

Digital Brain Rot and the Buddhist Path to Mental Clarity

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 23/July/2025

Accepted: 26/Aug/2025

Abstract

In an age dominated by algorithmic content, endless notifications and shrinking attention spans, “digital brain rot” has emerged as a popular term for the cognitive and emotional toll of excessive digital consumption. This paper explores the intersection of digital overstimulation and ancient Buddhist psychology, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding and healing the modern mind. Beginning with an analysis of digital brain rot and its causes such as social media, short-form video and compulsive multitasking. We examine its psychological consequences through current cognitive science then turn to early Buddhist teachings on the nature of mind (*citta, manas, vinnana*), the roots of suffering (*lobha, dosa, moha*) and mental obstacles (*nivarana*), revealing striking parallels between Buddhist insights and contemporary struggles with attention and addiction. Central to the discussion is the role of mindfulness (*sati*) as a counter to mindless consumption. Through practices such as *Vipassana, Samatha and Metta*, individuals can rewire their attention systems, as supported by modern neuroscience. We explore the ethical implications of the attention economy through Buddhist principles such as Right Livelihood and Right Effort and consider real-world applications. This paper concludes that Buddhist psychology offers a timeless, holistic response to digital disconnection. Far from being incompatible with modern life, it provides practical, ethical and contemplative tools for reclaiming attention, restoring mental clarity and navigating the digital world with awareness and compassion.

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Keywords: Brain rot, Digital Addiction, Attention Economy, Buddhist Psychology, Cognitive Fragmentation, Meditation, Digital detox.

1. Introduction

The term *brain rot* has re-emerged in the digital age as a popular catchphrase to describe the subjective experience of mental decline due to overexposure to digital media. Today it has taken on renewed relevance in internet culture. On platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (now X), users frequently refer to “digital brain rot” to describe states of cognitive fatigue, shortened attention spans or feelings of mental numbness after prolonged scrolling.

1.1 Causes: Social Media, Short-Form Content and Constant Multitasking

The rise of algorithmically optimized digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube Shorts and Facebook Reels has fundamentally reshaped how people consume information. These systems are designed around short-form, emotionally engaging and fast-paced content that maximizes user retention through dopamine-based reward cycles.

This rapid-fire consumption trains the brain to seek novelty and instant gratification, often at the expense of deeper cognitive processes like critical thinking, sustained attention and reflection. Social media further compounds this effect by layering interactivity and social feedback (likes, shares, comments), creating an environment of constant stimulation and performance. Meanwhile, users are encouraged to multitask: switching between conversations, video feeds, alerts and work tasks with increasing frequency.

1.2 Symptoms: Attention Fragmentation, Anxiety and Memory Loss

The cognitive and emotional symptoms associated with digital brain rot are becoming increasingly well-documented. One of the most prominent is attention fragmentation, the inability to focus on a single task for extended periods. Users often report restlessness, fidgeting and the persistent urge to “check something” even when no notifications are present.

Closely related is digital anxiety, including a low-grade but chronic sense of unease triggered by information overload or fear of missing out (FOMO). Notifications, trending content and algorithmic stimuli keep the nervous system in a state of hypervigilance, undermining the brain's ability to enter restorative states. This can contribute to mood dysregulation, irritability and burnout.

At the neurochemical level, digital brain rot involves dopamine dysregulation. Digital platforms trigger small, repeated dopamine surges through novelty and unpredictability. Over time, this conditions the brain to seek quick stimulation and reduces sensitivity to slower or more meaningful forms of engagement. This leads to desensitization and a diminished ability to enjoy activities that require effort or patience.

1.3 Psychological Impacts

Psychologically, the chronic use of fast-paced digital media can lead to patterns associated with digital addiction, emotional dysregulation and reduced cognitive resilience. In children and adolescents, excessive screen time has been linked to delayed emotional development and executive dysfunction. Among adults, researchers have observed impulsivity and poor self-regulation.

