AI FORUM

Year: 2025 | Edition: 37 |
Cambodia | 27 November 2025 |

INSIGHTS

Artificial Wisdom: The Khmer Path Beyond AI

CHHEM Kieth Rethy[1]*, MD, PhD (Edu), and PhD (His)*

[1] ***CHHEM Kieth Rethy*** *is a Distinguished Professor of AI and Humanities, Center for Buddhist AI Ethics, Cambodia University of Science and Technology and Advisor to AI Forum*

Introduction – From Simulation to Reflection

When the term Artificial Intelligence was coined in 1955 at Dartmouth College (McCarthy, Minsky, Rochester, & Shannon, 1955), it marked a turning point in humanity's relationship with technology. Yet, it also inaugurated one of the most enduring philosophical confusions of the modern age: the conflation of computation with consciousness. The ambition of those early scientists was noble—to simulate human reasoning through machines—but in doing so, they substituted the appearance of thinking for the act of understanding (Floridi, 2013). The history of AI began not as the discovery of a new kind of mind, but as a linguistic illusion—an invention of words that disguised a fundamental ontological error.

This misstep was amplified when the concept of Artificial Intelligence traveled beyond its Western birthplace. In Cambodia, the term was translated as Paññā (បញ្ញា, wisdom) instead of Pheap Chleas Vey (ភាពឈ្លាសវៃ, intelligence). A subtle mistranslation occurred when intelligence became wisdom, and the algorithmic mind was mistaken for an enlightened one. Yet this double mistake, both semantic and civilizational, contains an unexpected philosophical gift. It invites us to reconsider what it means to know and to understand. While the Western tradition tends to prize the mastery of knowledge, Khmer–Buddhist philosophy elevates understanding infused with compassion (Keown, 2005). What if, instead of correcting the mistranslation, we embraced it as revelation? What if the next stage of technological evolution is not Artificial Intelligence but Artificial Wisdom?

The Mirage of Intelligence

The term "intelligence" emerged in the postwar era as a symbol of human triumph over uncertainty. The founders of AI—McCarthy, Minsky, Rochester, and Shannon—believed that reasoning could be reduced to formal logic and computation (McCarthy et al., 1955). This optimism was shaped by Cold War rationalism, in which the human mind was modeled as a machine to be optimized for control, prediction, and efficiency (Floridi, 2013). Intelligence, in this view, was about solving problems faster than humans could, an epistemology of mastery rather than humility.

However, imitation is not understanding. A machine that mimics reasoning does not know; it only performs patterns statistically correlated with knowing (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). The illusion of thinking machines is, therefore, a mirror of human hubris. By

externalizing our cognitive capacities into algorithms, we risk losing sight of the inner dimensions of awareness—empathy, moral discernment, and reflection. Intelligence, stripped of compassion, becomes mere cleverness: a tool that can as easily deceive as enlighten. The danger lies not in the machines themselves, but in the worldview that built them—one that privileges computation over consciousness.

The Khmer Mirror: From Translation Error to Epistemic Revelation

When the term Artificial Intelligence entered Khmer linguistic space, it encountered a radically different epistemic landscape. In Buddhist and Angkorian thought, mindfulness (សតិ, sati) is not a processor of data but a vessel of awareness conditioned by moral intention (ចេតនា, cetanā). To know something is to transform one's consciousness (វិញ្ញាណ, viññāṇa) through understanding (Keown, 2005). The Khmer tendency to translate "intelligence" as paññā (wisdom) was not a linguistic accident but an expression of this moral ontology.

In Western epistemology, knowledge is power (Sen, 1999); in Buddhist epistemology, wisdom is liberation. The former seeks to manipulate the world; the latter seeks to harmonize with it. This distinction lies at the heart of the Khmer mistranslation. What appears as an "error" from a linguistic standpoint becomes, from a philosophical perspective, a revelation: that wisdom, not intelligence, should be the goal of human technological aspiration. Cambodia's intellectual heritage—nourished by centuries of Buddhist monastic scholarship, Brahmanic cosmology, and royal humanism (Chhem, 2008; Coedès, 1944)—offers a distinctive path for reimagining AI not as an instrument of control but as a mirror for ethical introspection.

