

Special Seminar

The Mind in Flight: Mentality and Mental Health in Buddhist Communities of Mainland Southeast Asia

Abstract :

The study of mental health often assumes that wellness relates to being of a 'sound mind', but just what does a 'sound' or 'unsound' mind look like in practice? How do local ideas about the mind relate to perceptions of mental health and mental disorder, and how are these connections altered as one moves between different health-seeking arenas, from the psychiatric hospital to the spirit doctor, and from the rural to the urban and back again? Dr. Julia Cassaniti will seek to answer these questions by attending to the intersection of mental processes and religious conceptions of the mind in mainland Southeast Asia, drawing on data gathered from over 700 psychiatrists, monks, and more. The talk will focus on ethnographic analyses carried out among Buddhists in a small rural valley community of Northern Thailand, and will include a larger comparative conversation with those of nearby Karen Christians, and Buddhist neighbors in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, in order to show some of the divergences and similarities in meanings across the region's religious and cultural landscape. Dr. Cassaniti will begin with a discussion of debates within the fields of Buddhist Studies and Medical Anthropology of Southeast Asia regarding the study of theory and practice, and will then examine in turn conceptions of personal agency as understood through the letting go of affective attachments; the intersubjective energies and effects of spiritual affect; and the global circulations of mindfulness' meanings in local mental health clinics. The lecture will conclude with a discussion of theories of causation and ideas about the mind's potential to generate new experiences, and the ways that these theories are understood to create personal and social change. By drawing attention to some of the social, supernatural, and political powers associated with the mind in Southeast Asia, Dr. Cassaniti will offer a new approach to understanding mentality and mental health in cultural context.

Short biography :

Julia Cassaniti is a psychological and medical anthropologist working on culture and cognition in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Buddhism in Thailand. Dr. Cassaniti's research examines the ways that shared religious ideas about causation, perception, and the mind are interpreted in personal and social life in Southeast Asia, and the implications that these interpretations have for global understandings of cognition and well-being. Her recent books include *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community* (Cornell U. Press, 2015) and *Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia* (Cornell U. Press, 2018), along with the edited volume *Universalism Without Uniformity: Explorations in Mind and Culture* (U. Chicago Press, 2017, with Usha Menon). She is currently a Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University, and an Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Washington State University.



Guest Speaker:

Julia Cassaniti

Visiting Associate Professor,
Department of Asian Studies, Cornell
University; Associate Professor,
Department of Anthropology Washington
State University

10/31

0:00p.m. – 2:00p.m

Place : Inamori Seminar Room213
(Inamori Memorial Bldg., 2nd floor)

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