SPEECHES & ADDRESSES

Rethinking Intelligence:

From Descartes' Thought to Eastern Wisdom

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KSI World Digital Economy & Technology Summit, 30 May 2025, Bangkok

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Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, and fellow architects of the digital age,

It is a profound honor to address you today at this summit dedicated to shaping the future of a sustainable digital economy. As we gather to explore how artificial intelligence is transforming business and society, I invite you to pause and reflect with me on a deeper question:

What does it mean to be intelligent?

For too long, we have been guided—some would say confined—by the Cartesian paradigm: "Cogito, ergo sum" — "I think, therefore I am." Intelligence, under this view, is abstract, disembodied, and individualistic. It favors calculation over compassion, precision over perspective, and control over context.

But in our rapidly evolving AI age, this narrow frame no longer serves us.

We are now challenged to rethink intelligence—not as a capacity for isolated reasoning, but as a way of being in the world.

Eastern wisdom traditions offer profound insights:

- From Buddhism, we learn "paññā," or wisdom, arises not merely from thought but from mindfulness, ethical conduct, and interdependence. Intelligence is relational. It is grounded in "sati"—awareness—and "karuṇā"—compassion.

- From Confucianism, intelligence is inseparable from virtue. The "junzi," or noble person, leads not with dominance but with moral example. Knowledge is incomplete without "ren"—humaneness—and "li"—ritual propriety.

These traditions remind us: "We behave, therefore we are."

Our intelligence manifests through our behavior, our relationships, and our responsibilities.

What does this mean for AI and our digital future?

It means moving beyond machine learning models that optimize for engagement or profit.

It means designing systems that reflect the values we wish to live by:

- Compassion, not just competition
- Transparency, not just throughput
- Wisdom, not just intelligence

If AI is to serve society—not replace it—it must be built upon a foundation of ethical interdependence, what I call "relational intelligence".

Let me frame this through a model familiar to many: the DIKW pyramid—Data, Information, Knowledge, Wisdom.

- In general, the West has excelled in mastering the bottom of the pyramid—data collection and information processing.
- The East, particularly through traditions like Buddhism and Daoism, emphasizes the top—wisdom as "lived insight," not just accumulated knowledge.

If data is the fuel of AI, then wisdom must be its compass.

We must climb the DIKW pyramid not with speed alone, but with direction, depth, and dignity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this 4th industrial revolution, we are not merely creating smarter machines. We are defining the character of our civilization.

Let us not train AI to think like us—let us train ourselves to think more wisely about AI.

Let us inspire ASEAN, and the world, with the courage to blend technological advancement with ethical grounding, and the humility to recognize that true intelligence lies not in thinking more—but in living better.

That is the path to a dignified digital future.

Before closing this wonderful summit, allow me to share a few take home messages:

- Technology must serve humanity, not the other way around.
- Digital transformation is a moral choice, not just a technical one.
- A borderless digital ASEAN must be bound by shared values, not just shared protocols.
- We must not only build smart machines—but raise wise humans.
- The future of intelligence lies at the intersection of Descartes' reason, Confucius' virtue, and the Buddha's compassion.