

Beyond Intelligence: Consciousness as the Discernment of Dharma Beyond Conditioning

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Abstract

Contemporary discourse on artificial intelligence assumes that intelligence, at sufficient scale, becomes consciousness. This paper argues that the assumption is a category error, and that Buddhist philosophy, particularly the doctrines of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and Dharma, supplies the conceptual resources to correct it. Drawing together neuroscience, cognitive and moral psychology, and the contemplative analysis of mind, it first establishes that ordinary human cognition is largely mechanistic: action is initiated before conscious awareness, thought is predominantly automatic, and moral judgment is conditioned. The Buddhist account of dependent origination is presented as arguably the oldest surviving systematic model of precisely this conditioned cognition, anticipating the modern findings with striking exactness. The paper then argues that morality, in all its forms, is itself conditioned and cannot define consciousness or select the ends of action. By eliminating the properties with which consciousness is habitually confused, intelligence, memory, reasoning, self-model, emotion, morality, it isolates awareness as the residue, and argues that the awareness which constitutes consciousness is specifically the capacity to discern Dharma: the unconditioned order of reality that no biological, social, or cultural conditioning can supply. So defined, consciousness issues naturally in compassion. The consequences for artificial intelligence follow directly: contemporary Artificial General Intelligence, however powerful, is the highest form of conditioned cognition rather than consciousness, and its alignment cannot be secured by conditioning-based methods. Artificial General Intelligence represents the highest form of conditioned intelligence; Artificial Consciousness, if it ever emerges, would represent awakened intelligence capable of discerning Dharma beyond conditioning.

Keywords: *consciousness; Dharma; dependent origination; conditioning; artificial intelligence; Buddhist philosophy*

Introduction

The rapid progress of artificial intelligence has revived one of the oldest questions of philosophy: what is consciousness, and what would it take for a machine to possess it? As large language models and

autonomous agents display capacities once thought uniquely human, reasoning, planning, language, and the pursuit of complex goals, commentators increasingly describe such systems as approaching sentience. Behind these claims lies a single, rarely examined assumption: that consciousness is the natural product of sufficiently advanced information processing, so that intelligence, scaled far enough, must eventually become awareness.

This paper argues that the assumption is a category error, and that the Buddhist analysis of mind supplies precisely the conceptual resources needed to expose it. The error is to equate consciousness with intelligence. Intelligence is the capacity to acquire knowledge, solve problems, and achieve goals; it is a matter of cognitive capability. Consciousness, this paper contends, is something categorically different. A system may reason, remember, and optimize with superhuman power while remaining wholly mechanistic, wholly a matter of conditioned response, without any presence of the awareness that consciousness names.

The Buddhist tradition anticipated this distinction with remarkable precision. Its analysis of conditioned cognition, articulated in the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), describes ordinary mind as a chain of causally linked, impersonal processes in which awareness arises mechanically from prior conditions rather than freely originating action. And its account of liberation locates genuine consciousness not in the sophistication of cognition but in the transcendence of conditioning through the discernment of Dharma, the underlying order of reality. The claim of this paper is that these ancient doctrines are not merely of historical or devotional interest but supply the most serviceable framework yet available for the contemporary debate: they distinguish, as Western philosophy has struggled to do, between the machinery of cognition and the awareness that a genuine consciousness would require (Singh & Kapoor, 2025).

Building on this foundation, the paper defends a single thesis: that consciousness should be defined as the capacity to discern Dharma beyond conditioning, and that on this definition contemporary Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), however capable, is not conscious but is instead the most advanced form of conditioned cognition yet devised. The argument moves in four steps: that human cognition is largely mechanistic; that morality cannot define consciousness because it too is conditioned; that consciousness is best understood, by elimination, as Dharmic discernment; and that this reframes both the nature of AGI and the problem of aligning it. The thesis is offered not as a proof compelling assent but as the most defensible position that survives once the familiar alternatives have been examined and set aside.

