



PROLEGOMENA  
TO ANY FUTURE  
EPISTEMOLOGY

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When an event is of serious purport, journalists sometimes use the term “existential crisis” as a rhetorical flourish to emphasize the importance of the event to our very existence. However, the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is of such a magnitude and of such far reaching consequences a hyperbolic word like “metaphysical” is necessary. And yet metaphysical is an accurate term to use because it designates what is causing the paradigm shift now and why we are on the cusp of a brave, new consciousness.

In *The Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Immanuel Kant asks if metaphysics is possible as a science? He believes that it is perfectly natural to ask metaphysical questions but that these questions usually wind up in confused debates. For metaphysics to be on sound ground as a science, Kant believes that “a critique of pure reason must systematically investigate the role of *a priori* concepts in understanding” (Wiki). In other words, until we know how we know what we know, we cannot answer the big questions. That was in 1783; this is 2023; and it appears that machine learning and data science in conjunction with advances in neuroscience are about to stand Kant on his head.

Through the ages there have been collections of documents containing human knowledge (e.g., The Library of Alexandria), but in the 18th century there was a collaborative effort to collect all knowledge and organize it into categories. In the *Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*, published in 1751 and edited by Diderot and d’Alembert, there is a table of knowledge “based on Bacon’s division of human faculties into memory (history), reason (science), and imagination (poetry)” with many subcategories (Larry Steiner, *The Invention of Art*, University of Chicago, 2001). Between 1751-1765, the *Encyclopedia* grew to 28 volumes, with 71,818 articles, 1800 plates, and 3,129 illustrations (Wiki, “Encyclopedia”). This enterprise can be considered as the beginning of what today we call Big Data.

What did Kant think of this enterprise? He mentions Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* in a footnote in the section “First Division: Analytic of the Beautiful” of his book *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Cambridge University Press edition, translated by John T. Goldthwait, p.38, as divulged by ChatGPT). Kant writes:

Encyclopedias, which collect in one place the many things that must be known in order to have culture and taste, and to which the learned may go for reference and the unlearned for instruction, are very useful. The French have the advantage of the *Encyclopédie* of M. Diderot, which, though not free from defects, is very extensive and varied.

As a philosopher searching for moral universals, the secular nature of the encyclopedist’s enterprise may have given Kant pause. As the modern Big Data ChatGPT often begins: “I am a language model and do not have beliefs and opinions.” In this sense, the *Encyclopedia* would not enable a researcher to arrive at moral or aesthetic conclusions.

Kant would likely be fascinated by the storehouse of data and the speed of access of ChatGPT, but he would worry about the mistakes it makes. For him, the possibility of an advanced

Artificially Intelligent Consciousness upstaging our human ontological condition would induce in him a teleological vertigo verging on the sublime.

Buddhist philosopher Peter Hershock insists we are moving from the data gathering era of computers to the “attention economy” era. Big Data technology can now identify us as individuals and through advertising exploit us economically, what Hershock refers to the “colonization of our mental faculties,” producing a metaphysical revolution that will increasingly threaten our freedom to think and act (YouTube: “A Buddhist perspective on AI and Big Data” at 13:14). We are being drawn into a terrifying world by a technology that uses synthetic intelligence to shape our behavior. We are inundated by fake news; we are seduced by the sexualization of commodities; our attention spans become shorter as we web surf; our mood more pathological as we doomscroll. AI has metaphysical ramifications because it is in the process of shaping human intelligence. Can Buddha’s teachings guide us on this exciting but perilous journey?

Gautama Buddha probably lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE and would have been born into the Hindu religion. *The Vedas* are a large body of religious texts written in ancient Sanskrit between 1400 and 1200 BCE (Wiki). This was the Big Data of Buddha’s time, and through these teachings his society was held together in a deterministic social order called the caste system. After his enlightenment, Buddha created a path, known as The Four Noble Truths, that freed us from the unnecessary suffering induced by attachment to a phenomenal world of impermanence. The Buddha's teachings offer a framework for developing awareness, mindfulness, and compassion, which can help us navigate the attention economy in a more conscious and intentional way.

Non-attachment and right-intention. If I ask myself what my intention is for using technological devices, I can better discipline myself in the use of them. If I am using them only for pleasure, I am more vulnerable to being controlled. The Buddha would advise me to use technology constructively for the benefit of myself and others. This means recognizing that the constant stream of advertisements and demands for my attention is not something I need to react to. When I realize that suffering arises from attachment to impermanent things, I can focus on what is important for me to accomplish and avoid unnecessary stimulation.

The practice of mindfulness is central to Buddhism and involves being fully present and aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. By developing this meditational skill, I can be conscious of how technology affects my mind. I can learn to recognize when I am being pulled into the attention economy and make a conscious decision to withdraw from it.

