Constructive Emotions Cultivating Kindness

Workshop

Friday, December 5 – Saturday, December 6, 2025

EINSTEIN FORUM

Conception:
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Cultivating Kindness

We are continually reminded of how saturated contemporary life is in negative affect, which intensifies and spreads so rapidly. But what constructive alternative emotional orientations might be set against this, and how might they be propagated? Since Buddhists have long devoted considerable attention to these questions, we take as our point of departure the suggestion that kindness (*maitrī*) is one such constructive alternative. We explore what insights into kindness classical Greek and Confucian equivalents might yield; ask what other constructive emotions might be useful or even necessary supports for kindness, both psychologically and conceptually; and we consider how such kindness might be extended to others in practice, and how far such extension might be practicable and desirable.

Laura Candiotto (Caligiari/Pardubice)

Kindness and Conviviality

Enactive ethics focuses on the constitutive character of caring relations, where these relationships are not limited to human beings, but they extend to all living beings and the cosmos. It is typically supposed that such caring relations can involve only individuals. But could loving care be extended to ecosystems? And, assuming that the extension is possible, is it also beneficial? Although the extension might be praiseworthy because it allows care to go beyond the limits of individual care, it risks missing a crucial dimension of caring, i.e., intimately acknowledging and valuing the uniqueness of the cared for and so being able to properly reply to their needs.

In this presentation, I focus on this problem of the individual for an ethics of enacted caring relations. I argue that such an extension of care is indeed necessary, but that the risks can be avoided by grounding such care in experiences of conviviality, and the felt dimension of acts of kindness (understood as 'caring with'). I show how the positive emotions that are at the core of acts of kindness—affection, warmth, gratitude, interest, joy, and hope—can support an enactive ethics of conviviality and interspecies care that has the potential to assume broader scopes precisely through its situatedness. This is because self-transcendent positive emotions, and an open heart in general, broaden thought-action repertoires—acts of kindness in particular support generosity, solidarity, and relationships of mutual trust.

Laura Candiotto is Associate Professor in Moral Philosophy at the University of Pardubice (CZ) and the University of Cagliari (IT). Her main research field is philosophy of emotions, at the intersection of enactive ethics and social epistemology, focusing in particular on love, compassion, wonder, and shame. She leads research projects on 'Vicious Epistemic Cultures'; 'Loving is Caring'; and on the development of tools for detecting and mitigating epistemic injustice in AI systems for identifying misleading information. She participates in the project 'Beyond Security', where she works on environmental emotions, especially in the intertwining of love, grief and hope in inhabiting a place that is dying. She is interested in the potential transformative power of affective experience under the weight of oppression. As a Tibetan Buddhism practitioner and member of Mind & Life Europe, she has a longstanding interest in the role of emotions in contemplative practices, with a focus on embodiment and desire.

Michael Griffin (Vancouver)

Harmonious Difference: Greek Platonist Practices of Kindness and Goodwill

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates proposes that personal and collective well-being flows from an orientation of kindness or goodwill (*eunoia*) toward one's entire community. Later Stoic philosophers agreed, and added that goodwill must include all persons equally, regardless of gender, location, or status: a 'community of the world' (*kosmopolis*). In a memorable spiritual exercise, one Stoic recommends transferring all human beings inward in concentric circles of care and respect, maximizing kindness to all (Hierocles 4.672,18–673,1). And during the twilight of the Roman Empire, Plato's last interpreters added that non-human animals and perhaps even plants shared sentience (Porphyry, *De Abst.*), and on this basis enjoined a vegetarian lifestyle of non-harm.

These threads in Ancient Greek philosophy can be brought into a fruitful dialogue with Buddhist traditions of loving-kindness as a practice and social orientation. In this talk, I want to suggest that the Platonic tradition contributes a particularly useful and actionable metaphor to that dialogue: the image of an ecosystem, society, or individual soul as a complex musical instrument, with kindness flowing from the attunement (*harmonia*) between diverse parts, making a whole that embraces difference and similarity as equally fundamental. For late Platonists, this metaphor suggested particular exercises for cultivating kindness.

