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I have an observation, and it is truly the human right of every soul on the planet, at this time in the Kali Yuga, to make observations and comment on them. Furthermore, it is the duty of concerned men and women to speak out on what they observe, to thus reaffirm the dharma. My observation is that learning from computers is taking youth in the opposite direction from sampradaya, the imparting of wisdom, person to person, heart to heart, mind to mind, teacher to student, guru to shishya. The teacher passes on not only information, but the mature refinements of attitude and behavior through personal guidance and healthy association.

People used to love and respect, honor and extol their teachers. They would compete in universities and colleges to study under a pundit or professor. Now you can get it all on a CD, or on the Internet, in the indifferent, calculating environment of cyberspace. People used to work to qualify to get into schools and vie to sit before an Einstein or Bose. Now they can buy advanced teachings on a CD or order it up freely on the World Wide Web. Maybe soon they will be able to download their diploma, to sign, frame and hang on the wall!

Prodigy, one of the largest producers of computer educational material, says that 300,000 of its two million online users are children. There they find encyclopedias, games, chat forums and interactive books and magazines, such as NOVA, National Geographicand more. There are several "homework helpers" that can access volumes of data at the click of a mouse. The Software Publisher's Association, a research group based in Washington, D.C., says the market for CD-ROM educational software is skyrocketing. For example, entranced before the computer, a child can explore every inch of an 18th century warship, displayed in cross-sectional views, meet the crew, study navigational tools and search for the young stowaway hidden somewhere in the hull. What's wrong with that?

I am not against computers. We have dozens of them in our monasteries. But the student learning predominantly from the computer is not endowed with or obligated to have human feelings anymore. The feelings of love and appreciation, respect and adulation, of thankfulness, acceptance and responsibility can all be suppressed or, worse, never developed in the formative years of life. Since the computer craze began eleven years ago, when Apple produced the Macintosh, I have observed the impact on youths of learning from computers rather than people. The outcome is a cool, calculating, almost robotic individual with a blank look in his eyes. He can just turn the computer off anytime and be the smartest one in the family. Does any human really yet know what registers in the objective and subjective mind of a youth being educated by the computer? Does anyone care?

A human teacher would know the student's state of mind and special gifts or needs, and society would guide him, for while

teaching English, French, German or any of the fourteen Indian languages, all the teacher's good qualities go into the student, enriching and blessing him, along with the experience the teacher has gained through the years. When the magic happens, a certain amount "rubs off," and a life is transformed. This is real education. This is training through sampradaya: people to people, heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul. This is how it used to be and how it still can be.

In a student-teacher relationship, the novice must deal directly with a human. Talk to a human. Be with a human and love or hate this human, as the case may be, depending on the student's evolution or spiritual development. But school classes, from the lower grades to the higher, are tending to rule out humans by replacing them with machines. Not just machines to write letters on, design buildings or do the many other things this remarkable technology can do, but machines of learning that do not have a heart, machines which the child has total control over, machines which parents and teachers sometimes use to subdue or occupy a child for hours, and thus simplify their duties. That's the big problem.

He can turn it on. He can turn it off. He can disagree with what is being taught or totally misunderstand, and no one would ever, ever know. These children are deprived of life's most precious gift, the passing down of knowledge--with respect and love for knowledge imparted--at certain psychological moments in a child's life. It is fulfillment gained in learning from a person with a heart yearning to fulfill dharma and pass on knowledge, and, most importantly, his knowing earned through experience. This can never, ever be programmed into any software on the Internet or a CD-ROM.

Moreover, the Information Highway is an uncensored, unsupervised world. In all previous methods of conveying knowledge to children, there was a responsible person involved, be it a teacher or librarian or parent. But the Internet's vast spectrum of information is equally available to every individual with access--at last count 35 million. Sadly, we are developing a generation--or two generations, for one is already started--of heartless children, deprived of love: an unhugging, cool, calculating generation. Where will it all lead? Perhaps our readers can ask their spiritual leaders for counsel and send it to me, in care of Hinduism Today. It is not too late to change the pattern. It is not too late if we make a move now. The young boy above sitting on my lap in Singapore was educated by humans, which explains the happy smile on his face.