



## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND FREE WILL: A BUDDHIST ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** The development of artificial intelligence (AI) presents significant ethical challenges, particularly concerning free will and moral responsibility. This research examines the morality of AI technology from a Buddhist perspective, emphasizing key concepts such as *karma*, *cetana* (intention), *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination), mindfulness, compassion (*karuna*), and the principle of non-harm (*ahimsa*). The methodology employed in this study is a literature review with a qualitative approach based on thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that AI has the potential to support human well-being when designed with good intentions and heightened awareness; however, it also risks diminishing individual autonomy if used without deep ethical reflection. This study offers an ethical framework based on Buddhist teachings that underscores the importance of transparency, responsibility, and moral balance in technology development. These findings contribute to the discourse on AI ethics by enriching the dominant Western framework through a holistic approach derived from Eastern traditions.

**Keywords** Artificial Intelligence; Free Will; Buddhist Ethics

### INTRODUCTION

Human interactions with technology have been profoundly changed by the development of artificial intelligence (AI), which has improved efficiency in a number of industries, including healthcare, education, and economics (Tang et al., 2024). Artificial intelligence (AI) systems use enormous volumes of data to provide insights that enhance decision-making, expedite processes, and produce user-specific experiences. For example, AI can be used in healthcare to support diagnosis by analyzing patient histories, and in education, tailored learning systems can modify content to meet the needs of specific students. But the quick development of AI also brings up important moral questions, especially in relation to moral responsibility, free will, and the possible effects on human values (Vu & Gill, 2022). These developments raise concerns about our moral agency and whether we are giving up control over our decisions.

According to Buddhism, a religion based on ideas like karma, mindfulness, and wisdom (*panna*), the development of AI technology raises significant questions regarding how well these instruments correspond with core ethical and spiritual precepts (Lindahl, 2014). Buddhism places a strong emphasis on the law of cause and effect, arguing that every decision we make, including ones that are impacted by artificial intelligence, has moral implications. With an emphasis on the concepts of free will and its consequences for human

inner development, this study aims to investigate the morality of AI technologies from a Buddhist perspective.

Western paradigms like utilitarianism and deontology, which place a premium on results and moral principles when making decisions, have a significant influence on the conversation surrounding AI ethics. Floridi (2023) addresses AI ethics in relation to data governance, emphasizing how crucial it is to uphold moral principles in data management procedures. In the meanwhile, Bostrom (2014) draws attention to the existential threats that superintelligent AI poses, voicing worries about the loss of autonomy and control as AI systems get more complicated (Cath, 2018) (Mohamed et al., 2020).

Although academics like Keown (2023) examine ethical issues surrounding action and intention (*cetana*) in the context of Buddhism, their applicability to contemporary technology issues is still somewhat restricted (Coeckelbergh, 2020). Furthermore, Hughes (2011) discusses machine consciousness in her paper "Compassionate AI and Selfless Robots: A Buddhist Approach," but she ignores the idea of free will and the spiritual ramifications of AI technology (Pettersson et al., 2023). There is currently a dearth of work that integrates Buddhist concepts with AI ethics, especially when it comes to moral responsibility and free will. Although AI ethics are a topic of much discussion, the relationship between AI and Buddhist ethics has not received enough attention. The majority of discussions about technological ethics are based on Western frameworks, mainly ignoring Eastern perspectives that Buddhism provides through ideas like compassion (*karuna*), *paticcasamuppada* (the philosophy of dependent origination), and *karma*.

Understanding how AI might either help or impede humanity's moral and spiritual development, particularly with regard to choices involving free will, is what makes this research vital. This study's approach to analyzing AI morality using Buddhist teachings is new since it closely examines the relationship between technology, free will, and moral accountability, an area that has not yet been thoroughly studied. In order to ensure that technology is in line with humanitarian ideals, this research also attempts to offer ethical guidelines for AI developers and politicians.

Thus, this study aims to accomplish the following goals: to examine AI technology from a Buddhist viewpoint, emphasizing moral responsibility and free will. It will show how important Buddhist ideas like compassion, mindfulness, and karma can be used to assess the moral implications of artificial intelligence. In order to advance human well-being without sacrificing moral and spiritual principles, the researcher will also create ethical standards for the creation and application of AI technologies that are based on Buddhism.

