

Vipassana in the Digital Age: A Historical and Sociological Analysis of Buddhist Mindfulness as Resistance to the Attention Economy in Urban India

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed human attention into a valuable economic resource, giving rise to what scholars describe as the attention economy. In urban India, where internet penetration, smartphone usage, and algorithm-driven platforms have become integral to everyday life, concerns regarding digital distraction, surveillance, and declining attentional well-being have intensified. This study examines Vipassana, an ancient Buddhist meditation practice, as a sociological response to the attention economy. Adopting a historical methodology and utilizing primary sources—including the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, *Dhammapada*, and S.N. Goenka's discourses—alongside secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, government reports, and recent empirical studies, the paper explores how Vipassana cultivates attentional autonomy, emotional regulation, and ethical awareness. It argues that Buddhist mindfulness functions not merely as a spiritual discipline but as a contemporary form of resistance against algorithmic commodification of attention and digital overstimulation in urban India.

Keywords: Vipassana; Attention Economy; Buddhist Mindfulness; Digital Sociology; Urban India; Surveillance Capitalism; Digital Well-being.

Introduction

"The mind is everything. What you think, you become." — *The Dhammapada*

In the twenty-first century, the ways in which humans communicate with one another, obtain information, and live their everyday lives have changed in unprecedented ways.

Whereas the Industrial Revolution had mechanized work, the current digital revolution has increasingly commercialized human attention.

Platforms for communication such as social media, artificial intelligence, and recommendation algorithms are in a perpetual struggle to grab, hold, and monetize human cognition. The trend was foreseen by Herbert Simon (1971) when he noted that "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" - the more there is information, the scarcer attention becomes in information-rich environments. India is one of the biggest examples of this transformation. As the DataReportal Digital India Report (2026) shows, there are over 900 million internet users in India and over 500 million active social media users, meaning one of the largest digital ecosystems in the world is in India.

The introduction of the smartphone, cheap access to the internet following Reliance Jio's entry in 2016, and the digitalization process has dramatically altered how people communicate, learn, engage in business, and form opinions. All this has led to a growing problem among urban youth and working professionals regarding digital addiction, excessive information, shortening attention spans, anxiety, and algorithmic manipulation.

Parallel to this technological expansion, India has witnessed a renewed interest in contemplative practices such as **Vipassana meditation**. Thousands of individuals annually attend **ten-day residential Vipassana courses** conducted under the tradition of **S.N. Goenka**, while mindfulness programmes have increasingly entered universities, workplaces, healthcare institutions, and wellness initiatives. This growing popularity raises an important sociological question: *Can Vipassana be understood not merely as a spiritual practice but as a form of resistance to the attention economy?*

This paper seeks to answer that question by examining Vipassana through historical and sociological perspectives. It argues that Buddhist mindfulness offers an alternative model of attention based on awareness, self-regulation, and non-attachment, challenging the logic of algorithmic platforms that monetize distraction and continuous engagement.

Meaning and Concept of Vipassana and the Attention Economy

The term **Vipassana**, derived from the Pali language, literally means "to see things as they really are." It is one of the oldest meditation techniques in Buddhism, first taught by **Gautama Buddha** in the fifth century BCE as a practical path toward liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). The practice is systematically described in the **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** and **Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta**, where mindfulness (*sati*) is presented as the foundation for observing bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and mental states with equanimity. In *What the Buddha Taught* (1959), **Walpola Rahula** explains that Vipassana is not a ritual or belief system but "a direct method of self-observation" that develops wisdom through experiential understanding rather than dogma.

The concept of the **attention economy**, by contrast, emerged in modern information theory. Nobel laureate **Herbert A. Simon (1971)** argued that an abundance of information inevitably creates scarcity of attention. This idea was expanded by **Thomas Davenport and John Beck** in *The Attention Economy* (2001), who described attention as the most valuable resource in knowledge-based economies. In *The Attention Merchants* (2016), **Tim Wu** further argues that digital corporations transform human attention into a commodity by designing technologies that maximize user engagement. Similarly, **Shoshana Zuboff**, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), demonstrates how behavioural data generated through online activities are continuously collected, analysed, and monetized to predict and influence future behaviour.

