Reflections on AI, Buddhism, Bhutan, and GMC

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Author's note: *A version of the reflections on Bhutanese identity and Gelephu Mindfulness City in this essay previously appeared as an op-ed in Kuensel, July 2024. This essay develops those reflections further in light of AI.*

Introduction

Long before Einstein's famous discovery that "time is relative", many Buddhist masters had meticulously examined subjects such as time and matter. By its very definition, time is temporal, and therefore a relative construct. When I hear that "time is relative," I think of masters such as Nāgārjuna, whose works go into great detail on what constitutes relative truths such as time. Such truths have become glib statements, catch phrases more appropriately used on greeting cards and social gatherings than in serious discussions and work conventions.

With an increased emphasis on corporate culture and progress, such insight is being disregarded. Profound truths are often passed off as abstract philosophy; thought-provoking enough in personal reflection but pseudoscientific and/or too fluffy for real life. Within the messy confluence of old and new, east and west, I believe that in modern Bhutan we are pigeonholing and devaluing some of the most profound, timeless insights that have been passed down to us.

When and how these developments took place are questions worth asking, especially now with His Majesty The King's vision of building a mindfulness city in Bhutan.

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Wisdom Goes West

At what point did we start missing the wisdom of our Buddhist ancestors? Why are ideas such as "time is relative" or "mind over matter" so often credited to Western thinkers? With AI and Google search at our fingertips, I imagine many of us would readily believe that these nuggets of wisdom were introduced to the world by physicists and geologists such as Albert Einstein and Sir Charles Lyell.

If a young Bhutanese student asks an AI chatbot about the nature of time, it will likely credit Einstein. It will probably not mention Nāgārjuna. It will not mention the centuries of Buddhist philosophical inquiry that preceded Western discovery.

AI models are not built to recognise how the programming prioritises partial, Western-centric narratives. They simply aggregate what is available, and what is available is overwhelmingly in English and overwhelmingly dominated by a Western intellectual history.[2] While these thinkers should be commended for sharing their insights, such wisdom existed and transpired long before them-even in our own country.

My aim in this essay is to trace how the displacement of Buddhist wisdom by Western frameworks, mediated through English-language translation, modern education, and now AI, work to challenge the Bhutanese identity. I argue that the Gelephu Mindfulness City offers an opportunity to respond to such growing challenges, but only if we consciously engage with our heritage rather than allow it to be mediated by foreign frameworks.

Losing our Roots

Bhutan is unique in that much of our nation's history is a retrospective projection of the past, based on Buddhist principles.

Since much of Bhutanese history was passed down orally, a significant portion of our known history was not documented in a uniform, organised

2 Tao et al. (2024), evaluating widely used large language models against nationally data across 107 countries and territories, found that these models consistently reflect cultural values resembling English- speaking and Protestant European societies. Naous et al. (2024) that this Western bias persists even when models are prompted in Arabic and set within an Arab cultural context.

manner until the latter end of the 20th century (Rose, 1977; Tobgay, 2022). What little has been documented is found mostly in Buddhist liturgy and narratives. Thus, the Bhutanese identity-by virtue of its history-is intimately bound to Buddhist ideals. Not to say that we are all Buddhist in Bhutan, or that we should be. The point is, timeless insights taught by the Buddha have long been ingrained in our culture and identity.

The preservation of culture is an intuitive part of Bhutanese livelihood, reflected in our country's national policies. But what is culture? What is our identity? Surely we are not defined simply by our clothing or language?

Culture is in constant flux, and people perpetually adopt new trends and shed old customs. If we were to take seriously the question of what it means to be Bhutanese, should we not be more concerned about our inner values than preserving our outward customs?

If it is not enough that we gloss over the knowledge and insights of our wisdom traditions, we are starting to parrot all kinds of narratives that we pick up from international media and knowledge systems. Trauma, anxiety, addiction, and self-esteem, for example, are ideas that are understandably important in this age of uncertainty and social media. But I feel we must be more discerning about the words we choose to use and the concepts that we subscribe to. The implications of psychoanalytic theory, for example, have influenced the meaning of words such as mind and mindfulness, suffering and freedom.

Lost in Translation

I touched on some of these challenges in this journal, a decade ago (Dorji, 2016). At the time, most of us probably considered "AI" to be pure fantasy, something out of the Terminator films or the Matrix.

