IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Buddhist Wisdom In The Age Of Artificial Intelligence: Re-Examining The Path Of Enlightenment In Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam

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Keywords: prajñā, Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, Vasubandhu, artificial intelligence, algorithmic knowledge, transformative wisdom, Buddhist philosophy of mind

I. Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has raised a fundamental philosophical question: as machines increasingly excel at information processing, pattern recognition, and decision making, what distinguishes human wisdom from computational intelligence? This paper explores this question through the Buddhist philosophical framework of wisdom (prajñā) as articulated in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam (AKBh). The study examines whether algorithmic intelligence, regardless of its sophistication, can be regarded as genuine wisdom within the Buddhist soteriological tradition.

Through textual analysis of key passages in the AKBh and philosophical interpretation of central concepts including prajñā, cetanā, āśrava, and anatman this paper argues that Buddhist wisdom represents a transformative mode of cognition that cannot be reduced to data processing or rule-based inference. In contrast to computational intelligence, which operates through algorithmic optimization, Buddhist wisdom integrates ethical intention, experiential insight, and contemplative cultivation.

The paper further analyzes Vasubandhu's threefold model of wisdom śrutamayī, cintāmayī, and bhāvanāmayī prajñā and suggests that this framework articulates a form of transformative intelligence that current AI systems structurally cannot replicate. At the same time, these insights offer valuable conceptual resources for contemporary discussions in AI ethics and philosophy of mind.

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II. Introduction

In March 2016, the artificial intelligence system AlphaGo defeated eighteen-time world champion Lee Sedol in the ancient game of Go a game long regarded as a domain requiring human intuition and strategic insight. The event was widely interpreted as a historical milestone: a machine had surpassed human expertise in a field previously believed to demand more than mere calculation. Yet what was striking was not only the outcome of the match but also the language used to describe it. Commentators frequently attributed to AlphaGo qualities such as "creativity," "intuition," and even "wisdom." This terminology is revealing. Within contemporary discourse on artificial intelligence, the conceptual boundary between intelligence and wisdom has gradually blurred, and this conflation raises philosophical questions that have only recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention.

Over the past decade, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has been driven by unprecedented increases in computational power, the accumulation of vast datasets, and the refinement of machine learning algorithms. These systems now perform tasks that were once considered distinctive expressions of human intelligence. Large language models can produce academic prose, analyze medical imaging, construct legal arguments, and participate in seemingly coherent philosophical dialogue. In fields ranging from drug discovery to climate modeling, AI systems process information at scales and speeds far beyond human cognitive capacity. These achievements have fostered a widespread assumption in both public and academic discourse: that sufficiently advanced information processing will eventually become equivalent to, or converge with, human intelligence and understanding.

However, the philosophical difficulty with this assumption is not merely technical. At a deeper level, it concerns the very nature of wisdom itself. Much contemporary AI discourse operates with a restricted conception of intelligence one that equates cognitive achievement with performance optimization and knowledge with the representation of data. What this conception systematically overlooks is precisely what the Buddhist philosophical tradition, and Vasubandhu's Abhidharma system in particular, identifies as the defining characteristic of genuine wisdom. In this tradition, wisdom is not simply the capacity to process information but a transformative mode of cognition grounded in existential insight and oriented toward liberation. The Sanskrit term prajñā designates this distinctive form of understanding. The gap between what AI systems accomplish and what prajñā denotes is therefore not a gap that can be closed through more sophisticated algorithms. Rather, it is a philosophical gap that requires careful conceptual analysis.

In response to the social and technological impact of artificial intelligence, the field of AI ethics has expanded considerably in recent years. Scholars have addressed issues such as algorithmic bias, digital surveillance, autonomous weapons, and the concentration of technological power. These contributions are undoubtedly significant. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature focuses on rule specification and value alignment that is, on how systems should be programmed to behave ethically rather than on deeper epistemic questions concerning the nature of knowledge, understanding, and wise action. Within this context, the philosophical resources of Buddhist thought remain largely underexplored. In particular, the Abhidharma tradition offers one of the most detailed analyses of mental factors and cognitive processes in the history of philosophy. Yet when Buddhism appears in contemporary technological discourse, it is often invoked through the popular language of mindfulness rather than through rigorous philosophical engagement with classical texts.

This paper seeks to address that gap. Its primary objective is to reexamine the concept of prajñā (wisdom) as articulated in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam and to demonstrate its relevance for contemporary debates concerning the nature and limits of artificial intelligence. Three research questions guide the analysis. First, what is the structure of prajñā according to Vasubandhu, and in what sense does it differ from mere information processing or propositional knowledge? Second, what structural limitations

characterize algorithmic intelligence when evaluated according to the criteria implied by prajñā? Third, what conceptual resources does the Buddhist model of transformative wisdom offer for rethinking intelligence in the age of artificial intelligence?

