



# RELI 315: Buddhism

George Mason University  
Spring 2024  
Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:00-1:15 PM  
Krug Hall 242

Instructor: Dr. Prabhavati Reddy  
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Office hours: TR 10:30-11:30 AM by appointment (after classes)

## **Course Objectives**

This course explores the core teachings and practices of Buddhism and introduces to different traditions and practices from their origins in India to their diffusion throughout Asia, and recently, into the west. We will begin with exploring the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha - with special attention to the Four Noble Truths, rebirth and cosmology, karma, holy beings and monastic discipline.

Buddhist doctrines explain the ways of understanding reality in an impermanent world, analysis of human condition and path to enlightenment or *nirvana*. Buddhist practices of devotion, meditation and ethics help to cultivate the qualities of mindfulness of body and mind, moral virtues, loving kindness and compassion. Teachings and practices serve as the essentials for the development of societal well-being and spiritual advancement of awakening.

Buddhism has been very good at adapting to different cultures so it would be interesting to learn its interactions with other traditions in cultural, political and religious domains of foreign lands. We will look at the development of Theravada and Mahayana traditions with reference to their different philosophical perspectives and doctrinal beliefs as well as the diffusion of these traditions to South and Southeast Asia, East Asia and North America.

## **Teaching Method**

The format of this course is a combination of lectures, in-class discussions based on reading assignments. PowerPoint lectures, digital images and films are the tools used to effectively engage students while facilitating an interactive learning environment.

## **Global Understanding Objectives (Mason Core):**

- To develop critical skills for reading challenging textual passages and conceptual thinking; to integrate and apply this knowledge in analyzing themes through lectures, discussions and written assignments.

- Questions, exams and field projects are designed to help students understand Buddhist values and evaluate their own values in comparative perspective and to reflect on how the outcomes of their learning may shape their interactions in both local and global settings.
- To understand Buddhist thought and practice in a global context; to compare interconnections and differences between Buddhism and other traditions in the contemporary world.

**Required Books** (Required books are available for purchase at GMU Bookstore)

1. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, Cambridge University Press, 2012
2. Dalai Lama w/ Howard Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, Riverhead Books, 2020
3. Selective readings (see supplementary sources on last page)

**Course Requirements**

- Regular class attendance and participation are required. Class absences are excused in the case of serious issues, decided on a case-by-case basis. Other classroom rules include not using phones and other gadgets during lectures and discussions. Laptops are allowed to take notes.
- Readings from the textbook must be done prior to attending that class. Electronic versions are allowed. Bring the book to class. We will often be referring to our readings in lectures and scheduled class discussions.
- Class Discussions are based on readings from required books for the course. \*Discussion schedule dates are given in the syllabus (questions on the blackboard). Assignments will be posted on the Blackboard.
- Listening to lectures keenly and taking notes are extremely important for the successful completion of the course.
- Check the Blackboard for class assignments, supplementary readings and announcements.

**Grading Evaluation** (All course assignments will be posted on the blackboard)

1. Class group discussions based on the readings & after lectures: 20% of final grade.  
All students are required to participate in discussions in order to get grade.
2. Midterm: 30% of final grade.  
Questions from syllabus covered up to the midterm date. Exam questions will be posted on the blackboard
3. Group field project and presentation: local Buddhist temples & meditation centers and museum 20%
4. Final Paper (6-7 pages) 30% of final grade

**Honor Code:** The George Mason University students should abide by the Honor Code and the guidelines of academic integrity are set by the university. You can find the information on the Honor Code at [academicintegrity.gmu.edu](http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu). The violation of Honor code rules will be reported to the Honor Committee for review. Students who involve with plagiarism or cheating will meet with the severe penalties.