Taken together, the emerging picture is clear, while the phrase *brain rot* may originate from internet humor, it reflects an authentic cognitive and emotional cost of unchecked digital immersion. Understanding its mechanisms is a crucial step toward developing strategies for recovery, resilience and mental clarity.

2. The Buddhist Conception of the Mind

Buddhist thought presents a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the human mind, its tendencies, and its potential for transformation. Rather than treating the mind as a fixed entity, early Buddhist teachings view it as a dynamic process composed of interdependent functions, shaped by intentional actions (*karma*), habits, and awareness. Central to this view is the understanding that suffering (*dukkha*) arises not merely from external conditions, but from deeply rooted patterns within consciousness itself. This offers a valuable framework for addressing the challenges of mental disarray seen in phenomena like digital brain rot, particularly by identifying and transforming the internal causes of distraction, agitation, and craving.

2.1 The Mind in Early Buddhist Thought: Citta, Manas and Vinnana

In early Buddhist psychology, the term "mind" is not monolithic but consists of several interacting components. Three core terms appear in Pali and Sanskrit texts: *citta*, *manas*, and *vinnana*.

Citta refers to the emotive or affective mind, the heart-mind that experiences feelings and moods. It is the aspect of consciousness that is most susceptible to transformation through ethical conduct and meditation.

Manas denotes the thinking or conceptualizing faculty, the rational, discursive mind responsible for judgment, intention and planning. It is closely tied to the sense of self (*ahamkara*) and the construction of identity.

Vinnana is consciousness in a more basic form, divided into six types corresponding to the five senses and the mental faculty. It is the process by which sensory and mental objects are apprehended.

These three work in tandem to construct moment-by-moment experience. Importantly, all are impermanent, conditioned and non-self. Therefore, mental affliction is not intrinsic but arises through causes and conditions and can be undone.

2.2 The Three Poisons: Roots of Mental Suffering

Central to the Buddhist understanding of mental distress are the Three Poisons (*Trivisa*): *Lobha* (greed or attachment), *Dosa* (aversion or hatred) and *Moha* (delusion or ignorance). These are considered the root defilements that perpetuate suffering and rebirth in the cycle of *samsara*.

Lobha manifests as craving whether for pleasure, stimulation, validation or possession. In the digital context, this corresponds to compulsive scrolling, constant checking and the addictive pull of novelty.

Dosa includes all forms of rejection and irritation, from anger to boredom and restlessness. It reflects the dissatisfaction when digital input fails to gratify or when we feel overwhelmed by content.

Moha is the fundamental misunderstanding of reality, including the misperception of permanence, selfhood and satisfaction in fleeting experiences. It is particularly salient in the digital age, where illusions of connection and control mask deeper disconnection and dependency.

These poisons obscure clarity and distort perception, leading to misjudgment, reactivity and mental turbulence. Buddhist practice, particularly meditation, is aimed at weakening these poisons through direct observation, insight (*vipassana*) and ethical cultivation.

2.3 The Five Hindrances: Barriers to Mental Clarity

More immediate and experiential than the Three Poisons are the Five Hindrances (*panca nivaranani*), which obstruct meditative concentration and inner stillness. These are:

1. **Kamacchanda (Sensual desire):** attraction to pleasurable objects, including digital media.
2. **Byapada (Ill-will):** irritation, aversion or hostility toward what is perceived.
3. **Thina-middha (Sloth and torpor):** lethargy, dullness and lack of motivation.
4. **Uddhacca-kukkucca (Restlessness and worry):** agitation, anxiety, inability to settle.
5. **Vicikiccha (Doubt):** skepticism, hesitation and lack of confidence in the path.

Each hindrance corresponds closely with common symptoms of digital brain rot. Restlessness and worry for instance, are fostered by the constant influx of stimulation and the fear of missing out (FOMO). Sloth and torpor mirror the mental exhaustion and passivity that arise after long periods of screen exposure. Sensual desire maps onto the dopamine-seeking behaviors embedded in social media use.