Our understanding of Buddhism in Bhutan has already been shaped by modern education, international media and other forces of change for decades. Even before AI, a growing dependence on English-language and secondary sources, compounded by a decline in Dzongkha and Chöke[3]

3 Referred to as Classical Tibetan by some, this is the classical liturgical language developed to translate the Buddhist canon from Sanskrit, and much of its philosophical vocabulary still carries that Sanskrit inheritance.

literacy, meant we were already struggling to encounter Buddhist wisdom on its own terms.

Our idea of what mindfulness is, for example, has for years been shaped by Western authors like Eckhart Tolle (*The Power of Now*). There are self-help books and clinical-psychology research readily available online. We have podcasts, YouTube videos, snippets on social media at our disposal, and nearly all of it consumed in English. Even when one looks for the source material itself, we have to read translations rendered in English, by non-Bhutanese, working carefully and in good faith.

However good the translators' intentions are, the English language comes with its own set of assumptions and meanings pushing forward what decolonial theorists call an epistemic zero point.[4] More often than not, important nuances are lost in translation.[5]

Take the word reincarnation, for example. In English, it implies something close to a soul passing from one body into the next, a continuous self simply changing vessels. This is actually antithetical to traditional Buddhist teachings.

There are thousands of source materials attributed to the Buddha, and thousands of commentaries that would tell you that there is no such thing as a soul, and traditional terms such as *yangsi* and *tulku*, usually translated as reincarnation, carry no such implication. At best, according to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (2025), the word *yangsi* means something closer to continuity than to a soul being reborn.

Similarly, the word enlightenment has now been adopted by Buddhists around the world. But somehow, the word itself carries the residue of eighteenth-century Europe, an age of reason and empirical proof, as we are taught, and comes with an implicit promise that one day you simply know everything, all at once.

4 The term comes from decolonial theorist Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007), who uses it to describe the pretence that one way of knowing-Western science, or a dominant language like English-is not a perspective at all, but a neutral (and, therefore, standard) standpoint from which every other tradition can be measured and judged.

5 What is not lost, though, is the irony that I am making this argument in English, for a Bhutanese journal, and largely for a Bhutanese audience.

However, our traditional language is very rich and nuanced, and the concept of a Buddha can be expressed in a multitude of ways, some of which are used to describe what Prince Siddhartha attained or, depending on the context, got rid of.

Almost all of these nuances are not only not expressed through the word enlightenment, and one could argue that the word enlightenment, because of its Greek etymology, could even hinder one's understanding of what Buddhist practitioners are trying to describe.

What is lost in translation is not limited to broad concepts like reincarnation and enlightenment. Think about how we learn about historical figures like Pema Lingpa, whose life and legacy are now mediated through English-language scholarship and, moving forward, AI-generated summaries.

Whether one is casually looking up information on Pema Lingpa or a dedicated researcher looking into his tradition, one has no choice but to rely on what is available. For the vast majority of us around the world, and now ironically in Bhutan as well, that means relying on materials in English over the original source materials.

Interpreting History

Modern scholarship on Pema Lingpa is limited, and, broadly speaking, narrows into two approaches. The first, represented by the British scholar Michael Aris, approaches Pema Lingpa with scepticism. Aris notes that Pema Lingpa received no formal religious training and suggests that his skills in metalworking and woodwork may have helped him fabricate the treasures he claimed to discover (Samuel, 1993, p. 296).

He catalogues accusations of fraud that Pema Lingpa faced from contemporaries and concludes that he was an outright fraud, albeit one who "made a lasting contribution to the cultural and spiritual life of their regions" (Aris, 1989, p. 5, as cited in Samuel, 1993, pp. 296–298).

The second perspective, represented by Sarah Harding, takes the tradition seriously on its own terms. Harding presents Pema Lingpa as a saint, a

treasure revealer[6] whose revelations continue to animate the religious and cultural fabric of Bhutan (Harding, 2003). Her work explains Pema Lingpa's *terma* revelations within the *Vajrayāna* Buddhist framework-the concealment of sacred teachings by Padmasambhava and their later discovery through spiritual revelation (Harding, 2003).

The problem with having these approaches is a lack of methodological reflection, and neither makes its epistemic assumptions explicit. The first approach does not consider the theoretical underpinnings of Buddhist traditions, instead focusing on an "objective" historical-critical approach, and the second assumes that the reader is already somewhat familiar with the theoretical groundwork.

