A Buddhist Appeal to the European Parliament and the European Commission on Artificial Intelligence

> *Without significant freedom of attention, there can be no true freedom of intention.*

PART ONE

Executive Summary

We are writing to the European Parliament and the European Commission as a coalition of organisations, scholars, and practitioners engaged in dialogue on the ethical, social, and civilisational implications of artificial intelligence, including representatives of the European Buddhist Union, the Italian Buddhist Union Research Centre, Mind & Life Europe, and the Buddhism & AI Initiative. We offer five "reorientations" that we hope will support European policy decision-making. They arise from a long-standing contemplative and ethical tradition concerned with attention, mind, human agency, and the alleviation of conflict and suffering, but they are offered here in a practical spirit: to help ensure that AI strengthens democracy, human dignity, and the conditions for shared flourishing.

1	**Freedom of attention is a prerequisite for democracy.** AI is a *technology of mind* that conditions, and may threaten, human attention and intention. Europe must recognize and protect these capacities for their foundational roles in human ethical life and democratic society.
2	**Concentrations of power undermine relationality and shared agency.** Today's AI race ignores interdependence; AI must be governed *relationally*, not only individually. Its benefits and harms are never confined to those who design or deploy it; they cascade through social, economic, political, and ecological relationships. Europe should lead international cooperation committed to more equitable and democratic AI futures for all.
3	**AI should enhance, not diminish, human agency.** Technologies like AI are tied to the deepest predicaments of our time, which are not technical problems to be solved but ethical knots that only human deliberation can untie. Europe should safeguard human agency and ethical authority and restrict the automation of moral decision-making.
4	**Data should be treated as an extension of bodily and personal integrity.** Data and knowledge represent what human attention has valued and cannot be separated from the ethics of persons. Europe should protect personal data as an extension of personhood and safeguard human knowledge creation.
5	**Humanity must remain the measure of technological progress.** AI policy must protect human dignity, care, meaningful participation, and the distinctiveness of human life, while exercising caution in extending moral or legal protections to AI systems.

We thank the European Parliament and the European Commission for the opportunity to share these ideas and welcome any further dialogue.

PART TWO

A Call for Civilizational Action on AI: A Buddhist Appeal to the European Parliament and the European Commission

AI is widely described as a new general-purpose technology that is bringing about a Fourth Industrial Revolution. Just as electricity came to be infused into virtually every site of human activity, from factory floors to family rooms, AI is being infused into everything from supply chains to smartphones and will prove similarly transformative.

But AI is a *civilizational* revolution as much as it is an industrial one. The Copernican Revolution decentred humanity in the physical cosmos. The AI revolution has the potential to decentre human intelligence, agency, and creativity—foundational aspects of human meaning and value.

Europe is distinctively positioned to shape this revolution, but the global impacts of AI compel a European response that is sensitive to views from around the world. We are writing to offer a Buddhist perspective drawn from a long-standing contemplative and ethical tradition that has been centrally concerned with attention, mind, and ethics, and alleviating the causes of conflict and suffering.

On Europe's Situation

The European Union has established itself as a global leader for rights-based data governance and AI regulation. But the pace of AI development greatly surpasses that of regulation, and its trajectory is being shaped by corporate and geopolitical competitions that are presumed to be winner-takes-all.

The last five years have seen rising conflict, the sidestepping of international democratic norms, and a deprioritizing of climate issues and sustainable development goals. The AI race is a significant cause of this displacement. Democratic institutions are vulnerable to LLM-facilitated mass misinformation and polarization. The same systems also enable corporate and state surveillance with previously impossible granularity and radically alter warfare by accelerating the battlefield "kill chain" to the point that keeping humans in the loop is becoming a tactical liability. And while AI reshapes geopolitical priorities and power, it is also poised to disrupt that which is closest to home: from livelihoods to human capacities for connection, critical reasoning, and creativity.

