

BOOK REVIEWS

Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age. By Peter D. Hershock. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. Pp. xi + 308.

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Perhaps one of the most interesting, paradoxical, and—in Peter Hershock’s way of thinking, in *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*—predictable aspects of the digital “revolution” is the degree to which information technology becomes less a means to an end and more an end in itself. Take, for example, the humble phenomenon of the “techno-bore.” Such people, having acquired some new electronic gizmo, spend all their time talking about the thing, especially savoring such conversations with like-minded techno-bores, who go on in equal and endless length about their latest toys. Rather than becoming a tool for organizing one’s affairs, the digital assistant becomes one’s main affair. Or, consider the case of the Internet. Although the “Web” is supposed to put us in touch with each other, say, by making e-mail possible, we find ourselves either unable to cope with the avalanche of mail that comes over the portal and thus unable to respond to it all (or *at all*), or we spend much more time on our mail than we ever did, thus making the mail itself a nuisance and consequently much less useful than formerly.

Of course, none of this is unique to computers and the digital workplace. The same complaints have been voiced in regard to cars, television (and radio, too), modern medicine, and industrialization—in fact, the whole gamut of innovations that we label “technology.” Indeed, although information technology is Hershock’s main target, it represents only the perfection of a form that has been developing for some time and which he often refers to with the phrase “technologies of control.” That is, cars, televisions, blenders, can openers, and computers are tools that are put to use in order to make our lives easier; they accomplish this purpose by putting some element of the world, some range of things, more directly under our control and, importantly, by limiting our involvement with them as well. We make things more tractable, more subject to our wanting (as distinct, Hershock says, from our desiring, which involves an element of respect for the desired), and thus more an extension of ourselves rather than obdurate and resistant things. For example, insofar as a sledgehammer makes breaking rocks easier, it makes rocks and their sizes and shapes more a function of our will, less a reflection of their nature, and distances us also from the material thing. To touch a rock with one’s hands is an entirely different experience, a much more intimate experience than touching it with a hammer. In a curious way, says Hershock, the rock becomes more “iconic.” In other words, it becomes more representation—our representation—and less a thing-in-itself. The computer and its screen “icons” simply push this envelope to its logical end, reducing all things to “buttons” that can be pushed at will, as our wants dictate.

The more things become iconic, the more they become an extension of our will. But the more they become an extension of our will, the more they become “us.” That is, insofar as I successfully “technologize” my world, the more my world becomes simply a reflection of what I want. The situation is not so different from that of the absolute dictator who purges all dissenting voices from his or her realm. The realm becomes the leader—Stalin’s Russia or Hitler’s Germany, for example. And as we well know from Orwell, such power corrupts absolutely and completely, corrupts both the ruler and the ruled, reducing citizens and ruler to an infantile level. Two related phenomena attend such a development, Hershock tells us: narcissism and nihilism. We become more narcissistic because we become more obsessed with our wants as a reflection of our world. We become more nihilistic because our world of wants is intrinsically meaningless: it reflects what we want, not why we want it, no larger purpose. In short, we become trapped in our own individuality, the lone consumer pointing and clicking at the screen of iconic wants. Modern information technology “colonizes our consciousness” just as the technology of industrialization and imperialism colonized the “vernacular” worlds of traditional African and Asian peoples. As thoroughly colonized and solipsistic techno-bores, captivated by our own technology, we become capable only of increasingly narrow conversations with like-minded others infatuated with (Oh Dear!) even more dazzling toys than our own. Quick! Click on an upgrade!