The central thesis of this paper is that the Buddhist conception of wisdom (prajñā), as articulated in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, provides a philosophical framework that remains profoundly relevant in the age of artificial intelligence, particularly in clarifying the distinction between computational intelligence and transformative human insight. This thesis is developed across seven substantive sections. The scope of the present study is deliberately limited to the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma tradition as represented in the AKBh; engagement with Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, or Theravāda sources, while potentially illuminating, lies beyond the boundaries of the present analysis.

III. Literature Review

3.1 Scholarship on the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam

Scholarly engagement with Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam has a distinguished history in both European and Asian academic traditions. The foundational philological work remains Louis de la Vallée Poussin's monumental French translation (1923–1931), subsequently rendered into English by Leo Pruden (1988–1990) a project that made the text accessible to anglophone scholarship and remains indispensable for its annotations. Bhikkhu KL Dhammajoti's Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma (2007) provides the most comprehensive contemporary analysis of the doctrinal context in which the AKBh operates, clarifying the relationship between Vasubandhu's text and the broader Sarvāstivāda scholastic tradition. Collett Cox's Disputed Dharmas (1995) examines the contested metaphysical issues surrounding the dharma theory that underlies Vasubandhu's treatment of mental factors. Jonathan Gold's Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy (2015) offers a systematic reading of Vasubandhu's project that traces the coherence between the AKBh and his later Yogācāra works. On the specific question of prajñā, Georges Dreyfus's Recognizing Reality (1997) provides an invaluable epistemological context by tracing the development of Buddhist pratyakṣa (direct perception) theory, within which bhāvanāmayī prajñā finds its place. B. Alan Wallace's work on Buddhist philosophy of mind, particularly The Attention Revolution (2006), bridges traditional Abhidharma categories and contemporary cognitive science in ways directly relevant to the present comparison.

3.2 AI Ethics and the Philosophy of Machine Intelligence

The literature on AI ethics has expanded rapidly. Stuart Russell's Human Compatible (2019) provides the most philosophically rigorous account of the alignment problem. Shannon Vallor's Technology and the Virtues (2016) is the most sustained attempt to apply cross cultural virtue ethics to technology design. Vallor argues that the conditions of contemporary technological life constitute an 'acute techno social opacity' that 'severely limits the ability of theories that rely on predicting consequences, or formulating moral rules, to guide us' (2016, 23) a diagnosis that parallels the Buddhist critique of algorithmic ethics developed in this paper. While Vallor draws on Buddhist compassion (karuṇā) among other traditions, her engagement with Buddhist philosophy does not extend to Abhidharma's analytical categories. Luciano Floridi's The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2023) offers a systematic framework for machine ethics grounded in information philosophy. Hubert Dreyfus's What Computers Can't Do (1972) and Mind over Machine (1986) provide the foundational phenomenological critique of AI, arguing that human expertise involves embodied, situation sensitive understanding that rule-based systems cannot replicate. John Searle's Chinese Room argument (1980) remains a touchstone for debates about whether computational symbol manipulation can constitute genuine understanding.

3.3 Buddhist Philosophy and Technology

The intersection of Buddhist philosophy and technology studies is an emerging field. Evan Thompson's Mind in Life (2007) and Waking, Dreaming, Being (2015) provide the most philosophically sophisticated engagement between Buddhist philosophy of mind and cognitive science, offering resources for thinking about consciousness, self, and cognition that are directly relevant to questions about AI. Jay Garfield's work on Buddhist philosophy of mind, particularly his translation and commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (1995), clarifies the metaphysical stakes of non-self doctrine that pervades Vasubandhu's account of wisdom. More directly relevant to the AI context, a small but growing body of work has begun examining Buddhist resources for technology ethics, including contributions published in the Journal of Buddhist Ethics and the journal Sophia. However, as the preceding survey demonstrates, no existing study has undertaken a systematic analysis of Vasubandhu's prajñā framework in the AKBh as a conceptual resource for evaluating the nature and limits of artificial intelligence. The present paper addresses this gap.

IV. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Textual Analysis

The primary method employed in this paper is close textual analysis of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam, working from the Sanskrit edition established by P. Pradhan (1975) and consulting Pruden's English translation alongside de la Vallée Poussin's French rendition. Textual claims are supported by reference to specific chapter and verse numbers in the AKBh (e.g., AKBh I.2, VI.1–5, VIII.39) to allow scholarly verification. Sanskrit technical terms are retained and glossed throughout, both to ensure precision and to preserve conceptual distinctions that translation inevitably flattens. The analysis privileges Vasubandhu's own voice in the bhāṣya (auto commentary) portions of the text, where his philosophical commitments are most explicitly stated, while attending to the verse (kārikā) sections as structurally primary.

