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Religious Subjectivity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence:The Reshaping of Religious Experience under Technological Rationality from a Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from being an external instrument to an environment that increasingly mediates attention, interpretation, and judgment. In religious life, this shift is not merely practical; it is structural. It reconfigures how religious experience is organized, how authority is distributed, and how religious subjectivity is formed. This article examines these transformations through a Buddhist philosophical lens, arguing that the rise of "algorithmic rationality" (a data-driven, predictive, optimizing mode of reason) reshapes the experiential conditions presupposed by Buddhist practice—especially the cultivation of mindfulness (smṛti), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā). Drawing on core Buddhist doctrines—dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), non-self (anātman), the dynamics of craving and grasping (tṛṣṇā/upādāna), and the ethical primacy of intention (cetanā)—the paper analyzes how AI reorganizes the field of experience by: (1) externalizing and commodifying attention, (2) delegating hermeneutic labor to machine mediation, (3) accelerating temporality and weakening the pedagogical value of "slow practice," (4) introducing a new form of authority that is opaque yet persuasive, and (5) intensifying subtle forms of attachment to metrics, personalization, and cognitive convenience. The article distinguishes the legitimate instrumental use of AI from its deeper tendency to colonize meaning-making and proposes a Buddhist-informed normative framework: "technological non-appropriation," "digital restraint," and "contemplative accountability." It concludes that Buddhism can engage AI constructively only by reasserting the irreducibility of liberation to optimization and by safeguarding the soteriological structure of practice against the reification and outsourcing of subjectivity.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Algorithmic Rationality; Buddhist Philosophy; Religious Subjectivity

1. The Problem of Religious Subjectivity Under Algorithmic Conditions

1.1. From "Tools" to "Conditions": Why AI Changes the Question

Discussions of technology and religion often assume a stable structure of religious life into which new tools are inserted. A printing press distributes sutras; a microphone amplifies chanting; a website announces temple activities. In such cases, technology appears as an external means, and the theoretical question becomes largely ethical or institutional: Are the uses appropriate? Do they distort tradition? Who controls access?

Artificial intelligence differs in scale and structure. It is not simply another medium for distribution. AI increasingly functions as a cognitive environment: it filters what is seen, prioritizes what is attended to, summarizes what is read, recommends what is practiced, and predicts what is desired. In this sense, it affects the conditions under which meaning and agency arise. The relation between the religious subject and religious content is no longer direct, even when mediated by texts and teachers; it is increasingly triangulated by systems that optimize attention and interpretability (Tampubolon & Nadeak, 2024). This shift is especially significant for Buddhism because Buddhist practice is centrally concerned with the conditioning of experience itself—how attention is trained, how craving arises, how conceptualization reifies, and how insight dismantles mistaken views.

When AI becomes an interpretive and attentional infrastructure, it does not merely alter what Buddhists do; it may alter how Buddhist experience becomes possible at all. The theoretical issue therefore becomes a matter of religious subjectivity: what is the status of the practitioner's agency, awareness, and responsibility under algorithmic mediation?

1.2. Religious subjectivity in Buddhism: a paradoxical focus

At first glance, "religious subjectivity" may seem an awkward category for Buddhism. Buddhism famously teaches non-self (anātman): the denial of a permanent, independent subject. Yet Buddhism is also intensely concerned with the transformation of experience—precisely the domain that modern thought associates with subjectivity. Buddhist practice presupposes that suffering (duḥkha) arises through ignorance and grasping, which are enacted through patterns of attention and identification. The path (mārga) is not a theoretical doctrine alone but a disciplined reconfiguration of lived experience through ethics (śīla), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā). This implies a functional notion of subjectivity: not a metaphysical self-substance, but a dynamic process of awareness and response that can be cultivated toward liberation. Accordingly, the question is not whether Buddhism "has" a subject. Rather, the question is: what kind of experiential agency is presupposed by Buddhist soteriology, and how is that agency reorganized when algorithmic rationality becomes a pervasive mediator of cognition and desire?

1.3. The thesis and argumentative strategy

This paper advances three claims:

(1) AI embodies a distinct form of technological rationality—algorithmic rationality—that tends to reorganize attention, interpretation, temporality, and authority.

(2) These reorganizations structurally reshape Buddhist religious experience by encouraging externalized attention, outsourced hermeneutics, accelerated practice-temporality, and new attachment-patterns linked to personalization and metrics.

