

Buddhism, like Western science, has the goal of understanding how the mind and brain work. Because Buddhism aims to change cognition and behavior for the general good, accurate understandings of mind and brain 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, especially because both have the common goals of developing accounts that are accurate and effective. Given these goals, Buddhists are extremely interested in what Western science has to say about mind and brain. Conversely, Western scientists realize increasingly that they can learn much from the accumulated insights of a tradition that, over the centuries, predicated many of its theories on close and rigorous observation of the mind.

Our proposed workshop would explore convergences between these perspectives and develop 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.

Emory has become one of the central sites for studying Buddhism as a religion and for developing scientific research related to Buddhism and to meditation more generally. At the Mind & Life Institute's annual meeting this past June (<http://www.mindandlife.org/>), Emory had more representatives than any other institution (around 10; notably, many relevant faculty and students from Emory did not attend). As a further reflection of Emory's strength in this area's strength, we have begun the Meditation Research Group at Emory that brings together researchers across multiple units who perform scientific research on meditation. This research group is being formalized as a Psychology 730 research group beginning in Spring 2009, after running informally this current semester. Approximately 20 people are attending from diverse Emory schools, including the College of Arts and Sciences, the Medical School, the Nursing School, the School of Public Health, the CDC, and the Veterans Administration. The seminar is led by a post doc from the Veterans Administration (Wendy Hasenkamp), four faculty from the College (Lobsang Negi, Sherryl Goodman, Linda Craighead, Larry Barsalou), two faculty from Psychiatry (Chuck Raison, Tadd Pace), and one faculty from the Nursing School (Susan Bauer-Wu). Thus, a large group of potentially interested students and faculty exists. Additionally, a variety of other students and faculty, not involved in the Meditation Research Group, have expressed interest in this area and in possibly participating. Thus a high level of attendance is possible. Because we want to include as many people as possible who are sincerely interested, we are open to accommodating a large group. Perhaps most significantly, this workshop would further contribute to bringing this community of researchers together and to further energizing it. A variety of activities and works are likely to follow.

We have developed a tentative set of topics for the workshop. As planning proceeds, however, it is quite likely that that these topics will evolve.

The workshop would meet once a week for a single three-hour session. The workshop would begin with two initial meetings that cover Buddhist theories of mind and brain. The first meeting would address the integrated Buddhist account of perception, concepts, and action, along with additional constructs such as causality and consciousness. The second meeting would address Buddhist theories of learning, focusing on practice, expertise, and plasticity. The next two meetings would then present related material from Western science on mind and brain. The third meeting would present relevant material from grounded theories of cognition; the fourth would present relevant material on concepts and knowledge. The remaining ten meetings would address various topics of interest simultaneously from both perspectives, including: concepts and knowledge; self concepts and self thought; imagery and simulation; affect and emotion; consciousness and subjective experience; embodiment; action, automaticity, and plasticity; altruism and compassion; happiness and optimism; relations between Buddhist Practice, Psychotherapy, and Medicine. Again, these topics are likely to evolve over the coming year.

Each meeting would be centered on discussion of assigned readings led by faculty and graduate student participants. In some meetings, especially the first four, some lecturing may occur. An alternative format under consideration is to spend half of each meeting presenting relevant material and then having an open discussion of this material a week later for half a session, after seminar participants have had a week to digest it. Under this model, the first half of each session would be spent discussing material presented at the previous meeting, and the second half would be spent presenting material on a new topic. We will resolve the format over the course of planning the workshop. Students taking the workshop for a grade would be required to write a 10-20 page paper on a topic related to the workshop. Students taking the workshop pass-fail would be required to attend regularly, read all assigned articles, and participate regularly in presenting articles. All students taking the workshop for credit would be expected to participate equally in presentations and other workshop responsibilities.