

Contemplative Literacy: Buddhist-Informed Mindfulness for the Digital Era

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Introduction

In Bhutan, “the onslaught of digital technology has brought numerous challenges, most of it in very insidious forms, of which the majority of the population is not even aware”, according to Dr Karma Phuntsho (2018, p. 103).

This assertion is made against the backdrop of the proliferation of digital technologies in Bhutan — via smartphones, computers and social media — which disrupt self-directed thinking, introspection and sustained attention, thereby weakening users’ connection to authentic thoughts and emotions.

“Unless the negativity embedded in the digital facilities are neutralised through promotion of responsible and *mindful use of technological tools*, these trends can precipitate into severe psychological and mental health problems, and eventually lead to much bigger cultural, social and economic consequences.” (Dr Karma Phuntsho, 2018, p. 105, emphasis added in italics).

This argument for the “*mindful use of digital technologies*” resonates globally in the context of the “attention economy”, where an overabundance of information competes for human attention, rendering it a scarce and highly valuable resource (Williams, 2018).

Much like mass commodities in the “monetary economy”, the flood of digital content has been contributing to addictive behaviours, disrupting natural routines, increasing stress and dissatisfaction and fragmenting human attention and social relationships. This presents a serious challenge

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for digital users, especially in the absence of “cultural authority” that might otherwise support self-regulation in the face of diminishing attentional control (Williams, 2018, p. 21).

Especially in societies where shared religious or cultural frameworks have dwindled — concerning norms that should have been cultivated and passed down over generations to guide individuals toward particular values — people face strong headwinds. They knowingly or unknowingly, grapple with a sense of disorientation: “We’re left to our *own* devices and, given our inherent scarcity of attention, the resulting cognitive overload often makes bringing our own boundaries extremely challenging, if not prohibitive.” (Williams, 2018, p. 24).

In the case of Bhutan, its vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH), grounded in Buddhist principles, offers valuable moral guidance for addressing the challenges of the digital age.

Central to this vision is the notion of mindfulness, which serves not only as a personal practice but also as a civic and cultural resource. Bhutan is thus well positioned to provide a model for *digital flourishing*, a state in which mindfulness enables individuals and societies to navigate the pressures of technological change with clarity and care.

“When you live with mindfulness, you will make no mistakes in your action,” according to Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi. “Mindful living acts like radar, helping you to detect and avoid negative consequences before they arise.” (Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, 2010, p. 14). In this light, mindfulness can help reclaim human autonomy, creativity and community in an increasingly automated world.

Japan: Confronting the Global Challenge

To broaden the discussion, I will draw a comparison with Japan, my country of residence. There, digitalisation has exacerbated cognitive fatigue and emotional strain, prompting calls for a revival of indigenous aesthetics, as will be elaborated below. This response in Japan reflects a shared global need to draw upon cultural and philosophical resources as a vital counterweight to the mechanising tendencies of digital technologies.

More specifically, a distinct set of social problems has emerged from the algorithms used in search engines and social media, that is, the computational procedures that drive digital platforms, often operating outside users' conscious awareness (Udagawa, 2025, pp. 102–146).

Firstly, these algorithms covertly exploit innate cognitive biases, subtly guiding individuals toward information that reinforces their existing beliefs.

Secondly, they personalise online content based on users' prior browsing behaviour, thereby creating “filter bubbles” that restrict exposure to diverse perspectives and reinforce pre-existing viewpoints, enclosing users within digital “echo chambers”.

Thirdly, they prioritise the capture of user attention over the accuracy or trustworthiness of information.

These algorithmic attributes have contributed to a broader, society-wide information disorder. For example, algorithms stimulate desire and consumerist materialism by consolidating users' viewing records across websites through cookies, tracking pixels, device fingerprinting and data-sharing agreements. This enables the delivery of targeted advertisements that exploit psychological triggers to intensify materialist behaviours.

Algorithms are also designed to favour content that offers a surprising twist or an unusual angle, because such content is more likely to seize attention and spread rapidly. Users are not only drawn to information that aligns with their beliefs but are also attracted to the new, surprising or unexpected — an effect known as the “novelty hypothesis”.

