Chapter 18
Understanding Our Minds and How We Can Liberate Ourselves and Others From the Hex of the Internet: A Vedantic Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In facing the frustration and anger generated by the imposition by the digital world of the power of conceptual thinking and unseen algorithms, the West has sought to find the balance of inner experience. From progressive developments in psychology and a study of the great spiritual teachers of the world a model of balance between conceptual thinking and internal experience emerges: There is a need, not only to think clearly and rationally, but also to feel and empathize with all, to know deep from within what is of primary human value and the innate relationship between all beings, from the physical world to the greatest Buddha. The suggestion is that, through a secular type of spirituality integration of all of those qualities, an overall worldview will emerge. Such integration will lead directly to exuberant action that not only benefits individuals, but all whom they meet and from there outwards, outwards, and outwards, to integrate and bless the contents of the entire universe.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital age—at least for the author—was in 1999. At that time, she was living in a very traditional (East Indian) Vedanta convent, where even radios and newspapers were banned, what to speak of television or computers. The opportunity had arisen to participate in creating an online millennial version of the Jewish Torah—which was rather prestigious for the Vedanta group, much identified with interfaith activities. Hence the permission to “go virtual”. It was great fun contributing Vedantic
interpretations of the Torah, and to see undreamt-of new vistas on the Internet, like a dove released from a tiny cage out into a vast, unfathomable blue sky where anything was possible. In this project the pure, spiritual abstractions of Vedanta were meeting and harmonizing with the down-to-earth goodness of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, and the other great figures of the Jewish tradition. They seemed to balance and exemplify the spiritual flights of Vedanta so well. And to be able to say as much and get an immediate response from a wide, diverse audience was heady stuff. This was the first, and perhaps the most exciting, possibility that the Internet had to offer. It opened vistas one might never had had without it, and in a way invited one to participate in the “universal mind” and to make one’s own contribution to it.

At that time the Internet was reasonably manageable and almost enjoyable, as it was possible to communicate immediately and easily with friends all over the world, and to order things online with a minimum of hassle before or after the purchase. One could find quite esoteric definitions and information difficult to access anywhere else, enjoy videos and amusing clips, and not have to obsess regarding intellectual property in all that we did. Passwords were pesky but mercifully few, and once established were reliable for the foreseeable future, while security programs were working away and seldom intruded unless their services were urgently needed. The same was true of online organizations or businesses with which one was involved. You got your information or item and that was that. If you needed help, it was still possible to speak to someone on the phone and to get a rational and informed opinion that usually solved whatever issue one had. It was a pleasure to go online and roam about without let or hindrance, discovering new ideas, new people, new places in text, visual images, videos, and sound. This was a much more varied and interesting world than the reference books or even magazines mandated by the convent lifestyle! Later participation in many social actions online led to a sense of personal influence in efforts to improve the lot of fellow beings globally.

THE INTERNET SKY BECOMES DARKER

The advent of social media was a first sign of change. The author signed up for Facebook and LinkedIn, and was happy to meet so many people, to have an online interview with a then-prominent American spiritual leader, and to connect with buddies from university from forty years back, the result of posting online the publication of the author’s first book. This all seemed very promising. Then began the tsunami of requests to “like”, to “share”— especially rating in “feedback” the hapless online helpers one encountered in the course of trying to resolve problems. There was an endless and unrequested inflow into one’s inbox from all manner of socially active groups. Hot on the heels of this fairly innocuous stuff came phishes, malware, identity theft, ransomware, to resolve which endless phone calls to one’s security company were necessary. From there one was shunted to tech support, the providers of which did not show any understanding of the actual problem or how to resolve it. Getting to speak with someone who had any idea how to help often involving shouting, demanding over and over to speak to a supervisor, or once in while just slamming down the phone in utter exasperation. This was intensely humiliating, given that the author is a nun and supposed to be serene at all times!

Ordering online, which was previously so effortless, became an obstacle course of routinely retired passwords, including requests to prove human identity, which got more and more complicated as time wore on. There were endless feedback requests and, in the case of overseas orders, a tussle with banks not wanting to release payment for overseas purchases.