AI and Spiritual Practice

The Druk Journal Interviews Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

With the increasing impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on human governance, The Druk Journal asks Buddhist teacher, filmmaker, and writer, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche (DJK Rinpoche), to share some thoughts on AI and spiritual practice.

TDJ: Is AI different from the technological innovations that have changed our lives in the past?

DJK Rinpoche[1]: No. Human beings have always innovated – from prolonging life to walking on the moon – in the hope of discovering new things and making life better, happier, and more fulfilling. That has not changed, and so we keep innovating and never finding the ultimate solution we seek.

Some even argue that, with all our innovation, the world has more pain and suffering than ever. I have mixed feelings about that view because innovation has produced some good things, like finding cures for illnesses that once could kill you.

TDJ: Should Bhutan try to catch up with the world in the use of AI?

DJK Rinpoche: Bhutan has no choice. In fact, we are probably already some years behind the game because we Bhutanese are so in love with the past, and so worried - if not panicked - that we might lose our past. Far fewer Bhutanese really think about the present and even fewer about the future.

We need to recognise that, in the way they manifest now, our Bhutanese schools, secular and religious institutes, customs and traditions may become obsolete in 20 years or so. But if we are aware and prepared for that, we may still manage to keep their core, quintessential essence as we glide through

1 Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche is an eminent Bhutanese lama, thinker, writer and filmmaker. He is the author of several books including What Makes You Not a Buddhist and Not for Happiness - a Guide to the So-called Preliminary Practices. His latest flim is 'Pig at the Crossing'.

the 21st century. Denying or ignoring that reality, on the other hand, will land us in a very sad state.

TDJ: How can AI be a useful tool in spiritual practice?

DJK Rinpoche: That is a much more complicated question. But the short answer is that AI is a tool, and any tool can be useful or a distraction. We can use a finger or stick to point to the moon, but we have a very strong tendency to look at the finger or stick. This is always a paradox on the path. Whatever helps us can also harm us. As the great 11th century master Tilopa said: "What binds idiots liberates the wise."

TDJ: Can AI ever replace human activity in the community?

DJK Rinpoche: If you mean "activity" in an external sense, then this is already happening. But sentient beings also have internal activities like intention and motivation.

I recently told students of mine who are studying to become Buddhist scholars and teachers that even the most complicated Buddhist philosophical questions can easily be answered by ChatGPT from multiple angles, with elaborations and copious references to verify the answers. And AI can do all that instantly without having to make appointments with students, dig through libraries, or flick through pages. And people can use it naked in their rooms or sitting on their toilet seats any time of day or night.

So I told these students that if the role of a khenpo, scholar or Buddhist teacher is just to dispense Buddhist information, then those jobs are over, and they will not find a job. Financially, emotionally, and at every level, AI is much cheaper.

So Buddhist lamas and teachers should really be doing something that AI cannot do – at least not yet. With a kind heart, they could bring someone to a restaurant, buy them a cup of tea, and listen to their stories and challenges. At least for now, I do not believe AI can do that. And that kind of personal care is extremely valuable.

TDJ: What is the best mindset to deal with AI?

DJK Rinpoche: One that has no prejudice or fear, and that is confident and aware.

Unfortunately, we tend to feel so secure in our familiar comfort zones that we usually dismiss anything new, or think we do not need it. But if we could really invest in and nurture what makes us human, which is our awareness and consciousness, there is no reason why we cannot be confident and aware.

What we really need is to be diligent in narrating our own stories with our own definitions. That is crucial. Sadly, we human beings have a weakness in falling for the first piece of information we get, especially if it is well packaged and articulated.

So, for years now, Bhutanese students have relied on Wikipedia and Google and now on ChatGPT for everything. It may be a lost cause to think we Bhutanese can really overcome that tendency when even the mighty Japanese and Indians have lost their own narrative.

So, 99.9% of Indians today use search engines like Google for their research, even when studying their own Indian culture, like Ayurveda recipes for example. They have become slaves of narratives originated from, and truths manufactured in San Diego, California. If Elon Musk wants to amuse himself with his new SpaceX by manipulating half a million Bhutanese to like durian (a fruit) within six months, he may well have the power to do it.

Many will be offended by my saying that, in this regard, I am very impressed with the Chinese who have shunned so-called freedom of information protocols by banning Facebook and Google and creating their own narrative.

I really hope that at least some of us Buddhist stakeholders will try to have a little influence on what we narrate. That is so necessary in our modern Buddhist world, where Buddhist morality, conduct and ethics are already defined through western eyes and imprisoned within a western framework.

TDJ: Today there are robot monks… what impact will this have on spiritual practice?

DJK Rinpoche: I do not know. It is too early to say, so we will have to wait and see. Personally, if I were to wake up to the sight of a monk with a robot's face, I would probably faint. But I recently heard of a European who got terribly depressed when his AI girlfriend was disloyal. So, I would rejoice if we could create a robot Buddhist monk to help such a person see a glimmer of the truth even at a mediocre level.