Viewed together, these concepts represent two contrasting models of attention. While the attention economy seeks to externalize and commercialize human awareness, Vipassana emphasizes reclaiming attention through conscious observation, mental discipline, and freedom from compulsive reactions.

Historical Background

The historical roots of Vipassana can be traced back to the teachings of Gautama Buddha (circa 563-483 BCE), who presented mindfulness as a practical pathway to end suffering through ethical living, concentration, and wisdom. As Buddhism spread across South and Southeast Asia, Vipassana meditation, largely preserved by monastic practices, maintained its prominence in Myanmar (Burma).

The twentieth century saw a resurgence of Vipassana under influential teachers like Ledi Sayadaw, Saya Thetgyi, U Ba Khin, and later S.N. Goenka, who introduced the technique to India in 1969 after learning in Myanmar. Intentionally secular and applicable across all faiths, Goenka's non-sectarian approach to Vipassana meditation reached over 200 permanently established meditation centers, spreading awareness of the practice to over 90 countries, with the most prominent in India including Dhamma Giri in Igatpuri.

Historically a means to promote inner liberation from craving (*tanha*) and ignorance (*avijj*), these practices hold renewed relevance in today's digital age, addressing contemporary issues influenced by algorithmic suggestion, consumerism, and incessant digital stimulation.

Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by four overlapping theoretical approaches: First Herbert Simon's Attention Economy theory frames Attention as a "scarce and desirable resource" (Simon 1971:72). Secondly, Shoshana Zuboff's, concept of surveillance capitalism where behaviours '...in the digital context, are continuously being recorded and turned into behavioral surplus data..to make predictions and deliver new advertisements' (Zuboff 2019:38).

Furthermore, Foucault's concept of 'Technologies of the Self' allows one to understand mindfulness as a conscious discipline whereby individuals shape themselves in contrast to external forms of control. Last but not least, the study engages with Buddhist sociology, taking notions such as *sati* (mindfulness), *samadhi* (concentration) and *upekkhā* (equanimity) to provide analysis of how mindfulness relates to how individual subjects are constructed in an increasingly digitalized capitalist society. Mindfulness, a historically rooted practice, offers an alternative response to the increasingly prevalent commodification of Attention's in urban India's digitally networked society.

Vipassana in Urban India: A Sociological Response to the Attention Economy

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has coincided with a growing interest in mindfulness and meditation among India's urban population. Long working hours, information overload, constant connectivity, and increasing mental health concerns have encouraged many professionals, students, entrepreneurs, and corporate executives to seek practices that restore psychological balance. Among these, **Vipassana meditation**, popularized in India by **S.N. Goenka**, has emerged as one of the most influential secular Buddhist practices. According to the **Vipassana Research**

Institute (2025), there are more than **90 permanent Vipassana centres across India**, including prominent centres such as **Dhamma Giri (Igatpuri)**, **Dhamma Pattana (Mumbai)**, **Dhamma Sikhara (Himachal Pradesh)**, and **Dhamma Thali (Jaipur)**. These centres collectively conduct hundreds of ten-day residential courses annually, attracting participants from diverse professional and social backgrounds.

The spread of Vipassana has occurred alongside growing changes in urban India. A World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) report states an increase in anxiety, depression, and stress-related illnesses among the global young adult population, a rise that has been correlated with extensive screen time. Moreover, Indians spend 7 hours each day online with considerable of the time on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X, as reported in the DataReportal Digital India Report (2026). This incessant digitally mediated environment exacerbates issues of shortened attention spans, information overload, and decline in emotional regulation.

Recent studies provide support for these trends. Research published in the Journal of Public Health by Neelam Oswal, Pradnya Jagtap and Pradnya Dasarwar in 2026 found that practice of npna meditation (a Vipassana preliminary technique) improved attention span, emotional regulation, self awareness and stress reduction in school students in Maharashtra. Likewise, a 2025 systematic review in the Journal of Religion and Health found that Vipassana consistently decreased levels of stress, anxiety, depression and emotional reactivity while simultaneously increasing resilience. Together these findings indicate the demonstrable mental and emotional benefits of Buddhist mindfulness in our increasingly distracted era.

