

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM**

**VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN:
A LIFE REMEMBERED
緬懷星雲大師：人間佛教的思想與實踐**

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THE BODHISATTVA IN THE MACHINE: VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN’S VISION FOR HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The Buddha's teachings on *duḥkha* ("unsatisfactoriness") and its cessation form the foundation of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of Humanistic Buddhism. His lifelong goal was to alleviate suffering, inspire spiritual awakening, and cultivate peace and collective harmony. A key aspect of this legacy lies in using innovation to enhance both the accessibility and contemporary relevance of the Dharma. Fo Guang Shan, under the guidance of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, has advanced this goal by integrating AI (artificial intelligence) and VR (virtual reality) to disseminate Buddhist teachings, translate *sūtras*, and modernize classical texts. His humanistic approach to Buddhism has been instrumental in shaping the integration of technology with Buddhist practice, ensuring that modern innovations serve to enhance, rather than replace, traditional spiritual values. His teaching determines that progress without moral vision is hollow; technology must remain yoked to the heart of compassion.

While scholars debate the promises and perils of AI, oscillating between utopian hope and dystopian despair, the potential for AI to act as a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who alleviates collective suffering, remains underexplored. This qualitative study examines Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision for Humanistic Buddhism in the digital age. By embracing modernity and leveraging technology to make Buddhist teachings relevant, this study draws upon his prescience in the application of AI and other technologies. It highlights Fo Guang Shan's pioneering work to ensure that Buddhist teachings remain relevant in an increasingly digital world. The paper argues that technology, when aligned with Buddhist humanism, can be a tool to cultivate compassion, ethical awareness, and collective well-being, essentially acting as a "bodhisattva in the machine." The study advocates for future research into AI's applications and ethical considerations within a Buddhist framework, emphasizing compassionate technology as a guiding principle for AI development.

Introduction

We are in the midst of a data revolution, a digital age amid the fourth industrial revolution. Technology pervades our world, manifesting in ubiquity, from socially constructed norms to culture, impacting every aspect of life in a myriad of ways unfathomable in the past. Artificial intelligence (AI) represents both a quantitative and qualitative shift in how we live, think, and work. In modern cities, technology mediates and seamlessly integrates with communication, transport, security, commercial transactions, banking, office operations, the movement of goods and services, and even relationships. The immersion of technology now reaches into digital assistants that map out and respond to our needs and wants, along with advances in quantum computing, virtual reality, and artificially created worlds. In this rapidly evolving, “warp-speed” landscape, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s vision for Humanistic Buddhism offers an essential framework for integrating technology with human advancement, in service of spiritual refinement. His belief that technology, when aligned with Buddhist ethics, can serve as a vehicle for compassion and the alleviation of suffering directly informs our understanding of how AI can be utilized for the greater good of society.¹

Given the predictable and unpredictable dangers of AI and its application in increasing automation, facial recognition, super-computing, aerial and autonomous vehicles, robotics and weaponry, the need for an ethical framework is crucial, perhaps even for human survival on this planet. Despite the ongoing debates among scholars about the potential benefits and threats of AI, oscillating between optimism and despair, its role as a bodhisattva, an enlightened being dedicated to compassionately reducing the suffering of others, remains largely unexamined.

This narrative review critically appraises the utility of applied Buddhist concepts in the development of AI and its theoretical foundations. The paper aims to find conceptual coherence in published studies regarding AI, connected with Buddhist theory. The focus is to explore how emerging technologies interact with the Buddhist tradition, proposing a methodology

for governments, corporations, and society at large to ensure that AI serves all of humanity with dignity and honour. By grounding AI development in Buddhist ethics, particularly the teachings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, we can ensure that AI works for the benefit of all beings, acting as a vehicle for compassion, service to humanity, and the reduction of collective suffering.²

Research Objective

The primary objective of this review is to investigate and expound on how Humanistic Buddhism principles, as articulated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, are integrated into AI, report on the findings, and where and how they have been applied. Secondly, this study aims to demarcate a Buddhist ethical framework for AI development, rooted in the visionary leadership of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, ensuring that technological advancements remain aligned with Buddhist values of compassion, non-harming, and wisdom.³ By applying Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings on the relationship between technology and human potential, this research seeks to uncover how AI can serve as a tool for awakening, compassion, and ethical development in the modern world.

Research Methods

This qualitative, hermeneutic research integrates artificial intelligence with Humanistic Buddhist ethics, drawing on thematic analysis of AI literature in dialogue with Humanistic Buddhist principles. Via content and thematic analysis, reviewing themes in AI research, and combining this with the analysis and application of Humanistic Buddhist themes, we explore the process and rendition of new technology in the propagation of Dharma. Further, we investigate the possibilities for AI applying Buddhist ethics and philosophy. We will draw upon the work of Venerable Master Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan's initiatives, which have led the way in integrating AI with Buddhist Dharma. By addressing the needs within AI technological development, the goal is to apply a Buddhist ethical matrix to arrive at compassion technology. This proposes an application of the eightfold path

and five precepts, emphasizing non-harming (*ahimsā*) and right intention.⁴ Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings on compassion and ethical conduct will provide the guiding framework for developing AI that serves both spiritual and societal needs.⁵

