

STANDARD SYLLABUS

Introduction to Buddhism THEO 297

This course provides an introduction to Buddhism.

Knowledge Area(s) satisfied: Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge

Skill(s) Developed: Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions

Values Requirement(s) satisfied: Understanding Diversity in the United States or the World, Understanding Spirituality or Faith in Action in the World

Learning Objectives:

Knowledge Area (Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge):

By taking this course, students will be able to demonstrate knowledge, with attention to historical development, of the central texts, beliefs, ethical understandings, and practices of Buddhism. By way of example, students who take this course should be able to: (1) name and discuss some of the most important Buddhist scriptures; (2) Articulate the general outline of the historical evolution of Buddhism, including its different major branches; and (3) Define and discuss key Buddhist concepts, terms, values, and religious practices.

The course addresses other competencies as well. By taking this course, for example, students should be able to analyze and interpret Buddhist religious texts, beliefs, and practices using standard scholarly methods and tools (competency a). For example, students should be able to analyze and interpret some Buddhist scriptures and scriptural passages. Students taking this course will also be able to demonstrate knowledge of the central ethical teachings and perspectives of Buddhism (competency e), e.g., the ethical teachings foundational to the "eightfold path". Finally, students taking this course will be able to evaluate the religious perspectives of Buddhists (competency d) in light of what they learn about the teachings and practices that are foundational to Buddhism in its many forms.

Skills (Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions):

Students will:

- (1) "comprehend, paraphrase, summarize, and contextualize the meaning of varying forms of communication."

In class discussions, quizzes, and/or examinations, students will demonstrate the ability to comprehend, paraphrase, summarize, and/or contextualize a variety of religious texts, histories, and ideas, as well as scholarly arguments about those texts, histories and ideas.

- (2) develop "strategies for seeking and synthesizing information to support an argument, make a decision, or resolve a problem."

In class discussions, quizzes, and/or examinations, students will be encouraged to articulate reasoned arguments about materials studies in the course or to critique arguments to which they are exposed in the class.

- (3) monitor students' own "individual thinking or behavior" in relationship to Buddhism "in order to question, confirm, validate, or correct" their presuppositions and prejudices.

Class discussions will require students to reflect on their own presuppositions and correct erroneous opinions by appealing to data and reasoned argumentation.

Values Area (Understanding Diversity in the United States or the World):

(1) Because this class is taught at a Catholic school with an overwhelmingly Christian undergraduate body, I generally use Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism as a comparison when talking about Buddhism. For example, I contrast Christian emphases on belief with Buddhist emphases on practice as foundational to religion. In discussing the complete lack of Theism in some kinds of Buddhism, I contrast Buddhist concerns with Christian and Jewish concerns. Hence class discussions emphasize diverse ways of being religious on a regular basis. Furthermore, since there are always students of diverse faith backgrounds in this class, questions of religious difference arise out of course materials and are addressed in class discussion.

(2) The course addresses a diversity of Buddhist traditions in several parts of the world. For example, the course will cover Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana forms of Buddhism; these three are considered distinct traditions, and they are practiced in different parts of the world; e.g., Theravada in Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia; Mahayana in China and Japan; and Vajrayana in Tibet. To that end, the course will discuss the history, nature, and/or practice of Buddhism in at least two--and usually more than two--different countries, such as India, Nepal, Tibet, Thailand, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, or the United States.

Values Area (Understanding Spirituality or Faith in Action in the World):

By taking this course, students will be able to "demonstrate knowledge of and capacity to articulate the foundations of" Buddhism, whether they are Buddhist themselves ("one's own" belief or faith tradition") or not ("others' beliefs or faith traditions"). They will also be able to "demonstrate how faith traditions or belief systems"--in this case Buddhism--have been or can be related to the intellectual and cultural life of Buddhists(e.g., Buddhist systems of philosophy, ritual customs that characterize Buddhist countries, Buddhist beliefs about the relationship between humans and other kinds of living beings, Buddhist beliefs about the human body and how illness and healing take place, and so forth.)

Learning Activities:

Possible array of texts:

- Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism
- Lucien Stryk, The World of the Buddha
- Edward Conze et al, Buddhist Texts Through the Ages
- Tim Ward, What the Buddha Never Taught
- Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of Understanding
- Lobsang Lhalungpa, The Life of Milarepa

Note: (Instructors may vary the textbooks.)

Possible evaluation methods:

- Lecture
- Discussion
- Written assignments
- Examinations
- Presentations
- Audio-visual resources
- Field trips

Note: (Instructors may vary the evaluation categories.)

Sample Semester Schedule:

- Week 1: Introduction to the course: the three turnings of the wheel of Buddhist law
Basic concepts in Buddhism
- Week 2: Historical introduction: religion in India at the time of the founder, Gautama
The life of Gautama the Buddha
- Week 3: The four noble truths
The human condition and the constitution of the physical world
The twelvefold chain of codependent origination
- Week 4: The eightfold path
Levels of meditation
- Week 5: What is nirvana?
The Theravada Tradition past and present
- Week 6: Discussion of What The Buddha Never Taught
- Week 7: Further discussion of primary sources from the Pali canon
- Week 8: The rise of Mahayana Buddhism in India
- Week 9: The path of the Bodhisattva (continued)

Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana
Buddhist devotional practices

Week 10: The Perfection of Wisdom (perfection #6): Emptiness
Mahayana Buddhist philosophy: Madhyamika, Yogacara

Week 11: Discussion of Mahayana philosophy (wrap up)
Tantric Buddhism; Buddhism in Tibet

Week 12: Buddhism in Tibet (continued)

Week 13: Discussion of the Tibetan Saint Milarepa

Week 14: Zen

Note: (Instructors may vary the presentation of topics to some degree, but the material covered will remain the same.)