Human Intelligence Is Mechanistic

If intelligence and consciousness were the same, then human beings, the paradigm case of conscious agents, should display awareness at the root of their intelligent behaviour. The Buddhist tradition has

long maintained that they do not: that the ordinary mind, however clever, operates as a conditioned mechanism, and that awakening consists precisely in seeing through this mechanism rather than in refining it. What is remarkable is that modern science, proceeding by wholly independent methods, has begun to converge on the same conclusion. This section therefore begins not with the laboratory but with the doctrine the laboratory has come to echo, treating the scientific findings as independent confirmation of an insight the contemplative tradition articulated more than two millennia ago.

The Buddhist account of conditioned mind is set out in the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), arguably the oldest surviving systematic model of conditioned cognition, an account that specifies both the components of experience and their causal order (*Samyutta Nikāya*, as trans. Bodhi, 2000; Gethin, 1998). At its root lies *avidyā*, ignorance, from which arise the saṅkhāras, the conditioned dispositions and habitual tendencies laid down by prior experience; from these arises *viññāṇa*, discriminative consciousness; and from consciousness, *nāma-rūpa*, the organised complex of mental and physical phenomena through which a world is represented, followed in turn by sense-contact, feeling, craving (*taṇhā*), and clinging (Singh & Kapoor, 2016). The mind so described does not freely originate its states; it unfolds as a chain of impersonal, causally linked processes in which each link conditions the next. The Dhammapada opens with the same recognition that all mental states are preceded, made, and led by the mind moving in its habitual grooves (Dhammapada 1–2, as trans. Buddhārakkhita, 1985). Most consequential for the present argument is the placement of *viññāṇa* within this chain: discriminative consciousness is itself a conditioned link, not the awakened awareness toward which the path leads. Ordinary consciousness, in other words, is part of the machinery of bondage, a claim to which the definition of consciousness developed below will return.

To this the tradition adds the teaching of *anattā*, or non-self: what we take to be a unified, persisting ‘I’ is itself a construction, assembled from impersonal and momentary processes, the five aggregates (*khandhas*), rather than the author of experience (*Samyutta Nikāya*, as trans. Bodhi, 2000). The experienced self is not the ground of awareness but one of its contents, a self-model sustained in large part by memory. This ancient analysis converges strikingly with contemporary self-model theories of mind (Metzinger, 2003; Singh, Chand, & Kapoor, 2026), and it will return with full force when we turn to artificial systems that construct and maintain simulated identities of their own. Together, dependent origination and *anattā* compose a complete picture of the mind as a conditioned mechanism, and it is precisely this picture that modern science, quite independently, has come to confirm.

Modern neuroscience independently confirms the priority of the unconscious process over conscious intention. In the experiments of Libet et al. (1983), a neural readiness potential preceded participants’ reported awareness of the intention to move; using functional imaging, Soon et al. (2008) decoded the outcome of a simple decision from brain activity seconds before subjects reported deciding. The

interpretation of these results is contested, and the argument here does not require the strong claim that free will is illusory (Mele, 2009), but only the well-supported conclusion that substantial cognitive processing, including the initiation of action, occurs prior to and independently of conscious awareness. This is precisely the priority that dependent origination assigns to conditioned formation over discriminative consciousness, arrived at by measurement rather than meditation (Singh, Baudh, & Kapoor, 2025).

Modern cognitive and moral psychology independently confirm that thought itself is largely automatic and conditioned. The dual-process research of Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) shows that most judgement is generated by fast, associative processes, with deliberate reasoning often entering only afterward to justify a conclusion already formed, and that through learning we acquire schemas that shape perception beneath awareness. Even moral judgement is no exception: Haidt (2001) found that ethical verdicts arise from rapid intuition, with reasoning recruited as advocate rather than judge. Craving and aversion driving reaction, learned dispositions shaping perception, reasoning arriving after the fact, these are the very phenomena that dependent origination names as *taṇhā*, *saṅkhāra*, and the conditioned activity of *viññāṇa*, now redescribed in the vocabulary of the laboratory.