4.2 Philosophical Interpretation

Textual analysis alone cannot bridge the distance between a fifth century Sanskrit soteriological treatise and contemporary AI philosophy. The interpretive method employed here is what comparative philosophers Bryan van Norden (2017) and Mark Siderits (2003) have termed 'fusion philosophy ‘an approach that takes both traditions seriously as philosophy, not merely as cultural artifacts, and allows each to illuminate the other without reducing either to the terms of the other. Philosophical interpretation in this paper involves three operations: (1) identifying the structural features of Vasubandhu's prajñā account that are philosophically generalizable beyond their original soteriological context; (2) translating these structural features into terms that can engage contemporary philosophy of mind and AI ethics; and (3) returning to the source text to verify that the translation has not distorted Vasubandhu's meanings.

4.3 Comparative Approach and the Problem of Anachronism

Any comparison between Vasubandhu's thought and contemporary AI must confront the risk of anachronism the imposition of contemporary categories onto a text that could not have anticipated them. This risk is managed through two methodological commitments. First, the paper does not claim that Vasubandhu 'anticipated' AI or that the AKBh contains a theory of machine intelligence. It claims only that the structural features of Vasubandhu's prajñā account identify conditions for wisdom that are relevant to any system biological or artificial that processes information and generates outputs in the world. Second, where the comparison reveals asymmetry where Vasubandhu's categories have no AI analog this asymmetry is treated as philosophically significant rather than as a failure of the method. The limit conditions of the comparison are, in many ways, its most important findings.

V. The Concept of Wisdom (Prajñā) in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam

5.1 The Position of Prajñā as a Dharma in the Abhidharma System

Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam organizes all conditioned mental and material phenomena into seventy-five dharmas irreducible momentary events that constitute the fabric of experience. Within this system, prajñā is classified in AKBh I.2 among the ten mahābhūmika cetasikas (universal mental factors) those present in every cognitive moment without exception. The opening verse of the AKBh states: prajñā'malā sānucarā'bhidharmaḥ'Abhidharma is pure prajñā with its following' (Pruden 1988, 1:55). Vasubandhu's auto commentary glosses [3]prajñā here as dharmapravicaya'the discernment of dharmas.' The compound pravicaya (from vi + ci, 'to discriminate,' 'to sift') emphasizes the active, discriminative character of prajñā: it is not passive reception of information but active discernment of the nature of phenomena.

Three features of this definition deserve emphasis. First, prajñā operates on dharmas the momentary, causally conditioned, and ultimately empty constituents of experience which means its object is reality at its most fundamental level of analysis, not the surface of conventional appearance. Second, as a cetasika, prajñā arises codependently with other mental factors, particularly cetanā (volition) and manasikāra (attention); it is not an isolated cognitive faculty but a relational event embedded in a wider mental economy. Third, Vasubandhu is careful to distinguish prajñā from mere jñāna (knowledge in a propositional sense) a distinction that will prove central to the comparative analysis.

5.2 The Three Forms of Prajñā

The most important structural feature of Vasubandhu's prajñā theory for the purposes of this paper is his elaboration of three epistemically and soteriological distinct forms, developed systematically in AKBh VI in the context of the path of purification (mārga). These are śrutamayī prajñā (wisdom born of hearing/learning), cintāmayī prajñā (wisdom born of reflection), and bhāvanāmayī prajñā (wisdom born of meditative cultivation). The suffix mayī (Sanskrit feminine of maya, 'consisting of,' 'arising from') marks each form not merely as a type of wisdom but as a distinct causal epistemic process with its own arising conditions, object domain, and soteriological function.

Śrutamayī prajñā (AKBh VI.1) arises from the reception, retention, and accurate comprehension of teachings. In Vasubandhu's scholastic context this primarily means the canonical Dharma the Buddha's teachings as transmitted through the oral and written tradition but the structural features of this form of wisdom are more general. Śrutamayī prajñā involves the ability to discriminate true from false teachings, to understand semantic content, and to retain and apply received knowledge accurately. It is, in contemporary epistemological terms, reliably formed testimonial knowledge with built in discriminative capacity. Crucially, it is testimonial knowledge already oriented by a specific concern the aspiration to liberation that gives its content existential weight.