The Buddhist path offers specific techniques for recognizing and overcoming these hindrances chiefly through mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*Samadhi*) and the cultivation of opposite mental states (e.g., generosity to counter desire, loving-kindness to counter ill-will).

2.4 Suffering (*Dukkha*) as a Mental-Emotional Phenomenon

One of the Buddha's foundational insights was that *dukkha* commonly translated as "suffering," but more accurately understood as satisfactoriness is not merely caused by external conditions, but by mental and emotional patterns of reactivity.

Digital era discomforts such as restlessness, overwhelm and attention fatigue can be seen as expressions of dukkha, intensified by modern technology but rooted in timeless human tendencies.

The Buddha taught that dukkha arises from craving, particularly the craving for sensory pleasure, existence and non-existence. Digital tools are explicitly designed to feed this craving through likes, notifications, video loops and feedback systems making them accelerants of dukkha rather than neutral instruments. What appears as entertainment or escape often masks deeper unease.

Importantly, dukkha is not an irreversible condition. By examining its causes through introspection and mindfulness, practitioners can begin to unravel the mental patterns that perpetuate it. This is the promise of the Four Noble Truths, which not only diagnose suffering but provide a practical path toward its cessation.

3. Mindfulness vs. Mindless Consumption

In the digital age, the distinction between mindful presence and mindless consumption has become critical to psychological and spiritual well-being. The Buddhist practice of *sati* commonly translated as mindfulness offers a profound counterpoint to the habitual distraction and overconsumption fostered by modern technologies. Where mindfulness cultivates clarity, attention and insight, mindless scrolling fosters fragmentation, craving and delusion. This contrast lies at the heart of both the Buddhist path and the modern struggle with digital brain rot.

3.1 What Is Buddhist Sati (Mindfulness)?

In early Buddhist teachings, *sati* refers to the quality of remembering or bearing in mind the present experience with clarity and discernment. Far from a passive or vague form of awareness, *sati* is an active, disciplined attention that continually returns the practitioner to what is happening right now physically, emotionally and mentally without clinging or aversion.

Sati is one of the seven factors of enlightenment and is foundational to the Noble Eightfold Path under Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*).

Sati is not merely a technique but a way of being that counteracts the mental autopilot so common in daily life. It cultivates a spacious and stable awareness in which one can see the arising and passing of thoughts, emotions and sensations with equanimity.

3.2 Mindless Scrolling as Modern *Moha* (Delusion)

In contrast, mindless scrolling, a hallmark of digital brain rot, is an unconscious behavior marked by compulsive repetition, shallow attention and the avoidance of discomfort. Users report entering “scroll holes,” losing track of time and feeling more exhausted than restored after prolonged engagement. Social media algorithms are designed to exploit this tendency by offering content that maximizes emotional engagement, not clarity or insight.

From a Buddhist perspective, this form of interaction mirrors the mental poison of *moha* delusion or ignorance. *Moha* refers to the inability to see things as they truly are. It manifests as confusion, aimlessness or the mistaken belief that fleeting experiences can provide lasting satisfaction.

3.3 Present-Moment Awareness vs. Fragmented Attention

Mindfulness promotes non-fragmented awareness, a continuous thread of attention that allows for reflection,

insight, and intentional action. It helps one remain present with what is occurring, even when that experience is uncomfortable, mundane, or emotionally charged.

In contrast, fragmented attention, a byproduct of constant multitasking and media consumption undermines this continuity. The mind becomes habituated to novelty and interruption, leading to cognitive overload and a reduced ability to engage deeply with any single experience.

3.4 Studies on Digital Addiction vs. Benefits of Mindfulness

A growing body of research has explored the cognitive and emotional costs of digital overuse. Studies on digital addiction have shown associations with anxiety, depression, reduced academic and work performance and sleep disturbances. These symptoms reflect not only a lifestyle imbalance but a neurological pattern of dysregulation particularly in the brain's reward and executive systems.

