Religion 242—Buddhism: An introduction

Course Description

This course is a broad introductory survey to the Buddhist tradition, focusing on the tradition’s history and development, its key doctrines and practices, its geographic spread, and its cultural adaptations. The course materials have a dual focus. We will examine the intellectual and philosophical history of Buddhism in detail; and we will also explore how Buddhism functions as a living, practical tradition.

Course Objectives

- To become acquainted with the history of the Buddhist tradition from the beginnings to the present
- To engage with Buddhist textual and artistic traditions both critically and empathetically
- To articulate the importance of Buddhism for understanding Asian art, history, and culture
- To think through Buddhist doctrines and practices in fruitful dialogue with your own values

Responsibilities

- Participation in the course is essential. Participation does not mean simply attending class and handing in written assignments. Participation means active involvement in discussion. One need not know all the answers to speak up; the classroom is a space where questions are especially valued. Come to every class prepared with your insights and your questions. It will be assumed that all students will have completed the session’s reading BEFORE arriving to class. You may be called on at any time to contribute to the class with your ideas and questions. We will occasionally break out into smaller groups to have discussions about readings. Your preparation and participation will be vital for these conversations.
- Any class about Buddhism will necessarily entail mastery of basic geographic knowledge: you must be able to distinguish Magadha from Mongolia, and Kyōto from Kaśmīr. To this end, we will have a short geographical quiz. A study map will be handed out one week in advance. Commit this map to memory, as you may be asked about any aspect of it on the quiz. Keep your geographical knowledge fresh over the course of the semester, as the final exam will also feature a map section.
- One of the biggest initial hurdles to students grappling with Buddhist texts and traditions is the large number of Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese vocabulary terms, unfamiliar place names, and so on. To enable us to read our sources more fluently and confidently, we will feature two terminology quizzes. These should also prove useful in your preparations for the final exam.
- This is an introductory survey to Buddhism, which means we will not have time to go in-depth into any particular topic. To give you the opportunity to pursue your own interests in more depth, you will write TWO 5-page critical reflection essays. In these essays you will be able to engage more deeply with Buddhist scriptures and exegetical works.
- At the end of the semester we will have an in-class final examination, allowing you the opportunity to synthesize and master all the material learned in this course. The exam will feature multiple choice, word identification, short answer, and essay questions.
Grading

Attendance and participation: 25%
Quizzes: 3 x 5% = 15%
Critical reflection essays: 2 x 15% = 30%
Final exam: 35%

Course Policies

Course website and syllabus updates: The Lotus Sūtra teaches us about upāyakauśalya, “skillfulness in expedient pedagogical techniques.” In the Buddhist tradition, good pedagogy is adaptive, adjusting to the proclivities and needs of particular students. As the semester progresses, I may make changes to the syllabus to ensure that our collective efforts are fruitful. If I do make changes to the syllabus, you will be notified via email, via the course website, and in an announcement in class. Pay close attention to the course website for updates and announcements!

Decorum: Texting, cell phone conversations, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Tinder, Yik-Yak, &c. &c. are simply not welcome in the classroom. If you feel compelled to surrender your privacy to rapacious Silicon Valley marketeers, please do so outside our sacred halls of learning. With that said, you are free to use laptops or tablets, and I will not monitor, parent, or police you in any way. I assume you are mature and responsible enough to come to the classroom prepared and focused.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Dean Patey in Disability Resources located in North College, room 221, or call 860-685-5581 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

Extracurriculars & Scheduling Conflicts: This syllabus contains the relevant deadlines for major assignments. You must notify me by the second week of the term about any known or potential extracurricular conflicts (such as religious observances, graduate or medical school interviews, or team activities). If you have a conflict on the due date of an assignment, I am happy to accept an assignment turned in ahead of time. I will not accept assignments which are late due to extracurricular scheduling conflicts. It is your responsibility to turn in the assignment on or before the due date.

Academic Honesty and Honorable Conduct: As a member of the Wesleyan community, you are expected to follow the Wesleyan Student Honor Code. I take very seriously my commitment to teaching you the scholarly values of proper citation and attribution. Accordingly, I will report all incidents of suspected academic dishonesty—without exception—to the Honor Board. If you have any questions about the proper citation practices, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Late Assignments: Late critical reflection essays will be deducted one letter grade immediately, followed by another letter grade for every extra day the assignment is late. Quizzes are held promptly at the beginning of class; unless you have a real, documented medical emergency, there is no way to make up a missed quiz.
Required books


This book is available through Wesleyan's library in electronic format. Click this link.


