



SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies



Yoga & Philosophy Seminar Series

The SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies is delighted to host a series of online seminars with leading scholars at the heart of Philosophy and Yoga Studies. Please join us for this opportunity to go deeper into the material with researchers, graduates in the academic study of yoga and students of yoga more broadly.

Sessions will be held over Zoom. Spaces are limited to facilitate exchange of ideas and participants are asked to register in advance. Readings will be shared prior to the sessions. Timings are British Summer Time.

To register email Ruth Westoby at ruth_westoby@soas.ac.uk. Please include a short description of your area of related research or study.

Yoga, Philosophy and Gender: Thinking through a Debate in the Mahābhārata

7th September, 6.30-8.00pm

Professor Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, Lancaster University

This seminar looks at the debate between the woman renouncer Sulabhā and a King Janaka in the Śānti Parvan of the *Mahābhārata*. It is presented by Bhīṣma in the course of his teaching Yudhiṣṭhira about the moral superiority and powers of renunciation. So in itself is a debate about whether spiritual ends can be gained while one is an householder (as Janaka argues) or only through renunciation. However, the episode in itself turns quite a lot on Sulabhā's being a woman, implying some intriguing ideas about social norms, knowledge, spiritual attainment, and gender. Through the lens of gender, I consider the role yoga plays - as displayed in Sulabhā's powers but also in the relationship between those powers, philosophical argument, and spiritual achievement that her triumphant argument presents.

Speaker biography: Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad is Fellow of the British Academy, and Distinguished Professor of Comparative Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University. He has written over fifty essays and seven books, and edited several others.

His 2014 *Divine Self Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries* (Bloomsbury) won the Best Book 2011-15 of the Society of Hindu Christian Studies. The seminar reading is from his 2018 *Human Being, Bodily Being: Phenomenology from Classical India* (OUP). He is currently writing a book on emotions in Sanskrit theory and literature.

Reading: Ram-Prasad, Chakravarthi. 2018. 'The Gendered Body' in *Human Being, Bodily Being: Phenomenology from Classical India*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Internalized Asceticism: Taxonomy, Tattva-Abhyāsa, and Jñāna-Yoga

14 September, 6.30-8.00pm

Dr Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette, University of Ghent

This seminar explores the gnostic turn in Indian religiosity as a process of 'internalization' with regard to asceticism. Although the trend can already be foreseen in previous literature, I locate its most significant trailblazing expression in the theorization of the Buddhist Nāgārjuna and the Jaina Kundakunda, around the second to fourth centuries CE. When compared with the pre-existing attitudes towards religious practice and doctrine prevalent within their respective tradition, both figures can aptly be presented as reformers. Both give a central role to the cultivation of knowledge, and its corollary means of knowing, in soteriological matters; in contrast with the previous emphasis on external 'renunciation' and discipline. This gnostic trend, which I identify with *jñāna-yoga*, and which I also illustrate in later literature – particularly in Bhāviveka and Haribhadra –, takes roots in the wake of the institutionalization and Sanskritization of ascetic communities. To fathom the practical dimension of this *jñāna-yoga*, the seminar examines the relevance of taxonomical practices and the correlated notion of *tattva-abhyāsa* (the study of reality as a practice), focusing in particular on the conception of a twofold nature of reality.

Speaker biography: Karl-Stéphan Bouthillette is what he likes to call 'French-Canadian': a Québécois. However, his studies have turned him into quite a globetrotter. He obtained his PhD (2018) in Indian Philosophies from the Institute for Indology and Tibetology of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, in Munich, Germany, where he was a member of the Distant Worlds: Munich Graduate School for Ancient Studies, in the division researching on 'coexistence'. He was then invited as a Fellow Researcher in Leiden, Holland, after receiving a Gonda Fellowship, following which he moved on to Ghent, in Belgium, where he was awarded a prestigious FWO Post-Doctoral Research Grant.