This is why, in such cases, AI-based information retrieval does not meaningfully engage with either of these approaches. It aggregates and synthesises available textual sources-largely in English-without transparently disclosing their provenance, methodological commitments, or the contextualising discourse.

Ask an AI tool about Pema Lingpa and you will get a composite portrait pieced together from encyclopedia entries, traditional hagiographies, and the occasional reference to scholars in the field. Yet AI lacks the capacity to properly discern and draw from these sources, to explain why they disagree, or to acknowledge that in order to understand someone like Pema Lingpa, one must discuss, engage, and, where necessary, challenge the assumptions that underpin modern academic approaches. This is work that AI, at this stage, does not seem to do.

This has particular implications for a modern Bhutanese reader who uses AI. For many of us, Pema Lingpa is not just a historical figure. Karma Phuntsho notes that "the spirit of Pema Lingpa permeates Bhutan's religious, cultural, social and political spheres" (Phuntsho, 2013, as cited in Pema Wangchuk, 2024, p. 12), and the University of Cambridge describes

6 Treasure revealers, also known as tertöns, are important figures in Tibetan Buddhism. They are believed to have the ability to discover spiritual treasures or teachings (Tib. terma) that were mainly hidden by Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rinpoche, a renowned Buddhist master who lived in the eighth century. According to tradition, Guru Rinpoche hid these treasures throughout Tibet and surrounding areas, with the prescient intention that they would be revealed at the appropriate time in the future when they could bring benefit to beings. These treasures take various forms, including sacred texts, statues, and relics.

Pema Lingpa as "Bhutan's foremost religious figure" whose tradition "underpin[s] the Bhutanese cultural identity" (Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge, n.d.).[7]

His descendants include the Royal family; his revealed teachings continue to structure Nyingma practice in Bhutan; his monasteries remain active centres of ritual life and pilgrimage (Pema Wangchuk, 2024, pp. 12, 14-15). Pema Lingpa is a foundational presence in Bhutanese cultural and religious identity largely because he is a homegrown tertön.[8]

To encounter Pema Lingpa through an AI-generated summary is to encounter a figure stripped of the interpretive traditions that give him meaning. He is presented instead as a collection of biographical facts whose miraculous deeds are recounted without the philosophical foundations of Buddhism through which Buddhists relate to figures like Pema Lingpa.[9]

AI may appear not to take sides, but this does not mean that AI is actually neutral or objective. AI amalgamates whatever information is available, ignoring the methodological assumptions and leaving out the philosophical foundations of the tradition. Its presentation of Bhutan and Buddhism is, at best, a superficial mashup of information.

As Tyson Yunkaporta writes, knowledge transmission requires cultural frameworks aligned with patterns of creation, not extraction and aggregation-a critique that extends directly to how AI, trained on Western assumptions, mishandles non-Western traditions (Yunkaporta, 2019; Abdilla et al., 2021).

This might not seem like a big deal. Why not endorse ideas that are accessible and useful? One could argue that if it is now easier than ever before to access information on figures like Pema Lingpa, why not?

7 I also draw here on the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit website at Cambridge, which hosted a project on Pema Lingpa involving Karma Phuntsho. It is worth noting the irony that even a Bhutanese scholar's work on Pema Lingpa is most readily accessible to a Bhutanese reader through an English-language, foreign academic institution. I believe this is a small illustration of the larger problem of mediation I am attempting to describe. That I am making this point in English, in a Bhutanese journal, for a Bhutanese reader, is another.

8 This is particularly important given the fact that the majority of tertöns hailed from areas outside of Bhutan, often originating from Tibet and other parts of the Himalayas.

9 The tradition of Pema Lingpa, and philosophical foundations of Buddhism allow for prophecy, nonlinear time, and the transmission of wisdom in ways that conventional historiography does not easily accommodate.

But should we compromise proper learning for easy access? Do we voluntarily surrender our own traditional values? Our Monarchs and ancestors have done everything they could to ensure Bhutan's sovereignty and safeguard our unique heritage-including in our future with the Gelephu Mindfulness City. It would be a huge loss if we were to allow the vast and profound insights of our wisdom heritage to be displaced or sidelined. It is one thing to look unique and sovereign. It is entirely another thing to be authentic and genuinely independent in our mindsets.

