Buddhism’s Engagement with the World

April 21-22, 2017

University of Utah
Buddhism’s Engagement with the World

Buddhism has frequently been portrayed as a tradition promoting a self-centered interest, a disengagement from the world and from its desires, attachments, aversions, and ignorance. This view is a caricature, and Buddhist practitioners as well as scholars of Buddhism have been trying to correct this misperception. The latter have, over the last few decades, explored many different aspects of how Buddhism has invested the political, social, intellectual, and cultural spheres of the societies it has influenced, but spreading recognition of these facets of Buddhism remains an important task that needs to be done. This conference aims to highlight how Buddhist thought can engage with a variety of issues ranging across philosophy, religious studies, politics, ecology, literature, and medicine, among others.

Friday, April 21

1:00- 1:15 Opening Remarks
Matt Haber, Chair of Philosophy

1:15-2:30 Laura Guerrero
“Buddhist Fictionalism Reconsidered”

The Madhyamaka Buddhist doctrine of emptiness has been described as the view that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. Some scholars have argued that this paradoxical sounding view is best understood as a form of global fictionalism, which takes our statements and beliefs to be at best only fictionally true in the way that statements and beliefs about fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes or Harry Potter, can be true. In this paper I criticize this interpretation of emptiness on the grounds that fictionalism cannot be made global.
One of the most common ways to discuss Buddhism’s contributions to the contemporary world is in terms of an “Engaged Buddhism” that works vigorously to reform political institutions and social systems. But what if Buddhism’s contribution turned out to involve some form of political disengagement? Many classical South Asian Buddhist texts, from Pali suttas and jātakas through Āśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita to Śāntideva’s Śikṣāsamuccaya, advocate that their audience avoid engagement with political institutions: a position that can fruitfully, and non-pejoratively, be called Disengaged Buddhism. Contemporary Engaged Buddhist works often either ignore Disengaged Buddhism, or treat it as a lack and a “vacuum”. This presentation will argue that the classical Buddhist rejection of political engagement is not merely a matter of silence or neglect, but a reasoned and considered stance that follows from key Buddhist tenets, especially the idea that the causes of suffering are primarily mental. It will then explore the question of whether contemporary audiences, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, might themselves have something to learn from the Disengaged Buddhists.
Charles Goodman

“Two-Level Consequentialism, Śāntideva’s Ethics, and the Justification of Punishment”

Two-level consequentialists maintain that normal humans are not good enough beings to be permitted to try to follow the true moral theory. This distinctive form of consequentialist indirection has the potential to justify many of the constraints on the promotion of the good that most people intuitively endorse by combining a very simple and sparse normative basis with empirical claims about individual and social psychology. This paper suggests that the writings of Śāntideva, a North Indian Buddhist who may have been the first fully fledged utilitarian ethical theorist in world history, have much to contribute to the development of a two-level consequentialist view. His most important contribution is the thesis that ordinary humans’ emotional reactions constitute a systematic and highly productive source of normative error. Beings whose emotions distort their evaluations and choices in such a way cannot be trusted simply to maximize the good, and should not trust many of their own moral intuitions. The potential fruitfulness of the two-level approach can be shown by drawing on it to develop replies to two forms of a perennial and troubling objection: that consequentialism would often, and unacceptably, justify punishing the innocent.
Buddhist non-theism poses a serious challenge to modern philosophy of religion. Although it is certainly true that not all forms of Buddhism eschew theistic religious structures and practices, from the origins of the tradition all the way through contemporary Buddhism, a significant portion of this tradition has been practiced and theoretized without substantial attention to theistic concerns. One consequence of this fact is that in the case of Buddhism many of the perennial questions that have been central to the discipline of philosophy of religion are rendered irrelevant: arguments for and against the existence of God, theodicy and the existence of evil, questions of free will and predestination in view of divine omnipotence and omniscience, and more. The prominence of Buddhism among world religions, therefore, constitutes a challenge to the philosophy of religion: How is it possible to reframe the discipline’s most significant questions so that they would be more broadly applicable? This, of course, raises an even much more fundamental question, “What is religion?” How can a more comprehensive understanding of this dimension of human culture be articulated? As an initial move toward addressing these questions, this presentation seeks to clarify the various roles that theism and non-theism have played in the history of Buddhism, and draws upon Nietzsche’s understanding of modern European nihilism in order to distinguish European atheism from the non-theistic religious orientation of Buddhism.
Saturday, April 22

10:30–12:00  William Edelglass
“Nature and Buddha-Nature: Poetry, Place, and the Transmission of Buddhism”

Earth Day Talk

Gary Snyder worked on Mountains and Rivers Without End—his poetic exploration of the intimacy between culture and the more-than-human world—for forty years. Snyder characterizes this work as a Buddhist sutra; it can be read as a story of how Buddhism finds itself at home in the mountains and valleys of the American West. This talk will present Snyder’s work, and explore some of the traditions that inform it, including East Asian reflections on the teachings of the Buddha in natural sounds of streams and wind and animal cries, as well as the contemporary discourse of Buddhism and ecology.

12:00-1:30  Lunch Break

1:30- 2:45  Pierce Salguero
“Beyond Mindfulness: Buddhism & Health in Historical Perspective”

The so-called “Mindfulness Revolution” sweeping through mainstream American popular culture has tended to overshadow both the deep historical roots of the connections between Buddhism and health, as well as the diversity of those Buddhist healing methods beyond merely meditation. This presentation will place the contemporary focus on the health benefits of mindfulness within the history of Buddhist engagements with medicine, with special focus on China. It will outline the many rich and complex approaches to healing that have been (and still are) used in Chinese Buddhist communities, and will suggest directions for further historical and clinical research beyond mindfulness.
While various styles of mindfulness meditation appear to enhance wellbeing, the precise mechanisms for its alleged efficacy remain a matter of much debate. One key cognitive capacity, however, may be a target of all styles of mindfulness training, and it may also account for many of mindfulness’s salubrious effects. That capacity is “dereification”: the ability to experience one’s thoughts merely as thoughts, and not as the objects that they represent. The mechanism here relates to the claim that, in at least some cases, our thoughts manifest as embodied simulations, and in the case of chronic stress, those thoughts drive psycho-physiological changes that impair wellbeing. Dereification, as a trainable cognitive skill, can enable one to modulate the intensity of these simulations, or even take them offline entirely. This talk examines the theoretical articulation of dereification in the Buddhist epistemological literature, with particular emphasis on the role played by the apoha or “exclusion” theory of concept formation. The practice of dereification will then be examined in the context of specific meditation practices that inform (and are informed by) that theoretical framework.