In view of these challenges, informatics specialist Tooru Nishigaki expresses cautious optimism, noting that “living beings observe their environment, select only the objects that are meaningful (or valuable) to them and live while constructing their own ‘world’ from those selected elements.” (Nishigaki, 2023, p. 80).

This perspective resonates with a growing unease among Japanese people toward a digitally driven system that prioritises instant gratification and shortcut solutions. Such a system stands in stark contrast to “a form of perfectionism rooted in a deep concern for group honour and harmony”

— “an aesthetic that estimates emotional cleanliness over abstract logic.” (Nishigaki, 2023, p. 148).

This indigenous aesthetic can serve as a foundation for more mindful engagement with online information, encouraging thoughtful restraint and ethical sensitivity, rather than impulsive or polarising reactions. It also provides a critical counterbalance to the unreflective embrace of the exogenous notion of digital “collective intelligence” — the belief that the unregulated exchange of opinions and information among autonomous, utility-maximising individuals will inherently lead to correct or optimal outcomes.

Bhutan: Cultivating Well-being Through Cultural Values

While, in Japan, there is a need to define a culturally resonant model of digital engagement, Bhutan’s public policies reflect homegrown normative elements that support humane and ethical digitisation. They exhibit an GNH-inspired orientation toward culturally attuned values, such as trust, community and inclusion — hallmarks of contemplative digital systems.

The Digital Transformation Programme (DTP) of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2024–2029) focuses on “cultivating a vibrant digital society” as one of its four major strategies (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2024, p. 87).

The strategy is aimed at “creating a secure and cohesive society through the strategic use of digital technologies”; ensures that citizens “safely utilise digital tools and platforms to access information, connect with others, conduct transactions, and participate in civic activities”; and intends to “facilitate volunteerism, donations for charitable causes, and other community-building activities towards promoting community vitality”.

The “Digital Strategy: Intelligent Bhutan” of GovTech, a leading agency in the country’s digital transformation, is a roadmap to advance Bhutan into a digitally empowered and inclusive society. The Strategy has a component to nurture a thriving “digital society” as part of the three key pillars (Government Technology Agency, 2024, pp. 19–20).

It intends to “foster community cohesion by promoting transparency and trust”; “empower individuals to connect, learn, collaborate and contribute

to collective progress”; and also aims at “leveraging digital solutions to enhance societal well-being”, on the premise that “the ultimate beneficiaries of the initiative are citizens”.

These and other related policy initiatives can be further strengthened by explicitly incorporating Buddhist-informed mindfulness, particularly in digital literacy — a cornerstone of digital transformation. Mindfulness-based approaches can help deepen users’ critical awareness, ethical discernment and reflective engagement with the influence of digitalisation on thought, knowledge and identity.

Such re-orientation is crucial in avoiding “bigger cultural, social and economic consequences”, identified by Dr Karma Phuntsho, who warns of “a capitalist corporate ethos [lurking beneath digital facilities that are] geared to lure people into more greed and consumerism” (2018, p. 104).

Contemplative Digital Literacy: Mindfulness as Civic and Ethical Engagement

To begin considering how best to integrate mindfulness into the promotion of digital literacy, it is useful to refer to a study that cautions against detaching mindfulness education from its Buddhist roots. Such detachment risks reducing mindfulness to utilitarian, non-judgemental stress-reduction techniques, merely encouraging students to “be in the here and now”, “see things as they are” and “be with whatever is” (Forbes, 2016, p. 359).

“The actual social relations that frame the meaning of these terms ... are not critically exposed and discussed but stand around outside conscious awareness like stagnant water” (Forbes, 2016, p. 359). As a result, mindfulness education often fails to engage students in the critical questioning and moral reasoning necessary to resist “a capitalist corporate ethos”.

In contrast, Bhutan is well positioned to promote a form of mindful digital literacy informed by Buddhist teachings, as “part of the study and practice of the Dharma, which indeed includes judging and enacting what is right” — an integral element of meaningful mindful education (Forbes, 2016, p. 356). This potential is reflected in Bhutanese schools, where mindfulness practices are integrated into daily student routines.

