Religion 214—Buddhism and the Body: Desire, Disgust, and Transcendence

“A history of the human body would be virtually coextensive with a history of human beings.”


“Cultural conceptualizations of the body, being so merged with the reality of bodily perception and experience, seem uniquely natural and basic. While the body is eminently ‘natural,’ it is just this perception of naturalness that allows culturally variable concepts of the body to be so fundamentally ingrained in the collective psyche. In fact, images of the body everywhere embody social and cultural form.”


“My body is a cage
that keeps me from dancing with the one I love
but my mind holds the key”


This is a course about the body, and the various ways that Buddhists have constructed, disciplined, despised, and venerated the human body. We will explore the Buddhist body in its various incarnations: the disciplined monastic body of monks and nuns, the hyper-masculine body of the Buddha, the sacred corpses of saints, the body given away in sacrifice, the body as marker of virtue, and vice, the sexual body, the body transfigured in ritual, and the body analyzed and scrutinized in medical traditions.

This course has no prerequisites. No previous study of Buddhism is necessary to succeed here. In fact, my hope is that this course can provide a very different kind of introduction to the Buddhist traditions. Rather than proceeding chronologically or geographically, we will instead proceed conceptually, leaping through space and time as we explore Buddhist ideas and practices.

The goal of the course is to shatter the illusion identified by Knauft in the brief quotation above: the magical link between our immediate sensory perceptions of the body and what we think is “given” or “natural” about the body. To do this will require intellectual tools. In academia we call these tools “theory.”

Theory is not limited, however, to the arcane writings of Frenchmen like Derrida or Foucault. In this course I want to take Buddhist theories about the body seriously as theory—as usable tools which might help us become better readers of human culture, to ask deeper questions about the texts we are reading not just for this course, but for any other intellectual endeavor. So you might also think of this not just as a survey of Buddhist thinking about the body, but also as an introduction to Buddhist thinking, full stop. We will along the way learn to become better readers of texts, of images, and of ourselves.

In short, in this course I don’t just want us to think of Buddhist bodies as objects which we study and probe with our
sharp intellectual scalpels; I want us to think of Buddhist bodies as addressing us and challenging us to expand our own ideas of what it means to be human, and what it means to inhabit a human body.

**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.

- **THREE 3-5 page critical reflection papers.** This is a writing-intensive course, and we will practice the discipline of *revising or rewriting* each of these reflection papers.

- **A 1-3 page proposal** for the final paper. The proposal should contain a brief summary of the paper’s topic along with a bibliography of sources you have consulted and plan to consult.

- **A final substantive paper, 10–15 pages in length,** exploring some aspect of Buddhism and the body. The paper should be much more than a book report; it should be a creative synthesis of your research and reflect your own thinking on a particular issue of Buddhism and embodiment. To encourage our discipline of revising and rewriting, I am happy to accept up to three pre-drafts of the final paper, and will endeavor to offer you incisive feedback on each of your drafts.

**Grades**

- Attendance and participation: 30%
- Critical reflection papers: 30%
- Final paper proposal: 10%
- Final paper: 30%

**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. This will be particularly true of our “communal reading” primary source assignments. *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 021, 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 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: This is a writing-intensive course. Falling behind will have cascading effects that will, frankly speaking, make you miserable for the rest of the semester. Accordingly, my late assignment policy is cantankerous and strict. Late papers will be deducted a letter grade per day late, rounding up by the day. This means a paper turned in three hours late will be deducted one letter grade; a paper turned in 25 hours late will be deducted two letter grades.

Required books


This book is available online at Wesleyan’s library. Click here.


This book is also available on 2-hour reserve at Olin Library.

Course Outline

I. Being Buddhist and Being Human

M 5 September: Introductions and dependent originations

Communal reading: Setting in motion the wheel of the dhamma (Dhammacakkappavattanasutta; from Samyuttanikāya 56.11, trans. Bodhi 2000, pp. 1843–1847); Theragāthā 10.5; Kappa;


Charming cadavers, Introduction, pp. 1–14
W 7 September: The manly Buddha


II. Desire and disgust

M 12 September: Celibacy and erotic temptation


*Charming cadavers*, chapter 1, “Celibacy and the social world,” pp. 15–40

W 14 September: The oozing body


*Charming cadavers*, chapter 2 “Like a boil with nine openings,” pp. 41–76

*Bull of a man*, chapter 4 “The problem with bodies,” pp. 112–140

M 19 September: The repulsive female body


*Charming cadavers*, chapter 3 “False advertising exposed,” pp. 77–110


III. Corpses

W 21 September: Meditating on corpses I

*Critical reflection #1 draft due at beginning of class*


M 26 September: Meditating on corpses II
Communal reading: Selections from *Visuddhimagga* chapter 6: *Asubhakammatthānaniddu*, pp. 169–185

IV. Monastic bodies

W 28 September: Sex
Communal reading: Selections from *Vinayapiṭaka*, *Pārājika* I, pp. 38–63

M 3 October: The bodies of nuns

**Critical reflection #1 rewrite due at beginning of class**
*Charming cadavers*, chapter 5, “Seeing through the gendered ‘I’,” pp. 141–180

W 5 October: The third sex, the shapeshifting serpent, and other unordainable bodies
Communal reading: Section on unordainable bodies, *Vinayapiṭaka*, vol. 4, pp. 107–116

V. Buddha bodies

M 10 October: The Buddha’s auspicious body
W 12 October: The aniconic Buddha


M 17 October: The iconic Buddha

Critical reflection #2 draft due at beginning of class


W 19 October: The indestructible Buddha


M 24 October: Fall Break — No class!

VI. Reliquary bodies

W 26 October: The reliquary Buddha


M 31 October: The reliquary dharma

Critical reflection #2 rewrite due at beginning of class


**W 2 November: The reliquary saṅgha**

Communal viewing: Cremation scene from *To the Land of Bliss*


**VII. Sacrificed bodies**

**M 7 November: The gift of the body in Buddhist literature**

*Final paper proposal due by beginning of class*

Communal reading: *Vessantara Jātaka*


**W 9 November: The gift of the body in Buddhist practice**


**VIII. Transfigured bodies**

**M 14 November: The body as marker of virtue and vice**


**W 16 November: Mahāyāna bodies**


**M 21 November: No class—RRO at the American Academy of Religion conference**

**W 23 November: No class—Thanksgiving Recess**

**M 28 November: Tantric bodies**

*Critical reflection #3 draft due at beginning of class*


**W 30 November: Rainbow bodies**


**IX. Empirical bodies**

**M 5 December: The scrutinized body**


**W 7 December: The meditating body**

*Critical reflection #3 rewrite due at beginning of class*

Communal reading: Excerpts from Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, chapter 2 “Mindfulness and clear comprehension”, pp. 32–62


**Final paper due via email Friday, 16 December, 12:00**