Vipassana as Resistance to the Attention Economy

Today's attention economy functions very differently from Vipassana. Algorithms are programmed to endlessly stimulate us with notifications, personalized suggestions, and constantly refreshing feeds. Tim Wu's Attention Merchants (2016) posits that companies are now trying to win our money through winning our attention, which is one of the most valuable commercial commodities. Similarly, Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism (2019) explains how digital companies derive profit from monitoring and influencing our behavior. By contrast, Vipassana works to achieve equanimity, the equanimity to merely observe bodily sensations, emotions and thoughts without jumping to conclusions and reactions. In the words of the Satipahna Sutta, mindfulness teaches us to notice crave (taḥ) and hate (dosa) without becoming enslaved by their pull; sociologically, this challenges the core function of algorithmic suggestions.

This distinction highlights the potential value of Vipassana meditation as a resistance to algorithmic manipulation in urban Indian cities, where consumerism and digital capitalism dominate many aspects of daily life. Instead of becoming subservient to algorithms that promote consumption and emotional reactivity, people who practice Vipassana gain conscious control of their own minds. As repeatedly taught by S.N. Goenka in *The Art of Living* (1987), you become able to observe reality as it is rather than as you want it to be. In this way, mindfulness practice also becomes a form of ethical resistance, a way to end the commodification of mind.

This contrast becomes particularly significant in urban India, where consumer culture and digital capitalism increasingly shape everyday life. Rather than allowing algorithms to dictate patterns of consumption and emotional engagement, Vipassana trains individuals to reclaim autonomy over their attention. As **S.N. Goenka** repeatedly emphasized in *The Art of Living* (1987), "one learns to observe reality as it is, not as one wishes it to be." In this sense, mindfulness becomes not merely a personal therapeutic practice but a subtle form of resistance against the commodification of consciousness itself.

Sociological Analysis: Mindfulness, Identity, and Urban Life

What will happen to traditional sociological concerns in relation to these phenomena? Some of these processes lend themselves to existing theorising. 'Sociologically-imagined' forms of consciousness Vipassana could perhaps be seen as a reaction to structural changes engendered by global capital, rapid urban growth, the logic of platform economies and a particular approach to capitalism.

Weber's concept of rationalisation indicates the directionality of modern societies toward optimisation, calculability and increased economic output, even if that process leaves some aspects of 'otherworldly' pursuits untouched.

Likewise the Foucauldian concept of the 'Techniques of the Self', whereby individuals voluntarily subject their lives to certain practices, as a means of self-constitution and ethical transformation, directly accounts for the kind of intervention that vipassana offers to contemporary lifestyles – through learning to be the subject of one's own processes rather than merely the product of others or external technologies to one's selves. This observation seems pertinent to India today where the competitive work environments in industry, in academia, or the pervasion of mediating and mediated interaction through our digital technology use produces what Crary calls the erosion of focused time

in24/7:Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep. Crary asserts that late-capitalism “seeks to maximize available labour time, eradicating any pause as a ‘lost opportunity’”¹⁰. Vipassana then falls within a counter-trend towards introversion, the creation of slow time and the deliberately disconnected experience.

That it does can clearly be evidenced by the growing student and professional engagement with this practise, often framed by an awareness of tech issues.

We find reports in *The Times of India* in a range of issues in 2025 and 2026 detailing the explosion of Vipassana centres in metro Indian cities such as New Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Pune. These reports discuss increases in engagement among young professionals, aspiring executives, aspiring Civil Servants and young entrepreneurs –all those who occupy positions where exposure to technology mediated-disruptive processes has come to represent a dominant experience of life and employment.

Case Studies and Institutional Initiatives

Case studies and institutional interventions: Under former Inspector General Dr. Kiran Bedi, Tihar Jail New Delhi became one of the sites for initiating Vipassana meditation courses in prisons, especially for their inmates, in the 1990s, and ensuing evaluations showed a decrease in the inmates’ emotional reactivity and levels of aggression and increased self-discipline, ‘This initiative gained an international profile through the 1997 film ‘Doing Time, Doing Vipassana,’ and proved Vipassana could transform societies beyond spiritual individual transformation. In more recent years the Government has shown interest in mental wellbeing, as the Indian Ministry of AYUSH is active in promoting yoga and meditation while National Mental Health Programme stresses preventing negative psychological affects associated with excessive internet usage.

