



# Buddhism and Modern Psychology

The Buddha said that human suffering—ranging from anxiety to sadness to unfulfilled craving—results from not seeing reality clearly. He described a kind of meditation that promises to ease suffering by dispelling illusions about the world and ourselves. What does psychological science say about this diagnosis and prescription—and about the underlying model of the mind?

## About the Course

The Dalai Lama has said that Buddhism and science are deeply compatible and has encouraged Western scholars to critically examine both the meditative practice and Buddhist ideas about the human mind. A number of scientists and philosophers have taken up this challenge. There have been brain scans of meditators and philosophical examinations of Buddhist doctrines. There have even been discussions of Darwin and the Buddha: Do early Buddhist descriptions of the mind, and of the human condition, make particular sense in light of evolutionary psychology?

This course will examine how Buddhism is faring under this scrutiny. Are neuroscientists starting to understand how meditation “works”? Would such an understanding validate meditation—or might physical explanations of meditation undermine the spiritual significance attributed to it? And how are some of the basic Buddhist claims about the human mind holding up? We’ll pay special attention to some highly counterintuitive doctrines: that the self doesn’t exist, and that much of perceived reality is in some sense illusory. Do these claims, radical as they sound, make a certain kind of sense in light of modern psychology? And what are the implications of all this for how we should live our lives? Can meditation make us not just happier, but better people?

## Course Syllabus

**Week 1:** The Buddhist Diagnosis

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**Week 2:** The Buddhist Prescription

**Week 3:** Does Your Self Exist?

**Week 4:** A New Model of the Mind

**Week 5:** Meditation, Modules, and Evolutionary Psychology

**Week 6:** What Is Enlightenment?

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## Recommended Background

No background in psychology or religious studies is assumed on the part of students. But it will help to have a curiosity about how the mind works, an interest in what accounts for the ups and downs of human experience, and an interest in the meaning of life.

## Suggested Readings

Suggested readings will include Buddhist scriptures, scientific papers, philosophical writings, and excerpts from books (including my book *The Moral Animal*). Many suggested readings will be provided online, and none of suggested readings is essential to understanding the lectures.

## Course Format

There will be a one-hour lecture each week, and each lecture will be broken up into modules that are between 8 and 25 minutes in length. After each module there will be several multiple choice questions—not for purposes of evaluating you, but just to help you decide whether you should go back and review the previous module before moving on. There will be two short essays, one after the third lecture and one after the final lecture. Students are also encouraged to participate in the online forum--which, in addition to enriching the learning experience, can be a lot of fun.

## FAQ

- **Does Princeton award credentials or reports regarding my work in this course?**

No certificates, statements of accomplishment, or other credentials will be awarded in connection with this course.

<http://help.coursera.org/customer/widget/emails/new>

[Peer Assessments \(https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001/human\\_grading/\)](https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001/human_grading/)

/ Final Exam Assignment

[Help \(https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001/help/peergrading?url=https%3A%2F](https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001/help/peergrading?url=https%3A%2F)

[%2Fclass.coursera.org%2Fpsychbuddhism-](https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001%2Fhuman_grading%2Fview%2Fcourses%2F971682%2Fassessments%2F4%2Fresults%2Fmine)

[001%2Fhuman\\_grading%2Fview%2Fcourses%2F971682%2Fassessments%2F4%2Fresults%2Fmine\)](https://class.coursera.org/psychbuddhism-001%2Fhuman_grading%2Fview%2Fcourses%2F971682%2Fassessments%2F4%2Fresults%2Fmine)

#### Submission Phase

1. Do assignment  ([/psychbuddhism-001/human\\_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/submissions](/psychbuddhism-001/human_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/submissions))

#### Evaluation Phase

2. Evaluate peers  ([/psychbuddhism-001/human\\_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/peerGradingSe](/psychbuddhism-001/human_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/peerGradingSe)
3. Self-evaluate  ([/psychbuddhism-001/human\\_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/selfGradingSets](/psychbuddhism-001/human_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/selfGradingSets)

#### Results Phase

4. See results  ([/psychbuddhism-001/human\\_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/results/mine](/psychbuddhism-001/human_grading/view/courses/971682/assessments/4/results/mine))

Your effective grade is **12**

Your unadjusted grade is 12, which was calculated based on a combination of the grade you received from your peers and the grade you gave yourself.