His current areas of research focus on early developments in Indian philosophical doxography and list-making. He is also theorizing the Indian intellectual dimensions of spiritual life, especially in the scholastic aspect of their expression. In brief, he has taken interest in what he describes as the 'yoga of reason', or the 'path of knowledge', pursued by the 'nerds' among yogins.

Readings: Johnson, W. J. 1995. *Harmless Souls: Karmic Bondage and Religious Change in Early Jainism with Special Reference to Umāsvāti and Kundakunda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Bouthillette, Karl-Stéphan. Forthcoming. *Bhāviveka*. Routledge Handbook of Indian Buddhist Studies.

Entangled Ontologies in the Pātañjalayogaśāstra: Sāṃkhya, Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika

21 September, 6.30pm-8.00pm

Dr Karen O'Brien-Kop, University of Roehampton

This seminar will explore ontology in relation to theories and practices of mind and meditation. How does ontology shape meditation practices in Sanskrit meditation treatises in South Asia and what are some fine-grained arguments that are both shared and refuted between different schools – on the mind, its basis, and transmigration? To consider these questions, we will read a few selected passages in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.

Speaker biography: Karen O'Brien-Kop is a Lecturer in Asian Religions and Ethics at Roehampton University. She researches classical South Asian Sanskrit texts and culture on meditation and yoga, in particular the interconnections of Hinduism and Buddhism, and philosophy of mind. She previously worked as a Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS University of London, where she also completed her doctoral research.

Karen has published articles in *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religions of South Asia* and is working on a book manuscript with the working title '*Rethinking Classical Yoga and Buddhism*', as well as a chapter called 'Defining Body and Mind: Asceticism, Yoga and Meditation' for the Bloomsbury series *A Cultural History of Hinduism*. Along with Dr Suzanne Newcombe, she has co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (2020).

Reading: Dhammajoti, Kuala Lumpur. 2007. *Abhidharma Doctrines and Controversy on Perception*. 3rd rev. ed. Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong [Chapter 2 and Chapter 3]

Perrett, Roy W. 2016. *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Chapter 6: Self]

Studying Yoga Philosophically: Ontology, Epistemology, Ethics

28 September, 7.00pm-8.30pm

Dr Mikel Burley, University of Leeds

The paper will be based on my contribution to the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*. Concerning the application of philosophy as a disciplinary approach to the study of yoga, it discusses three main themes: 'Yoga and ontology', 'Yoga and epistemology' and 'Yoga and ethics'. In the case of ontology (the study of being or of what exists), questions may be raised about how best to interpret the ontological systems articulated in classical sources such as the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (i.e. *Yogasūtra* plus *Yogabhāṣya*) and *Sāṃkhya-kārikā*. Addressing these questions may involve comparisons with aspects of Western philosophy, provided care is taken not to shoehorn the original material into Western categories. In the case of epistemology (the study of knowledge and of what can be known), we may ask not only what yoga and meditative traditions consider knowledge to consist in but also whether the ways of knowing could intelligibly include a state of 'pure consciousness', as is suggested by certain traditional sources. And in connection with ethics (broadly construed as the study of how best to live one's life), issues include the extent to which systems of meditative practice incorporate moral principles or, alternatively, seek to transcend morality altogether. The paper concludes by summarizing prospects for further philosophical inquiry into yoga and meditation.

Speaker biography: Mikel (Mik) Burley is Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Leeds. His publications include *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary* (Bloomsbury, 2020), *Rebirth and the Stream of Life: A Philosophical Study of Reincarnation, Karma and Ethics* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (Routledge, 2007).

Reading: Burley, Mikel. 2020 forthcoming. Yoga and Philosophy: Ontology, epistemology, ethics. *Routledge Handbook on Yoga and Meditation*.

Image credit: From page 2 of Losty, Jeremiah P. 2016. *A Picture Book of the Devi Mahatmya*. Simon Ray.