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Rethinking Self-Understanding in the Age of AI: From Reflective Outcome to Pre-Configured Self-Understanding

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Abstract

This study reconceptualizes self-understanding not as a reflective outcome but as a conditionally constituted process grounded in the Buddhist principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Adopting a comparative philosophical analysis, it examines how traditional meditation and AI-mediated meditation differently configure the conditions under which experience and self-understanding arise. Drawing on early Buddhist texts, Madhyamaka philosophy, and classical meditation theory, the study develops an analytical framework centered on conditions, interdependence, non-self, and the processes of arising, transformation, and cessation. The analysis shows that traditional meditation operates as a structure of conditional disclosure, in which practitioners observe the dynamic interplay of experiential conditions. By contrast, the AI-mediated systems examined in this study tend to pre-configure these conditions through algorithmic classification, procedural guidance, and interface design. In such contexts, self-understanding is increasingly shaped through technologically mediated interpretations. The findings suggest that the key distinction lies not in the presence of conditions themselves but in the visibility and configurational control of those conditions. This study contributes a theoretical framework for understanding how digital environments may reshape contemplative agency and the conditions under which self-understanding is formed.

Keywords: dependent origination; AI-mediated meditation; pre-configured self-understanding; contemplative agency; technological mediation; digital religion; Buddhist modernism



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1. Introduction

How human beings come to know themselves has long occupied a central place in religious thought. Self-understanding—the mode through which practitioners recognize and define themselves—has traditionally been regarded as a foundational act of existential formation: a process in which one observes the living movements of inner experience and assigns them meaning and spiritual significance. This process is not primarily about regulating psychological states or refining functional skills. It concerns the deeper question of how the phenomenon of “I” arises, is interpreted, and is accorded value within the ever-changing flow of lived experience. Self-understanding is thus not a matter of apprehending a fixed interior state. It is an ongoing existential and spiritual inquiry into how one recognizes and constitutes oneself within a field of experience that never stands

still. Yet despite the centrality of self-understanding to religious and contemplative traditions, existing scholarship has given surprisingly limited theoretical attention to the conditions under which it arises and is constituted. The dominant tendency has been to treat self-understanding as the product of psychological capacities or reflective processes residing within the individual—a stance that leaves largely underexplored the conditional generative structures through which selfhood actually forms. This framing positions self-understanding as a feature of an already-formed state, rather than something that must be analyzed in terms of the conditions through which it continuously arises and shifts.

In practice, however, self-understanding is not a self-contained event that inner reflection alone can complete. It takes shape within a complex interplay of sensory experience, attentional intentionality, emotional background, relational context, and—increasingly—the pervasive conditions of technological mediation. It is better conceived, therefore, not as a fixed inner attribute but as an experiential event that arises from the particular way in which conditions converge at any given moment.

Meditation sharpens this picture considerably. In the Buddhist tradition, meditation is not a technique for psychological stabilization; it is a soteriological practice through which practitioners penetrate the insubstantiality (無實體性) of the self and the structure of dependent arising. The Pāli Nikāya records the Buddha's instruction to directly observe experience (sati) so as to realize that “the self” is not a fixed essence but an experiential phenomenon constituted moment by moment in accordance with conditions (Buddhaghosa 2010; Shulman 2010, 2024). Self-understanding, the tradition insists, is not the product of a single act of inner reflection. It emerges from the real-time interaction of multiple conditions—attention, sensation, bodily feeling, and relational context.

The rapid expansion of AI-mediated meditation may reorganize these conditional structures in new ways. Such systems take diverse forms. LLM-based conversational AI assistants, for instance, supply interpretive language that frames the practitioner's state before phenomenological observation begins. Biometric feedback platforms translate physiological signals—heart rate variability, respiration patterns—into categorical emotional labels presented as objective data. Recommendation-driven mindfulness applications sequence practice modules in response to algorithmically inferred user states, while generative AI systems adaptively produce instructional content calibrated to classified emotional profiles in real time. Digital Religion scholars have long documented the penetration of technology into religious and spiritual practice (McDonnell 2014). In AI-mediated environments, practitioners' emotions are datafied, classified, and labeled; linguistic frames defining the state and flow of meditation are presented before practice begins. Practitioners thus come to recognize their own states through categories and interpretive frameworks supplied by the technology, rather than through direct phenomenological observation. This structure resonates with Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (enframing)—the way technology pre-orders and pre-empts human experience, determining in advance how beings show up and are understood (Heidegger 1977).

These developments raise a pressing question: Is AI-based meditation a tool that helps practitioners perceive their experience more clearly, or does it reorganize the interpretive conditions through which practitioners engage with their own experience? More broadly, how is the soteriological self-transformation at which Buddhist practice aims—insight into *anātman* (無我) through the direct observation of conditions—being repositioned in technologically mediated environments?

This study addresses these questions not in terms of technological efficiency or instrumental utility, but in terms of the structure of the conditions that make self-understanding possible. The central claim of this study is more specific: AI-mediated meditation may reorganize the conditional, attentional, and interpretive arrangements through which self-

understanding becomes possible. This study does not claim that the ontological status of the self itself changes. Rather, it argues that the conditions through which practitioners access, interpret, and enact self-understanding may be technologically reorganized. Accordingly, the study moves away from treating self-understanding as a fixed inner entity or the product of reflection, and redefines it as a processual event arising within the configuration of conditions. To this end, it proposes the concept of pre-configured self-understanding: the way in which self-understanding may already be structurally organized in a particular direction—through the algorithmic arrangement of attention, perception, and interpretation—before experience unfolds. This concept resonates with Buddhist dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which treats experience as the interdependent constitution of conditions without presupposing an independent self-nature (*svabhāva*, 自性), and repositions meditation as an analytic site for revealing the conditional generative structure of self-understanding (Nāgārjuna 1995, MMK 24.18; Levman 2024; Divino 2025; Kaewwilai 2025).

Pre-configured self-understanding carries three defining characteristics. This distinction should not be confused with ordinary guidance. Guidance assists practitioners during an already unfolding experience, whereas pre-configuration operates at the threshold of experience by arranging what becomes salient, how a state is categorized, and which interpretive possibilities are made available in advance. The issue is therefore not that AI systems merely provide instruction, but that they may organize the attentional and interpretive conditions through which experience first becomes intelligible. First, condition precedence: the sensory, attentional, emotional, and interpretive elements constituting experience may be arranged through algorithms and interfaces before the practitioner perceives them. Second, normativization of interpretation: practitioners may be guided to understand their experience through the categories and language the technological system supplies. Third, structural constraint on contemplative agency: the possibilities available to the practicing subject for forming and interpreting experience may be partially delimited by the prior technological organization of conditions.

