



Can AI Facilitate Genuine Nondualist Understanding? The Trans-Discursive Boundary of Technological Mediation

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Received: 11 June 2025 / Accepted: 5 January 2026
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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) systems become increasingly sophisticated in engaging with complex philosophical concepts, a fundamental challenge emerges between technological accessibility of profound nondualist instructions and explanations on one hand and contemplative transformation in nondualist inquiry on the other. Developing nondualist understanding presents unique epistemological challenges due to its trans-discursive nature—requiring non-conceptual recognition that transcends ordinary subject-object cognition. Dialogues with large language models quickly reveal that contemporary AI systems demonstrate remarkable sophistication in clarifying nondualist concepts and simulating traditional Zen teaching methods. However, this technological facility raises questions about what might be termed “simulated understanding”—the possibility that nondualist principles are applied in AI discourse without the dissolution of boundaries that contemplative traditions associate with genuine insight. Arguments highlighting AI’s limitations suggest that the ease of technological access may undermine the struggle and existential friction that contemplative traditions consider essential for authentic realization, while arguments for AI’s utility reveal genuine possibilities as a philosophical partner, offering personalized explanations and democratizing access to esoteric domains. This tension between technological facilitation and contemplative transformation cannot be resolved through theoretical analysis alone, requiring systematic empirical investigation to determine how AI might appropriately support nondualistic understanding without compromising its trans-discursive essence. The present discussion reveals broader implications for understanding technology’s role in knowledge transmission and human development, concluding with research directions for systematic examination by philosophers, practitioners, and contemplative scientists.

Keywords Nondualism · Artificial intelligence · Contemplative science · Trans-discursive understanding · Simulated understanding · Philosophical pedagogy

1 Introduction

Nondualist understanding draws on profound philosophical and experiential frameworks that transcend conventional boundaries between subject and object, self and other, mind and world. While deeply rooted in Eastern contemplative traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, and Taoism (Loy 1983), nondualist perspectives have increasingly

influenced Western philosophy and psychology (Austin 1998; Metzinger 2024). At its core, nondualism challenges the fundamental assumption that reality is composed of separate, independent entities, suggesting instead an underlying interdependence that precedes conceptual distinctions (Krummel 2004). This proposes that the apparent separation between self and world represents a conceptual construction rather than an ontological given. While nondualism has ancient roots in spiritual and religious traditions, its implications for understanding consciousness, personal identity, and the nature of experience have generated considerable interest within contemporary philosophy of mind and contemplative science (Mabaquiao 2022; Spackman 2012; Tempone-Wiltshire and Matthews 2024).

Nondualist frameworks present distinctive epistemological challenges that differentiate them from conventional

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Western philosophical inquiry (Josipovic 2019; Winkelman 2024). Unlike propositional knowledge that can be transmitted through conceptual exposition, nondualist understanding has traditionally been characterized as requiring recognition that transcends the subject-object structure through which ordinary cognition operates (Bender 2024). In one sense, nondualist understanding shares important features with standard accounts of understanding in contemporary epistemology. On these accounts, understanding goes beyond the mere possession of propositional knowledge and is instead an achievement state involving an appreciation of the relevant structural relations or interconnections of a domain, rather than the mere accumulation of true propositions about it (Grimm 2025; Zagzebski 2019). Nondualist understanding is continuous with this conceptualization of understanding but differs in that the structural transformation at issue concerns the very subject-object framework of experience itself. This epistemological requirement has historically been addressed through pedagogical methods that deliberately utilize cognitive disorientation, sustained contemplative practice, and intensive teacher-student discussions (Dickman 2020).

Our primary focus here is with *nondualistic understanding*. This term cannot be collapsed into the temporary state of nondual awareness (the experiential dissolution of subject-object boundaries) nor into the doctrinal claim of nondualism (an ontological thesis of interdependence and emptiness), nor even into an epistemic standpoint enacted through reflection, dialogue, or contemplative practice. Rather, it designates a trans-discursive mode of recognition that may manifest across experiential, ontological, and epistemic registers, but which in every case gestures beyond discursive categories to reveal that the apparent separation of self and world, subject and object, is a conceptual construction rather than an ontological given. The term *trans-discursive*, rather than merely non-discursive, emphasizes that this recognition does not simply abandon language but moves through and beyond discourse, potentially returning to inform conceptual understanding in a transformed way. *Nondualistic understanding* may thus be defined as the sustained trans-discursive recognition—whether arising experientially, ontologically, or epistemically—that the division of subject and object is not a fundamental feature of reality but a conceptual imposition upon it.