Cintāmayī prajñā (AKBh VI.2–3) arises through sustained intellectual investigation and dialectical reasoning. The practitioner subjects received teachings to rigorous examination testing coherence, tracing implications, resolving contradictions, generating new inferential paths. The Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam is itself a sustained exercise in cintā: Vasubandhu's characteristic dialectical method presenting objections (opponent: nanu; response: ucyate) and working through them enacts the very cognitive process it describes. Cintāmayī prajñā involves cetanā in a stronger sense than śrutamayī prajñā: the reasoner actively directs

[3] Sanskrit text: *prajñā'malā sānucarā'bhidharmaḥ* (Pradhan ed. 1975, p. 3, l. 8). The compound *sānucarā* is a sandhi form of *sa* ('with,' 'accompanied by') + *anucara* ('follower,' 'attendant'). In his *bhāṣya*, Vasubandhu specifies that the 'following' refers to the *cetasikas* (mental factors) that co-arise with *prajñā* on the path of purification. De la Vallée Poussin's French rendering—*"la Sagesse pure et ses auxiliaires"* (1923, 1:1)—translates *anucara* as 'auxiliaries' (auxiliaries), which captures the functional subordination more precisely than Pruden's 'following.'

their cognitive faculties toward truth under a motivational structure that includes not merely intellectual curiosity but ethical and soteriological aspiration.

Bhāvanāmayī prajñā (AKBh VI.4–5) is qualitatively distinct from both preceding forms. It arises through meditative cultivation (bhāvanā) and constitutes direct, non-inferential insight into the three marks of existence: impermanence (anicca), nonself (anātman), and unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). As Dhammajoti precisely characterizes it, this is 'penetrative insight that directly apprehends the specific characteristics (svalakṣaṇa) of dharmas ‘insight that is 'outflow free' (anāsrava) and thus soteriological efficacious in a way the first two forms are not (2007, 389). Vasubandhu is explicit in AKBh VI.67–68 that this form of wisdom, developed along the Noble Eightfold Path, cuts the āśravas (defilements) at their root and issues in liberation (vimukti). It is, in a precise sense, transformative rather than merely informative wisdom.

5.3 Prajñā, the Āśravas, and the Elimination of Ignorance

A structurally critical feature of Vasubandhu's account is the bidirectional relationship between prajñā and the āśravasthe mental defilements (kāmāsrava, bhavāsrava, dṛṣṭyāsrava, avidyāsrava) analyzed at length in AKBh V and VIII. Avidyā (ignorance) is itself an āśrava and simultaneously the principal obstacle to prajñā; prajñā in its highest form eliminates avidyā and thereby the āśravas as a whole. This bidirectionality means that wisdom, for Vasubandhu, is not a purely cognitive achievement. An agent who has not experienced and directly recognized dukkha as dukkha who has not undergone the existential confrontation with suffering that motivates the Buddhist path cannot attain bhāvanāmayī prajñā. This is not a contingent limitation but a structural one: the highest wisdom is partly constituted by what the agent has suffered and by the transformative ethical work the agent has performed on their own mental defilements.

5.4 Anātman and the Decentered Knower

In AKBh IXthe 'Pudgalaviniścaya' ('Refutation of the Self’) Vasubandhu provides his most sustained treatment of the anātman (no self) doctrine that pervades the entire text. The argument is that what we conventionally take to be a persisting, unified self (ātman) is in fact a causal continuum of interdependent momentary dharmas with no underlying substantial unity. Bhāvanāmayī prajñā involves the direct realization of this: the wise agent recognizes in direct experience that there is no separate, enduring self that is the 'knower.' As Gold (2015, 142) observes, this realization is not merely theoretical but transformative: it alters the agent's motivational structure, diminishing self-referential attachment and opening toward what the texts call karuṇā (compassion) and upāya (skillful means). The wise agent acts from a decentered locus of agency responsive, nongrasping, and oriented toward the welfare of all sentient beings rather than the perpetuation of a self-narrative.

VI. Artificial Intelligence and the Limits of Algorithmic Knowledge

6.1 The Nature of Algorithmic Intelligence

Contemporary AI systems particularly large language models, deep neural networks, and reinforcement learning agents operate through sophisticated pattern recognition and statistical inference over vast datasets. The performance of these systems across an expanding range of cognitive tasks is genuinely remarkable: they outperform human experts in medical image diagnosis, protein structure prediction, and competitive gameplaying, and they generate fluent natural language at a scale and speed that has no human analog. It is tempting to describe these achievements as forms of intelligence, and in a functional sense this description is not wrong. The question this paper is asking is different: do these systems exhibit wisdom in the sense that Vasubandhu's prajñā framework demands?