(3) Buddhist philosophy provides both diagnostic and normative resources to engage AI without surrendering the soteriological integrity of practice; however, this requires deliberate restraint and a reassertion of contemplative accountability.

Methodologically, the paper combines conceptual analysis of algorithmic rationality with Buddhist doctrinal and philosophical resources. It does not aim to offer sociological survey data or ethnographic descriptions. Instead, it provides a theoretical account of structural transformation, clarifying why the AI question for Buddhism is fundamentally a question about the formation of experience.

2. Algorithmic Rationality: From Instrumental Means to Cognitive Governance

2.1. Instrumental Rationality and Its Limits

Modern discussions often conceptualize technological rationality as instrumental: a neutral calculus of means to ends. On this view, a tool is morally and spiritually indifferent; what matters is the intention of its user. Much of Buddhist engagement with modern technology has implicitly followed this model, seeing technology as a set of supports (upāya, “skillful means”) that can be used for wholesome ends.

Yet instrumental rationality becomes inadequate when the tool begins to shape the user’s ends. AI systems are not passive instruments. They infer preferences, generate goals by optimizing engagement, and reorder choices through subtle incentives. The user’s intention remains relevant, but it is increasingly situated within an engineered environment that influences attention and desire.

2.2. Key Features of Algorithmic Rationality

Algorithmic rationality, understood as a mode of reasoning and governance, does not merely use numbers; it reorders reality so that what is real and actionable is what can be rendered into data. Quantification and legibility operate as a filtering principle: phenomena that resist measurement—ambivalence, silence, moral struggle, contemplative depth—are pushed to the margins, while what can be counted becomes privileged as “evidence” of truth and value. Prediction then extends this logic temporally by treating the future as a statistically manageable horizon, in which novelty, freedom, and transformation are conceptually reduced to variations of past behavioral regularities. Optimization turns prediction into governance: once the system can anticipate behavior, it can shape it, continuously adjusting informational environments to

maximize a metric that stands in for the "good" (attention, retention, affective satisfaction). Automation completes the circuit by delegating micro-decisions—what to see, what to read, what to practice, what to trust—to processes that bypass reflective deliberation. Finally, opacity and asymmetry introduce an epistemic imbalance: users are governed by outputs whose underlying reasoning is largely inaccessible, while those who design or control the system possess disproportionate power to define categories, defaults, and incentive structures. Taken together, these five features form a self-reinforcing architecture in which human perception and choice are increasingly pre-structured by computational systems, often without the subject's explicit awareness of the conditioning at work.

These features matter religiously precisely because religion—especially Buddhism—cannot be reduced to information acquisition or behavioral compliance. Buddhist practice concerns the transformation of the conditions of experience: how craving arises, how attention is trained, how views are loosened, and how wisdom emerges through disciplined ethical and contemplative cultivation (Chattopadhyay, 2022). Algorithmic rationality, by contrast, tends to treat the inner life as a domain to be rendered legible, predicted, and optimized. In doing so, it converts qualitative transformation into measurable proxies (minutes meditated, streaks maintained, calmness scores, "personalized" progress), and it risks replacing the Buddhist telos of liberation from grasping with a subtler telos of managed well-being and efficient self-regulation. Moreover, Buddhism insists that insight (prajñā) is inseparable from intentionality (cetanā) and cannot be outsourced: the path requires the practitioner to encounter uncertainty, discomfort, and impermanence directly rather than to have these existential pressures engineered away through personalization and reassurance. The tension, then, is not that AI "contradicts" Buddhism at the level of doctrine, but that algorithmic rationality can reorganize the very experiential field in which Buddhist subjectivity is formed—externalizing attention, displacing hermeneutic responsibility, and fostering new attachments to prediction, optimization, and the illusion of control.

2.3. Algorithmic Rationality as a New Kind of Conditioning

Buddhism is, at its core, a theory of conditioning. Dependent origination describes how phenomena arise through conditions, including mental conditions: contact (sparśa), feeling (vedanā), craving (tṛṣṇā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava) (Chowdhury, 2022). Buddhist practice is a disciplined intervention into conditioning: it aims to interrupt habitual chains and to cultivate wholesome conditions.

AI environments can be understood as novel conditioning systems. They systematically shape contact and attention (what is presented), modulate feeling (through affective design), stimulate craving (through novelty and personalization), and encourage clinging (through identity reinforcement, "for you" feeds, and quantified self-tracking). This does not mean AI is inherently "unwholesome," but it means its default logics often align with craving and grasping rather than with restraint and insight.

