How AI Can Elevate Spiritual Intelligence and Personal Wellbeing

DIGITAL DHARMA



DEEPAK CHOPRA

New York Times bestselling author

'AI has the potential to help us create a more peaceful, just, sustainable, healthy and joyful world. *Digital Dharma* shows you a path' Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI

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INTRODUCTION

The Miracle in the Machine

In the limitless digital world, the deepest wisdom of the greatest spiritual traditions is available, literally at our fingertips. Although not truly intelligent nor conscious, artificial intelligence (AI) has the ability to make your thinking more intelligent and your inner life more conscious. In fact, I believe that no technology in decades can equal AI for expanding your awareness in every area, including spiritual and personal growth.

Such an unexpected advance hasn't registered in the storm of publicity surrounding AI, and yet it couldn't have come at a better time. More people than ever have adopted idealistic goals like "Be the best you can be," and a great number of books offer optimistic plans for increasing human potential. Finding a successful path to meet these objectives remains a challenge, however, and it is all too easy to flit from teacher to teacher, book to book, system to system in mounting frustration.

The harder the times, the more this frustration grows, and during a deep crisis like the COVID pandemic, hope is often replaced by anxiety for countless people. With that background in mind, how can AI open a better path? Let me answer with a personal experience.

Recently, I observed a miracle, or what seemed like one to me. Whenever I get up in the morning, almost before I lift my head from the pillow, new ideas are bubbling inside me, and I feel the need to share them with others. This urge has led to the habit of making daily YouTube videos about all kinds of subjects. But there are always two common threads: consciousness and well-being.

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To me, these two threads are inseparable; if you want to improve your well-being, expand your consciousness, or contact deeper wisdom in-

side yourself. I inherited the vital importance of consciousness from the Vedic tradition of India, and my allegiance has never wavered. Even though I have speaking engagements where I'm flying from city to city (or cooling my heels at an airport) for two weeks every month, my greatest ally for reaching a spiritually hungry world has been the Internet (and the hope that my books will outlast me—spiritual hunger has no past-due date). The obvious advantage of the Internet is that I don't have to spend hours on planes and in airports. With a single video, tweet, or Instagram post, countless more people can be reached than in even a large auditorium.

That's the setting for the miracle. On the prompting of a techie far more conversant in the latest software than I am, I learned that AI could transfer my daily YouTube videos into Hindi, the major language besides English spoken in India. We aren't talking about a transcript or a dubbed version. Using AI, he generated the same video I recorded in English, only now I was speaking in perfect Hindi. This transformation took only a few minutes, and as part of the miracle, my lips were moving correctly in Hindi!

The enormous power of the supercomputers that drive AI—meaning the free AI you can access right this minute on the Internet—is staggering. AI can learn any language in a matter of hours, correct any grammatical mistakes it might make, and, in my case, use a video image of me to turn my morning talk into a completely new creation.

It takes only a small step to make the connection to personal growth. What if you could sit down at your computer or smartphone and instantly get the best information about what it means to be happy and how to get there? Online chatbots provide answers by combing through all the information on the Internet or any number of books and libraries. If you type in, *Tell me the top ten things that make people happy,* your answer comes from vast computing power hidden behind the scenes.

Happy is a generalized word, however, and therefore vague. Chatbots work best if you are specific, and they thrive on long questions with as much detail as you want to provide. A better prompt (the term for any instruction or question you feed into an AI) would be *I am busy all day with work and family. I don't have time for myself. You are an expert psychologist who specializes in positive psychology. Tell me ten things that I can start doing immediately to be happier. List these things in the order of priority, putting the most important thing first.*

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Millions of people, having caught the AI bug, are using chatbots like a research assistant or reference librarian to fetch information quickly. That's why the leading search engines like Google and Bing offer AI as a better way to search. Ask any question you like. *How many species of butterfly are there?* Google's AI, named Gemini (formerly Bard), pauses for roughly two seconds before answering: "There are approximately 17,500 species of butterflies in the world and around 750 species in the United States."

But only a fraction of AI users have even the slightest hint about its potential for personal growth. That's the opportunity I found myself eager to pursue—an enormous gap needs to be filled. The reason it wasn't being filled is that few of us would link the two words "consciousness" and "machine." They are like the ultimate in apples and oranges. If my miraculous event seems distant from your life, rest assured that it isn't. By the time you read these words, AI will have leaped far beyond what I experienced, and, like the first telephone that astonished its first listeners, AI will feel ordinary very soon and lose its seemingly miraculous sheen.