Michael Griffin is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His research focuses on late ancient Mediterranean Platonism, and he co-edits the *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* series (Bloomsbury). He is the author of three books, *Aristotle's Categories in the Early Roman Empire* (2015) and *Olympiodorus of Alexandria on Plato Alcibiades I* (2014, vol. 1 and 2016, vol. 2), and articles on aspects of ancient ethics, logic, and education, currently focusing on the 'scale of virtues' in late antique Platonism. In addition, he is a participant of the Buddhist-Platonist philosophical working group coordinated by Amber Carpenter and Pierre-Julien Harter.

Olga Klimecki (Hamburg)

Cultivating Kindness Through Meditation: A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective

Would today's world be different if people experienced more kindness and care both towards themselves and towards each other? This fundamental question has been driving our research for almost two decades. We have been exploring how cultivating kindness through meditation can change feelings, related brain functions, health, and well-being, as well as social behaviour such as altruism or conflict behaviour. We studied adolescents, middle-aged, and older adults in various settings and countries. We also studied conflicts in couples, at the workplace, and protracted conflicts (particularly between Israelis and Palestinians). In addition to presenting our research, I will invite an embodied exploration of what cultivating kindness and compassion can currently mean to every one of us.

Olga Klimecki is a neuroscientist and psychologist. At the University of Geneva from 2013 to 2020, Klimecki is currently interim chair of Social Psychology at the Bundeswehruniversität Hamburg, Germany. She holds a PhD from the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and a Dr. rer. nat. habil. from the Technical University of Dresden, Germany, where she was guest professor (2020–2021 and interim chair of Biological Psychology (2024–2025). She has (co-)authored more than 80 publications, received various grants and awards, and is co-principal investigator of the longest study on meditation to date: the Medit-Ageing/Silver Santé study. In addition to her scientific work, Olga practises and teaches mindfulness meditation. She is currently particularly interested in embodied mindfulness practices in movement and dancing.

Carola Roloff (Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedroen) (Hamburg)

Cultivating Kindness and Perspective:
Maitrī and the Four Immeasurables in a Pluralistic World

This contribution explores how the Buddhist *brahmavihāras* —particularly loving-kindness (*maitrī*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*)—can be understood as intentional relational attitudes that foster openness, dialogue, and resilience in pluralistic societies. Drawing on canonical sources from different Buddhist traditions and contemporary contexts of interreligious and inter-convictional education, I will examine how these practices may serve as both ethical principles and transformative exercises cultivating perspective-taking and mutual respect.

In dialogue with modern philosophy of emotions and Martha Nussbaum's concept of 'cultivated capabilities', I propose that *maitrī* and *upekṣā* represent not only inner dispositions but also capacities for social justice and inclusive coexistence. Equanimity here does not mean indifference or impartiality, but a compassionate discernment that acknowledges suffering on all sides and helps overcome affective bias, stigma, and polarization.

Within a dialogical-hermeneutical framework, I will further explore how Buddhist contemplative methods such as the practice of exchanging self and other can enact the ethical core of the so-called Golden Rule—encouraging empathy without identity dissolution. In a world marked by conflict and fragmentation, the cultivation of kindness and equanimity may open new pathways for ethical responsibility, relational awareness, and peaceful coexistence across religious and non-religious boundaries.

Dr Carola Roloff (Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedroen) is a Tibetologist, Buddhologist, and ordained Buddhist nun. She is Senior Research Fellow in Pluralistic Dialogical Religious Education at the University of Hamburg. Her work focuses on Buddhist ethics and the brahmavihāras—especially loving-kindness (maitrī) and equanimity (upekṣā)—in interreligious and educational contexts. She researches how contemplative practices cultivate perspective-taking, reduce affective bias, and support convivial coexistence in plural societies. Recent publications include *The Buddhist Nun's Ordination in the Tibetan Canon* (2020), 'Gender Justice as a Challenge to Buddhism and Christianity' (2024), and 'Openness towards the Religious Other in Buddhism' (2020). She contributes to academic and civil-society dialogue (ENBCS, ESWTR, ESITIS) and chairs Buddhist foundations supporting education and women's monastic initiatives.