2.4. Why AI Challenges Religious Subjectivity

Artificial intelligence challenges religious subjectivity not by denying belief or prohibiting practice, but by subtly reconfiguring the loci of responsibility that religious life presupposes (Umbrello, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2025). Religious subjectivity—particularly in Buddhism—depends on the practitioner's cultivated capacity to own attention, to engage in interpretive labor, and to assume ethical responsibility through intentional action (cetanā). Algorithmic rationality, however, systematically displaces these capacities into external infrastructures: attention is steered by ranking and recommendation systems rather than by mindful resolve; interpretation is increasingly delegated to automated summaries and explanations that pre-structure understanding; and ethical deliberation is shaped through nudges, metrics, and social feedback mechanisms that operate prior to conscious reflection. The result is not merely a loss of focus or an increase in convenience, but a deeper reorganization of agency itself. In Buddhist terms, agency is neither an autonomous self nor a passive mechanism; it is a conditioned yet cultivable capacity to respond wisely to experience. When the conditions that shape intention and awareness are technologically engineered in advance—often invisibly—the practitioner's field of moral and contemplative responsibility is narrowed and redirected. What is at stake, therefore, is the integrity of the experiential space in which Buddhist practice unfolds: a space that must allow for deliberate attention, interpretive struggle, and ethically grounded intention, rather than one pre-scripted by systems optimized for prediction, efficiency, and behavioral management.

3. Buddhist Religious Subjectivity and the Structure of Experience

3.1. Non-self as a Siscipline, not a Senial of Agency

The doctrine of non-self denies a permanent, independent ego-substance, but it does not deny the efficacy of intentional action. Karma is unintelligible without intention; liberation is unintelligible without cultivation. Buddhism thus maintains a middle path: it refuses metaphysical selfhood while insisting on moral and contemplative responsibility.

Buddhist subjectivity can therefore be understood as a process of habituation and de-habituation. The practitioner is a nexus of conditions: mental factors, embodied routines, ethical commitments, and interpretive frames. Religious transformation occurs when these conditions are reoriented away from grasping and toward insight and compassion.

3.2. The Triad of Training and the Soteriological Structure

Buddhist practice is classically organized around the three trainings:

(1) Śīla (ethical discipline): restraint, non-harm, and the formation of wholesome conduct.

(2) Samādhi (concentration): stabilization and deepening of attention.

(3) Prajñā (wisdom): insight into impermanence, non-self, and dependent origination.

This structure implies that religious experience is not primarily "content consumption." It is transformative training. The subject is formed through repeated practice, not through episodic inspiration. AI systems, however, operate in an economy of consumption and engagement. Thus

the key question becomes: can AI-mediated environments sustain the disciplines that Buddhism regards as essential to liberation?

3.3. Attention as the Axis of Buddhist Subject Formation

Mindfulness (smṛti) is not merely present-moment awareness; it is a cultivated ability to remember the task, to return to the object, to discern wholesome from unwholesome, and to recognize arising phenomena without grasping. Attention is therefore both epistemic and ethical. It is the medium through which craving is known and loosened. In algorithmic environments, attention is commodified. It becomes a scarce resource competed for by platforms optimized for engagement. Even when Buddhist content is delivered through such platforms, the underlying architecture tends to fragment attention, prioritize novelty, and reward quick gratification. This creates a structural conflict with the Buddhist cultivation of sustained, non-grasping awareness.

3.4. Interpretation and "Right View"

Buddhism is not anti-conceptual, but it treats concepts as provisional. "Right view" is not merely correct doctrine; it is a guiding orientation that supports practice. Interpretation is therefore integral to subject formation: how one reads a teaching shapes how one practices.

Traditional Buddhist hermeneutics involves teacher-student transmission, communal practice, and repeated reflection. Interpretation is enacted through time and relationship. AI-generated explanations may offer accessibility, but they risk converting interpretation into a consumable product. When "understanding" is delivered instantly, the practitioner may bypass the slow, transformative labor of grappling—precisely the labor through which views are refined and attachment to conceptual certainty is weakened.

