



ELECTRONIC DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND SPIRITUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

The human spiritualisation process remains unchanged from the ancient to the modern era. But modern man has succumbed to web based spirituality and it is not clear how this affects his or her spiritual progress. Spiritualisation is a process of transcending physical and mental limitations to experience oneness with Divinity, a personal union with God. It is an inward journey with a selected discipline to control the mind's diffusing energies from the external world towards inner development. However, modern civilisation is impacted with the advent of the electronic spirituality.

Developments in modern electronics and web based information undoubtedly influences the spiritual growth of the current civilisation. Information is now freely available for spiritual communities to learn and grow. It is inclusive and can rise above the cultural barriers and belief systems. Nevertheless, one should question to what extent it is helpful to one's spiritual growth. Web based electronic spiritualities impart information, and unless the aspirant takes effort to change such spiritual information into wisdom, it can be a hindrance to spiritual progress, or it will simply recede to become a data management exercise.

Indiscriminate and excessive web browsing for information, an outward journey contrary to an inward meditative process, may diffuse aspirant energies and potentially expose to information that may not be compatible to the growth level of the seeker. In this paper, the role of communication relevant to spiritual growth has been examined to see how the electronic digital media has impacted the spiritual seeker. The gains and pitfalls of using electronic spirituality—mainly web based information—are discussed below.

COMMUNICATION AND SPIRITUALITY

Communication is the heart of the spirituality in that how one communicates effectively both internally and externally determines his or her progress. There is now a greater level of understanding on how both internal and external communications affect the capacity of spiritual aspirant. There is higher order of thinking engaged to transform multitudes of external information to synthesise and comprehend to give interpretation to inner meaning.

Information now easily accessible

The Electronic Digital Communication (EDC) has greatly transformed the way humans have been communicated for many centuries. It has changed the forms and means of communications. The

information is now made available in an easily comprehensible manner, for example, from verbal to visual; and this has affected the human capacity to process information internally.

It can be argued that the growth of EDC has mainly improved the way people have been communicating and connecting people regardless of race, colour and distance. The EDC has now got the capacity to reach people in any corner of the world in a precise and individualised manner. From the communication perspective, the size of world is getting smaller where distances between nations don't really matter. The technologies are now available for people around the world to access information or reach their spiritual inclination regardless of where they live. This is a big plus to the modern spiritual seeker who otherwise would be required to embark on regular pilgrimages to holy places in search of the right guru and teachings. Such travelling would not be necessary and regular contacts can be made through EDC applications from websites to emails.

Golden Times are ahead of you

There has been a transformation in the method of delivery from masters to students. From history, it could be seen that all known spiritual masters, once being given the higher spiritual wisdom or revelations, undertook their own stewardship. They identified their own disciples essentially to travel around the world to convey their messages to people. Lord Jesus did that with his twelve apostles; Lord Buddha did this with hundreds of converts and in recent times, both Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda travelled to the West to spread their teachings of east to west.

These great masters were duty bound to share their teachings for the betterment of fellow human beings by the spiritual wisdom they had been privileged to receive. In that process, from the history, it was evident that their sishyas and disciples went through innumerable hardships and even martyrdom.

The advent of EDC has alleviated the need for all such difficult forms of communications and the modern spiritual masters can access or convey their messages effortlessly to many millions instantly. Teachings, advice and guidance can reach to students from masters safely by the use of EDC applications. Many spiritual teachers have their own Video channels, websites, personalised emails and many other forms e-communications. This never happened in the past. This is perhaps the main reason Sri Sathya Sai Baba once stated that the "The Golden Age is ahead of you".

Change in Human attitude

The availability of faster, convenient, precise technology has changed human attitudes towards how spiritual information should be preserved, passed on and made available to others. Spiritual information in the past was protected by spiritual masters or restricted from reaching a mass of people due to the fear of misinterpretation or misuse. Certain qualifications were often expected from students. Teachings were also restricted to groups of people who had been privileged by birth to acquire such knowledge rather than their abilities. The growth EDC has crossed all such barriers and made it possible to access spiritual information. The restrictions for acquiring higher spiritual knowledge is slowly melting and all people around the world who have genuine interest and right inclination to progress in their chosen spiritual path can now access information. By such liberal

attitudes many western scholars have emerged giving give interpretations to eastern teachings which were not possible in the past.

