

Topics in Political Thought II: Buddhist Political Thought
POL484H/2026H
Winter 2021

Professor: Matthew J Walton
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Virtual office hours: Wednesdays 2:30-4:30pm, or by appointment

Class Meetings: Blackboard Collaborate, Thursdays, 10am-12pm

Course Description:

Popular conceptions of Buddhism are overdetermined by its association with idealized notions of peace and detachment. Both aspects complicate the study of Buddhism and politics, leading some scholars and practitioners to even deny the existence of a field of Buddhist political thought. This course rejects that conclusion, and instead explores the range of Buddhist practices, beliefs, communities and positionalities as generating an equally wide range of political perspectives, consonant with a diverse set of ideologies.

While both Buddhist Studies and Political Theory have traditionally been dominated by textual analysis, we will attempt to push beyond this focus, to also look at practices, arts and other material items, embodied positionalities and affective experiences as potentially generative of political thinking. We will also try to problematize some of the very terms of study in the field. In recent years, scholars have attended more closely to the contingent historical construction of “Buddhism,” as a category strongly influenced by nineteenth-century European scholarship, but also actively shaped by Buddhists themselves, within their own communities and in global conversations.

The readings and topics in the course will be focused primarily on Theravāda Buddhism in South & Southeast Asia (and the diaspora), with some additional readings on Mahāyāna and Zen traditions. (Students will be free to write their essays on any Buddhist tradition, text or practice.) We will pair close reading of several Theravāda primary sources (including *suttas* and *jatakas*) with secondary analysis from a range of perspectives and disciplines. After a series of introductory and foundational readings, there will be units on Methods, Identity & Positionality and Political Ideologies.

[Please note: while course assignments and delivery/participation methods may seem extensive, the number and type of assignments is designed to lower the stakes for any given assignment and to give you an opportunity to practice and develop a range of important skills. The many modes of delivery and participation are intended to allow you to engage with course materials on your own time as much as possible, and to provide multiple pathways for doing so, knowing that some students will face challenges in an online-only platform and that some students are not necessarily comfortable participating in large group settings.]

Course Readings:

All required course readings are available online, either as copyright-compliant postings on the course Quercus site or as links to the University of Toronto Libraries electronic collection. You are responsible for completing all readings by the dates indicated on the syllabus. The additional readings are optional for undergraduates but strongly encouraged, and are required for graduate students taking the course. I also strongly encourage you to look at several of the class discussion responses each week as they are posted by your fellow students. I have tried to make the assigned readings less onerous during the weeks when you have an assignment due, so please plan accordingly.

Course Requirements:

Class Participation (20%): While I recognize the challenge of robust participation in a fully online setting, this remains an essential aspect of a seminar course. The following is the range of ways through which your participation will be measured: participation during synchronous full-class discussions (by audio, video or chat); completing occasional “in-class” writing responses, usually assigned in a pre-recorded lecture, with responses submitted on Quercus; participation during occasional synchronous small group discussions; participating in weekly open discussion threads on Quercus; or talking with me about course ideas over email or during virtual office hours. I know that not everyone is comfortable speaking regularly in class, so I hope this range of possible methods provides an option that works for you. I still expect you to attend class regularly and maintain contact with me in order to ensure that you are meeting my expectations regarding course participation.

Class Discussant (30%): Each student must sign up to be a discussant at **three** class sessions during the course of the semester, with at least one session prior to Week 6. (Sign-up will be online and must be completed by the second class.) For each discussant session you are expected to read all assigned readings closely (I recommend that you also read the additional readings) and write a 1,000-1,500 word critical response. This is **NOT** a summary of the readings, but should include personal reflection on what the readings make you think about and could include questions about the readings that you wish to pose to the class, as well as your provisional responses to those questions. Each of these response papers must be posted to the course page **no later than 8pm the day before class**. These papers do not have to be fully developed essays, nor do they need to address all of the readings, but they should demonstrate to me that you’ve prepared for the discussion and considered some of the implications of the reading(s). You do not have to prepare a formal presentation for class but you should be a particularly active participant on days when you’ve written a Class Discussant response. Discussants are discussion *leaders*; I still expect all of you to have read the assigned readings and a selection of other students’ discussant responses and to be prepared to participate in our discussions. Discussant responses and the questions and ideas they generate will form part of the framework for our synchronous discussions online during the assigned class period.