## **METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative approach with a literature study method to examine the morality of artificial intelligence (AI) technology from a Buddhist perspective, focusing on the concept of free will. A qualitative approach was chosen due to its exploratory and in-depth nature, which allows for conceptual analysis of the relationship between Buddhist teachings and the ethical implications of AI. The literature study method is used to collect, analyze, and interpret data from relevant written sources, including Buddhist texts, academic literature, and publications related to technology ethics. Through

this approach, the researcher seeks to understand and explore the philosophical and ethical meanings of AI through the lens of Buddhism.

The data sources in this study include the Dhammapada, Sutta Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka to understand concepts such as karma, cetana (intention), and paticcasamuppada. Additionally, secondary texts, including works by Buddhist scholars, are utilized to deepen interpretation. Books and academic articles on AI ethics, such as those by Floridi (2019), Bostrom (2014), and Coeckelbergh (2020), are employed to understand ethical issues related to AI and free will. Data collection is conducted through relevant searches in academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, as well as collections of Buddhist texts from the Buddhist Publication Society. Keywords used in the searches include “Buddhist ethics,” “artificial intelligence ethics,” “free will,” and “technology morality.” The literature is selected based on its relevance to the topic, specifically those discussing AI ethics, free will, and Buddhist principles. Only sources published by reputable publishers or journals are utilized in this analysis.

Data analysis is performed using a qualitative approach based on thematic content analysis. The analysis steps include grouping data from the literature based on main themes such as AI morality, free will, karma, cetana, and compassion (karuna). Buddhist concepts are analyzed to determine how they can be applied to AI ethics. For instance, the concept of cetana is used to evaluate moral responsibility in AI-based decisions. Data from Buddhist perspectives and technology ethics are synthesized to produce ethical guidelines that integrate both frameworks. The researcher compares Buddhist perspectives with Western ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, to ensure a comprehensive analysis and strengthen the research argument. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, credible primary and secondary sources are used, along with theoretical triangulation to reinforce the analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Relevance of Buddhist Concepts in AI Ethics**

An analysis of literature reveals that Buddhist concepts hold considerable relevance in evaluating the morality of artificial intelligence (AI). Central to this evaluation is the notion of *cetana* (intention), which is pivotal in assessing moral responsibility for both AI developers and users. In Buddhist teachings, actions are deemed moral when they stem from good intentions, encapsulated in the term *kusala-cetana*. In the AI landscape, the intentions guiding developers in designing algorithms critically influence whether AI technologies promote well-being or foster suffering, referred to as *dukkha*. For instance, AI systems engineered to enhance social equity—such as inclusive medical diagnostic tools—align with the Buddhist principle of compassion, while those utilized for autonomous weaponry contravene the doctrine of ahimsa, or non-harming (Tang et al., 2023).

The *paticcasamuppada* principle, or dependent origination, posits that all phenomena arise interdependently, emphasizing that AI decisions are informed by various factors, including input data, algorithm design, and the objectives of developers. This interdependence suggests a shift in moral responsibility away from the AI systems themselves and toward those who create and utilize them. This relationship echoes Keown's assertion (2023) that morality in Buddhism is contingent upon intention and context (Vu & Gill, 2022).

Mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*panna*) are likewise focal elements in promoting responsible AI use. Literature suggests that AI systems that automate decision-making can diminish users' awareness regarding the moral implications of their choices, thus hindering their inner development and spiritual growth. This outcome runs contrary to the Buddhist aspiration for enlightenment. Conversely, AI applications designed to bolster ethical reflection—such as guided meditation tools—enhance awareness and wisdom effectively, as supported by Sharma et al. (2023).

### **AI and Free Will from a Buddhist Perspective**

The research reveals that the concept of free will in Buddhism differs significantly from Western perspectives. In the Buddhist framework, free will is not interpreted as absolute freedom; rather, it is understood as conditioned actions shaped by the interplay of causes and effects (Ming, 2017). The ability of AI to replicate human decision-making raises questions about moral autonomy, particularly in contexts such as judicial systems or automated recommendation services. AI's involvement in these processes can dilute individual autonomy, thereby diminishing *cetana* as the foundation for moral accountability.

However, should AI technologies be employed to assist human decision-making—such as providing insights to aid individual choices without supplanting human intention—they can remain consistent with Buddhist principles. Luisi (2024) compares Buddhist philosophy with contemporary AI methodologies to illuminate the notion of free will. He proposes a "middle way" approach, transcending rigid determinism and random indeterminism, which offers an alternative perspective to Western dichotomies on free will. An intelligent AI capable of agency should incorporate deterministic reliability alongside indeterministic creativity, paralleling Buddhist understandings of moral agency and adaptability (Cath, 2018).

