RELG 220: Introduction to Buddhism
Elon Goldstein

Course Description
An introduction to Buddhism from a social historical perspective that examines Buddhist religious goals and practices in the local contexts of India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, and Japan.

Course Overview
What are enlightenment and nirvana? Why and how do Buddhists meditate? What is it like to be a Buddhist today? One of the world's major religions, Buddhism began in India about 2,500 years ago. It spread in different forms across all of Asia and remains a creative force throughout the modern world. This course provides an introduction to Buddhist traditions from each of the three major cultural areas in which distinctive types of Buddhism have developed. We examine Theravāda Buddhism from Southeast Asia, Zen Buddhism from East Asia, and Indian-Tibetan Buddhism from South Asia. For each tradition, our emphasis is twofold: to acquaint ourselves with fundamental features of Buddhist thought and practice, and to get a taste of how Buddhists live nowadays amidst the complexities of real life. We therefore study both classical texts and contemporary auto/ biographies to compare and contrast a set of themes across traditions. Our themes include the religious goal, practices leading to the goal, religious community, and trials and triumphs in the lives of Buddhists, particularly female renunciants and masters. Along the way, we will also consider the presence of each type of Buddhism in America.

Learning Objectives
Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to articulate fundamental ideals of Buddhist thought and practice from the three traditions that we study. Students will be able to connect the picture formed by those religious ideals to real cases of Buddhists' lives today. Students will be able to identify what is shared and what is unique among the Theravāda, Zen, and Indo-Tibetan traditions of Buddhism that we examine. Students will be able to articulate specific ways in which the study of Buddhism sheds light on important, broader issues presently debated within the study of religion.

Readings
• links to course readings on Blackboard, with a focus on classical texts in English translation and on examples of practice from each tradition
Requirements

• 20% — short written responses to weekly readings, due on most weeks as indicated on the course website. The responses will be based on writing prompts posted online. Responses are due at the start of the final class each week. A response should be roughly two-thirds of a page in length, double-spaced. These short reflections provide a valuable opportunity to think about the assigned readings prior to our last class discussion of each week. They will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Only responses submitted on-time will be accepted.
• 20% — midterm exam [week 7]
• 25% — 4-6 page interpretive essay. The essay is based on prior lectures and readings. Additional reading is not necessary. Students choose a topic from among a set of prompts that will be posted online. Alternatively, students may propose an original topic and have it approved by the instructor at least one week before the due date. The essay will require a close engagement with one or more of our primary sources. It will be evaluated both for quality of thought and quality of expression. [Topics given week 10; paper due week 12].

(for guidelines and expectations, see the handout on writing an interpretive essay)
• 35% — comprehensive final exam with an emphasis on course material since the midterm participation — participation forms an important part of the course. Meaningful contributions to class discussions and other in-class activities enhance everyone's learning experience. Consistent contributions can lift a student's final grade by as much as one full grade, e.g., from a B+ to an A-. Students should feel free to discuss the quality of their class participation with the instructor at any point during the semester.

Attendance

Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in the course. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. We will follow the university's policy regarding attendance and the effect of unexcused absences on a student's course grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason, be sure to present the needed documentation to the instructor immediately upon your return (e.g., if you are absent for a legitimate medical reason, bring a doctor's note as soon as you come back to class).

Grading Scale

100-90 A ; 89-87 B+ ; 86-80 B ; 79-77 C+ ; 76-70 C ; 69-67 D+ ; 66-60 D ; below 60 F

WEEKLY OUTLINE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Week 1, Studying Buddhism: Promises and Pitfalls

subtopics: scholarly approaches toward religion in religious studies; the historical spread of Buddhism across time and space; one Buddhism or many Buddhisms?; the diversity of Buddhist traditions; the manifold aspects of any single Buddhist tradition; scholarly challenges in the study of Buddhism: Orientalism, Colonialism, Protestant Buddhism, Rational Buddhism, secular Buddhism, potentially problematic assumptions about religion in religious studies, Buddhist critiques of academic analyses of Buddhism; Buddhism--strange or familiar?

readings:
• links to primary and secondary sources on Blackboard
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapter 10

Week 2, The Life of the Buddha as a Religious Paradigm [September 2nd: no class--Labor Day]

readings:
• links to excerpts on Blackboard on the Buddha's life (jātaka stories; Pali Nikāyas; Mahāvastu; Buddhacarita; Lalitavistarasūtra; Nidānakathā; Denkoroku)
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapter 1

Week 3. The Three Jewels of Buddhism: Enlightened Being, Teaching, and Community  
**readings:**
• links to primary sources on Blackboard (Three Jewels, Four Truths, Eightfold Path)  
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapters 2, 3, and 5

Week 4., Classical Theravāda Buddhist Thought and Practice: the Pali Nikāyas readings:
• links to primary sources from the Pali Nikāyas on Blackboard  
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapters 6 and 7

Week 5., Complexities in Theravādin Thought, Practice, and Institutions  
**readings:**
• links to primary sources on Blackboard  
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapters 4 and 8

Week 6, Autobiography: A Black American Woman Meets Theravāda Buddhism  
**readings:**
• Faith Adiele. Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun

Week 7, Theravāda today: From Modern Forest Traditions to the Widespread Applicationsof Mindfulness in Contemporary Society  
**readings:**
• Faith Adiele. Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun (continued)  
Study all previous material for comprehensive midterm.

**Midterm Exam**

Week 8, Introduction to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Mahāyāna, the Great Way. [Fall break Oct. 17-18--no class on the 18th.]

**readings:**
• Gethin Foundations of Buddhism chapter 9  
• The Third Dzogchen Rinpoche. Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries. (1st half)

Week 9, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Vajrayāna, the Adamantine Way  
**readings:**
• The Third Dzogchen Rinpoche. Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries. (2nd half)

Week 10, 1. A Modern Tibetan Buddhist Life  
**readings:**
• Chagdud Tulku. Lord of the Dance: Autobiography of a Tibetan Lama. (1st half)

* Paper topics distributed Nov. 1st.  
Week 11, Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism  
**readings:**
• Chagdud Tulku. Lord of the Dance: Autobiography of a Tibetan Lama. (2nd half)

Week 12,. Zen: the Paradoxes of Original Enlightenment
readings:

- Thomas Cleary. *Classics of Buddhism and Zen. Volume Four* (selections)

* Papers due.

Week 13, Zen Myths: Zen History, Zen Institutions, and Challenges in Scholarly Study

readings:

- links to primary and secondary sources on Blackboard
- Thomas Cleary. *Classics of Buddhism and Zen. Volume Four* (selections)

Week 14, Zen in America [Thanksgiving break Nov. 27-Dec. 1--no class on Wed., Nov. 27 and Fri., Nov. 29]

readings:

- Thomas Cleary. *Classics of Buddhism and Zen. Volume Four* (selections)

Week 15, Taking Stock of What We Have Learned about Buddhism and Religion

subtopics: dimensions of religion: narratives, tenets, praxis (ritual, meditation, asceticism), communal life, ethnography, social institutions and structures, politics, philosophy, theology, ethics, ontology, psychology, epistemology, cosmology, soteriology, orality and writing, tradition. Changing traditions. Buddhism past and present. Areas for further study.

readings:

- links to primary and secondary sources on Blackboard

**Comprehensive final exam, date TBA,**