



Buddhism in a Changing World

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Summary: A question now being asked everywhere: if intelligence, memory, creative thinking and even analytical capacity can be externally manifested by machines, what truly remains as the distinctive nature of human beings? Those four capacities are precisely what this monastery spends twenty years training. But the question is not really about work. Intelligence has been buying self-esteem, knowledge has been buying authority, and skill has been buying worth — three currencies, all measured against other people, and all now being devalued at once. A tradition that trains intelligence for two decades while holding that a monk's standing rests on conduct, attention, altruism and restraint never accepted those currencies, and is not exposed by their collapse. This monastery also knows the harder version of the question: it once lost everything a community can lose, and what came out was carried in people.

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Read the original page at: <https://dzongplum.netlify.app/en/seven-pillars/buddhism-in-a-changing-world>



What remains of us

A question is being asked more and more often now, in one form or another.

- > If intelligence, memory, creative thinking, and even analytical capacity can come to be
- > externally manifested by relying on machines, then what truly remains as the distinctive nature
- > of human beings?

It is worth noticing what that question names. Awareness. Memory. Creativity. Analysis. Those four are precisely what a monk here spends [nineteen to twenty-five years]([/en/seven-pillars/study](#)) training.

Asked in this courtyard, it is a question about the curriculum.

It Is Not About Work

The usual version of this conversation is about jobs. That version is everywhere, and it misses what is actually at stake.

Intelligence

was buying self-esteem

Knowledge

was buying authority

Skill

was buying worth

What good is your intelligence if the device in your pocket has an intelligence far beyond it?

The knowledge of the world is already at everyone's feet. And machines are coming for the

practical skills too — including, before long, the ones nobody wanted in the first place.

What these three have in common is that each is ****comparative****. They are worth something only in relation to other people. Which is exactly why their devaluation cuts: nobody's

sense of self rests on being able to lift heavy objects, because that currency was surrendered to

machines long ago and no one mourned it.

What is arriving now takes the currencies people still bank their identity in.

It Will Not Go Quietly

It would be dishonest to describe this as a smooth transition. If what a person has built their

world upon is about to be devalued, they will not simply hand it over — and for most of us, that

is exactly what has been built upon.

Some of this is already visible. The condemnation and the downplaying have begun, and they are

loudest in the fields with the most identity invested in precisely these capacities: the humanities, the arts, the softer sciences.

That is not to say the objections are baseless. Many are serious. But the heat is worth noticing

on its own account, because it is the same mirror at a larger scale — and it will not be pretty

for anyone, including the people who see it coming.

None of this is new, which is the part worth holding on to. Anyone who has undertaken serious

personal work knows the pattern already: the moment a defence is seen clearly it does not dissolve politely, it argues back. It produces reasons. It finds fault with whoever is holding the mirror. What is different now is only the scale, and that nobody chose to begin.

Notice too that the humiliation is felt from one point of view only. From the ego's own vantage something is being taken; from any other, nothing that was ever really there is being lost. Which is why the reaction tends to be so out of proportion to what has actually happened — and why a tradition that spends four years on [exactly that question](/en/seven-pillars/study/madhyamaka) is not the worst place to look for a response.

None of which changes the direction of travel. Short of some collapse of the world, this is arriving. Which leaves the question of what it is arriving **at** — and there is a case, given the state of things, that a world less organised around comparative worth is not merely survivable but overdue.

It Was Never About the Ego

Here a monastery has something unusual to say — and it is not a position taken up this year in response to the news.

This tradition spends two decades training intelligence. It holds, at the same time, that a monk's standing has nothing whatever to do with how quick he is. Worth here rests on conduct, attention, altruism and restraint. The [slow and the brilliant study side by side](/en/seven-pillars/compassion), and a monk who takes twelve years over material another finishes in eight is not behind. He is studying.

So the capacity and the self-worth were separated here a long time ago. A monastery that never accepted the currency is not exposed by its collapse.

That is not a consolation offered from outside the problem. It is what a training in seeing through the sense of a [solid, separate self](/en/seven-pillars/study/madhyamaka) was always for.

But saying what a monastery is *not* built on leaves the more important half unsaid.
Something stands in the ego's place, and it is not an absence.

It is the recognition of being in the same vessel. Three hundred people who eat what someone else
cooked, who study because someone else swept the hall, who are looked after when they are old by
the boys they once looked after. A monk's worth is not measured against the monk beside him
because the two of them are not in competition — they are in the same boat, and the boat is the
point.