Hershock’s point here is that from a Buddhist perspective all this should appear profoundly troubling. Why? True freedom eludes us. The more we have of what we want, the more we want. We are never free of want, and therefore we are never free. We lose what Hershock calls our “creative virtuosity” and our “dramatic interdependence” with others and with reality itself. Everything becomes a postmodern sign of ourselves, and this is truly an impoverished way to live. Buddhism, Hershock tells us, is primarily concerned with assisting us in the effort to connect with others, to appreciate spontaneously things as they are, not just as we want them to be, because Buddhism teaches liberation from the ego as the only path out of suffering. (Actually, Hershock dislikes the term “suffering” as a translation of *dukkha*, preferring “troubling,” which he interprets as “things going out of kilter” [108]). Although technology attempts to remedy our suffering (the “out of kilter” nature of things) by making things more tractable, from a Buddhist perspective this simply intensifies the problem. We do not suffer because of things. We suffer because we want things to be a certain way, in light of who we take ourselves to be, what our needs and wants are—in short, because of our ego. Consequently, Buddhist “technology,” or meditative practice, is aimed not at controlling things, or at control at all for that matter, but at the self, at unfixating the self’s concern with itself. As a consequence, Buddhism runs completely against the grain of modern technological fixes for our problems. As Hershock puts it, Buddhism aims at affecting the narrative structure in which we understand our lives, at making that narrative structure more responsive to the interdependent world of which we are a part, not at making the world more responsive to our narrative structure. The narcissism and nihilism that invariably accompany a technological perspective are an anathema to a committed Buddhist.

“So, what can we do?” we ask. Two sorts of responses are ruled out: neither a technological response nor a “green” response will relieve our suffering. That is, it is fruitless to rely on technology to relieve suffering, because technology is driven by want, and wanting an end to our suffering is still *wanting*. More computer access is more access to *things*, as anyone who has “surfing the Net” will tell you. Of course, one might argue that there are wants and then there are needs. Sometimes the Net meets certain needs, such as for access to health experts that are locally unavailable. For, say, a villager in a far-flung location, this could mean the difference between good medical advice and none at all. Or how about the networking and sharing that social activists in very different parts of the Globe are able to achieve by virtue of computer networks. Hershock’s response is that although these may be “useful” purposes to which networks can be put, we risk certain philosophical assumptions that, from a Buddhist standpoint, are not worth making. This point also explains Hershock’s curious hostility to “the greening of technology,” that is, using technology solely for socially and environmentally conscientious purposes.

Specifically what Hershock takes aim at is what he calls “the moral transparency” thesis. This is the point of view that claims technology-in-itself is morally transparent, as having no moral significance when considered apart from the uses we make of it. Such an attitude ignores the colonizing effect technology has on our consciousness. It grabs our attention by providing the setting in which we focus on things—and, again, that setting is defined as one of control and iconic reduction, where things become mere symbols of what we want out of them. The technological setting itself conveys such a value to things, and, in Buddhist terms, this is an egocentric value. Consequently, any technological involvement with things, including a “green” one that picks the “right” technologies and their uses, will fail to challenge the mentality of control, what one might call “the dictatorship of wants.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, Hershock’s Buddhist solution involves systematic disengagement from technology through the cultivation of, specifically, Zen meditative practice. In Hershock’s words, such an anti-technology technology “breaks down the cycle of our wanting. In this way, it directly undermines the purposes, effects, and mechanisms of our control and being-controlled. When we break the cycle of our wanting, the compulsion to satisfy ourselves through decisive acts of consumption naturally eases” (p. 280). In other words, Hershock advocates a very radical and pronounced disengagement, one that he sees as a thorough alternative to a technologized existence, and one that should become increasingly attractive as the inevitable impermanence of things eventually comes to claim our current form of life. In fact, Hershock sees his point of view as sympathetic in some ways to that of the Luddites and even the fears of the Unabomber insofar as they both more clearly appreciate the full effect of technology itself—that technology itself is the human enemy. However, likening Earth First or Unabomber radical action to a good sparring partner in the martial arts, Hershock maintains that such opposition only strengthens the technological foe. Furthermore, he points out, any form of terror is an anathema to Buddhists as it requires a “practiced ignorance of interdependence,”

one of Buddhism's most important insights. By contrast, meditation breaks down the very basis of a technological existence in undermining the value of control itself. Meditation teaches us to value the unexpected and the inconvenient, resistant nature of things because it undermines wanting and elevates appreciating "things as they are."

As an exploration and statement of the issues surrounding technology, this is a most valuable book. Increasingly, scholars are turning their attention in this direction, but few have thought the issues through as thoroughly and from as unusual a standpoint as Hershock. Whatever any other, particularly Buddhist-inspired, commentator has to say on the issue ought to include some consideration of Hershock's points. In fact, anyone concerned with the effects of media on our lives will find Hershock's concept of "colonization" with regard to consciousness provocative and extremely insightful. However, this is not to say that the book is perfect. Many points are repetitively stated in nearly identical language, and this can make for somewhat tiresome reading. Also, Hershock sometimes skates perilously close to cliché and caricature, especially when describing what he takes to be the values typical of an "Asian" or a "Western" society. He tends to celebrate the lifestyle of "vernacular" communities—meaning traditional societies—as rich in an emotional closeness that we moderns now lack. I am not in a position to judge such claims, never having lived in such a rarefied environment, but I suspect that none of us is, as such societies have virtually ceased to exist.