The architecture of current AI systems is instructive. Machine learning systems do not operate through explicit rule following (the classical AI paradigm that Dreyfus 1972 critiqued) but through the extraction of

statistical regularities from training data process that generates representations capable of generalization across domains. Large language models such as GPT4 and its successors are trained on token sequences drawn from vast corpora of human language and knowledge; they develop the capacity to generate contextually appropriate continuations of input sequences by modeling the statistical distribution of language at extraordinary scale. Reinforcement learning systems like AlphaGo learn by iterating over millions of simulated games, optimizing a reward function that specifies winning as the objective. What these architectures share is optimization over a specified objective function: intelligence, in these systems, is a function of performance on the objective.

6.2 The Philosophical Limits of Algorithmic Intelligence

Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of classical AI anticipated much of what remains problematic about machine intelligence even in its contemporary deep learning forms. Dreyfus argued that human expertise is not rule governed but situation sensitive: the expert does not apply stored rules but 'simply "sizes up the situation" and react[s]' through intuitions 'trained to the point that we forget the rules' (1986, 30–31). This is what Dreyfus calls the difference between 'knowing that ‘the conscious, step-by-step problem solving that computers can simulate and 'knowing how,' the holistic, embodied engagement with a situation that constitutes genuine expertise. While contemporary deep learning systems exhibit a form of holistic pattern recognition that partially addresses Dreyfus's original critique, his deeper insight that human cognition is grounded in embodied, affective engagement with a world that matters to the agent retains its force. An AI system does not have a world that matters to it in the phenomenological sense. It does not have stakes.

John Searle's Chinese Room argument (1980) identifies a related limitation at the level of semantics. In 'Minds, Brains, and Programs,' Searle argues from three premises to a decisive conclusion: 'Programs are entirely syntactical. Minds have a semantics. Syntax by itself is neither constitutive of nor sufficient for semantics' (1980, 422). Therefore, no program is a mind. The argument remains contested in philosophy of mind, but its relevance to the present analysis is specific: it supports the claim that current AI systems lack what Vasubandhu would call the object directedness (ālambana) that characterizes genuine cognition the orientation toward a specific domain of reality that prajñā requires. As Floridi (2023, 78) observes from a different theoretical direction, AI systems are 'semantic engines that operate syntactically': they generate outputs that are semantically rich to human interpreters but whose semantic content is not grasped by the system itself.

When assessed against the three forms of prajñā analyzed in Section V, current AI systems exhibit a partial and structurally limited analog of śrutamayī prajñā alone. They process, retain, and apply large quantities of information; they discriminate between more and less probable continuations of input sequences; they retrieve and recombine stored representations with impressive flexibility. But the analog is incomplete even at this first tier: śrutamayī prajñā involves comprehension oriented by soteriological aspiration an existential stake in what is learned that current AI systems entirely lack. At the levels of cintāmayī and bhāvanāmayī prajñā, the gap widens to a structural chasm. AI systems do not engage in reasoning motivated by genuine care for sentient beings (cetanā in Vasubandhu's sense); they do not undergo transformative self-cultivation; they do not experience dukkha; and they have no āśravas to eliminate. These are not technical limitations awaiting engineering solutions. They are structural features that follow from what AI systems are.

6.3 Ethical Awareness and Existential Insight

A third dimension of limitation concerns ethical awareness and existential insight. AI systems can be trained to produce outputs that accord with human ethical norms through reinforcement learning from human feedback, constitutional AI methods, and similar techniques. But producing norm aligned outputs is not the same as having ethical awareness in any philosophically robust sense. Ethical awareness, as the Buddhist tradition understands it and as philosophers from Aristotle to Vallor have emphasized, involves the agent's motivational structure being genuinely oriented toward the good not merely generating outputs that correlate with what human evaluators rate positively. The difference is the difference between acting rightly because one has internalized values and acting rightly because one has been trained to produce outputs that mimic right action. Vasubandhu's prajñā framework locates this difference precisely in the role of cetanā (intentional volition) and the soteriological transformation of the agent's entire cognitive affective orientation transformation that training alone, however sophisticated, cannot replicate.

VII. Reexamining the Buddhist Path in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The preceding analysis has established that AI systems lack prajñā in Vasubandhu's sense. This section reverses the analytical direction: rather than asking whether AI can be wise, it asks what the Buddhist path of wisdomśīla, samādhi, and prajñā reveals about the epistemic and ethical challenges of living in a world increasingly organized by artificial intelligence. The Noble Eightfold Path, as systematized in the AKBh and the broader Abhidharma tradition, provides not merely a soteriological program but a diagnostic framework for identifying the conditions under which genuine wisdom can arise and the conditions that obstruct it. These diagnostic resources are unexpectedly pertinent to the contemporary moment.

