Twitter brain

The Internet and social networking are turning us into copies of themselves. The replicators of science fiction is now a human fact. The way we speed-process digital texts is conditioning our brains to skim through the torrents of online information. We are being brainwashed into speed-reading at the cost of slow-reading and its vital benefits that we have been enjoying for the last six millennia.

Reading started with the first writing, which probably began with Sumerian cuneiforms some 6000 years ago, then the Egyptian hierogylphics about 1000 years after that, then Chinese paper around 105 CE. Then came the first movable type printing in 11th century China, but it was the Gutenberg printing (1450) that habituated us into reading. Since then we have books and prints of all sorts. Of course, we learned to read very long before that.

Universal reading however is probably under 3000 years, which of course includes the Buddha's time. We have an interesting reference to writing in the suttas. The Commentary to the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta (M 140) says that king Bimbisāra of Magadha in the central Ganges plain corresponded with king Pukkusāti in Takkasilā (modern Taxila in Afghanistan).

One of Bimbisāra's royal letters was written on a long gold foil, 4 cubits long and a span wide (about 2.4 m by 0.3 m), inscribed with descriptions of the 3 Jewels, quoting three verses from **the Ratana Sutta** and various other teachings, such as the 4 focuses of mindfulness, the noble eightfold path and the 37 limbs of awakening.[1] On account of these letters, Pukkusāti renounced the world under the Buddha, as recorded in **the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140).[2]

As noted above, we have learned to read, and our brain has evolved and adapted to reading, for some 6000 years. Such reading was, and is, in a linear way, left to right (as in English) or right to left (as in Arabic), or top to bottom (as in Chinese). We then took our time reading, and carefully learning and remembering information.

Dr Margaret Wof, a Tufts University cognitive neuroscientist and author of *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain* (2007) explains in her book that we are not born with brain circuits dedicated to reading. There are no genes for reading as there are for language or vision. With the invention of writing and reading, our brain improvises a brand-new circuit for reading by connecting various regions of neural tissues devoted to other abilities, such as spoken language, motor coordination and vision.

When we read a paper book or "hard copy" we tend to treat letters and words as physical objects. This gives us a sense of a fixed image (that is, a "sign" or *nimitta,* in mindfulness training and meditation). This is more difficult with digital images of the same letters and words: they glitter, flicker, glare and blink, and the brightness discomforts, even hurts, our eyes faster than when we read them on paper. They also move around and disappear at the touch of our fingers. In short, we have less concentration and shorter attention span than we do when we paper-read.

Paper reading is more experiential than screen reading. We feel the smoothness or subtle weight of the paper pages on our fingers. They make distinctive rustling, crinkling or crackling sounds. They even have a bookish smell. We can underline a word or a sentence, or highlight it; or paste stick-it notes and tiny colourful page-markers on them; or perhaps bend or dog-ear a page when we need to.

[1] MA 5:38; see SD 4.17 (1.2): link.
[2] M 140 @ SD 4.17: link..

We experience more fully a book or a paper page. More importantly, the more senses we involve in reading, the better we remember facts and know things. Otherwise, we might merely store what the digital page or text holds. And with less senses involved (mostly looking and quick manual actions), we are simply a selective storage appendage to the digital master. As such, digital information may change our lives, but does not really contribute to our wellbeing, satisfaction or happiness, as reading a good book or writing does.

Furthermore, our brains now need to form short cuts to deal with all this: scanning for texts, searching for keywords, scrolling up and down quickly running after our interests. This is non-linear reading, very unlike how we have been reading and learning for the last 6000 years. We are rapidly switching from "slow *reading*" to "rapid *leading*." We now read not just with our eyes, but also with our hand – touching, pushing, linking, scrolling and jumping through the texts. We are *led* by the texts.

There is now a huge amount of digital information, hyperlinked texts, videos embedded in the computer pages, and interactivity with anyone anywhere. This also means we begin to treat people also as digital realities, extensions of the keyboard or the mouse.

As such, we may become less human and even less inhibited. A vital implication is that we become digital speed junkies whose senses and hearts become so callous that we find it more difficult to enjoy (feel the fun and gain) in reading a book. Then when we sit down with a novel, our past habitual clicking, scrolling and jumping about on the electronic page simply prevents us from reading beyond a few pages. We are unable to be absorbed in the author's world so that our own lives are enriched.

The early suttas, on the other hand, are designed for the careful readers to experience the world of the Buddha and the early saints. These suttas were originally only orally transmitted. We must be with a teacher, and be attentive and amenable, so that we will directly learn.[3] A few centuries after the Buddha, his teachings were put down into writing: first on bark or palm leaves, then on paper, and now we have the digital Buddha word.

Buddhism as an oral and aural tradition is still the best means of learning and training for spiritual transformation and awakening. However, even as a book tradition, the suttas still work their wonders if we understand and accept the teachings they preserve. The suttas, even as books, are structured in the same way as its oral tradition: it works best if we are willing and able to *listen* to them -- to listen with the ear and the heart.

To benefit from the sutta-reading, we must remember, know, and feel the suttas; only then we will go through a wholesome change. To remember a sutta, or any part of it, is to merely have an idea that it can do something good for us. To know a sutta is to be able to locate a passage that inspires us and be more familiar with it. To feel a sutta means to put that passage or teaching into practice so that we feel happy. All this works together to bring us closer to self-awareness and awakening to true reality.

If we treat the suttas as just a part of digital information, then that is all we will get. We will only see blinking pixels of words and text which we click, cut and paste, perhaps read, if we are not distracted by something else texting or twittering us, or a number of other colourful buttons and displays enticing us like the witch's gingerbread house in a glittering digital forest.[4]

The suttas are like healthy food which we must ourself taste and take. Then we must mindfully chew it again and again (hence, the repetitive cycles). We must not rush our meals, and we must let the food

[3] See SD 9 (11.c): link. See **Oral tradition,** SD 58.1.

[4] This is an allusion to one of the Grimms brothers' fairy tales entitled "Hansel and Gretel" (1812).

settle to be absorbed into our system. That way, we build ourself up with spiritual food, growing in health and wisdom. This is clearly better than being a twitter-brain.

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