Science Technology and Sustainability Review
Volume 2, Article 3 | August 2025

CamTech University Press

Toward Humane AI: Reframing AI Through Buddhist Ethics and Eastern Moral Traditions

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly impacts all facets of human life—from healthcare and finance to education and surveillance—conversations surrounding AI ethics have gained prominence. However, most ethical debates concerning AI are rooted in Western intellectual traditions. This study advocates for the incorporation of Buddhist ethics and Eastern moral traditions, including the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nagarjuna, as crucial components in redefining the future of AI. Buddhism, emphasizing compassion, interdependence, non-harming, and emptiness *(sūnyatā)* (សុញ្ញតា) presents a moral framework wherein technical advancement serves as a method to alleviate suffering *(Dukkha Samudaya)* (ទុក្ខសមុទយៈ) rather than an ultimate goal. The study presents a "Humane AI" framework by connecting the Buddhist perspective with the intrinsic constraints of AI, such as its lack of subjectivity and inability to achieve wisdom. This framework prioritizes mindfulness, intention, and alleviation of suffering, encouraging developers and policymakers to walk a Middle Path (មជ្ឈិមាបដិបទា) in AI development.

Keywords: Humane AI, Eastern Moral Philosophy, Emptiness *(Śūnyatā)*, Compassionate AI, Middle Way *(Madhyamaka)*

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a disruptive force, transforming businesses, altering labor markets, and redefining human-machine interaction. Nonetheless, the rapid development of AI brings concerns regarding bias, monitoring, degradation of mental health, subsidence of autonomy, and an increase of socio-economic inequalities. These detriments frequently contribute to both direct and structural suffering for beings and communities. Buddhist ethics prioritize the relief of suffering *(dukkha)*, compassion *(karuṇā)*, and mindfulness *(sati)* as fundamental ethical imperatives, in contrast to the dominant beneficial and deontological frameworks in Western ethics. Ethical considerations for AI development are usually an afterthought and add-ons through regulation and risk assessment, in addition to the epistemological bias such as through its binary logical framework. At our Buddhist

Peer review under responsibility of Research and Innovation Center, CamTech University.
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AI Ethics Center we established at CamTech University in Cambodia, we examine the ethical aspects of AI development through the perspective of Buddhist ethics and Eastern moral traditions, presenting an innovative moral framework that transcends rigid boundaries in favor of a more complex, interdependent, and human-centered approach. This paper is a series of research papers where social issues such as *economic crisis*, *AI* and *sustainability* and *the environment* are addressed through the Buddhist philosophy, particularly the Noble Eightfold Path or Middle Path.

2. Suffering *(dukkha)* in the Age of AI

2.1. Suffering

There are several ways that AI makes Dukkha, or suffering, getting worse, both directly and indirectly. The aforementioned are some of the methods:

- **Emotional Suffering *(citta dukkha)* (ចិត្តទុក្ខៈ):** Algorithms that change how people pay attention (like on social media) can make people depressed, anxious, lonely, and hurt themselves.
- **Inequality:** AI-powered systems can make healthcare, education, jobs, and law enforcement even more unequal.
- **Surveillance and Control:** Facial recognition and data collection can take away your freedom and privacy.
- **Automation Anxiety:** Millions of people are worried about losing their jobs because of automation, which makes them unsure about their future and their finances.

AI could help minimize suffering in some ways, including by improving medical diagnosis, predicting disasters, and personalizing learning. However, the existing paradigms that guide its development typically don't include ethical reflection based on a deep, caring relationship with all living things.

2.2. Buddhist Ethical Approach to Suffering

A fundamental philosophy of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths (អរិយសច្ច) (Figure 1), which can be interpreted as a moral compass for AI:

- ***Dukkha*** (ទុក្ខសច្ចៈ)**:** What form of suffering is present or anticipated with this AI system?
- ***Samudaya*** (សមុទយសច្ចៈ)**:** What causes this suffering (e.g., craving for control, profit motives, ignorance)?
- ***Nirodha*** (និរោធសច្ចៈ)**:** Can this suffering be alleviated through ethical design or governance?
- ***Magga*** (មគ្គសច្ចៈ)**:** What is the Noble Eightfold Path for creating compassionate and skillful AI?