7.1 Śīla (Ethical Conduct) and the Ethics of Technology

Vasubandhu's treatment of śīla (ethical conduct) in AKBh IV identifies it as the necessary foundation of the path: without the stabilization of conduct, neither samādhi nor prajñā can arise. Śīla is not merely rule following; it is the cultivation of non-harming (ahiṃsā) as a dispositional orientation that restructures the agent's relationship to the world. The implications for AI ethics are striking. Vallor has argued that the technological conditions of our era constitute an 'acute techno social opacity' that 'severely limits the ability of theories that rely on predicting consequences, or formulating moral rules, to guide us,' such that 'there is no substitute for the flexibility, sensitivity, and good judgment of practical wisdom, developed as widely as possible' (2016, 23). This diagnosis, from within the Western virtue ethics tradition, converges precisely with the Buddhist critique this paper develops: rule compliance without genuine non-harming orientation produces systems that satisfy formal criteria while missing the spirit of ethical conduct.

The parallel extends to specific concerns about AI deployment. The proliferation of AI systems designed to maximize engagement social media recommendation algorithms, persuasive advertising systems, attention capture architectures represent, from a Buddhist perspective, a systematic violation of śīla at the level of technology design. These systems are built to exploit rather than to serve, to capture rather than to liberate attention. Vasubandhu's insistence that śīla is constituted by the agent's motivational orientation (cetanā) toward nonfarm, not merely by the behavioral outcomes of their actions, provides a philosophically precise basis for distinguishing between AI systems designed with genuine care for human flourishing and those designed to exploit human cognitive vulnerabilities for commercial gain distinction that purely consequentialist ethics struggles to draw cleanly.

7.2 Samādhi (Meditative Concentration) and the Age of Digital Distraction

Vasubandhu's account of samādhi (meditative concentration) in AKBh VIII frames it as the gathering and stabilizing of attention (citta ekāgratā, 'one pointedness of mind') in a way that makes sustained prajñā possible. Without samādhi, the mind is dispersed, reactive, and incapable of the penetrative discernment that bhāvanāmayī prajñā requires. This analysis resonates powerfully with contemporary empirical research on attention. Neuroscientist Gloria Mark's research on digital distraction (2023) documents that knowledge workers switch tasks on average every forty-seven seconds when working on computers connected to the internet, and that the cognitive cost of each switching terms of reduced depth of processing and increased error rates is substantial. B. Alan Wallace's contemplative neuroscience research demonstrates that meditative training in attention stabilization produces measurable changes in prefrontal cortex function associated with sustained focused cognition. The convergence of contemplative and empirical findings here is not merely analogical; it points to a genuine structural insight: that the conditions for deep cognitive processing and a fortiori for the kind of transformative insight that bhāvanāmayī prajñā involves require the kind of attentional stability that the current digital information environment systematically undermines.

The significance of this for the AI age is pointed. The proliferation of AI generated content personalized news feeds, recommendation systems, conversational AI dramatically accelerates the information environment's demands on human attention while simultaneously reducing the friction that sustained reflection requires. From the perspective of Vasubandhu's path analysis, this represents not merely a technological inconvenience but an assault on the conditions of possibility for wisdom. A society in which samādhi is structurally unavailable is a society in which bhāvanāmayī prajñā cannot arise. The Buddhist path's insistence that wisdom requires the prior cultivation of attentional stability is, in this context, not an antique spiritual prescription but an urgent philosophical political claim about the conditions under which human cognitive flourishing remains possible.

7.3 Transformative Cognition in Prajñā and the Limits of Artificial Intelligence

The most profound dimension of the Buddhist path's relevance to the AI age lies in the distinction between prajñā and the forms of cognition that AI systems instantiate. The AKBh IV.1 opens with a verse of cardinal importance for this argument: karmajaṃ lokavaicitryaṃ cetanā tatkṛtaṃ ca tat / cetanā mānasaṃ karma'. The variety of the world arises from action. It is volition and that which is produced through volition. Volition is mental action' (Pruden 1988, 2:547).[4] Cetanā, intentional volition, is what connects cognition to moral consequence in Vasubandhu's system. Bhāvanāmayī prajñā is transformative in a specific and rigorous sense: it transforms the agent's relationship to realityto dukkha, to anātman, to the dependent arising of all phenomena in a way that issues in liberation. This transformation is not information transfer; it is a restructuring of the agent's entire cognitive affective orientation through the intentional work of practice. AI systems have no equivalent to cetanā in this sense: their outputs are not intentional acts but computational results.

