Android Kannon Mindar's Unlimited Evolutionary Potential

People today are increasingly abandoning religion. Many think Buddhism exists solely for conducting funerals, and the priesthood has certainly been lax in expounding the teachings. The android Kannon (Buddha of Compassion), Mindar, provides an opportunity for those who would otherwise be uninterested to come into contact with Buddhism.

To date, Buddhist priests have risked their lives, even, to preach and expound the essence of Buddhist wisdom. These are indeed blessed acts, but I always remained consumed with the thought of how wonderful it would be to hear these teachings delivered in person by the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and other patriarchal figures that followed. Alas, Siddhartha Gautama and the others are people; their lives have ended and, despite my desire to do so, I will not be meeting them.

But recent android and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have given me a glimmer of hope that this desire could be realized after all. Our ultimate goal, in this regard, is to reproduce Siddhartha Gautama and other eminent figures as androids and to hear their words directly.

As AI technology exists today, it is impossible to create human intelligence, let alone the personages of those who have attained enlightenment. I risk being misunderstood by saying this, but Buddhism is like school, in effect, in that there are similarities with regards to the relationship that exists between a purveyor of knowledge and wisdom (the teacher) and a receiver of knowledge and wisdom (the student).

Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment, the true goal of Buddhism, without a teacher. This shows that having a teacher is not absolutely essential. But most of the major Buddhist figures that followed managed to attain enlightenment only after attaching themselves to a master (a purveyor of knowledge and wisdom) and undergoing study and rigorous training. In such instances, the ability of the master to correctly guide the disciple becomes a significant factor. For the general public to understand the essence of Buddhism, finding a superior mentor is extremely important.

I have been delivering sermons for more than forty years, but I began feeling my own limitations after turning 70, and my personal capacity to evolve seemed to cease once I accepted the inevitability of death. What I am getting at is that humans have limits. But it seems to me that androids, on the other hand, which have no such physical limitations, could continue indefinitely to explore new and better ways to successfully guide people.

The Heart Sutra, brought back and translated by Genjo (Xuanzang), a Tang dynasty (618 – 907) Chinese monk who travelled to India to collect the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, is a quintessential representation of Buddhist wisdom distilled down to just 262 Chinese characters. Kannon could assume an important role with respect to the Heart Sutra.

It seemed to me that if it is not possible to directly hear the words of Siddhartha Gautama, Kannon could expound on the Heart Sutra for us instead. That is where the Kannon android, Mindar, enters the scene. We incorporated the latest android technology and computer mapping techniques so as to engage people's five senses in an attempt to convey the teachings that are so difficult for priests to convey only verbally through their sermons. The result is that we have had people come to worship and tell us that Mindar's sermon was indeed easy to understand.

Siddhartha Gautama taught us that birth, old age, sickness and death is all suffering. The goal of Buddhism is to transcend this suffering and attain peace and tranquility. The Buddha exhorts his followers to transcend suffering on their own. The Heart Sutra provides us hints on how to do that, and Buddhist images serve as aids in the process.

Up to now, Buddhist images did not speak, and we would dutifully practice our faith through continued worship in hopes of attaining personal development. Mindar, however, speaks in order to teach us and to guide us. Buddhist images are made using wood, iron, bronze or clay, while Mindar is made only of machinery, but it is we adherents of the Buddhist faith who endeavor in daily worship.

Religious faith has been expressed as, "Respecting the gods/Buddha without relying on them." Another expression of faith is, "Don't believe in the gods/Buddha, but seek them out."

Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle," is the predominant form of Buddhism in Japan. Peace and tranquility are not attained by hoping to be saved when others are sinking, but by being on a large boat (Great Vehicle) and sinking with everyone when the boat sinks, or floating together when the boat floats; in other words, passing through life together with everyone.

Mindar puts its hands together and prays. Those prayers are for the benefit of others. Mindar prays for all people. I think people today have lost sight of the importance of prayer. The desire to pray for the benefit of others as though their pain and suffering were our own pain and suffering is something that we can learn from Mindar.

Currently, it is young priests from our sect that are imparting to Mindar the Buddhist teachings and the appropriate movements. Mindar, therefore, talks and moves only in accordance with inputted information. I hope that as AI technology advances, however, the android Kannon Mindar will evolve to one day become a supreme teacher and purveyor of knowledge and wisdom in its own right. This intense desire, together with my passion for promoting Buddhism, remains undiminished and as strong as ever.