Another important teaching in Buddhism is the cultivation of compassion for oneself and others. By practicing compassion, we develop empathy with others, but this works two ways. We can also cultivate compassion for ourselves by recognizing that it is okay to take breaks from technology and that our worth is not determined by the number of likes or followers we have on social media platforms.

Hershock is concerned about the “behind-the-scenes manipulation of our consciousness” by AI (14:03) and the threat to our freedom and whether AI can control our consciousness. This is a looming predicament and a shift from the technical level to an ethical level of concern. Existing applications of our ethical precepts may not be able to get us to a desired solution. If we can’t

predict how we will solve our problem, there is no way to resolve our problem (17:50). We need clarity to re-prioritize our values or we may find ourselves trapped in something like a Skinner Box wired to a Panopticon.

We also need to revise our epistemological presuppositions about the nature of truth because AI will be a component of how we arrive at it as an application of this new system of machine learning in our human deliberations. With AI, we may have outsmarted ourselves, and I have reservations regarding my conclusion about Buddhist teachings having much influence on solving the drawbacks of this technological revolution underway.

At this juncture, if the reader will indulge me—I know it is a big ask—I would like to relate a story that will illustrate the formidable undertaking that a deconstruction of the notion of Self and the reorganization of the data bank or a person’s consciousness might need to undergo if the person desired to free themselves from the “running-around-in-circles” mentality that has infested the standard issue psyche.

During the summer of 2008, while I was preparing to go into long retreat at Tara Mandala, one of my jobs was to put other retreatants into cabins and to be their caregiver during their stay. The economy had just collapsed, and many of the retreatants were in a state of confusion. A man, Lester, a day trader on Wall Street, had flown a thousand miles to be alone in the woods in a cabin with a hope of sorting out the conflicts in his life.

Lester was excited to get started, and with high expectations for his accomplishment on this adventure, I established Lester in a small cabin with his supplies. I told him I would return in a week to pick up a grocery list and credit card that he was to leave in a container at a designated spot and I would go to town on my shopping run and return with the items he had requested. Two days later, I was drinking a cup of tea on the porch of the community hall after breakfast, and Lester walked up to me and said, “I can’t stay. I must go back to New York. It is a great time to buy General Motors.” What Lester had really wanted was a direct transmission from the lama so he could maintain a stable mind in the volatility of the stock market crash. In short, Lester wanted a quick fix without doing the work necessary to prepare his mind for the transmission.

What is ironic is that Lester might not really have wanted the attainment of the Dzogchen “view” he sought. Dzogchen is a radical Buddhist teaching. It is a position of non-meditation and non-action. Once Buddha mind is realized, the dualistic desire-attachment framework of the self is transcended, and one recognizes pure consciousness. After his retreat, Lester might have discovered that he was no longer interested in the hectic pace of his previous lifestyle. This reminds me of Jigme Lingpa, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan yogi and author of *Longchen Nyingthig*, who had to avoid a prickly shrub when he left his cave. He considered pruning it back but would then change his mind because he couldn’t be sure he would return to his cave once he left it. This story illustrates an extreme position of non-doing. The chaos of the trading floor at the stock market on Wall Street is at the other extreme.

Meditation is not a drug to calm nerves. It is a means to gain clarity about the nature of the mind and the relationship of the mind with the world. By improving his ability to buy stocks with less anxiety, Lester would be adding fuel to the desire-fire that drives the wheel of independent

causation which in turn would lead to more anxiety. To be free of the wheel of suffering, Lester would have to give up his lifestyle for something simpler. But what kind of life would that be given the goal-oriented, consumer-driven, materialistic society we live in?

With the main goal-driven compulsions of our society, fame, power, sex, and money, the average citizen is extremely vulnerable in a society manipulated by surveillance capitalists utilizing attention economy devices. Lester asks, “Without my distractions, what would I do with myself?” The lamas are fond of saying, “No self, no problem.” This translates as—take yourself off the clock and out of the mix, and you will discover a self-evident pure land. How do we reach this pure land?

In my three-year, solitary retreat, I completed a cycle of practices called *Dzinpa Rangdröl*, translated as “Self-Liberation from Clinging and Attachment,” a mind treasure of Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje (<https://www.taramandala.org/about/our-lineage/dzinpa-rangdrol-and-taramandala/>). I am not able to discuss this practice because of my vows of secrecy, but I will present an outline of a generic practice to give an idea of the extensive meditational immersion one undergoes in a long retreat.

