



Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - 2024-2025

Exchange

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam offers many English-taught courses in a variety of subjects, ranging from arts & culture and social sciences, neurosciences and computer science, to economics and business administration.

The International Office is responsible for course approval and course registration for exchange students. For details about course registration, requirements, credits, semesters and so on, please [visit the exchange programmes webpages](#).

Buddhism, Mindfulness and Psychology

Course Code	G_BATRSAL014
Credits	6
Period	P1
Course Level	300
Language Of Tuition	English
Faculty	Faculty of Religion and Theology
Course Coordinator	dr. H.W.A. Blezer
Examiner	dr. H.W.A. Blezer
Teaching Staff	dr. H.W.A. Blezer
Teaching method(s)	Lecture, Seminar

Course Objective

After finishing this course, the student has:

- acquired knowledge and understanding of the complex content, conceptual development and religious role and significance of Buddhist texts, particularly from the Therāvada tradition;
- acquired knowledge and understanding of the way in which Buddhist texts, particularly from the Theravāda tradition, have their impact on Western modernity, with particular reference to the Mindfulness movement;
- acquired knowledge of the content and history of Therāvada traditions of meditation and Mindfulness traditions in particular;
- demonstrated analytical insight into the history of the framing Buddhism in psychological terms and ideas and their background & resonance in modern Asia;
- demonstrated familiarity with the complex relationships of psychological readings of Buddhism against the backdrop of Buddhist modernisation movements in Asia and the reception of Buddhism outside Asia;
- demonstrated insight into resonances and also dissonances in self- and worldviews as (Therāvada) forms of meditation are deployed in non-Asian contexts;
- demonstrated analytical insight into how things appear “in the eye of the beholder”: i.e., appreciation of the reflection of our own history of religious ideas in the marriage of convenience between Buddhism and psychology, and recognition of our tendencies to ‘psychologise’ the sacred and to ‘sacralise’ psychology;
- demonstrated understanding of the problematic nature of patently modernist categories such as ‘immediate experience’ in Buddhism and the implied epistemic paradoxes; - demonstrated the ability to engage first and third person approaches in academia;
- developed and demonstrated the required skill of selective reading in voluminous and varied primary and secondary sources; for instance, the ability judiciously to extract relevant data from chapters and articles that are written from a variety of perspectives and theoretical framings and skilfully to manage the distinction of primary doctrinal and narrative sources and secondary sources, which engage analysis and reflection.
- acquired and demonstrated, in essay and presentation, basic academic skills, such as asking proper academic questions, critically appraising information, and effectively presenting data and academic arguments, both in writing and verbally, and demonstrating awareness of the target audience while doing so.

Course Content

Summary: Since the late nineteenth century, various forms of Buddhism emerged from modernising Asia and, with apparent ease, penetrated new cognitive, spiritual and cultural domains—many far removed from their origins, geographically as well as epistemically. In the process, Buddhism became abbreviated to ‘meditation’ and later even to mindfulness, and a curious marriage of convenience emerged between Buddhism and psychology. How did this come to pass and what does the most recent global rise of interest tell us about Buddhism, and what does it reveal about those who are interested?

In this course we shall also explore that fascinating marriage of convenience between Buddhism and psychology by tracing the reception history and mainstreaming of mindfulness 'meditation'. Literary, ritual, social, but also perceived spiritual and philosophical aspects of Buddhist traditions will come into view, in an exercise in Buddhist hermeneutics that is self-reflexive. The focus is on older Buddhist and Theravāda sources, which, by their perceived remoteness, challenge our own world views and self-understandings. It thus resumes the self-reflexive exercise of studying various religious traditions in so-called World Religions, but by engaging the case study of the reception history of mindfulness. Participants in this course will also be granted the opportunity to attend an Applied Buddhist Mindfulness training.

Long read: Mostly outside Asia and Asian communities abroad, Buddhism has almost become synonymous with meditation. More often than not, Buddhism is framed as a 'science of the mind' or 'non-modern psychology'—as if it were not a contradiction in terms, given that psychology is the very flagship of modernity. The common language of popular Buddhism thus mostly derives from pop psychology. This language and particular mode of understanding indeed has become a prominent characteristic of global Buddhist modernism.