Thus, mindfulness not only helps individuals become aware of their digital habits, it actively rewires the brain in favor of balance, clarity and intentionality.

4. The Attention Economy and the Ethics of Distraction

In the contemporary digital landscape, attention is no longer simply a cognitive function, it is a commodity. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram operate within what scholars term the attention economy, a system where user engagement is monetized through advertising and data extraction. These platforms are engineered to capture and retain attention as long as possible, often by exploiting human psychological vulnerabilities such as novelty-seeking, emotional arousal and social validation. This dynamic fosters an environment of chronic distraction, overstimulation and compulsive use hallmarks of what might be called “digital dukkha.”

4.1 How Tech Platforms Profit from Attention Depletion

At the heart of the attention economy is a business model built on user engagement time. The longer a user scrolls, clicks, likes and watches, the more data is collected and the more targeted ads can be sold. Algorithms are designed not to promote truth, well-being or even relevance, but to predict and provoke behaviors that maximize screen time. This often involves amplifying outrage, sensationalism and hyper-personalized content loops.

Such platforms don't merely respond to attention, they shape it. By encouraging rapid, fragmented and emotionally charged interactions, they erode the user's ability to sustain focus. The cost is not only individual cognitive health but also collective attention, our shared ability to engage with meaningful discourse, civic life and ethical reflection.

4.2 Buddhist Ethics (Sila) and the Critique of Exploitative Systems

In early Buddhist teachings, *Sila* (ethical conduct) is the foundation of the path to liberation. It involves refraining from actions that cause harm to oneself or others and cultivating behaviors that support mental clarity and compassion. While *Sila* is typically interpreted at the personal level e.g., avoiding lying, stealing or intoxication, it can also serve as a lens for critiquing systemic harm.

From this ethical standpoint, the intentional design of addictive platforms for profit without regard for the psychological consequences raises serious moral concerns.

The manipulation of users' attention for financial gain constitutes a form of exploitation, reinforcing unwholesome mental states (greed, craving, delusion) on a mass scale.

4.3 Right Livelihood and Right Effort as Responses

Two elements of the Noble Eightfold Path offer clear responses to the ethical challenges of the attention economy: Right Livelihood (*samma-ajiva*) and Right Effort (*samma-vayama*).

Right Livelihood urges individuals to earn a living in a way that does not cause harm or perpetuate suffering. Applied to the digital world, this calls into question careers or companies that profit from manipulating attention and generating compulsive behaviors. It invites the development of ethical technology platforms that support well-being, clarity and autonomy. Right Effort, meanwhile, is the practice of actively cultivating wholesome mental states while preventing and abandoning unwholesome ones. This means recognizing when digital use is driven by craving or avoidance and choosing instead to foster mindfulness, discipline and mental calm. It is a conscious turning away from passive consumption toward intentional engagement.

Ultimately, Buddhist ethics do not reject technology but they call for its use to be aligned with wisdom, compassion and liberation from suffering. In an era where attention is bought and sold, reclaiming it becomes a radical and ethical act.

5. Meditation as Cognitive Detox

In confronting the cognitive fragmentation and mental fatigue of digital brain rot, meditation emerges as a potent antidote for what might be called a "cognitive detox." Rooted in ancient Buddhist practice, meditation cultivates focused attention, emotional balance and self-awareness, counteracting the overstimulation and distraction endemic to digital consumption. This section explores key types of meditation, neuroscientific findings supporting their benefits, real-world applications and how meditation compares to popular digital detox retreats.

5.1 Types of Meditation: Vipassana, Samatha, Metta

Buddhist meditation is traditionally categorized into several complementary practices:

Vipassana (insight meditation) focuses on developing clear, non-reactive awareness of present-moment experience. It involves observing bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions with equanimity to discern their impermanent and conditioned nature. *Vipassana* aims to foster deep insight into the nature of reality and the mind's habitual patterns.