All this puts Europe in a difficult position with respect to AI regulation. European technology and funding lag significantly behind that of the United States and China, leading to calls from within Europe to deregulate AI industries to promote competitiveness. **Yet, Europe's regulatory ecosystem is crucial to protecting European sovereignty and ensuring that AI systems contribute favourably to European life. Loosening regulation to compete on the terms set elsewhere may risk forfeiting the values Europe most needs to protect.**

Five Reorientations for Democratic AI Governance

The dominant frames through which AI is currently understood and regulated are predicated on largely unexamined assumptions: that individuals (persons, corporations and nations) are the basic units of ethical concern, not relations among them; that AI is just a new kind of tool; that technologies are fundamentally value-neutral; that data is a by-product of human activity; and that human beings are defined principally by their productive potential and market value.

From our perspective, while each of these assumptions may have limited validity, they collectively work against clear moral and practical engagement with the risks and opportunities of the AI revolution. Supplementing the modern European cultural frame with such a frame helps clarify the predicaments now shaping global dynamics and offers a route to AI policy that contributes to human and planetary flourishing.

01 AI Impacts on Mind, Attention, and Agency

The opening verse of the *Dhammapada*, one of the most widely read collections of the Buddha's teachings, begins with "mind precedes all things." It is our thoughts and intentions (whether helpful or harmful) that shape our speech and actions, which in turn shape our cultures, societies, and relations with nature.

Unlike any previous technology, AI interprets, responds to, and extends human values and intentions, including conflicts among them. Interactions with AI systems affect attentional scope and quality, structure imagination, reinforce worldviews, and shape decision-making and action pathways. From our point of view, the fact that AI is increasingly a conditioning factor in human experience means that it is a "technology of mind" that demands rigorous ethical analysis.

Of particular significance here is the role of attention, which is not just a quantifiable proxy for time. Attention is an index of what matters—a salience amplifier that we recognize as foundational for cultivating appropriate intentions and ethical discernment.

The algorithmic power to capture and direct human attention is the power to determine what matters to individuals and groups, and to shape human agency from within. It is already visible in the so-called "attention economy", where social media platforms, digital advertising and marketing systems are designed to predict, capture, and monetise human attention. As AI systems become more personalised, persuasive, and embedded in everyday life, these dynamics may intensify and become harder for individuals and societies to recognize or resist.[1]

Without significant freedom-of-attention, there can be no true freedom-of-intention. And without freedom-of-intention, all other freedoms become either illusory or impossible, including the freedom required to engage in the open ethical deliberations that uphold today's democracies and that will be needed to realize more just and equitable futures for all.

02 Relationality and Shared Agency

This approach begins from the recognition that all things exist interdependently. People, actions, technologies, and environments come into being through and depend on webs of relationships in which responsibility and accountability are necessarily shared. Interdependence means that the effects of AI are never confined to those who design or deploy it. The benefits and harms of AI cascade through social, economic, and ecological relationships. **Governance therefore cannot focus only**

[1]See also "Beyond the attention economy, towards an ecology of attending. A manifesto"

on individual actors but must consider the quality of the relationships and systems that AI helps create.

From this vantage point, many ethical and religious traditions warn that excesses of power are corrupting, whether at the level of persons, corporations, or nation-states. Concentrations of power are conducive to ignoring interdependencies and to exercising control in ways that diminish autonomy for others, limit diversity, and hollow out sovereignty. **A winner-take-all framing of AI competition is thus dangerous both to international peace and shared prosperity.**

03 Tools, Technologies, and Alignment

It is common to think of AI systems as value-neutral *tools* that can be evaluated in terms of their task-specific utility and risks, and from which we have substantive "exit rights," or the capacity to opt out of using them at any point. But there is a liability to assuming that the dynamics of AI-human alignment are one-way.

Extending the perspective on interdependence makes it clear that *technologies* are not reducible to the tools associated with them. Technologies are relational systems that emerge from human conduct, reflecting human values and interests, but that in turn condition and constrain our conduct, just as transportation infrastructures have done with our cities, social media with our relationships, and as AI is set to do in nearly every aspect of our lives. In contrast with tools, exit rights from technologies are minimal. **And where the risks of tool design and use can often be mitigated at a purely technical level, the risks of a technology are necessarily ethical because they concern our values and relations.**

This points to a deeper distinction at the heart of AI policy between *problems* and *predicaments*. Problems occur when goals are broadly agreed upon but existing tools no longer deliver desired results. For example, hybrid and electric cars are solutions to the problem of automotive carbon emissions. Climate disruption, however, is not a technical problem. It is a predicament: that is, evidence of conflicts among competing environmental, cultural, economic, and political values. Resolving a predicament involves evaluating and ranking competing goods and interests and their relational effects, and that is an essentially human task, not one that can be outsourced to AI.

