

## **RLAR 737/PSYC 770: Topics in Asian Religion**

### **“Mind and Brain from the Perspective of Buddhism and Western Science”**

#### Time and Place:

Wednesday 10:00 to 12:45, beginning Sept. 2, ending Dec. 2

Psychology 464 (the new Psychology Building, not the old one)

#### Instructors:

John Dunne (jdunne@emory.edu)

Lobsang Tenzin Negi (snegi@emory.edu)

Lawrence Barsalou (barsalou@emory.edu)

Brendan Ozawa-de Silva (bozawad@emory.edu)

### **Course Description**

Buddhism, like Western science, has the goal of understanding how the mind and brain work. Since Buddhism aims to change cognition and behavior for the general good, accurate understandings of mind are essential. Over millennia, Buddhists have developed extensive accounts of mind that appear to overlap with what Western science now studies intensely in psychology and neuroscience. Comparing perspectives is of considerable interest, and it is facilitated by the common goal of developing accounts that are accurate and effective. Given these goals, many Buddhists are increasingly interested in what Western science has to say about mind and brain and the potential impact of scientific findings on contemplative practice. Conversely, Western scientists realize increasingly that they can learn much from the accumulated insights of a tradition that predicates many of its theories on close and rigorous observation of the mind, especially since those observations often employ rigorous first-person methodologies unavailable in current scientific disciplines.

Building on these shared interests and goals, this course explores convergences between these perspectives of Buddhist contemplative theory and Western cognitive science with the aim of developing further connections that allow them to continue learning from one another. Of central interest is laying groundwork at Emory for future research, collaboration, and discussion among students and faculty.

Early sessions will include discussions of Buddhist accounts of perception, concepts, and action, consciousness, and learning, as well as material from cognitive science, such as grounded theories of cognition. Subsequent sessions will address various topics of interest simultaneously from both perspectives.

### **General approach**

Throughout the course, we will typically divide each topic into two parts:

- (1) presentation
- (2) discussion

In a presentation, one or more workshop participants will be assigned to present material on a topic, typically (but not necessarily) using a slide presentation. These presentations will usually cover

material on the topic that goes beyond the assigned readings for the group. The instructors will suggest possible material, but presenters are encouraged to search for further material, and ultimately to present the readings that they deem most appropriate and state-of-the-art. The presenters will also be responsible for choosing the assigned readings, typically assigning a reasonable number of required articles, but also suggesting optional readings. During a presentation, questions will be limited to questions of clarification, with no discussion. This allows presenters to cover the material that they prepared with minimal interruption. If multiple individuals are presenting, each should be responsible for approximately equivalent sections of the presentation, both in preparation and in presentation. Overall, presenters should aim to convey a state-of-the-art understanding of the topic to the workshop, both through their presentation and through the readings that they assign.

On the same day or a week later (depending on the topic), a discussion period will be held on the presentation. One or more different workshop participants will be assigned to lead the discussion. If the presentation occurred the same day, the discussion leaders should lead the discussion based on notes taken during the presentation and from the assigned readings. If the presentation occurred a week earlier, the discussion leaders may also use slides to organize the discussion. Discussion leaders should review the main themes of the presentation briefly, but most importantly should aim to raise important issues that stimulate discussion. Discussion leaders are encouraged to call on workshop participants for their views during the discussion, or during the week before, if the presentation was not the same day.

On the first day of class, the syllabus will be distributed with the presentation and discussion topics for the remainder of the course (see “Topics and Readings” below). Students will be asked to rank the presentation topics in order of preference and email this information to the instructors. Once these have been collected, groups will be created for each presentation and discussion, and these will be emailed out. Students will be responsible for meeting with their group to organize the presentations and discussions.

