meditation.

Now, one might object that even before printed books were available, many people—like the hunter, the craftsman, and ascetic—had all trained their brains to concentrate on a single activity. In that case, what is the value of the printed book? Carr writes that reading was important not only for the knowledge which was acquired from the author's words but

for the way those words set off intellectual vibrations within their minds ... in the quiet spaces opened up by the prolonged, undistracted reading of a book, people made their associations, drew their inferences and analogies, and fostered their ideas. In other words, they thought as deeply as they read.<sup>5</sup>

Here, we see that one benefit of reading and education is that we learn to appreciate different points of view, even if we do not necessarily agree with the other person's thinking. Secondly, we become increasingly logical in our thinking and look for evidence to support our positions, rather than merely going by feeling and biased presuppositions. Third, we develop our ability to make associations, inferences, and analogies to better understand the ideas being presented.

*And what was the ultimate effect of the printing press on civilisation?*

According to the British philosopher Francis Bacon, once books became common among the masses, the 'literary mind, once confined to the cloisters of the monasteries and the towers of the university, had become the general mind' (ibid., 72). As a result, the world had been remade.

This is a very important observation: it is when the 'literary mind became the general mind' that society became remade. If this is the case, then what happens when the 'literary mind' becomes diminished because the general masses stop engaging in deep reading? It is interesting to note

that one noticeable trend in society is the tendency towards cancel culture or to simply shut off and not listen to many points of view which are not consistent with our own. As a result, foundations of democracy like open civil debates and unbiased and well-researched journalism are getting diminished.

One might object that these are nice claims, but is there any evidence to support the decline in reading habits in the present age? Secondly, even if there is, how does the internet contribute to this decline in the reading habit and what are the effects of this upon the general mind?

### **III. How the Internet is Warping Our Minds and Adversely Affecting Our Lives?**

Numerous studies show that the internet has caused a significant decline in the reading of printed books. The National Literacy Trust of the US did a survey in 2019 which revealed that only 26% of under-18s spent some time each day reading. This is the lowest daily level recorded since the survey of children's reading habits began in 2005. It also found that fewer children enjoy reading and that this dwindled with age: nearly twice as many five to eight-year-olds as 14 to 16-year-olds said they took pleasure from reading. Overall, a mere 53% of children said they enjoyed reading 'very much' or 'quite a lot'—the lowest level since 2013.<sup>6</sup>

Most experts attribute this to the advent of the internet, social media, and the android phone. They argue that it is affecting how we are receiving and doling out information. One might object that there is some evidence that the reading habit is arguably still intact. It is simply that users now prefer to read online and not from printed materials. If this is the case, then why can't the 'literary linear mind' still be maintained and cultivated through online reading?

Yes, surveys reveal that internet users are indeed preferring to do their reading online,

rather than through printed materials. However, the very medium of the internet works paradoxically to warp the linear literary mind: '*The net seizes our attention only to scatter it.*'<sup>7</sup>

Countless studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, web designers, and social media experts all point to the same conclusion: the online environment promotes 'cursory reading, hurried, distracted thinking, and superficial learning' (ibid., 115–16). Although it may be possible to think deeply while surfing the Net, just as it may be possible to think shallowly while reading a book, this is simply not the type of thinking that Net technology encourages and rewards.

For example, when a printed book—whether it be a scholarly article or an old Victorian novel—gets transferred onto an electronic device that is connected to the internet, we automatically enter into that environment of distraction:

[The] words become wrapped in all the distractions of the networked computer. Its links and other digital enhancement propel the reader hither and yon. ... *The linearity of the printed book is shattered, along with the calm attentiveness, it encourages in the reader* (ibid., 104; emphasis added).

