Silent Screens, Noisy Minds: Buddhist Perspectives on Digital Addiction
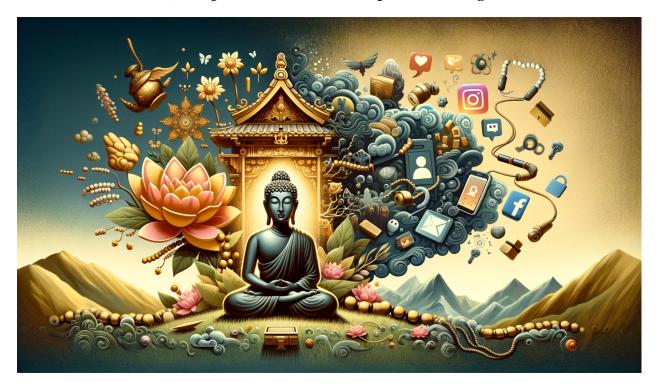

Image generated using the DALL-E 4 model.

Envision a phone nested in the curves of your pants pocket, a silent brick that

suddenly jolts to life with a buzz and a ding, only to die again quickly after. This

sequence of sounds and haptic feedback signals a message from someone dear to you. As

you reach for this device, your heart often quickens in anticipation. You type in your

passcode, and there, in the glowing embrace of the screen, lies a text, a digital whisper

from a loved one near or far. In that moment, you believe — truly believe — that they are

there, on the other end, their being reaching out to you through bits and bytes floating

through the air. You respond, as your fingers dance over the well-worn glass, drawn by a

sense of urgency: a duty to maintain this eternal thread that binds your soul to theirs.

Yet, in this dance of digital connection, a single truth remains unspoken: though your

heart flutters from the wonder of the illusion of reconnection, you are stagnant in

solitude. In this modern ritual of communication, where voices are but mere lights on a screen, leaving faces unseen, my generation constantly grapples with a profound paradox — the hunger for connection in a world more connected than ever, yet profoundly alone.

In the modern age, smartphones and digital technology, through their calculated use of dark patterns and addictive designs, perpetuate a cycle of artificial desire and suffering, known in Buddhist teachings as *dukkha*, that profoundly impacts today's youth. This paper posits that by recognizing and understanding these phenomena through the lens of Buddhist teachings on desire and attachment, we can gain a more profound insight into the nature of our predicament. Furthermore, it explores alternative, mindful approaches to technology use — approaches that foster healthy reconnections, reduce suffering, and promote a sense of well-being and altruistic living grounded in genuine human connections.

Contemporary Korean-German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han writes about the current state of the modern technological society in his book *The Burnout Society*:

> From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are not infections, but infarctions; they do not follow from the negativity of what is immunologically foreign, but from an excess of positivity. Therefore, they elude all technologies and techniques that seek to combat what is alien.

This plague that Han describes in his novel is one of artificial addiction that draws from "dark patterns." A dark pattern is a user interface that has been carefully crafted to trick users into doing things they didn't mean to do. Often, UX design leads you to good or wanted behavior, however, this only occurs when designers' interests are aligned with

the well-being of their users. In today's corporate hellscape, this is seldom the case. Instead, companies designing software are strongly incentivized to keep users on their platform, infinitely scrolling their existence away, in order to generate more advertising revenue. Past that, these dark patterns enslave us through neurological conditioning so that we feel constantly obligated to respond to nagging notifications, as if they were real people pulling us away from the present moment. This relentless barrage of pings and alerts creates a digital environment where our attention is commodified, our peace of mind sold to the highest bidder.

In understanding the impact of technology on our lives, it is essential to turn to ancient wisdom, particularly the Buddhist teachings on desire (*tanha*) and suffering (*dukkha*). First, we must understand *dukkha* as the nature of our existence. As Mitchell writes, "life as ordinarily lived is dissatisfactory. (36)" This idea of suffering expands past the traditional understanding of the word to encompass the idea of a being that not only isn't at peace, but never can be. As humans we exist in this state throughout our physical lives in this form and across our existence, which is why it is so imperative that we do not bring more *dukkha* onto ourselves of our own volition through technological invention. The second idea that we must understand in the context of this problem is the cause of *dukkha*: *tanha* or desire which literally translates to "thirst." One of the three forms of desire is the desire to "defend oneself and one's possessions, to advance one's own life, to enhance one's ego and social status (48)…" Is this not the reason that we cling so closely to our devices? The addictive nature of technology, fueled by dark patterns, can be viewed as a form of tanha, where the craving for constant stimulation and digital interaction becomes a cycle of unfulfilled desire.

Now, we've recognized the true nature of modern technology and its role in our lives, but the question of connection is still valid. Should we throw away our devices and stop connecting with one another through our newly-built networks? In fact, the Dalai Lama asserts the opposite, speaking on the necessity for us to connect: "if a person is living, … and is the only human being in an animal sanctuary, … the best he or she can do is become, perhaps, king of the jungle. Can such a person have friends? Acquire renown? … become a hero…? (60)." To throw away what we have would be selfish in nature; it is our duty to depend on others so that others may depend on us, therefore we must view the solution from another perspective.

Mindful technology use, inspired by Buddhist teachings, offers a path forward. This approach calls for awareness and intentionality in our digital engagements — demoting the device from captor to tool. It's about being fully present in our online interactions, acknowledging the fleeting nature of digital content, and discerning the real from virtual. It may be okay to allow notifications to notify us, but to still be mindful of where they draw our attention, never away from the present moment.

Further, in fostering genuine connections, the focus shifts from quantity to quality. The Dalai Lama's emphasis on interdependence highlights the potential for technology to be a tool for compassionate and altruistic engagement. It's about using digital platforms not just as a means of self-expression, but as venues for meaningful exchange, empathy, and support. Creating and participating in online communities that encourage positive, supportive interactions can nurture a sense of connectedness that transcends physical boundaries. Especially when we see progress bogged down by constant Othering, we can utilize technology to break down the physical barriers of racial inequality (Badal; Willis). By applying the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness

to our digital interactions, we cultivate a sense of digital responsibility — recognizing that each action, click, and comment contributes to the larger web of our shared human experience.

This issue is also deeply rooted in attachment. Another reason that we cling so closely to our online persona is that it is perceived as an extension of our own self. Buddhist thought tells us that this perception of the Self is ultimately foolish in nature. When the nun Vajira is confronted by a demon with this very question of the Self, she is able to brush him off with ease as these questions are asked on the false premise that the Self is a concrete being rather than "a heap of karmic constituents" (Strong, 95). The digital persona, much like the traditional notion of self in Buddhism, is a construct — a collection of likes, posts, and shared content, constantly evolving and dependent on external validation. Just as Vajira dismisses the demon's inquiries, we too can learn to view our online selves with a sense of detachment, understanding them as fluid and impermanent.

As we sail the digital currents of our age, let us embrace the wisdom of Buddhist teachings and reinterpret them in significant ways. In the mindful intertwining of our online and offline constituents, we discover a harmonious balance, where technology serves not as a source of suffering, but a canvas for true connection, compassion, and shared human experience. With each mindful click, we step closer to a world where our digital interactions no longer enslave our youth, but unites, heralding an era of the most enlightened and interconnected Being to have ever walked the Earth.