The First Noble Truth in Buddhism says that pain *(dukkha)* is a natural aspect of life. The concept of being ethical goes beyond simply to follow the rules; it's also to actively do things that make this suffering less. The role of intent *(cetana)*, the mental impulse that comes before and shapes every action, is at the heart of this ethical approach. In Buddhist thought, it is not the mere act that defines its moral weight, but the intention behind it. As stated in the

Anguttara Nikāya: "It is volition, monks, that I call karma; for having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind." This emphasis on intent highlights that even technologically sophisticated tools like AI must be evaluated not only based on outcomes but on the motivations and ethical vision of their creators. Why are we building this system? From what mental state—greed, compassion, ignorance, or wisdom—does it arise? Ethical AI, therefore, must be grounded in wholesome intent, mindful awareness, and a sincere aspiration to reduce suffering.

Figure 1: The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Paths

Source: Adopted from Heng (2020)

2.3. Nagarjuna, Emptiness, and the Ontology of AI: The Middle Path of Emptiness

Another key concept in Buddhism that can guide AI Ethics is the **Middle Path (Figure 1)**. In Buddhism, the Middle-Path (មជ្ឈិមាបដិបទា) is about balance — not going to extremes. It means living wisely, without chasing pleasure or punishing ourselves. But it's also something deeper. It's closely connected to the idea of emptiness (*sūnyatā*). Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE), the founder of the *Madhyamaka* school of Mahayana Buddhism, introduced the concept of *(sūnyatā)* (សុញ្ញតា), or emptiness—not as nihilism, but as a denial of intrinsic, independent essence in all phenomena. Everything, including technology and AI, exists only in interdependent co-arising

(*pratītyasamutpāda*) (បដិច្ចសមុប្បាទ). For Nagarjuna, the self, ethics, and even knowledge are empty of inherent existence. This does not negate their functionality but invites humility, contextual sensitivity, and relational awareness.

Applying Nagarjuna's insights on the middle path of emptiness, AI ethics can be reframed as the following:

- **There is "No Inherent Evil or Good in AI":** Technology is empty—it is not inherently good or evil. Its ethical value arises from context and intention.
- **On Interdependence:** AI systems are embedded in vast networks—data collectors, programmers, users, environments. Ethical responsibility is distributed and relational.
- **On the Middle Path:** Avoid both extremes of AI utopianism and AI fatalism. Ethical assessment must navigate between extremes.

Madhyamaka as a major philosophical tradition challenges developers and ethicists to abandon egoistic, individualistic frames of control and instead cultivate an awareness of systems, conditions, and dependent responsibilities.

3. Humanistic Buddhism and AI Practice

3.1. Core Ethical Values for AI

In accordance with Buddhist teachings, we present the subsequent ethical framework for Humane AI (Table 1). An ethical approach to AI, informed by fundamental Buddhist principles, commences with Ahimsa, the dedication to prevent harm, guaranteeing that technology enhances rather than detracts. It is influenced by *Karunā*, integrating compassion into algorithms to ensure they operate with empathy and consideration. Through Sati, developers engage in conscious awareness when managing data—ensuring transparency, ethics, and respect. Utilizing Upaya, AI systems employ contextual understanding to adeptly address various human demands. Rooted in *Anattā*, the doctrine of non-self, AI is engineered not solely for ego or profit, but for the common welfare of humanity. These principles serve as a framework for developers, politicians, and educators to assess and direct AI initiatives.