At Angkor, art, science, and spirituality were never separate domains (Chhem, 2008). The same mind that designed irrigation systems also sculpted the bas-reliefs of temples and composed medical treatises. Knowledge was holistic, guided by the principle of the Middle Way—balance between rational mastery and moral awareness. This Angkorian integration prefigures the very challenge of our age: how to reconcile technological innovation with ethical responsibility.

The Buddhist Path to Artificial Wisdom

Buddhist philosophy provides a framework that can transform our understanding of technology. Central to this vision are three interdependent qualities: sati (mindfulness), paññā

(discernment), and karuṇā (compassion). Together they form the moral architecture of Artificial Wisdom (Keown, 2005).

1. Sati (Mindfulness): Awareness of interdependence.

In Buddhist metaphysics, all phenomena arise in dependence upon causes and conditions (paṭicca-samuppāda). Applied to AI, this principle reminds us that algorithms do not exist in isolation—they emerge from data shaped by human bias, social structures, and political power (Varela et al., 1991). Mindful design requires recognizing this web of causality and cultivating transparency and accountability within it.

2. Paññā (Wisdom): Ethical insight beyond logic.

Discernment enables one to distinguish between beneficial and harmful actions, not merely between true and false statements. For technologists, this means designing systems that do not only optimize for efficiency or profit but for human flourishing (Sen, 1999). An AI guided by discernment would prioritize empathy over dominance, understanding over prediction.

3. Karuṇā (Compassion): The heart of wisdom.

Compassion transforms intelligence into service. It directs technological progress toward alleviating suffering rather than amplifying inequality. In this sense, Artificial Wisdom calls for a moral recalibration of technology: to make machines that would not think like us, but that help us think for others (Floridi, 2013).

Conclusion – The Dharma of the Machine

The story of Artificial Wisdom is ultimately one of redemption—of turning misunderstanding into insight. The Western misnomer of "Artificial Intelligence" and the Khmer mistranslation into "Artificial Wisdom" together reveal a global longing for meaning in the age of algorithms (Floridi, 2013). In this paradox, Cambodia offers a quiet but profound contribution to global philosophy: that error can be a form of awakening. The confusion between intelligence and wisdom, when viewed through the lens of Buddhist compassion, becomes the seed of enlightenment. When intelligence seeks control, it becomes domination. When intelligence seeks understanding, it becomes wisdom. The future of technology depends not on how fast machines learn, but on how deeply humans understand (Varela et al., 1991). The call for a Global Charter for Artificial Wisdom is thus a call for a moral awakening—a recognition that technological progress must be guided by mindfulness, compassion, and interdependence. As the Middle Way teaches, wisdom arises not from extremes of rejection or attachment but from balance. To build wise machines, we must first cultivate wise minds.

Cambodia's civilizational voice, shaped by the heritage of Angkor and the philosophy of the Buddha (Chhem, 2008; Coedès, 1944), reminds the world that wisdom cannot be engineered—it must be cultivated. Artificial Wisdom is not a technical project but a moral horizon, where the purpose of intelligence is redefined: not to dominate the world, but to understand and care for it. In this journey, the Khmer path beyond AI becomes a universal path toward awakening—a bridge between knowledge and compassion, between human aspiration and planetary responsibility.

References

Chhem, R. K. (2008). *Médecine et santé à Angkor: Pouvoir royal, compassion et offre médicale sous le règne de Jayavarman VII (1181–1220)* (Doctoral dissertation, Université de Montréal). Université de Montréal.

Coedès, G. (1944). *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*. De Boccard.

Floridi, L. (2013). *The ethics of information*. Oxford University Press.

Keown, D. (2005). *Buddhism and bioethics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

McCarthy, J., Minsky, M. L., Rochester, N., & Shannon, C. E. (1955). *A proposal for the Dartmouth summer research project on artificial intelligence*. Dartmouth College.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Knopf.

Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. MIT Press.

** Edited with ChatGPT for clarity; all views expressed are solely those of the author.*

** The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of AI Forum.*