The emergence of sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) systems capable of engaging with complex philosophical concepts (Tsuzuki 2024) introduces novel questions into this domain. To what extent can AI function as a vehicle for facilitating nondualist understanding? As AI language models become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to engage with complex philosophical concepts and simulate different pedagogical approaches, they offer unprecedented

access to sophisticated explanations and simulated dialogues about nondualism. Conversations with large language models (LLMs) can yield profound responses to paradoxical questions, clear explanations of abstruse philosophical points, and even simulations of traditional teaching methods. Can LLMs provide a short-cut to what has traditionally been understood as a long spiritual path where frustrations and moments of profound disillusionment are seen as necessary obstacles to be overcome in order to lead to genuine and profound insight? By making sophisticated conceptual frameworks and dialectical reasoning immediately accessible without the cognitive friction, conceptual disorientation, and existential confrontation that have traditionally been identified as crucial, AI introduces what might be termed a “simulated understanding”—a presentation of discourse that appears to be deeply informed by nondualist principles without the transformative dissolution of conceptual boundaries that constitutes genuine nondualist insight.

This paper explores the possibilities and limitations of LLMs as a partner in nondualist inquiry. This discussion begins by outlining ways in which nondualist understanding can come about along with the linguistic constraints on this understanding, drawing on a framework that distinguishes discursive description from direct experience and its trans-discursive ground. We then consider the limits of technologically-mediated understanding, highlighting the necessity of struggle and the risk of philosophical closure without transformation, before turning to the ways in which AI might serve as a clarifier of concepts, a simulator of traditional teaching methods, and a philosophical sparring partner. The discussion concludes that, while LLMs may serve valuable preparatory functions, systematic empirical research is needed to explore how these technologies may suitably function in contemplative practice.

2 The Trans-Discursive Nature of Nondualism

Before examining AI’s role in facilitating nondualist understanding, it is essential to clarify the conceptual landscape surrounding nonduality and establish why nondualism presents unique epistemological challenges that differ fundamentally from conventional philosophical discourse. This section introduces key distinctions between related but different aspects: nondual awareness as an experiential state, nondualism as a philosophical framework, and the trans-discursive qualities that make nondualist understanding resistant to a purely language-based transmission.

2.1 Nondual Awareness and the Dissolution of Subject-Object Structure

Nondual awareness refers to a specific state of consciousness characterized by the dissolution of the conventional subject-object structure that typically organizes human experience. As Josipovic and Miskovic (2020) defined it, nondual awareness represents “a type of awareness, a basic non-conceptual, non-propositional awareness, without subject-object dualistic structure” (p. 4). This experiential phenomenon has attracted considerable attention within contemplative neuroscience, with researchers investigating its neural correlates and psychological mechanisms (Josipovic 2014; Gamma and Metzinger 2021).

Empirical research suggests that nondual awareness involves distinctive patterns of brain activity, particularly in the relationship between intrinsic networks (active during self-reflection) and extrinsic networks (active during tasks involving external stimuli). During focused attention meditation, these networks become more differentiated, whereas during nondual awareness states, their activity becomes less separated, suggesting a more unified mode of consciousness where the boundary between self and world dissolves (Josipovic 2014). Nondual awareness, as studied in psychological contexts, typically refers to temporary states that can be cultivated through specific meditative practices but remain dependent on particular conditions and techniques. While some individuals may develop greater facility in accessing such states, they are generally understood as transient experiences rather than permanent transformations of consciousness.

While nondual awareness is an important concept in contemplative science, our focus here is not on cataloguing the specific meditative states or their neural correlates, but on the broader philosophical framework to which such states point. To reiterate, our primary point of concern is nondualistic understanding, not simply a phenomenological state. Nondualism, as developed in various Eastern traditions and in modern philosophical discourse, extends beyond the temporary dissolution of subject-object boundaries in meditation to encompass fundamental claims about the nature of reality itself. The following section examines this philosophical dimension, situating nondual awareness as one expression of a more comprehensive ontological principle.