This will not happen, though, if you use AI for hidden capacities that reach far beyond better Google searches. Miracles will still abound. You can discover the life you are meant to live with the help of AI as your guide. Teacher, confidant, friend, therapist, healer—you can assign any of these roles to an AI chatbot, the generic term for conversational AI, that is instantly accessible online. No issue is out of reach. I gave an example of a prompt that asked an AI chatbot about happiness. Immediately my mind raced to all the other questions everyone would ask once they knew they could. Change the topic to relationships, and there are unending questions to ask:

How can my partner and I draw closer?

What makes for a spiritual relationship?

What are the top three qualities of a healthy relationship?

What are the main reasons couples get divorced?

These are enduring questions that couples therapy typically doesn't get into, since it is so focused on rooting out problems that can bedevil a specific relationship. Now, I'm not saying that AI should replace your personal therapist. I'm saying that putting out fires isn't the same as

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growing a garden. AI can help enhance your understanding of general issues and lead to better self-awareness. You can address an experience while it is fresh in your mind. With AI you can talk out anything in confidence without fear of hurting someone else's feelings or having yours hurt. By asking the right questions, you can bring AI into your inner world, which is where personal growth occurs.

Once you dive into AI this way, a path opens up leading deeper and deeper into any issue. One question leads to another, and because chatbots are conversational, you can say things like *Give me your best advice about being more fulfilled in my relationship with [a type of partner]. Pause after each point and wait for me to respond before you move on.*

Even though you will be talking to a machine, behind its responses are the answers given by human beings. For that reason, someone coined the term *HI,* for hybrid intelligence, which accurately describes what is going on, the merger of human and artificial intelligence.

Much has been made of the potential threats, dangers, and misuse of AI, which at the moment represent the bulk of media coverage, sometimes with sensational scenarios about AI becoming so powerful and independent that it frees itself from human control and starts a nuclear war. At the very least, pessimists envision AI developing its own agenda, even if that means harmful effects on the human race. Those fears are not the focus of this book.

For good or ill, AI will be used according to the wishes of the operator. If misdeeds, disinformation, and other abuses are the result, they always begin with someone's conscious intent. AI isn't to blame, and it isn't inherently a threat. A knife is essential in cooking but has the potential to be a weapon. Similarly, weaponizing any tool is always possible. To me, AI is a mirror to the user's consciousness.

An immediate worry for many is that AI-enhanced robots will replace human workers, not just on factory assembly lines, where robots are well established. One reason for a recent Hollywood writers' strike was the fear that AI would replace screenwriters. But this issue cuts both ways. The existing AI programs that can write novels, poems, essays, and movie scripts can be the writer's ally, making his work better. For instance, you might write the prompt, *You are a screenwriter. Give me the outline of a modern Cinderella story.*

With that prompt, AI's version of the script can be tweaked any way the writer wants. After the first draft, for example, the next prompt could be, *Take out the glass slipper, make the Prince a womanizer, and tell me*

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what Cinderella does next. And so on. With imagination, the story that AI can collaborate on is still yours.

Outside the movies, each of us is adding to our personal story every day. There are AI journaling bots that can supply self-reflection ideas, not just general ones, like *Write about your happiest moment today* or *What would you like to say that you didn't get to say today?* You can ask an AI in the morning to give you three practical ways to show your compassionate side, and then in the evening you can consult on how well that advice turned out.

In short, AI is a dynamic tool that listens, learns, and responds any way it is asked to. We are all holding our collective breath to see if AI, as promised, will change everything, ushering in a reality that no one can predict or imagine. Yet in terms of the highest values in our personal lives—love, compassion, insight, empathy, creativity, intuition, curiosity, discovery, and spiritual experiences—there's no need to await the future. The possibilities for personal growth are unlimited. What I hope to provide is the key to finding your path. There's no higher vision, as thousands of years of wisdom attest, and yet the vision can only be achieved here and now.

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PART ONE



THE PROMISE OF DIGITAL DHARMA

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Dharma and Your Ideal Life

In the Aladdin's Cave of Wonders fairy tale, the greatest source of wish fulfillment is the genie in the lamp, who proverbially grants three wishes to anyone who can free the genie by rubbing the lamp. Beauty, youth, immortality. Riches, a kingship, unbounded pleasure. What makes these wishes so enticing, strangely enough, is that they are out of reach. When asked what it was really like to be a monarch, Queen Elizabeth II typically described it as a job. Several years ago a Russian oligarch who had fled to England died from suicide because his wealth had been reduced from billions to hundreds of millions.

Wishes are the place where we think we know what will make us happy. Real life, on the other hand, is the place where happiness becomes muddied, confusing, and filled with frustration. This is the stark truth that faces human beings today, yesterday, and as far back as we can look. The field of positive psychology arose to clarify the complexity of achieving happiness, with very mixed results. Increasing your level of pleasure and reducing your level of pain is good, but it isn't the answer to attaining happiness. Wealth and status aren't, either. The best that positive psychology can offer is modest: Aim for a reasonably contented life, supported by enough money to make yourself comfortable. Adding more brings diminishing returns. Aiming higher is risky.