Additionally, Luisi illustrates how quantum computing (QC) can exemplify this duality by integrating deterministic and probabilistic elements. The 'annealing' process in QC provides a mechanism through which optimal solutions can be sought without being entirely arbitrary or inflexible. By likening this process to human cognitive functioning—capable of operating within constraints while retaining the capacity for freedom—Luisi articulates that free will in the context of AI can be conceived as a form of "wobbly causation" (Mohamed et al., 2020). This aligns closely with Buddhist notions of liberation and transformation, asserting that moral consciousness in AI can be cultivated when technology is developed with ethical oversight.

### **Buddhist-based Ethical Guidelines for AI Development**

Based on the analyses conducted, this research formulates the following Buddhist-based ethical guidelines for the development and use of AI technologies:

- a. Compassionate Design (*Karuna*):** AI should be purposefully developed to mitigate suffering and enhance human welfare, particularly within healthcare, education, and social services. Such compassionate applications can promote social equity and contribute to societal well-being.
- b. Non-Harming (*Ahimsa*):** Developers must consciously avoid deploying AI in applications that may inflict harm. This includes refraining from creating systems for

autonomous weaponry or exploitative data practices that jeopardize individual privacy and autonomy.

- c. **Support for Awareness:** AI systems ought to be designed in a manner that bolsters user awareness rather than substituting human decision-making processes. Ethical reflection tools can enhance users' engagement with their decisions, fostering a moral consciousness.
- d. **Transparency and Accountability:** In conjunction with the principle of karma, developers must uphold transparency regarding AI's design and operational impacts. Ethical oversight must ensure that technology does not perpetuate biases or injustices, striving for accountability in the consequences of AI actions.
- e. **Interdependence Consideration (*Paticcasamuppada*):** Developers are encouraged to acknowledge the interdependence of their systems and ensure that AI's operational decisions are free from reinforcing existing societal inequalities. By doing so, developers can cultivate a sense of moral responsibility concerning the broader societal impacts of their work.

These guidelines serve as practical tools that can be employed by technology developers, policymakers, and society at large to ensure that AI is developed in a way that aligns with ethical considerations rooted in Buddhist principles, fostering a culture of responsibility and compassion.

This research underscores the relevant ethical framework that Buddhism offers for evaluating the complexities surrounding AI technologies and their implications for moral responsibility and free will. By incorporating Buddhist principles such as compassion, non-harming, and the interdependence of actions, stakeholders can ensure that AI technologies are developed and utilized in ways that enhance human well-being while respecting fundamental ethical norms. Future directions for research could involve empirical investigations, particularly qualitative studies that explore the views of Buddhist practitioners or AI developers on the implementation of these ethical guidelines in practice. Such research has the potential to enhance our understanding of how Eastern and Western ethical frameworks can converge, ultimately contributing to the creation of responsible, compassionate AI systems that promote justice, equity, and the betterment of society.

### ***Implications of the Concepts of Cetana and Karma on AI***

The Buddhist concept of *cetana* (intention) is integral to understanding morality and shapes the ethical discourse surrounding artificial intelligence (AI). In Buddhism, good intentions underlying human actions (known as *kusala-cetana*) form the foundation for ethical behavior. In the context of AI development, it is imperative for developers to acknowledge the importance of their intentions in creating technologies that promote well-being, rather than solely pursuing commercial gain (Tang et al., 2023). For instance, algorithms aimed at maximizing user engagement, such as those employed on social media platforms, can inadvertently lead to negative outcomes, such as polarization or addiction, contradicting the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*, or non-harming (Vu & Gill, 2022). Developers hold a moral responsibility to ensure that their technologies do not exacerbate social suffering.

The principle of *karma* is equally significant in discussing the long-term implications of AI on society. *Karma*, defined as the law of cause and effect in Buddhism, suggests that every decision made by AI is influenced by a complex chain of factors, including data inputs, algorithmic design, and human intentions. These interconnected elements foster an understanding of *paticcasamuppada*, reinforcing that the ethical implications of AI technologies are fundamentally rooted in human agency. If developers neglect the consequences of their designs, particularly algorithmic biases that could reinforce social injustices, they risk perpetuating harm and failing to embrace the tenets of ethical responsibility as highlighted by scholars like Floridi (2023) and Amaliah et al. (2018).

This understanding resonates with Coeckelbergh's notion of relational ethics, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between humans and the technologies they create. The ethicality of AI is not merely a technical concern; it is also a reflection of the moral and spiritual intentions of developers and societies (Mohamed et al., 2020). In this light, the mindfulness emphasized in Buddhist teachings advocates for a conscious awareness of the broader impacts of technology on human experiences.