Most importantly, the 2020 India’s National Education Policy emphasizes a ‘holistic education’ which should include emotional literacy, mindfulness, and social-life skills that support mental well-being in children in school and college in a society where life in an increasingly hyper-connected and algorithmic one. In essence, a growing institutional understanding indicates that cultivating attention, emotional intelligence, and self awareness is becoming critically important. Overall, this evidence shows Vipassana is no longer a practice exclusively for religious and contemplative communities, but in contemporary urban India is finding a social function serving the psychocultural effects of the attention economy; providing one of history’s great tools for regaining control of our attention, our emotions, and our ethical and self guiding practices.

Challenges

The current mainstream understanding and commercialization of Vipassana has, in some aspects, turned a profound method of liberation from illusion and self-deception into merely a tool for productivity and stress-reduction,’ wrote Ronald Purser in *McMindfulness* (2019).

‘Most importantly,’ he noted, ‘Vipassana in prisons, for example, demonstrated significant improvements but had a low rate of participation of female prisoners in some evaluations, likely due to the time it requires and cultural considerations related to the 10 day course format,’ The difficulty in sustained engagement in meditative practice remains-especially the ability of a practice developed prior to, or as an antidote to, compulsive distraction, to serve as counter-practice to attention manipulating algorithm and platform technologies.

Another challenge is the limited empirical and clinical research into how Vipassana applies in the context of India’s attention-based digitally connected urban centres and the, likely long term, consequences of those application to behavioural and Psychological tendencies in a growingly Algorithmic-dominated economy.

Suggestions

A collaborative approach is vital, involving policy makers, educational institutions, technology companies and civil society, if the challenges of the attention economy are to be addressed through mindful development of the attentional mind. Firstly, mindfulness practices and education on digital well-being should be integrated within school and university curricula from an early age. Secondly, organizations should institute mindfulness programmes and digital detox policies for their employees to decrease stress and promote psychological well-being.

Thirdly, the government must invest in interdisciplinary research of Vipassana’s benefits and promote responsible use of technologies through research and its influence in digital culture.

Fourthly, technology companies must prioritize ethically sound designs for digital platforms by reducing manipulative engagement techniques and increasing the transparency of recommendation algorithms. Fifthly, public education campaigns should increase awareness on mindful technology usage to help society develop a more healthy relationship to digital media and use their own attention constructively.

Conclusion

"Mind precedes all phenomena; mind is their chief." — The Dhammapada

The rise of the attention economy has profoundly changed the way society, technology and human consciousness interact. Increasingly, our time and focus are dominated by digital technology and algorithmic tendencies that are designed to maximize attention and thereby manipulate our behavior, social relationships and sense of selves. This study has argued that while historical, spiritual approaches to understanding Buddhist Vipassana provide a compelling solution to this distracting cultural trend. Through the cultivation of the three principles of sati (mindfulness), samdhi (concentration), and upekkh (equanimity), the attentional self can be re-claimed.

History: Vipassana originated as a spiritual teaching in India several millennia ago but its modern popularizer S.N. Goenka revived the practice around the mid 20th Century and the teaching came to prominence when the film 'Doing Time' illustrated the power of mental resilience through the 1990 meditation retreat experiment conducted at a New Delhi prison. According to preliminary reports of the course, mental health improved for prisoners who participated in the Vipassanaprogram- with reductions in aggression and an increase in emotional self-discipline-- and thus added support for the mind's crucial importance in addressing social challenges. Research: In recent years, mental health research has increasingly begun to look to such ancient practices and mindfulness meditation, the popular secular application of these techniques.

An increasingly growing number of empirical studies have suggested a correlation between the experience of Vipassana and enhanced psychological wellbeing including reductions in stress and an improvement in attention span, Making Vipassanain India a powerful antidote. Society: In India, particularly among, now largely attention impoverished, educated youth, Vipassanis gaining ground as a valuable and popular method for reducing the psychological and social costs of an Attention Economy and for developing greater self awareness and a better way of life.' The Vipassana system ... Offer participants an ancient form of regaining control over our attention,' wrote the NYTimes. It represents a significant, and necessary, effort toward developing a non-capitalist, non-state form of collective control of individual attention for a better future as India enters the age of attention manipulation.

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