

Buddhist Philosophy

Religion 369

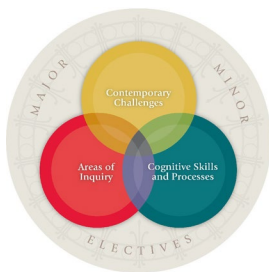
Tuesday and Thursday 2:00-3:20PM

Spring 2024

Professor: Dr. Ernest B. Brewster (Department of Religion)
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Location: Hickman Hall, Room 130
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:45-1:45PM in Hickman Hall, Room 130. Please let me know, in advance, when you will be coming in during office hours. Zoom appointments will be available upon request.

Course Description:

What do Buddhists mean when they argue that there is “no self?” What do Buddhists mean when they claim that everything is “empty?” Is the Buddhist theory of karma a type of “fatalism”? Do Buddhists mean to say that everything we experience is a matter of predetermined fate? Does Buddhism really teach us that we are all connected? This course aims to answer these, and other, foundational questions related to Buddhist philosophy. We will begin by exploring the central philosophical arguments attributed to the historical Buddha and continue by surveying the major philosophical traditions of Buddhism. In our course of study, we will examine the intra-Buddhist debates over issues of: metaphysics (what is really real?), ethics (what should we do?), and epistemology (what and how do we know?). We will also engage in the problems with, and the significance of, modern interpretations of Buddhist philosophy. Throughout the course we will attempt to critically appreciate both the universality, and the particularity, of the Buddhist ways of thinking.



This course fulfills the following core curriculum learning goals of Rutgers University: [AHO] [HST]

Philosophical and Theoretical Issues: Arts and Humanities

Students will examine critically philosophical and other theoretical issues concerning the nature of reality, human experience, knowledge, value, and/or cultural production.

Required Texts: (available through the campus bookstore and as noted below)

Edelglass, William, and Jay Garfield, eds. (2009). *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (1st Edition). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0195328172

Siderits, Mark. (2021). *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Second Edition). Hackett Publishing Company. ISBN-13: 978-1624669811

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu>).

All other readings will be posted on the Canvas website. Please note: if there are no pages assigned to the reading, you must read the entire chapter/paper/entry. If pages are assigned, please read the assigned pages.

Schedule of Topics, Readings and Assignments:

Week 1: Class 1 Tuesday, January 16 th	We will start with an overview of the semester and discuss what will, and will not be, covered in the class. We will cover the important question of why we study Buddhist philosophy. No reading responses are required during the first week of class.
Week 1: Class 2 Thursday, January 18 th	This course will focus on Buddhism as “philosophy.” What does it mean to study Buddhism as philosophy? How is it different from, or similar to, studying Buddhism as a religion? Required Readings: “Buddhism as Philosophy?” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> .
Week 2: Class1 Tuesday, January 23 rd	We will discuss the intellectual context within which the central arguments of early Buddhism were formulated. Required Readings: “Early Buddhism: Basic Teachings,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> .
First reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, January 23 rd	
Week 2: Class 2 Thursday, January 25 th	What did the historical Buddha perceived to be the inherent problem in our existence? How did he support his understanding? How did he diagnose the cause of the problem? What was the remedy proposed by the Buddha? Required Readings: “Four Truths,” in <i>Foundations of Buddhism</i> , Rupert Gethin (pp. 59-81) [.pdf to be provided on Canvas]

<p>Week 3: Class 1 Tuesday, January 30th</p>	<p>We will study more closely one of the more interesting and controversial claims made by the Buddha and his followers, the claim that there is no-self (Sanskrit: <i>anātman</i>). What did the early Buddhist philosophers mean by this? What were the arguments used to uphold the claim of no-self?</p> <p>Required Readings: “Non-Self: Empty Persons,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (first half)</p>
<p>Second reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, January 23rd</p>	
<p>Week 3: Class 2 Thursday, February 1st</p>	<p>We will continue our discussion of the core Buddhist tenet of no-self.</p> <p>Required Readings: “Non-Self: Empty Persons,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (second half)</p>
<p>Week 4: Class 1 Tuesday, February 6th</p>	<p>Last week we discussed what could be labeled as the “metaphysics” of early Buddhism. In this class, we turn our attention to the “ethics” of early Buddhism. Here we will examine the early Buddhist arguments about what we “should” or “must” do. How are the metaphysical arguments related to the ethical arguments developed by the early Buddhist philosophers?</p> <p>Required Readings: “Buddhist Ethics,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (first half)</p>
<p>Third reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, February 6th</p>	
<p>Week 4: Class 2 Thursday, February 8th</p>	<p>We continue our discussion of the relationship between the metaphysical arguments and its ethical arguments of early Buddhism.</p> <p>Required Readings: “Buddhist Ethics,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (second half)</p> <p>Optional Readings: “Theravāda Texts on Ethics,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p>

