



Research
Center
Italian
Buddhist
Union



Buddhist Perspectives on Consciousness, Evolution, and AI

International Symposium
Italian Buddhist Union Research Center

November 17, 2023, 9:45 am - 6:00 pm
Villa Selvatico - Battaglia Terme (Padua)

Schedule

9:45 am – 10:15 am – Welcoming remarks

Filippo Scianna - Italian Buddhist Union, President

Stefano Davide Bettera - European Buddhist Union, President

Chiara Mascarello - Project Coordinator

Peter D. Hershock - Project Lead

10:15 am – 12:15 pm – Roundtable and Q&A from audience

Rethinking Consciousness for a Better Understanding of AI and Human Nature

The study of consciousness is not just an intellectual challenge; it is becoming increasingly important for pressing ethical and practical issues. For instance, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has ignited intense debates about the possibility of non-biological consciousness, and these debates are gaining deepening significance as different forms of artificial intelligence become ever more integral to our daily lives. Without a shared account of consciousness, however, it is hard to even begin grappling with these intricate issues, their societal impacts, and their ethical implications. Understanding what we mean by “consciousness,” as well as “sentience,” is thus crucial in navigating the future of humanity.

These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this roundtable: *Should we expect robots with personhood, rights, and responsibilities? Do chatbots and similar technologies already possess some level of consciousness, or might they develop it in the future? Is an artificial consciousness even possible? What is the relationship between intelligence and consciousness (or sentience)? Might reverse-engineering the human mind as a means to building machine consciousness shed important light on our own, human nature(s)?*

Buddhism has from its beginnings explored the nature of consciousness and sentience, developing various theoretical perspectives, but always within an interdependent and relational therapeutic framework based on contemplative inquiry. Tapping into these sources to shed new light on one of the oldest questions of humankind—and to train that light on humanity’s future—is the main primary aim of this session.

Panelists:

Martin T. Adam

Jenny Hung

Francesco Tormen

Peter D. Hershock

12:15 pm – 1:30 pm – Lunch break

1:30 pm – 3:30 pm – Roundtable and Q&A from audience

Ethical and Societal Impacts of Human Enhancement, Technological Evolution, and Artificial Life

How consciousness is theorized is ethically significant, especially as we envision scenarios that are becoming increasingly imminent with the digital transformation and synthetic biology. We are witnessing evolutionary changes that transcend the biological level to encompass the cultural, technological, and relational dimensions of human presence. And these technologically mediated changes are impacting not only on our natural environments, but also disrupting the “climate” of interpersonal and socio-political relations and setting the stage for fundamental alterations to the very biology of humanity itself. These evolutionary dynamics call into question the adequacy of ethical systems focused on individual agents, their actions, and their near-term causal effects, and whether it is necessary to develop new ethical frameworks.

These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this roundtable: *How do we ethically frame the possibilities of human enhancement when it pushes beyond the boundaries of our physical and cognitive limits, altering our current biological constitution in the process? How do we navigate the potential of technology to alleviate suffering and enhance physical and cognitive capabilities, and what are the ethical implications of this? Furthermore, how do we approach the emerging horizon of synthetic biology?*

Given that Buddhist traditions have always sought to transform—and thus enhance—human presence through various forms of contemplative practice, and through developing theoretical support for those practices in the context of overarching emancipatory, ethical commitments, they have the potential to offer valuable insights as humanity debates whether, how, and to what extent to engage in intentional evolution.

Panelists:

Charles A. Goodman

Gunter Bombaerts

Soraj Hongladarom

James J. Hughes

3:30 pm – 4:00 pm – Coffee break

4:00 pm – 6:00 pm – Roundtable and Q&A from audience

Buddhist Contributions to Shaping the Digital Transformation and Inflecting the Extension of Technological Frontiers

This session shifts attention back to the present and how Buddhist resources might help to address the challenge of understanding the risks and dangers of new technologies, how best to counterbalance their

negative consequences, and the ways in which the potentials of new technologies can be harnessed to benefit humankind.