My intention is not to criticise Western ideas. Rather, I argue that Western values and principles need not define our outlook on the world and should absolutely not supersede the timeless wisdom that is profound, relevant, and still very much alive in our culture.

As much as our Buddhist teachers need to communicate more effectively, those of us that consider ourselves to be critical thinkers could certainly learn to be more reflexive and open minded. To meaningfully connect with a figure like Pema Lingpa is to engage with his teachings and to practise them. Practitioners of his tradition connect with Pema Lingpa as a principle rather than a historical figure.

AI On Our Own Terms

AI has changed, and will continue to change the course of history. With an increasing dependence on AI tools for everyday tasks, work, research and even entertainment, right now is a critical juncture in Bhutanese history.

What I have shared in this paper are just a few anecdotes and examples, to bring attention to the pressing need for those of us who care about the Buddha dharma to start connecting with our wisdom heritage now. If we do not, by the time Gelephu Mindfulness City begins to materialise, I fear that we may no longer be custodians of the Buddha's teachings.

Buddhists around the world may increasingly rely on these same flawed AI systems, and Bhutanese may end up as guests in our own tradition, rather than its custodians. Our temples may function as museums and wellbeing centres, and we may just play host to scholars and practitioners from outside Bhutan.

Beyond Bhutan, if Buddhists around the world come to rely on these same flawed AI systems, who is to say what will happen to the Buddha's teachings? We may end up with something that appears Buddhist, but could lose too much of what has been painstakingly preserved, experienced and passed down for over 2,600 years.

Whether we accept it or not, AI is here to stay. The fact is, many of us in Bhutan now speak English, which has also become a first language for many of the young Bhutanese growing up in diaspora communities. This presents a distinct challenge of its own, one that I cannot fully address here, but it also means we have the linguistic and cultural access to engage with these global platforms directly.

With the Gelephu Mindfulness City envisioned as a place where Buddhist traditions from around the world can convene and collaborate, Bhutan is uniquely placed to ask a difficult question: How do we want AI to speak about our traditions, and on whose terms?

Rather than seeing GMC only as a showcase for wellbeing and mindfulness, we could also treat it as a space where practitioners, scholars, and technologists sit together and decide what it would mean for an AI system to learn from Bhutan, not just describe Bhutan.

This does not mean we will suddenly build our own competitor to the largest global AI models. It does mean, however, that we can choose to take responsibility for the sources and perspectives that AI draws on when it talks about Buddhism and Bhutan.

If GMC becomes a place where living lineages, translation projects such as 84000, Bhutanese-language materials, and technical expertise meet, then the question is no longer only "How will AI change Bhutan?" but also, "How might Bhutan contribute to the AI systems that shape global understandings of Buddhism and Bhutanese culture?"

His Majesty The King works tirelessly doing everything in his power to safeguard our people and values. Why else would GMC be in the works? Why else would His Majesty emphasise mindfulness and compassion? Is that not a call for us to revisit and carefully examine our values?

I do not believe His Majesty is simply trying to entice the world with exotic words and ideas. Personally, I take the GMC initiative as a Royal Command for us to become more mindful and resilient. Life may not be perfect here in our small Kingdom, yet in these turbulent times, I feel thankful to have someone remind me that we need to live consciously and compassionately in a world that is being torn apart by war and dwindling resources. I pray, as a Buddhist and a Bhutanese, that we are able to answer that call with the depth and authenticity it deserves.

Afterword: I have developed the arguments shared here with Claude, DeepSeek, ChatGPT, and Perplexity, and I intend to do the same with other AI tools in due course. Because these platforms increasingly shape how knowledge is accessed, I believe they need to be exposed to perspectives that challenge their default modes of synthesis. More broadly, in my own experience using AI, I have found it consistently draws from Western descriptions and understanding, occasionally offers quotes that cannot actually be verified, and requires heavy pushback and feedback. I note also that projects like 84000 are working to translate the Tibetan Buddhist canon into modern languages, with contextual explanations that address the very issues of nuance and interpretation raised in this essay.[10] *My hope is that these platforms might draw on such resources, and on the broader discussions emerging from Bhutan, to become more aware of the nuances and complexities of Bhutanese and Buddhist traditions.*

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10 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha was founded by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and aims to translate roughly 70,000 pages of the Kangyur and 161,800 pages of the Tengyur into modern languages (Lewis, 2025).

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