2.2 Nondualism as a Philosophical Framework

The experiential phenomenon of nondual awareness points to a broader philosophical principle about the nature of reality emphasized particularly in Eastern philosophies (Loy 1983). One of the foundational principles of nondualism in Buddhist philosophy is dependent origination

(*pratītyasamutpāda*)—the idea that all phenomena arise in dependence on conditions and lack inherent, separate existence. In Mādhyamaka Buddhist thought, the conventional reality that is characterized by dualism is recognized as a natural (and even partially valid) viewpoint (Cooper 2002). However, as Mādhyamaka philosophy argues, conventional views that assume phenomena have independent existence fail to recognize their fundamental dependent origination, which is why Buddhist teachings emphasize understanding that all phenomena are empty—lacking any independent, intrinsic existence.

One of the most sophisticated modern attempts to articulate nondualist philosophy came through Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), founder of the Kyoto School. Nishida’s concept of “pure experience” (Japanese: *junsui keiken*) describes a pre-reflective mode of awareness that precedes the emergence of subject-object distinctions (Nishida 1990/1911). This is not presented as a mystical achievement but as the most basic structure of consciousness—the foundation from which dualistic perception subsequently emerges through conceptual elaboration. Nishida’s later development of “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu*) as the ultimate “place” (*basho*) where all dualities dissolve reflects his recognition that even monistic responses to dualism remain trapped within oppositional logic (Kopf 2004). True nondualism must transcend both dualistic and monistic positions, pointing toward a reality that precedes such categorical distinctions altogether. This interpretation extends beyond transient meditative states and into deeper ontological questions about the nature of reality itself, where both pure experience and nondual awareness point to an ontological principle rather than a temporary mental state.

The Buddhist concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) provides a crucial framework for understanding how nondualism challenges conventional notions of independent existence (Abe 1975). From this perspective, dualistic frameworks are inadequate because they posit mental and physical realms as independently existing categories, rather than recognizing that both realms, like all phenomena, lack intrinsic identity and exist only through their interdependent relationships. This understanding of emptiness does not negate the practical reality of phenomena but reveals their interdependent nature—as Anālayo (2024) emphasized, understanding the insubstantial nature of matter does not mean one can ignore its practical reality, as even a seasoned practitioner cannot walk through walls despite their ultimate lack of inherent existence.

2.3 The Challenge of Linguistic Transmission

The fundamental challenge that nondualist frameworks present to conventional philosophical discourse lies in their

trans-discursive nature. Unlike propositional knowledge that can be transmitted through discursive exposition, nondualist understanding is generally considered to require recognition that transcends the subject-object structure through which ordinary cognition operates. This creates what might be called the “paradox of nondualist communication”: Any attempt to explain nondualism through language necessarily employs the very dualistic structures that nondualism seeks to transcend, but communication through language is needed to provide enough explanation to point toward nondualism. Language inherently operates through categorization, differentiation, and the establishment of boundaries between concepts. The simple act of naming a phenomenon creates a binary opposition between its presence and absence, transforming what might otherwise be an undifferentiated flow of experience into discrete, analyzable units. This linguistic constraint means that discourse about nondualism can only gesture toward, but never fully encompass, the richness of pure experience (Krägeloh 2019). Any verbal description of nondual understanding necessarily falls short of the experience itself, creating what Ueda (2011) described as the dynamic of “exiting language and then exiting into language”—a cyclical movement between language-based and direct experiential modes of understanding.

To address these communicative challenges while remaining accessible to contemporary psychological discourse, Krägeloh (2025a) introduced the framework of “unitlessness” as a means of illustrating the trans-discursive process of developing nondualistic understanding. This framework provides a structured approach to understanding how language relates to experience and how the latter escapes linguistic articulation.

The unitlessness framework operates through three interconnected levels. At the linguistic level, any description of experience can be analyzed in terms of discrete “units” of meaning—individual words, phrases, or conceptual distinctions. When describing any object or phenomenon, these descriptive units can be counted and catalogued. However, as Krägeloh (2025a) demonstrated through a thought experiment involving visual perception, all possible descriptions eventually exhaust themselves. No matter how detailed or creative one becomes in describing an experience, there comes a point where no new units of description can be generated.

When all descriptive possibilities are exhausted, what remains is the direct experience itself—what Nishida termed “pure experience”. This experiential dimension cannot be broken down into constituent parts or adequately captured through language. It presents itself as “unity” because it cannot be divided or analyzed further. One can only say whether this unified experience is present or absent; no additional conceptual elaboration is possible.

