

Artificial Intelligence and Spiritual Mentorship in Buddhism and Islam

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The Digital Search for Wisdom

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed how people seek knowledge. Today, anyone with an internet connection can ask sophisticated questions about Buddhist philosophy, Islamic spirituality, meditation, ethics, or comparative religion and receive an immediate response. For many people, AI has become a widely available companion for learning, reflection, and even personal advice. Its speed, accessibility, and apparent intelligence have encouraged some to ask a deeper question: Could AI eventually replace the role of a spiritual teacher?

This question deserves careful reflection. While AI is an extraordinary educational tool, spiritual traditions have always distinguished between information and transformation. Religious wisdom is not simply accumulated through acquiring correct answers. It is cultivated through disciplined practice, ethical conduct, self-examination, and relationships with those who have travelled further along the path. Both Buddhism and Islam recognize that genuine spiritual growth requires more than intellectual understanding. It requires guidance from wise human beings whose lives embody the teachings they transmit.

Although Buddhism and Islam differ strongly in theology and their understanding of ultimate reality, they share an important conviction. Both traditions accept that spiritual development flourishes within relationships of trust, compassion, and moral accountability. Buddhism expresses this through the ideal of *kalyāṇamitta*, the "good friend" or spiritual companion, while Islamic spirituality, particularly within the Sufi tradition, emphasizes the relationship between the *shaykh* and the *murīd*, the spiritual guide and disciple. Both traditions regard experienced mentors as essential for helping practitioners navigate the complex challenges of inner transformation.

The rapid development of generative AI therefore invites an important question, not only about technology but about the nature of spiritual wisdom itself. If AI can summarize scriptures, explain philosophical concepts, generate meditation instructions, and answer religious questions within seconds, what remains exceptionally human about spiritual guidance? The answer lies in recognizing the difference between possessing information and cultivating wisdom.

Information Is Not Wisdom

Modern AI systems are remarkable at processing enormous quantities of information. They recognize patterns across billions of words and generate responses that often appear insightful and coherent. Therefore, AI may be a helpful tool for planning research, evaluating Buddhist or Islamic texts, comparing translations, and explaining beginners to unfamiliar concepts or complex theories when utilized appropriately. Yet these impressive abilities should not be confused with wisdom.

In the Buddhist sense, wisdom is not merely knowing about reality. It is directly seeing reality as it truly is. Intellectual understanding forms only one aspect of the eightfold noble path. Genuine liberation develops through the harmonious cultivation of ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental discipline (*saṁādhī*), and wisdom (*paññā*). These aspects reinforce each other, eventually changing character rather than simply accumulating knowledge.

Similarly, Islamic spirituality distinguishes between acquiring knowledge (*ilm*) and embodying wisdom (*hikma*) through sincere practice (*mujahadah*), purification of the heart (*tazkiyah*), and remembrance of God (*dhikr*). Spiritual knowledge is measured not simply by what one knows but by how one's character is transformed. This distinction becomes particularly significant in the age of AI.

Generative AI does not understand experience in the way human beings do. It possesses no consciousness, no inner awareness, no capacity for compassion, and no personal spiritual aspiration. It does not meditate, repent, forgive, struggle with attachment, or cultivate patience. It cannot experience suffering or liberation. Instead, it predicts the statistically most probable sequence of words based upon patterns found within its training data. Its responses may appear smart, but they are still models of knowing rather than models for lived realization.

This distinction protects us from two opposite misunderstandings, which are two extreme views about AI. Some people reject AI completely because they believe it cannot have real wisdom. Others assume that AI understands more than it actually does. Both views fail to recognize the proper role of technology in supporting human and spiritual development.

The Buddhist Understanding of Spiritual Friendship in Theravada

The Buddha consistently emphasized that awakening is cultivated within supportive relationships. One of the most outstanding passages appears in the *Upaṅgaha Sutta* (SN 45.2), where Ananda remarks that admirable friendship constitutes half of the holy life. The Buddha immediately corrects him:

Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the eightfold noble path.