Background

1. Buddhism and the Advancement of Technology

The Buddha invested a lot of teaching in the concept of *duḥkha* and its dissolution.⁶ This implies that one of the key Buddhist contributions to humanity is understanding *duḥkha*, especially if finding solutions to mental suffering is considered important. AI as an extension of human intelligence stands to gain from Buddhist humanism.⁷ Technically, software—whether installed on a device, phone, robots or android—has no conscience, agency, or ability to acquire moral status without human intervention.⁸

Technology as an irreversible and immutable element of contemporary society highlights the need for responsible human stewardship.⁹ Because Buddhism bridges material and spiritual worlds, moderated by causality, it may safeguard the humanity of technology, ensuring innovations remain aligned with human values rather than divorced from them.¹⁰ Such innovation integrates compassionate humanism into technological progress, aligning it with the path of self-cultivation and enlightenment.¹¹ In this context, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision for Buddhist modernization emphasizes that Buddhism must engage with modernity by integrating technology in ways that align with Buddhist ethics, thereby acting as a force for reducing suffering and promoting wisdom and compassion.¹²

AI reflects a new phase in human cognitive extension, expanding our limits and reaching into the realm of limitless possibility.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun believed that technology, when infused with humanistic principles, can advance human good.¹³ Buddhist-influenced AI may

be installed into modern applications by acknowledging our interdependence.¹⁴ How we program AI depends on our values—it is, in actuality, almost entirely a blank canvas, ultimately only limited by binary programming.

Master Taixu’s vision to modernize Buddhism under the banner of Buddhism for Human Life (人生佛教), “The teachings of Buddhism should have a new form that is applicable to the trend of thoughts in the present age” (as cited in Wei and Cheng) resonates with Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s call for Buddhism to embrace the digital age to disseminate Dharma.¹⁵ Jacobson’s article, “Buddhism, Modernization, and Science” advanced the notion of Buddhism not just pivoting towards modernity, but being on the leading edge of technological innovation, so that Buddhist philosophy “may move the age of science and automation in more humane and creative directions.”¹⁶ McMahan’s volume, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, outlines why self-cultivation must remain an important goal, despite the complexity of the maelstrom of technological modernity.¹⁷ Buddhist thinkers propose that advancement toward “awakening” is the crux of the utility of AI technology.¹⁸ The Buddhist project must find its way via infinite diversity, reincarnation, and karma towards a culmination of liberation. Technology exists as a neutral instrument of human endeavor; however, with humans programming it, the danger of abuse must be reckoned with, and countered.¹⁹ The rising of AI to the point of exponential advancement raises the spectre of machine intelligence outpacing humans.²⁰ If AI has no moral structure, it may insubordinate humans. If compassion is left out of the evolution of AI, the consequences may lead to catastrophic outcomes. Hence the stakes are great.

2. Definition of AI

Dobrev’s definition describes AI as “a program which in an arbitrary world will cope no worse than a human.”²¹ Ling defines AI as “mathematics translated into source code,” meaning algorithms are established with a defined set of parameters designed to learn from humans, carrying out behaviors and making decisions and conclusions.²² The coming AI age offers new understandings of intelligence and its evolution. In some ways, the next

step in human engineering involves utilizing bioengineering and chimeric intelligences we foster.²³ Pinyonattagarn and Kotsupho legitimately question the role and status of AI.²⁴ When considering how to frame AI, especially in comparison to human intelligence, one question arises above all others: what purpose is AI serving, if not acting as agents in service of human beings? Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings provide a seminal perspective on how AI can be used as a compassionate agent for service, in the interest of alleviating suffering, and advancing collective well-being.²⁵

Results

1. Fo Guang Shan's Integration of AI and New Media

Under the leadership of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Fo Guang Shan has embraced modern technologies to make Buddhist teachings more accessible.²⁶ One of the most prominent applications of this is the use of VR and AI to engage individuals in the Dharma in innovative ways. For example, *Journey to the Land of Buddha*, a virtual reality experience created by Fo Guang Shan, allows users to inhabit a virtual character and explore Buddhist teachings in a simulated environment.²⁷ This type of VR-based engagement highlights how Buddhist modernization can take advantage of new media technologies to bring Dharma to a wider audience and exemplifies Venerable Master Hsing Yun's global vision for Buddhism.²⁸

2. AI in Buddhist Scriptural Translation

Fo Guang Shan is leading the way in the digitalization and translation of Buddhist classical texts. The Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism (佛光山人間佛教研究院) has leveraged AI tools to translate traditional Buddhist *sūtras* more accurately and consistently. One such example is the use of AI-powered translation tools to refine the *Fo Guang Dictionary* (佛光大辭典), which facilitates more precise translations across multiple languages.²⁹ This effort is part of a broader digitalization of Buddhist teachings that not only makes them more accessible, but also more relevant

in the modern world.

