

The Institute for Comparative Literature and Society and the Center for Buddhism and East Asian Religions present

Beyond the Hype: "Buddhism and Neuroscience" in a New Key

11 November 2016, 9:00 am-6:00 pm

Deutsches Haus, 420 W 116th Street, Columbia University

Over the past three decades, since the creation of the Mind and Life Institute in the 80s under the auspices of the Dalai Lama and the neurobiologist Francisco Varela, a series of conferences have introduced the idea of a convergence between Buddhism and neuroscience. Neuroscientists have been particularly interested in the possible neural correlates of Buddhist meditation, and their experiments have contributed to the current popularity of Mindfulness and derived techniques, such as "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction." Apart from meditation, a number of important issues, such as notions of self and non-self, or Buddhist ethics and neuroethics, have been discussed. Yet, because of the media attention and a desire to reach consensus, problems and disagreements between the two fields have sometimes been ignored or downplayed, and the conversation has been limited to certain forms of Buddhist thought and practice. The time has come to move "beyond the hype" and to engage in a broader and more critical discussion. With its strong programs in Neuroscience and Buddhist Studies, Columbia University is a natural venue for this conversation. This workshop would include a dozen scholars from both the scientific and the social science fields.

This conference was made possible through the generosity of the following sponsors: Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures, Barnard College, Institute for Religion and Culture in Public Life, East Asian Languages and Cultures, Department of Religion, Center for Science and Society, Heyman Center for the Humanities, and Neuroscience and History Workshop at Columbia University.

Participants:

Willoughby Britton (Brown); Michel Bitbol (Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris); Marion Dapsance (Columbia); Georges Dreyfus (Williams College); Bernard Faure (Columbia); Linda Heuman (Brown); David Lewis (Researcher at The Center for Trauma and Contemplative Practice); Jared R. Lindahl (Brown); David L. McMahan (Franklin and Marshall College); Ronald E. Purser (San Francisco State University); and William S. Waldron (Middlebury College)

First session: 9:30am-12:00pm

9:30-10:15am

Linda Heuman, Visiting Scholar at Brown University, Department of Religious Studies: "The Importance of Keeping Differences in Sight in Buddhism's Dialogue with Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Modernity"

10:15-11:00am

Michel Bitbol, Director of Research at CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris: "Overcoming biases in the dialogue between Neuroscience and Buddhism"

11:00-11:15am:

Coffee break

11:15am-12pm

Bernard Faure, Kao Professor of Japanese Religions, Columbia University: "Should Buddhism Be Naturalized? A View from the Margins"

Lunch: 12pm-1pm (Please make lunch arrangements on your own)

Local recommendations:

Subs Conscious 1213 Amsterdam Ave at 120 th Street Tel: (212) 864-2720	Hamilton Deli 1129 Amsterdam Ave at 116 th Street Tel: (212) 749-8924
Strokos Gourmet Deli 1090 Amsterdam Ave at 113 th St. Tel: (212) 666-2121	Pita Grill Amsterdam 1028 Amsterdam Avenue at 111 th St. Tel: 212-662-9100

Second session: 1:00pm-3:15pm

1:00pm-1:45pm

William S. Waldron, Professor of Religion and Chair of Department of Religion, Middlebury College: “Reflections on Indian Buddhist Thought and the Scientific Study of Meditation. Or: Why Scientists should Talk More with their Monks”

1:45pm-2:30pm

David L. McMahan, Charles A. Dana Professor of Religious Studies, Franklin and Marshall College: “Implicit Anthropologies and Epistemologies of Mindfulness”

2:30pm-3:15pm

Georges Dreyfus, Jackson Professor of Religion, Williams College: “An Experience in Meditation and Phenomenology”

3:15pm-3:30pm:

Coffee break

Third session: 3:30pm-5:45pm

3:30pm-4:15pm

Willoughby B. Britton, Assistant Professor (Research), Brown University Medical School, and **Jared R. Lindahl**, Visiting Assistant Professor of Humanities (Research), Brown University: “Meditation-Related Difficulties: A Mixed-Methods Study of Buddhist Practitioners and a Clinical Population”