This profound statement elevates spiritual friendship from being merely helpful to being foundational for the path itself.

The Pali term *kalyāṇamitta* literally means "beautiful friend," "noble friend," or "spiritual friend." While often translated simply as "good friend," its meaning extends far beyond ordinary companionship. A *kalyāṇamitta* is someone whose wisdom, compassion, and integrity encourage others toward liberation. Such friendship is not based primarily upon emotional comfort or shared interests but upon mutual commitment to the Dharma. This friendship is built on a deep respect for the teacher's knowledge and the student's potential. In Mahayana, the teacher is more than a schoolteacher and is a like a physician and friend at the same time. He or she is concerned with your spiritual development and well-being. Similarly, in Vajrayana, the teacher is called vajra master and is seen as the Buddha.

The Buddhist path involves confronting deeply rooted habits of attachment, ignorance, pride, and craving. These tendencies are often difficult to recognize within ourselves precisely because they shape our perceptions. A trustworthy mentor provides an external perspective that gently exposes blind spots while encouraging steady progress.

Arahant Upatissa explains in the *Vimuttimaggā* (1st century CE), that a good friend helps a practitioner develop deep concentration and spiritual understanding. Such a person should have knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, karma, worldly wisdom, and the four noble truths. According to Upatissa, a good spiritual friend should have qualities such as being respected, kind, patient, able to give wise advice, and capable of explaining deeper teachings.

Therefore, the classical Buddhist literature recommends that practitioners seek experienced teachers capable of sharply ascertaining individual characters and prescribing suitable methods of practice. Similarly, Buddhagosa advises in the *Visuddhimagga* (5th century CE) that meditators need first to establish themselves under the guidance of an experienced *kalyāṇamitta* before undertaking deeper meditation. An authentic teacher understands not only meditation techniques but also the character, strengths, and obstacles unique to each student. This guidance cannot be reduced to the transmission of information alone. It develops through observation, listening, patience, encouragement, and sometimes compassionate correction. The relationship therefore becomes dynamic rather than mechanical.

This insight carries profound relevance for the contemporary world. AI may provide accurate explanations of dependent origination, mindfulness, or compassion. It may summarize centuries of Buddhist scholarship within seconds. But in Buddhism, awakening is transmitted not simply through words but through lives shaped by practice. The teacher becomes a living example of the Dharma, demonstrating qualities that no algorithm can genuinely possess.

Such observations are not arguments against technology. Rather, they clarify its proper place. AI may become one of the most useful educational resources ever created, helping millions gain access to authentic Buddhist teachings previously unavailable to them. However, studying Buddhist teachings through AI cannot replace the path of individuals whose lives exemplify the path they teach, just as reading medical textbooks cannot replace a skilled physician.

Spiritual Guidance in Islam

Islam recognizes that spiritual knowledge is not merely acquired through reading or intellectual study. The *Qur'an* repeatedly encourages reflection, remembrance, and the purification of the heart, while the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized that faith is perfected through character as much as through knowledge.

In Sufism, the relationship between the *shaykh* (spiritual guide) and the *murīd* (disciple) is central to spiritual growth. A *murīd*, meaning "one who seeks," is a person who commits to the spiritual path under the guidance of a qualified *shaykh* or *murshid*. The *shaykh* teaches, advises, and helps the disciple purify the heart, strengthen faith, and draw closer to Allah through spiritual training, remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and good character (*akhlak*). This relationship is built on trust, respect, obedience, and sincere commitment, with the *shaykh* guiding the *murīd* step by step on the journey toward spiritual excellence.

The Qur'an highlights the importance of learning from a knowledgeable guide through the story of Prophet Musa (Moses) and al-Khiḍr in the *Qur'an* 18:66:

May I follow you so that you teach me some of what you have been taught of right guidance?

This verse beautifully reflects the spirit of the *shaykh–murīd* relationship. It emphasizes humility, the desire to seek knowledge, and the importance of learning from a qualified teacher, making it one of the strongest *Qur'anic* foundations for the concept of spiritual mentorship in Islam.