Methods/Sources Paper (20%, Due by 11:59pm on Feb 25): You will write a 2,000-3,000 word paper in which you critically assess one or more of the different methodological approaches to or problems within the study of Buddhist political thought **or** consider the implications of using different types of sources in this field of study. I will provide a more detailed essay prompt by Week 2. (**NB: Graduate students will be expected to write a 3,000-5,000 word paper.)

Annotated Bibliography (10%, Due by 11:59pm on Mar 11): You will create an annotated bibliography (minimum 8 sources) that will help you develop your final essay/project. An annotated bibliography is a list of relevant sources (books, chapters, or articles or other materials) along with a brief (original) summary of each. (**NB: Graduate students must have a minimum of 12 sources.)

Final Essay/Project (20%, Due by 11:59pm on Apr 1): You may choose any topic related to Buddhist political thought for your final essay/project. Essays should be 2,000-3,000 words and could be any form or style, including an exegesis of a primary text; close study of a practice; consideration of a methodological or source problem; a critique of an existing study; a personal narrative reflection; or other models. If you would prefer, I am open to you completing a final project that is not a written essay (for example, a multi-media presentation; a performance; a website; or other format). If you choose the project option you **must** discuss your plan with me first to get approval (and I suggest you talk with me sooner rather than later if you intend to pursue this option). You will also submit a 500 word summary of your project and you are still required to complete the annotated bibliography. (**NB: Graduate students will be expected to write a 3,000-5,000 word essay but are also permitted to choose the project option.)

Delivery/Participation Methods:

- Readings (available through Quercus; to be done in advance of the scheduled class meeting)
- Reading Questions (optional; posted weekly on Quercus; designed to help guide your study and provide confidence that you are recognizing and understanding some of the main arguments from each reading)
- Class Lecture (pre-recorded lecture; posted weekly on Quercus; providing background on the thinkers and texts and an introduction the readings and their arguments)
- Reflection Lecture (from time to time, I might post a short video/audio recording to re-iterate an important point from previous discussions, to reflect on some connections between readings that we didn't have a chance to explore, or to offer additional thoughts about a reading or topic)
- Class Discussant Posts (assigned short response papers—described above—that are posted publicly on Quercus to share students' reactions to and analysis of the readings; I will read all of these in advance of the scheduled class meeting and use them to plan our group discussion)
- Open Discussion Thread (optional; for posting questions, ideas, concerns about the readings that you'd like to share with classmates and to incorporate into our group discussion)
- All-Class Discussions (synchronous; held on Bb Collaborate to discuss the readings, their arguments and implications)
- Small Group Discussions (on occasion, we will breakout into small groups during our synchronous class time, to do close readings of passages from the texts or to discuss questions I will provide)
- Office Hours (held virtually for 2 hours a week, on Bb Collaborate; also available by appointment via Skype or another platform)
- Announcements (reminders of assignments due, updates on course plans or changes)

Course Policies:

Late Work/Make-up Exams

If you are unable to complete an assignment by its scheduled date for a valid reason, please do your best to inform me before the due date and we will make alternate arrangements. All late work that is not excused in advance is at risk of being penalized at a rate of **2% per day of lateness**. Please contact me in advance if you expect you will be late submitting an assignment.

Accessibility Policy

I do my best to welcome students with diverse learning styles and needs in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Accessibility Services Office as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. I know that this formal process can be slow, so I want to encourage you to come to me in advance to talk about any accommodations you might need or challenges you might be facing. I am also open to hearing about ways in which the course environment or structure might unintentionally exclude or disadvantage certain people and will work to respond to any such concerns.