The concept of “pre-configured self-understanding” shares certain affinities with theories such as scaffolding (Vygotsky 1978), distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995), and enactivism (Varela et al. 1991), all of which recognize that cognition and experience are shaped through relations among persons, tools, bodies, and environments. However, the present study differs in its analytical focus. Scaffolding primarily concerns forms of support provided during the process of performance, while distributed cognition emphasizes the distribution of cognitive activity across humans, tools, and environments. Enactivism (Varela et al. 1991), likewise, explains experience as a relational rather than fixed inner process, emerging through the ongoing, reciprocal interaction between organism and environment.

By contrast, “pre-configured self-understanding” shifts the analytical focus from the interaction itself to a prior structural question: how the very conditions of sensing, attention, emotion, bodily experience, and interpretation may already be technologically arranged before experience unfolds. In this sense, the concept does not simply describe external support or distributed interaction; rather, it extends the analysis by examining how AI-mediated environments constitutively pre-arrange the conditions under which relational interaction and self-understanding become possible in the first place. Crucially, enactivism takes the organism–environment coupling as its primary analytical unit, examining how cognition emerges within that ongoing interaction. Pre-configured self-understanding shifts the focus one step earlier: to the conditions that structure what kind of coupling is possible in the first place—a question that enactivism, oriented toward the dynamics of interaction itself, does not systematically foreground. This study is positioned primarily

as a comparative philosophical analysis grounded in Buddhist philosophy while engaging selectively with the philosophy of technology and digital religion.

2. Research Methodology

This study does not collect first-person empirical data. It is a comparative philosophical analysis built around conceptual reconstruction and theoretical comparison. Comparative philosophical analysis elucidates how different philosophical traditions or conceptual systems apprehend the same phenomenon in divergent ways—a methodology with a long record in religious studies and Buddhist scholarship (Nāgārjuna 1995; McMahan 2008). The goal here is to redefine self-understanding as a process of conditional arising rather than a reflective outcome, using dependent origination as the analytical framework through which the divergent modes of experience constitution in traditional and AI-based meditation can be traced.

Two epistemological commitments ground this approach. First, the conceptual categories of Buddhist philosophy are not merely religious language. They constitute a sophisticated theoretical system for analyzing the structure of experience philosophically. The conditional analysis framework of dependent origination, in particular, offers a vocabulary capable of critical dialogue with phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1962), embodied cognition (Varela et al. 1991), and philosophy of technology (Heidegger 1977; Stiegler 1998). Second, the two objects of comparison—traditional meditation and AI-based meditation—are not evaluated in terms of the relative superiority of their effects or values. They function as ideal types designed to reveal structural differences in the conditions through which self-understanding arises.

The scope of analysis is delimited as follows. Traditional meditation is represented by selected forms of early Buddhist contemplative practice in which practitioners engage with changing experiential conditions within structured meditative settings—specifically, the vipassanā tradition and early Buddhist meditation theory, drawing primarily on Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* and the satipaṭṭhāna framework of the Pāli Nikāya. AI-based meditation is delimited to technologically mediated environments in which experiential conditions are arranged in advance through algorithms and interfaces. This distinction is intended as a theoretical framework for analyzing how self-understanding is conditionally organized across the two modes, rather than as an evaluation of meditative efficacy.

Dependent origination was selected as the analytical framework because it treats experience and self not as fixed entities but as the interdependent combination of conditions. This provides more precise conceptual tools for analyzing the micro-level changes through which experience arises, transforms, and ceases than does Actor-Network Theory (ANT) or phenomenology alone. The study therefore focuses not on the content or outcomes of experience but on reconstructing the structure of self-understanding by examining the conditional configurations in which experience forms.

The Buddhist corpus for this study was selected to enable a multi-layered analysis of dependent origination across three complementary dimensions: definition, conditional structure, and praxis. Specifically, the Early Buddhist texts (Pāli Nikāyas) provide explicit formulations of core concepts; Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka* philosophy offers a philosophical elaboration through the analysis of emptiness and lack of self-nature (*svabhāva*); and Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* concretizes the practical structure of observing conditions within contemplative practice. These sources were thus selected not for doctrinal completeness but for their analytical relevance to different levels at which dependent origination can be examined.

The analytical procedure proceeded in three stages. First, key concepts of dependent origination—conditionality, interdependence, lack of self-nature, arising, transfor-

mation, cessation, and clinging—were extracted and reconstructed into a set of analytical categories. Second, these categories were applied comparatively to traditional meditation practices and AI-mediated meditation environments, with particular attention to how experiential conditions are arranged and structured. Third, the study theoretically interpreted how differences in these conditional arrangements give rise to distinct forms of self-understanding.

This study operates at the intersection of a theoretically informed interpretation of Buddhist contemplative traditions and a critical analysis of contemporary technological environments. Accordingly, the aim is not to provide a doctrinal validation of any specific tradition, but to elucidate how differences in the structure of practice and the arrangement of conditions reshape the formation of experience and self-understanding.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Conditional Arising of Self-Understanding: Critical Perspectives on Technologically Mediated Environments

In Buddhist contemplative theory, self-understanding is not the discovery of fixed psychological traits residing within the individual. It is a contemplative process of observing conditionally arising phenomena. The essentialist view—which posits the self as an independent, invariant object—cannot adequately account for how self-awareness is formed and transformed in the actual field of practice, where sensation, emotion, and complex technological environments intersect in real time. Accordingly, the conditions under examination in this study are not treated merely as contextual factors that influence an already-constituted experience. They are understood as constitutive of the very structural possibilities through which self-understanding can become intelligible in the first place.

Although this study engages contemplative phenomenology, Madhyamaka philosophy, and philosophy of technology, it does not seek to synthesize them into a single theoretical framework. Rather, these traditions are employed as complementary analytical perspectives addressing different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Contemplative phenomenology helps illuminate the structure of lived experience, Madhyamaka philosophy provides a framework for understanding conditionality and the absence of inherent essence, and philosophy of technology assists in examining how technological systems participate in shaping the conditions under which self-understanding emerges.

This concern directly intersects with the McMindfulness critique that has gained momentum in recent religious and meditation studies. Scholars have shown that mindfulness has been reconstituted as an instrument of individual efficiency and psychological stabilization, recontextualized outside the ethical and soteriological frameworks emphasized in traditional Buddhism—specifically, the threefold training of *sīla* (戒, ethics), *saṃādhi* (定, meditation), and *paññā* (慧, wisdom) (Purser 2019). This shift has unfolded across cultural settings as mindfulness is decontextualized and commodified (Wilson 2014), and it belongs to the larger formation of Buddhist modernism—the synthesis of traditional Buddhist practice with Western psychology and scientific discourse that McMahan (2008) has examined in detail. That framework offers resources for interpreting AI-based meditation as a possible extension of Buddhist modernism. More critically, scholars have argued that alongside meditation’s interiorization, its interpretive horizons may be reorganized or diminished in ways that exceed mere cultural adaptation (King 1999).