Samatha (calming or concentration meditation) develops focused attention on a single object, such as the breath or a visualized image. This practice enhances mental stability and reduces distractibility, cultivating tranquility (*samadhi*).

Metta (loving-kindness meditation) cultivates benevolence and compassion toward oneself and others. This practice counters ill-will and social fragmentation by nurturing positive emotional states.

Emotionally, meditation has been shown to decrease stress markers such as cortisol, improve mood regulation and increase resilience to negative stimuli. These neurobiological changes support meditation as a means to restore balance disrupted by the digital environment.

5.2 Meditation vs. Digital Detox Retreats

Both meditation and digital detox retreats aim to reduce cognitive overload, but they differ in approach and scope.

Digital detox retreats typically involve temporary disconnection from all digital devices and stimuli. These retreats offer respite from constant notifications and algorithmic manipulation, allowing the nervous system to reset. However, the detox is often external and time-limited, with the risk of relapse once regular digital engagement resumes. Optimal recovery from digital brain rot likely involves integrating both approaches, temporary external breaks to reduce sensory overload, combined with ongoing meditation to build mental clarity and balance.

6. Rewiring the Mind: Buddhist Psychology in a Digital World

In the face of pervasive digital distractions and dopamine-driven compulsions, Buddhist psychology offers a profound framework for mental hygiene and transformation. The Noble Eightfold Path provides a holistic blueprint for cultivating wholesome mental states and counteracting the fragmentation caused by passive digital consumption. At its core, this path invites a deliberate rewiring of the mind shifting from reactive craving to mindful presence, from escapism to acceptance.

6.1 The Eightfold Path as a Framework for Mental Hygiene

The Eightfold Path is traditionally divided into three interrelated categories: ethical conduct (*sila*), mental discipline (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). Together, these components guide practitioners toward reducing suffering (*dukkha*) by transforming the underlying causes of mental agitation.

Right View and Right Intention cultivate an understanding of reality that recognizes impermanence and non-self, encouraging attitudes of renunciation and goodwill.

Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood establish ethical boundaries that prevent harm, including harm to one's own mental clarity.

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration develop the mental strength and focus necessary to resist compulsive behaviors and maintain sustained awareness.

When applied to the digital age, the Eightfold Path functions as a mental hygiene regimen of practices and attitudes that keep the mind healthy and resilient amidst a barrage of distractions.

6.2 Bhavana (Mental Cultivation) vs. Passive Digital Consumption

The Pali term *bhavana*, meaning "mental cultivation" or "development," Bhavana contrasts sharply with passive digital consumption, where users are often swept along by the momentum of external stimuli and algorithmic designs.

Bhavana involves disciplined practice such as meditation, ethical reflection and mindful awareness that fosters insight, emotional balance and cognitive control. Instead of being reactive consumers of content, practitioners become mindful agents of their own mental states. This shift is crucial for overcoming "digital brain rot," which thrives on fragmentation and habituated craving.

6.3 Embracing *Dukkha* Instead of Escaping into Endless Stimulation

Buddhism uniquely emphasizes the importance of facing *dukkha*, the inherent unsatisfactoriness and suffering of existence rather than evading it. In the digital context, much consumption is an attempt to escape boredom, anxiety or discomfort by chasing pleasurable or distracting content.

However, this avoidance only deepens restlessness and dissatisfaction. The Buddhist path invites us to embrace *dukkha* with mindful presence, observing it without judgment or reaction. This acceptance diminishes its power, reduces craving and ultimately leads to a more stable and peaceful mind.

6.4 Reframing Dopamine Addiction through the Lens of Buddhist Non-Attachment

Modern neuroscience links compulsive digital behaviors to dysregulated dopamine circuits, which reinforce habits through intermittent rewards like notifications and new content. While dopamine itself is a natural and essential neurotransmitter, its hijacking by technology can create addiction-like cycles.