<p>Week 5: Class 1 Tuesday, February 13th</p>	<p>We will prepare ourselves for an intense discussion of the Abhidharma tradition of Buddhist philosophy. This entails studying the Abhidharma concept of the “dhamma/dharma,” the ultimate building blocks of the world, and the historical context of the Abhidharma Buddhist tradition.</p> <p>Required Readings: “A Nyāya Interlude,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (first half)</p>
<p>Fourth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, February 13th</p>	
<p>Week 5: Class 2 Thursday, February 15th</p>	<p>We will continue our discussion of the Buddhist metaphysical ontology of dharmas. We will explore the similarities and the differences between the metaphysical arguments developed by the Buddhists and the philosophers of the Brāhmanical or Hindu tradition of Nyāya.</p> <p>Required Readings: “A Nyāya Interlude,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (second half)</p> <p>Optional Reading: “Theravāda Metaphysics and Ontology,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p>
<p>Week 6: Class 1 Tuesday, February 20th</p>	<p>Last week we touched upon the concept of the “dharma.” This week, we will explore the arguments put forth by the Abhidharma philosophers to support the validity of the concept of the dharma. What reasons do we have for accepting the Abhidharma claim that what ultimately exists are property-particulars? We will also see how the Abhidharma metaphysical arguments reinforce the doctrine of no-self.</p> <p>Required Reading: “Abhidharma: The Metaphysics of Empty Persons,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (first half)</p>
<p>Fifth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, February 20th</p>	
<p>Week 6: Class 2 Thursday February 22nd</p>	<p>We explore how the metaphysical arguments put forth by the Abhidharma philosophers reinforce the doctrine of no-self.</p> <p>Required Reading: “Abhidharma: The Metaphysics of Empty Persons,” in</p>

	<p><i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (second half)</p> <p>Optional Reading:</p> <p>“Abhidharma,” in <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>.</p>
<p>Week 7: Class 1 Tuesday, February 27th</p>	<p>This week we will continue our discussion of Abhidharma philosophy. We will learn about the distinct schools and philosophical doctrines within the Abhidharma tradition.</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“Vasubandhu’s <i>Abhidharmakośa</i>: The Critique of the Soul,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p>
<p>Sixth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, February 27th</p>	
<p>Week 7: Class 2 Thursday, February 29th</p>	<p>We will explore the intra-Buddhist debates between the Abhidharma theorists on the existence or non-existence of the “person” (Sanskrit: <i>pudgala</i>).</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“Vasubandhu’s <i>Abhidharmakośa</i>: The Critique of the Pudgalavādin’s Theory of Persons,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p> <p>Optional Readings:</p> <p>“Pudgalavāda Doctrines of the Person,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p>
<p>Week 8: Class 1 Tuesday, March 5th</p>	<p>Around the beginning of the Common Era, a group of Buddhist texts, purported to be the teachings of the historical Buddha, began to appear. These teachings contained philosophical ideas that were radically different from the earlier traditions. Among these ideas was the doctrine of emptiness: the claim that everything--even the dharmas (!)-- is empty. We will learn about the new metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological claims of the “Mahāyāna” Buddhism.</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“The Rise of Mahāyāna,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i></p>
<p>Seventh reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, March 5th</p>	