Such tendencies are likely to intensify in digital meditation applications and AI-based environments. Digital Religion scholarship has tracked how technological mediation reconstitutes the temporality, corporeality, and communal relationality of religious practice (McDonnell 2014; Geraci 2014). Research in this field demonstrates that digital technology transforms not only the content of religious practice but the structural conditions un-

der which practice occurs—reshaping the form of religiosity itself (McDonnell 2014). AI-mediated meditation may therefore represent more than a change in tools alone. It may reorganize the practical and interpretive conditions through which practitioners access self-understanding. The concern of the present analysis is not technological mediation itself, but how different configurations of mediation may shape the visibility of conditions and the location of interpretive authority.

This study extends these discussions by reinterpreting the secularization of meditation not as a shift in content but as a structural transformation in the conditional configuration that constitutes experience. In contemporary AI-based meditation environments, where algorithms instantly datafy and define practitioners' states, self-understanding can no longer be treated as a purely inner operation. It must be grasped as the outcome of conditional arising—reshaped by technological mediation and environmental arrangement.

Grounded in dependent origination, this reconceptualization holds that self-understanding becomes visible only when sensory experience, attentional intentionality, and technological interfaces combine in specific ways. Rather than possessing a stable, invariant essence, the self is a fluid process that arises, transforms, and ceases as conditions shift—a position articulated in Buddhist philosophy under the concept of *niḥsvabhāva* (無自性, the absence of independent self-nature), which is examined in detail in Section Conceptual Framework: Conditional Structure Analysis Based on Dependent Origination. This non-essentialist view is what opens a reflective space for practitioners: by observing how conditions configure their experience, they can engage with that configuration actively rather than accepting technologically mediated interpretations as given.

Conceptual Framework: Conditional Structure Analysis Based on Dependent Origination

This section does not aim to provide a comprehensive doctrinal account of dependent origination. Rather, it reconstructs selected Buddhist concepts as analytical categories for examining how self-understanding becomes possible under different configurations of experiential and technological conditions. The concept of pre-configured self-understanding requires more precise specification than its three defining features alone provide. What, exactly, is configured in advance; at what stage of experience this configuration operates; and what structural consequences follow for agency and interpretation—these are analytically distinct questions, and the argument of this study depends on not conflating them. The following paragraphs address each dimension in turn.

At the level of what is configured, pre-configuration operates across three experiential strata. The first is attentional structure: the directionality and selectivity of attention—what the practitioner is guided to notice, and in what sequence—is organized by algorithmic interface design before phenomenological engagement begins. The second is interpretive framing: the categories through which sensations and emotional states are named and assigned meaning are supplied by the system prior to the practitioner's own meaning-making. The third is perceptual salience: the relative prominence assigned to certain experiential elements over others is shaped by datafication and classification processes that precede conscious awareness.

A second dimension concerns the temporal position of pre-configuration: not what is organized, but when—that is, at what stage of experience this organization takes effect. Pre-configuration operates prior to the arising of experience itself, at the stage of condition-arrangement. This is what distinguishes it from scaffolding or guided attention, both of which intervene during or after experience.

A third dimension concerns what follows structurally from this prior arrangement, particularly in terms of how interpretive agency is distributed. At the level of structural consequences, the result is not the elimination of practitioner agency, but a potential redis-

tribution of interpretive functions between practitioners and technological systems. In AI-mediated environments, classifications, feedback systems, and interface design may shape how experiential states are categorized, presented, and made available for reflection. The consequence is not the elimination of agency but its structural repositioning: the practitioner operates within interpretive possibilities that may already be partially structured in advance.

The analysis now shifts from the phenomenological register—how experience is structured and felt—to the ontological register of Madhyamaka philosophy, which provides the structural vocabulary for understanding why no element within that experiential field possesses fixed, independent essence. This is not a change of subject but a deepening of the same question: what makes pre-configured self-understanding structurally possible is precisely the absence of any essence that could resist reconfiguration. Table 1 reconstitutes the principles of dependent origination as a qualitative analytical tool for tracing how self-understanding forms. In Buddhist philosophy, dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is not a description of causal relations among discrete things. It is a structural claim within Madhyamaka philosophy: experiential phenomena arise through the interdependent configuration of multiple conditions (*pratīyaya*), and no phenomenon possesses an independent self-nature (*svabhāva*). The formula in the *Nidāna-saṃyutta* (SN 12) of the Pāli *Saṃyutta Nikāya*—“when this exists, that comes to be (*imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*); with the arising of this, that arises (*imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati*)”—should be read not as a linear statement of causation but as a structural model in which experience arises within a configuration of conditions. This structural precedence, namely the arrangement of conditions prior to experience itself, is what grounds the concept of pre-configured self-understanding introduced in Section 1.

Table 1. Conceptual Framework for Conditional Analysis of Self-Understanding Based on Dependent Origination.

Core Concept of Dependent Origination	Analytical Category	Meaning in This Study
Condition (<i>pratīyaya</i>)	Sensation, attention, emotion, environment, technology	Elements constituting experience
Interdependence	No hierarchy among conditions	Exclusion of single causation
<i>Niḥsvabhāva</i>	Absence of fixed self	Non-essentialism of self-understanding
Arising	Combination of conditions	Formation of experience
Transformation	Change of conditions	Modification of self-understanding
Cessation	Dissolution of conditions	Non-continuity of experience
Grasping (<i>upādāna</i>)	Fixation of interpretation and identification	Possible fixation on algorithmically mediated interpretive outputs

Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) 24.18 deepens this insight. His declaration—“whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness (*yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe*)”—presents *śūnyatā* (空) not as mere absence or nihilism but as the claim that all phenomena exist only in conditioned relationships, possessing no independent structure of arising. Self-understanding, accordingly, is not a substantial process that arises spontaneously from within; it is a relational process emerging through changing relations among sensation, attention, emotion, social context, and technological mediation. This is why this study emphasizes *niḥsvabhāva* (無自性): self-understanding is not the discovery of a fixed self but a non-essential, conditionally constituted process that can be pre-configured in particular directions.