## Lecture Topics and Course Schedule

### **The Life of Buddha and Buddhist Teachings**

- 1/16 Course introduction; Buddhist schools & sources, Harvey, *Buddhism*, 1-7
- 1/18 & 23 The Life of Gautama Buddha, awakening & the first sermon, Harvey, 8-31  
**Watch film:** Life of Buddha, BBC documentary  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Heho8bXXLi4>
- 1/25 Rebirth, Karma and Cosmology, Harvey, 32-49
- 1/30 Jataka Stories: Buddha's Past Lives through art panels
- 2/1 Buddha's teachings. The Four Noble Truths. Harvey, 50-62; **\*Art of Happiness**, 127-143  
The First True Reality: *dukkha*/suffering/painful; the five *khandhas* of personality; conditioned phenomena, impermanence and *anatta*/non-Self
- 2/6 The Second True Reality. Harvey, 62-73; **\*Art of Happiness**, 144-166  
The origins of *dukkha*; conditioned rising and the 12-chain formula  
Watch film Four Noble truths: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHWIQzd8bVw>
- 2/8 The Third True Reality. Harvey, 73-81; **\*Art of Happiness**, 194-211  
The cessation of *dukkha*, *nirvana* during life and beyond death and the Arahats
- 2/13 The Fourth True Reality. Harvey, 81-87; **\*Art of Happiness**, 215-241  
The path to the cessation of the *dukkha*; the noble eight-fold path to practice *dharmas*
- 2/15 **\*Art of Happiness**, 9-55; **Class group discussion**
- 2/20 The Sangha. Harvey, 88-108; *Saffron Days*, Chapter 1 The Robe.  
Early Developments in Buddhism; the Sangha, Schools & their doctrines; King Asoka's patronage  
Watch clip: Bodhi Gaya: the seat of Enlightenment.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xA42Eu6Fds>

### **The Rise of Buddhist Schools and Buddhist Practices**

- 2/22 The Mahayana School. Holy Beings and Doctrines. Harvey, 108-113, 151-172  
The path and stages of Bodhisattva; The *Trikaya* doctrine & the Mahayana perception of Buddhas and the Mahayana pantheon
- 2/27 Buddhism in Art. Images, concepts, symbols

- 2/29 No class. **MIDTERM DUE** (exam will be posted on the blackboard 2/22)
- 3/4-3/10 Spring Recess No classes**
- 3/12 The Sangha Development. Harvey, 287-317  
The monastic code of discipline and ordination; nuns, study and meditation; relationship with laity
- 3/14 Buddhist Devotion. Harvey, 237-263  
The refuges/triple gems, images and chanting, devotional practices; worship, Buddhist stupas & relics and pilgrimage
- 3/19 Buddhist Ethics. Harvey, 264-286;  
Ethics, *dana*/act of giving, observation and positive implications of precepts, cultivation of lovingkindness and compassion; ethics of social relationships
- 3/21 Meditation in Southern Buddhism (Theravada). Harvey, 318-339  
The *samatha* and *vipassana* meditations; the approaches and qualities to be developed by these meditations
- 3/26 Meditation in Mahayana Buddhism. Harvey, 344-346, 361-375  
Pure Land visualizations and Zen meditations
- 3/28 Tibetan Buddhism. Harvey, 180-193 & 347-361  
What is the Tantric Buddhism? Tantric Visualizations in Northern Buddhism. Tibetan mandalas and thang-ka paintings  
**Watch film:** A Monk's Guide to Happiness with Gelong Thubten (meditation); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1gY7RWE48U>
- 4/2 \***Art of Happiness**, 77-123, 289-311 **Class group discussion**
- 4/4 Field Project and Presentations
- 4/9 Field Project and Presentations
- 4/11 Field Project and Presentations
- The Spread of Buddhism to other Asian countries & Beyond Buddhism in Modern Period**
- 4/16 From India to Central Asia, East Asia: China and Japan. Harvey, 194-236
- 4/18 Buddhism Today: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. Harvey, 376-402
- 4/23 Buddhism in the West. Harvey, 419-458
- 4/25 last class & discussion of final paper
- 5/2 **Final paper due Thursday, May 2**

Supplementary Sources (Johnson Center and Fenwick library)

- Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998
- John Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, 1998
- Bhikku Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, 2005
- Fisher, Robert E. *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, 1993.
- Paul, Diana Y., ed. *Women in Buddhism: Images of Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*, 1979.
- Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*, 1990
- Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia*, 1996
- Walpola Piyananda, *Saffron Days in L.A.*, Shambhala, 2001
- Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha: A Novel*, Dover Thrift Editions, 1998

Useful websites:

<https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/>

<https://www.buddhanet.net/>

<https://www.lionsroar.com/>