<p>Week 8: Class 2 Thursday, March 7th</p>	<p>Mahāyāna Buddhism was not merely an ideological and philosophical development. In this class, we will study the religious and practical aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism.</p> <p>Required Readings: “The Mahāyāna” in <i>Foundations of Buddhism</i>. Pdf. on Canvas.</p>
<p>Friday, March 8th</p>	<p>First Writing Assignment Due</p>
<p>No Classes on March 12 and March 14th Spring Recess March 9th–March 15th</p>	
<p>Week 9: Class 1 Tuesday, March 19th</p>	<p>Yogācāra is one of the two major philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In their interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness, the Yogācāra philosophers come to espouse a unique metaphysical thesis known as the “consciousness-only” or “impression-only.” The Yogācāra thesis that what is ultimately real is only the consciousness of sentient beings. This week and next, we will examine the arguments advanced by the Yogācāra philosophers in support of the bold claim of “consciousness-only”.</p> <p>Required Readings: “Yogācāra: Impressions-only and the Denial of Physical Objects,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy (first half)</i></p>
<p>Eighth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, March 19th</p>	
<p>Week 9: Class 2 Thursday, March 21st</p>	<p>We will continue to examine the arguments put forth by the Yogācāra philosophers to support the provocative claim that everything in the universe is of the nature of consciousness.</p> <p>Required Readings: “Yogācāra: Impressions-only and the Denial of Physical Objects,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy (second half)</i></p>
<p>Week 10: Class 1 Tuesday, March 26th</p>	<p>We will continue our discussion of Yogācāra philosophy.</p> <p>Required Readings: “Vasubandhu’s <i>Trisvabhāvanirdeśa</i>,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p> <p>Optional Readings: “Vasubandhu,” in <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i></p>

Ninth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, March 26 th	
Week 10: Class 2 Thursday, March 28 th	<p>We will continue our discussion of the core Yogācāra philosophical doctrines.</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“Yogācāra Theories of the Components of Perception,” in <i>Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings</i>.</p>
Week 11: Class 1 Tuesday, April 2 nd	<p>Madhyamaka Buddhism is the other major philosophical text-tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Unlike the Yogācāra philosophers, who qualify the doctrine of fundamental emptiness with the claim that consciousness is the only ultimate reality, the Madhyamaka philosophers take the doctrine of emptiness literally, by arguing that nothing can be ultimately real. We will explore the succinct, yet enigmatic, arguments put forth by the Madhyamaka philosophers and examine several of the modern interpretations of their claim. This week and next, we will examine the “semantic” or “anti-realist” interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy.</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (first half).</p>
Tenth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, April 2 nd	
Week 11: Class 2 Thursday, April 4 th	<p>We will continue our discussion of Madhyamaka Philosophy.</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>“Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness,” in <i>Buddhism as Philosophy</i> (second half).</p> <p>Optional Reading:</p> <p>“Nāgārjuna,” in <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>.</p>
Week 12: Class 1 Tuesday, April 9 th	<p>We continue to study another major modern interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy: the “transcendental” or “mystical” interpretation. What arguments are used to support this interpretation? Does this interpretation cohere well with the claims made by the Madhyamaka philosophers?</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <p>Excerpts from <i>Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka</i>, by Jan Westerhoff.</p>

Eleventh reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, April 9 th	
Week 12: Class 2 Thursday, April 11 th	<p>So far in this semester, we have studied the traditional Buddhist, or modern interpretations of the Buddhist traditions. This week, we take a turn, and examine how the concepts and theses developed in the context of Buddhist philosophy contribute to contemporary philosophical discourse. More specifically, we will examine the compatibilism-incompatibilism (of free-will and determinism) debate within contemporary analytic philosophy, and the two solutions to the problem that are offered by the Buddhist philosophical tradition.</p> <p>Required Readings: “The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism,” by Peter van Inwagen.</p>
Week 13: Class 1 Tuesday, April 16 th	<p>Which of the two solutions do you prefer – compatibilism or incompatibilism? Why? How would you evaluate each argument?</p> <p>Required Readings: “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” by Harry G. Frankfurt.</p>
Twelfth reading response due on or before 12:00 am (midnight) Tuesday, April 16 th	
Week 13: Class 2 Thursday, April 18 th	<p>We will continue to evaluate the positions of compatibilism and incompatibilism regarding free-will and determinism.</p> <p>Required Readings: Excerpts from <i>The Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics</i>, by Charles Goodman</p>
Week 14: Class 1 Tuesday, April 23 rd	<p>Required Readings: “Buddhist Paleocompatibilism,” by Mark Siderits.</p> <p>No reading responses are required during the last week of class.</p>