4:15pm-5:00pm

Ronald E. Purser, Professor of Management, San Francisco State University, and **David Lewis**, Researcher at The Center for Trauma and Contemplative Practice: “Contemplative Neuroscience’s “Truthiness” Problem”

5:00pm-5:45pm

Marion Dapsance, Postdoctoral Fellow, Columbia University: “What It Means to be a ‘Scientific Monk’”

Closing remarks: 5:45pm-6:00pm

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Paper submitted to “Beyond the Hype: Buddhism and Neuroscience in a New Key”, Columbia University, Nov. 11, 2016

Not for Circulation

The Importance of Keeping Differences in Sight in Buddhism’s Dialogue with Science and Modernity

Linda Heuman

Abstract: In this essay, I reflect on the question of how to best communicate across difference in a way that fosters mutual respect. Exploring Buddhism’s dialogues with science and with modernity, I explore how claims to sameness and difference of Buddhism and science function in these conversations. I challenge the notion that Buddhism and science are compatible. My main intent isn’t to argue the contrary—though I do claim that Buddhism and science have important differences—but more importantly, to explore *the conditions of possibility that have given rise to their compatibility seeming self-evident*. The emphasis on common ground, I argue, is not a reflection of some objectively true state of affairs, as many who accept it assume; rather, it is a *dialogue strategy*, used to promote mutual respect toward the attainment of common goals. But this dialogue strategy, I argue, is wrongly employed in this context; it doesn’t attain the collaborators’ goal of non-hegemony. Further, it an implicit power imbalance between the collaborators by which Buddhist “belief” is treated as less credible than scientific “knowledge.” I then draw on French theorist Bruno Latour to investigate implicit assumptions that frame the modern notions of credible knowledge, and explore critiques of those assumptions from Latour and the field of science studies.

Michel Bitbol

“Overcoming biases in the dialogue between Neuroscience and Buddhism”

Abstract :

The dialogue between neuroscience and Buddhism has mostly developed on a biased and shaky basis. It relies on a disputable (realist and foundationalist) view of science, on a latently reductionist or eliminativist view of mind and consciousness, on a correlative minimization of the existential import of contemplative practice, and on an unfair distribution of roles between the cultural and epistemological frameworks of the West and of Buddhist Asia. After having assessed these biases, I will suggest some methods to overcome them. It will turn out that several branches of philosophy, ranging from the philosophy of science to phenomenology, can contribute usefully to this task, and therefore serve as an indispensable buffer between neuroscience and Buddhism. Finally, I will point out that one of the most prominent originators of the dialogue between Buddhism and science, namely Francisco Varela, had avoided each one of the denounced biases from the outset. This raises the following question: why did this dialogue go astray after Varela's death?

Bernard Faure

Should Buddhism Be Naturalized? A View from the Margins

In the recent past, a number of Western scholars have argued for a need to "naturalize" Buddhism, that is, to rid it from allegedly peripheral elements such as karma, cosmology, ritual, and myth, in order to better focus on the philosophical content of the Buddha's teaching. What such philosophically-minded scholars would see as a long-overdue purification process, however, others may see as an impoverishment, a form of reductionism.

The same debate has been rehearsed, in one way or another, for more than one century. What gives it a renewed urgency is the advent of neuroscience. In particular, its reduction of mind to brain—of mental events to physical phenomena—presents Buddhism with a radical challenge.

This paper will explore this challenge and examine the question of the naturalization of Buddhism using a two-pronged approach: a critical assessment of naturalism in general and of neuroscientific naturalism in particular; and a reevaluation of the most recent forms of Buddhist modernism and postmodernism, including the extraordinary success of mindfulness.