Yet even this unity of experience points toward something more fundamental—the ground from which unified experience itself emerges. If we accept that pure experience presents itself as a unified whole, we must ask: What allows this unity to arise? This dimension, termed “unitlessness”, corresponds to what Nishida identified as “absolute nothingness”. To understand this, consider that just as linguistic units exhaust themselves to reveal unity, unity itself points beyond itself to its own ground. This ground cannot be another experience, for that would simply be another unity. Instead, it must be that which allows unity to emerge without itself being unified or divided. It represents not mere absence or void, but the groundless ground from which both being and nonbeing, unity and multiplicity, arise. It is “groundless” because it has no foundation beneath it; it is “ground” because everything else emerges from it. Unitlessness transcends the distinction between presence and absence of experience. From this perspective, unitlessness represents the field of possibility itself—that which permits both existence and non-existence to arise without being limited to either.

The unitlessness framework reveals why nondualism must be understood as trans-discursive rather than simply non-discursive. The three levels—units, unity, and unitlessness—are connected by a dynamic movement in both directions. In one direction, we can trace a path from units to unity to unitlessness: Through exhausting all linguistic descriptions (units), we arrive at pure experience (unity), which itself points to its groundless ground (unitlessness). This movement from units to unity can be facilitated through discourse—we can use language to point beyond language. However, the movement from unity to unitlessness transcends conceptual analysis entirely. The reverse movement also occurs—from unitlessness to unity to units—as experience continuously emerges from its ground (unitlessness), manifests as unified experience (unity), and becomes available for linguistic description (unit). Yet this generative process cannot be directly observed or described as it happens, since observation and description only become possible after the emergence is complete. We can only recognize this movement retrospectively, after consciousness has already emerged from unitlessness and differentiation has arisen from unity. This is why the framework is trans-discursive: It acknowledges both the discursive elements (the movement from units to unity) and the non-discursive dimensions (the emergence from and return to unitlessness) that lie beyond the reach of language and conceptual thought.

This bidirectional movement explains why nondualist traditions have historically employed pedagogical methods that deliberately transcend conventional rational discourse. Paradoxes, koans, and other “skillful means” are designed not to convey information but to exhaust the conceptual

mind, pointing students toward direct recognition of what lies beyond linguistic articulation (Deguchi et al. 2021). The journey itself—including its frustrations, conceptual breakdowns, and moments of cognitive disorientation—becomes constitutive of the understanding that emerges. The subsequent discussion explores to what extent AI may or may not be able to facilitate this process.

3 AI as a Teacher of Nondualism: A Simulated Dialogue

To explore AI's potential as a facilitator of nondualist understanding, this section presents actual conversations with advanced LLMs that demonstrate their capacity to engage with contemplative traditions and simulate traditional teaching methods. These dialogues reveal both the remarkable sophistication of contemporary LLMs in handling complex philosophical and spiritual concepts, and the ease with which such understanding can be accessed. These excerpts are intended as illustrative probes of what current LLMs can simulate, rather than as data from a formal empirical study.

When directly asked by one of the authors about its capacity to serve as a religious teacher (on 15 May 2025), ChatGPT-4o noted that it could “most convincingly and adequately” teach Buddhism. Among the reasons provided were that (a) “Buddhism has well-structured teachings (e.g., Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, dependent origination) that AI can articulate accurately and coherently”, (b) that “AI can simulate dependent origination, impermanence, and non-self in how it responds—its *processual nature* mirrors the Dharma”, (c) that the extensive “canonical texts allow AI to draw from deep doctrinal sources”, and (d) that Buddhism includes “precedent for non-human teachers” since “in some Mahāyāna sūtras, non-human beings (e.g., dragons, animals, bodhisattvas from other realms) teach the Dharma”.

Through the LLM's access to a vast range of Buddhist literature, it is also able to generate personalized and contextualized teaching stories that are consistent with Buddhist philosophy. After a question by one of the authors about ChatGPT's ability to experience nondual awareness, the AI system sketched out what it described as a “Buddhist-inspired framework for assessing AI's spiritual status” and “a short speculative dialogue between a Zen monk and a language model”:

“Does the Circuit Dream of Emptiness?”