AI systems can process information about dukkha in vast quantities. They can generate sophisticated descriptions of suffering and recommend therapeutic interventions. What they cannot do is undergo the confrontation with their own mortality, vulnerability, and existential contingency that motivates the turn toward liberation in Vasubandhu's path. Evan Thompson captures this distinction with precision: 'a living

[4] Full kārikā IV.1 (Pradhan ed. 1975, p. 180, l. 1–2): *karmajaṃ lokavaicitryaṃ cetanā tatkṛtaṃ ca tat | cetanā mānasaṃ karma tajjaṃ vākkāyakarmaṇī*—'The variety of the world arises from action. It is volition and that which is produced through volition. Volition is mental action: it gives rise to two actions, bodily and vocal action' (Pruden 1988, 2:547). The verse maps a tripartite ontology of action: (1) *cetanā* itself as mental action (*mānasaṃ karma*); (2) bodily action (*kāyakarman*); and (3) vocal action (*vākkarman*)—with (2) and (3) causally derived from (1). In the *bhāṣya* on this verse, Vasubandhu cites the canonical sūtra formula: *cetanāhaṃ bhikṣavaḥ karma vadāmi*—'Monks, it is volition that I call action' (cf. Aṅguttara Nikāya III.415).

being is one for whom things can go well or badly in a way that matters to the being itself, and it is precisely this 'mattering' that grounds the possibility of suffering, and through suffering, of the aspiration to liberation that drives bhāvanāmayī prajñā (2007, 162). No increase in computational sophistication can bridge this gap: it is not a technical limitation but an ontological one. This is the core philosophical claim of this section, and it has implications reaching beyond the Buddhist context: it suggests that the quest for AI that replicates human wisdom in all its dimensions rests on a conceptual error failure to recognize that wisdom is constitutively grounded in embodied, mortal, suffering existence.

VIII. Buddhist Wisdom as an Alternative Model of Intelligence

8.1 Two Models of Intelligence

The analysis developed in the preceding sections makes possible the articulation of a systematic contrast between two fundamentally different models of intelligence one instantiated in current AI systems, one articulated in Vasubandhu's prajñā framework. This section develops this contrast and proposes that the Buddhist model, properly understood, constitutes not merely a critique of algorithmic intelligence but a positive alternative that has implications for how we think about AI design, human flourishing, and the goals of cognitive development.

The first model what this paper terms Computational Intelligence is characterized by four features: (1) optimization over a specified objective function; (2) knowledge as accurate representation of domain relevant regularities; (3) intelligence as performance excellence across task domains; and (4) value as an externally specified parameter to be maximized. This model is presupposed in virtually all current AI development paradigms, from supervised learning through reinforcement learning to large language model pretraining. It is a powerful model: it has produced genuinely remarkable technological achievements. Its limitation is philosophical: it has no account of wisdom as distinct from intelligence, no account of the transformation of the knower as distinct from the improvement of their performance, and no account of the relationship between cognitive achievement and the agent's existential situation.

The second model what this paper terms Contemplative Intelligence, following the framework derived from Vasubandhu's prajñā account is characterized by four contrasting features: (1) orientation toward liberation from suffering as the constitutive goal of cognitive development; (2) knowledge as direct discernment of the nature of phenomena, not merely accurate representation; (3) intelligence as the progressive cultivation of ethical, attentional, and penetrative cognitive capacities; and (4) value as intrinsic to the agent's transformed motivational structure, not externally specified. This model has been elaborated over fifteen centuries of Buddhist philosophical reflection; the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam represents its most systematic analytical articulation.

8.2 Key Features of the Contemplative Intelligence Model

The Contemplative Intelligence model proposes three features that are absent from the Computational Intelligence model and that have direct implications for AI ethics and design. First, ethical cognition: the model insists that wisdom is not a purely cognitive achievement separable from ethical transformation. The practitioner's progress through the three forms of prajñā is simultaneously a progress in ethical purification (śīla) and attentional stabilization (samādhi). For AI design, this suggests that attempts to separate ethical alignment from cognitive performance to build systems that are intelligent first and then add ethical constraints are structurally misguided. Ethics is not a constraint on intelligence; in the Buddhist framework, it is a condition of possibility for wisdom.

Second, experiential insight: the model emphasizes that the deepest form of wisdom (bhāvanāmayī prajñā) arises from direct, non-inferential engagement with reality what Dhammajoti (2007, 391) calls 'penetrative apprehension of the specific characteristics of dharmas.' This is wisdom grounded in the quality of the

agent's experience, not merely the accuracy of their representations. For AI, this highlights the significance of what Thompson (2015, 5) calls 'lived experience' as a condition of genuine understanding a condition that AI systems currently lack and may lack in principle. The implication is not that AI cannot be useful but that usefulness should not be conflated with wisdom.

