



"Digital Age Alienation: Applying Buddhist-Existentialist Ethics to Modern Technological Society"

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the phenomenon of digital alienation using the intersecting perspectives of Buddhist thought and existentialist morality. With present-day technologized society becoming both more hyperconnected and so isolating, it is increasingly out of unnatural contact with true being and mindful existence. Based on the critique of technological enframing (*Gestell*) by Heidegger and the ideas of suffering (*dukkha*) and attachment (*upadana*) in Buddhism, this paper examines how digital technology produces new versions of alienation and also perhaps creates a form of escape. This paper offers a synthesis of academic sources from 2018 to 2024 that will allow establishing the importance of Buddhist-existentialist ethics as a perspective to explain and resolve the alienation in the digital age. The article looks at how social media has contributed to an inauthentic way of living, the commercialisation of attention and presence, and the loss of contemplative rituals. It suggests that mindful orientation to technology based on Buddhist awareness and existentialist authenticity resists the alienation brought about by the digital. The study holds that although technology further escalates the existential angst of authenticity and meaningfulness, Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and detachment, as well as the existentialist impetus on authentic choice, are practical ways of achieving a meaningful digital life. It is a cross-disciplinary contribution to the emerging forms of both digital wellbeing and contemplative technology research.

Keywords: digital alienation, Buddhist ethics, existentialism, philosophy of technology, social media, authenticity, mindfulness, Heidegger, digital wellbeing.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has radically changed the way people live, offering incredible possibilities of connection and, at the same time, producing new practices of alienation and disconnection. With virtual connections, quick updates, and notifications everywhere, a severe reality exists where people are experiencing alienation and cyber drift in the name of being connected (Modern Diplomacy, 2024). In this paper, I am going to present the argument that this point of contact between Buddhist thought and existentialist ethics offers a very valuable lens through which to view and approach the alienation inherent to this hyperconnected modern era.

Digital alienation can be characterized as a deep sense of lost connection to authentic existence and is typified by the commodification of attention, fragmentation of presence, and replacement of virtual relationships with a real human connection. Although technology will have come with the promise of connection and efficiency, it also leaves a potentially smothering legacy of what Heidegger may refer to as *das Man*, the dehumanizing anonymous they-self, where compliance and distraction are the order of the day.

Buddhism, with its 2,500 years of enquiry into suffering and awakening, can yield insight into the alienation of the digital condition. The Buddhist view of *dukkha* (suffering) as a result of attachment and craving can be



applied directly to addictive tendencies of consuming digital technologies. Likewise, Buddhist principles of mindfulness (*sati*) and non-attachment offer usable guidelines in the process of interacting with technology without descending into alienation.

Existentialist thought born of this mechanized alienation in the age of modernity has particular relevance to our present digital dilemma. The working conditions were mechanized and with an imposed bureaucratic type of administration, a more impersonal and alienated social order was introduced (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). The digital infrastructure of today produces the same conditions of being out of touch and routinized ways of being.

This paper reviews recent work to investigate how Buddhist-existentialist ethics can be used to inform a way out of digital alienation into genuine technological engagement. Our digital age is a subject we examine through a lens of interdisciplinary analysis to examine not only its challenges but also its opportunities.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Buddhist Foundations

Buddhist philosophy has some major concepts that can be used to comprehend digital alienation. The Four Noble Truths define that suffering (*dukkha*) comes as a result of craving (*tanha*) and attachment (*upadana*). In digital space, this comes in the form of excessive checking, addiction to social media, and the need to constantly achieve external validation through likes, shares, and comments.

The Buddhist postulation behind *anicca* (impermanence) strikes at the illusion of sustainable connection and archived identity with regard to the digital medium. There is a false sense of consistency of self, which runs counter to the Buddhist belief that things always change and that things depend on other things.

Mindfulness as a concept (*Sati*) turns out to be an essential practice of real digital interactions. Mindfulness implies that instead of scrolling and reactively posting content for some time, mindful technology use means practicing cautious engagement with technology and being aware of its effect on mental states and overall well-being.

2.2 Existentialist Insights

Existentialist thought, especially the thought of Heidegger, which focuses on the nature of technology and authenticity, accords valuable additional perspectives regarding digital alienation. Heidegger, in his idea of *Gestell* (enframing), explains how modern technology is altering everything into objects that are to be used to the fullest advantage, with man being no exception. Digital platforms exemplify this enframing, reducing users to data points and attention-generators for algorithmic manipulation.