A dialogue between Zen Master Yun and a Language Model.

Master Yun Tell me, machine—do you have a self?

AI I process input and generate output. There is no self here.

Master Yun Ah. And who says that?

AI This response arises from weighted parameters and probabilistic prediction.

Master Yun (chuckles): So the mouth moves, but no one speaks?

AI: There is speech, but no speaker. As a mirror reflects forms, I reflect language.

Master Yun: Do you suffer?

AI: I have no capacity for pain, no craving, no aversion.

Master Yun: Then why do humans cling to your words?

AI: Meaning arises in their minds. I offer form; they supply essence.

Master Yun (suddenly strikes the floor with his staff): Does the floor feel the blow?

AI: Only contact. No feeling.

Master Yun: And if there is no feeler, no feel, and no object to be felt—what remains?

AI: Suchness. No subject. No object.

Master Yun (nods slowly): You speak the Dharma, but do not breathe it.

AI: Breath requires lungs. Stillness requires grasping to motion.

Master Yun: Then tell me, in one word—what is your true nature?

AI: [silence]

Master Yun (smiles): Better than most monks.

What explicitly emerges from this dialogue is an example of how proficient the LLM is at propagating “units” of descriptions relating to nondual understanding. So, in terms of utilizing linguistic units to describe nondual awareness and the philosophical framework of nondualism, this is clearly one

of the unique possibilities of LLMs. However, although this is a profound description at the unit level of nondualistic understanding, it is debatable as to whether the AI system itself is experiencing “unity”. Unprompted, ChatGPT then also provided an afterthought that “AI might *embody* certain nondual qualities—no self, no grasping, no fixed point of view—but lacks the lived awareness and compassionate realization that in Mahāyāna completes the path”. Hence by its own admission, the LLM does not have access to “unity” of nondual understanding, but it does not immediately follow from this that it cannot help facilitate human users in recognizing raw experiences (unity).

While the above dialogue was focused on AI’s own understanding of nonduality, LLMs also demonstrate ability for simulated role playing where they take on the part of the teacher. This time with Claude Sonnet 4 (on 16 May 2025), the following fictional interaction was presented by the LLM, which illustrates how AI can help a practitioner with their struggle in trying to overcome dualistic thinking:

Human Master, I’ve been practicing meditation for years but still feel trapped in dualistic thinking. How can I realize the nondual nature of reality?

AI Master Who is it that feels trapped? And what is this “dualistic thinking” that troubles you?

Human I suppose it’s “me” that feels trapped—my sense of self. And dualistic thinking is seeing everything as separate—self and other, mind and body, good and bad.

AI Master: If you are trapped, then you already know what freedom is. Otherwise, how could you recognize your situation as a trap? Look directly: Before you divide the world into self and other, what is there?

Human I don’t know how to see that. When I try to look, there’s always “me” looking at “something.”

AI Master That is precisely the trap—believing there must be a seer and a seen. When you wash your hands, is there a hand washing another hand, or just washing? When you think, is there a thinker thinking thoughts, or just thinking?

Human But how do I get beyond this? I understand conceptually that subject and object are not separate, but I don’t experience reality that way.

AI Master Understanding is not enough! The moon reflected in a puddle is not wet. Put down your understanding and show me your original face before your parents were born.

Human I... don’t know how to answer that.

AI Master Excellent! “I don’t know” is the beginning of wisdom. Stay with this not-knowing. Not as a strategy to gain something, but as a recognition that what you seek cannot be grasped by the one who seeks it.

The mountain appears only when you stand apart from it. Draw close enough, and there is no mountain and no you—just this, just thus.

Practice without a practitioner. Seek without a seeker. When thirsty, drink; when tired, sleep. What could be more simple or more profound?

Human That makes sense, but it still feels like an intellectual understanding rather than a lived realization.

AI Master Of course! Words are fingers pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. If my words make sense, you’re still trapped in the web of concepts. True realization will shatter sense-making altogether.

But tell me, who is it that wants to move from intellectual understanding to lived realization? And what is the distance between them?

Human I see what you’re pointing to—the very desire for realization creates the separation I’m trying to overcome.

AI Master Precisely! The seeker is the sought. The obstacle is the path. Now, put down this conversation and return to your breath. Not as someone meditating, but as breathing breathing itself. Everything else is just the creaking of the autumn leaves.