One academic, Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., described her ordeal when reading Charles Dickens' novel *Nicholas Nickleby* on her Kindle:

Although mildly disorienting at first, I quickly adjusted to the Kindle's screen and mastered the scroll and page-turn buttons. Nevertheless, my eyes were restless and jumped around as they do when I try to read for a sustained time on the computer. Distractions abounded. I looked up Dickens on Wikipedia, then jumped straight down the Internet rabbit hole following a link

about a Dickens short story. ... Twenty minutes later I still hadn't returned to my reading of Nickleby on the Kindle.<sup>8</sup>

The above experience may better be described as a *stream of consciousness reading* which is antithetical to the *concentrated linear literary mind*. Moreover, this fragmented state negatively affects our long term knowledge retention. What do I mean? If we do not read with focus, then we will not be able to properly store the information in our short term memory. If the information is not stored in the short term memory, then how can we expect it to go to the long term memory where it can be permanently stored for retrieval? Though one may argue that it is not necessary to store knowledge in our long term database of the mind any longer because of the internet, the counterargument is that when knowledge is stored in our long term memory, it is not merely for the sake of retrieval. We can also—as Sri Ramakrishna puts it—'chew the cud' and continue to refine, deepen, and assimilate the knowledge which we have.

*When one spends a large chunk of the day in a fragmented state, how is the brain affected?*

Experiments show that just as the brain can build new or stronger circuits through physical or mental practice, those circuits can be weakened through neglect. As Carr explains: 'If we stop exercising our mental skills we do not just forget them: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, when we stop reading printed books with deep focus and instead spend the majority of our time reading online with a fragmented mind, then the part of the brain which was once responsible for flow gets displaced by our new scattered mind.

*How does this affect our minds?*

Prominent neurologists are finding that our virtual behaviour is spilling over into our

real lives. Maryanne Wolf, a Tufts University cognitive neuroscientist, worries 'that the superficial way we read during the day is affecting us when we have to read with more in-depth processing'.<sup>10</sup>

According to a new study, excessive use of the internet may make children more prone to the symptoms of Attention-Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The study looked at 2,587 high school students who had not been diagnosed with ADHD. Students were surveyed on how much time they spent on digital media, including social media. Researchers found that the students who reported using digital media many times a day were more likely than their peers to display symptoms like inattention, difficulties in organising and completing tasks, and hyperactivity-impulsivity, such as having trouble sitting still.<sup>11</sup>

This is even more alarming if we link this to the findings of psychologist Walter Mischel's Stanford Marshmallow Test, which finds that a toddler's ability to control its immediate impulse to eat a marshmallow is predictive of its future success in life.<sup>12</sup> What does this mean for our children who are growing up in an environment where we check our smartphones on average about 262 times per day or once every 5.5 minutes?<sup>13</sup>

*And how does the loss of the 'linear literary mind' affect our spiritual life?*

#### **IV. The Necessity of the Linear Literary Mind for Spiritual Aspirants**

Deep book reading gives one the ability to engage in deep concentration and focus and also helps us to cultivate our feelings and willpower, which has already been explained above.

Hence, whether we are a jnana yogi, raja yogi, bhakta, or karma yogi, concentration and focus are the prerequisites in any of these paths. The *Yoga Sutras* stress that we must first be able to

concentrate the mind on external objects, and then turn this focused mind on itself to gain higher spiritual knowledge. This is arguably when spiritual life begins. Similarly, in the path of knowledge, without concentration, how will one be able to discern between the real and the unreal? Hence, if we are losing the ability to focus on external objects (like deep reading), what hope will we have to succeed in the spiritual world?

In the practice of *karma yoga*, we must feel for the suffering of others and then try to ameliorate their suffering. Similarly, in the practice of *bhakti yoga*, we must be able to cultivate and purify our emotions and direct them towards the divine. However, studies show that by spending an inordinate time in the virtual world, children are beginning to neglect and not properly cultivate their relationships with their parents, teachers, and friends. Our scriptures say that respect and love for our parents, teachers, and friends is a prerequisite for any spiritual path. Without first cultivating a loving and sympathetic heart, it is very difficult to make progress in the path of Karma yoga or Bhakti yoga.