This study reconstitutes these core concepts as analytical categories for tracing self-understanding formation. Rather than treating self-understanding as fixed self-recognition

or the expression of inner dispositions, the framework grasps it as a process that arises, transforms, and ceases as conditions combine and change. The subsequent comparative analysis is structured around three axes: (1) what conditions constitute experience; (2) how those conditions are configured; and (3) how changes in that configuration transform the form of self-understanding. This redefines self-understanding not as the product of an autonomous subject but as a conditionally constituted process emerging through the arrangement and variation of conditions. One conceptual distinction warrants explicit attention. *Anātman* (無我) describes the absence of a fixed self in primarily psychological and contemplative terms—a concept native to early Buddhism. *Niḥsvabhāva* (無自性) articulates a more fundamental philosophical position: all beings lack an independent essence, and in Madhyamaka philosophy this is identified with *śūnyatā* (空性) (Williams 2009). This study uses *niḥsvabhāva* to analyze self-understanding as a conditional construct rather than an independent entity.

Grasping (*upādāna*) occupies a pivotal place in the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination (*dvādaśāṅ ga-praṭītyasamutpāda*), arising after craving (*trṣṇā*). It denotes the cognitive and emotional binding through which a particular interpretation of experience or state is identified with as if it were a fixed entity. In the present analysis, grasping is connected to the tendency of AI-based meditation practitioners to rely on algorithmically mediated interpretations without sufficient reflective examination.

This study draws on concepts from both Early Buddhism (Theravāda tradition) and Madhyamaka philosophy. However, this does not imply a doctrinal equivalence between the two traditions; rather, it reflects a deliberate analytical distinction between different levels of inquiry. In this framework, the Early Buddhist notion of *anattā* (non-self) is employed as a contemplative foundation for analyzing the experiential dissolution of the self within practice. By contrast, the Madhyamaka concept of *niḥsvabhāva* (lack of self-nature) is used as an analytical framework to interpret the absence of inherent essence in all phenomena. By assigning these concepts to distinct analytical roles—*anattā* for the analysis of experience and *niḥsvabhāva* for the structural interpretation of self-understanding—the study maintains a clear separation between contemplative and structural levels. This distinction enables a more precise account of how self-understanding is both enacted within practice and interpreted at the level of conditional structure, without collapsing the differences between the two traditions into a single doctrinal synthesis.

3.2. The Conditional Structure of Self-Understanding: Traditional Meditation and AI-Based Meditation

3.2.1. Delimiting the Scope of Analysis: AI-Based Meditation

In this study, “AI-based meditation” is defined not as an umbrella term for all forms of digital meditation technology, but more narrowly as interventional systems in which algorithms analyze aspects of the practitioner’s state and may shape the flow of experience. While such systems appear in diverse forms—including content-delivery applications, biosignal-based biofeedback platforms, conversational AI meditation coaches, and immersive virtual-reality environments (see Appendix A for an overview of representative AI-mediated meditation systems considered in this study), the present analysis is restricted to those that share three defining features. Table A1 organizes these systems into five types according to their representative function, mode of intervention, and concrete operational examples. For the purposes of the theoretical analysis developed in this study, the five types are not treated as distinct cases requiring separate analysis. Rather, they are understood as instantiations of a common structural logic: each datafies some aspect of the practitioner’s state, delivers feedback through algorithmic processing, and organizes practice into procedurally structured sequences. The variation across types is not irrelevant—it indicates that pre-configured self-understanding is not a single mechanism but a structural

tendency that manifests at different levels of technological mediation and with varying degrees of conditional concealment. In what follows, the analysis draws on this typology to illustrate how the three defining features identified above operate across different system architectures.

A biofeedback platform illustrates all three: it datafies physiological signals into emotional categories, delivers feedback through algorithmic classification, and organizes practice into procedurally sequenced stages determined by system outputs rather than practitioner observation. These features are: (1) the datafication and classification of the practitioner's state; (2) the delivery of feedback through algorithmic processes; and (3) the organization of practice into procedurally structured sequences. Together, these characteristics indicate a shift in the role of AI—from an auxiliary tool that supports practice to a mediating system that intervenes in the arrangement of the conditions through which experience is constituted. Accordingly, this study does not seek to generalize across all forms of AI-based meditation. Rather, it focuses specifically on those systems in which the conditions of experience are technologically pre-arranged. By delimiting the scope in this way, the analysis aims to examine how such configurations of conditional arrangements reshape the formation of experience and self-understanding.

What distinguishes AI-mediated meditation from earlier forms of digitally guided practice is not simply the presence of technological assistance or structured guidance, but the adaptive reconfiguration of experiential conditions in real time. Conventional digital meditation applications—such as audio-guided timers or pre-recorded instructional sequences—deliver fixed content that remains uniform regardless of the practitioner's state. By contrast, the AI-mediated systems examined in this study dynamically reorganize the conditions of sensation, attention, and interpretation in response to continuously analyzed practitioner inputs. It is precisely this capacity for real-time, state-responsive pre-arrangement of experiential conditions that constitutes the specifically AI-driven dimension of “pre-configured self-understanding”—distinguishing it from digitally mediated contemplative environments more generally, in which the configuration of conditions, though technologically delivered, remains static and practitioner-independent.

3.2.2. The Conditional Structure of Self-Understanding in Traditional Meditation

Within the dependent origination framework, self-understanding is not an independent capacity residing within the individual. It is a process that forms through the interdependent combination of multilayered conditions—sensation, attention, emotion, and environment. Within this framework, the body is understood not as a fixed biological substrate or stable foundation of the self but as one of the interdependent conditions through which contemplative experience and self-understanding continuously arise, transform, and cease. Bodily sensation therefore functions as an important experiential site through which practitioners observe the dynamic interplay of conditions within meditative practice.

This understanding of the body as a condition through which experience becomes observable finds resonance in both phenomenological and enactivist perspectives. For Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 84–102), the body is not an object within experience but the very medium through which the world first becomes perceptible; the practitioner does not first exist and then perceive, but is already bodily oriented toward a perceptual field before any reflective act. This account converges with the satipaṭṭhāna framework, in which bodily sensation serves as the primary gateway through which conditions are encountered and observed, rather than as a merely instrumental substrate for mental activity. Similarly, the enactivist understanding of experience as emerging through ongoing reciprocal interaction between organism and environment (Varela et al. 1991) reinforces the view that

contemplative experience is relationally constituted rather than generated by an isolated inner subject.

Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga distinguishes two complementary modes of practice: samatha (止, tranquility) and vipassanā (觀, insight). Vipassanā is described as the direct observation of the arising and cessation of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandha)—form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa) (Buddhaghosa 2010). This structure enables practitioners to observe in real time the conditions that constitute their experience and to witness directly how those conditions combine, transform, and dissolve. Traditional meditation, understood this way, can function as a practice environment in which conditions become more available for observation. Although contemplative practice is also shaped by teachers, doctrines, and institutional forms, practitioners are generally encouraged to engage with changing experiential conditions as they emerge within practice.