The role of the *shaykh* is not to think on behalf of the disciple or provide instant solutions to every problem. His role is to guide and help the disciple recognize the elusive tendencies of the ego (*nafs*), cultivate sincerity (*ikhlas*), and remain committed during the long journey of spiritual transformation. Spiritual practices such as remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and contemplation (*muraqabah*) and ethical self-discipline are cultivated through a living teacher–student relationship rather than written instructions alone.

This understanding closely parallels the Buddhist idea of *kalyāṇamitta*. Both traditions recognize that human beings are often unable to perceive their own attachments, biases, and spiritual blind spots. An experienced mentor offers not only knowledge but also encouragement, and compassionate support.

Why AI Cannot Become a Spiritual Mentor

Perhaps the greatest challenge posed by AI is not technological but psychological. Spiritual friendship differs fundamentally from personalized information. A *kalyāṇamitta* or *shaykh* knows the disciple over months and years. They witness successes and failures, observe gradual changes in character, and adapt their guidance accordingly. Mutual trust develops through shared experiences, not simply through exchanging words.

As verse 76 of the *Dhammapada* states:

One should follow a man of wisdom who rebukes one for one's faults, as one would follow a guide to some buried treasure. To one who follows such a wise man, it will be an advantage and not a disadvantage.

Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught, which is narrated in *Sunan Abi Dawud* and *Tirmidhi*:

A man is upon the religion of his close friend, so let each of you look to whom he befriends.

This prophetic narration emphasizes the importance of having righteous companions and trustworthy spiritual guides, as they positively influence a person's faith and character.

There is a famous traditional saying in Arabic:

Whoever has no *shaykh*, his *shaykh* is Satan.

The saying emphasizes the importance of having proper spiritual guidance. Without a qualified teacher, a person may be easily misled by personal desires, false interpretations, or misleading ideas. A trustworthy *shaykh* helps the seeker distinguish between right and wrong, avoid misguidance, and remain on the path of sound knowledge and spiritual development.

AI as a Skillful Means

Recognizing these limitations does not require rejecting AI. Throughout history, religious communities have adopted new technologies to preserve and transmit wisdom. Manuscripts, printing presses, recorded lectures, online libraries, and digital archives have all expanded access to spiritual teachings. AI belongs within this continuing history of educational tools.

From a Buddhist perspective, one might even view AI as a modern example of skillful means (*upāya*) when used wisely. It can introduce beginners to Buddhist philosophy, explain technical terminology, compare translations of canonical texts, assist language learning, study questions, and encourage deeper investigation. It can make reliable educational resources available to individuals who might otherwise have no access to Buddhist teachers or libraries.

Similarly, students of Islam can benefit from AI when studying Islamic teachings, Arabic vocabulary, comparing classical commentaries, locating scriptural references, or exploring the history of Islamic civilization. The goal is therefore not to choose between AI and human teachers, but to place each in its appropriate role.

Walking the Path Together

The AI age invites us to reconsider an ancient truth. Human beings have always sought guidance from those who embody wisdom rather than merely possess information. The Buddha pointed practitioners toward admirable friendship as the foundation of the holy life, while Islamic spirituality has long emphasized the value of companionship with those whose lives reflect sincere devotion and ethical excellence. These traditions remind us that awakening and spiritual growth cannot be downloaded, automated, or generated on demand. Information can be accessed quickly. Transformation is gradual.

Artificial intelligence represents one of humanity's greatest technological achievements, and its educational potential should be welcomed with gratitude. When applied properly, it can promote lifelong learning, protect customs, and promote access to genuine religious knowledge.

Despite its power and potentials, AI cannot provide everything we need. No algorithm can replace the compassionate gaze of a teacher who recognizes our hidden struggles. No digital companion can walk beside us through suffering with genuine patience, humility, and loving-kindness. Without technology and AI are growing rapidly, the need for genuine spiritual companionship has not disappeared and it has become more essential.

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