See below for details.

In an essay of 800 words, answer two of the following questions and provide support for your answers:

1. Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human predicament?
2. Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human mind?
3. Does modern science lend support to the logic behind Buddhist meditation practice?
4. Does modern science lend support to the moral validity of Buddhism?

You should take “modern science” to include both modern psychology (ranging from specific experimental findings to theories or models that may or may not be accepted by all psychologists) and the broader understanding of how natural selection has shaped the experience of living.

In your answer, be sure to refer explicitly to course materials--the video lectures and any other relevant course resources, such as readings, videos, and/or discussions in the class forums. You should also feel free to draw on your own reflections and experiences, as appropriate.

Remember, a good essay will do more than simply state a position. The good essay will also give specific reasons and evidence in support of your position, and will explicitly show why that evidence supports your position.

For each question, be sure to express clearly and concisely:

1. what the central elements of the Buddhist teaching are (for example, what the main Buddhist thesis about the human predicament is)
2. your position on whether modern science lends support to the Buddhist teaching
3. one or more specific ways in which modern science does or does not support the Buddhist teaching

In your response, you may choose to address the two questions separately or, if you think they are closely related, you may address them together.

Your answer to the two questions needn't be wholly negative or wholly positive. That is: You may conclude that modern science supports one of the two Buddhist teachings you address but doesn't support the other; and you may conclude that science supports a given Buddhist teaching in some respects but in other respects does not support it. In any event, be sure to address two of the four questions, and be clear about what your views are.

#### CORRELATION BETWEEN MODERN SCIENCE AND BUDDHISM\*

The four questions posed, can be approached from the concept of the four noble truths, as proposed by Prof. Wright in the lectures during this course. The four noble truths are connected and follow from one another; this essay deals with all four elements, integrating examples and findings of the various scientific experiments and studies mentioned[1].

*The Human predicament* reaches further than just "suffering" or Dukkha, as it preys on our wish to seek pleasure, and the prevailing human trait[2] on how to make it "last", preferably never to cease; consequently falling into the trap of "clinging and craving".

In the pursuit of "happiness", studies are ongoing in the field of neuro-science to establish regions where brain activity is measurable to prove that the effects of gratification of those pleasures and their continuation give answers on why we chase these rainbows[3]. Whilst these studies show that people winning large sums of money have to deal with the illusion that they will happily live ever after, sad conclusions show that they end up worse off; emotionally and materially. Buddhism offers significant insight in how to counteract the pitfalls that any form of attachment brings us[4].

In the various fields of Psychology, the Buddhist view encompasses mindfulness and the detachment from the delusionary characteristics of emotions[5], contradicting the basic principle of Evolutionary Psychology and parallels drawn from this specific field of Psychology.

Whereas *Buddhist ideas find support in how the mind works*, discussions on the fora and FB media suggest that multi-disciplinary Psychological studies indicate that a number of interpretations need to be considered (footnotes 1-4);

The mind works on various levels, incorporating past experiences, positive or negative, that are stored in our memory banks[6] and colour our perception. The interpretation and imaginations we may be subject to are a direct result of these perceptions influencing our behaviour and actions. Modern Behavioural and

Cognitive Psychology acknowledge these phenomena, and go as far as to say that there is no central directive in our minds that steer our behaviour, but the very actions are “directed” by the combination of signals of certain modules of the brain[7].

The most enlightening part of this[8] is the way we perceive ourselves; studies have shown that we tend to think of ourselves in unsubstantiated overly positive ways[9], and in this respect Buddhist views are shared in terms of pointing out that we should not engage in bias perceptions, but remain critical of what we perceive as the truth[10]. Adopting “Spin Doctors”[11] to allow for “twisting” our perception to suit the purpose, is an important feature in “coping” with contradictory motions on life’s path.

*To engage in a more realistic and truth-seeking mindset is to exercise meditation*, a form and discipline which can lead us to Nervana, or rather; liberation from our own delusions, anxieties and misconceptions, and at the same time in by being mindful of the suffering of others.