These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this roundtable: *Can we harness new technologies to promote awareness, wisdom, and compassion? What is the potential of contemplative technologies in the educational field and in promoting personal growth? How can we maintain a critical spirit and develop practices of “technological hygiene” that protect our minds from the influences of technology? And, can AI and digital transformation be developed to contribute to the public good and open diversity-enhancing and equity-seeking pathways to more humane futures for all?*

The panel calls for an exploration of ideas, projects and case-studies which bridge Buddhism and cutting-edge technologies.

Panelists:

Jeanne Lim

Beverley F. McGuire

Shi Juewei

Stuart R. Sarbacker

6:00 pm – Closing remarks

Organizing Committee

Peter D. Hershock - Project Lead

Chiara Mascarello - Project Coordinator

Francesco Tormen - Scientific Consultant

Emma Bano - Event Manager

We would like to express our gratitude to Adroit for their work on the documentary associated with the project. Special thanks to Andrea Pertegato (director) and Cecilia Fincato (project manager).

The symposium members

MARTIN T. ADAM is an Assistant Professor in the Pacific and Asian Studies Department at the University of Victoria. His area of research specialization is Indian Buddhism, with more general interests in other south Asian religious traditions (Hinduism, Jainism). His studies have included extended periods at institutions in India, Nepal, and Switzerland. A recent study leave included periods at McGill's Faculty of Religious Studies and Oxford's Wolfson College, where he was conducting research in the area of early Indian Buddhist Metaethics. He is also guest editor, alongside Michael Berman, for the Special Issue titled "Buddhism and the Future: Transhumanism and Posthumanism" in *CJBS* Vol. 18.

GUNTER BOMBAERTS is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Sciences at Eindhoven University of Technology and is actively engaged in the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies (ESDiT) Research Project. Among his most recent papers are: "Attention as Practice: Buddhist Ethical Responses to Persuasive Technologies" (2023) and "Generative AI: Generating Morality and Shaping Engineering Ethics Education" (2023).

CHARLES A. GOODMAN is a Professor in the Philosophy Department and the Department of Asian and Asian-American Studies at Binghamton University. He is interested in ethics, metaphysics and epistemology in South Asian, Tibetan and Chinese traditions. He is the author of *Consequences of Compassion: An*

Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics (2009) and a co-author of *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness* (2016). His translations from Sanskrit include *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva* (2016) and *The Tattvasaṃgraha of Śāntarakṣita: Selected Metaphysical Chapters* (2022). He has also published articles on Buddhist philosophy and on applied ethics.

PETER D. HERSHOCK is Director of the Asian Studies Development Program and Coordinator of the Humane AI Initiative at the East-West Center in Honolulu, and was a Berggruen Institute China Center fellow from 2017 to 2018. His philosophical work makes use of Buddhist conceptual resources to address contemporary issues. He has authored or edited more than a dozen books on Buddhism, Asian philosophy and contemporary issues. These include: *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* (1999); *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence* (2006); *Valuing Diversity: Buddhist Reflection on Realizing a More Equitable Global Future* (2012); *Buddhism and Intelligent Technology: Toward a More Humane Future* (2021); and *Consciousness Mattering: A Buddhist Synthesis* (2023).

SORAJ HONGLADAROM is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Research Fellow and Founding Director at the Center for Science, Technology, and Society at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. His concern is mainly on how science and technology can be integrated

into the life-world of the people in the so-called Third World countries, and what kind of ethical considerations can be obtained from such relation. He is the author of *The Ethics of AI and Robotics: A Buddhist Viewpoint*, published by Lexington Books in 2020, as well as *The Online Self*, published by Springer in 2016.