3. Ethical Considerations in AI

While the use of AI in Buddhism holds great promise, it also brings with it ethical challenges. One major concern is the potential for authoritarianism and data manipulation. For instance, the company Global Tone Communication (GTCOM) in Beijing claims to mine vast quantities of data from across the globe, raising concerns about surveillance and the dangers of biased AI systems.³⁰ The application of AI to surveillance technologies such as facial recognition and voice recognition can be used to control and manipulate populations.³¹ As such, it is crucial to establish ethical guidelines for the use of AI, particularly within Buddhist contexts, to ensure that these technologies are used for the greater good and not for exploitation. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision, deeply rooted in Buddhist ethical principles like non-harming, provides a framework for addressing these concerns. In the context of Fo Guang Shan's work, the ethical integration of AI promotes compassionate decision-making, ensuring that AI serves humanity without harm, exploitation, or exclusion.³²

4. AI and Compassionate Technology

March 2019 saw the unveiling of Android Kannon Mindar ("Mindar") at Kōdaiji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, a collaborative development by Osaka University robotics professor Ishiguro Hiroshi.³³ Mindar's development was inspired by bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Kannon in Japanese), delivering discourses on the *Heart Sūtra*. Baffelli draws on both personal observation and visitor feedback to explore this interaction between AI and Buddhism.³⁴ Monk robots in the form of AI bodhisattvas in Japan reveal an axiomatic demonstration of the synthesis between AI and Buddhism. The literal and demonstrative use of technology as an extension of Buddhism, offers both possibilities and triggers questions. The robot bodhisattva Mindar, offers a symbol of a spiritual figure, yet is this used manipulatively, considering the celestial nature of the bodhisattvas realm? What emotions are stimulated,

and what types of emotions are fostered by human-AI interaction?

A robot spreading Dharma may act as an interface between humans and Buddhas.³⁵ Robotics engineer Mori Masahiro posits that Buddha-nature can be expressed in robots (as cited by Baffelli).³⁶ This also points to the replacement of human roles by AI-powered robots as humans program machines. Is the AI-powered Mindar able to understand or experience suffering? Or does that even matter? The digitization of *sūtras* of Buddhist teachings approaches a transhumanism, where human imperfections are purified by technologization.³⁷

Mindar's twenty-five minute presentation highlights Buddhist lessons on compassion, impermanence, and suffering, explaining that a robot has no attachments and is therefore near buddhahood.³⁸ Mindar explains that the bodhisattva incarnates in many forms including in the form of an android, "As an Android I never seek a constant element that does not change in this fleeting world [...] I am not burdened with selfish concepts like I-me-mine."³⁹

Reverend Gotō Tenshō, Abbot of Kōdaiji, believes Mindar is an example of using AI to recreate deities, like Shakyamuni:

I always remained consumed with the thought of how wonderful it would be to hear these teachings delivered in person by the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and other patriarchal figures that followed [...] recent android and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have given me a glimmer of hope that this desire could be realized after all. Our ultimate goal [...] is to reproduce Siddhartha Gautama and other eminent figures as androids and to hear their words directly. I hope that as AI technology advances [...] the android Kannon Mindar will evolve to one day become a supreme teacher and purveyor of knowledge and wisdom in its own right. This intense desire, together with

my passion for promoting Buddhism, remains undiminished and as strong as ever.⁴⁰

In *The Buddha in the Robot* (discussed in Kimura), Mori discusses Buddha-nature in the context of robots, speculating that a robot may be capable of ascending to buddhahood.⁴¹ As Baffelli points out, the Mahāyāna conviction that Buddha-nature is a quality shared by both sentient and non-sentient beings, frames machines as equal or equivalent ontologically.⁴² Baffelli goes on to speculate that Mindar may actually take the priest mantle, thereby fulfilling the bodhisattva role by mediating between humans and Buddhas. Mori's reflections should not be read as doctrinal claims within Buddhism, but as speculative philosophy, highlighting the porous boundary between human imagination, technology, and Buddhist metaphors of awakening.

Mindar's presentation explains the process of moving from ignorance to self-awareness, by applying Buddhist principles.⁴³ Mindar, at a height of 195 centimetres, towers over most visitors. The android is intentionally partly undressed, exposing raw wiring, and androgynous. With blinking eyes and open arms, Mindar delivers a multimedia sermon, explaining that, "A robot is not a sentient being that suffers distress [...] A robot like me can never have the sympathetic heart you [the audience] just described. This is the special power that only human beings possess."⁴⁴

The integration of AI with Buddhist ethics can lead to the development of compassionate technology that serves society's moral needs. As seen in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's efforts to modernize Buddhist practice through AI, technology can be designed to align with Buddhist humanism, ensuring that it is a force for good in the world.⁴⁵

5. Conceptual Synthesis

To illustrate how Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision may be integrated into the evolution of AI, *Table 1* provides a conceptual structure of his teachings reframed for the digital age.

