

Can Artificial Intelligence Fulfil the Role of a Buddhist Counsellor? An Early Buddhist Psychological Perspective

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is gradually becoming an important part of modern life. In recent years, there have been numerous applications of chatbots and virtual assistants that are capable of providing support in terms of emotions, guidance for mental well-being and meditative practices. The reasons why many people use AI are that it is always accessible, responds immediately and gives the chance for the user to talk about one's issues anonymously. This raises an important question: Can Artificial Intelligence fulfil the role of a Buddhist Counsellor? Buddhist counselling is different from many modern counselling approaches. It is not limited to solving emotional problems or reducing stress. According to Early Buddhist psychology, counselling aims to help individuals understand the nature of suffering (*dukkha*), identify its cause, cultivate wholesome mental qualities, and progress towards lasting well-being through ethical conduct, mental development, and wisdom. These principles are explained throughout the Pāli Canon, especially in teachings such as the Four Noble Truths (SN 56.11), the Noble Eightfold Path (SN 45.8), mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhana Sutta*, MN 10), loving-kindness (*Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, Sn 1.8), compassion (AN 4.125), and spiritual friendship (*Upaddha Sutta*, SN 45.2). Although AI has shown considerable potential in providing mental health support, most existing studies focus on technological development, ethical concerns, or the effectiveness of AI in general counselling. Comparatively little attention has been given to whether AI can fulfil the psychological and ethical qualities required of a Buddhist counsellor according to Early Buddhist teachings. This reveals an important research gap at the intersection of Buddhist psychology, counselling, and artificial intelligence. Therefore, this study examines whether contemporary AI can function as a Buddhist counsellor from the perspective of early Buddhist psychology. Rather than asking whether AI can replace human beings in general, the study evaluates AI against the essential qualities of Buddhist counselling found in the Pāli Canon. It argues that while AI may serve as a valuable supportive tool for Buddhist education and preliminary emotional guidance, it cannot fully replace the cultivated wisdom, genuine compassion, ethical responsibility, and experiential understanding that characterize an authentic Buddhist counsellor.

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Objectives

The study aims to explore the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Buddhist counselling from the perspective of Early Buddhist psychology. Specifically, the study seeks to:

Examine the fundamental principles of Buddhist counselling as presented in the Early Buddhist texts.

Identify the psychological and ethical qualities expected of a Buddhist counsellor according to the Pāli Canon.

Evaluate whether the capabilities of contemporary AI correspond to these Buddhist counselling principles.

Discuss the potential role and limitations of AI in supporting Buddhist counselling in the modern world.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual and comparative analysis. The research primarily examines the psychological and ethical principles of Buddhist counselling found in the Early Buddhist texts and compares them with the current capabilities of Artificial Intelligence in counselling and emotional support. The primary sources consist of selected discourses from the Pāli Canon, including selected discourses from the Dīgha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Saṃyutta Nikaya, Aṅguttara Nikaya and Sutta Nipata. Primary textual references are identified using standard Pali Canon discourse references and consulted alongside the English translations by Bhikkhu Bodhi. These texts are used to identify the essential qualities of Buddhist counselling, such as understanding suffering (*dukkha*), mindfulness (*sati*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa-mitta*). Secondary sources include scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on Buddhist psychology and counselling, and recent studies on Artificial Intelligence, mental health, and AI- assisted counselling. Works by leading Buddhist scholars, together with recent research from psychology and AI journals, are used to support the analysis. The collected data are analyzed through thematic analysis. First, the study identifies the key psychological and ethical characteristics of Buddhist counselling based on Early Buddhist teachings. Second, these qualities are compared with the present capabilities of AI to evaluate its strengths and limitations in the counselling process. Based on this analysis, the study discusses the appropriate role of AI as a supportive tool in Buddhist counselling from the perspective of Early Buddhist psychology.