**Reflections on Indian Buddhist Thought
and the Scientific Study of Meditation
Or: Why Scientists should Talk More with their Monks**

William S. Waldron
Middlebury College, VT

This is an intriguing phenomena, is it not, scientists studying yogis from centuries old traditions, whose worldviews are about as diametrically opposite as one can could imagine? And yet, here we are, with thousands of studies published on the benefits of meditation here and mindfulness there. In many of these studies Buddhist monks have been treated as objects whose minds are to be studied by scientists rather than as subjects who study minds on their own. In the process, Buddhist philosophy has often been given short shrift, if not entirely neglected. But there are serious philosophical questions involving the scientific study of mind, which both need to be addressed as this field moves forward and about which Buddhist thinkers have thought a great deal. In this essay, I hope to bring some of the richness of these views to broader attention through a series of reflections occasioned by bringing distinct stages of Indian Buddhist philosophy into dialogue with modern science and philosophy of the mind. Though I cannot hope to treat any of them comprehensively, I do hope to offer some interesting views on this latest, fascinating chapter in science and religion.

Abstract

Implicit Anthropologies and Epistemologies of Mindfulness

David L. McMahan

The scientific study of Buddhist-derived meditative practices often contains certain implicit views of the human being (anthropologies), along with associated views of what, exactly, meditation does or what the meditator comes to know (epistemologies). One view of the human being, derived from the European Enlightenment, is that of the free, autonomous subject who can be trained to neutralize his or her biases, presuppositions, and cultural conditioning to attain a kind of judgment-free access to the raw data of the mind. In this model one observes the contents of consciousness with clarity and distinction, then has the freedom as an autonomous subject to choose which ideas, desires, and impulses upon which to act. The second view is of the human being as what Ortega and Vidal have called the “cerebral subject.” This view is a powerful contemporary picture of the human being as essentially identical with the brain and its functions. In this view, the brain can be trained and developed to produce various “mental states” that can, in turn, be modeled by fMRI and other technologies, such that we can determine these states by observing their neurological correlates. Both of these perspectives tend to neglect the crucial role of context and social existence and contain problematic Cartesian presuppositions. Rather than seeing meditation primarily in terms of interior mental states that can be mapped in neural imaging technologies, meditation might be better understood as a set of technologies of self involving the cultivation of attitudes, ethical orientations, values, judgments, strategies, and behaviors grounded in particular cultures’ repertoires of possible ways of being in the world.

An Experience in Meditation and Phenomenology

Georges Dreyfus

In recent years, developments in the scientific study of meditation have propelled this practice traditionally reserved for religious virtuosi to an unprecedented fame. Inspired by this phenomenon, I have tried in my own teaching to use meditation in the study of consciousness. In this paper, I reflect on this experience, its benefits and limitations and argue that although the critiques of the use of meditation are not wrong to be worried about the distortions and the vastly inflated expectations that the popularity of meditation is bound to bring about and the subsequent disillusion that it may lead to, we should not reject the study and practice of meditation in the context of broader philosophical or scientific inquiries such as those pertaining to the nature of consciousness. In my own experience, I have found that meditation is useful as a complement and support of phenomenology, an approach that is at the core of the Buddhist views of the mind and of the nature of existence. I have also found that students who had some familiarity with meditation were easily introduced to the practice of phenomenology and gained easily familiarity with some of the important features of subjectivity. This suggests that the combination of these two approaches might be of some value in the task of understanding subjectivity. This could take various forms such as the Varela's neurophenomenology but also the use of phenomenology for helping Buddhists to gain a better understanding of their own tradition and enable them to provide better descriptions of the nature of the practices of meditation.

Research Beyond the Hype:
A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Difficulties in Buddhist
Practitioners

Willoughby B. Britton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor (Research)
Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior
Brown University Medical School

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Abstract

The Varieties of Contemplative Experience research project is a mixed-methods study of contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners (n=60) across Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan lineages. In order to better understand phenomena underreported in the scholarship, science, and media coverage on meditation, we employed outlier sampling by intentionally recruiting practitioners who could report unexpected, challenging, difficult, distressing, or functionally impairing experiences associated with meditation. Interviews queried demographics, phenomenological reports of experiences, interpretations and causal factors, and remedies. Qualitative content analysis followed a data-driven approach using open coding to generate and refine two coding structures: a phenomenology codebook consisting of 59 categories of experience across cognitive, affective, perceptual, somatic, conative, sense of self, and social domains; and an influencing factors codebook consisting of 26 categories of risk factors and

remedies across practitioner, practice, relationship, and health behavior domains. In addition to the qualitative analysis, other variables such as causality assessment and type and degree of impairment were queried with a quantitative survey instrument.