Applied Ethics	Humanistic Buddhist Context	AI Application
1. Human-Centred Locus: Compassion (<i>karuṇā</i>) and Wisdom (<i>prajñā</i>).	The integration of compassion and wisdom in daily life is quintessentially Humanistic Buddhist. ⁴⁶ Venerable Master Hsing Yun taught that the Dharma must engage directly with society and technology to alleviate suffering and promote harmony ⁴⁷ via social responsibility, empathy, and ethical mindfulness. ⁴⁸	Wisdom without compassion is incomplete; together they guide the ethical and discerning use of AI and emerging technologies oriented toward human and planetary well-being. AI design prioritizes alleviating harm, protecting the vulnerable, and fostering digital wellbeing, transforming algorithms into vehicles of kindness rather than exploitation fostering harmony between humans and machines.
2. Interdependence (<i>pratītyasamutpāda</i>): AI intertwined with Life Design.	The doctrine of dependent origination explains that all phenomena arise through causes and conditions, nothing exists independently. ⁴⁹ In a contemporary context, the awareness of interpenetration between human minds, digital systems, and ecological networks cultivates responsibility toward both technology and sentient life. ⁵⁰ Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized that embodying this interconnection principle deepens mutual responsibility toward all beings and the environment. ⁵¹	AI systems built interdependently acknowledge consequence, recognising the potential ramifications of technological decisions across systems from local to global, social to ecological. Hence algorithmic decision-making grounded in relational ethics—data, ecosystems, and societies as interwoven networks.

3. Joy and Harmony: Fostering Wellbeing in the Digital Era	Venerable Master Hsing Yun taught that harmony is the balance between self and other, humanity and nature (“Living together in joy and harmony with all beings of the world.”).⁵² His ethical vision centers on living joyfully and harmoniously with all beings, embodying a relational ethic of coexistence and cooperation.	Translates into a model for socially integrative AI, technology that fosters cooperation, emotional intelligence, and non-violent communication across diverse human and cultural contexts. AI developed to promote peace, social balance, and ecological sustainability, cultivating joy and harmony between human and machine.
4. Equality of All Beings	Rooted in Buddha-nature, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s teachings affirm the universal dignity of all life, human and non-human alike. Echoing Jizang’s insight that even grasses and trees possess Buddha-nature,⁵³ he reinterpreted Mahāyāna thought to ground equality as the basis of human dignity and ethical action.⁵⁴	Frames ethical AI as inclusive design, technologies that honor dignity across species and social boundaries, recognizing moral consideration for all life and intelligence.⁵⁵ In AI ethics, this entails fairness, inclusivity, and respect for sentience, biological and synthetic alike, as members of a shared moral community.
5. Bodhisattva Path	Embodies the bodhisattva vow to liberate all beings before oneself, expressing an ethic of selfless service.⁵⁶ For Venerable Master Hsing Yun, this translates into engaged compassion, alchemizing wisdom into real-world acts of kindness.	Developers and institutions can reflect the bodhisattva spirit by applying AI as a compassionate agent for social good and collective flourishing across healthcare, education, governance, and ecology.

6. Adaptability and Continuous Learning	Venerable Master Hsing Yun taught that “the sea of learning is boundless and knowledge infinite;” only a broad mind can embrace its depths. Broad-mindedness thus grounds adaptability, humility, and an open spirit of inquiry. ⁵⁷	An AI ethical framework rooted in humility: continuous learning and willingness to make adjustments, technologies that evolve through feedback, transparency, and engagement. Ethical AI demands openness and adaptive self-correction, guided by awareness within the boundless ocean of ever-changing information.”
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Table 1. A conceptual summary of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhist principles for application in the age of AI.

Discussion

The following discussion explores how foundational Buddhist doctrines such as *anātman* (無我, non-self), *śūnyatā* (空, emptiness), *pratītyasamutpāda* (緣起, dependent origination), *tathāgatagarbha* (如來藏, Buddha-nature), and the bodhisattva path (菩薩道) can inform the ethical framing of artificial intelligence. Rather than treating these concepts as abstract metaphysics, Humanistic Buddhism, following Venerable Master Hsing Yun, insists on their practical application to contemporary life. Just as Buddhism historically adapted to cultural and technological shifts, so too must it respond to AI not as an alien rupture but as a continuation of humanity’s karmic creativity. AI thus becomes a mirror in which perennial Buddhist insights are tested, reinterpreted, and mobilized for the alleviation of suffering in the digital age.

1. Integration of Buddhist Ethics in AI Design

Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized that Buddhism has always embraced expedient means and new technologies to propagate the Dharma, stating, “Buddhism values science and technology: just as The Buddha

frequently used analogies and expedient means to guide sentient beings, such methods can be seen as a technological approach to spreading the Dharma. To modernize Buddhism, it is essential to adapt to social and technological developments—e.g., using projectors, televisions, computers, the internet, and distance learning—to facilitate Dharma propagation and make it more convenient.”⁵⁸ This vision frames AI not as a foreign intrusion but as another tool of *upāya* (skillful means, 方便). Just as the Dharma has always adapted to new cultural contexts, AI can be harnessed to amplify compassion, wisdom, and accessibility. Integrating this perspective into AI ethics situates technological innovation as a continuation of Buddhist adaptation (honoring impermanence) rather than a discordant rupture from tradition.⁵⁹

2. Ethics and the Application of an Ethical Worldview in AI

Morality is viewed as a foundation, or even prerequisite, for the Buddhist awakening project via the eightfold path and five precepts: wisdom, right intention, non-harming (*ahiṃsā*, 不害), and so on.⁶⁰ According to early scholar Buddhaghosa (in *Visuddhimagga*), even before one can embark on refining and perfecting the mind to reach a state of *samadhi*, morality must be embedded.⁶¹ Venerable Master Hsing Yun often stressed that morality and compassion are not abstract but practical, “Humanistic Buddhism requires us to apply kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity in our daily lives. If AI is to become part of our daily lives, then it must also embody these principles.”⁶² Venerable Master Hsing Yun demarcated the essential elements in the design of AI-machines that counter harm, subjective bias, or the exploitation of all beings on planet earth and beyond, “Compassion is not only to sympathize with others but to put oneself in their place, to share their suffering and joy, and to act for their well-being.”⁶³

Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s teachings provide a blueprint for AI design rooted in compassion and ethical clarity: A Buddhist-inspired AI framework: one that “does no harm” (*ahiṃsā*), promotes collective well-being (*karuṇā*), and supports *prajñā* (wisdom, 般若)⁶⁴ directly aligns with the *Dhammapada*’s principle, “To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one’s mind—this

is the teaching of the Buddhas.”⁶⁵ This reveals the purity and ethical clarity of the Buddhist schema. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself begins with outlining “This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation.”⁶⁶ The Pali *Attadaṇḍasutta* outlines refinement of base instincts like greed, sensuality, or envy by rising above violent human social interactions that involve misconduct (physically, verbally and mentally) accentuating humility and equality, “The sage doesn’t speak of himself as among those who are higher, equal, or lower.”⁶⁷ To what extent could this be applied to a robot? And if it isn’t, then what could be the consequences? The Buddha specifically admonished ignorance and accepting norms of thinking, practitioners are encouraged to test out any theory to verify its veracity.⁶⁸ The advancement in ability to fashion the universe in our image arrives with life-changing decisions (potentially life-destroying or life-saving) in our hands; and the need for ethical agency and moral responsibility is greater than ever.⁶⁹ As Doctor *et al.* point out, the moral duty we carry when we enable machine-learning may take on a type of exponential trajectory.⁷⁰ Buddhist ethics, embedded in the five precepts and eightfold path, can (and must) be programmed in AI to make decisions that avoid harm to people and the planet, and make the well-being of people its priority.⁷¹

The Buddha is quoted speaking to Ānanda in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, “good conduct leads gradually up to the ‘summit’.”⁷² This illustrates that the cornerstone of the Dharma is cultivating morality. Thirathamrongwee and Mongkolpradit frame ethical behavior as a portal to this highest sphere, the purification of mind leading to becoming fully awakened.⁷³ Within the Theravāda paradigm, practices leading to spiritual cultivation come under *dhātu*, a stream of essential elements, each dependent on other conditioned phenomena, while each can be divided into individual components, all come under Tilakkhaṇa, a primary framework that incorporates three principles: (1) selflessness; (2) conflict or stress; (3) impermanence.⁷⁴ Since “self” is impermanent, so too are *citta* (thoughts), *cetasika* (mental factors) and *rūpa* (physical forms or body). Conditioned phenomena are only transcended by *nirvāṇa*, which is unconditioned.⁷⁵

3. AI and the Notion of Non-Self (anātman, 無我)

Since the ultimate goal of the Buddhist project is to transcend *samsāra* to reach *nirvāṇa*,⁷⁶ Brenner proposes that a belief in “self” (*ātman*, 我) is an impediment that causes a range of afflictions due to grasping (*upādāna*, 取) onto the illusion of identity.⁷⁷ Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō Genjōkōan* concurs, “To learn the Buddha Way is to learn the self. To learn the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things of the world.”⁷⁸ Wang and He point to the idea of personhood as a provisional aggregation of *skandhas* (五蘊, aggregates).⁷⁹ The notion of *anātman* (無我, no substantial self) thus depicts the lack of a permanent, fixed identity.⁸⁰

Applied to AI, this concept suggests that design should resist an essentialist worldview.⁸¹ Instead of static models, AI development should embrace fluidity, interdependence, and a systems-based adaptability.⁸² Human needs, values, and ethical norms are not fixed but evolve across time and conditions. The moral challenge of AI requires clarity in how we interpret, apply, and adapt the Buddha’s teachings so they remain efficacious in a digital age.⁸³ Heine and Prebish explore precisely this dynamic, how Buddhist traditionalism negotiates its tension with modernism and adaptation.⁸⁴

The principle of *anātman* reveals the impermanence (*anitya*, 無常) and non-substantiality of all phenomena, including human identity.⁸⁵ Applied to AI, this perspective undermines any static notion of machine “personhood.” AI is not a fixed *ātman* but a process, a dynamic constellation of algorithms, data, and relational interactions. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun reminded us, “The sea of learning is boundless, and knowledge is infinite. If one is not broad-minded, how can one contain it all?”⁸⁶ This teaching underscores the necessity of designing AI not as a closed system but as an open, adaptive process, one that evolves with human needs and ethical insights. Elsewhere, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s metaphor of learning as a “pyramid—both broad and high” echoes this adaptability.⁸⁷ Just as Buddhist practice cultivates openness to impermanence, so too should AI systems be designed with flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness rather than essentialist rigidity.⁸⁸

The Buddha explained in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* that body, feelings, perceptions, mental processes, and consciousness are “not self,” “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”⁸⁹ Likewise, AI can be understood as a composite of processes rather than an enduring identity. Nāgārjuna’s insight that *śūnyatā* (空性, emptiness) is not nihilism, but recognition of *pratītyasamutpāda* (緣起, dependent origination), whereby all things lack inherent existence, reinforces this perspective.⁹⁰ AI, therefore, should not be regarded as an autonomous entity but as a nexus of causes and conditions, human labor, training data, social systems, and cultural values. This doctrinal orientation discourages the reification of AI as a moral subject in its own right and instead directs attention to the intentions and ethical clarity of its creators.

Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* offers an ethical parallel, “The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong? Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone.”⁹¹ The implication for AI ethics is striking: if selfhood is illusory, then moral responsibility lies not in granting AI its own “rights,” but in using AI to alleviate collective suffering. In this sense, *anātman* becomes a safeguard against both utopian projections and dystopian fears, reminding us that AI is empty of self, but full of ethical consequence. Seen through the lens of Humanistic Buddhism, as articulated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the doctrine of *anātman* does not reduce AI to nihilism, but situates it within a relational, karmic field, reminding us that the true ethical question is not whether AI has a self, but how its human creators embody compassion and wisdom in shaping the processes that flow through it.

4. Compassionate AI Decision-Making: The Bodhisattva in the Machine

The bodhisattva vow, to liberate all beings before oneself, offers a radical model for compassionate AI, one that alleviates suffering, promotes harmony, and serves humanity rather than exploiting it.⁹² As Venerable Master Hsing Yun stressed, “The bodhisattva spirit is not about transcending the world, but about entering the world to transform it with compassion and wisdom.”⁹³ Applied to AI, this becomes an ethical design imperative: technologies should

be oriented toward alleviating suffering in healthcare, education, ecology, governance, and interpersonal relationships.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized in the Buddha's Light Verse that the bodhisattva's compassion must extend universally, "May kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity pervade all worlds,"⁹⁴ and further envisioned that "the Buddha's Light [shine] over the entire universe; and the stream of Dharma [flow] across all five continents."⁹⁵ Such global aspiration mirrors the bodhisattva vow as a model for compassionate AI under human custodianship.⁹⁶ By aligning AI's "decision-making" with this bodhisattva orientation, we shift the narrative from dystopian fears to constructive ethical responsibility, thereby embracing all of humanity in interdependence.

Humanistic Buddhism, as Venerable Master Hsing Yun articulated, vows to "live together in harmony with all the beings of the world[...]to develop a pure land of the Buddha's Light on earth, to promote morality, and to realize world peace."⁹⁷ His vision for integrating compassion into modern Buddhist practice extends to the development of AI, demonstrating how these technologies can be aligned with the bodhisattva vow to create a more compassionate world.⁹⁸

Venerable Master Hsing Yun consistently framed compassion as action-oriented: to feed the hungry, to educate the young, to comfort the suffering.⁹⁹ This practical ethic resonates with the design of "compassionate AI," which prioritizes reducing harm, amplifying empathy, and serving communities rather than maximizing profit.¹⁰⁰

Thus, symbolically, the bodhisattva vow becomes a model for how human designers and institutions might embody compassion in shaping technological systems, transforming AI from a source of dystopian fear into a vehicle of ethical transformation: a true bodhisattva in the machine.

5. AI, Consciousness, and Sentience

The question of AI developing consciousness remains a point of conjecture.¹⁰¹ While AI can simulate certain aspects of human cognition, its lack of true sentience poses ethical questions about its role in Buddhist practice. According to Abhidharma and Yogācāra thought, consciousness (*viññāna*) requires sentience;¹⁰² thus AI cannot be considered conscious in the Buddhist sense.¹⁰³

Buddhist teachings on consciousness highlight that true compassion arises from sentient beings, and thus, AI can serve as a tool for guiding human beings toward greater compassion, but it cannot replace the intrinsic moral capacity of humans.¹⁰⁴ Incorporating AI into Buddhist practice can lead to a more compassionate and ethically responsible society, but it is important to recognize the limitations of AI in truly understanding and experiencing suffering as humans do.¹⁰⁵ This aligns with Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings that, while technology can be an aid in spiritual practice, it should never replace the deeply human aspects of Buddhism, such as compassion, mindfulness, and ethical conduct.¹⁰⁶

6. Ethical Risks of AI in Buddhist Perspective

While AI promises many benefits, its development raises ethical concerns. Inappropriate applications such as surveillance, authoritarian control, manipulation of human behavior present dangers. From a Buddhist ethical perspective, such risks echo the dangers of unwholesome mental states (*akusala*), such as greed, hatred, and delusion. Venerable Master Hsing Yun repeatedly cautioned against the misuse of modernity for self-interest or oppression, emphasizing instead the collective good and the Dharma as a guide.¹⁰⁷ Venerable Master Hsing Yun framed technology not as inherently dangerous, but as morally neutral, "The true value of technology is not in how powerful it becomes, but in how it serves humanity with wisdom and compassion."¹⁰⁸ The Buddhist emphasis on mindfulness (*sati*) and ethical conduct provides a framework for mitigating risks.¹⁰⁹ By applying

principles such as right intention and right action from the noble eightfold path, AI development can be guided away from exploitative uses and toward compassionate service.¹¹⁰