3.5. Temporality: the Pedagogy of Slowness

Buddhist practice is temporally thick. It presupposes repetition, patience, and gradual cultivation. Even sudden insight traditions presuppose long preparation and ethical grounding. The temporal structure matters because it reshapes desire: it trains the practitioner to tolerate discomfort, to remain with arising phenomena, and to see impermanence directly.

AI systems, by contrast, are temporally thin. They accelerate access, compress learning, and create expectations of immediate results. This acceleration can be useful (e.g., access to teachings), but it risks weakening the formation of patience and the capacity to endure the slow unfolding of insight.

4. How AI Reshapes Buddhist Religious Experience: Mechanisms of Transformation

This chapter analyzes concrete mechanisms by which algorithmic rationality restructures the field of Buddhist practice. The aim is not to demonize technology but to clarify how mediation works.

4.1. Externalization of Attention: from Mindfulness to Managed Focus

In Buddhist practice, mindfulness (smṛti) is not a passive state but an actively cultivated capacity that involves remembering the object of practice, sustaining attention through effort, and repeatedly returning to awareness when distraction arises. This cultivation presupposes that attention is something for which the practitioner bears responsibility: one learns, through discipline, to notice impulses, to resist compulsive reactivity, and to remain present with phenomena as they unfold. Algorithmic systems, by contrast, are designed to manage attention from the outside. Through ranking mechanisms, push notifications, and personalized feeds, they pre-structure what appears, when it appears, and how urgently it demands response. When Buddhist teachings and practices are primarily encountered within such AI-mediated environments, attention subtly shifts from being intention-led to being stimulus-led. Engagement is no longer grounded primarily in the practitioner's deliberate resolve to practice, but in externally generated prompts that invite, interrupt, and redirect focus. Over time, this alters the phenomenology of practice itself: attention becomes reactive rather than reflective, responsive to cues rather than anchored in chosen commitment.

This externalization of attention also transforms the temporal and affective texture of Buddhist practice. Sustained cultivation—sitting with a single object, returning patiently to the breath, or dwelling with difficult mental states—gives way to fragmented micro-engagements dispersed across digital sessions. Practice risks being reorganized into brief, consumable units that fit the rhythms of the attention economy rather than the pedagogical rhythms of contemplative training (O'Donnell, 2015). Moreover, because algorithmic environments reward emotional salience and novelty, even religious or "mindfulness" content is incentivized to hook attention through reassurance, inspiration, or aesthetic appeal. From a Buddhist perspective, this fosters subtle forms of craving (tṛṣṇā): the mind becomes habituated to seeking the next gratifying stimulus, even under the guise of spiritual engagement. The danger, therefore, is not merely that practitioners become distracted, but that their capacity to remain with experience without grasping—precisely the capacity mindfulness is meant to cultivate—is structurally weakened by an environment that continually trains attention to move, select, and desire.

4.2. Outsourcing Hermeneutics: the Machine as Interpreter

AI tools can translate sutras, summarize commentaries, answer doctrinal questions, and generate interpretations. This can lower barriers and broaden access—an undeniably positive possibility. Yet the philosophical risk is the outsourcing of hermeneutic responsibility.

Buddhist understanding is not merely cognitive; it is existential. Interpretive labor is part of transformation: struggling with a teaching reveals one's attachments, assumptions, and cravings for certainty. When AI delivers an interpretation that feels authoritative, the practitioner may mistake clarity for insight.

Moreover, AI interpretations are shaped by training data and optimization goals. They may produce plausible synthesis without lineage sensitivity, context awareness, or ethical accountability. In a tradition where "right view" supports liberation, an interpretive infrastructure

that is optimized for helpfulness rather than truth or soteriological integrity may subtly distort practice.

4.3. Commodification Of Experience: Personalization, Metrics, And Spiritual Consumption

Algorithmic rationality tends to personalize. In consumer contexts, personalization is marketed as empowerment: content "for you." In Buddhist contexts, personalization can feel compassionate and skillful: tailored practices, customized teachings, mood-based meditations. However, personalization easily becomes commodification. The practitioner's experience becomes a target for optimization: calmness, reduced stress, improved productivity. Buddhism does not deny conventional benefits, but it warns against confusing comfort with liberation. When practice is framed primarily as a lifestyle enhancement, it risks reinforcing the very selfing-process Buddhism seeks to expose. Metrics intensify this risk. If meditation apps quantify streaks, minutes, "focus scores," or emotional states, practice becomes entangled with performance and identity. The practitioner may cling to metrics as proof of progress. In Buddhist terms, this is a subtle form of attachment (upādāna): clinging to spiritual identity and achievements.