So when and how did this hermeneutical practice arise? As you will have ample opportunity to discover on this course, these somewhat complex processes of framing have been going on for quite some time; in fact, almost since the very birth of psychology as a discipline. In the end, such preferred readings of Buddhism may reveal more about the receiving cultures and the rise of global modernity than they do about Buddhism in its 'original' Asian contexts. This is about our specific history with religion, as exemplified in the transition through the age of Enlightenment and the rise of modern disciplines of science, secularisation, processes of individuation, interiorisation of the psyche and the increasing, at times sheer dazzling self-reflexivity of modernity, and, of course, the concomitant history of reception of Buddhism.

First and foremost, this class is an introduction to Theravāda forms of meditation, based on 'Buddhist classics', but there is also plenty of room for the experiential side of things. In this seminar we shall also have opportunity to reflect on the reception history and psychological interpretation of Buddhism. Bravely conquering our neophyte trepidation, we will leap into the deepest waters from the very outset. Our main sources of information on Buddhism will be original texts in translation, rather than second- or third-hand information and digests. We will first study several typical examples of Buddhist texts and genres; 'typical' in the sense that they have contributed to the widely held assumption that Buddhism, au fond, is some kind of non-modern form of psychology. Don't let the technical nature and at times hermetical appearance of the Buddhist reading materials discourage you; many of these texts indeed appear a far cry from the Buddhist literature that is specifically produced for 'Western' audiences and which many of those interested in Buddhism in this 'New Age' may be familiar with. This is a different cup of tea altogether, not rarely steeped by the sharpest minds, greatest philosophers and most erudite scholars of pre-modern Asia. Some of these were also reputed to be accomplished yogis; but that is not as self-evident as it may seem. In fact, the very problems we experience when reading, understanding and contextualising the materials are what fuel the subsequent discourse and our discussions in this seminar.

We shall be reading, in translation, complicated, knowledge-intensive materials that often are difficult to penetrate without extensive commentary, for instance a late-tantric schematic representation of the mental domain, referring to visualizations and other imaginings & conceptualisations of so-called disturbing emotions, transcendent wisdoms, and various other mental categories, pertaining to both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, cyclic existence and its extinction: i.e., final release of the same (and be warned, these encompass more than fits our idea of an internalised psyche). We shall familiarize ourselves with Buddhist theories of perception and an abundance of Buddhist scholastic classifications pertaining to the mental domain. Struggling with these, at times, gnomic texts, we will also learn a thing or two about Buddhist views and theories of mind and on Buddhist perspectives on our human potential.

This course on Buddhism and Psychology thus provides a rare journey of self-discovery, touching the very core of modern self-understanding, across receiving cultures globally. A journey on which we critically examine everything we meet on our way, questioning modernist Buddhist assumptions, received wisdom of current Buddhist Studies discourse, and even some of the points of departure of this very course, and where needed fundamentally to revise or reframe them, if you dare ...

Additional Information Teaching Methods

Discussion seminar and presentations. 6 EC (168 hours/'SBU'), level 300: Attendance at seminar: ~36h Readings & summaries: 40h (readings partly used for presentation/essay) Oral presentation and paper for 6 ECTS: 3.500 –

4.500 words: additional 92h.

Method of Assessment

- Active participation and summaries (at least 10) (20%)
- Oral presentation or alternative, depending on group size (20%)
- Paper (60%)

Entry Requirements

A prior introduction to Buddhism is recommended, such as Buddhism (G_BATRSAL001); otherwise, work with an academic quality introductory textbook (TBA).

Literature

See course outline on Canvas.

Additional Information Target Audience

Minor, elective, and regular students, also from the Buddhist Seminary (e.g., resolving deficiencies in prior learning trajectory).

Additional Information

Attendance is mandatory, for at least 80% of the meetings.

Explanation Canvas

First readings on Canvas.

Recommended background knowledge

An introductory course to Buddhism is strongly recommended, otherwise make inquiries about preparatory readings.