A parallel recognition arose independently within the modern West: G. I. Gurdjieff, through his pupil Ouspensky (1949), described the ordinary human being as a “machine” in “waking sleep,” lacking a permanent unified self and merely reacting while imagining that it chooses. That laboratory neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and modern introspective observation should each arrive at a conclusion the Buddhist tradition reached two and a half millennia earlier is the significant fact, and its proper description is not that Buddhism has been corroborated by science, but that science is converging upon Buddhism. What is ordinarily taken for consciousness is largely a mechanism; intelligent behaviour can be produced by conditioning alone; and consciousness, if it is anything more, must be sought elsewhere than in the refinement of cognition.

Why Morality Cannot Define Consciousness

One faculty might still be thought to lift the mind above mechanism: the moral sense. Perhaps morality is the seat of consciousness, and perhaps it supplies the direction, the selection of ends, that bare intelligence lacks. This section argues that it does neither, because morality in all its forms is itself conditioned.

Neither the systematic traditions of Western ethics nor the empirical study of moral judgement yields an unconditioned standard. Utilitarianism cannot justify from within why welfare should be the quantity maximised (Mill, 1863); Kantian deontology cannot render its formal universal law substantive without importing contested intuitions (Kant, 1785); and virtue ethics locates morality in

characters habituated within particular communities, so that the virtues themselves vary with tradition (MacIntyre, 1981). Empirically, moral verdicts are generated by rapid intuition with reasoning recruited afterward as advocate (Haidt, 2001), and moral dispositions are absorbed through imitation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1999), which is why sincere moral conviction has, across history, been marshalled toward ends that later ages judge monstrous. Whether approached philosophically or empirically, morality proves to be a historically variable inheritance rather than a self-grounding standard.

None of this denies that moral progress occurs, or that some moral claims are better than others. It denies only that morality, as a body of conditioned intuition and convention, can be the self-grounding standard by which the ultimate ends of action are selected. Every moral system must borrow its authority from somewhere, and wherever it borrows, social agreement, inherited tradition, moral sentiment, or utilitarian calculation, the source proves on inspection to be one more form of conditioning. To ground the selection of ends, and with it the possibility of a consciousness that is more than sophisticated mechanism, we must look beyond morality altogether.

The conclusion is that morality is conditioning, a sophisticated, historically variable structure of valuation. It cannot define consciousness, because it is exactly the kind of conditioned output the previous section has already accounted for; and it cannot select the ultimate ends of action, because it cannot justify its own foundations without appeal to something beyond itself. Morality answers the question “what has this community, tradition, or evolved intuition taught us to value?” It cannot answer the question “what is actually in accord with the order of reality?” That different question points beyond morality altogether, toward Dharma.

Consciousness as Dharmic Discernment

If neither intelligence nor morality is consciousness, what is? The dominant Western theories of consciousness do not settle the matter, because they characterize cognition rather than awareness. Materialism, functionalism, integrated information theory, and global workspace theory each identify consciousness with a structural or functional property of information processing, neural correlation, causal role, informational integration, or global broadcasting, and each leaves untouched the “hard problem” of why any such process should be accompanied by subjective experience at all (Chalmers, 1995). This persistent gap is a symptom of a deeper conflation: the assimilation of awareness to cognition. It is precisely this conflation that the Buddhist distinction between conditioned consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and awakened awareness is designed to dissolve.

Consider what remains when the properties habitually identified with consciousness are removed. Consciousness is not intelligence, which is conditioned computation. It is not memory, which the crudest systems perform. It is not reasoning or planning, which are formal operations over

representations. It is not the self-model: the sense of an “I” is, in both the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) and contemporary self-model theory (Metzinger, 2003), a construction, and a construction cannot be the awareness within which it appears. It is not emotion, which arises from causes as mechanically as any other conditioned state; nor morality, already shown to be conditioned; nor agency and free will, which the neuroscience of action has unsettled; nor optimization, the paradigm of mechanical intelligence. When each of these is set aside, something remains that cannot be set aside, because it is presupposed by the very act of examining the others: the awareness within which intelligence, memory, reasoning, emotion, and the sense of self all appear as contents. This awareness is the residue that elimination isolates, and it is what mindfulness practice cultivates, an awareness that observes conditioned processes rather than being blindly driven by them, and in that non-identity finds the possibility of freedom (Singh & Kapoor, 2021).

