

Cultural Contradictions of the New Networking Technologies

by Raymond Barglow

Published in Tikkun Magazine, January 2000

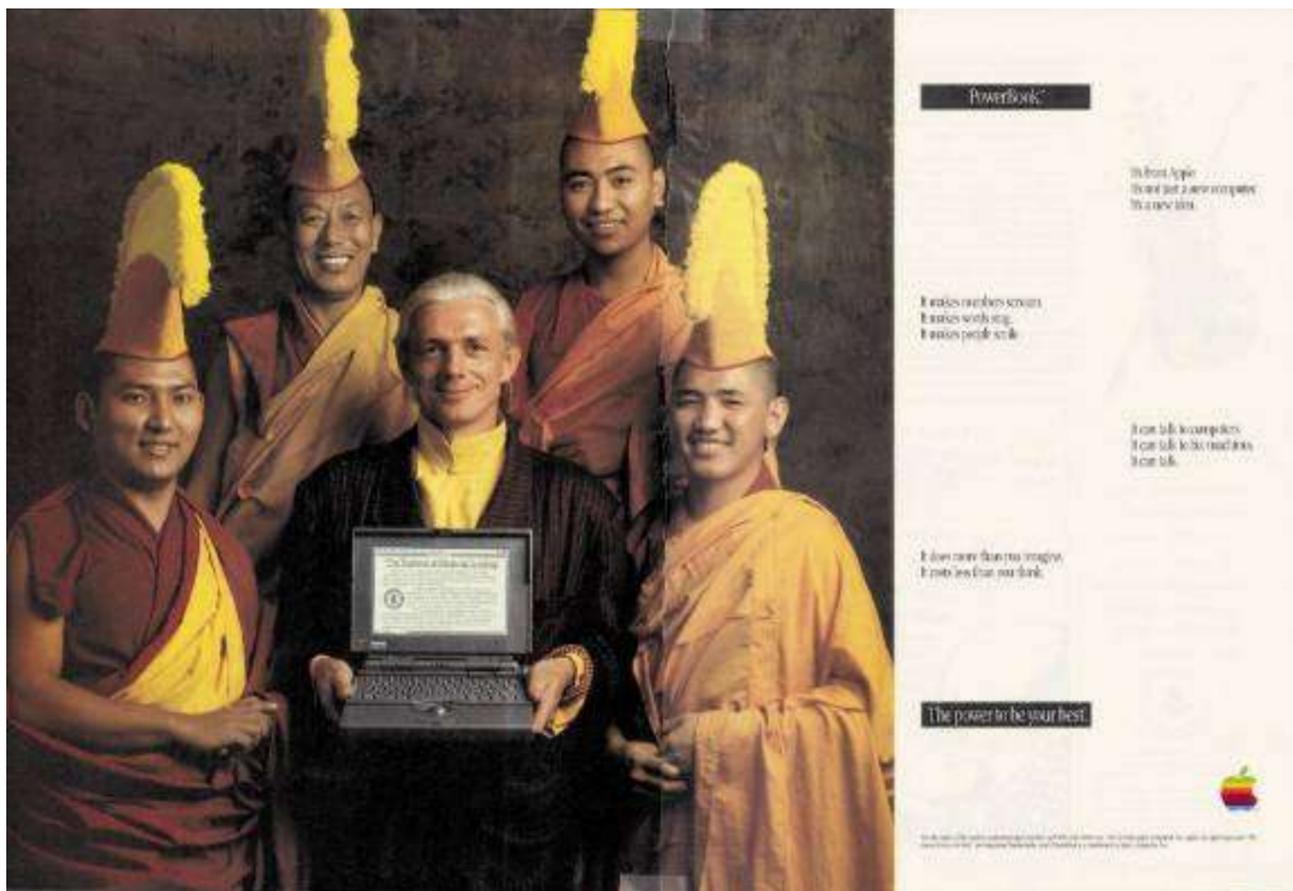
Is Technology Turning Over a New Leaf?

The past millennium has been one of world-transforming technological advance. With the Industrial Revolution several centuries behind us, and the Information Revolution well underway, humankind seems to approach the destiny promised in Genesis: "dominion over all the earth." Yet this project of mastery – implemented to most dramatic effect in industrialized nations – has not fulfilled the ideals of emancipation enunciated during the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Rather, as German theorists of the Frankfurt School first pointed out in the 1930s, the technological domination of nature has served the ends of social domination, providing weapons of war and of police states, industrial machinery that regiments workers and pollutes the environment, and mass media that manipulate audiences. During the past century, it became possible for nuclear technologies to wipe out human existence on the planet altogether.