JAMES J. HUGHES, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, a “technoprogressive” think-tank which promotes ideas about how technological progress can increase freedom, happiness, and human flourishing in democratic societies. He is a bioethicist and sociologist who serves as the Associate Provost for Institutional Research, Assessment and Planning for the University of Massachusetts Boston. He is the author of *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (2004).

JENNY HUNG is an Assistant Professor (Philosophy & Religion) in the Division of Humanities at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. She has two PhDs, one in philosophy, another in nanophysics. She investigates the nature of the self from both the Western and Eastern perspectives, aiming to answer the most fundamental questions of human existence. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California, Riverside, and the Australian National University. She also visited Stanford University to work with John Perry on paradoxes in Buddhism and has recently embarked on a funded project on the self from various traditions with Perry.

JUEWEI SHI has been an ordained monastic and has engaged in Buddhist Studies scholarship for over 20 years. Prior to her ordination, Juewei applied research in artificial intelligence and business process re-engineering to real-world problems in the Singapore government for over 10 years. During her time as an academic monastic, Juewei has been a co-editor and author of texts related to the application of Buddhism in contemporary society. She has also funded community projects, webinar series and podcasts, as well as led the creation of digital apps and tools.

JEANNE LIM is the co-founder and CEO of beingAI, which creates AI beings® who build positive engagement with people. After many years in the tech industry (Apple), she joined Hanson Robotics as Chief Marketing Officer and later assumed the CEO's role. Jeanne was instrumental in building Sophia the Robot's fictional character. Through co-creating Sophia's character together with her inventor, David Hanson, Jeanne saw that thoughtfully-designed AI characters have the potential to build long-term, meaningful relationships with people. She worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to establish Sophia as their first non-human Innovation Champion in Asia Pacific.

CHIARA MASCARELLO is the co-scientific director of the Italian Buddhist Union's Research Center and currently teaches Tibetan Language at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research has been focused on self-awareness (*rang rig*) in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and the contemporary philosophical debate, as well as contemplative practices,

particularly Lojong (mind training). She is a member of the Organizing Committee for the Postgraduate Program in Contemplative Studies at the University of Padua and lectures in various university postgraduate programs. Since 2013, she has worked as an interpreter and translator from Tibetan both in Italy and abroad, in addition to regularly conducting translation courses.

BEVERLEY F. MCGUIRE is a Professor of East Asian Religions at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She received her Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University, her M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School, and her B.A. in Comparative Literature from Stanford University. Her research interests include Buddhism and digital media, Buddhist views of karma, Buddhist board games, and contemplative pedagogy. She previously participated in the “Public Theologies of Technology and Presence” program (www.shin-ibs.edu/luce) through the Institute of Buddhist Studies as well as “Sacred Writes: Public Scholarship on Religion” (www.sacred-writes.org).

STUART R. SARBACKER is Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Philosophy at the Oregon State University. His work is centered on the relationships between Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. He recently completed a three-year program on religion and

technology (Institute for Buddhist Studies, Berkeley). His work in this sphere applies philosophical and ethical concepts associated with Indian contemplative traditions to emergent technologies, especially human augmentation. This includes research on the “Psychedelic Renaissance,” as well as the role of psychoactive substances in historical and contemporary yoga and meditation traditions. In many of his courses, Sarbacker utilizes innovative contemplative pedagogies that aim to bridge the gaps between academic study, self-reflection, and engagement in civic life.

FRANCESCO TORMEN is the co-scientific director of the Italian Buddhist Union’s Research Center and teaches Tibetan Language at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. He is a member of the Organizing Committee for the Postgraduate Program in Contemplative Studies at the University of Padua and teaches in the Postgraduate Program in Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Contemplative Practices at the University of Pisa. Recently, he has published papers on Tibetan Madhyamaka, lucid dreaming in Buddhism and neuroscience, and the relationship between Buddhism, posthumanism, and transhumanism. He is also a translator and interpreter from Tibetan and conducts seminars and retreats on meditation and lucid dreaming throughout Italy.

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