4.4. Acceleration of Temporality: the "Shortcut" Temptation

AI promises efficiency: faster learning, smarter guidance, optimized routines. Applied to Buddhism, this can generate a "shortcut" mentality: if a system can deliver the best practice for one's personality and schedule, why endure the uncertainty and difficulty of slow cultivation?

The Buddhist path, however, is not reducible to information selection. It is the transformation of craving and ignorance. The desire for shortcuts is itself a form of craving. An AI that caters to that craving may inadvertently strengthen it, turning the path into an instrument for self-improvement rather than liberation.

Acceleration also affects ritual and communal life. If digital systems streamline chanting, automate scheduling, or provide instant doctrinal answers, practitioners may lose the formative value of communal repetition and embodied participation. The ritual is not merely a means; it shapes attention and humility through its very slowness.

4.5. Emergence of a New Authority: Opaque Persuasion and "Machine Charisma"

Traditional Buddhist authority is complex: it involves lineage, ethical conduct, communal recognition, and the tested reliability of teachings. While institutions can fail, authority is, in principle, accountable: teachers can be questioned; communities can respond; texts can be traced.

Algorithmic authority is different. It is persuasive without being accountable. Its outputs feel neutral, objective, and efficient. Yet its reasoning is often opaque, and its incentives may be commercial. When an AI system answers a doctrinal question with confidence, it may acquire a form of "machine charisma." Practitioners may defer to it because it seems omnipresent and instantly responsive.

This creates a structural risk: the displacement of the teacher-student relationship by a system that cannot embody ethics, cannot be held accountable in the same way, and cannot participate in

the lived context of practice. The danger is not that AI "lies," but that it reorganizes epistemic trust in ways that weaken the relational and ethical dimensions of Buddhist learning.

4.6. Reconditioning Craving: Novelty, Reassurance, and Identity Reinforcement

Buddhist psychology emphasizes how craving arises through contact and feeling. Algorithmic environments intensify contact and manipulate feeling through novelty and reassurance. Even spiritual content can become a cycle of reassurance-seeking: the practitioner asks the machine for confirmation, comfort, and interpretation, repeatedly. This can produce a distinct modern pattern: the outsourcing of existential uncertainty. Buddhism, however, treats uncertainty and suffering as sites of insight. If AI continually soothes uncertainty with confident answers and personalized reassurance, it may reduce the practitioner's encounter with duḥkha in its transformative dimension. Additionally, personalization often reinforces identity categories: "You are this kind of person; here is your practice." Buddhism aims to loosen identity fixation. A system that constantly categorizes the user may subtly intensify selfing.

5. Philosophical Tensions and Risks for Buddhist Subjectivity

(1) Intention (cetanā) and responsibility under delegated judgment

In Buddhist ethics, intention is central. Karma is not merely behavior; it is volition and orientation. When AI guides decisions—what to read, what to practice, how to interpret—responsibility becomes distributed. One might object: the user chooses to follow recommendations, so intention remains. Yet Buddhism also recognizes conditioning: choices arise within fields of influence (Wuthnow & Cadge, 2004). If an environment systematically nudges certain behaviors, it can weaken the practitioner's reflective intentionality. This is not determinism; it is erosion of agency through habituation. A Buddhist critique would therefore ask: does AI-mediated practice strengthen or weaken the capacity for wholesome intention? Does it cultivate mindfulness, or does it cultivate reliance? Does it enable ethical reflection, or does it substitute automated judgment for deliberate discernment?

(2) Reification and the subtle transformation of "emptiness" into data

A central insight in many Buddhist traditions is emptiness (śūnyatā): the lack of inherent existence in phenomena. Emptiness is not nihilism; it is the insight that things exist dependently and conceptually. Reification is the opposite tendency: treating constructs as inherently real. Algorithmic systems inherently reify. They must classify, label, and predict. This is not a moral failure; it is a functional requirement. Yet when applied to meditation and spiritual development, reification becomes spiritually dangerous. It can transform states of mind into "objects" to be acquired, optimize compassion into a score, and treat insight as a measurable outcome. From a Buddhist perspective, this confuses conventional truth (useful categories) with ultimate insight (non-grasping understanding). It encourages attachment to representations. The practitioner may come to relate to practice as a managed project rather than a relinquishment of grasping.