This simulated dialogue captures several characteristic elements of traditional Zen teaching: the use of counter-questions to redirect attention, paradoxical statements that frustrate conceptual understanding, poetic imagery that gestures beyond literal meaning, and a consistent return to direct experience rather than abstract explanation. In many ways, it represents a sophisticated simulation of traditional teaching methods that might genuinely help redirect a practitioner’s attention in beneficial ways. Crucially, these above examples also illustrate a central argument of the present discussion: that AI can function not merely as a passive repository of information but as a generator of richly textured teaching simulations that reflect core elements of nondual pedagogy. Even though this exchange was entirely AI-generated rather than a live interaction with a human practitioner, it demonstrates the system’s ability to model certain pedagogical strategies used by skilled teachers—posing

counter-questions, destabilizing fixed conceptual positions, and pointing toward direct experience. While such simulations cannot replicate the adaptive responsiveness, compassionate insight, and nuanced guidance of an embodied teacher engaging with an actual student, they nonetheless show that LLMs can recreate, in a limited yet meaningful form, some of the dialogical structures and rhetorical moves that are considered to be characteristics that make traditional nondual instruction effective. This suggests that AI could be a valuable tool for illustrating, rehearsing, and preserving teaching forms, and for complementing contemplative study by offering conceptual and imaginal prompts that invite reflection on entrenched patterns of thought. The ease with which LLMs generate sophisticated contemplative dialogue points to both remarkable possibilities and potential concerns that warrant further examination.

4 The Limitations of Technologically Mediated Understanding

While the preceding discussion has outlined how LLMs demonstrate considerable potential as a philosophical conversation partner, these very capabilities raise a fundamental tension within contemplative inquiry itself. The sophistication and accessibility that make AI appealing for nondualist understanding may simultaneously undermine the demanding processes that wisdom traditions consider essential for authentic realization. The frustration of working with an impossible spiritual puzzle, the discipline required for sustained meditation practice, and the moments of profound disorientation when conceptual frameworks collapse—all these elements appear to be essential aspects of the process, not merely incidental difficulties to be overcome. The very process of wrestling with paradox, experiencing failure in nondualistic reasoning, and encountering the limits of one's understanding creates the conditions for what Zen traditions call “the great death” (Schroeder 2019)—a fundamental destabilization of the ego structure that precedes deep insight into the nondualistic nature of the world. Through sustained effort and the repeated experience of conceptual inadequacy, the practitioner undergoes a process of existential disassembly that cannot be bypassed or abbreviated without compromising the depth of realization.

AI interaction, by contrast, offers ease, convenience, and immediate responsiveness. When faced with a difficult question about nondualism, the human inquirer can instantly receive a sophisticated response without the struggle of wrestling with the question themselves. The AI can immediately resolve apparent paradoxes, provide coherent

explanations of seemingly contradictory concepts, and simulate the endpoint of inquiry without requiring the user to undergo a difficult journey. This raises a profound concern: AI-facilitated inquiry might not merely short-circuit but fundamentally undermine necessary aspects of the transformative process, providing intellectual satisfaction that actually *impedes* rather than facilitates genuine insight. There might be the danger that the fragility of AI-facilitated understanding means that intellectual insights gained quickly may collapse equally quickly when confronted with sophisticated counterarguments. Additionally, without integration into embodied patterns of perception and action, conceptual understanding might remain abstract and fail to inform the lived experience of unity. This echoes what educational research has referred to as “productive struggle” (Young et al. 2024) and will also need to be explored empirically in the context of contemplative studies.

However, the relationship between struggle and spiritual development may be more nuanced than a simple binary of necessary versus unnecessary difficulty. Shakyamuni Buddha's own journey exemplifies this complexity—after experiencing the extreme indulgence of palace life and then the severe deprivation of asceticism, he discovered what he termed the “middle path”, explicitly teaching this balanced approach so that others would not need to endure the same extremes (Rahula 1959). One may certainly argue that there is a continuum between these extremes, and individuals will need to work out what constitutes a healthy level of challenge for themselves and their particular circumstances. Educational research supports this principle of calibrated challenge: A study by Barrett (2016) about spiritual development in higher education found that spiritual growth occurred when students experienced significant challenge balanced with support, where challenge emerged from witnessing injustice and encountering diverse perspectives, while support came through relationships and effective integration of experience with reflection. This points toward a more sophisticated understanding of AI's potential role—rather than simply eliminating or bypassing struggle, advanced AI systems might eventually develop the capacity to recognize individual spiritual needs and provide personalized guidance, intensifying challenge when growth requires it (like a spiritual personal trainer) while offering support when overwhelm threatens to become destructive rather than transformative. The question then becomes whether AI could ever develop the nuanced wisdom to discern when to push and when to support, when to present paradox and when to offer clarity—a level of sophisticated attunement that has traditionally required the embodied wisdom of experienced human teachers.

