

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Religion 23 (ASLC 15)

Fall 2010

Tuesdays and Thursdays 2-3:30, CHAPIN 101

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Office hours: Mondays 12:30-2:30, Thursdays 3:30-4:30, or by appointment

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I. As we begin, some first thoughts

Listening, thinking, questioning, answering
Examining, writing, practicing, and memorizing --
Daily these eight disciplines need wearing
As one wears flower garlands.

Like a cat eating a shrimp with special enjoyment
A learner must study all texts -- omitting none --
And he must learn all by heart.
He must become sharp as teeth of a saw
Penetrating deeply all discussed matters,
Thus reaching comprehension
Indelible as a stone inscription.

--from "Deliverance Cannot Be Far Distant,"
by Shin Mahatthathera (1458-1529 C.E.),
a Burmese Buddhist monk

II. Introduction to the course

This course is an introduction to the diverse ideals, practices, and traditions of Buddhism from their origins in South Asia to their geographical and historical diffusion throughout Asia and, more recently, into the west. We will explore the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – and how they each provide refuge for those suffering in *samsara* (endless rebirth). We will engage in close readings of the literary and philosophical texts central to Buddhism, as well as recent historical and anthropological studies of Buddhist traditions. In addition, a central means of our access into this tradition is the life stories of several contemporary Buddhists who bring to our study an additional level of immediacy and concreteness.

Our objectives are: to become adept in reading critically difficult primary and secondary texts, to gain a grasp on the general contours of Buddhist thought, to employ several different disciplinary approaches to understanding the multifaceted aspects of religious life, and to learn to think and better.

III. Books

All books are available for purchase at Amherst Bookstore and also are on reserve at the library. Please let me know if for any reason you are having trouble acquiring the readings.

Gethin, Rupert: The Foundations of Buddhism
 Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. In the Buddha's Words
 Brown, Sid: The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind
 van de Wetering, Janwillem: The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery
 Unno, Taitetsu: River of Fire, River of Water
 Gyatso, Tenzin: Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama

Often required readings will be available on the course website either on the webpage menu or as an e-reserve. Please print these out and bring them with you to class – failure to do so will result in a grade penalty. We will often be referring to our readings in class and you will get much more out of our discussions if you have the text in front of you.

“In-class readings” refers to readings that I hand out to you in class and that we read together; please keep these because some of them will be used and referred to later in the course.

IV. Course Requirements

A. Regular attendance, punctuality, preparation, participation, and overall adherence to classroom etiquette which includes not using laptops, phones, gadgets, or other geegaws during class discussion. It also includes not inexplicably getting up in the middle of our seminar and leaving the room unless you are experiencing some horrific emergency. Lack of attendance will affect your final grade. More than two unexcused absences will result in your grade falling by a third (i.e. from an A to an A-, etc.).

- Two things will happen outside of our normal class period that you will need to plan on. One is viewing a film for Week Five, *The Dhamma Brothers*, which is streamed for the class and you can view it on any campus computer screen, or check it out from the library to see. The second is a class field trip to the Peace Pagoda and the Cambodian temple in Leverett. We will be planning to go together, through carpooling, on some fair-weathered weekend in September or October.

B. Adherence to Amherst College’s “Statement of Intellectual Responsibility,” which reads as follows:

Every person's education is the product of his or her own intellectual effort and participation in a process of critical exchange. Amherst cannot educate those who are unwilling to submit their own work and ideas to critical assessment. Nor can it tolerate those who interfere with the participation of others in the critical process. Therefore, the College considers it a violation of the requirements of intellectual responsibility to submit work that is not one's own or otherwise to subvert the conditions under which academic work is performed by oneself or by others.

Cases of plagiarism or cheating will meet with the severest penalties.

C. Reflections (25%): Nearly every week you will submit a 300-350 word (about a page or a page and a half) reflection paper (hard copy only) discussing the quotation from the readings assigned for that week (given on the syllabus). This is a reflection paper, not a “reaction” paper; that is, you are to offer a critical discussion of the quotation in question in relation to the rest of the author’s argument or discussion, based on a very close and careful reading of the text. This assignment will be due in class every Thursday and cannot be submitted late under any circumstances. However, your lowest grade or one missed assignment will automatically be

dropped in the final assessment of your grade (out of the 10 assigned reflections, only the best 9 will count in your final grade). Reflection papers will be graded on a ten-point scale.

Please also append two questions to your reflection paper every week. These can be questions that have occurred to you in class (but you didn't have the opportunity to ask), or from the readings, or anything else that you need to know about related to class. Asking questions is part of the training of our work together.

D. Four Papers: 75% of your final grade

- i. Paper One: (17%) a 4-5 page essay due on September 27
- ii. Paper Two: (18%) a 4-5 page essay due on October 8
- iii. Paper Three: (20%) a 6 page essay due on November 9
- iv. Paper Four: (20%) a 6 page essay due on December 17

Further instructions on each of these assignments will be handed out to you. All papers must be submitted in hard copy. Late papers will receive a grade penalty.