Results

The analysis indicates that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significant potential to support Buddhist counselling in several practical ways. AI can provide immediate access to Buddhist teachings, explain key psychological concepts found in the Pāli Canon, guide users in basic mindfulness and meditation practices, and offer preliminary emotional support. These features make AI a useful educational and supportive resource, particularly for individuals who may not have immediate access to qualified Buddhist counsellors or monastic teachers.

Essential Qualities of Buddhist Counselling	Current AI Capabilities	Assessment
Understanding of Dukkha	Explains the concept through learned information	Limited understanding
Karuṇā	Generates compassionate responses	Simulated, not experienced
Mettā	Uses supportive language	No genuine intention
Paññā	Organizes and analyses information	No experiential insight
Sati	Guides mindfulness practice	Cannot cultivate mindfulness
Sīla	Operates within programmed rules	No moral cultivation
Kalyāṇa-mitta	Provides conversational interaction	Cannot form authentic spiritual friendship

Table 1. Comparison between the essential qualities of Buddhist counselling and the current capabilities of Artificial Intelligence

However, the findings also reveal important limitations when AI is evaluated through the principles of Early Buddhist psychology. Buddhist counselling is not merely the delivery of information or advice. It is a process that depends on qualities developed through ethical training, meditation, and wisdom. The analysis shows that while AI can generate responses that appear compassionate and supportive, it does not possess genuine compassion (karuṇā), loving-kindness (mettā), or wisdom (paññā). Similarly, AI can explain the practice of mindfulness (sati), but it cannot cultivate mindfulness or directly experience suffering (dukkha), which are essential for understanding the human condition from a Buddhist perspective. The comparative analysis further suggests that AI is most effective when used as a complementary tool rather than an independent Buddhist counsellor. It can support Dhamma learning, encourage self-reflection, and provide general guidance. However, it cannot replace the role of a human Buddhist counsellor who embodies ethical conduct (sīla), experiential wisdom, and spiritual friendship (kalyāṇa-mitta). These findings suggest that the future of

Buddhist counselling lies in a balanced integration of AI-assisted support with the ethical, psychological, and spiritual qualities cultivated by human Buddhist counsellors according to Early Buddhist teachings.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Artificial Intelligence (AI) can play an important supportive role in Buddhist counselling in today's digital society. Its ability to provide immediate access to Buddhist teachings, guided meditation, and preliminary emotional support makes it a useful resource, especially for individuals who have limited access to qualified Buddhist counsellors or monastic teachers. AI also offers a convenient platform for learning Dhamma, encouraging self-reflection, and promoting awareness of mental well-being. However, the analysis indicates that Buddhist counselling involves much more than providing information or answering questions. According to Early Buddhist psychology, the counselling process is grounded in the cultivation of ethical conduct (*sīla*), mindfulness (*sati*), compassion (*karuṇā*), loving kindness (*mettā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa-mitta*). These qualities are developed through personal practice, meditation, and direct experience of life. Although AI can generate supportive responses based on learned information, it cannot genuinely experience suffering, cultivate wholesome mental states, or develop the moral and spiritual qualities expected of a Buddhist counsellor. Therefore, the study argues that AI should be understood as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for human Buddhist counsellors. It can assist in Buddhist education and provide initial guidance, but the deeper transformation of the mind, which is the primary goal of Buddhist counselling, continues to depend on human wisdom, ethical cultivation, and compassionate relationships.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Artificial Intelligence has considerable potential to support Buddhist counselling by improving access to Buddhist teachings, mindfulness practices, and preliminary emotional guidance. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Early Buddhist psychology, AI cannot fully fulfil the role of a Buddhist counsellor because it lacks genuine compassion, experiential wisdom, ethical cultivation, and authentic spiritual relationships. Rather than replacing human counsellors, AI should be integrated as a supportive resource that complements traditional Buddhist counselling. By evaluating AI through the principles of Early Buddhist psychology, this study contributes to the growing field of Buddhist psychology and Counselling by offering an Early Buddhist framework for understanding the appropriate role of Artificial intelligence in counselling practice.

Keywords- Artificial Intelligence, Buddhist Counselling, Early Buddhist Psychology, Compassion, Pāli Canon

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