These data represent an attempt to address a number of limitations that currently pervade the science of meditation, in particular a lack of knowledge about the range of experiences associated with meditation as well as the marginalization of individual differences and personal narratives in research studies whose findings are based on group averages. These data also call attention to the ways in which appraisal processes and social relationships determine the emotional valence, meaning, and value of meditation experiences.

While science and Buddhism are often portrayed as competing adversaries, this overlooks the longstanding history of Buddhists using science to promote a Buddhist agenda, including many of today's most prominent neuroscientists engaged in meditation research. Some of the consequences of scientists with Buddhist commitments include pro-Buddhist/pro-meditation publication bias, an insular interpretation of neuroscientific findings often at odds with other findings in neuroscience and psychology, and the tacit promotion of Buddhist conceptions of suffering and wellbeing in both scientific research and in clinical practice. Investigating the Buddhism and science dialogue ultimately requires that the far-reaching implications of these agendas be explored in order to determine if there is a way to move the research forward without compromising the commitments of either scientists or Buddhists, while also refraining from imposing tacit views or values on the ordinary practitioners of meditation who are impacted by this dialogue.

ABSTRACT

CONTEMPLATIVE NEUROSCIENCE'S "TRUTHINESS" PROBLEM

Ronald E. Purser
San Francisco State University

David Lewis
The Center for Trauma and Contemplative Practice

In a sweeping genealogical analysis, Abi-Rached and Rose trace the emergence of a particular style of thought or ethos that privileges molecular biology, in the form of current neuroscience, as the foundation for the scientific study of mind and mental life. We question, and answer paradoxically, whether this reductionist "neuromolecular gaze" has, through so-called contemplative neuroscience, any place in the dialog between modern science and Buddhism, at least without deep changes in methods and assumptions. We first explore technical and conceptual shortcomings in the parent field of cognitive neuroscience. Reviewing neuroscience's putative applications to psychopathology, by far its largest and most characteristic subdomain, we argue that the field in general has been singularly unsuccessful in robustly correlating behavior and experience with neural events, and has therefore yielded no meaningful molar or ecological insight into human affairs. Since contemplative neuroscience is built on the same assumptions, methods and technologies used for mental disorder but presents significantly more challenging subtleties and obstacles, we consequently question whether it can provide, in the foreseeable future, any meaningful insight into the exceptional mental *order* and ways of being cultivated by Buddhism. Yet, despite the lack of progress and honest positive prognosis, contemplative neuroscience has managed to create a false sense of achievement and meaning, a Foucauldian "regime of truth". We analyze how contemplative neuroscience communications

and popular fMRI brain imaging are discursive formations that enact a “cerebral or neuronal” self-as-brain. Rather than promoting Buddhist soteriological aims however, as is often claimed, self-as-brain actually impedes them: it strengthens rather than weakens the phenomenological sense of an independent knower that *has* experience, a primary obstacle to realizing the nature of mind as empty of self-nature which lies at the heart of Buddhism. Finally, leveraging the Buddhist propensity to turn nothing into something, we suggest how the above critique might actually enable fruitful dialog.

What It Means to be a 'Scientific Monk'

Matthieu Ricard, the Mind and Life Institute, and Western Esotericism.

The dialogue between Buddhism and science is not only about ideas but also about people. Among the most famous proponents of such a dialogue is Matthieu Ricard, a French convert to Tibetan Buddhism, frequently presented as 'a scientist and a Buddhist practitioner' or, even more boldly, as a 'scientific monk'. What does the term precisely refer to? In this talk, I will analyse Matthieu Ricard's personal and intellectual trajectory, his understanding of science and of Buddhism, and his specific contributions to the Mind and Life Institute. I will show that his worldview – and that of the Mind and Life Institute, composed of like-minded individuals from the same socio-cultural background – actually is a contemporary rewording of 19th century western esoteric traditions.

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