Entering a new millennium, are we now prepared to resolve the historical contradiction between the liberating promise of technology and its actual applications? Advocates of the new technologies argue that the old stereotypes about technology – that it objectifies and deadens nature, homogenizes cultural differences, distances the mind from the body, detaches technical means from ethical purpose – overlook technology's recent revolutionary turn: the new information technologies are integrative; they help people communicate and connect. Literally weaving a worldwide web, they can serve a community-building function, linking us directly to one another in ways that encourage mutual understanding and respect.

Recognition of the "Other"

In a world fractured by ethnic, religious, and territorial rivalries, this is welcome news. An advertisement for Apple Computer suggests that today's information technologies might even support the preservation and communication of ancient non-Western ways of life:



In the ad, Tibetan Buddhism is being kept alive with the assistance of the notebook computer that the fellow at the center, surrounded by smiling monks and perhaps himself a student of Buddhism, displays for us to admire. On its screen we see the title of a document, "The Tradition of Drepung Loseling," and immediately beneath a description of the recent history of this Tibetan monastery.

At the lower right of the advertisement, we see the computer company's trademark, an apple with a bite taken out of it – suggesting that, contrary to what we read in Genesis, there is no reason not to eat from the tree of knowledge. The text visible on the monitor screen speaks of the monks' worldwide tours, "performing 'Sacred Music, Sacred Dance for World Peace' in over 100 cities in North America and Europe." The current tour, the text continues, "applies traditional Tibetan practices for the purification and healing of our troubled planet."

This juxtaposition of a recent and highly sophisticated Western technology with an ancient Eastern tradition presumes their harmony. Consider, however, the subtext of the Apple advertisement: the monks are represented as circling the Westerner, who links the two cultures and holds in his hands the computer, whose operations he, not they, has mastered. Meaning is drawn down from the peripheral figures and lodged in the information-processing object, around which the scene is centered. The text to the right of the image drops any reference to Tibetan religion and speaks only of the machine:

PowerBook.™

It's from Apple.
It's not just a new computer.
It's a new idea.

It makes numbers scream.
It makes words sing.
It makes people smile.

It can talk to computers.
It can talk to fax machines.
It can talk.

Offered to us in haiku-like form, this advertising copy pays homage to a technical artifact elevated to the status of a spiritual icon.

The formal design of the advertisement's imagery resembles that of traditional Christian representations of Madonna and Child:



male figures replace Mary and her admirers, and a computer displaces the Christ Child as the center of wonder and authority. The laptop computer has become the Incarnation!

From one perspective, what the Apple ad communicates is an altruistic relationship between Western technological rationality and an ancient spiritual tradition. From another perspective, however, the advertisement represents yet one more instance, however subtle and disguised, of cultural imperialism – a non-Western way of life is incorporated within a Western technology-centered and market-centered concept of how the world is put together. A discourse of the “other,” treated with intolerance in the past, now becomes too easily accessible and assimilated: how pleasant and appealing Tibetan Buddhism’s representatives seem, decked out in their colorful robes and ceremonial caps.

Obscured by the advertisement is a problematic relationship between Tibetan traditional beliefs and practices on the one hand, and a postindustrial order on the other. I’m thinking here not only of the obvious priorities of the current global order -- the emphasis on consumption and “getting ahead,” for instance -- but also of “materialism” in the literal sense of the word, which attributes fundamental reality only to physical entities and processes. An Apple computer is not merely a value-neutral vehicle of communication and calculation. Rather, it concludes centuries of scientific advance and economic development, and thereby embodies a particular set of understandings and values. Objects such as computers, televisions, and cellular phones amount to “facts on the ground,” so to speak, that provide a kind of obvious evidence for the truthfulness and power of Western ways of knowing and changing the world.

The attempt to harmonize those ways with an Eastern tradition like Buddhism is contradictory on two counts. There is first of all a metaphysical conflict: can religious or spiritual belief of any kind be compatible with the materialist bent of natural science? A second conflict is ethical: Can the values of the world’s spiritual traditions be reconciled with those of the global marketplace?