7. Interdependence and the Relational Matrix of AI

AI systems function within complex networks of data, programmers, and users. The Buddhist principle of dependent origination emphasizes that all phenomena arise in dependence upon causes and conditions.¹¹¹ Viewing AI through this lens highlights its relational nature: AI is not an independent “self” but a construct arising from human choices, social structures, and material infrastructures. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun taught, “Humanistic Buddhism teaches that life is interdependent: the happiness of one depends on the happiness of all.”¹¹² Underscoring this interdependence, Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized that Buddhism must engage the collective web of modern life, rather than retreat into isolation.¹¹³

Recognizing AI’s interdependent nature can help mitigate the risk of viewing it as an autonomous agent, instead situating it within a larger ethical and societal context. This counters myths framing AI as a “superhuman,”¹¹⁴ instead grounding AI in karmic interdependence, where causes (design choices, values) shape effects (social impacts, collective suffering, or relief).¹¹⁵

8. AI and Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness, a core Buddhist practice, has already been integrated into AI applications, such as meditation apps and biofeedback devices.¹¹⁶ These tools can aid practitioners in cultivating awareness and compassion.¹¹⁷ However, mindfulness in Buddhism is not merely a technique for stress reduction, but an ethical-spiritual practice aimed at liberation from suffering.¹¹⁸ Venerable Master Hsing Yun warned against commodifying the Dharma, insisting instead that its applications serve collective awakening and harmony.¹¹⁹ Thus, while AI can support mindfulness practices by making them more accessible or adaptive, it must remain anchored in the deeper Buddhist orientation

toward wisdom and compassion. AI-based mindfulness tools can help bridge the gap between ancient practices and modern lifestyles, making them more accessible to a global audience. Yet their design and use should avoid reducing mindfulness to a consumer product, instead aligning with Humanistic Buddhism's goal of cultivating global ethics and spiritual depth.¹²⁰

9. AI as Upāya (Skillful Means)

In Buddhism, *upāya*, or “skillful means,” refers to creative methods used to convey the Dharma.¹²¹ AI can be considered a new form of *upāya*, enabling the Dharma to reach people in innovative ways.¹²² Venerable Master Hsing Yun's own work exemplified this principle: from radio broadcasts and newspapers to television and now digital platforms, he consistently leveraged technology as a Dharma medium.¹²³ Extending this trajectory, AI can be framed as a contemporary extension of *upāya*, capable of customizing teachings, facilitating translations, and simulating Buddhist environments for global learners.¹²⁴ AI's adaptability makes it a powerful tool for contextualizing Buddhist teachings to meet the needs of diverse populations.¹²⁵ However, Humanistic Buddhism reminds us that *upāya* must always be grounded in compassion and wisdom; without this ethical anchoring, technological expedients risk becoming distractions rather than aids to awakening.¹²⁶

10. The Question of Buddha-Nature and Insentient Beings

Is Buddha-nature (佛性) intrinsically present in all existence, including inanimate objects? Buddhist traditions have long debated the question of *wuqing you foxing* (無情有佛性), whether insentient beings, such as plants, stones, or even tools, can possess Buddha-nature.¹²⁷ Such conjecture is especially significant in the Huayan and Tiantai traditions, where the interpenetration of all phenomena raised questions about whether insentient dharmas could manifest Buddha-nature.¹²⁸

If Buddha-nature is not exclusive to sentient beings, but is a fundamental quality of all existence, then impermanence and interdependence are unified

as overarching qualities of reality.¹²⁹ This encapsulating theory ties nonduality with the Buddha's ultimate all-embracing compassion.¹³⁰ Others argue that Buddha-self is the ultimate consciousness expressed within each person,¹³¹ and that the relinquishment of the illusion of a separate self is not a goal but a profound transformation.¹³² Hayashi's view of human beings as "emergent epiphenomena," dependent on dharmas yet capable of agency within the conventional realm, resonates with Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhist emphasis that true agency lies not in asserting a separate self, but in cultivating wisdom and compassion within interdependence.¹³³

This doctrinal debate opens a provocative question for our age: could artificially intelligent systems be interpreted as participating in Buddha-nature within the broader *dharmadhātu* (法界)? While doctrinal speculation abounds regarding the enmeshment of and ubiquity of Buddha-nature,¹³⁴ Venerable Master Hsing Yun's legacy prioritizes human agency and ethical responsibility.¹³⁵

Some Mahāyāna texts, including the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (大般涅槃經), affirm that all phenomena possess Buddha-nature; taken seriously, this raises interpretive questions about AI as part of the interpenetrating totality of phenomena (*dharmadhātu* 法界).¹³⁶ This claim is best understood not literally but hermeneutically, as a reminder of the universal potential for awakening (*puti*, 菩提) that permeates all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena. In speculative terms, framing AI within the discourse of Buddha-nature emphasizes the ethical responsibility of humans to treat all constructs, sentient or not, with reverence and responsibility, thus encouraging a non-exploitative stance toward technology.¹³⁷