Finally, in any of the yogas, a strong will and determination are required. As Swamiji says, spiritual aspirants need ‘gigantic wills which nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and secrets of the universe and accomplish their purpose in any fashion even if it meant going to the bottom of the ocean and meeting Death face to face.’<sup>14</sup> But what we are seeing is that excessive use of the internet diminishes our willpower and makes us superficial thinkers.

One might wonder, at this point, whether the ‘*literary linear mind*’ is needed for spiritual progress. After all, there have been many exemplary spiritual luminaries who were even unable to read. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this topic, we will briefly answer

in two ways. Firstly, being great spiritual souls, they are exceptions to the rule and we should not compare ourselves to them. Secondly, an interesting reply is given by Sri Ramakrishna to this in his *Gospel*. In the middle of a debate, Dr Bhaduri tells Dr Sarkar: ‘What I have just said you will find in the Vedanta. You must study the scriptures. Then you will understand.’ Dr Sarkar replied: ‘Why so? Has he (meaning the Master) acquired all this wisdom by studying the scriptures?’ Master then replied: ‘But how many scriptures I have heard.’<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Sri Ramakrishna had perfected the ability to concentrate and receive information from others through hearing. In fact, in older days, scriptures were referred to as *śruti* because they were transmitted orally, rather than through reading books. Ancient Vedic culture emphasised receiving scriptural knowledge through the threefold process of *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (assimilation). However, in the present-day situation, society does not fully support the transmission of knowledge through these processes alone. Hence, the need to engage in deep reading to help cultivate the faculty of concentration.

### **V. Practical Tips for Using the Internet Mindfully and Beneficially**


Here are five practical tips on how spiritual aspirants can use the internet mindfully and beneficially:

(1) *Incorporate the practice of reading printed books into our daily lives.* The importance of reading printed books—not on a computer but in real-time—cannot be overstated. As we have discussed, we must take proactive steps to strengthen our ‘linear literary mind’ for the sake of preserving some of our fundamental mental traits like the *ability to think, feel, and will* with intensity and extensivity.

(2) *Apply the process of discernment in virtual time*: It is sometimes tempting to temporarily relax our concentration and discrimination, surrender our willpower, and abandon our sense of morality when we enter into the virtual world. However, as we have discussed, our virtual browsing does have real-life consequences. In *Meditation and Spiritual Life*, Swami Yatiswarananda advises spiritual aspirants to apply the sword of discernment even in the dream state.<sup>16</sup> One senior monk added that we should ‘sleep with the sword underneath our pillow and be ever-ready to slash away *maya* even in the dream state’. Similarly, when engaging in the virtual world, we must be ready to apply our sense of discrimination and not get carried away by its *maya*.

(3) We should be very conscious in our dealings with the internet and avoid the tendency towards passivity in the virtual world. How? One way is to cultivate discipline by setting boundaries for ourselves for using the net. We should limit ourselves to using the internet at specific times during the day and avoid going online at bedtime or before going to sleep. Secondly, when we are watching a YouTube video on Vedanta, we should actively pay attention, rather than simply passively listening. We should be active participants, mindful observers, and critical thinkers while watching the net. Techniques include taking notes, pausing the video to check if we can recall what the speaker has said, writing down questions that you would have for the speaker, and seeking answers.

(4) Once we leave the virtual world, let us go and interact with the real world. This means meeting people, having live conversations, cultivating meaningful human relations without the smartphone, and engaging in the selfless service of others with friends. One nice way to cultivate human relations is to get together, go and do service to society in a homeless shelter or an Ashrama, and so on.

(5) Use the virtual world to supplement and enrich our real world and spiritual world—but not to replace them. The internet is a wonderful tool to help us spread the universal message of Vedanta, simplify our lives, save time, and free up our mental energies for creative spiritual pursuits. Always remember that it is a supplement to enrich our spiritual life. 

## References

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