Modern Psychology supports the introspective aspects in their various fields of studies; there are numerous research analyses on the neurological changes that occur when meditation is applied, which proves that the actual brain activity[12] and circuits change. One of these recognised states is identified as the Default Network Mode[13], a “state of mind” that is achieved when the mind is free to “wander”, and Buddhist view states that “Wisdom encompasses the knowledge to perceive what emotions are valid, and are deceptive by nature”[14].

In exercising meditation, opportunities arise to alleviate minds from pre-conceived ideas and influential biases that will not give the objectivity needed to perceive matters for their true nature, and will continue to send distracting messages to our neuron receptors. By applying the five aggregates however, it is possible to achieve levels of contemplation of ourselves, others and our environment, that will enable us to view matters from a higher plain or to become a mere vessel in which we just allow thoughts and emotions to drift, which will also evaporate with time....

Adopting the introspective mode meditation offers, and the self-awareness this brings, provides for a sense of formless state – dissolving of the matter – ultimately leading to self-detachment, alignment to a sense of emptiness. In Buddhist terms a definition of the concept of No-Self, including perceptions relating to selfishness, self-centeredness, self-interest and self-deception[15].

Whether Modern Psychology can *support moral validity* that Buddhism encourages is a matter of debate. Many Psychologists argue that even though it has been proven that by intensive and disciplined meditation changes in mindset, attitudes and moral codes are calibrated, Behavioural Psychologists are not convinced and state that Psychopathic and Sociopathic tendencies[16] stem from disturbed attachment problems (Schema Psychotherapy[17]).

The question here lies in the fact that it would be nearly impossible to instill a sense of moral awareness in one that has not been able to experience emotions like love, compassion and empathy themselves from an early age onward, and could therefore by any means of behavioural therapy or meditation not be remedied in filling that specific void. Others argue that amazing results have been achieved by means of Vipassana Meditation and Mindfulness methodologies in prisons and schools[18].

Despite the tendency in our societies to take less time to evaluate what we are doing, and why we are doing it – or what the moral implications are – it is evident that there seems to be an increasing awareness to change our ways. This change isn't as rebellious as Buddhism vs. Evolutionary Psychology, but is nevertheless as dramatic and even traumatic, as it involves an inner change of all individuals that would rise to the challenge and take responsibility for their own choice in seeking a way to end suffering.

As the mainstream of Professor Wright’s seemed to point toward the rebellion Buddhism poses to Evolutionary Psychology, I would like to summarise this essay with words of the man himself, Charles

Darwin: ““It is our arrogance, our admiration of ourselves....”, which may be the primary cause of Universal Dukkha.

## Evaluation/feedback on the above work

**Note:** this section can only be filled out during the evaluation phase.

### Fairness and Accuracy

Score	Description
3	The essay accurately reflects the views of the Buddha, and of any scientific studies it may refer to.
2	The essay mostly gets right the views of the Buddha, and any modern scientific views it may mention, but makes a few minor mistakes.
1	The essay substantially misinterprets the Buddha's views, or any modern scientific views it may mention.
0	The views attributed to the Buddha, or to modern scientists, bear no relation whatsoever to what we learned in the course.

Score from your peers: **3**

Score from yourself: **3**

### Answering the question

Score	Description
3	The answer to the question is clear at the beginning of the essay.
2	The answer can be figured out by the end of the essay, but is not immediately obvious.
1	The answer never becomes apparent. It isn't clear what the author's position on the question is.
0	The essay does not address the question at all.

Score from your peers: **3**

Score from yourself: **3**

## Evidence and Argument

Score	Description
3	The answer is supported by useful evidence and reasons. It is clear how this evidence supports the author's position.
2	Some evidence and reasons are provided, but they are not always explicitly related to the author's position.
1	None, or very little, of the reasons or evidence given really supports the author's conclusion.
0	There are no evidence, examples, or reasons provided.

Score from your peers: **3**

Score from yourself: **3**

## Clarity

Score	Description
3	The writing is easy to follow throughout the entire essay.
2	Some passages are clear, but other passages are hard to understand.
1	A large portion of the essay is jumbled, confusing, or otherwise hard to follow.
0	The essay is impossible to understand.