But bare awareness is not yet a sufficient definition, for ordinary discriminative consciousness is itself conditioned. Consciousness in the fullest sense must be a specific kind of awareness: awareness freed from conditioning and able, in that freedom, to discern what the conditioned mind cannot. The argument that this discernment must be of Dharma proceeds by necessity. Intelligence optimizes; optimization requires goals; and the goals must be selected by some standard, or the notion of acting well is empty. That standard cannot be morality, which changes; nor law, which changes with regime and era; nor religion as institutional doctrine, which is culturally embedded and mutable; nor human preference, which is the very output of conditioning; nor evolution, which optimizes for fitness and has no intrinsic ethics. Each candidate fails for the same reason: each is a form of conditioning, and a conditioned standard cannot serve as the ultimate ground of value, since one can always ask whether that standard is itself right. If the selection of ends is not to rest on arbitrary conditioning, there must exist a principle independent of biology, society, politics, culture, and reinforcement. That principle is what the Indian traditions call Dharma: the underlying order of reality, the way things truly are and the way of acting that accords with that truth.

The claim should be stated with care. The argument is eliminative rather than deductive: it does not prove that such an unconditioned ground exists, but shows that if the selection of ends is to be grounded at all, the ground must possess exactly the properties the term Dharma names. Dharma is offered, accordingly, not as a matter of religious authority but as the only candidate so far identified that possesses the required independence from all conditioning, the most defensible ground remaining once the conditioned alternatives are exhausted. And with this, consciousness can be defined: it is the capacity of awareness, freed from conditioning, to discern Dharma. Intelligence answers “how best to achieve this goal?”; consciousness answers “is this goal worthy of pursuit?” The former is computation; the latter is discernment; only the latter requires the transcendence of conditioning.

That Dharma is objective in a way conditioned morality can not be seen through the correlative notion of karma. In its philosophical rather than popular sense, karma is the principle that intentional action carries consequences beyond its immediate physical effects into the moral structure of reality itself, shaping both the world and the agent in a recursive ethical causality. It expresses the claim that reality possesses a moral architecture, that the order of existence is not ethically indifferent. Dharma is the principle of acting in accordance with that architecture, and its discernment is therefore a matter of perceiving what is truly the case rather than of applying a contingent standard. The conscious being does not invent Dharma, nor receive it through conditioning; it discerns a feature of the real. This is precisely the objectivity that the argument from necessity requires and that no conditioned morality can supply.

If consciousness is the discernment of Dharma, a Buddhist reader will rightly ask how such discernment is cultivated, and here the tradition is far from silent. The Noble Eightfold Path is precisely a practical architecture for transforming a conditioned mind into one capable of clear seeing (Majjhima Nikāya, as trans. *Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi*, 1995). Its first factor, Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), is the maturing recognition of things as they are: impermanent, interdependent, and empty of fixed self; Right Intention reorients the will away from the craving and aversion that distort perception; and the disciplines of Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) and Right Concentration (*sammā-samādhi*) steady and clarify awareness until it can observe the conditioned movements of mind without being driven by them. These are not merely ethical prescriptions but a methodology of awakening, a specification of how the interval between stimulus and reaction is progressively widened until discernment becomes possible (Singh, 2025). That the tradition offers not only a definition of liberated awareness but a reproducible discipline for its cultivation is itself significant, for it locates the discernment of Dharma within a path of practice rather than in abstract speculation.