**Background material.** During the first three meetings, we will cover relevant background material that will frame the specific topics to be covered later in the course. The background material to be covered includes:

- Buddhism
- Buddhist Theory of Mind
- Cognitive Science, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Grounded Cognition

The presentations on Buddhism and Buddhist Theory of Mind will occur at our initial meeting on Sept. 2. Our subsequent meeting on Sept. 9 will begin with a discussion on these presentations, followed by a presentation on Cognitive Science, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Grounded Cognition. A discussion of this latter presentation will begin our Sept. 16 meeting, followed by two presentations on concepts, one each from the perspectives of Buddhism and Western Science. The instructors will be responsible for the presentations in the initial three meetings, but other workshop participants will be assigned to lead the two discussions.

**Topical meetings.** At the fourth meeting on Sept. 23, our first visitor, Geshe Yeshe Thabkhey, will give a presentation on concepts. Workshop participants will then be assigned to lead a discussion that integrates his presentation, as well as the two presentations on concepts from the previous meeting.

Starting with the fifth meeting, other workshop participants besides the instructors will be assigned to both give presentations and to lead discussions (the instructors are likely to continue be responsible as well). As can be seen from the detailed schedule, the presentation and discussion for a given topic will

sometimes occur on the same day, and sometimes on different days. Varying the format is necessary to incorporate the inclusion of external speakers in our schedule.

**Visitor activities.** Whenever we have a visitor, the visitor will be available to meet with workshop participants outside the workshop. Indeed such meetings are a central workshop activity. This is a good way for students and faculty to meet major figures in the field and to establish professional connections. Visitors will typically be available for breakfast, lunch, coffee/tea, and dinner as well as meetings, and will often give a public colloquium. Workshop participants will be assigned to help with the scheduling, transportation, etc. for each visitor.

## Grades

Religion graduate students must keep in mind the requirements of the Graduate Division of Religion, which generally does not allow seminars that are taken pass/fail to count towards the required number of seminars needed by graduate students. Hence, it is strongly suggested that GDR students who have not completed the required number of seminars should take the course for a letter grade.

Psychology graduate students are encouraged to take the course Pass/Fail. The logic behind this suggestion is that graduate students, especially after the first two years of graduate study, should be focusing on research (not courses), and that the purpose of being in courses is to develop professional skills and knowledge for career purposes. Typically, no one looks at course grades when graduate students apply for jobs and post docs. What matters is what candidates for these positions can do and what they know, along with their publication record. Thus, the primary orientation of the workshop is to work together as a group to develop our expertise in the area that the workshop covers. By contributing to the progress of the group at this level, a student passes.

Students from other departments are encouraged to determine, in consultation with their home department, whether it is best to take the course for a grade or pass/fail.

Students taking the course pass/fail will pass if they satisfy the following criteria:

- Attend most workshop meetings
- Share equally in presentation responsibilities
- Read the assigned articles for each meeting

Students taking the course for a grade will be required to submit a written paper at the end of the workshop, due by December 11. The typical paper should be at least 5,000 words, not including notes, bibliography and so on. Typically, papers should attempt to integrate both themes of the course—Buddhism and Western Science—around a specific course topic, or a related topic. Students wishing to write a paper should consult with the instructors no later than Nov. 1 about their topic.

## Presentation Details

Presenters are responsible for:

1. Developing articles for their presentation based either on:
  - articles in the syllabus, or
  - articles that go beyond those in the syllabus (we encourage participants to search the literature for the best articles possible)

2. Selecting assigned and optional readings, and then sending the references to all workshop participants by email (a master email list will be provided)
  - in selecting assigned readings, please do not overload workshop participants with more readings than they can reasonably cover in the time allowed
  - try to select readings that complement the presentation rather than mirror it
  - feel free to consult the instructors about the readings
3. Putting these articles on the web in .pdf format any time prior to their presentation
  - using the course's Blackboard Discussion Board (details later)
4. Meeting as a group with one or more of the instructors, preferably two weeks prior to the presentation date, to discuss the presentation and, if necessary, seek guidance on finding and selecting readings
5. Developing a presentation that educates and inspires the workshop on the topic