Indeed, at this point no society remains untouched by modern technology, whether of the informational or more traditionally industrial sort. As many comparative political scientists and sociologists are quick to point out, the world is rapidly losing whatever indigenous cultures remain (and their languages as well), and people are increasingly coming to resemble each other in terms of what they wear, what they eat, and what they think and value.¹ Furthermore, as Hershock himself points out in his final chapter ("So What?"), information technology is here to stay. No one is going to abandon their e-mail, computer workstation, cell phone, and so on. "We're locked-in," as he says. All of which raises something of a problem: if all these technologies are by their very nature un-Buddhist, then even if we follow Hershock and devote more of our lives to Buddhist meditation, at least part of our lives must be spent in a very un-Buddhist way. It is unlikely that we are, or will be, capable of being thorough Buddhists. Is authentic Buddhism as endangered as indigenous cultures and their languages? Maybe it is, but then there are two more problems. The first is the inevitable disappointment that Buddhism can provide no moral guidance in the use of those technologies to which we seem irrevocably committed. The second is that such a point of view could be construed as somewhat un-Buddhist itself.

Hershock himself points out on numerous occasions that the Buddhism to which he is most drawn, Ch'an or Zen, stresses the cultivation of what is often called "Beginner's Mind." For Hershock this means a mind that is appreciative of things rather than controlling, that is flexible and improvisational, and so on. This is certainly true, but the phrase typically also highlights another problem. One can only

begin to the degree that one accepts a situation for what it is. As opposed to the expert, the beginner is not aiming toward some predetermined end. This, of course, is what leads Hershock to identify the end as nontechnological. The beginner also, therefore, does not discriminate in the sense of making labels. Thus, such a mind appreciates all things equally, or, in the words of the late Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, “for Zen students a weed, which for most people is worthless, is a treasure.” Furthermore, as Suzuki adds, “With this attitude, whatever you do, life becomes an art.”² The point, I take it, is that if one has indeed attained a nondiscriminatory and accepting state of mind, a mind un- or decolonized with regard to technologies of control, then everything becomes an opportunity to dispel delusion and achieve enlightenment. Or, as Dōgen pointed out, “Buddhas greatly enlighten delusion,” and between enlightenment and delusion “there is not a single thing whatsoever.” Thus, why shouldn’t a tool or a technology—a “weed” in an ironic sense—become an equally enlightening opportunity? Can’t we maintain Beginner’s Mind in the experience of informational media?

Moving in this direction, perhaps one could begin to practice an art of the technological. Now what that might entail in terms of our conduct toward our machines cannot be prescribed in any meaningful sense because it will be as improvisational as Hershock maintains any properly Zen conduct is. For some readers, this might address the disappointment that Hershock’s conception of Zen practice gives so little guidance with regard to technology-related conduct, conduct which he himself sees no one entirely giving up.

In fact, Hershock himself seems at times to come close to such a view. Of course, this involves reinvoking a version of the moral-transparency thesis. To the degree that technologies are both delusion and enlightenment, like everything else—all dharmas—their value and very identity hinge upon how they are used: to further enlightenment or to sink into delusion. Thus, their moral value is conferred; as with all reality so for tools-in-themselves, the artifacts of technology: it is ambiguity all the way down. As Hershock says, “Technologies and the problems they address are equally a function of our values, our way of seeing things” (p. 281). If so, it sounds as though the problem is not with technology but with us. But then how do we know we won’t be in a position to incorporate “technology” into enlightenment? Let me hasten to add, however, that my own sense is that the Zen approach to machines and technology may be a matter of knowing—to paraphrase the *Tao Te Ching*—when our work is done and therefore when to stop and turn them off.

Notes

- 1 – For example, see political scientist Ronald Inglehart’s *Modernization and Post-modernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 2 – See Shunryu Suzuki’s collected talks *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), pp. 121–122.