Amherst College

**REL 252/ASLC 252**

**Buddhist Life Writing**

Professor: Maria Heim ([mrheim@amherst.edu](mailto:mrheim@amherst.edu)); 542-8475

Class Times: Tu-Thu. 8:30-9:50 in Webster 220

Office Hours: Mondays 3:30-4:30; Tuesdays 1-2; Thursdays 11:30-1 in Chapin 207

**Course Description:**

From the biographies of Gotama Buddha to the autobiographies of western converts, life writing plays a central role in teaching Buddhist philosophy, practice, history, and myth. This course explores the diverse forms and purposes of Buddhist life writing in the literary and visual cultures of India, Tibet, China, Vietnam, Japan, and America. Experiencing the lives of eminent saints and laypersons, charismatic teachers, recluses, and political activists, the course aims to broaden understanding of how Buddhists have variously imagined the ideal life. We will pay particular attention to how literary and cultural conventions of genre guide the composition of lives.

**Required Books** (most available on reserve and at Food for Thought Bookstore)

*The Living Buddha*, by Daisaku Ikeda

*The Story of Gotama Buddha*, trans. N. A. Jayawickrama (available from pariyatti.org, and extra copies on reserve)

*The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara,* trans. Cone and Gombrich (note: this book is out-of-print so you will need to purchase a photographed copy in Chapin Lounge office from Diane Dix)

*Handsome Nanda*, by Ashvaghosa, trans. by Linda Covill

*The Life of Milarepa*, trans. Andrew Quintman

*The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*, by Susan Wriggens

*Learning True Love*, by Chang Khan

*Footsteps in the Snow,* by Sheng Yen

*Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist,* Stephen Batchelor

*That Bird Has My Wings*, Jay Jarvis Masters

There are also several writings available on e-reserve. *Please print these out and bring them with you to class!*

**Requirements:**

1. Class attendance and participation. Please refrain from using laptops or other electronic gadgets in class. More than two unexcused absences will result in a drop in your final grade.
2. A Weekly Ungraded Writing Assignment to be submitted every Thursday. Unless otherwise noted, this consists of (1) selecting a paragraph from the week’s reading that you choose and focus on intently (more on this to come), and (2) submitting two questions from the readings or class discussion that you need help with. Chronic failure to submit these or sloppy work will result in a drop in your final grade.
3. Two six-page papers on topics to be assigned. The first is due on Friday, September 30th and the second is due on Monday, November 7th. (Each is 25% of your grade).
4. Three film reviews (3 pages each) on two streamed videos and one film (and director’s talk) at Amherst Cinema. More details to follow. (Each is 5% of your grade).
5. A final project, 12 pages in length, on a biography or biographical tradition that we have *not* read in class, that explores one or more of the themes of the course. (35% of your final grade).

**Section I: Biographies of the Buddha and His Family and Disciples**

Week One (September 6-8): **Introduction to the course**

• Start reading Ikeda, *The Living Buddha*

• *Background Reading*: Frank Reynolds and Charles Hallisey, “Buddhism: An Overview,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (e-reserve)—this reading is strongly recommended for everyone, but particularly those with no previous background in studying Buddhism.

Week Two (September 13-15): **A Modern Biography of the Buddha**

• Daisaku Ikeda, *The Living Buddha*

Week Three (September 20-22): **A Traditional Biography of the Buddha**

• Jayawickrama, trans. *Story of Gotama Buddha*

***Saturday, September 24: Extracurricular opportunity:*** *We will be taking a bus to NYC to The Asia Society where we will be visiting the exhibition “The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: the Art of Gandhara” and the Rubin Museum. This is an all-day trip that promises to be really spectacular. You will need to sign up in advance in order to hold your free seat on the bus. More details forthcoming.*

Week Four (September 27-29): **Jataka Tales**

• Cone and Gombrich, trans. *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara (this book is out-of-print so we will be using a photographed copy which you will need to purchase from Diane Dix in Chapin Lounge office)*

• Sarah Shaw, “And That Was I: How the Buddha Himself Creates a Path between Biography and Autobiography” (e-reserve)

**Paper One due on Friday, September 30th, slipped under my office door (Chapin 207)**

Week Five (October 4-6): **Buddha’s Family**

*Tuesday* • Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality” (e-reserve)

• “Sama Jataka” (I’ll hand this out to you in class)

*Thursday* • “A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodhara, and Rahula in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya” (e-reserve)

• “Bimba’s Lament” trans. Donald Swearer (e-reserve)

*Film: “Samsara” (this film is streamed for our class; you can access it from any campus computer and view; you can also check it out from the library: PN1997 .S247 [note: it is not the Ellen Bruno film by the same name]). Please see it by the end of Week Five. Film Review due by Monday, October 10th.*

**Section II: Lives told in Traditional Genres**

*Fall Break: October 11*

Week Six (October 13): **Sanskrit Aesthetics**

• Covill, trans. *Handsome Nanda (read as far as you can for Thursday)*

*October 13-16: Sand mandala construction in Frost Library. Please try to attend the opening ceremony, the closing ceremony, or any of the 4-day long project. More details to be announced.*

Week Seven (October 18-20): **Sanskrit Aesthetics, con’t**

• Covill, trans. *Handsome Nanda*

•If you can, begin reading *The Life of Milarepa*

*October 22 and 23: Film Screening and Director’s talk. “My Reincarnation” will be screened at Amherst Cinema, and there will be a discussion following the film with the film’s director, Jennifer Fox and the subject of the film, Khentse Yeshi Namkhai. You must attend one of these showings (I will give you free tickets!) and write a film review which will be due Wednesday, October 26.*