Alexis Shotwell (Ottawa)
Kilian Jörg (Vienna/Linz)

The Political Potential of Spontaneous Delight in Other People's Good Fortune

The contemporary world is so difficult; anywhere we look, people are suffering. Under the conditions in which we all live, where everyone needs money to pay for the most basic conditions of their lives, people's material and affective landscapes are shaped by a certain imperative of self-protective isolation. Scarcity is not only a political myth justifying the idea that everyone should selfishly guard their own (emotional and practical) resources; it is an orientation animating much of conventional society. Cultivating loving-kindness (*maitrī*) is one compelling technology for re-orienting ourselves to behave otherwise. But especially under contemporary conditions, it is essential to bring into any conversation about kindness a consideration of the third of the Buddhist's 'immeasurables': rejoicing (*muditā*), spontaneous joy in others' good fortune.

In this talk, we suggest fruitful synergies between this affective technology and specific strands in Western philosophy. Starting from a post-Kantian commitment to non-ideal ethical praxis, we engage a much earlier form of moral philosophy as shaping our *mores,* or ways of being together. We suggest that shaping collective practices of mutual flourishing benefits from reformulating our understanding of interpersonal ethical engagement, reading *muditā* as a generative and anti-capitalist feeling.

Kilian Jörg works artistically and philosophically on how the transformative forces of ecological catastrophe can best be imagined and deployed. Previous focal topics include club culture; the political backlash from an ecological perspective; cultivating distance in catastrophic times; and a speculative religion of waste. Current work considers the car as a metaphor for our toxic lifestyle entanglements (*Das Auto und die ökologische Katastrophe*, 2024); the socio-psychological effects of living with ecocide; radical activist strategies of reclaiming land like the ZAD in France (*Durchlöchert den Status Quo!*, 2025); and creating rituals that enable us to cultivate more complex feelings in time of collapse. They teach at the School of Transformation at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and the program Plastic and Environment at the Art University of Linz, and are affiliated to various collectives, including the Futurama.Lab, Stoffwechsel—Ecologies of Collaboration and the CRC Affective Societies at the FU Berlin.

Alexis Shotwell is Professor in Sociology & Anthropology and in Philosophy at Carleton University, on unceded Algonquin land. She works on complexity, complicity, and collective transformation. Shotwell's current projects investigate how we might understand, bear witness, and respond to unjust histories and complex presents with an eye toward creating different futures. She is the co-investigator for the AIDS Activist History Project (aidsactivisthistory.ca), and the author of *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (2011); *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016); and *Only With Others* (forthcoming).

Christian Suhr (Aarhus)

Anthropology of and from the Heart

Attending to the heart is not easy, yet it may be necessary for understanding and counteracting the tensions, indifference, and intercultural misunderstandings that characterize our contemporary world. Can we create more space for the qualities of the heart within research and teaching, scientific critique, and our engagement with the communities and environments in which we live and work? Might the bodily, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the heart serve both as an object of inquiry and as a point of departure for research?

In this talk, I introduce audiovisual, multimodal, and micro-phenomenological methods that can help us explore these questions by deepening our understanding of the roles of the senses, the body, and emotions in human life. I also invite participants to take part in a brief auto-elicitation exercise and present examples from ongoing research on how practitioners in Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim traditions relate to the heart and, in diverse ways, experience and cultivate love in their lives. Drawing on the exercise and these examples, I hope to engage participants in a conversation about what an anthropology of and from the heart might look like.

Christian Suhr is a filmmaker and Professor of visual and multimodal anthropology at Aarhus University. Based on fieldwork in Denmark, Egypt, and Papua New Guinea, his research has focused on psychiatric and religious healing practices, the potential of audiovisual media in anthropological research, and the role of anthropology in public debates. He is the author of the award-winning book and film *Descending with Angels: Islamic Exorcism and Psychiatry* (Manchester University Press, 2019) and has directed a series of ethnographic films, including *Light upon Light* (Suhr & Lotfy 2022) and *Ngat is Dead* (Suhr, Otto & Dalsgaard 2009). In collaboration with colleagues from the Department of Anthropology, he founded the Eye & Mind Laboratory for Multimodal Anthropology in 2014. He currently leads the ERC project 'Heart Openings: The Experience and Cultivation of Love in Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam' (2021–27).