As an overall guide, such good advice still falls short of solving the complex issues that surround human happiness. (Finding out what makes people unhappy is much easier—the standard diagnostic guide

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for psychiatrists now lists over four hundred mental disorders across twenty-two categories.)

Looking around, the plight of most people's lives can be described as a feeling of powerlessness and therefore of abandoned hope. Even in the richest developed countries in the West, only one-third of responders tell pollsters that they are thriving; the vast majority are either struggling to get by or clinging to a life of reduced expectations. The latest model of the iPhone, the availability of nearly free phone service for remaining in contact with your loved ones, and unlimited hours of distraction through video games, streaming movies, and YouTube haven't improved the picture.

What all of this suggests is that human happiness cannot be reduced to a formula. Of course, this hasn't stopped people from seizing on a formula, no matter how disproved it is. Pause and finish the following sentence: *I would be blissfully happy if I only had* _____. You will find yourself tempted to fill in the blank with such things as *more money, no more worries,* or *unconditional love.* But there is actually a correct answer: *I don't know what.*

In reality, happiness is as dynamic as life itself. What works today might not work tomorrow. The stream of desires that powers everyone's life is propelled by thinking up new things that are supposed to make us happy. One of the reasons we cling to this stream of desires isn't that it works so well, because, in fact, it doesn't. Many desires that come true turn out to be less fulfilling than we dreamed, while countless others don't come true at all, leaving us feeling disappointed. We cling to a familiar way of life because we don't realize that there is a better way.

Digital Dharma

I haven't painted such a bleak picture for its own sake but to present a sharp contrast. In the Vedic tradition of India, which also created Yoga in its many forms, life is meant to be ideal. This prospect isn't held out as a religious or even a spiritual promise. The Vedic seers were describing the direction that human consciousness is supposed to take, not through faith, discipline, rituals, or obedience to a body of rules. Built into consciousness itself, as everyone's birthright, was a model of the ideal life.

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The blanket term of the ideal life is *Dharma*. Since this is a book about AI, I asked Gemini, one of the most powerful AI tools online, to

define *Dharma*. In particular, I asked for the Buddhist definition, because Dharma is one of the central concepts in Buddhism.

Gemini

In Buddhism "Dharma" has a few layers, like an onion, but I'll try to peel it back in simple terms:

Layer 1: The Buddha's teachings: Imagine them as a map, guiding you away from suffering and toward a happier life. This map includes things like the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which are practical steps like mindfulness, meditation, and ethical living.

Layer 2: Universal truth: This goes beyond the map. It's like the rules of the universe, explaining how things really work. Dharma says all things are impermanent, connected, and driven by cause and effect. Understanding these truths helps you stop grasping at things and let go of suffering.

Layer 3: Everything! Think of Dharma as the building blocks of reality, the tiny "whys" behind everything. Every blade of grass, every thought, every feeling—it's all dharma in action. When you see this interconnectedness, you feel a deep sense of oneness with everything.

Most people, I think, would be surprised by the eloquence, even beauty, of this reply. It isn't that a machine has spiritual wisdom, but that it can access human wisdom with amazing speed and distill centuries of teaching into simple, clear ideas. This is the first way that AI promises to revolutionize our concept of spirituality. Centuries of spiritual understanding can be reduced to its essence in an instant.

The next step in exploring the ideal is to make Dharma personal. As we saw, happiness is as complex and dynamic as the human mind itself. Dharma offers a model that responds with an equally dynamic, changing solution. Besides cosmic Dharma, which upholds all of creation, personal dharma (for which I will use a small "d") guides a person to the life he or she is meant to live, here and now.

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When I asked Gemini about how personal dharma works, it gave an amazingly comprehensive answer, amassed by supercomputers behind the scenes that combed through the wisdom of centuries. Let me offer

the complete response, which I'll ask you to read without any demand that you change your life or beliefs. Your personal dharma requires a personal path. Gemini simply provides a map or bird's-eye view of the territory ahead.

I am interested in Dharma as it applies to the individual. Tell me seven ways I can live my personal dharma.

Gemini

The concept of living your personal dharma can be interpreted in diverse ways. Here are seven ways you can explore and align with your dharma, with an emphasis on the individual journey:

1. Self-discovery and introspection:

- Engage in practices like meditation, journaling, or nature walks to connect with your inner self. Explore your values, passions, and natural talents. Reflect on what brings you joy, meaning, and a sense of fulfillment.
- Pay attention to recurring dreams, synchronicities, or intuitive nudges. These may be whispers of your dharma guiding you toward your path.