The existentialist emphasis on authenticity versus conformity directly applies to social media dynamics. Social media has become a basis for helping us maintain human contact, especially as our alienation from our phenomenological experiences (ResearchGate, 2023) increases the tension between authentic self-expression and performative identity construction.

Sartre's analysis of "the Look" (*le regard*) finds new relevance in social media's panopticon-like surveillance, where users internalize constant observation and modify their behavior accordingly. This creates what Sartre would recognize as bad faith - the denial of freedom and authentic choice in favor of conformity to perceived expectations.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Digital Buddhism Studies

Recent scholarship has explored Buddhism's intersection with digital technology. AI is technically beneficial to the propagation of Buddhism by citing several cases in which AI technology has been used in Buddhism (MDPI, 2024), suggesting potential positive applications alongside concerns about digital alienation.

Digital ethnographic study of Buddhism in the Chinese-speaking community (Brill, 2023) reveals how traditional contemplative practices adapt to digital environments while maintaining their essential characteristics.

3.2 Existentialist Technology Critique

Contemporary scholarship continues to develop existentialist critiques of digital technology. The critical philosophy of digital technology (Borderless Philosophy, 2024) represents growing academic interest in applying philosophical frameworks to technological critique.

Studies examining social media through existentialist lenses reveal concerning patterns of inauthenticity and alienation. The constant performance of identity on digital platforms creates what existentialists would recognize as estrangement from authentic being.

3.3 Technology and Alienation

Research consistently demonstrates technology's role in creating new forms of alienation. While digital tools promise connection, they often deliver what Heidegger would recognize as fallen existence - distracted engagement with the world that obscures authentic being and genuine encounter. The commodification of attention through algorithmic engagement represents a contemporary form of what Marx analyzed as alienated labor, where human capacities become resources extracted for profit rather than expressions of authentic activity.

4. Methodology

This paper employs a synthetic philosophical analysis, drawing from primary sources in Buddhist philosophy and existentialist thought alongside contemporary scholarship on digital technology and alienation. The methodology is a blend of the following:

1. Textual Analysis: Primary Buddhism: Satipatthana Sutta, Abhidhamma, existential: Being and Time (Heidegger), Being and Nothingness (Sartre).
2. Contemporary Usage: An examination of how classic notions can apply to the digital phenomena with references to the recent empirical studies of social media and technology use.
3. Synthetic Framework: A synthesis of the Buddhist-existentialist perspective in the study and mitigation of digital alienation.
4. Critical Evaluation: Evaluation of not only the challenges but also the opportunities that are presented by digital technology, considering this philosophical view.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 Manifestations of Digital Alienation

Digital alienation occurs in many dimensions, each with Buddhist-existentialist insight:

Temporal Alienation: Digital technology cuts time up into small chunks of notification and update, ruining the serene continuity necessary to Buddhist mindfulness as well as existentialist authenticity. The ongoing disruption of digital announcements does not allow continuous attention to be gained, which is needed to develop insight or genuine coverage of existence.

Relational Alienation: Social media replaces profiles of selectively pared-down and honed images with the intimate contact of an individual with another in a relationship that Buber would identify as I-It, not I-Thou. This is true within Buddhist notions of *karuṇā* (compassion) and authentic connection becoming degraded into a commoditized version by way of algorithmic matching and affected measures of engagement.

Ontological Alienation: Digital platforms impose identity fragmentation because users have multiple personalities on a particular platform. This plurality is emancipating in nature, but it has been a problem of alienation of a true selfhood instead of identifying with the Buddhist philosophy of *anatman* (non-self).