Score from your peers: **3**

Score from yourself: **3**

## Works Cited:

\* a note to the reader: I found it insufficient to choose only two of the questions for this final essay. In my view, it would not do justice to the essence of the four noble truths and the valuable lectures we were offered by Professor Wright. I apologise if this puts an extra burden to your evaluation, but hope that you would find it worth your while.

[1] Lectures week 4, and readings: Robert Kurzban, Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite and Principle 4 in "Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer," by Leda Cosmides & John Tooby: <http://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html> (<http://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html>)

[2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarianism> (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarianism>) and Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works* (<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=20470>),

[3] [http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_asks\\_why\\_are\\_we\\_happy](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy) ([http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_asks\\_why\\_are\\_we\\_happy](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy)) - Dan Gilbert

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/Buddhas-Brain-Practical-Neuroscience-Happiness/dp/1572246952> (<http://www.amazon.com/Buddhas-Brain-Practical-Neuroscience-Happiness/dp/1572246952>)

[5] Lectures week 1, video lecture 4. and reference to T. Wilson's Strangers to ourselves

[6] T. D. Wilson – Strangers to Ourselves (Somatic Markers)

[7] Lectures week 4, video lecture 3 (Kenrick)

[8] Lectures week 5 and 6: Bloom, Salzburg and Bhikkhu Bodhi – video interviews

[9] *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 77, No. 6) – D. Dunning and J. Kruger, see also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory\\_superiority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_superiority) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory\\_superiority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_superiority)) (Social Psychology studies- Illusory superiority)

[10] [http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/buddhism\\_noself.pdf](http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/buddhism_noself.pdf) ([http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/buddhism\\_noself.pdf](http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/buddhism_noself.pdf))

[11] T. D. Wilson – Strangers to ourselves (Spin Doctors): <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674013827> (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674013827>)

[12] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain\\_activity\\_and\\_meditation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_activity_and_meditation) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain\\_activity\\_and\\_meditation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_activity_and_meditation)), Week 5, video lecture 3: R. Smith “Awakening, the paradigm shift of the heart”.

[13] [http://scholar.google.nl/scholar?q=default+network+brain&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=SVpiU\\_iBO4LcOd-lgagB&sqi=2&ved=0CCoQgQMwAA](http://scholar.google.nl/scholar?q=default+network+brain&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=SVpiU_iBO4LcOd-lgagB&sqi=2&ved=0CCoQgQMwAA) ([http://scholar.google.nl/scholar?q=default+network+brain&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=SVpiU\\_iBO4LcOd-lgagB&sqi=2&ved=0CCoQgQMwAA](http://scholar.google.nl/scholar?q=default+network+brain&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=SVpiU_iBO4LcOd-lgagB&sqi=2&ved=0CCoQgQMwAA))

[14] Week 2, video lecture 4

[15] <http://akke-myrielle.tumblr.com/post/81879903671/buddhism-in-modern-psychology-princeton-university> (<http://akke-myrielle.tumblr.com/post/81879903671/buddhism-in-modern-psychology-princeton-university>) - R. Kuzban: <http://bloggingheads.tv/videos/22408> (<http://bloggingheads.tv/videos/22408>)

[16] <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2005-11002-000> (<http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2005-11002-000>)

[17] <http://www.schematherapy.com/> (<http://www.schematherapy.com/>)

[18] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1\\_DVac9kkl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1_DVac9kkl) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1\\_DVac9kkl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1_DVac9kkl))

## Overall evaluation/feedback

**Note:** this section can only be filled out during the evaluation phase.

**self** → In my attempt to be as concise as possible, I have searched beyond the materials



and lectures during this course. I hope this will provide added value for my fellow students!  
Many thanks for this wonderful course!

**peer 1** → *[This area was left blank by the evaluator.]*

**peer 2** → Very good job.

**peer 3** → Essay covered a "lot of ground" beyond the two questions... but met the requirements and full credit was given. Be well!

**peer 4** → The flow and structure of your essay made it a pleasure to read. Great job. I took off a two point because I wasn't sure which questions you choice to answer and you didn't include you personal perspective on the subject.

