Introduction to Buddhism

Course: THEO 297
Term: Fall 2016
Instructor: Professor Deng Xiaosong

Buddhism has over twenty-five hundred years of history and has taken root, in one form and another and at one time or another, in virtually every country in Asia. In more recent times, it has found a niche in Western nations as well.

This class aims at giving the students an overview of basic Buddhist doctrine, an introduction of the history of its development in India, China and Tibet and a discussion of certain related religious topics, such as religious experience and asceticism. This class will be divided into three parts, namely, early Buddhism in India, Mahayana Buddhism in China and Tantric practice in Tibet. Each of the three parts will be dealt with in the above mentioned doctrinal and historical perspectives. Though this class is primarily a survey class of Buddhist practice, there will be sessions of class addressing specific issues of Buddhist practice. It is considered to be beneficial for the students to dive deeper into certain areas of the vast array of social and cultural phenomena that have clustered in the course of time around a figure called the Buddha. The purpose of doing so is to portray somehow more precisely the thoughts and actions of the large segment of human race who have called themselves Buddhists.

15% to 20% of the class time will be used to have a class discussion on the assigned reading. Several school organized field trips to religious places of worship and Buddhist monasteries as a part of the class activities will provide the students with first hand experience of the living Buddhist practice.

Core Curriculum Requirements:

Knowledge Area(s) satisfied: Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge
Skill(s) Developed: Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions
Values Requirement(s) satisfied: 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:
(1) 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 and 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 beliefsaaa about the human body and how illness and healing take place, and so forth.)

Required Textbooks

All assigned readings for this class will be put on reserve for the students to check out for a period of time not exceeding 2 hours.

Grades
The term grade consists of class attendance 10%, class involvement 10%, mid-term exam 20%, class presentation 20% and a term paper 40%. Only valid medical or family emergencies qualify as an absence, and documentation of the same must be presented to the professor no later than the next class meeting. Late attendance may eventually cause attendance grade detraction. Term paper (10-15 pages) should be submitted no later than the last day of the class.
Class Advancement

Week 1
Teacher and class introduction
The Buddha-life story Before He Was Buddha-the life of Siddhartha and the rise of Buddhism-earliest religious practice in India (What the Buddha Taught P16-50  Entering the Stream P57-61 P83-86)

Week 2
The Four Noble Truth and Karma, the wheel of life and Buddhist cosmology Entering the Stream P122-130  What the Buddha Taught P51-66 Founding the Buddhist Community and the Buddha’s passing away Answers to Common Questions about Buddhism P165-217

Week 3
Religious life in early centuries
The rise of Mahayana Buddhism in India Answers to Common Questions about Buddhism P219-253  Buddhist Saints in India Chpt 1.2

Week 4
The Spread, Development and Evolution of Buddhism in China Buddhist Saints in India Chpt 3.4

Week 5
Field Trip

Week 6
Mid-term Exam

Week 7
The Bodhisattva Path The Buddhist Religion P99-108  The Experience of Buddhism P158-172 Chan Zen mind, the beginner’s mind

Week 8
Field Trip

Week 9
Introduction of Tantra Entering the Stream P251-253 P258-265 Tibetan Buddhism-an overview The Indestructible Truth P17-207

Week 10
The Tibetan Book of the Dead
Topics on Tibetan Buddhism-Dalai Lama, Milarepa
Life of Milarepa
Tantric rituals, Mandala and systematic advancement

Week 12
Religious Experience and in depth psychology
The secret of golden flower

Week 13
Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism
Review of the class
The term paper is due during the final week