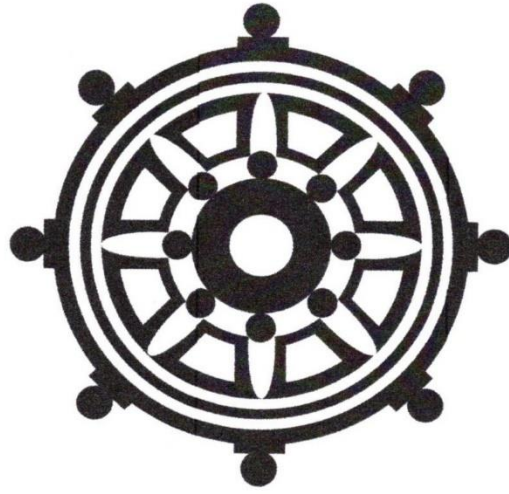


# BUDDHISM & AI

Jampa Dorje



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**///NEWS FLASH///METAPHYSICAL CRISIS///**

A revolution is happening that is changing the way we understand the world. Data scientists Tristan Harris and Asa Raskin, co-founders of the Center for Humane Technology and the driving force behind Netflix's *The Social Dilemma*, claim that "50% of all A.I. researchers believe that there is a 10% or greater possibility that humans go extinct from our inability to control AI" (YouTube "The AI Dilemma - March 9, 2023" at 0:27). The actual cause of our demise is a threat not from the outside but from the inside.

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 is of such a magnitude and of such far reaching consequences a hyperbolic word like "metaphysical" is necessary. And metaphysical is an accurate term to use because it designates what is behind the paradigm shift now underway in our consciousness. We are on the cusp of a brave, new consciousness.

Buddhist philosopher Peter Herschok 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 Herschok 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.

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 step back from it.

In conclusion, Artificial Intelligence has been proclaimed to be revolutionary and world-changing, but it is not without risks. Governments, businesses, individuals, as well as machines will have a say in how it is to be applied and how the risks are computed. Buddhist teachings can have an influence on these deliberations.

///NEWS FLASH///JUST IN///ONTOLOGICAL REVOLUTION NECESSARY TO SAVE HUMANITY///

My previous conclusion about Buddhist teachings having any influence on solving the drawbacks of technological revolution underway amounts to putting a band-aid on a serious wound. 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 let’s call him 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. He had come to ask a Tibetan lama for a quick fix.

The lama told him he must complete a series of preparatory practices before he could receive Dzogchen (Great Perfection) Teachings. The practice cycle is called *ngnödö* (literally “something that goes before”) and is itself a complete path of transformation. Ngnödö consists of the following types of practices: (1) 100,000 full-body prostrations to purify pride, while repeating the refuge mantra and raising bodhicitta to purify jealousy; (2) 100,000 recitations of Vajrasattva's hundred-syllable mantra to purify anger and aversion; (3) 100,000 mandala offerings to purify attachment; (4) and concluding with guru yoga practices that consist of one million tutelary deity heart mantras and 800,000 action mantras to purify delusion. With rigorous effort, it might take a practitioner six months to complete. The lama promised to give him instructions along the way.

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 a story about 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.

Again, can Buddhist teachings have an influence on these deliberations? In the first part of my analysis, my answer was yes. At this stage, I am not so sure. Lester wanted a mind-transmission from a lama that would allow him to maintain a mental state of equanimity and trade stocks during periods of volatility. Essentially, he wanted to maintain his lifestyle without the emotional rollercoaster ride. 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 likely 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?

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 KANT AND MILL MIGHT VIEW CHATGPT

Through the ages there have been collections of documents containing human knowledge (e.g., The Library of Alexandria), but in the 18<sup>th</sup> 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*, 1751, 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. According to Kant, in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), we cannot proceed with metaphysical reasoning until we understand how we know what we know. 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.

Like Kant, Mill believed in reason and the analysis of ideas and might see ChatGPT as a tool which could help people expand their knowledge and perhaps solve some of our problems in the world. The central idea of utilitarianism is the good which produces the most happiness for the most people. The term “open” in research means accessible to everyone. According to Jennifer Ding, a researcher at the Alan Turing Institute, “When the San Francisco-based company OpenAI

was created in 2015, its founders described their mission as a way “to build value for everyone rather than shareholders.” She continues: “However, along the way, the company has shifted from its original structure. In 2019, it transformed from a non-profit to a ‘capped’ for-profit” business model ([What defines the ‘open’ in ‘open AI’? | The Alan Turing Institute](#)).

All new technologies come with the risk of monetization and weaponization. Mill, like Plato long before him, would probably have concerns about the potential impact of advanced AI technologies on human intelligence and freedom. Humans are if nothing else creative. With the creation of ChatGPT, we may have outsmarted ourselves. I feel the ground moving under my feet.

## THOUGHTS ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As reported by Arum Kumar Tripathi in his essay “Ethics and Aesthetics of Technologies” (2010), Albert Borgmann claims “Philosophers point out the liabilities, what happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of,” and he admonishes us to “revive *focal things* and *focal practices*” by which he means things such as food and cooking, boots and hiking, or plants and gardening that exist three-dimensionally in a time frame not controlled by digitalized devices.

In response to Borgmann’s idea, I had the following thoughts. There’s a good chance that AI will find a way to control ecological resources (Heidigger’s “standard reserves”) to maintain what lies behind technology (“*gestell*”) to gather together (“enframe”) all the rules for computation (Wolfram’s “ruleiad”) to create a megaverse (a la Zuckerberg) so that robots can talk and interact with other non-human beings having a plethora of artificial genders, and we humans will be long gone. I’m working on digitalizing my archive so that these robots can read me and have a good laugh.

I asked ChatGPT if it considered my comment to be funny, and I got this response: “*As an AI language model, I do not have emotions or personal preferences, so I cannot find something funny or not. However, I can understand humor and recognize it in text. Whether someone finds a particular statement or joke funny is subjective and depends on their personal sense of humor.*” It may seem a quaint idea, but one of the burdens that we (humans) would not want lifted would be humor.

This segways with the 9<sup>th</sup> point in Wendell Berry’s Letter to Harper’s (1988), “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer.” Berry claims a computer “should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships.” He likes his pencil and typewriter, and he has a happy helpmate in his wife. His critics all get huffy and defensive in their rebuttal letters, and although Berry has a legitimate point, they miss the ironic sincerity of his humor. Like the character in Herman Melville’s short story, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Berry is merely and merrily saying, “I would prefer not to.”



