

INSIGHTS

Mahayana Buddhist Perspective on AI⁺

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Introduction

In recent years, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) has raised profound ethical and philosophical questions about the nature of consciousness, intelligence, and the human mind. From a Buddhist perspective, which emphasizes understanding the mind, ethical conduct, compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness, there are unique insights to be gained. This essay explores the intersection of Buddhism and AI, posing four fundamental questions to guide our inquiry.

What is the Nature of Intelligence in Buddhism, and How Does It Relate to AI?

In Buddhist philosophy, intelligence is often defined in terms of wisdom (*prajna*) and understanding the nature of reality. *Prajna* is the ability to see things as they truly are, beyond surface appearances or misconceptions. It involves insight into the impermanent, interconnected, and ultimately unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena, known as the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, suffering, and non-self).

Intelligence, from a Buddhist perspective, is not merely about intellectual capacity or knowledge accumulation, but about the deeper understanding of the nature of reality and the cultivation of wisdom. It is the ability to discern the causes and effects of actions (*karma*), understand the workings of the mind, and perceive the true nature of phenomena as they arise and pass away.

In this context, intelligence is closely linked to ethical behavior and spiritual development. It is seen as a quality that leads to liberation (*nirvana*) from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) by overcoming ignorance and delusion.

AI, in its current form, lacks the qualities of self, consciousness, and the ability to experience karma and its effects, as emphasized in Buddhist teachings on non-self (*anatta*). Designed and programmed by humans, AI reflects the intentions and biases of its creators rather than possessing a permanent, unchanging self. Additionally, while AI can simulate learning and adaptation, it does not demonstrate the deeper understanding of impermanence and interconnectedness central to Buddhist teachings. AI's limitations suggest a misalignment with

core Buddhist concepts related to the nature of self, consciousness, impermanence, and interconnectedness.

How Does Buddhist Ethics Inform the Development and Use of AI?

Buddhism emphasizes several ethical principles that are relevant to discussions about AI, including compassion, non-harm (*ahimsa*), and interconnectedness. 1) Buddhism teaches the importance of compassion toward all beings, recognizing their inherent suffering and the desire to alleviate it. In the context of AI, compassion can be reflected in how AI technologies are developed and used. AI systems should be designed to benefit all sentient beings. 2) Ahimsa is the principle of non-violence and non-harming. In the context of AI, this principle suggests that AI should be used in ways that do not cause harm to sentient beings, including humans, animals, and the environment. 3) Buddhism teaches that all beings and phenomena are interconnected and interdependent. This principle highlights the importance of considering the broader implications of AI technologies. AI should be developed and used in ways that consider its impact on society, the environment, and the well-being of all beings. Hence, Buddhist ethics can provide valuable guidance for AI development to ensure that it benefits all beings and minimizes harm. 1) AI systems should be designed with compassion in mind, seeking to benefit all beings. This means considering the impact of AI on individuals, communities, and the environment, and designing AI systems that prioritize the well-being of all. 2) AI development should adhere to the principle of non-harm, ensuring that AI systems do not cause harm to sentient beings. This includes avoiding the use of AI in ways that could lead to discrimination, exploitation, or violence. 3) Recognizing the interconnected nature of all beings and phenomena, AI development should consider the broader implications of AI technologies. This includes considering the social, environmental, and ethical impact of AI, and designing AI systems that contribute positively to society and the world. 4) Practicing mindfulness and awareness can help AI developers and users remain conscious of the impact of AI on themselves and others, and used it in ways that are compassionate and beneficial to all beings.

Can AI Possess Consciousness or Be Considered Sentient From a Buddhist Perspective?

In Buddhism, consciousness (*Viññāna*) refers to one of the five aggregates for others (*skandhas*: form, feeling, perception and mental formation) that together make up sentient beings. It is the

mental process of recognizing and cognizing objects, including thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. Consciousness in Buddhism is considered to be dependently originated, meaning it arises in dependence on causes and conditions. It is not a permanent, unchanging entity but rather a dynamic process that is interconnected with other aggregates and conditioned phenomena. It is through consciousness that sentient beings perceive and interact with the world around them. AI, being a product of human design and lacking a biological basis for consciousness, does not fit this description.

However, according to Buddhist teachings, AI cannot possess consciousness or be considered sentient, as it lacks the fundamental qualities that define sentience in the Buddhist context. Therefore, AI cannot be morally responsible, but humans who possess consciousness are! Yet, the question of whether AI systems possess consciousness is still a contentious debate among scholars.

How Can Buddhist Teachings on Impermanence and Interconnectedness Influence Our Approach to AI?

Impermanence (*Anicca*) teaches that all phenomena, including AI, are subject to change. AI systems are constantly evolving and adapting based on new data feeding and programming, reflecting the impermanent nature of all things in the Buddhist worldview. Understanding *anicca* can help us approach AI with a sense of flexibility and openness, recognizing that AI technologies will continue to change and their use should be adapted to the wellbeing of people. The concept of interconnectedness, or *Pratityasamutpada*, in Buddhism teaches that all phenomena are interconnected and dependently originated. This ancient principle, originating over 2500 years ago, highlights the profound understanding of interdependence long before the digital age. It emphasizes that nothing exists independently or in isolation, but rather, everything is interconnected and arises in dependence on various causes and conditions. This understanding, deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, resonates with the modern concept of digital connectivity, illustrating a timeless truth about the nature of existence. This means that AI is not isolated but exists within a complex web of relationships with other beings. This interconnectedness implies that the development and use of AI should be guided by ethical considerations and an awareness of its impact on society and the environment. In sum, these two concepts remind us to approach AI with mindfulness and ethical awareness and that we

should cultivate a more compassionate and responsible approach to the development and use of AI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Buddhist perspective on AI offers profound insights into intelligence, ethics, consciousness, and impermanence. By considering these insights, we can cultivate a more mindful and compassionate approach to developing and using AI, ensuring it aligns with human values and promotes the well-being of all beings. When crafting policies for global governance, it is important to incorporate these Buddhist principles to ensure that breakthrough technologies, including AI, are designed with inclusivity and sustainability in mind, ultimately promoting human well-being and the well-being of the planet.

**References available upon request*

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