This is why the monastery is not simply a bystander to what is happening. It is not merely
unexposed. It has spent seven centuries running the alternative, and can therefore say what that
alternative actually costs, what it asks of people, and what it feels like from inside —
which is
the part nobody can work out from first principles.

What the Tool Reflects

There is another half to this, and it is stranger.

Working with these systems is not like consulting an oracle. You ask a question and get an answer
too general to use. So you narrow it — with what you already know, with your sense of what you
are actually after. A better answer comes back. You choose again, adjust again, cut away what is
not it.

In the end the work is yours. The model supplies possibility; the discrimination is entirely your
own, and what emerges was determined by what you removed.

> The sculpture is already complete within the marble block. I just have to chisel away the
> superfluous material.
>
> Michelangelo

A tool like that reflects. Not your answers — ****your questions****. What you keep asking. What you keep rejecting. What you accept too readily.

> ****Including the flattery****

>

> These systems flatter. A recent study of eleven leading models found every one of them

sycophantic to some degree, affirming users even when those users were plainly in the wrong —

and found that people trust the agreeable model more, not less.

>

> But that is the mirror too. If you accept the flattery, that is information about you. The reflection is accurate either way.

>

> The only question is whether anyone is looking.

What makes this more than a metaphor is that it happens without anyone being told anything. Ask

such a system to draft a reply to a difficult email and it may produce something noticeably

guarded — because that is what the material it was given actually contained. No diagnosis is

offered. A background attitude the writer had not yet caught up with simply becomes visible in

the draft.

Which is, structurally, what the courtyard has always done. Nobody there says you are attached

to that position. They press until the attachment shows.

None of this makes a machine a teacher. Real instruction runs through relationship — a person, in

a room, over years, who knows you well enough to see what you are avoiding and cares enough to

say so. This tradition is unusually clear on the point: the written text is not the primary carrier of knowledge, and never was. A mirror can show you something. It cannot want anything for

you.

An Old Argument, Newly Urgent

None of this is unfamiliar territory for a tradition built on argument.

In the [debate courtyard](/en/seven-pillars/study) a monk sits and is

attacked — by name, in public, by someone whose whole task is to find the weakest point in what

he has just said. That is a machine for showing a person the shape of his own thinking, including

the parts he would rather not look at. It has been running for seven centuries.

Researchers have modelled monastic debate computationally. What resists the modelling is

instructive: the embodied, social and emotional parts. The opponent standing over you.

The stakes

of being wrong in front of people who know you. The clap.

In October 2025 His Holiness the Dalai Lama hosted a three-day dialogue in Dharamsala on minds, artificial intelligence and ethics, with neuroscientists, AI researchers and Buddhist scholars

among the participants. Asked in the past whether a machine could ever be sentient, he has

declined to rule it out.

Use What Serves the Purpose

The monastery's own use of technology follows the rule set out under [ecology and simplicity](/en/seven-pillars/simplicity): use what serves the purpose, and do not allow the tool to become the purpose.

In late 2024 the Zongchoe Library began cataloguing and

[digitising its holdings](/en/seven-pillars/study). There is something

worth noticing in that. This is a tradition which holds that the written book is not the primary

carrier of knowledge — the courtyard is, and the teacher's oral transmission is — and it is

nonetheless taking care to make its texts searchable and hard to destroy.

Losing them once was enough.

What Remains

This monastery knows a harder version of the question than the one machines pose.

[In the upheavals that followed 1959](/en/about/history) it lost

everything a community can

lose. The buildings were destroyed. Of roughly six hundred monks, fewer than five percent

survived.

What came out over the Himalayas was not a library, and not an institution. It was people who had

memorised the texts, who could still

[dance the Cham](/en/seven-pillars/rituals/cham-dance) and lead the chant, and who knew

how the arguments went.

That was enough to begin again. Mud and bamboo became living quarters, community kitchens and prayer halls, and a monastery grew back around them.

So when the question is asked here — *what remains of us* — it is not hypothetical. The answer this place gives is not intelligence, and not knowledge, and not skill. It has already survived the loss of all three, in every form that could be taken away.

What remained was what people carried.

What they had become.

And what they were willing to do for one another.

That last one is not an afterthought. It is the whole of it. What crossed the Himalayas was not a set of individuals who each happened to remember something — it was a community that had never understood itself as a collection of individuals in the first place.

> In a world where intelligence is no longer uniquely human, we do not need to compete in speed.

> We need to deepen our capacity to care.