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NOTE: Wesleyan's library has only the first edition in its collections; we require the second edition for this course. I recommend you purchase the book.

Course Outline

T 8 September: Introduction

Gethin “Introduction,” pp. 1–6

Lewis “Introduction,” pp. 1–9

Th 10 September: Buddha


T 15 September: Dharma


Lopez §37, “The direct path to enlightenment,” pp. 343–349.

Web Setting in motion the wheel of the dhamma (Dhammacakkappavattanasutta; from Sānyuttanikāya 56.11, trans. Bodhi 2000, pp. 1843–1847);

Th 17 September: Saṅgha


monks,” pp. 233–251

**T 22 September: Growth and development of the Buddhist orders**

Gethin ch. 2, “The word of the Buddha,” pp. 49–56


*Recommended reading:* Gethin ch. 6, “No self,” pp. 133–162

**Th 24 September: The rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism**

*Geographic quiz at beginning of class!*


Williams ch. 1, “Introduction,” pp. 1–44

**T 29 September: Abhidharma and the Perfection of Wisdom**


*Recommended reading:* Gethin ch. 5, “The Buddhist cosmos,” pp. 112–132

**Th 1 October: Madhyamakā**

Gethin ch. 9, “The Mahāyāna,” pp. 237–244

Lewis ch. 4, “Nāgārjuna,” pp. 39–51

Williams ch. 3, “Mādhyamika,” pp. 63–83

**T 6 October: The Practice of Yoga**

Gethin ch. 9, “The Mahāyāna,” pp. 244–250


Williams ch. 4, “Yogācāra,” pp. 84–102
Th 8 October: Tathāgatagarbha

**Terminology quiz #1 at the beginning of class!**


Williams ch. 5, “Tathāgatagarbha,” pp. 103–128

Web “The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra,” in Donald S. Lopez, ed. *Buddhism in Practice*

T 13 October: Buddhism comes to China

Web: “Mouzi: Disposing of error.” *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, pp. 421–426


Th 15 October: Buddhist adaptations in China


Williams ch. 6, “Huayan,” pp. 129–148


T 20 October: Buddhist integration in China


Th 22 October: Esoteric Buddhism comes to Tibet

**Critical Reflection Essay #1 due at the beginning of class**

Gethin ch. 10, “Evolving traditions of Buddhism,” pp. 266–269

Lopez §53. “Songs of the siddhas,” pp. 478–487

Williams ch. 9, “The path of the bodhisattva,” pp. 187–208

Web “The adoption of Buddhism and the foundation of Samyé monastery,” in Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Matthew Kapstein,
and Gray Tuttle, eds. 2013, Sources of Tibetan tradition, pp. 60–66

Web “The introduction of esoteric Buddhism,” in Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Matthew Kapstein, and Gray Tuttle, eds. 2013, Sources of Tibetan tradition, pp. 155–163

T 27 October: No class—Fall Break!

T 3 November: Modern Tibetan Buddhism


T 5 November: Buddhism in Śrī Laṅkā and Southeast Asia


T 10 November: Buddhism in Japan: State protection and Zen


Th 12 November: Buddhism in Japan: Lotus Buddhism


Lopez §57, “Finding enlightenment in the final age,” pp. 513–521

T 17 November: Buddhism in modern Japan


Th 19 November: Pure Land Buddhisms

Terminology quiz #2 at beginning of class!


T 24 November: Film: To the Land of Bliss

Th 26 November: No class—Thanksgiving Recess!

T 1 December: Buddhist revival in Burma and Śrī Laṅkā


Th 3 December: Buddhism in America: Theosophy and “world religions”

Critical Reflection Essay #2 due at the beginning of class!


Web Henry Steel Olcott, A Buddhist Catechism

T 8 December: Buddhism in America: The Beat Generation and beyond


Web Allen Ginsberg, Howl

Web Gary Snyder, Smokey the Bear Sūtra
Web Jan Nattier, “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” from Charles Prebish & Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. The Faces of Buddhism in America, pp. 183–195

**Recommended Reading: Web** Charles Prebish, “American Buddhism: A Brief History,” in Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America, pp. 1–50

**Th 10 December: Modern global Buddhism**