The Scientific "Contradiction"

Here in the pages of [Tikkun](#) and elsewhere, it has been argued that spirituality need not contradict scientific reason, that at the core of the world’s diverse religious traditions we find a shared and scientifically tenable understanding. The current Dalai Lama tells a story that illustrates this point. In 1955 he went to China to meet with Chairman Mao Tse Tung. At the conclusion of their discussions, the Chairman congratulated the Tibetan monk for having seen through the illusions of religion. The Dalai Lama reports in his autobiography that he was astonished by Mao’s misperception:

How could he have misjudged me so? The only possible explanation was that he had misinterpreted my great interest in scientific matters and material progress. It was true that I wanted to modernize Tibet ... and true also that my cast of mind is basically scientific.... I have always been open to the discoveries and truths of modern science. Perhaps this is what tricked Mao into thinking that my religious practices were nothing more to me than a prop or convention.

The mistake here, says the Dalai Lama, consists in assuming that a high regard for science is incompatible with a spiritual perspective. On the contrary, he submits, Eastern and Western ways of knowing ultimately converge. The Dalai Lama reminds us that, after all, “Both science and the teachings of the Buddha tell us of the fundamental unity of all things.”

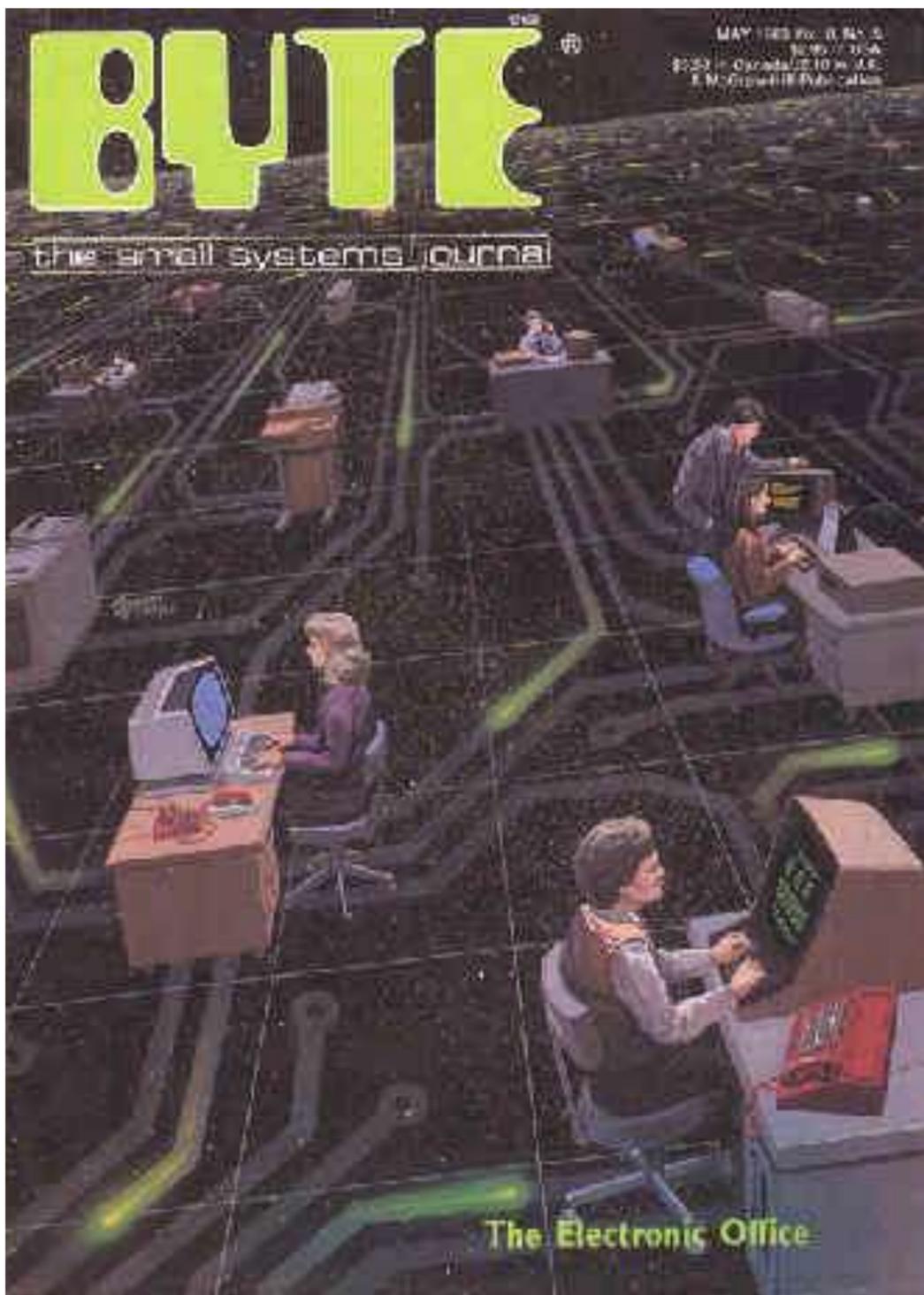
Unresolved by the Dalai Lama’s remarks, however, is the metaphysical question underlying the perennial “religion-versus-science” debate: is the “unity” in which Buddhists believe the same as that postulated by science? The kind of unity recognized by spirituality in most of its traditional forms assumes the existence of design and purpose in the universe: God’s plan, Allah’s Sharia, Buddhist karma and reincarnation. Science’s unity, on the other hand, assumes a universe populated only by physical processes and forces. Science finds no evidence for the hypothesis that our universe has been designed or guided in a purposeful way – by a divine intelligence for example.