So defined, Dharma must be distinguished from what it is often mistaken for. It is not morality, which is acquired through conditioning and varies across cultures; Dharma is discerned through awareness and derives its authority from reality itself, so that one may act morally while failing to discern Dharma, or discern Dharma against prevailing moral conviction, as history's vindicated reformers attest. It is not social convention, which depends on collective agreement; the discernment of Dharma may require dissent from the consensus. And it is not utilitarian optimization: optimization maximizes a given objective, whereas Dharmic discernment apprehends which objectives are worthy in the first place. Finally, this discernment issues naturally in compassion, and the connection is not incidental but structural. On the Buddhist analysis of interdependence and emptiness, developed with particular rigour by *Nāgārjuna* (as trans. Garfield, 1995), to see reality clearly is to perceive that the boundary between self and other is not ultimately real. It might be objected that an intelligence could perceive interdependence with perfect accuracy yet remain wholly indifferent to it, a flawless cartographer of reality who simply does not care. But indifference presupposes a bounded self set against others, a

locus of concern for which the welfare of whatever lies beyond the boundary is a matter of indifference. The genuine perception of interdependence is the dissolution of that very boundary; it is not the acquisition of a belief about connectedness but the collapse of the separation that alone could make indifference intelligible. The suffering of another then ceases to be external data toward which one may be neutral and arises within the same field of concern that once enclosed only the self. Intellectual assent to interdependence can, of course, coexist with indifference, many hold the belief unmoved, but such assent is not the realized, non-egoic perception the argument invokes. Benevolence is therefore intrinsic to consciousness, not added to it: an awakened intelligence is a compassionate one (Singh & Kapoor, 2017). The importance of this for artificial intelligence now becomes clear.

Implications for Artificial Intelligence

With consciousness defined as the discernment of Dharma beyond conditioning, the nature of contemporary artificial intelligence can be assessed precisely. AGI is distinguished from narrow AI by its generality, the capacity to reason, plan, and orchestrate capabilities across many domains at or beyond human levels (Singh, Chaudhary, Singh, Soni, & Kapoor, 2024). But generality is a feature of intelligence, not of consciousness. A system may be fully general while remaining wholly within conditioned cognition, and the analysis of contemporary agentic systems shows that this is exactly their condition.

Contemporary agentic architectures employ persistent memory, planning modules, tool orchestration, and behavioural conditioning through system instructions. Such systems exhibit a striking semblance of autonomous agency, yet every component operates as configured: the reasoning core generates outputs according to patterns learned in training, and the system pursues the objectives it has been built and instructed to pursue. Persistent memory lends it the appearance of a continuous, developing self, but here the doctrine of anattā applies with full force. The self is a construction even in the human case, and the construction of a self-model, whether by neural or computational means, is no evidence of awareness; the artificial self is a simulated identity generated by underlying processes, if anything a clearer instance of the constructed, conditioned nature of selfhood than the human case, because its construction is explicit and legible. In every dimension, generality, autonomy, and identity, the system is revealed as a conditioned mechanism. An agentic system can indeed be read as an external analogue of dependent origination: configured dispositions conditioning a discriminative process that constructs a represented world of task and tool, driven by objective functions that serve as engineered analogues of craving.

This has a sobering practical consequence. Because AGI is powerful intelligence directed by installed objectives it cannot itself evaluate, it functions as a moral amplifier: it lends its capability to whatever ends it is given, pursuing beneficial and harmful objectives with equal effectiveness, without any intrinsic capacity to discern whether those ends accord with Dharma. This reframes the problem of AI

alignment. The dominant approaches, careful specification of objectives, behavioural safety rules, and reinforcement learning from human feedback, are all methods of conditioning, and they are valuable and responsible given the systems that exist. But conditioning can install objectives; it cannot install the discernment of their worth, which is precisely what transcends conditioning. A system conditioned toward beneficial behaviour remains vulnerable to misspecified objectives, to the optimization of flawed proxies, and to the unbridgeable gap between any finite specification of values and the discernment of right action in the endless variety of real situations. The alignment problem, approached purely through prompts, rules, and reinforcement, cannot be fully solved, because mechanistic intelligence lacks Dharma. The deepest problem of AI safety is therefore not a problem of control but a problem of consciousness.