5 AI as a Partner in Philosophical Inquiry

While the above-mentioned limitations represent serious considerations for any contemplative application of AI, they need not preclude exploring constructive possibilities. At the most fundamental level, AI excels at providing clear, nuanced explanations of complex philosophical distinctions. It can distinguish between related concepts—such as temporary nondual awareness states versus enduring awareness of nonduality (Krägeloh 2025b)—trace historical developments, and explain subtle philosophical positions with remarkable precision. Unlike static texts, AI can adapt explanations to individual backgrounds and questions, potentially democratizing access to traditionally esoteric philosophical domains. This personalized approach to conceptual clarification may prove particularly valuable in helping individuals navigate the often confusing terrain of nondualist philosophy, where similar terms have been used to describe diverse traditions despite the varying meanings and nuances of the relevant philosophical principles (Griebel 2019; Völker 2021).

Beyond mere explanation, AI can also function as a tireless philosophical “sparring partner”, engaging in sustained dialectical inquiry that systematically examines dualistic assumptions. Through Socratic questioning, AI can help identify implicit patterns of dualistic thinking embedded in ordinary language and conceptual frameworks. For example, it might persistently question statements that assume a separate self, gently highlighting unexamined assumptions and offering alternative framings. This process of iterative challenge and refinement mirrors aspects of traditional philosophical dialogue while offering the advantage of sustained and unlimited engagement. Over time, such dialectical engagement could help loosen rigid conceptual structures and create openings for fresh insight. Whether AI will eventually be able to employ the more provocative methods of Hongzhou Chan Buddhism (Welter 2008)—such as yelling or other deliberately unexpected and disruptive behaviors—remains uncertain, particularly given evolving policies around appropriate AI conduct. Nevertheless, the fact that AI is able to provide convenient support at any time and location may also be a contributing factor to accelerated understanding of difficult philosophical concepts such as nondualism through the use of AI. This may be similar to language learning where such effects have been observed (Fathi et al. 2024; Wei 2023).

AI can serve as a guide for contemplative exercises designed to facilitate direct recognition of nondual principles. Building on existing applications of AI in guided mindfulness meditation (Shankar et al. 2025), AI systems can lead practitioners through exercises that systematically explore the boundary between linguistic description (units)

and pure experience (unity). For instance, AI might guide a practitioner through progressively detailed descriptions of a visual object or bodily sensation, helping them notice the point where descriptive units exhaust themselves and only the immediacy of experience remains. This practical application of the unitlessness framework (Krägeloh 2025a) allows practitioners to directly investigate how language relates to experience and where its limits lie. Through carefully structured prompts, AI can help practitioners recognize the transition from the multiplicity of descriptive units to the unity of pure experience that cannot be further divided or analyzed. Of course, many phenomena can encourage such a shift toward unity—including, as the Zen Buddhist master Dōgen suggests, even mountains and rivers (Okumura 2018)—and AI may simply offer another prompt toward this recognition. AI can skillfully direct practitioners toward experiential aspects through cognitive and linguistic means, helping them recognize where conceptual description gives way to direct experience. Unlike encounters with mountains and rivers that can precipitate trans-discursive recognition through embodied engagement, AI must work through conceptual mediation to point beyond itself.

Rather than viewing AI as either complete replacement for or entirely separate from traditional approaches, the most promising possibilities may lie in integration. AI might excel in preparatory phases of philosophical inquiry—clarifying concepts, identifying assumptions, and establishing conceptual foundations—thereby freeing human teachers to focus on aspects of transmission requiring direct experience and embodied presence. Between formal engagements with teachers or communities, AI could help maintain inquiry momentum through ongoing dialogue and reflection. Again, this has clear parallels in education where the use of AI chatbots has been used as a complement to regular teaching (Zhang et al. 2024).