Week Eight (October 25-27): **Milarepa in text, film, and art**

• Quintman, trans. *The Life of Milarepa*

*Film: “Milarepa” (this film is streamed for our class; you can access it from any campus computer and view; you can also check it out from the library: PN1997 .M52. Please see it by the end of Week Eight). Film Review due by Monday, October 31.*

Week Nine (November 1-3):

Tuesday: *Meet at the Mead Art Museum at 9 am sharp! We will be viewing the tangkha exhibit together.*

Thursday: **A Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road**

• Wriggens, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*

**Paper Two due on Monday, November 7, slipped under my office door (Chapin 207)**

**Section III: Modern Buddhist Lives**

Week Ten (November 8-10): **Buddhist Modernities and Modernist Buddhism**

• David MacMahon, first two chapters of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (e-reserve)

•if you can, begin reading Chang Khong

Week Eleven (November 15-17): A **Socially Engaged Buddhist Life**

• Sister Chang Khong, *Learning True Love*

*Thanksgiving*

Week Twelve (November 29-December 1): **Master Sheng Yen and Traditions of Zen Hagiography**

• Sheng Yen, *Footsteps in the Snow*

•Dana Sawyer, “down east roshi” (*http://www.tricycle.com/ancestors/down-east-roshi)*

• Stuart Lachs, “When the Saints Go Marching In: Modern Day Zen Hagiography” (<http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/When_the_Saints_Go_Marching_Marching_In.pdf>)

Week Thirteen (December 6-8): **A PostModern Sensibility**

• Stephen Batchelor, *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*

Week Fourteen (December 13): **Finding Freedom**

• Jay Jarvis Masters, *That Bird Has My Wings*

**Final Paper due Monday December 19, slipped under my office door.**

## Picturing Enlightenment: Thangka in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College Events and Extracurricular Opportunities

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| Thangka depicting Bodhisattva and Shakti | **Friday, August 26, 2011, 9:00 a.m. Exhibition Opens:** Picturing Enlightenment: Thangka in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, a year-long presentation of a recently conserved collection of Buddhist scroll paintings, opens to the public. |
| Robert Thurman  rhie_100 | **Friday, September 16, 2011, 4:30 p.m. Keynote Conversation:** Robert Thurman, Jey Tsong Kappa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, and Marilyn Rhie, Jesse Wells Post Professor of Art and Professor of East Asian Studies at Smith College, will offer a joint presentation exploring issues in Tibetan art history and Buddhism raised by the exhibition. A public reception in the museum follows the free public conversation in adjacent Stirn Auditorium. |
| Monk at work | **Thursday, October 13-16, ongoing  Sand Mandala** Monks from the Tibetan Buddhist Namgyal Monastery in Ithaca, New York, will create a sand mandala in the college’s Frost Library. This free public event will mark the start of the project. Co-sponsored by the Amherst College Department of Religion. |
| David Gardiner | **Friday, October 14, 2011, 2:00 p.m. Exhibition Tour:** In conjunction with the [*Fourth Annual Seminar on Exploring Buddhism: Buddhist Views on Death and Impermanence*](https://sites.google.com/site/friendsofkhenrinpoche/) (Amherst College, October 13-14 and Florence Civic Center, October 15-16), Professor David L. Gardiner, Associate Professor of Religion, Colorado College, and Amherst College Class of 1980, Paola Zamperini, Associate Professor of Asian Languages and Civilizations, and Mead director Elizabeth Barker will share insights into the exhibition Picturing Enlightenment. |
| Buddha Painting | **Friday, October 14, 2011, 7:00 p.m. Artist’s Talk:** Joan Bredin-Price will discuss her paintings depicting Dhyani Buddhas and other Buddhist deities in this public event marking the opening of the regional artist’s exhibition in Amherst College’s Frost Library. The talk will take place in the Periodicals Area on the library’s first floor. A public reception follows. |
| Camille withThangka | **Wednesday, October 19, 2011, 4:30 p.m. Public Lecture:** Camille Myers Breeze, Director and Head Conservator of Museum Textile Services in Andover, Massachusetts, will present “Opening Doors: Conserving the Mead Art Museum’s Thangka Collection.” The free public lecture will be followed by a reception. |
| My Reincarnation | **Saturday, October 22, 2011, noon and Sunday, October 23, 7:30 p.m. Film Screening and Discussion:** Amherst Cinema will screen the documentary film *My Reincarnation.* The film’s director, Jennifer Fox, and its subject, the Buddhist teacher Khyentse Yeshi Namkhai, will speak. The event is co-sponsored by Shang Shung Institute School of Tibetan Medicine in Conway, Massachusetts. |
| Wangmo | **Wednesday, December 7, 2011, 4:30 p.m Gallery Talk:** *Menpa* (Dr.) Phuntsog Wangmo, Cultural Director of Shang Shung Institute in America School of Tibetan Medicine in Conway, Massachusetts, will lead a gallery talk about the female Buddhist deity Tara. The free public event is co-sponsored by Shang Shung Institute in America. |
| Thangka possibly depicting Lobsang Yeshe, the fifth Panchen Lama | **Wednesday, December 7, 2011, 7:30 p.m. Meditation at the Mead:** This facilitated, artwork-focused quiet meditation in the museum’s ongoing series will consider Buddhist meditative practices and engage Buddhist scroll paintings featured in the exhibition. |