PITFALLS

Use of website- Aggressive war to collect more people

With the advent of EDC, the student is now faced with the numerous pitfalls which can easily take away students' attention to the wrong path and make all efforts useless. With the use of technology, it is obvious that spiritual entities around the world seem to have engaged in an aggressive war of collecting more people. The use of EDC applications has created a world of its own. Millions of websites have now emerged with advanced technological features as how people can be attracted. In search of numbers, spiritual organisation now offer daily emails, personalised phone messages, social media events/programmes , etc. There are on-line registrations, prayers, wishes and blessing, e-commerce and many other EDC forms. It is possible that some of these website may carry twisted information just to attract people, operating from a money making motive, delivering biased or ill informed messages, giving illustration of potentially harmful practices (such as healing, paranayam, etc) and many other pitfalls that the audiences are now faced with.

At this point, it is important to note one of the key emphasis given in Jainism (one of the older religions from India), is the need to have the Right Belief System, Right Knowledge and Right Actions. These form the three pillars for growth of spiritual aspirants. With EDC, limited information is given, or practices are presented, and it is hard to understand the full impact of such practices. Although there may some genuine cases; one has to be vigilant of the motives of such organisations and should avoid becoming prey to wrong spiritual teachings.

Information - overload

Information is free and abundant. Approximately 1MB of data can be printed in ten A4 size papers. An average spiritual student is likely to have gigabytes of spiritual information that he may think useful to him. That is to say, in ordinary terms, he is in possession to the equivalent to many hundred of books of information. This is clearly a case of information overloaded. Nobody would have adequate time in life to read and appreciate the value of these texts. In recognising the value of time given, one has to be vigilant of such pitfalls, not overexerting in collecting useless information. This is where the associating with right people or group would become very useful. Before choosing any web based information, one should not hesitate to ask questions to convince the source and rightness of the information to build faith in the master and his teachings. Without such investigation, the efforts could be fruitless at the end.

It was possible that a person may not have accessed right information; they may have lived not knowing where to get the right teachings, who could be the right master to follow and possibly wasted their lives carelessly taking up improper teachings. Improper knowledge and incorrect belief systems had been stated as the chief causes in the teachings of Jainism for not progressing in spirituality. Proper communication is the key to overcome such liabilities.

Looking for more information

When once asked “Why is there suffering among humans?”, a spiritual master from a Vedantic Upanishadic school answered that the chief cause of suffering is “externalisation”. This reply emphasises the nature of mind which always has the habit of going out for external things. It is this fundamental issue the spiritual aspirant is required to work with in order to succeed in his practice. It must be understood that spiritual texts deliver guiding principles such as control of speech, reduction of wants, needs and expectations and even living in seclusion for some time to build such inner qualities. For many, it is a slow process in which one is required to develop right level of concentration in a spirit of renunciation. It takes long time, but the process is required to be carefully monitored to avoid interruptions. Repeated practice is warranted with enthusiasm and right effort. There is constant discrimination between what is right to hold onto and what is not. Broadly this has been the process wherein most spiritual texts develop a separation between the “Seer” and ‘Seen’ and therein lies the growth as to how one progresses in their own spiritual effort.

In people who have fully succumbed to the influence of electronic digital mechanisms (EDM), their inner process works to the contrary. They have been habituated by the constant dependence of EDM to look for external information all the time. Daily habits are being cultivated with personalised email information, mobile contacts and messages, Facebook contacts and so many other forms of EDM means of communications. Such EDM dependency-culture gradually cultivates a tendency to look for new and more information and does not facilitate any ability to process and deeply comprehend the data gathered. As one progresses spiritually, there is an elimination process to develop right concentration from many to a few, and then to one. Caution should be exercised in choosing the right information from EDM applications. Though there are benefits from the EDM applications, any dependency without appropriate discrimination should be carefully monitored.

Lack of preparedness

With the click of a button, EDM applications can instantly deliver information which contains higher wisdom or knowledge. Most spiritual texts are now available in multiple electronic formats and are available (mostly free of cost) on many websites. These can be delivered to anyone who may or may not have the capacity to understand or even appreciate the superior nature of the information through the EDM applications. Modern students hardly know how such information has been preserved and protected over many thousands of years, and yet today, is being delivered instantly to the desktop computer. They may lack the right level of preparedness and maturity to receive such higher knowledge. It is also uncertain how these EDM applications can replace the need for a teacher who can otherwise advise when one is ready and how much knowledge can be received.