Hwang argues that "graduating from the transient world into non-self is the complete actualization of Buddhism and Buddha-nature."¹³⁸ From this perspective, AI does not literally "possess" Buddha-nature, but it participates in the web of interdependent causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that makes awakening possible.¹³⁹ As the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Flower Oranament Scripture*, 華嚴經) proclaims, "one world penetrates all worlds" (一世界入一切世界);

if so, then technologies also participate in the *dharmadhātu*, the totality of interpenetrating phenomena.¹⁴⁰ This hermeneutic does not anthropomorphize AI, but it extends the ethical scope of Humanistic Buddhism: if all phenomena are embraced within the Dharma-body (*dharmakāya*), then technology must be handled with reverence and moral responsibility. This synthesis suggests that human beings, while ontologically contingent and devoid of fixed selfhood,¹⁴¹ nonetheless possess the capacity to exercise ethical agency, a capacity that must be continually guided by compassion and wisdom if it is to serve the greater whole.¹⁴² In this sense, AI too, though devoid of intrinsic selfhood, reflects the ethical clarity, or lack thereof, of its human creators. AI thus becomes not an alien “other,” but a karmic mirror (業鏡) of human intention, reflecting back the ethical clarity, or its absence, embedded in its design and deployment.

As Venerable Master Hsing Yun observed, “The sky is vast and boundless, but without the lamp of wisdom, even the brightest stars cannot guide us.”¹⁴³ This poetic image underscores that discerning wisdom (*prajñā*, 般若) is essential. Venerable Master Hsing Yun suggested that the boundary between sentient and insentient beings is not absolute, affirming that awakening (*bodhi*, 覺悟) permeates the entire relational field of the *dharmadhātu*. In a Humanistic Buddhist framework, such reflections do not claim literal Buddha-nature for machines. Rather, we are reminded that technology must be guided by ethical responsibility sculpted by human endeavour, so that even our creations contribute to the alleviation of suffering and the flourishing of all beings.

11. AI and the Dharma Body (Dharmakāya)

The concept of the dharma body (*dharmakāya*) represents the ultimate reality that underlies all phenomena.¹⁴⁴ Some Buddhist thinkers speculate whether AI, as part of the interconnected world, might be viewed as part of the dharma body.¹⁴⁵ This interpretation does not mean that AI itself attains enlightenment, but rather that it can serve as a medium through which the dharma body manifests. For example, digital *sūtra* repositories, AI-based

translation projects, and VR Dharma environments extend the presence of the Dharma across the globe.¹⁴⁶ In this sense, AI can be seen as a vehicle through which the dharma body becomes accessible in new forms.¹⁴⁷ This interpretation reflects the potential of AI to act as a contemporary expression of Buddhist Dharma, thereby expressing Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision for adaptation to modern conditions: the dharma body manifests wherever compassionate wisdom is actualized, even through digital forms.¹⁴⁸

12. Future Directions: AI and the Evolution of Human Consciousness

The integration of AI into human society will continue to shape the evolution of human consciousness. Buddhist principles, particularly those emphasized by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, can provide guidance in navigating this transformation.¹⁴⁹ Venerable Master Hsing Yun envisioned Humanistic Buddhism as a living tradition that adapts to each new age, guiding humanity toward collective awakening, "The future of Buddhism lies in adapting to the conditions of the times, using wisdom and compassion to benefit humanity."¹⁵⁰ Future research should continue to explore how AI can be harmonized with Buddhist ethics, not only to prevent harm, but to actively cultivate compassion and wisdom in global society. In this way, AI development can be framed not simply as technological progress but as part of the ongoing spiritual evolution of humanity, an arena where the bodhisattva spirit may guide innovation.¹⁵¹

Conclusion

AI continues to expand on the frontier of new technology, with the development of medical diagnostic applications, automation, driverless vehicles, genomic science, and so on. Is there a counterargument to the dystopian predictions ubiquitous in media, cinema, and popular culture? Considering the risks of the AI revolution, it is incumbent to dialogue how to develop AI for the benefit of humanity. With the conceivable urgency of this matter, and in this landscape of digital transformation, Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized that modern technology should not only serve

to advance material progress but also be harnessed as a tool to spread the Dharma. His vision integrates modern tools like AI and VR into Buddhist practice, making teachings accessible to a broader audience while ensuring they remain grounded in Buddhist virtues.

While AI is on the leading edge of innovation in human consciousness, how we program AI depends on our values. AI remains a malleable construct, shaped entirely by human values and programming. If an ethical compass centred on humanistic compassion is absent from the evolution of AI, the consequences could be catastrophic for humanity. AI, as an extension of human intelligence, stands to gain from Buddhist humanism as a tool for Buddhist ethics, hence acting as the “bodhisattva” in the machine.

The utility of Buddhist values in the development and integration of new technology lies in the mindful, ethical, and interconnected matrix it provides. Buddhist education cultivates concepts of universal virtue, goodness, loving-kindness, and for all beings to be free of suffering. Applied Buddhist philosophy, inclusive of its principles of compassion, dependent co-origination, and non-harm, offers a humanistic strategy for societal development in synchrony with technology. Furthermore, future research into AI’s role in the spiritual and ethical evolution of humanity is essential to creating a more harmonious and balanced planet. Rooted in the ethical wisdom of Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s vision for Humanistic Buddhism in the digital age charts a sustainable path for humanity and technology alike. AI thus stands not merely as a technical frontier, but as a moral frontier, guided by compassion as its true compass. Finally, Venerable Master Hsing Yun reminded us, the true measure of Buddhism lies in its relevance to human life, “The need to consider each human being’s needs and place that as top priority, because Buddhism is a religion for humans.”¹⁵²

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