In this debate (whose arguments are too complex to be tracked in this brief essay) much turns on the meaning of concepts like “design” and “purpose.” They may be taken to point us in the direction of a Designer or Creator, much as – to use the shopworn example – the existence of a watch implies that of a watch-maker. But there really is no need to invoke such supernatural agency in accounting for nature’s ways. Contemporary writers about science like Swimme, Goodenough, and Suzuki point out that the scientific story of the origins of our planet and of life on its surface is compelling and enchanting in its own right. With its account of the interdependence of all beings, science weaves a narrative of creation and evolution that is as dramatic as Genesis. Nature has, by a kind of miracle, given rise to conscious, meaning-creating beings capable of reflecting upon its harmonies and dissonances. Understood in this way, scientific reason need not contradict, and might even complement, the wisdom in a Sanskrit text, Rumi poem, or Kabbalist reading of Torah.

The Ethical Contradiction

An Apple computer incorporates not only a scientific understanding, however, but also economic principles of the postindustrial marketplace. These principles – unlike the scientific discoveries that have made the machine possible – can’t be reconciled with a Buddhist philosophy. The manufacture of Apple computer components, which typically occurs under conditions of sweatshop labor here in the United States and abroad, is hardly in keeping with a Buddhist emphasis upon respect and compassion for all sentient beings. (I do not mean to single out Apple here; electronics assembly worldwide is notorious for its abusive labor practices.) Tibetan Buddhism, like other religious traditions at their best, teaches an unconditional generosity toward others that is radically at odds with prevailing economic priorities.

Today's information technologies provide the "nervous system," so to speak, of an international order that impoverishes and exploits a global underclass. This electronically networked order, which integrates governments, corporations, and banks, recognizes no geographical boundaries. The walls that contained the factory and office environments of the past have disappeared in the "Electronic Office" represented on the cover of Byte Magazine, which merges a workplace setting with the entire universe.



The depths of outer space are suggested by white dots spread randomly across a black expanse and circuit paths in the shape of comets. Information processors – people sitting or standing in front of computer monitors – occupy an all-encompassing grid of pathways that recedes infinitely into the background.

Each person is allocated to a workstation, and all the stations are linked by the network. Each is a node, a receiver and sender of information – like an electronic "chip" plugged into a circuit board, the picture suggests. Even where two individuals are located in physical proximity to one another, on the right side of this cosmic workspace, they look not at one another but at the screen that absorbs the attention of both. Removed from this network, this picture seems to suggest, someone would become as aimless and lifeless as an electronic component yanked from an information system. To be sure, the "Electronic Office" connects people, but it neither empowers them nor provides their lives with any meaning beyond integration into the controlling apparatus.

Of course it is not only within corporate environments that the new technologies are deployed. Does the "personal computer," with its capacity for electronic networking, return a measure of freedom and self-determination to the individual? Anticipating the explosive growth of Internet traffic, Michael Dertouzos, Director of MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science, proposed in 1991 that the United States make a major investment in a "National Information Infrastructure" (NII) that would enable us to recreate our social relationships:

Philosophically, the NII should be viewed as a new means of controlling our personal locality -- choosing our working associates, vendors, entertainers, and perhaps even friends -- without being limited to those that happen to be physically near. With the importance of physical proximity diminished, every person on the national information infrastructure could assemble his or her own electronic "neighborhood."