What this structure makes visible, repeatedly and concretely, is the non-linear way in which subtle changes in conditions produce different experiential outcomes from the same stimulus. Tranquility (pīti, sukha) arising during practice is not a static outcome of meditative proficiency or fixed personal disposition. It is a conditional phenomenon—temporarily arising when bodily tension, environmental stability, the locus of attention, and emotional background converge in a particular way. Conversely, the dispersal of concentration or the onset of bodily discomfort is not a failure in any simple sense; it reflects the way subtle shifts in conditions redirect the entire experiential field.

Traditional meditation reveals experience as a process constituted through changing configurations of conditions rather than a product of a single cause, allowing practitioners to observe how experience emerges through the interaction of sensation, attention, emotion, and context. It is important to acknowledge, however, that traditional meditation is not itself a structurally neutral or condition-free environment. The vipassanā tradition, for instance, operates within a normatively organized framework: the teacher's authority structures the practitioner's interpretive horizon, the sequence of practice stages prescribed in the Visuddhimagga imposes a specific directionality on experiential exploration, and the ethical regulations of the Vinaya establish prior conditions that shape the practitioner's relational and behavioral field. In this sense, traditional meditation is not simply an open or unconditioned structure. What distinguishes it from AI-mediated meditation is not the absence of pre-arranged conditions but rather the degree to which the organization of those conditions remains relatively available to practitioners' observation. In traditional contemplative environments, even the normative structures of teacher-guidance and staged practice are typically made available for reflective examination within the practice itself—the practitioner is invited to observe how these conditions operate, rather than to accept their outputs unreflectively. The analytical contrast developed in this study should therefore be understood not as an opposition between an idealized open form and a deficient closed one, but as a structural differentiation along a continuum of conditional visibility: from environments in which the configuration of conditions is relatively more accessible to the practitioner's observation to those in which it is relatively more concealed within technological mediation.

3.2.3. The Dissolution of the Essentialist View of Self and the Emergence of Contemplative Agency

The rendering visible of conditions in traditional meditation leads practitioners away from the essentialist assumption that emotions and thoughts originate in a fixed inner entity. Instead, practitioners come to redefine these as cognitive constructs that manifest when multilayered conditions—sensation, attention, emotion, and environment—interact at a given moment. The fundamental orientation of traditional meditation shifts: rather

than seeking a stable answer to the question “who am I?”, practitioners develop the capacity to observe the conditional structure through which the experience of “I” is generated. This resonates with the contemplative ideal of 隨處作主 (suicheo jakju)—meeting each situation as master of oneself, whatever the conditions one encounters.

The soteriological significance of this reorientation is clear. Traditional meditation enables practitioners to experience directly that their experience arises within a specific combination of conditions. Through this, it cultivates the capacity to recognize and reconstitute the conditional structure through which the self forms—what this study calls contemplative agency. This expands well beyond the traditional notion of a fixed essential self, offering the theoretical foundation for reconceptualizing contemplative agency as the capacity to critically observe and adjust the conditions that constitute one’s experience.

3.2.4. Conditions of Self-Understanding in AI-Based Meditation: Technological Intervention and the Normativity of Condition Configuration

AI-mediated meditation differs from traditional meditation not because it introduces mediation for the first time but because it may relocate some aspects of condition-formation into algorithmic and interface-based processes. It forms a distinct conditional structure because the conditions constituting experience are pre-set by technological algorithms from the outset. Before practitioners can explore their own sensation or emotion, they receive what is framed as objective data: a technological diagnosis derived from biometric signals and multimodal analysis—voice, facial expression, and related inputs (Khan et al. 2025). The starting point of experience is thus shifted from the practitioner’s phenomenological self-observation to the normative labeling provided by the technology. Within this structure, emotional and attentional states may become increasingly organized through the classificatory logic of the algorithmic system rather than emerging solely through autonomous interpretation.

Having traced the conditional structure of AI-mediated meditation in Buddhist philosophical terms, it is now useful to approach the same structure from within philosophy of technology—not to replace the Buddhist framework, but to bring into view a dimension that it does not itself foreground: the tendency of technological systems not merely to arrange conditions but to conceal the fact of that arrangement. This structure bears formal resemblance to Gestell, Heidegger’s (1977) account of the essence of technology. Gestell is not simply the use of entities as tools; it is a prior determination of how entities will show up and be understood. In this respect, Gestell can be compared with the conditional structure of dependent origination, insofar as both involve the pre-arrangement of the conditions under which beings appear. But an important divergence separates them. Dependent origination aims at dissolving grasping and reification by making interdependent arising transparent. Gestell, by contrast, tends to conceal the operation of condition configuration and to reduce beings to a single interpretive possibility—what Heidegger calls “standing-reserve” (Bestand). The “pre-configured self-understanding” this study proposes refers precisely to this concealed precedence: in AI-based meditation, the algorithm partially organizes in advance how practitioners perceive their own experience by datafying and classifying their emotions and states before practice unfolds.

A potential concern within such environments is that practitioners may become more likely to rely on algorithmically mediated interpretations when outputs are presented as objective, data-driven, or diagnostically authoritative. The concern here is not that practitioners passively accept such interpretations, but that technologically mediated environments may influence how experiential states are categorized and made available for reflection. Some evidence suggests this is not merely theoretical. Studies have reported that algorithmic outputs in technologically mediated contexts can exert significant influence on how users understand their own states. This study treats this not as a universal empirical

finding to be generalized but as a theoretical tendency inherent in the structural conditions through which self-understanding forms in technologically mediated environments.

The technology's language intervenes directly in how practitioners represent and assign meaning to their experience. It may guide practitioners to align themselves with the categories the system has established, rather than discovering meaning through their own observation. These tendencies suggest the possibility that interpretive processes within contemplative practice may become more technologically mediated, as practitioners increasingly engage with classifications, feedback systems, and externally structured interpretive frameworks. This possibility aligns with emerging findings from human–AI feedback research suggesting that technologically mediated outputs can influence how individuals engage with and interpret self-relevant information (Glickman and Sharot 2025). These tendencies suggest that practitioners' engagement with experience may increasingly operate within technologically mediated interpretive frameworks, as classifications, feedback systems, and interface design shape how experiential states are categorized, presented, and made available for reflection. The concern is therefore not that practitioner agency is eliminated but that interpretive processes may become partially redistributed within technologically mediated environments.

3.2.5. The Standardization of Practice and the Reduction of Self-Understanding in Fragmented Environments

AI-mediated meditation may also shape the temporal flow of contemplative practice through algorithmically structured procedures, such as voice interfaces, sequenced prompts, and feedback systems. These features can guide attention in ways that differ from more open-ended observation of arising sensations and emotions. Rather than eliminating practitioner agency, such structures may influence how practitioners move through contemplative processes and how experiential states become available for interpretation.