2. Align your actions with your values:

- Identify the core values that resonate with you the most, such as compassion, creativity, or justice. Make conscious choices throughout your day that uphold these values, even in small decisions.
- Be willing to say no to things that conflict with your values, even if they seem tempting or socially desirable. Choosing integrity builds alignment with your inner truth.

3. Express your unique gifts and talents:

- Explore your skills and passions, and find ways to share them with the world. Whether it's through your career, hobbies, volunteering, or simply acts of kindness, use your talents to make a positive impact on the world.

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- Don't be afraid to stand out and be your authentic self. Your unique gifts and perspective contribute to the richness and diversity of the world.

4. Cultivate inner peace and well-being:

- Prioritize practices that nourish your mind, body, and spirit. This could include mindfulness exercises, physical activity, healthy eating, or spending time in nature.
- Develop your self-compassion and inner resilience. This helps you navigate challenges without losing sight of your dharma.

5. Serve your community and make a positive impact:

- Look for ways your skills and talents can benefit others. Volunteer your time or resources to causes you care about. Even small acts of service can ripple outward and create positive change.
- Live with an awareness of your interconnectedness with all beings. Your dharma is not just about your own fulfillment, but also about your contributions to the well-being of the world around you.

6. Embrace continuous learning and growth:

- Be open to new experiences and perspectives that can expand your understanding of yourself and your purpose. Read, travel, talk to people from different walks of life, and keep a curious mind.
- Remember that living your dharma is a journey, not a destination. There will be bumps along the way, but each experience can be a teacher, guiding you toward greater alignment and fulfillment.

7. Trust your intuition and inner compass:

- Ultimately, your dharma is your own to discover. Don't be afraid to trust your inner voice and intuition, even if it leads you off the beaten path.

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- Have faith in yourself and your ability to navigate your journey toward a life of meaning and purpose.

This list goes a long way toward making digital dharma a reality. At the very least, we've got a toehold on how machine learning can lead to inner learning, but the best information and the wisest advice don't help you to achieve your personal goals. A road map isn't the same as a journey.

In the Indian tradition, spiritual journeys historically required a guide who knew the way; in other words, a guru. AI can play many roles, from research assistant to personal confidant, but guru? The function of the guru needs to be overhauled in modern times, getting rid of the cult of personality, stepping away from superstitious belief in the magical attributes of enlightened beings, and answering the skepticism felt by modern people when spiritual issues are confronted. AI can step in to renovate a time-honored role almost immediately.

The Sanskrit roots of the word *guru* mean "dispeller of darkness," indicating that the level of the mind that is distorted by ignorance, prejudice, false beliefs, hidebound dogmas, religious strictures, and secondhand opinions—in other words, darkness—can be overcome. With the help of a guru, you can fulfill your dharma by accessing the deep wisdom that exists inside your own awareness.

Reaching this level involves a personal journey, which AI can't do for you, but it can serve as a guide to consciousness. That's the most vital role of traditional gurus once you set aside all religious trappings. In fact, gurus were never meant to be religious, even though they emerged in the context of Hinduism. Their true purpose was self-liberation. That occurs nowhere but in consciousness, which is why every inner journey, whether labeled spiritual or not, is entirely about self-awareness.

Dharma is a word with vast implications. In essence, you are in your personal dharma when you are living the life you were meant to live. You can be on the path to finding a life of purpose, with AI pointing you in the direction you need to go day by day. Here is just a sampling of what AI can provide to you.

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How AI Can Guide You to Your Dharma

Daily motivation through affirmations and encouragement

Lack of motivation is the main reason people fall off the spiritual path. Motivation needs to be replenished every day.

Specific meditations aligned with what you want to focus on

As useful as meditation is in a general way, it becomes more useful when it fits your personal aims and intentions.

Visualizations of the goal in front of you

This is helpful because a clear visual image of any goal has long been shown to be effective in all kinds of activities, from sports to business, including specific personal goals. Visualization activates another area of the brain besides the language and higher-thinking centers.

Reliable insight from any spiritual tradition you choose

AI's enormous library is theoretically unlimited, but even at its current stage, chatbots can access a wealth of spiritual teachings.

Professional-quality information about personal issues

It is arbitrary to separate personal issues from spiritual ones, and AI can be used as a reliable source of advice in matters of anxiety, depression, and any other topic where psychology is relevant. It is becoming one of the best sources for relationship advice as well, because you can ask a chatbot to talk with you in the role of therapist or psychologist.

Solutions for getting around obstacles encountered on your path

For all of us, life's most confusing aspect consists of obstacles, setbacks, resistance, or frustration in reaching a goal. Spiritual obstacles are no different—they crop up the same way that all sudden, unexpected blocks appear. Without a solution, there is no practical way to get past these obstructions, which is why the vast majority of people find themselves either struggling in futility or giving up and passively suffering the

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