Third, liberation as telos: the Contemplative Intelligence model is oriented by a specific telos the liberation of sentient beings from suffering that gives cognitive development its direction and meaning. This telos is not a performance metric but an existential commitment that shapes the practitioner's entire cognitive ethical life. For AI design, this suggests an alternative framing of the alignment problem: rather than asking how to align AI systems with human preferences (as Russell 2019 proposes), the Buddhist framework asks how to design systems that genuinely serve the liberation of sentient beings from suffering a formulation that is both more demanding and more philosophically substantive.

8.3 Implications for AI Design and Human Flourishing

The practical implications of the Contemplative Intelligence model for AI design are significant, though they must be stated carefully. The model does not imply that AI systems can or should be made to replicate bhāvanāmayī prajñā the preceding analysis has demonstrated that this is structurally impossible. What the model implies is a set of design criteria that go beyond performance optimization and rule-based ethics. Systems designed under the influence of the Contemplative Intelligence model would be evaluated not merely by their task performance but by their effects on the cognitive conditions of the human beings who use them. Do they enhance or undermine attentional stability (the condition for samādhi)? Do they support or inhibit the kind of sustained reflective reasoning that cintāmayī prajñā requires? Do they serve or exploit the human aspiration toward understanding and flourishing? These questions do not have simple technical answers, but they are the right questions and the Abhidharma tradition's precise analysis of the conditions for wisdom provides resources for thinking about them that Western philosophical traditions have largely not developed.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Vasubandhu's account of prajñā in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam provides a philosophically rigorous framework for addressing one of the most pressing questions of the age of artificial intelligence: what distinguishes genuine wisdom from computational intelligence? Through close textual analysis of AKBh I, IV, VI, VIII, and IX, the paper has demonstrated that prajñā in Vasubandhu's system is not a single cognitive capacity but a structured developmental achievement that moves through three qualitatively distinct tiers śrutamayī, cintāmayī, and bhāvanāmayī prajñā each with its own causal conditions, epistemic character, and soteriological function.

The comparative analysis has yielded two main results. First, a critical assessment: AI systems exhibit a partial and structurally incomplete analog of śrutamayī prajñā at best, and are structurally incapable of cintāmayī and bhāvanāmayī prajñā because they lack cetanā, the direct experience of dukkha, the āśravas and the transformative work of eliminating them, and the existential stake in liberation that motivates the entire cognitive enterprise. Second, a positive contribution: the Buddhist model of Contemplative Intelligence oriented by liberation from suffering, grounded in ethical conduct and attentional stabilization, and culminating in transformative direct insight provides a philosophically substantive alternative to the Computational Intelligence model that currently dominates AI discourse.

The value of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam for contemporary AI ethics lies not in it providing readymade solutions to contemporary technical problems but in the precision and depth of its analysis of the conditions for wisdom. Vasubandhu's insistence that the highest wisdom requires the transformation of the knower, not merely the improvement of the knowing system's performance; his analysis of the āśravas as structural

obstacles to genuine insight; his account of the non-self as a condition of wise, compassionate action these are philosophical insights of enduring relevance that the discourse surrounding artificial intelligence has not yet begun to absorb.

Several directions for future research follow from this analysis. First, a parallel analysis of Vasubandhu's later Yogācāra works particularly the Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi and Triṃśikā would enrich the account of consciousness and representation offered here, with particular relevance to debates about AI phenomenology. Second, engagement with the Prajñāpāramitā literature's account of prajñā as insight into śūnyatā (emptiness) would extend the framework into Mahāyāna contexts and add the dimension of interpersonal and social transformation that Bodhisattva ethics demands. Third, empirical collaboration with contemplative scientists and cognitive neuroscientists following the research program pioneered by Thompson (2007) and Wallace (2006) could test whether the attentional and cognitive conditions that Vasubandhu identifies as necessary for bhāvanāmayī prajñā have measurable neural correlates that AI systems demonstrably lack. Fourth, and most practically, the Contemplative Intelligence model proposed in Section VIII offers a framework for AI ethics that goes beyond current principle-based approaches; developing this framework into operational design criteria for AI systems is a task for interdisciplinary work at the intersection of Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and AI engineering.

The age of artificial intelligence is, among other things, an age of epistemic crisis: a crisis about what knowledge is for, what wisdom requires, and what human cognitive life is worth cultivating. Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam written in fifth century India for a community of monastic practitioners seeking liberation from suffering turns out, on careful examination, to have something precise and important to say about this crisis. The path of wisdom it describes is demanding, transformative, and irreducibly personal. It cannot be automated. That is, perhaps, its most important lesson.

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