Buddhist psychology reframes this issue by focusing not on suppression but on non-attachment, a letting go of clinging to fleeting pleasures and aversions. Non-attachment does not mean indifference but a clear-eyed awareness that cravings are impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory.

This framework positions Buddhist psychology as a powerful guide for mental renewal in the digital age transforming distraction into discipline, craving into clarity and overwhelm into equanimity.

7. Cultural and Philosophical Reflections

As digital technology becomes ever more pervasive, Buddhist communities both monastic and lay are actively negotiating how to integrate these tools without sacrificing core principles of mindfulness and ethical conduct. This engagement raises important questions about the compatibility of modern life with ancient contemplative practices and opens space for innovative approaches such as “digital monasticism.”

7.1 Buddhist Monks and Laypeople Engaging with Technology Today

Buddhist monks traditionally live in monastic settings designed to minimize distractions and support intensive meditation. However, many now utilize digital technologies to teach, communicate and share the Dharma globally. For instance, live-streamed meditation sessions, online teachings and digital texts allow teachings to reach wider audiences than ever before.

7.2 Is Modern Life Inherently Incompatible with Mindfulness?

A common critique holds that the fast-paced, distraction-filled nature of modern life fundamentally conflicts with mindfulness, which requires sustained attention and quietude. While challenges are undeniable, Buddhist philosophy does not prescribe withdrawal from the world as the only path. Instead, it teaches skillful engagement being present and ethical within whatever circumstances arise. Mindfulness is not about eliminating all stimulation but cultivating awareness of how stimulation affects the mind. This means modern life need not be inherently incompatible with mindfulness, rather, it demands greater intentionality and discipline.

7.3 Digital Monasticism? New Models of Conscious Tech Use

Emerging practices sometimes called digital monasticism seek to apply monastic ideals of restraint and mindfulness to technology use. This may include scheduled “tech fasts,” setting boundaries on device use or adopting meditative approaches to interaction with digital content.

Some practitioners advocate for designing technology that aligns with Buddhist ethics promoting clarity, compassion and autonomy rather than exploitation. This aligns with broader movements for ethical tech development and digital well-being. In sum, the relationship between Buddhism and technology is dynamic and evolving. Rather than rejecting or blindly embracing digital tools, the path forward involves mindful integration using technology as a support for, rather than a distraction from mental clarity and ethical living.

Conclusion

Digital brain rot marked by fragmented attention, anxiety and dopamine-driven compulsions is more than a modern malaise; it is a symptom of a broader disconnection from mindful presence and authentic engagement. As technology reshapes our cognitive landscapes, the relentless stimulation and algorithmic manipulation threaten not only individual well-being but also the collective capacity for focus, reflection and ethical awareness. Buddhist teachings offer a timeless and deeply relevant response to this challenge. Rooted in profound insights into the nature of mind, suffering and liberation, Buddhism provides practical tools for cultivating mindfulness, ethical discernment and mental discipline.

The Noble Eightfold Path and concepts like non-attachment serve as frameworks for rewiring the mind in the digital age, fostering resilience against compulsive behaviors and restoring clarity. Simultaneously, emerging movements such as digital monasticism and ethical tech design reflect a growing awareness of the need for mindful integration of technology rather than wholesale rejection.

Looking forward, the future of attention and inner peace in a digital civilization depends on our capacity to consciously engage with technology while nurturing the ancient wisdom that fosters mental clarity and compassion. By blending Buddhist psychology with modern innovations, education and ethical frameworks, we can reclaim our attention as a precious resource not a commodity and cultivate an environment where technology supports, rather than erodes, human flourishing. Ultimately, the Buddhist path invites us to awaken not only from digital distraction but from the deeper ignorance that fuels it, opening the way toward lasting peace amidst the demands of a rapidly evolving world.

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