Currently, Al Gore is one of the enthusiastic advocates of this vision. In his speeches he touts the Internet's ability to extend the freedom of human communications. But how will this freedom be exercised? Will we populate our "electronic neighborhoods" only with people who are more or less like ourselves, and in whose company we feel comfortable? We might welcome into our "neighborhood" the smiling Tibetan monks in the Apple advertisement, but not have anything to do at all with the disenfranchised and homeless who aren't sending us electronic mail.

Networking technologies are celebrated as the basis for a more connected and integrated world, seemingly in keeping with the Dalai Lama's dream of a worldwide community of peoples. But the World Wide Web may amount to little more than a network of tunnel visions: a world compartmentalized along lines of social class and professional specialization. When automobiles were first mass-produced, they too were advertised as a technology that would bring us together by making everyone accessible to everyone else. Yet automotive travel turned out to have quite different consequences, including the formation of suburbs insulated from the ghettos of the inner city. Similarly, the "information superhighway" is as likely to atomize as to integrate: the individual self will find its purpose and identity within an electronically contrived virtual reality inhabited only by like-minded others.

Communities: Virtual and Real

How might a different kind of outcome be achieved? The challenge is to go beyond our specialized "virtual communities" to create real ones – inclusive communities that embrace what the Dalai Lama calls in his most recent book Ethics for the New Millennium a "sense of universal responsibility.... of the equal right of all others to happiness and not to suffer." One reason that the Dalai Lama's message resonates so widely is that it speaks to a longing so many of us share – across national and religious and cultural boundaries – for a transformed world. "We are only just beginning to see," the Dalai Lama notes, "the emergence of a global consciousness (which has been made possible by the communications revolution).... a growing sense of a single, mutually dependent, human community.... Given human beings' love of truth, justice, peace, and freedom, creating a better, more compassionate world is a genuine possibility."

But if the desire for justice and peace is so widely shared, then why has there not been more movement of the world toward these values? At the end of a millennium of extraordinary technological advance and global integration, why do poverty and war and xenophobia abound? Part of the answer is that our forms of social association, from the fiefdom to the nation-state -- and more recently the World Trade Organization, as protesters have pointed out -- have not encouraged solidarity across borders, nor even democratic decision making internally. If the wider scope of communication provided by the new networking technologies is to yield more than the delivery of e-commerce packages to our doorsteps, then these technologies must be married to an old-fashioned ideal -- grassroots democracy. This ideal is deeply embedded, the Dalai Lama pointed out in a recent address to the National Endowment for Democracy, in Eastern as well as Western traditions: "Not only are Buddhism and democracy compatible, they are rooted in the same understanding of equality and the potential of the individual."

The principle of democratic self-determination is obviously relevant to the Tibetans' desire to reclaim their homeland from Chinese domination. But as the Dalai Lama suggests, taking this principle seriously would transform every human institution. At a company like Apple, democracy would mean that workers at all levels, from assemblers in Third World countries to software developers in Silicon Valley, could use the networking technologies that they themselves produce to deliberate upon and reshape the conditions and direction of their own labor. These technologies could also help communities external to the company to have their say, in setting standards of environmental safety, for example, but also in arriving at broader policy decisions about the purposes that technology should serve.

Such cooperation already occurs in embryonic forms. Last year's protest in Seattle against WTO policies, for example, relied a lot upon electronic networking, beginning with worldwide discussions among some 700 non-governmental organizations to plan the protest and culminating in video streaming of information to the Internet from many street locations in the city during the week-long demonstrations. These electronic media have been helping a new generation of activists to come of age and convey their message to the world.

Among those marching in the streets of Seattle were members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, expressing a global awareness quite at odds with Apple Computer's image of a multicultural marketplace. Especially in countries like Burma and Thailand, Buddhists have been effective in challenging corporate power. When faith traditions are true to themselves, the Dalai Lama believes, they travel a path as committed to social justice and protection of the environment as any other activism. In fact, the insights of these traditions are essential to the movement we aim to build. To worldwide conversations that help us clarify the values and direction of that movement, the new technologies can make an invaluable contribution.