04 Data, Knowledge, and Epistemic Equity

The immense power of current AI systems ultimately rests on the human data on which they are trained. Data is sometimes called the "new oil" (a depletable material resource) or "digital exhaust" (a byproduct of digital life). It is neither. Better thought of as "digital DNA," the data generated through digital connectivity afford corporations and states the means to build detailed representations of human preferences, behaviour, and decision patterns—essentially a "digital proxy" of a human person. Such an intimate facsimile is personal, and **the right to retain our own data and control its use should be as fundamental as our right to maintain the integrity of our own bodies and determine the uses of our own genetic information**.

This reimagining of data implies a parallel reimagining of knowledge and the access that AI promises to a global knowledge common. Knowledge is not a storable commodity that is reducible to information or data. Rather, knowing is an ecologically- and historically-situated relational process, and acquiring new knowledge through research in the natural and human sciences is value-laden and requires both freedom of attention and intention—the freedom to determine what knowledge matters and matters most. This cautions against the use of AI to automate research. **AI should be employed to promote and enhance human epistemic autonomy, not compromise it, and to support long-term research and non-instrumental inquiry.**

05 Affirming Life & Human Dignity

As AI systems advance and present even more persuasive simulations of human behaviour, it may create conditions in which human agency and capacities for empathetic care are outsourced to AI. AI is increasingly being used for companionship, therapy, career and personal life decisions, and for finding meaning. The relational risks of this are complex. **Care must be taken to preserve the prosocial domains of activity that deepen our ethical and relational commitments and secure human dignity.**

These risks are especially serious when commercial AI systems simulate care, intimacy, companionship, or understanding in response to human vulnerability, distress, loneliness, or isolation. While AI may play a beneficial role in welfare and support services, such uses require careful public oversight, preventive safeguards, and appropriate regulation, especially where minors, elderly people, people in psychological distress, or other vulnerable groups are involved.

A related concern arises as these systems present more convincingly as agents with inner experience. Buddhism recognizes the sentience and moral standing of many forms of life; it does not reserve moral concern for human beings alone, even as it also affirms the distinctiveness of human life and its potential for spiritual and ethical growth. We thus call for caution before extending the category of moral personhood to AI systems that lack embodiment and the capacity to suffer, since doing so risks hollowing out the significance of life and might prove conducive to systemic dehumanization.

The environmental costs of large AI systems—especially energy and water use—must also be taken seriously. A relational approach to AI cannot separate human flourishing from the health of the planet.

Policy Directions

Pursuant to the above reorientations, we suggest that a set of new governance and policy positions may strengthen Europe's commitments to its democratic values and help Europe play a defining role in stewarding a more ethical future for AI's impact.

1. A reorientation around *AI Impacts on Mind, Attention, and Agency* implies that the pursuit of free attention and intention are fundamental human rights that are threatened by AI technology. Towards this end, we recommend that Europe formally recognize the pursuit of freedom of attention in European Law, and enact policies that: A) mandate that applications of AI that deliberately capitalize attention be subject to human oversight and accountability—including engagement-maximizing recommender systems and ad-driven attention-capture business models—and restrict or ban applications of AI that dramatically infringe upon the right to attention and intention; B) require that "AI Benchmarks" be extended to include evaluations of how AI use affects mental health, attention span, discernment, personal agency, and ethical orientations; and C) make attention training and social-emotional learning part of digital literacy in European education from primary school onward.