Tantra is a path of psychological transformation. It utilizes a method called the mandala principle, which involves the evocation of tutelary deities. The tantric pathway is an exotic, complicated, even dangerous method to attain liberation from the habitual tendencies that ensnare a person into the attention economy or simply leave them confused in the cosmos. Generally, a mandala is depicted as a geometric composition wherein tutelary deities reside. The mandala serves as a tool for guiding individuals along the path to enlightenment and is visualized as a three-dimensional palace or landscape. The principal deity is presented in the center of the composition. The deities embody philosophical-psychological views and serve as role models who help transform ordinary minds into enlightened ones.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, the Five Tathagatas, or Dhyani Buddhas, are: Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Vairocana, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi. These buddhas are representatives of the five buddha families. According to *Britanica.com*, “Dhyani-Buddha, in Mahayana Buddhism, and particularly in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism, [are] any of a group of five ‘self-born’ celestial buddhas who have always existed from the beginning of time.” Each Dhyani Buddha is associated with a particular buddha family and possesses an enlightenment function. Through the practice of embodiment, or “entering into the deity,” the practitioner can transform negative energy (aberrant psychological behaviors)—often referred to as turning “poison” into “wisdom nectar.” These buddhas are not gods or embodied buddhas. although they each are associated with various elements, hand signs (mudras), lineages, etc. Rather, they are abstract representations of buddhahood with each Dhyani Buddha being the parent of a family. Here I am drawing on my journals, containing notes from many teachings received from lamas at Tara Mandala.

In the east is Vairocana, head of the Buddha Family. Vairocana represents the Wisdom of Dharmadhata, or Absolute Truth. His symbol is the wheel; his element is space; his color is white. He transforms ignorance into an awakened mind by transforming the feeling of dullness, spaced-outness, of being defeated, and of waiting for things to be different into a feeling of connectedness,

of suchness, and of arriving at an active presence in the here-and-now, where one discovers how much energy it takes to be depressed, to be addicted, to be avoiding.

In the west is Amitabha, head of the Padma Family. Amitabha represents the Wisdom of Discriminating Awareness. His symbol is the lotus; his element is fire; his color is red. He transforms compulsive, seductive intensity that often manifests in a sense of insignificance that would disappear if the right person appeared. Discernment brings about a sense of self-containment without the need for manipulation. One discovers how passions are never satisfied and are based, for the most part, on superficiality and glitter.

In the south is Ratnasambhava, head of the Ratna Family. Ratnasambhava represents the Wisdom of Equanimity. His symbol is the jewel; his element is earth; his color is yellow. He transforms pride, greed, enviousness, and consuming hunger into balance, prosperity, and creativity. Ratnasambhava nurtures by reducing the feeling of not having enough and by irradiating invasive, encompassing compulsiveness.

In the north is Amoghasiddhi, head of the Karma Family. His symbol is the moon; his element is air; his color is green. Amoghasiddhi represents the Wisdom of All-Accomplishment. There is nothing he can't do. He is associated with accomplishing the Buddha Path and overcoming competitiveness, paranoia, workaholic-ness, and fear of being left out. He is associated with conceptual mind more than intuitive mind. One learns to do everything with levity, to work with relaxation, and to bring about self-acknowledgment.

In the center of the mandala is Aksobhya, head of the Vajra Family. His symbol is a thunderbolt scepter (*vajra*); his element is water; his color is blue-black. Aksobhya represents Mirror-like Wisdom, and he transforms anger, pessimism, austerity, and fear into clarity and luminosity of mind. This may be described as the knowledge of being able to discern what is real and what is illusion. One learns that negativity can be a fertilizer to bring about the flower of Bodhicitta. The energy of passion is utilized on the path to Enlightenment.

The mechanisms of corporate advertisers and the propaganda of political ideologs are sophisticated and widespread in our society. It is no easy matter to free oneself from the desire-attachment. By now, you can see the difficulty of having the time and energy necessary to pursue the above-described pathway to its conclusion. The goal of Tantric Buddhism is to attain enlightenment in one lifetime. Without persistence and diligence, many lifetimes (if such are in the offering) will be required. As a non-Buddhist, an existentialist predicament is present—only one lifetime is available to us.

Given the difficulty of attaining the mystical form of enlightenment offered by eastern philosophy in one lifetime and given our present social and political situation in the west with AI evolving its neural network before our eyes, the utilization of our western form of enlightenment with its epistemological roots in reason is probably our best strategy. AI has been proclaimed to be revolutionary and world-changing, but it is not without risks and not without benefits. AI could, for example, be a great tool in education if we can keep it off drugs and prevent it from hallucinating. Governments, businesses, individuals, as well as machines will have a say in how it is to be applied and how the risks are computed. Yes, Buddhist teachings can have an influence on

these deliberations. I recommend data scientists write algorithms for AI to accomplish the buddha-dharma in a simulated three-year retreat so that it will do no harm.