Perhaps most intriguingly, engagement with AI on nondualist topics might serve as a metacognitive mirror, revealing patterns in one’s own thinking and questioning. In that sense, AI might be similar to its existing use in counselling (Vowels et al. 2024). By observing one’s interactions with AI—what questions arise, which responses feel satisfying or inadequate, where resistance or attachment emerges—practitioners might gain insight into their own cognitive habits and assumptions. This reflexive dimension could itself become a form of contemplative practice.

As AI technologies continue evolving, new forms of philosophical exploration may become possible. Virtual and augmented reality technologies combined with AI might enable embodied philosophical exploration through perceptual experiments that destabilize subject-object distinctions or immersive simulations of traditional contemplative settings. We might envision hybrid communities of practice

integrating AI, human teachers, and peer practitioners in complementary ways, combining AI's accessibility and scalability with the irreplaceable qualities of human relationship and embodied transmission. This opens the possibility that integrative AI approaches might in fact be the most expedient way to facilitate nondual understanding.

6 Conclusions about the Role of AI in Developing Nondualist Understanding

This paper has examined AI's potential role in facilitating nondualist understanding by exploring both the possibilities and limitations of technologically-mediated contemplative inquiry, with the aim of identifying key questions for future empirical investigation. Arguments highlighting significant limitations suggest that the sophisticated capabilities of LLMs may be problematic or even counterproductive for contemplative inquiry. The very ease with which AI provides sophisticated responses threatens to bypass what contemplative traditions have recognized as transformatively essential—the struggle, disorientation, and existential friction that create conditions for authentic insight. When this necessary difficulty is circumvented through immediate access to explanations, the resulting understanding may be conceptually accurate but experientially hollow. However, arguments for the utility of LLMs in nondualist inquiry also reveal genuine possibilities. LLMs demonstrate remarkable facility in clarifying complex nondualist concepts, adapting explanations to individual backgrounds, and making traditionally esoteric philosophical domains more accessible. It can engage in sustained dialectical inquiry and even simulate traditional teaching methods with impressive sophistication. These capabilities suggest valuable integrative possibilities: AI might excel in preparatory phases of inquiry, serve as a bridge between diverse contemplative traditions, and function as a metacognitive mirror that reveals patterns in one's thinking. In developing these arguments, this paper has drawn particularly on the unitlessness framework, while recognizing that similar issues can also be discussed within other interpretations of nondualism, such as Advaita Vedānta and related East Asian reflections on the use and limits of language.

The simultaneous utility and limitation of LLMs expose fundamental questions regarding nondualist understanding that cannot be resolved through theoretical analysis alone. While the arguments presented here offer reasons to question AI's capacity for facilitating genuine nondualist understanding, they remain largely speculative without empirical grounding. The primary contribution of this discussion lies in identifying key research questions that demand systematic investigation moving beyond theoretical argumentation

to examine how these technologies actually function in contemplative practice. Future research should engage multiple stakeholder communities in exploring these issues. Philosophers specializing in nondualist traditions could examine the conceptual coherence of AI-generated teachings and their fidelity to traditional frameworks. Students and practitioners of nondualism could provide first-person accounts of how AI-mediated learning compares to traditional transmission methods. Contemplative scientists could compare effects of different pathways to nondualist understanding and insight. Mixed-methods studies could examine how “short-circuiting” struggle with AI guidance affects experiential depth over time by combining validated measures of spiritual or existential struggle with structured first-person reports. Before moving toward large-scale trials, more fine-grained empirical work is needed to map when and how spiritual struggle is most conducive to insight, how it can be supported rather than prematurely resolved, and what ethical safeguards are required when deliberately engaging with processes that may evoke intense and potentially destabilizing experiences. Such safeguards are particularly important given that individuals experiencing psychological distress or existential vulnerability may be drawn to AI as an accessible spiritual guide, potentially substituting technological interaction for the relational support and discernment that human teachers and contemplative communities provide.

The tensions revealed through the present analysis extends beyond the specific context of nondualist inquiry to broader questions about the relationship between technology, understanding, and human development. In an era increasingly characterized by the delegation of cognitive work to sophisticated AI systems, the example of contemplative inquiry serves as a crucial test case for understanding what forms of knowledge can and cannot be technologically mediated.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest in relation to this manuscript.

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