I'm always willing to work with any student to help facilitate your participation and success in this course, whether you have a formal accommodation granted or not. I recognize that a range of other circumstances might affect your ability to engage fully with course expectations. Please feel free to come to me to discuss any difficulties you are experiencing and we can work together to address them.

Attendance Policy

I expect you to be engaged with course matters as much as you are able, including doing the weekly readings, listening to pre-recorded lectures, and participating in discussions during the scheduled class

time. I also recognize that your ability to access materials or participate in discussions might fluctuate, due to technological limitations, environmental stresses or other factors. If you're having trouble keeping up, please get in touch with me and we can work together to find a suitable way forward.

Grading Policy

I will be happy to discuss any grades that I give on assignments. I will do my best to communicate the criteria I'll be grading on in advance but please ask questions if you are confused. If you feel that I have made an error, you can take it up with me through the following procedure (Please note that I will only discuss issues with grading during the 7 days after the assignment has been handed back):

1. Wait a minimum of 24 hours after receiving your grade to contact me.
2. Put in writing the reasons why you are dissatisfied with the grade.
3. Bring the exam and your written statement to my office hours and we will discuss the grade.

Academic Integrity:

Cheating and plagiarism are offenses against academic integrity and are subject to disciplinary action by the university. Plagiarism is copying someone else's work and presenting it as your own (by not attributing it to its true source). If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask me. I take this matter very seriously and will **NOT** tolerate plagiarism. Let me stress again: if you are unsure about how to properly cite an idea, please ask me. Otherwise, I expect university students to know proper citation methods, styles and norms. Your written assignments other than class discussion responses will all be submitted using turnitin.com; if you would like to request an alternate method of submission, please let me know and we can arrange this.

Course Readings:

Week 1 (Jan 14): Foundations I (The "Interpretive Plasticity" of Buddhist Thought)

Required

Traiphum Phra Ruang (Three Worlds According to King Ruang): A Thai Buddhist Cosmology. 1982 [1345]. Frank E Reynolds and Mani B Reynolds (ed.), Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press. [**pp.124-159]

Additional

Jackson, Peter. 1993. "Re-interpreting the *Traiphuum Phra Ruang*: Political Functions of Buddhist Symbolism in Contemporary Thailand." In *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, Ed. Trevor Ling. Singapore: ISEAS Press.

Week 2 (Jan 21): Foundations II (Thinking from Buddhist Worldviews)

Required

Rāhula, W., 1974. *What the Buddha taught* (Vol. 641). Grove Press. [**Chapters 2-6]
Williams, A.K., 2002. *Being Black: Zen and the art of living with fearlessness and grace*. Penguin. [**Part 1: the nature of our existence]

Additional

Gethin, R., 1998. *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press. [**Chapter 9]
Walton, M.J., 2016. *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press. [**Chapter 2]

Week 3 (Jan 28): Foundations III (The Politics of Authenticity)

Required

Turner, A., 2016. [“Myanmar: Contesting Conceptual Landscapes in the Politics of Buddhism.”](#) *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 19.

Harris, E., 2006. *Theravada Buddhism and the British encounter: Religious, missionary and colonial experience in nineteenth century Sri Lanka*. Routledge. [**Part IV]

Abeysekara, A., 2002. *Colors of the robe: religion, identity, and difference*. Univ of South Carolina Press. [**Chapter 2]

Additional

Berkwitz, S.C. 2017. “The rhetoric of authenticity: modernity and “true Buddhism” in Sri Lanka.” *Theravāda Buddhist Encounters with Modernity*. (Ed. J Schober and S Collins) Routledge.

Week 4 (Feb 4): Methods I (Theravāda Canonical Texts and Classical Interpretations)

Required

Agganna Sutta

Cakkavatti Sutta

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1976. *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[**Chapter 2]

Additional

Schober, J. 1995. "The Theravada Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 86 (2): 307-325.