This dynamic may become more pronounced within fragmented everyday contexts characterized by interruptions, mobility, and competing attentional demands. In such environments, practitioners may engage more frequently with immediate feedback and predefined categories when interpreting their experiences. The concern is not that technologically mediated feedback necessarily prevents reflection but that it may shape the rhythm, pacing, and direction of contemplative engagement in structured ways.

Taken together, traditional and AI-mediated meditation can be understood as different configurations of mediation rather than oppositions between open and closed systems. Traditional contemplative settings often provide greater opportunities for observing conditions as they arise within practice, whereas AI-mediated environments may organize aspects of contemplative experience through classification, sequencing, and feedback mechanisms before practitioners engage with them reflectively. These differences suggest that self-understanding in AI-mediated environments may increasingly operate within technologically mediated interpretive frameworks rather than emerging solely through open-ended observation.

3.3. The Distinctiveness of Dependent-Originationist Analysis: Contrast with Actor-Network Theory

From a dependent-originationist standpoint, self-understanding is not a fixed entity. It is a phenomenal event manifesting within the interdependent combination of conditions—sensation, attention, emotion, physical environment, and technological mediation (Sangiacomo 2025). As the combination of conditions changes, experience transforms or ceases. This is precisely why traditional and AI-based meditation tend to produce different modes of self-awareness: the former generally supports contemplative environments in which conditions remain relatively more accessible to practitioners' observation

and reflective engagement, whereas the latter may tend toward more normatively organized structures in which algorithmic labeling and directive interface design partially pre-configure the conditions under which experience is interpreted.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is often brought to bear on the complex mechanisms through which humans and technology combine to constitute contemplative environments, and for good reason. ANT effectively traces how agency is distributed and stabilized within networks of human and non-human actors (Ryan et al. 2024). Its limitation, however, is that its primary focus on structural configuration and role distribution within networks leaves it poorly positioned to explain how individual experience specifically arises through the combination of conditions, or how it transforms and ceases as conditions subtly shift.

Dependent origination centers precisely on what ANT marginalizes: the arising, transformation, and cessation of experience as functions of compositional changes in conditions. This allows the real-time tracking of how technological intervention reconstitutes a practitioner's cognitive and emotional conditions and transforms self-awareness—something that ANT's network-stabilization focus cannot easily accomplish. It is worth acknowledging that expanded approaches within ANT do attend to micro-level experience and practice. Still, the arising–transformation–cessation framework of dependent origination is better suited to the specific analytical purpose of this study. In this respect, dependent origination provides a distinctive framework for examining how the conditions through which self-understanding becomes intelligible are themselves continuously constituted and transformed within AI-mediated contemplative environments.

3.4. The Significance of Dependent-Originationist Analysis: Reconceptualization of Self-Understanding

Dependent origination grasps self-understanding as a constitutive phenomenon manifesting through the interdependent combination of specific conditions. This provides the theoretical foundation for explaining why self-awareness appears in different forms in different contexts. Traditional meditation enables practitioners to form autonomous self-understanding by directly experiencing the variation of conditions—attention, sensation, environment. AI-based meditation causes self-understanding to be structured within a technologically mediated organization of experience. Self-understanding may take different forms depending on how experiential conditions are organized: this is the consistent implication of the dependent-originationist perspective.

This analysis of the generative structure of experience is inseparable from the question of contemplative agency. This study redefines contemplative agency not as the sum of fixed dispositions or virtues but as the systemic capacity to apprehend the conditions that generate experience and to actively adjust and transform those conditions. The capacity to critically read and engage with the conditions constituting experience is, in this sense, a core element of character formation in contemporary technologically mediated environments (Eustice-Corwin et al. 2023). Dependent origination provides a distinctive analytical framework for tracing how experience arises, transforms, and ceases as conditions shift. It is this capacity—to follow the generative pathway from condition-configuration through experiential change to the cultivation of contemplative agency, which distinguishes it from approaches that treat experience primarily as the outcome of action or the distribution of roles within a network. This study adopts dependent origination as the most appropriate theoretical framework for explaining self-understanding and contemplative agency in technologically reorganized environments, and through it seeks to re-examine the space of contemplative reflection that the age of AI demands.

4. Results: Comparative Analysis of the Conditional Structures of Traditional and AI-Based Meditation

4.1. Traditional Meditation: Condition Self-Disclosure and Experiential Accessibility

Building upon the structural criteria conceptualized in Table 1, this section applies the conceptual framework established in Section 3 to examine how experiential conditions are differently organized, disclosed, and engaged across contemplative environments. Rather than introducing new theoretical categories, the analysis focuses on how previously established concepts operate differently within traditional contemplative practice and AI-mediated meditation systems. Specifically, the following discussion examines how different configurations of conditions generate distinct forms of self-understanding and contemplative engagement.

The conditional disclosure structure of traditional meditation can be traced across three dimensions of experiential organization. In terms of the analytical categories presented in Table 1, traditional meditation exhibits a structure in which (1) conditions are not externally fixed but become progressively identifiable, (2) interdependence is rendered observable through the co-arising of experiential elements, and (3) processes of arising, transformation, and cessation are directly tracked within the practitioner's field of attention. Practitioners do not assign a fixed value to breathing or bodily sensation as such; rather, they repeatedly discover that even the same stimulus produces different experiential outcomes depending on how conditions converge at a given moment.

What becomes visible in this process is the non-linear way in which subtle shifts in conditions produce qualitatively different experiences. In this sense, traditional meditation operates as a condition self-disclosure structure: conditions are neither imposed nor pre-arranged but become available through the practitioner's ongoing observation. With external technological intervention and others' interpretive language largely absent, changes in experience appear directly as correspondences between shifting conditions and shifting phenomena.

Through this process, practitioners come to sensorially apprehend and internalize the logic of the conditional configurations organizing their conscious experience. This directly connects to the contemplative implication of dependent origination—that the observation of conditions can lead to the cessation of grasping and suffering (Murphy 2016). Traditional meditation therefore does not locate the source of experience in an isolated inner essence. Instead, it demonstrates through direct experience that self-understanding emerges from the interdependent configuration of conditions. Practitioners come to recognize that emotions and thoughts are not the products of a single inner cause but compounds of interacting conditions. Self-understanding is thus not a fixed entity but an emergent construct shaped by the configuration of conditions—one that remains open to continuous observation and reconfiguration by the practitioner.

4.2. AI-Based Meditation: The Restructuring and Concealment of Conditions Through Technological Mediation

Applying the second analytical dimension illustrated in Table 1, the discussion now shifts toward the structural consequences of condition reconfiguration. Rather than reiterating the theoretical mechanics of dependent origination developed in Section 3, this subsection examines how AI-mediated environments may reorganize the sequencing of attention, interpretation, and contemplative reflection. In terms of the analytical categories presented in Table 1, AI-based meditation shows a structure in which (1) conditions are pre-identified and categorized through datafication, (2) interdependence is mediated through system-level interpretation rather than directly observed co-arising, and (3) processes of arising, transformation, and cessation are organized into pre-defined procedural

sequences. As a result, the conditional structure of experience is not primarily disclosed through observation but is partially structured through the system's classificatory and procedural logic.