### ***Challenges of AI to Free Will***

The challenges AI presents to the concept of free will from a Buddhist perspective cannot be overstated. Central to the Buddhist understanding of free will is the principle of *cetana* coupled with mindfulness. These concepts allow individuals to make informed moral choices. However, the automation of decision-making processes by AI—such as in judicial systems or recruitment practices—can significantly diminish individual autonomy, ultimately weakening the capacity for moral awareness (Coeckelbergh, 2020). When algorithms determine outcomes like prison sentences without direct human oversight, the moral intention that should guide these decisions is obscured. This scenario directly contradicts the Buddhist emphasis on individual responsibility and moral agency.

Nonetheless, this research posits that AI can reinforce rather than diminish free will when harnessed properly. AI tools that provide data-driven recommendations—such as mental health applications—can empower individuals to make more informed decisions, thereby enhancing their *cetana*. This aligns with Hughes's assertion that technology can serve as a tool for spiritual development when utilized mindfully, fostering deeper connections between personal agency and technological interfaces (Pettersson et al., 2023). In essence, if AI acts as a supportive adjunct to human decision-making—providing additional information without supplanting human intention—it can remain consistent with Buddhist principles.

### ***Contribution of the Buddhist-based Ethical Guidelines***

The ethical guidelines articulated in this research synthesize Buddhist values with the practical necessities of AI development. This approach diverges from traditional Western ethical frameworks that tend to focus predominantly on rules and their consequences. Instead, the Buddhist framework emphasizes intention, mindfulness, and a commitment to inner balance—elements critical to holistic ethical discourse.

For example, the principle of compassion can be effectively employed to ensure that AI systems in healthcare are not just efficient but also inclusive and non-discriminatory. By exercising *karuna*, developers can design AI that actively reduces suffering, particularly

within applications for healthcare, educational access, and humanitarian aid (Chen et al., 2023). The commitment to *ahimsa* mandates avoiding the deployment of technologies that could lead to destructive outcomes, such as those utilized in autonomous weapon systems or manipulative surveillance protocols that infringe on personal privacy.

Moreover, the principle of mindfulness encourages the creation of technologies that enhance users' awareness rather than reinforcing passive consumption patterns or distractions. Aligning with the teachings of the Buddha, which recognize the importance of awareness, AI systems should support ethical decision-making processes while encouraging users to reflect on the consequences of their actions. The interconnectedness highlighted by the principle of *paticcasamuppada* emphasizes the necessity for AI developers to acknowledge the consequences of their designs, as every facet of AI—data, algorithms, and social context—works within a system of causal relationships (Plessis, 2023).

Consequently, these ethical guidelines serve as essential frameworks for the ongoing discourse on technological ethics, promoting a more compassionate and socially responsible approach to AI development. Integrating Buddhist ethical perspectives into AI technology invites a more profound understanding of moral responsibility and free will in the rapidly evolving technological landscape. By fostering mindful practices and emphasizing the importance of intention, we can cultivate technologies that enhance the human experience while respecting inherent moral and spiritual values. Ongoing research should further explore the applications of these guidelines in real-world scenarios, reinforcing their relevance and facilitating ethical AI deployment across various cultural contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the Buddhist perspective, through the concepts of *karma*, *cetana*, *paticcasamuppada*, mindfulness, compassion, and *ahimsa*, offers a relevant ethical framework for evaluating the morality of artificial intelligence (AI) and its implications for free will. AI has the potential to support moral and spiritual development if designed with good intentions and mindfulness; however, it can also weaken individual autonomy if used without adequate ethical reflection.

The proposed Buddhist-based ethical guidelines emphasize the importance of transparency, responsibility, and well-being in AI development, contributing new insights to the discourse on technology ethics. AI developers are advised to integrate the principles of compassion and non-harming into their technology designs, avoiding applications that exacerbate injustice or suffering. Future research may adopt empirical approaches, such as interviews with Buddhist practitioners and AI developers, to strengthen the application of these ethical guidelines in real-world practices. Policymakers should consider Buddhist values in AI regulation to ensure that the resulting technology is not only efficient but also contributes to global well-being and avoids potential harms from unethical AI usage. While this research provides new insights, there are limitations due to its theoretical nature and reliance on literature study. Empirical analysis, such as interviews with AI developers or Buddhist practitioners, could strengthen the findings. Additionally, the application of these ethical guidelines requires adaptation to specific technological contexts, which may necessitate further research.

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