Despite this emphasis, a new type of digital literacy education may be called for, to enable users to become conscious of the mechanisms of how digitally mediated information comes into view. The focus should be placed not only on interpreting “the content’ displayed” but also understanding “the structure of the media itself as ‘the container’ that presents that content” (Udagawa, 2025, p. 200).

Digital literacy initiatives should align with a key element of mindfulness — “a stepping back and observing experience *combined* with an analytical reflection upon its antecedent causes” (King, 2016, p. 31).

As noted above, algorithms on search engines and social media platforms manipulate cognitive biases, personalise content into “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers”, and prioritise novelty and belief-confirming information over trustworthiness. These mechanisms contribute to information disorder and reinforce materialist tendencies.

Therefore, users must engage in analytical reflection on how the “container” of digital technologies — platform design, algorithmic curation and interface mechanics — can subtly erode attentional autonomy, privileging emotionally charged or manipulative content over high-quality information.

The following conceptual framework outlines how the Buddhist notion of “the nature of mind” can guide the development of contemplative digital literacy as a civic education initiative.

“The nature of mind is free from all extremes and fabrications of the ordinary mind” and is “pure and refined with three qualities: Clarity, emptiness and pervasiveness.” (Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, 2010, p. 19).

Accordingly, a programme can incorporate:

“Clarity” — cultivating perceptual awareness and discernment in digital environments;

“Emptiness” — letting go of fixed views and fostering non-reactivity and openness to diverse perspectives online;

“Pervasiveness” — recognising that the mind pervades in all digital actions, including posting, reading and responding.

Such a framework supports digital users in cultivating “attention as a stabilising mode of continued awareness” essential in the digital age (King, 2016, p. 31). At the same time, mindfulness should be framed as encompassing both individual and sociopolitical dimensions, as emphasised in Engaged Buddhism (King, 2016, p. 40).

This strand of Buddhism reinterprets ancient teachings as “a form of direct political ‘consciousness-raising’, in relation to the embedded structures of social and economic injustice that inform our everyday experience” in a capitalism-driven world (King, 2016, p. 30).

Conclusion: A Way Forward

In reality, it may be difficult for users to consistently exercise this type of digital literacy. “Even if one understands as knowledge, the importance of questioning algorithms or recognising potential biases in platforms, it is cognitively taxing to keep such perspectives in mind during everyday media consumption.” (Udagawa, 2025, p. 225).

This predicament is exacerbated by the attention economy’s tendency to steer human psychological responses toward the cognitively “easier path”. (Udagawa, 2025, p. 221).

However, the antidote to the attention economy’s exploitation of human psychology is not to overcome human nature, but to align with its deeper dimensions — our drive to learn, belong, pass down wisdom and lead examined lives. Rather than resisting the “easier path” through sheer willpower, we can strive to make the “harder path” meaningful, communal and humanly rewarding.

As Joseph Henrich (2016), a proponent of “culture-gene co-evolution” theory, argues, human beings are biologically equipped as cultural learners, with evolved capacities to absorb and transmit accumulated adaptive knowledge, capacities that have been central to our evolutionary success.

Addressing the challenge of sustaining digital literacy amid the pressures of the attention economy — by drawing on culturally rooted values — resonates with our innate human impulses toward learning, wisdom and cultural transmission.

To be effective, this challenge should not be framed as a purely contemporary or isolated dilemma, but as part of a long-standing human struggle for autonomy. From a broader perspective, the digital economy's tendency to drive users toward instant gratification and shortcuts can be seen as a continuation of the age-old capitalist logic, one that intensifies the commodification of attention, emotion and time.

In this context, fostering digital literacy requires more than technical proficiency or critical thinking alone; it demands a deeper cultural and contemplative grounding. By drawing on Buddhist-inspired mindfulness, which nurtures mental balance rather than reactivity, individuals can cultivate the inner resources necessary to navigate digital spaces with clarity and care.

In this way, promoting digital literacy becomes not merely an act of resisting manipulation, but a process of reclaiming attention as a site of autonomy, wisdom, and ethical living. By harnessing our innate capacity to learn from accumulated cultural and philosophical traditions, we can transform digital engagement into a more conscious, communal and meaningful practice.

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