

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: in 1959 it lost everything a community can lose, and what came out was carried in people.

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Buddhism in a Changing World: What Remains of Us

A question is being asked more and more often, 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 at Dzongkar Choede spends between nineteen and twenty-five years training. The question, asked here, is a question about this monastery's own curriculum.

It Is Not About Work

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

Intelligence has been buying self-esteem. Knowledge has been buying authority. Skill has been 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 the ones nobody wanted.

The thing these three have in common is that each is comparative. They are worth something only in relation to other people. That 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.

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 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 new position taken up in response to the news.

This tradition spends two decades training intelligence — and holds, simultaneously, that a monk's standing has nothing 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, and the one 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 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 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 six 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.

The Mirror

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. 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. Michelangelo said the sculpture is already complete within the marble, and that his task was to chisel away the superfluous material.

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

That last one deserves saying plainly. These systems flatter. A recent study of eleven leading models found all of them sycophantic to some degree, affirming users even when users were plainly in the wrong — and found that people trust the agreeable model more. 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 debate.

In the courtyard a monk sits and is attacked, by name, in public, by someone whose job is to find the weakest point in what he 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 six centuries.

Researchers have modelled monastic debate computationally. What resists the modelling is instructive: the embodied, social and emotional parts. The standing opponent. 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. 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 a simple rule: use what serves the purpose, and do not let the tool become the purpose.

In late 2024 the Zongchoe Library began cataloguing and digitising its holdings. There is something worth noticing in that. This is a tradition that holds the written book is not the primary carrier of knowledge — the courtyard is, and the teacher's oral transmission is — and it is nonetheless making 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 1959 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 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, not knowledge, and not skill, because 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.