Within this configuration, what becomes salient is not the open variability of conditions but the alignment between experience and the categories established by the system. Sensations and emotions may be interpreted through predefined labels derived from biometric or multimodal analysis. Consequently, the relationship between conditions and experience is less likely to be apprehended as an emergent process and more likely to be mediated through the system's interpretive framework. From a dependent-origination perspective, the issue is not simply that technology adds a new condition. Rather, the configuration of conditions becomes less accessible to observation. Algorithmic processes and interface structures often operate as a "black box," making it difficult for practitioners to track how conditions interact. Instead, they tend to interpret their experience through outputs such as labels or guided feedback.

In this sense, AI-based meditation bears a formal resemblance to Heidegger's *Gestell* (Section 3.2.4): both organize the conditions under which phenomena appear while tending to conceal the operation of that organization. The key distinction thus lies not in the presence of conditions, but in their visibility to the practitioner. Accordingly, self-understanding in AI-based meditation may shift from actively exploring conditions to aligning oneself with a technologically structured framework—the tendency this study designates as pre-configured self-understanding (Section 1).

4.3. *Different Condition Combinations, Different Forms of Self-Understanding*

Finally, building upon the comparative framework summarized in Table 1, this section examines how differences in the visibility and organization of conditions may shape contemplative practice in distinct ways. The comparison focuses not on whether practice is mediated, but on how conditions are arranged and made available for observation within different contemplative environments. As established in Sections 3.2.2 and 4.1, traditional practice tends toward a condition self-disclosure structure in which practitioners directly encounter the changing configurations that constitute experience.

AI-mediated meditation environments organize contemplative practice differently. Practitioners engage with attention cues, classifications, feedback systems, and procedural sequences that may shape how experiences are structured and interpreted. Self-understanding may therefore emerge within technologically mediated interpretive frameworks through which experiential states are categorized and presented. When analyzed through dependent origination, the distinction between these modes lies less in the type of conditions involved than in how conditions are organized and how visible such configurations remain during practice. Traditional contemplative settings often provide greater opportunities for observing changing relations among conditions as they unfold, whereas AI-mediated environments may organize aspects of condition formation through classification, sequencing, and feedback mechanisms that are not always directly observable.

A further implication concerns how experiential interpretation is organized within contemplative practice. In traditional meditation, practitioners often have greater opportunities to interpret experience through direct observation of conditions as they arise and shift. In AI-mediated environments, by contrast, aspects of experiential interpretation may be shaped through classification, feedback systems, and interface design before practitioners engage with them reflectively. These differences suggest not the elimination of practitioner agency but different ways in which interpretive functions are organized and experienced across contemplative environments.

5. Discussion

5.1. *The Structural Reorganization of Contemplative Agency in Technologically Mediated Environments*

The differences in condition configuration identified in this study carry implications that extend beyond technique comparison. They suggest that AI-mediated environments may reorganize the practical and interpretive conditions through which contemplative agency is exercised. The issue is not elimination but repositioning—and repositioning carries consequences. When interpretive authority is structurally relocated away from the practitioner, the pathway through which contemplative insight is cultivated may be partially restructured at its foundation. The deepest value of traditional meditation's self-disclosing structure lies in what it makes possible: by directly observing the causal formation of experience, practitioners come to grasp the self not as an isolated essence but as conditioned dynamism—moment-by-moment conditional arising. This is the structural foundation of the soteriological insight that Buddhist contemplative theory aims at: the direct realization of anātman and niḥsvabhāva.

This analysis does not assume that traditional meditation is inherently superior or that AI-mediated meditation is necessarily deficient. Both forms of practice are structured by prior conditions, norms, and mediating authorities. The distinction proposed here concerns the degree to which these conditions remain visible and available for reflective examination. The normative concern of this study is therefore not technological mediation as such, but the possible concealment of condition-formation and the relocation of interpretive authority away from the practitioner.

AI-based meditation, by contrast, may tend to shift aspects of this difficult and gradual process of self-disclosure toward technologically mediated forms of convenience and interpretation. The algorithm presents interpretive results rather than exposing the generative structure of conditions. This tendency can be read as a technologically intensified extension of the interiorization and individualization that critics of Buddhist modernism have long identified—the weakening of the communal and cosmological dimensions of traditional practice and its reconstitution as a tool for psychological self-improvement. Though McMahan's (2008) original analysis predates AI-mediated meditation and cannot be applied without interpretive extension, the structural logic he identifies—the progressive decontextualization of Buddhist practice from its ethical and soteriological matrix—finds a new instantiation in algorithmically mediated contemplative environments. When practitioners are positioned to confirm categories the technology has set rather than to discover conditions for themselves, the practitioner's contemplative agency is structurally repositioned.

This repositioning is more than a matter of convenience. It suggests changes in the practical and interpretive conditions through which processes of self-understanding are organized within contemplative practice. The core of practice, from a dependent-originationist standpoint, is becoming aware of the relational network of conditions constituting one's experience and dissolving the pattern of grasping (upādāna). AI-mediated environments may fundamentally alter how practitioners access this process and may partially reconstitute the pathway through which reflection occurs. The interface between technology and meditation is thus not simply a form of instrumental support; it may also shape the interpretive and experiential conditions through which contemplative practice is organized.

The preceding analysis has focused on the structural and philosophical dimensions of this repositioning—how condition-configuration shapes the formation of experience, and how contemplative agency may be redistributed within technologically mediated environments. A further layer of context is supplied by Digital Religion scholarship, which

situates these structural dynamics within a broader account of how technological authority operates in contemporary religious practice.

Digital Religion studies offer an important complementary perspective here. Scholars have noted how digital technology reconstitutes the concept of “authenticity” in religious practice, generating new forms of religiosity in the tension between traditional and technological authority (McDonnell 2014). The authority of the algorithm’s “diagnosis” in AI-based meditation functions as precisely this kind of new technological authority—one whose influence on the process of self-understanding formation warrants sustained critical scrutiny.

5.2. *Toward a Contemporary Reconstitution of Dependent-Originationist Contemplative Theory*

The comparative analysis of this study also carries implications for how Buddhist contemplative theory should position itself within AI-mediated environments. The “condition sensitivity” cultivated by traditional meditation is the foundation of the soteriological capacity through which practitioners autonomously observe and reconstitute their inner and environmental conditions. This remains a core element for Buddhist contemplative theory to preserve and articulate, even as AI-based meditation continues to expand. The self-understanding Buddhist practice aims at is not the technological mastery of emotion regulation in accordance with prescribed norms; it is the formation of contemplative agency—the capacity to directly observe and adjust the conditional structure through which experience arises.