Principle	**Ethical Interpretation in AI Context**
Ahimsa (អហិង្សា)	Design and deploy AI systems that avoid harm to individuals, societies, and ecosystems.
Karuṇā (ករុណា)	Embedding compassion in algorithms, especially in sensitive areas like healthcare, education, and welfare.
Sati (Mindfulness) (សតិ)	Practice mindful data use: Transparent, careful data practices; awareness of long-term consequences.

Upaya (ឧបាយ/ មធ្យោបាយ)	Build AI that adapts skillfully to context — not one-size-fits-all, but thoughtful and responsive.
Anattā (Non-Self) (អនត្តា)	Moving beyond ego-centric AI (e.g., profit and power maximization) to design for shared well-being and collective good.

Table 1: Core Ethical Values for AI

Both humanistic Buddhism and post-humanist ethics concern the hierarchical boundaries that separate life and death, people and machines. The idea of oneness and coexistence that Master Hsing Yun talks about is similar to post-humanist ideas of transcendence and pluralism. However Humanistic Buddhism says that people must change from the inside out. Zheng (2024) discovers that robust AI and transhumanism may prioritize physical enhancement over spiritual enlightenment.

Nagarjuna's perspective on non-duality contests the subject-object dualism. AI systems are intrinsically linked to human intention, data, and interaction.

This encompasses the subsequent elements:

- Collective Accountability: We jointly shape the advantages and detriments of AI.
- Shared Existence: AI is not an isolated entity but rather an integral component of an interdependent moral ecosystem.
- Analyzing Selfish Design: Transition from control-oriented frameworks to care-oriented frameworks.

Nagarjuna instructs us to perceive AI as devoid of intrinsic value—neither intrinsically beneficial nor detrimental, but potent contingent upon its causes and conditions. This perspective enables us to uphold ethical vigilance while fostering creative openness.

3. Future Directions

To make progress toward Humane AI, we propose

- **Ethics Curriculum:** Integrate Buddhist and Eastern moral traditions in AI ethics education.
- **AI *Sanghas*** (សង្ឃ/ក្រុម/ពួក ឬសហគមន៍): Cross-disciplinary think tanks grounded in mindfulness and compassion.
- **Policy Design:** Create global AI regulations that include non-Western moral values.
- **AI for Dukkha Alleviation** (*Dukkha Samudaya)* (ទុក្ខសមុទយៈ): Prioritize technologies aimed at reducing human suffering—mental health, elderly care, climate crisis response, etc.

Finally, we propose some questions for reflections and further investigations:

- How can the Buddhist *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma challenge binary ethics and deepen AI's capacity to navigate moral ambiguity?

- "How can ethical frameworks evolve fast enough to guide superintelligent AI at the onset of the technological singularity?"
- How can emerging technologies integrate ethical singularity thinking before reaching irreversible autonomy?
- Do diverse moral traditions (e.g., Buddhist, Confucian, Indigenous) offer sustainable models for an ethical singularity?

4. Conclusion

AI transcends mere functionality; it is a moral artifact shaped by the developers' objectives and worldview. Buddhist ethics, particularly Nagarjuna's philosophy, provide a comprehensive, compassionate, and interdependent framework for contemplating and directing the advancement of AI. Confucianism posits that the cultivation of virtue, social harmony *(he)*, and humaneness *(ren)* necessitates that AI facilitate moral interactions and foster a society grounded in kindness and propriety. Similarly, **Aristotle's** virtue ethics emphasizes *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and the shaping of moral character through habituated action—paralleling the Buddhist emphasis on intention (*cetana*) and ethical mindfulness. By embracing values such as non-harming, compassion, mindfulness, and skillful means, we can reframe AI not as a vehicle of domination or alienation, but as a partner in the alleviation of suffering and the cultivation of well-being. A Humane AI is not merely more accurate, more intelligent, or more productive. It is more aware, more compassionate, and more humble. It is grounded in the ancient question: "Does this help reduce suffering?" If the answer is yes, then we are not just building better machines. We are becoming better human beings.

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