One characteristic of humans is their unusual ability to develop new technologies that amplify behaviors. Widely used technologies include cars, computers, and cell phones, all of which speed up aspects of our lives. Such technologies confer many benefits through increased efficiency, convenience, and/or power in performing specific tasks. However, technologies often have hidden costs such as increased demands on our attention and increased multi-tasking. If attention is an important aspect of spiritual behaviors such as feelings of oneness with nature and/or other people, empathy, and creative kindness, then technologies can indirectly enhance or diminish an individual’s spirituality depending on how those technologies are used.

In sum, technology can influence attention, which can in turn influence spirituality. I would like to propose a multidisciplinary academic course that would explore these interconnections not only from the perspective of modern technologies, which in many cases overtax our attention, but also from the historical perspective of technologies that have been developed to enhance spiritual behaviors. I use the term “technology” very broadly to include the design of sacred places, meditative practices, and musical experiences that influence attention, and in turn influence spiritual behavior. I realize that the term “spiritual behavior” may have many different interpretations among the CSR community, but I welcome that diversity and the various insights it may offer. My intention is to include both formal religious practices as well as behaviors not associated with formal religions.

This proposal is for an academic course that (1) historically reviews broadly defined “technology” designed to enhance spiritual behaviors, (2) examines the indirect effects of older and modern technology on attention and in turn spiritual behaviors, and (3) encourages students to think about new technologies or modifications of existing technologies that might enhance attention and spiritual behavior. For example, temples and cathedrals were high tech when they were constructed. Augmented reality, i.e., superimposing virtual images and sounds on real world scenes, may permit creative combinations of new and old technology.

This course could be group taught and thereby serve as a way of introducing CSR faculty to a broader range of students from many different majors, who might not otherwise explore CSR course offerings. In his essay on “The two cultures,” C. P Snow was dismayed at the intellectual fragmentation of university culture. This proposed course might be a step toward greater integration. My hope is that CSR faculty might try out this proposal and see if it works for them. As an initial step, this topic could be a subsection of a course that I teach on “Technology, Efficiency, and Happiness,” which could then grow into a new course. Another first step might be a symposium involving faculty from multiple departments perhaps including psychology, design, and engineering along with the many departments traditionally associated with CSR.