(3) The displacement of "knowing" by "being informed"

Buddhist wisdom is not mere information. It is a transformative knowing that changes one's relation to experience. AI can deliver information at scale, but information is not insight. There is therefore a risk of confusing "being informed about Buddhism" with practicing Buddhism. This confusion is amplified when AI outputs are fluent and coherent. Fluency produces epistemic confidence. Yet Buddhist learning often requires encountering paradox, difficulty, and the limits of conceptualization. A system optimized for helpfulness may smooth out precisely the rough edges that provoke deep reflection.

(4) The temptation of spiritual convenience: comfort as the new telos

In many modern contexts, Buddhism is reframed as a therapeutic technique for calmness and productivity. AI-driven wellness platforms can intensify this reframing. The implicit telos becomes comfort and performance. The dharma becomes a tool for better functioning within existing conditions. Buddhism does not deny the relief of suffering. But it diagnoses suffering at a deeper level: attachment to self, impermanence, and the delusion of control. If AI turns Buddhist practice into a tool for self-optimization, it may strengthen the very delusion of control Buddhism seeks to dismantle.

(5) Community, sangha, and the risk of disembodied religiosity

Buddhism traditionally locates religious life within the framework of the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—thereby affirming that community is not an optional supplement to individual practice but a constitutive condition for ethical formation, doctrinal clarification, and spiritual accountability. The sangha provides embodied contexts in which conduct is visible, correction is possible, and compassion is enacted through shared ritual, service, and mutual care. By contrast, AI-mediated religiosity tends toward disembodiment: practice becomes increasingly solitary, on-demand, and customized to individual preference. This shift has far-reaching implications. When practice is removed from communal settings, ethical accountability weakens, as one's conduct is no longer shaped through relational exposure and correction but remains largely private and self-evaluated. Compassion, severed from concrete interpersonal obligation, risks becoming primarily affective or sentimental rather than practiced through sustained engagement with others' needs. Rituals, which in traditional settings function as repetitive, embodied disciplines that cultivate humility, patience, and collective memory, are reduced to optional content streams that can be consumed or skipped without consequence. Likewise, the teacher–student relationship—central to Buddhist transmission and the gradual correction of misunderstanding—may be displaced by self-guided exploration mediated by algorithms, where guidance is plentiful but responsibility is diffuse and challenge is easily avoided. None of this implies that digital engagement is inherently incompatible with Buddhism; rather, it highlights that Buddhist subjectivity presupposes relational and embodied conditions that algorithmic environments, oriented toward personalization and convenience, do not support by default and may actively erode unless consciously counterbalanced.

(6) A new form of attachment: the "algorithmic self"

Closely related to this disembodiment is the emergence of a new form of attachment that may be described as the "algorithmic self." Even as Buddhism offers a sustained critique of substantial selfhood, modern technological environments continuously generate new identity formations. Under algorithmic rationality, the self is rendered as a profile: a statistically inferred pattern of preferences, behaviors, moods, and tendencies that is continually predicted, reinforced, and mirrored back to the user. This algorithmic self is not imposed coercively; it is produced through feedback loops that feel intuitive and affirming—"you like this," "this suits you," "people like you practice this way." For Buddhist practice, this is especially perilous because it intensifies identification precisely at the point where practice seeks to loosen it. The practitioner may become attached to being "a mindful person," "a committed Buddhist," or "an advanced meditator," not as provisional designations for functional roles, but as defended self-concepts sustained by metrics, personalization, and social visibility. Buddhist texts have long warned against attachment to views, spiritual achievement, and subtle forms of pride; AI environments risk producing a technologically amplified version of these tendencies, where identity is stabilized through quantified progress, curated self-presentation, and constant affirmation. Liberation thus becomes more difficult not because the self is crudely reasserted, but because attachment becomes more refined, ambient, and difficult to detect, embedded within systems that continuously invite the practitioner to recognize themselves in the very patterns Buddhism urges them to see as empty and contingent.

6. A Buddhist Theoretical Response: Reclaiming Practice under Technological Rationality

If artificial intelligence reshapes the conditions under which religious experience and subjectivity are formed, a Buddhist response cannot be limited to either technological enthusiasm or outright rejection. Buddhism has historically engaged new cultural and material conditions with remarkable adaptability, yet this adaptability has always been guided by a rigorous soteriological criterion: whether a given practice or tool reduces grasping (upādāna), clarifies intention (cetanā), and supports the cultivation of liberation-oriented wisdom (prajñā). The challenge posed by algorithmic rationality therefore requires a response that is neither reactive nor naïve, but critically discerning. This chapter articulates a set of interconnected Buddhist principles through which religious practice may be reclaimed under conditions increasingly shaped by technological rationality.