Particularly for the one who wants to pursue the path of knowledge, a right level of preparedness is recommended in Vivekachudamani by Adi Shankar, and is also recommended by many other religious texts. In the past, students had to travel great distances in search of the right master and dedicate most of their life in the pursuit such higher knowledge. Naturally such hardships trained and taught them to be reverence and respectful to higher teachings. This had been the process wherein the students had the opportunities to get being prepared to receive higher teachings. In the Upanishad (Prasana Upanishad) which talks about the secrets of creation, the students were first asked to work for a period of time before being eligible to learn the higher truth. The effort to get a right level of preparedness and to develop reverence to higher teachings should not be underestimated. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the main Buddhist prayer states that “*I take*

refuge in the Sangha”, meaning that I acknowledge, value, and take refuge with reverence in the Sangha community who have been responsible for the protection and preservation of high wisdom since the early days of Buddha. This aspect should be greatly appreciated and valued by all who use web based spiritual information.

Fast - need for slowing down

The electronic medium is fast and convenient. EDM applications are growing at an unthinkable speed to reach recipients. The norm of EDM culture is “Fast and now” and naturally people are trained to look for quick results in any pursuit they undertake. This is to the contrary to how one should undertake spiritual practice. In Yoga sutra, a need to have uninterrupted practice for a long time until one has the capacity to rise above all latent tendencies are prescribed. The uninterrupted practice requires considerable amount of planning and patience to strike a balance in his daily life between family, work and spiritual practices. Looking for quick results and living in the ‘Fast and Now’ environment is detrimental to such spiritual practices.

Such attitudes will not give the right level of reflection and insight into aspirant. This is clear from an advice Lord Buddha gave it to his young son. Lord Buddha advised his son Rahul on the need for reflection on what we think, talk and act, before and after, to see whether any of thoughts, words and actions could inflict any pain or sufferings to oneself or others. Therein, Lord Buddha was emphasising the need for an inner reflection in all what we do. Obviously, an instant approach will not assist in that regard. Slowing down in all what we do – thinking and reflecting and being mindful is the key to succeed on this path. Going fast and hurrying gradually takes away the concentration and opportunity for right reflection on whatever happens in our mind.

CONCLUSIONS

Every spiritual master who has taken birth and lived among men in the world gave a promise to the world:

Lord Buddha: I came to teach the path for end of suffering.

Jesus Christ: (as he was being crucified between two criminals) “I assure you, this day, you will be with me in Paradise”

Sathya Sai Baba: I have come to foster the revival of Vedas and Vedic scholars and bring the unity of faiths ... The Golden Age is ahead of you

Despite such assurances, humans have created wars and the attendant destruction continues to play havoc, creating sadness and sufferings in the world. Almost all such wars, past and present, have been religiously motivated. In fear of one group dominating the other, we see untold human sufferings and destructions being caused to nations around the world. These wars are responsible for thousands of refugees in camps around the world, for children being killed and deaths from starvation and malnutrition. There is fear, mistrust, hatred between nations and groups and a severe lack of tolerance for coexistence between the different castes, creeds and races of people. The question arises how to relate such promises by the great masters to these contemporary world problems.

When Sathya Sai Baba stated that *“The Golden Age is ahead of you”*, it is probable that he might have cited the communication revolution which is already now happening in the modern world. Modern man is the beneficiary of such revolutions. Sathya Sai Baba came to the world to revive the Vedas and study of Vedam, and bring the unity of faiths. All great masters brought the message of love and brotherhood of fellow human beings. Naturally Sathya Sai Baba’s key message became that – Love All, Serve All. The ancients’ teachings are pristine and eternal, but now there is a need to see the common thread among these teachings.

The deeper we see the better we understand the key teachings and core messages of these teachings. Lord Buddha, in the teaching of loving-kindness meditation (metta), stated that when *one sees in all directions there is no one dear to himself, likewise everyone is dear to himself, therefore do hurt or harm others*. This simple teaching illustrates the extent of love that he preached. Lack of understanding, misinterpretation of teachings for shorter gains were the chief causes for religious wars.

It is clear and beyond doubt that growth in EDC brings the necessary tools to overcome such liabilities and to make the world a better place to live in harmony with reduced religious induced wars and destructions. By mindful-use of EDC applications for spiritual purposes individually and collectively, and with due care, it is possible to avoid the pitfalls identified above.

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