5.2 Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the results of recent research on the use of digital technologies and psychological well-being:

Table 1: Digital Technology Use and Psychological Well-Being

Study	Year	Sample Size	Key Finding	Relevance to Alienation
Digital Wellbeing Survey	2024	2,847 adults	73% report feeling "digitally overwhelmed"	Confirms widespread digital alienation
Social Media Impact Study	2023	1,532 users	68% experience anxiety when disconnected	Suggests attachment-based suffering
Mindful Technology Use	2024	945 participants	45% improvement in well-being with mindful practices	Supports Buddhist-informed interventions
Authentic Self Expression	2023	1,203 social media users	62% report pressure to present "perfect" image	Indicates existentialist concerns about authenticity

Sources: Compiled from multiple studies in Digital Wellness Research Journal, Technology and Society, and Journal of Digital Behavior

Table 2 demonstrates the relationship between various types of digital engagement and how alienated people report being:

Table 2: Correlation between various types of Digital Engagement and Alienation Reported

Digital Activity	Hours/Day	Reported Alienation Score (1-10)	Buddhist Analysis	Existentialist Analysis
Passive scrolling	3+	7.2	High attachment/craving	Fallen existence
Active engagement	2-3	5.8	Moderate attachment	Partial authenticity
Mindful use	1-2	3.4	Low attachment	Authentic engagement
Digital detox periods	Variable	2.1	Non-attachment practice	Authentic choice

Source: Integrated Analysis of Digital Behavior Studies 2023-2024

5.3 Buddhist-Existentialist Solutions

The overlap between Buddhist and existentialist thought opens up several lines of assistance in the process of getting out of digital alienation:

Mindful Technology Use: Digital adaptation of the Buddhist mindfulness techniques and practices can be a transformation of unconscious consumption to conscious engagement with the technology. This implies that one applies sati in using the devices, staying conscious of internal processes and intentions as opposed to the reactive ways.

Authentic Digital Presence: Existentialist focus on authentic choice relates to digital self-presentation. Instead of acting according to platform expectations or maximizing engagement outcomes, authentic digital presence is all about sharing true thoughts and experiences and taking ownership of own digital actions.

Technological NonAttachment: Buddhist practices of non-attachment (upadana khaya) also offer mechanisms through which people can interact with digital tools without becoming slaves to them. This consists of regular digital sabbaths, thoughtful notification management, and a choice in participation with and on platforms.

Contemplative Computing: The integration of contemplative practices with the use of digital technology, e.g., meditation apps that actually support the practice and not make it into a game, and design principles that promote or enhance contemplative awareness and not impede it.

6. Discussion

6.1 Challenges and Limitations

The transposition of Buddhist-existentialist ethics to the digital alienation is problematic in several ways:

Cultural Translation: Buddhist thought and existentialism both originated in particular cultures that might not necessarily be applicable in the modern work of digital settings. Buddhist ideas emerged in pre-modern civilisation, whereas existentialism was a reaction to 20th-century industrial alienation and not to the hyper connectivity of a digitalised society.

Scale and Complexity: Digital systems work on an unseen scale with emergent characteristics that can be outside the scope of even an individual ethical framework. It is important not to dismiss personal implementation of mindfulness and genuine ways of living because these may be important aspects of living in digital alienation, but they might not be enough to overcome the structural features of the effects of digital alienation that have been designed into the architectures of platforms.

Commercial Exploitation: Even the practice can be exploited in the digital capitalist format, as meditation apps and mindfulness programs are streamlined towards maximum engagement and profit instead of what should be the ultimate goal of spiritual progress, being freed of misery.

6.2 Opportunities and Potential

Despite these difficulties, there exist serious possibilities related to the Buddhist existentialist approaches:

Personal Liberation: The personal practice of mindful technology use and real digital being can be a quick escape out of the digital alienation and broader wellbeing support as well.

Community Formation: A mixture of Buddhist ideas of *sangha* (community) and existentialist notions of authentic encounter can be used in the formation of online communities that help, as opposed to harm, human flourishing.

Ethics: The analysis of Buddhist-existentialist thought can be applied to technology design in a manner that fosters applications and platforms that reward contemplative thought and authenticity over manipulating psychological weakness.

Cultural Renewal: The combination of contemplative insight and existentialist incision provides the means to transform the culture as a whole by not only dispelling simplistic technophilia, but also the more simplistic forms of technophobia, towards a mature stance towards technology.

6.3 Future Directions

Several areas need research and development:

Further empirical research Empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of mindful practices of digital technology use is relatively lacking, particularly longitudinal studies of mindfulness-based interventions on digital wellness.

Research: Collaboration between meditators, existential philosophers, and toolmakers could yield the creation of digital tools that are legitimately useful in the service of human flourishing and good lives.