6.1. The Principle of Technological Non-Appropriation

At the core of Buddhist practice lies the discipline of non-appropriation: the capacity to relate to phenomena without clinging, identification, or reification. Applied to the contemporary technological environment, this discipline may be reformulated as technological non-appropriation: the use of digital and algorithmic tools without allowing them to become objects of attachment, sources of identity, or substitutes for existential responsibility. From a Buddhist perspective, the ethical and spiritual danger of AI does not primarily reside in its presence, but in the subtle ways it invites appropriation—encouraging the practitioner to seek certainty,

reassurance, efficiency, or self-definition through technological mediation rather than through the transformative work of practice.

Technological non-appropriation therefore does not prohibit the use of AI, nor does it romanticize pre-digital forms of religiosity. Instead, it insists on ontological clarity: AI belongs to the domain of conventional supports (saṃvṛti-satya), not to the domain of liberation. When algorithmic systems are tacitly treated as authoritative interpreters of the Dharma, as reliable indicators of spiritual progress, or as personalized guides to "what one truly needs," they begin to function as objects of grasping. The practitioner may then appropriate technology as a source of identity ("this is how I practice"), control ("the system knows what is best for me"), or reassurance ("my progress is verified"), thereby reinforcing precisely those patterns of attachment that Buddhist practice aims to loosen. Practically, the principle of technological non-appropriation thus implies disciplined limits: AI should not be treated as a definitive dharma authority, optimization metrics should not be mistaken for spiritual development, personalization should not be conflated with wisdom, and convenience should never be allowed to redefine the measure of the path. What is at stake is not technological usage as such, but the preservation of a non-grasping orientation toward all conditioned supports, including the most sophisticated ones.

6.2. Digital Restraint (Saṃvara) as Contemporary Śīla

Buddhist ethics has always emphasized restraint (saṃvara), particularly the guarding of the sense doors and the careful regulation of conditions that give rise to unwholesome mental states. In the context of an AI-driven attention economy, restraint acquires renewed centrality—not as ascetic moralism, but as a pragmatic protection of the conditions necessary for mindfulness and insight. Algorithmic systems are explicitly designed to capture, direct, and monetize attention; without intentional counter-practices, the practitioner's attentional field becomes increasingly fragmented, reactive, and externally governed.

Digital restraint may therefore be understood as a contemporary extension of śīla, responsive to novel forms of conditioning. It involves limiting exposure to algorithmically optimized feeds that privilege novelty and emotional arousal over depth and continuity; establishing clear boundaries around notifications, compulsive checking, and passive scrolling; prioritizing spaces for study and practice that are not structured by engagement-maximization metrics; and cultivating intentional modes of entry into and exit from digital environments rather than remaining in a state of perpetual availability. Such restraint is not a rejection of technology, but a recognition that attention is the primary medium of Buddhist training. If attention is continuously captured, redirected, and exhausted by algorithmic demands, the cultivation of mindfulness becomes structurally undermined. Digital restraint thus functions as an ethical safeguard for contemplative life, preserving the interior space in which awareness can stabilize and insight can mature.

6.3. Contemplative Accountability: Preserving the Teacher, the Sangha, and Lived Correction

One of the most significant risks of algorithmic rationality lies in the displacement of accountability. Algorithmic authority is persuasive precisely because it appears neutral, efficient, and omnipresent, yet it remains fundamentally opaque and ethically unanswerable. Buddhist

practice, by contrast, has always relied on forms of accountability that are relational, embodied, and corrigible. For this reason, a Buddhist response to AI must insist on preserving dimensions of accountability that technological systems cannot replicate.

Teacher accountability remains central: authentic guidance is grounded not merely in informational competence, but in ethical conduct, lived experience, and contextual sensitivity to the practitioner's condition. Sangha accountability is equally indispensable: communal practice exposes blind spots, interrupts self-deception, and grounds compassion in concrete relationships rather than abstract ideals. Embodied accountability—through ritual participation, service, and ethical action—resists the reduction of Buddhism to a purely cognitive or psychological technique. While AI may assist learning by increasing access to texts and explanations, it cannot substitute for these relational structures through which Buddhist subjectivity is formed, challenged, and refined. Without such accountability, practice risks becoming privatized, self-validating, and insulated from the corrective friction that genuine transformation requires.