This raises the question of how traditional contemplative theory and contemporary technology should relate. The procedural adaptation characteristic of AI-based meditation may reinforce reliance on the refined outputs technology provides, gradually weakening the traditional contemplative pathway of exploring and reflecting on conditions. But this does not amount to a wholesale rejection of the interface between technology and meditation. The critical point is that technology should be designed to support practitioners’ capacity to observe conditions themselves—not to interpret and prescribe conditions on their behalf.

Dependent origination suggests a direction for such design: technology that helps practitioners observe more clearly the conditional structure in which experience arises. This points toward open structures that support the practitioner’s own exploration of experiential conditions rather than closed structures in which algorithms pre-classify and label experience before practice begins. As research on religious practice in virtual spaces has argued, technologically mediated practice can exercise transformative potential when technology mediates and expands practitioners’ agency rather than replacing it (Geraci 2014). This study proposes dependent origination as one theoretical framework through which Buddhist contemplative theory can engage constructively with the technological conditions of the age of AI.

5.3. *Alternative Interpretations and Limitations of the Argument*

Several alternative interpretations deserve consideration. First, AI-mediated meditation should not be understood exclusively as a constraint upon contemplative reflection. Under certain conditions, algorithmic systems may enhance accessibility, continuity of practice, and opportunities for reflective engagement. Second, practitioners themselves should not be assumed to be passive recipients of technological interpretation; users may actively negotiate, reject, or reinterpret system outputs. Third, traditional practice is itself mediated—a point the argument of this study presupposes rather than contests (see Section 3.2.2). The distinction proposed in this study therefore concerns differences in the visibility and organization of conditions rather than a simple opposition between mediated

and unmediated forms of practice. These considerations do not invalidate the argument developed here but indicate that the tendencies identified should be understood as structural possibilities rather than universal outcomes.

6. Conclusions

This study redefines self-understanding not as the outcome of reflection but as a processual event arising within the configuration of conditions and analyzes its structural transformation in AI-mediated environments through the concept of pre-configured self-understanding, read through the lens of Buddhist dependent origination. The study makes three distinct contributions. First, it reconceptualizes self-understanding as a process of conditional arising rather than post-experiential interpretation—a theoretical move that connects the dependent-originationist analysis of selfhood in Buddhist contemplative theory to the contemporary AI environment, expanding Buddhist philosophy's reach into pressing present-day questions. Second, by analyzing the pre-arrangement of experiential conditions in AI-based environments through critical dialogue with Heidegger's *Gestell* and Digital Religion scholarship, the study identifies a structural transformation in contemplative agency that has not previously been theorized in these terms. Third, by applying dependent origination to the analysis of a contemporary technological environment, it establishes a productive theoretical interface between Buddhist philosophy, philosophy of technology, and Digital Religion studies. Ultimately, this study suggests that self-understanding in the age of AI may no longer be understood simply as the aftereffect of human reflection but increasingly as a technologically pre-structured process shaped through the prior arrangement of experiential conditions. In this respect, the conditions examined in this study are not merely factors that influence an already-constituted self-understanding; they are constitutive of the very intelligibility through which any self-understanding becomes possible in the first place.

The study's primary limitation is its theoretical scope: it does not include empirical verification of actual practitioners' experience in AI-based meditation. Its analysis is also limited to specific types of AI meditation systems rather than the full range of available formats. The treatment of variation within Buddhist contemplative traditions—including the significant differences between the Zen (禪) and vipassanā traditions—is necessarily schematic. Future research should move in two directions simultaneously: toward empirical verification of the theoretical tendencies identified here, and toward comparative analysis of how different Buddhist contemplative traditions interface with different technological environments to produce divergent structures of self-understanding formation. Such work will be essential both for the theoretical reconstitution of Buddhist contemplative theory in the age of AI and for advancing the productive interdisciplinary dialogue between Digital Religion studies and Buddhist philosophy that this study has begun. In particular, future studies should empirically investigate how these pre-configured conditions operate across specific AI-mediated environments, including generative AI systems and personalized recommendation algorithms, and how practitioners phenomenologically experience such transformations in contemplative practice.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Typology of AI Meditation Systems: Representative Functions, Modes of Intervention, and Concrete Examples. This table provides a systematic overview of the five primary types of AI meditation systems referenced throughout this study. Each type is distinguished by its representative function, mode of intervention in the practitioner’s experiential conditions, and a concrete operational example. This typology informs the analysis of pre-configured self-understanding developed in Sections 3.2.1 and 4.2.

AI Meditation System Type	Representative Function	Mode of Intervention	Representative Systems	Concrete Example
Conversational AI Assistants	Interpretive dialogue and reflection support; provides language and framing before phenomenological observation begins	Supply linguistic and interpretive framing	ChatGPT, Claude, Woebot	When a user inputs “my mind feels heavy,” the system responds with reflective prompts (“In what situations does that feeling arise?”), framing the practitioner’s state before direct observation begins.
Biometric Feedback Platforms	Physiological monitoring (HRV, EEG, respiration) and real-time emotional classification; translates bodily signals into categorized states	Translate bodily signals into categorized emotional states	Muse Headband, Spire Stone, Fitbit Sense	An EEG headband measures focus and relaxation levels in real time, delivering bird sounds (calm) or rain sounds (tension) as biofeedback—guiding meditation depth through algorithmically classified physiological data.
Recommendation-Driven Mindfulness Applications	Personalized content sequencing based on user history, preferences, and inferred states; continuous optimization through engagement data	Guide practice through algorithmic content recommendation	Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer	After a user completes three consecutive sleep meditations, the algorithm automatically recommends a “Deep Sleep Advanced Course” as the next stage, sequencing practice according to inferred progress.
Generative AI Meditation Systems	Real-time generation of adaptive meditation scripts calibrated to the practitioner’s current state and context; each session produces unique instructional content	Generate customized prompts and instructions in real time	Luminate, Aura, Balance	Given input such as “I feel tense before a presentation,” an LLM generates a bespoke 5 min script sequencing breath work, body scan, and positive visualization—pre-arranging the conditions of the session before practice begins.
Immersive VR Meditation Environments	Simulated contemplative settings (360° natural or sacred environments); structures attention through designed spatial presence	Structure attention through designed immersive environments	TRIPP, Guided Meditation VR, Healium	A VR headset renders a Himalayan snowscape; as the user’s heart rate decreases, animated snowflakes bloom—reinforcing relaxation through visually responsive environmental reward.

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