THEME 03

Can technology enhance spirituality?

SPIRITUALITY **TECHNOLOGY** **SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

As in so many other domains, technology has been a game-changer for spirituality. Mass-communication of spiritual messages, for example, was made possible first through print, then radio, television and finally the internet, reaching every corner of the globe. Today, mindfulness apps, software that calculates astrology charts and spiritual podcasts make spirituality even more accessible. But does technology also substantially contribute to the aims of spirituality?

Our observations

- In the Oxford dictionary, spirituality is defined as "the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things". Historically, it refers to a process of re-formation which "aims to recover the original shape of man" oriented at "the image of God". Both definitions seem to fit the profile of spiritual movements we see today: Taoism, astrology, mindfulness, transcendental meditation, Buddhism, the Rajneesh movement, Rosicrucianism, etc.

- In the past decade, a new category in the realm of (non-)believers has emerged, called "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). This group wants some connection to the divine, without devoting themselves to an institutionalized religion such as the Catholic Church or Islam.

- In the U.S. and Europe, SBNRs have increased substantially. The number of U.S. adults (27%) that think of themselves as SBNR has increased by 8% in five years. This growth has been broad-based: It has occurred among men and women; whites, blacks and Hispanics; people of many different ages and education levels; and among Republicans and Democrats. There are some common characteristics to those who identify as SBNR: they are relatively young and highly educated compared to, for example, those who identify as neither spiritual nor religious.

- Popular spiritual leaders today are, Eckhart Tolle, for example, whose first book *The Power of the Now* became a worldwide bestseller and remained on the New York Times bestseller list for years afterwards, and Deepak Chopra, who was named as one of the hundred greatest heroes and idols of the twentieth century by TIME Magazine in 1999.

- The spiritual and religious market is part of the market for self-improvement products & services, which is worth $9.9 billion a year in the U.S., according to a study by Business Wire.

Connecting the dots

A group that identifies itself as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) is growing in the West. There are many popular spiritual movements to be found that offer a variety of practices. Most of them advocate that humans ought to follow a certain path to find their true divine nature, which cannot be found by dedicating one's life to matters of the ego, such as status, career or having a hedonistic lifestyle. The path that many spiritual movements aim for direct our body, emotions and thinking patterns towards a disposition in which this true state of being can be achieved. Obviously, technology has always played a big role in distributing and facilitating spiritual messages, but today it seems that technology is also increasingly and more directly applied in matters of the body, emotions and thinking patterns. When technology is involved with spirituality, it aims to improve or enhance these aspects of life. Meditation apps, for example, aim to make it easier to meditate or change thinking patterns. One of the latest developments is that of VR programs to generate transformative spiritual experiences. The question thus arises whether technology can also contribute to the more essential aims of these movements and the path they advocate. The messages of some of the most influential spiritual leaders of our time, such as Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle, do not focus on our situation, and on such things as diseases, disabilities, limitations, poverty, emotional problems or narrow thinking patterns. Those

things are important, but the improvement of these issues does not ultimately contribute to the aims of their teachings. Even when we are healthy, beautiful, rich, have great intelligence, have access to profound and transformative experiences, we will still not be free of one urge: to make things even better, to improve, to exceed. In this urge lies the ultimate source of our suffering: it prevents us from fully accepting what is. And here lies the key for them: only through total acceptance of what is, will we stop perceiving ourselves, others and the world as a means to an end and can we achieve true compassion, love and become our true self. Though technology can make it a lot easier to accept what is, simply because it can dissolve many obstacles we experience in reality, the ability to fully accept what is, no matter what the situation brings, will not be accomplished by it. Even if technology could generate all sorts of profound and transformative experiences, by means of digital environments, for instance, in which we could practice accepting difficult situations, this would ultimately not lead to acceptance of what is, because the underlying motivation for having these experiences would still be to improve ourselves, to exceed, to become better. This does not mean that technology hinders a spiritual path that is in accordance with the teachings of these spiritual leaders per se, but it cannot contribute to its essential aims either.

Implications

- Turning to spirituality is often motivated by experiences of pain and sorrow in life. Because technology is increasingly reducing diseases, disabilities and in time even might resolve fundamental limitations of the human body, fewer people might turn to spirituality to relieve them of their struggles.

- The spiritual message to accept what is without reservations, is contrary to many technological developments such as personal digital assistants, dating sites, personalized content, etc. Instead of helping people to deal with inconvenient aspects of life, their goal is to reduce friction as much as possible.