6.4. Hermeneutic Humility: Resisting the Collapse of Insight into Explanation

A further requirement for reclaiming Buddhist practice under technological rationality is the cultivation of hermeneutic humility. Buddhist traditions consistently distinguish between conceptual understanding and liberating insight, warning against the premature closure of inquiry through reified explanations. AI-generated interpretations and summaries can be valuable aids, but they must be held provisionally. The danger arises when explanation is mistaken for realization, and fluency for wisdom.

Hermeneutic humility involves returning repeatedly to primary texts and traditional commentarial contexts, treating AI outputs as preliminary orientation rather than final judgment, and allowing unresolved questions to remain open as sites of practice rather than problems demanding immediate resolution. It also involves recognizing that not-knowing, confusion, and interpretive struggle are not failures but integral dimensions of Buddhist pedagogy. Insight often emerges not through the accumulation of answers, but through sustained engagement with what resists easy comprehension. In this sense, humility before the limits of explanation is not anti-intellectual; it is a disciplined refusal to allow conceptual clarity to substitute for existential transformation.

6.5. Reorienting "Skillful Means" (upāya) in the AI Era

Buddhism has long demonstrated a capacity to adapt its forms through the principle of skillful means (upāya), adjusting pedagogical strategies to the needs and capacities of different contexts and audiences (Ma Rhea, 2018). However, upāya has never meant the uncritical adoption of whatever is effective or efficient. Skillful means are skillful only insofar as they are guided by wisdom and oriented toward liberation. In the age of artificial intelligence, this principle must be rearticulated with particular care.

AI tools may function as skillful means only if they genuinely support the three trainings—ethical discipline, concentration, and wisdom—rather than subtly undermining them. Accordingly, the use of AI in Buddhist contexts must be evaluated through normative questions: Does it strengthen ethical intention, or does it displace responsibility into automated systems? Does it

deepen attention, or does it fragment awareness through constant stimulation? Does it cultivate wisdom, or does it replace insight with readily consumable information? Does it strengthen sangha and compassion, or does it intensify isolation, self-curation, and identity fixation? Efficiency alone cannot serve as a criterion of skillfulness. A tool that accelerates access while weakening ethical intentionality, attentional stability, or communal accountability cannot be considered upāya in a genuinely Buddhist sense, regardless of its technological sophistication.

Taken together, these principles articulate a Buddhist theoretical response that neither rejects artificial intelligence nor allows it to redefine the structure of religious life. They affirm that liberation cannot be optimized, subjectivity cannot be outsourced, and wisdom cannot be automated. What Buddhism offers in the age of AI is not a competing technology, but a disciplined way of inhabiting conditioned systems without being dominated by them—a way of using tools without surrendering the work of awakening to the logic of calculation, prediction, and control.

7. Conclusion

The rise of artificial intelligence confronts Buddhism with a decisive question: can the tradition preserve the soteriological structure of practice in an environment increasingly optimized to capture attention, outsource interpretation, and accelerate desire?

This paper has argued that algorithmic rationality reshapes Buddhist religious experience structurally. It externalizes attention, outsources hermeneutic labor, accelerates temporality, introduces opaque authority, and fosters new forms of attachment tied to personalization and metrics. These shifts are not incidental. They reorganize the very conditions under which Buddhist subjectivity—understood as a cultivated process of ethical intention, mindful awareness, and liberating insight—can be formed.

Yet Buddhism also offers powerful resources for response. Dependent origination clarifies that AI environments are conditioning systems; non-self clarifies that liberation cannot be outsourced to a system; the primacy of intention clarifies that responsibility remains central even under mediation; and the three trainings clarify that wisdom is not reducible to informational optimization.

The most constructive engagement with AI is therefore neither rejection nor uncritical adoption. It is disciplined discernment: technological non-appropriation, digital restraint, contemplative accountability, and hermeneutic humility. On this basis, Buddhism can use AI as a conventional support while resisting its tendency to colonize meaning-making. The ultimate criterion remains the same as in classical Buddhism: whether a practice reduces grasping, deepens compassion, and opens the possibility of liberation.

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