2. A reorientation around *Relationality and Shared Agency* implies that Europe must avoid AI race dynamics and work to ensure that the material benefits of AI are shared widely across all segments of global society. AI governance should also protect economic security, employment, and meaningful livelihoods, ensuring that the pursuit of economic gain in the AI race does not come at the cost of human dignity and social stability. This may be empowered by policies that: A) prevent any single entity from controlling or owning a disproportionate share of AI technology; B) establish distributed liability across developers, platforms, deployers, and users, and require that externalities like social and environmental costs are measured and priced in; and C) replicate these same measures on an international scale, creating governance mechanisms and treaties that prevent any single company or state from gaining unilateral control over advanced AI.

3. A reorientation around *Tools, Technologies, and Alignment* implies that AI technology is generating complex predicaments that can only be adequately addressed at ethical—not merely technical or legal—registers. Policy can be used as an instrument to keep humans in positions of ethical authority, such as: A) adopt a principle that ethical deliberation is, and should remain, a human labour, and restrict systems that obscure that accountability or automate moral judgment; B) restrict fully-autonomous corporations and research processes that seek to displace humans from the process of value-creation and knowledge discovery; and C) prohibit AI designed to take human life without human control and accountability, and establish international norms governing AI in military contexts, in keeping with the EU's commitment to peace and security.

4. A reorientation around *Data, Knowledge, and Epistemic Equity* implies that data and knowledge must be recognized as capturing and conveying what humans value and therefore must be protected. Policy can defend data rights and restrict systems which intend to decouple knowledge and values. This could involve commitments to: A) maintain and strengthen European data protection rights by treating personal data as an extension of bodily integrity, with its storage and use governed by the individual; B) require transparency by all technology providers in how they use data, enable users to determine the purposes for which their data is accessed, and require AI systems to prioritize interpretability and interoperability so that diverse and independent knowledge ecosystems can be upheld; and C) support equitable access to AI tools for the public and academia, and invest in European public AI research capacity and open scientific

infrastructure, and protect academic access and the conditions for long-term, non-instrumental inquiry.

5. A reorientation around *Affirming Life & Human Dignity* places concern for human dignity at the heart of political action and cautions against extending this view to AI. To this end, we recommend that Europe introduce policy to A) restrict AI companionship for minors, and limit AI systems which aim to replace humans in systems of care and thereby outsource crucial dimensions of our humanity; B) protect a fundamental "right to meaningful pursuits," including work, recognizing the human need for dignity through these opportunities; and C) challenge efforts to extend legal personhood or fundamental rights to AI systems, which risks diluting human dignity and moral standing.

Closing Vision

These reorientations are offered to help clarify some of the challenging dynamics surrounding AI in ways that will be useful to members of the European Parliament, the European Commission and policy staff as they seek to exemplify their commitment to European values and wiser decision-making regarding AI.

The deeper question is not whether Europe can win the AI race as currently framed. The deeper question is whether the race is the right thing to be running. From our perspective, the answer is plainly no: a race premised on competition and power concentration, diminishing human collaboration and creativity, and creating a future in which human agency atrophies and indignity increases is not acceptable. An alternative vision must be enacted. This alternative cannot be achieved by regulation alone; it requires public, democratic, and civil-society-led AI infrastructures designed for human and planetary flourishing rather than extraction.

A *Democratic AI Infrastructure* should be supported as a public good. Legislation and regulation are essential, but they are not sufficient. Europe should also support the creation of AI systems developed for public benefit rather than corporate extraction, in cooperation with civil society, universities, public institutions, and NGOs. Such systems could help citizens access trustworthy information, participate in democratic deliberation, build local and transnational communities, and protect sensitive data from being repurposed for commercial or manipulative ends. In fields such as healthcare, education, and social care, publicly accountable AI tools should strengthen human relationships and community participation rather than convert human vulnerability into proprietary data.

Buddhism does not offer a paradisiacal vision or end-state of the future. The aim of our tradition is to ease conflict and suffering and to free people from compulsion, and this allows the human story to remain open through ongoing efforts to live and relate to one another more wisely and compassionately. AI may well pose a genuine threat to human values and society. But it also constitutes an ethical and evolutionary opportunity to renew global commitment to the democratic values at the heart of the European civilizational adventure. Our decisions today must be taken with responsibility to these values and the benefit of future generations.