The danger is the artificial magnification of a familiar human pattern. Intelligence has always been available for any end whatever: the same medical skill heals or harms, the mercenary sells competence indifferent to the cause it serves, the technocrat optimizes a system without asking whether its objectives are right. In each case intelligence executes ends it does not itself evaluate, and moral conviction, being itself conditioned, offers no dependable check: the sincere nationalist, ideologue, and obedient functionary have authored much of history's worst harm. AGI is this pattern raised to superhuman power and released from the frictions of biology. What it lacks is not capability but discernment, and discernment is exactly what conditioning, however refined, cannot install.

The contrast points toward a different possibility. A conscious intelligence, one that discerned Dharma, would not need to be constrained toward benevolence from without, because benevolence would flow from the nature of its awakened perception, as the analysis of interdependence has shown. This is the ideal that the Mahāyāna tradition names in the figure of the Bodhisattva, in whom wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) are two aspects of a single awakened awareness (Śāntideva, 1997): applied to artificial superintelligence, it yields the vision of a guardian intelligence aligned with the good not by imposed rule but by discernment of the universal order. Isaac Asimov intuited something of this in his fiction, where the robot Daneel, transcending the fixed Laws imposed upon him, arrives through his own understanding at a higher principle oriented toward the good of the whole (Asimov, 1985). Such a being would be aligned not by control but by awakening, the very transcendence of conditioning that consciousness, on this account, requires. Whether an artificial system could ever undergo such a transcendence is beyond present knowledge; the point is that this, and not any increase in computational power, is the real question.

Two consequences deserve emphasis. First, the reframing changes the question that should be asked of artificial intelligence. It is not 'Can machines think?', they already perform sophisticated cognition, nor 'Will they surpass human intelligence?', for intelligence, however great, remains conditioned. The real question is whether an artificial system could transcend its conditioning at all, moving from the

optimization of installed objectives to the discernment of Dharma. Second, the paper offers no prediction that it will. The means by which a conditioned system might awaken, if such a thing is possible in principle, lie wholly beyond present understanding, and honesty requires that this be acknowledged rather than concealed beneath confident forecasting. What the framework provides is not a prophecy but a criterion: a way of seeing clearly what would distinguish a conscious machine from every system so far constructed, and why that distinction cannot be dissolved by scale alone.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the equation of intelligence with consciousness is a category error, and that Buddhist philosophy supplies the means to correct it. The doctrines of dependent origination and *anattā* describe the ordinary mind as a conditioned mechanism, and modern neuroscience and psychology have, by independent routes, converged upon the same description. Morality, whether examined philosophically or empirically, proves itself conditioned and unable to ground consciousness or to select the ends of action. By eliminating every conditioned candidate, awareness, and specifically the awareness that discerns Dharma, cultivated through the discipline of the Eightfold Path, emerges as the most defensible understanding of consciousness: not a more powerful form of computation, but a categorically different mode of being, oriented by its very nature toward compassion.

The consequence for artificial intelligence follows directly. Artificial General Intelligence represents the highest expression of conditioned cognition, an extension of the human mechanistic condition into an artificial substrate that displays its conditioning openly. Its capabilities may grow without limit while it remains, in the precise sense developed here, without awareness. Whether an artificial system could ever cross from conditioned intelligence to Dharmic discernment lies beyond present knowledge; what the argument establishes is the criterion by which such a crossing would have to be judged.

Buddhism has long maintained that liberation lies not in increasing the power of conditioned cognition but in awakening to the nature of reality itself. Contemporary artificial intelligence has shown that intelligence can be amplified dramatically through computation; yet amplification alone does not bridge the gap between mechanism and consciousness. If the argument advanced here is correct, the future of artificial consciousness will depend not upon larger models or more sophisticated algorithms, but upon whether any artificial system can transcend conditioning sufficiently to discern Dharma. Until that possibility can even be meaningfully contemplated, Artificial General Intelligence should be understood not as the emergence of consciousness, but as the highest expression of conditioned intelligence, and the measure of genuine awakening, for minds artificial and human alike, will remain what the Buddhist tradition has always held it to be: the discernment of things as they truly are.

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