Curie Virag (Warwick)

Kindness as a Virtue in Early Confucian Ethics

The virtue of kindness cuts across a number of terms that have been of central importance in the Confucian tradition. While the most obvious counterpart to our modern notion of kindness (or to the Sanskrit Buddhist term *maitrī*) might be a term like *en* 恩 (kindness, favour, benevolence), discussions around other values and virtues such as *ren* 仁 (usually translated as 'humaneness' or 'benevolence'), *ai* 愛 (love, care, concern) and *de* 德 (virtue) can also be appropriately taken as 'kindness' depending on the context. My paper examines the discussions around these terms in the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius* and *Xunzi*. While it is uncontroversial that each of these terms represented values that were important in early Confucian writings, a major early tension in early Confucian thought was that between care for one's own vs. care for everyone else. This being the case, if kindness entails a kind of universally directed concern for others, when, and in what ways, can these foundational Confucian texts be understood as positing an ideal of kindness? What might we learn about kindness as a virtue, and about how to nurture and foster kindness, in light of the ways in which kindness was conceptualised in the early Confucian tradition?

Curie Virág is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. She works in the history of ethics, epistemology, moral psychology, and philosophical anthropology in classical China and across traditions, with a particular focus on emotions. She is the author of *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford 2017) and co-editor, with Douglas Cairns, of *In the Mind, in the Body, in the World: Emotions in Early China and Ancient Greece* (Oxford 2024). She has published on such topics as pleasure, contempt, moral agency, practical wisdom, self-cultivation, and cross-cultural methodology in the study of emotions. She is currently working on her second monograph, tentatively titled *Emotional Worlds: Self, Community and Cosmos in Medieval China*.

In every heart, every love

A screening and discussion of preliminary scenes from film-in-progress

Directed by **Christian Suhr**
Produced by **Hala Lotfy** (Hassala Films, forthcoming)

A Danish filmmaker and anthropologist teams up with three Egyptian filmmakers to explore how Sufis in Egypt train their hearts to realize divine love. Blending anthropology and cinema, they use the camera not only as an instrument of observation but as a vessel for transmitting moments of spiritual connection, asking: how can we learn to see and listen to the world, and to one another, with love?

Their journey leads them to a retired banker whose life was forever changed by a mystical embrace, a teacher whose childhood trauma evolved into a challenging dialogue with God, and a real-estate agent whose meeting with a holy man revealed the difference between craving and unconditional love.

Through these stories, the film offers insights into how Sufi devotion shapes human experience—and how the filmmakers themselves are transformed by the love they set out to understand.

Following *Light upon Light* (Suhr and Lotfy, premiered at CPH:DOX and the Cairo International Film Festival in 2022), the film is the second film in a trilogy about Sufism produced by the Hassala Film Collective and forms part of the HEART OPENINGS project, an ongoing series of cinematic and anthropological explorations of how people cultivate love in Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim communities around the world.

PROGRAMME

FRIDAY 5 DECEMBER

17.00 **Amber Carpenter** (Potsdam): Welcome

17.15 **Carola Roloff** (Hamburg)
Cultivating Kindness and Perspective: Maitrī and the Four Immeasurables in a Pluralistic World

18.30 FILM PREVIEW: *In every heart, every love*
[work in progress]

SATURDAY 6 DECEMBER

10.00 **Michael Griffin** (Vancouver)
Harmonious Difference:
Greek Platonist Practices of Kindness and Goodwill

11.30 **Curie Virag** (Warwick)
Kindness as a Virtue in Early Confucian Ethics

14.00 **Alexis Shotwell** (Ottawa), **Kilian Jörg** (Vienna)
The Political Potential of Spontaneous Delight in Other People's Good Fortune

15.15 **Christian Suhr** (Aarhus)
Anthropology of and from the Heart

16.45 **Olga Klimecki** (Hamburg)
Cultivating Kindness Through Meditation:
A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective

18.00 **Laura Candiotto** (Cagliari/Pardubice):
Kindness and Conviviality