V. Course Schedule of Readings

Week One

September 9. Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels

- Introduction to the Course
- In-class reading: "The Kālāma Sutta"

Week Two

September 14. Buddhas Past, Present, and Future

- Reading: Gethin, 1-34

September 16. "Our Buddha"

- Reading: Bodhi, 43-75; "A Life of the Buddha" (in-class reading)
- Reflection #1: Gethin, p. 29: "Thus something has happened to Gautama the man that means that the categories that normally apply to human beings no longer properly apply."

Week Three

September 21. Thus Have I Heard

- Reading: Gethin, 35-84

September 23. Four Truths

- Reading: Bodhi, 19-40, 75-78; 335-337
- Reflection #2: Bodhi, p. 76: "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering."

Week Four

September 27: *PAPER 1 DUE, slipped under my office door by 5*

September 28. The Thrice-Thousandfold World (and our place in it)

- Reading: Gethin, 112-132; Bodhi, 145-172, 216-220

September 30. No Self

- Reading: Gethin, 133-162; Bodhi, 301-20, 338-45, 353-55, 364-69
- Reflection #3: Bodhi, p. 162: "Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior or superior."

Week Five

October 5. Meditation and Buddhist Theories of Mind

- Reading: Gethin, 163-223
- Film: “The Dhamma Brothers” (streamed for our class and available on the course website – please view it by this week)

October 7. Meditation and Buddhist Theories of Mind, con’t

- Reading Bodhi, 176-179; 257-298
- Reflection #4: Bodhi, p. 179: “And as great as all this might be, it would be even more fruitful still if one would develop a mind of loving-kindness even for the time it takes to pull a cow’s udder. And as great as all this might be, it would be even more fruitful still if one would develop the perception of impermanence just for the time it takes to snap one’s fingers.”

October 8: PAPER 2 DUE, slipped under my office door by 5

Week Six

October 12: Fall Break

October 14: The Quest for Freedom: The Saṅgha

- Reading: Gethin, 85-111; Bodhi, 172-176, 223-53.
- *Let’s take a break! No reflection paper this week.*

Week Seven

October 19-21. The Contemporary Sangha: A Case Study from Thailand

- Reading: Brown, all
- Reflection #5: Brown, p. 65: “Wābī met many beings through her meditation—beings in pain—and she suffered pain with them and because of them, and she inflicted pain on them.”

Week Eight

October 26-28. Mahayana Reformulations: The “Perfection of Wisdom”

- Reading: Gethin, 224-276 (reread 56-58)
“The Heart Sutra” (course website)
“The Diamond Sutra” (course website)
- Reflection #6: “The Heart Sutra”: “Therefore one should know the *prajnaparamita* as the great spell, the spell of great knowledge, the utmost spell, the unequalled spell, allayer of all suffering, in truth - for what could go wrong ?”

October 29: PAPER 3 DUE, slipped under my office door by 5

Week Nine

November 2: The Development of Mahayana Ideas

- Reading: “The Whole Universe as a Sutra” (given in class)

November 4: Getting Some Ground Under Our Feet—Buddhism goes to China

- Reading: Brook, “Institution” (e- reserve)
In-class reading: excerpt from the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*
- Reflection #7: Brook, p. 144: “This image of Buddhism as asocial, apolitical, and ‘otherworldly’ has outlasted the colonial era, encouraging many a scholar to go off in search of his or her obscure subject without relying on the dull wattage of the institutions that make it present in real life.”

Week Ten

November 9-11. November 19. Single Practice Schools in Japan: Zen

- Reading: van de Wetering, first half
- Reflection #8: van de Wetering, p. 55: “Zen is free; Zen training is not. The training is bound to time and place, and tied up with customs and tradition.”

Week Eleven**November 16-19: Single Practice Schools in Japan: Shin Buddhism**

- Reading: *A Record in Lament of Divergences (Tannisho)* (course website)
- Unno, all
- Reflection #9: *Tannisho*, p. 663: “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.”

Thanksgiving Break

Week Twelve**November 30 – December 2: The Diamond Vehicle: Introducing Tibetan Buddhism**

- Reading: Dalai Lama, up to page 208
- Reflection #10: Dalai Lama, p. 204: “As for my own religious practice, I try to live my life pursuing what I call the Bodhisattva ideal.”

Week Thirteen**December 7-9: Mandalas and Visual Experience**

Thursday: meet in the study room at the Mead Art Museum: we will be studying Tibetan *tangkas* together

- Reading: Dalai Lama, finish

Week Fourteen**December 14: Buddhist Modernities**

Reading: McMahon, chpt from *The Making of Buddhist Modernities* (e-reserve)

December 15, PAPER 4 DUE, slipped under my office door by 5