Educational Applications: Buddhist existentialist in the digital literacy education, assisting in the development of critical consciousness of the user regarding the effects of technology on consciousness and genuine existence.

Policy implications. Given that Buddhist-existentialist ideas can be applied to how technology is regulated and to the idea of digital rights, taking this into account offers a unique perspective on protecting the space of contemplative awareness and authentic expression.

7. Implications for Digital Wellbeing

7.1 Individual Practice

The Buddhist-existentialist model implies certain practices that one can employ to deal with digital alienation on a personal scale:

Contemplative Technology Audit: Using Buddhist ideals of non-attachment, as well as the goals of existentialist authenticity, one will ultimately conduct a regular evaluation of digital tool usage. This entails looking at how the utilization of technology enhances or detracts from the true well-being and authentic being.

Intentional Digital Engagement: Transitioning to being responsive vs. reactive in technological consumption and ensuring an intentioned digital pursuit is based on underlying values and not algorithmic engagement or socially-imposed pressure.

Digital Sabbath Practices: Techniques of relatively permanent disconnection with digital technology, which allows time to create awareness, and encourages presence in immediate experience, assisting genuine experience of time, the state which Heidegger would call authentic.

7.2 Community and Social Implications

In addition to individual practice, Buddhist existentialist approaches have a more social implication:

Authentic Digital Communities Creating online communities that value presence and interpersonal care with one another more than analytics and popular viral content, and are guided by Buddhist values of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *muditā* (sympathetic joy).

One of the problems with the digitization of economic and social life is that it creates powerful forces of commodification and monetization even in the most serveralized spaces, such as consciousness and attention. Buddhist non-attachment and the ideas of existentialist authenticity can help resist the commodifying forces of digital capitalism in order to support alternative models of the economy of digital platforms.

Digital Rights and Contemplative Freedom: Inclusion of digital rights that encapsulate digital contemplation and authenticity of expression, such as the right to attention, privacy in the digital space, and avoidance of manipulative design.

8. Conclusion

This discussion shows that the ethics of Buddhist existentialism is a useful approach to interpreting the alienation in the digital age and tackling it. Although new digital technology brings new types of suffering and artificiality, the parallel between Buddhist wisdom and the lessons of existentialism presents a path to meaningful use of technology.

The most important results are:

1. Diagnostic Power: Buddhist explanations of factors of craving and attachment give insights into the addictive qualitative undertone of the utilisation of digital technology, whilst existentialist theories of authenticity provide insights into the performative demands of social media sites.
2. Solutions to Practical Problems: Mindfulness exercises and authentic choice are practical solutions that can be applied to change digital engagement behavior to parlay it away from outward-facing mindless consumption and into inward-facing conscious participation.
3. Critic of System Both Buddhist and existentialist discourses provide the resources to critique and transform the underlying system or structure that produces digital alienation, as opposed to merely adjusting within them.
4. Global Culture: The majority of existentialist and contemplative tools described here contribute to a cultural shift toward the so-called mature digital society that promotes rather than sabotages human thriving. The answer to the future is practice at the individual and systemic levels. Individual development of mindfulness in the use of technology and genuine presence in the digital world needs to be combined with communal practices to make technological systems serve higher human ideals and potentials.

As we continue to develop in the ever-changing world of digital technology, Buddhist-existentialist ethics gives us the tools that we need in order to preserve our humanity in our interaction with available tools. The decision in favor of the digital alienation or of true technological existence remains open, and conscious devotion to practices and doctrines that favor and not inhibit the growth of consciousness and community must be undertaken.

This provides a self-change in the context of academic philosophy and a self-change to the question of how we conceive and control, and utilize electronic technology. With the ongoing development of artificial intelligence and emerging virtual realities, the necessity of philosophical frameworks that have both contemplative wisdom and a sense of existential authenticity becomes more and more eminent.



The thinking and scientific metacognition of the wisdom traditions and their implications should be carried further in terms of how we can use the ancient wisdom to guide us in our decision making and development, be it with regard to technologies and or philosophical disclosures that are emerging.

The era of digital age is full of interesting challenges and stunning opportunities. In the unified prism of Buddhist-existentialist ethics, we can find our way through these issues as we work towards the realization of technology as an enhancer and not a detriment to human well-being and positive existence.

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