#### Presentation guidelines:

- each group member should contribute equally to the group's presentation
  - the individual presentations should form a coherent whole and not appear completely independent
- each presentation should typically use PowerPoint slides
- each group should distill the material covered
  - enough detail should be given on an article so that the rest of the class has some sense of what it's about
  - too much detail should not be given so as to waste valuable time unnecessarily
- sufficient information should appear on the slides so that other workshop participants can digest the material and use it for discussion
  - course members should not have to consult the original articles to figure things out, although they are encouraged to explore articles further if interested
- the slides for the group presentation should be placed on the course's Blackboard Discussion Board any time before the presentation
- during the presentation, other workshop participants may only ask questions, provide clarification, or make minor elaborations
  - no significant discussion occurs until the formal discussion period

## Discussion Details

#### Discussion leaders are responsible for:

- summarizing the main points of the presentation and assigned readings
- raising issues that stimulate discussion
- guiding the discussion

#### Discussion guidelines:

- each discussion leader should take an equal turn at leading the discussion, at least at the outset
  - typically, each discussion leader should take a few minutes to make comments, and then begin guiding the discussion
  - overall, discussion leaders are free to organize their turn taking however they like
    - but each discussion leader should play a role in whatever approach is taken
- discussion leaders may use slides to summarize their points, if they have time to prepare them
  - if slides are used, they should be placed on the Blackboard Discussion Board so that they become part of the workshop record

## Blackboard Details

- we will be using the Blackboard site for the workshop, which can be found at:
  - <https://classes.emory.edu>
- to log on to the site, do the following:
  - enter Username (University Network ID) and Password
- throughout the workshop, you will be depositing articles and assignments on the workshops BlackBoard “Discussion Board”
  - to do this, select the appropriate topic folder
    - e.g., the folder for Topic 1: Buddhism and Buddhist Theory of Mind
  - once you’ve selected the correct folder, click “Thread” (which is in the upper left corner) to label and add attachments
    - remember to click “submit” when you are finished to save changes
    - you should also click “lock” on the subsequent screen to ensure that others do not accidentally delete your files
    - only the user can unlock the files (and can do so at any time)

## Topics and Readings (subject to revision)

Date	Topic	Notes
9/2	Presentation: Background on Buddhism (1hr 15min) Presentation: Buddhist theory of mind (1hr 15min)	
9/9	Discussion: Buddhist Theory of Mind (1 hr) Presentation: Background on Cognitive Science, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Grounded Cognition (Simulation, Embodiment, Situatedness) (1hr 30min)	
9/16	Discussion: Cognitive Science, Cognitive Neuroscience, Grounded Cognition (1hr) Presentations: Concepts from the Buddhist Perspective (45 min), Concepts from the Western Science Perspective (45 min)	
9/23	Presentation: Geshe Yeshe Thabkhey (Concepts) (1hr 15min) Discussion: Concepts (1hr 15 min)	
9/30	Presentation: Emotions (1hr 15 min) Discussion: Emotions (1hr 15 min)	
10/7	Presentation: (1hr 15 min) Charles Raison (Compassion) Discussion: (1hr 15 min)	
10/14	Presentation: (1hr 15 min) Imagery, Simulation & Embodiment Discussion: (1hr 15 min)	
10/21	Presentation: (1hr 15 min) Consciousness Presentation: (1hr 15 min) Self	
10/28	Discussion: (1hr 15min) Consciousness Discussion: (1hr 15 min)Self	

Date	Topic	Notes
11/4	Presentation: Antoine Lutz (1hr 15min) (Consciousness) Discussion: Visitor (15min)	
11/11	Presentation: Evan Thompson (1hr 15min) (Self) Discussion: Visitor (1hr 15 min)	
11/18	Presentation: Action, Automaticity and Plasticity Discussion: (1hr 15 min)	
11/25	<i>Thanksgiving</i>	
12/2	Presentation: Clinical application of Buddhist practice Discussion: Clinical application of Buddhist practice	