Week 14: Class 2 Thursday, April 25 th	We review our semester of exploring Buddhist philosophy and discuss our final paper projects.
April 25 th is the last day of class. I encourage you to set up a meeting with me to discuss the final assignment. This final assignment is due on Thursday May 2 nd if you are graduating and on Monday, May 6 th if you are not graduating.	
Thur., May 2 nd (for graduating students) or Mon., May 6 th (for non-graduating students)	Second Writing Assignment Due

Course Requirements and Assessment:

Attendance and Class Participation: 25% of the final grade

Two unexcused absences are permitted. If you want to make up a missed session, please contact me (preferably before you miss the class) to obtain an assignment.

12 Weekly Reading Responses: 20% of the final grade. See the schedule above for the Reading Responses due dates.

- (1) Refer to a specific passage in the assigned reading(s) of the day, formulate at least one thoughtful question or observation and post it on the course Canvas site by 12am –midnight—prior to class on Tuesday. No postings are required during the first or last weeks of class.
- (2) Respond to at least one reading response by another student; prior to 12am—midnight—prior to class on Thursday. No postings are required during the first or last weeks of class.

First Writing Assignment: 25% of the final grade, between 1,800 and 2,000 words. Due on March 8th.

By this point we will have familiarized ourselves with the major arguments for and against the Buddhist philosophical thesis of no-self (Sanskrit: *anātman*). Do you agree or disagree with this thesis?

For this written assignment, please formulate your argument either for, or against, the thesis of no-self. Please be as charitable as possible when you present the position of your opponent. 40 percent of your grade on this assignment will be based on how well you articulate the argument of your opponent. The remaining 60 percent will be based on how well you support your argument.

Second Writing Assignment: 30% of the final grade, due on May 2nd (for graduating students) or May 6th (for non-graduating students), between 2,500 and 3,000 words. For this assignment, please select to write an essay on one of the four topics listed. If you want to write about something else, let me know in advance as I will offer suggestions for secondary sources. Again, please be as charitable as possible when you present the position of your opponent. 40 percent of your grade on this assignment will be based on how well you articulate the argument of your opponent. The remaining 60 percent will be based on how well you support your argument.

Topics:

- (1) Do you agree with the thesis of the Yogācāra tradition that external reality is not real and that only cognition and consciousness exist? Build your argument either for or against this thesis by referring to the arguments introduced in the readings on Yogācāra.
- (2) Do you agree with the thesis of the Madhyamaka tradition that Buddhist reductionism (Abhidharma & Yogācāra metaphysics) is incoherent and bound to fail? Build your argument either for or against this thesis by choosing one of four the modern interpretations of Madhyamaka philosophy and by referring to their arguments (I recommend choosing the semantic interpretation, but you can choose other interpretations as well).
- (3) Choose either the solution proposed by Goodman or Siderits to the problem of free-will and determinism. Build your argument either for or against the solution you choose. You may, or may not refer to the other solution, as you in formulate your argument.
- (4) “Given its tendency to reduce human suffering into an abstract, universal characteristic of sentient existence, and its refutation of the reality of wholes (which would include race, gender, class, etc.), Buddhist philosophy is inherently racist and sexist.” Build your argument either for or against this thesis by drawing on our readings and your original research.

Special Needs and Disability Statement:

If you have any special needs or a disability that requires any special accommodation to fulfill any course requirements, you need to provide acceptable documentation to the Office of Disability Services. That office will then make arrangements as needed with me.

Be sure to take advantage of the many academic support services Rutgers offers through a variety of Learning Centers. Go to <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/about-us> for more information. If, at any point, you experience anything impacting your performance or ability to participate in this class, please reach out to me. Please also see the academic, health, and mental wellness resources searchable at <https://success.rutgers.edu/> for further support.

Consult this syllabus regularly. It contains all the foundational information you need to know. It is also very important that you keep up regularly with all materials on Canvas, especially any announcements I may post from time to time. Please set your notifications appropriately so that you do not miss anything. Consult with the OIT Help Desk (833-648-4357) for Canvas help.