Week 5 (Feb 11): Methods II (Context, Materiality, Embodiment & Practice)

Required

McDaniel, J.T., 2011. *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. Columbia University Press. [**Chapter 4: Art & Objects]

Ohnuma, Reiko. 2019. “Bodies and Embodiment in the Bodhicaryāvatāra.” *Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice*. Gold, J.C. and Duckworth, D.S. eds., Columbia University Press.

Darlington, S.M., 1998. “The ordination of a tree: The Buddhist ecology movement in Thailand.” *Ethnology*, pp.1-15.

Additional

Jordt, Ingrid. 2007. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens: Ohio University Press. [**Chapter 2: The Phenomenology of Satipattāna Vipassanā Meditation]

****Please Note: No class on Feb 18 for Reading Week****

Week 6 (Feb 25): Identity & Positionality I (Race)

Required

Williams, A.K., Owens, L.R. and Syedullah, J., 2016. *Radical dharma: Talking race, love, and liberation*. North Atlantic Books. [**“Radical Dharma: Race”]

Vesely-Flad, Rima. 2019. "Racism and Anatta: Black Buddhists, Embodiment and Interpretations of Non-Self." *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*. (ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae) Rowman & Littlefield.

Additional

Cheah, Joseph. 2011. *Race and religion in American Buddhism: white supremacy and immigrant adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press. [**Chapter 1: Colonial Legacy of White Supremacy in American Buddhism]

McNicholl, A., 2018. Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writing. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 86(4), pp.883-911.

****Methods/Sources Paper Due****

Week 7 (Mar 4): Identity & Positionality II (Gender)

Required

Cone, Margaret, and Richard F. Gombrich. 1997. *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [**pp.1-96]

Thitsa, K., 1980. "Providence and prostitution: Women in Buddhist Thailand." *Change: International Reports*. [**Sections II, VII-X]

Additional

Jory, P., 2002. The Vessantara Jataka, Barami, and the Bodhisatta-Kings: the origin and spread of a Thai concept of power. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, pp.36-78.

Satha-Anand, S., 2004. Moral Dilemma in the Bodhisattva Ideal: A Re-Reading of Vessantara Jataka Tale. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, 7(2), pp.83-105.

Week 8 (Mar 11): Political Ideologies I (Capitalism, Consumption and Class)

Required

Scott, R.M., 2009. *Nirvana for sale?: Buddhism, wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in contemporary Thailand*. SUNY Press. [**Chapters 1 & 2]

Phra Thēpwisutthimēthī and Donald K. Swearer. 1989. *Me and mine: selected essays of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa*. Albany: State University of New York Press. [***"Democratic socialism," and "A dictatorial dhammic socialism"]

Additional

Foxeus, N., 2017. Possessed for Success: Prosperity Buddhism and the Cult of the Guardians of the Treasure Trove in Upper Burma. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 18(1), pp.108-139.

Aung San. 2015 [1998]. *The Writings of General Aung San*. Ed. Mya Han. Yangon: Yan Aung Books. [**Annexure 8: Many Kinds of Politics]

****Annotated Bibliography Due****

Week 9 (Mar 18): Political Ideologies II (Buddhist Democratic Thought and Practice)

Required

Madsen, Richard. 2007. *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [**Chapters 2 & 3]

Frechette, Ann. 2007. "Democracy and Democratization among Tibetans in Exile." *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol.66(1): 97-127.

Additional

Walton, M.J., 2016. *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press. [**Chapter 6]

Wells, T., 2019. "Narrative and elucidating the concept of democracy: the case of Myanmar's activists and democratic leaders." *Democratization*, 26(2), pp.190-207.

Week 10 (Mar 25): Political Ideologies III (Justifications of Violence)

Required

Victoria, Brian (Daizen). 1997. *Zen at War*. New York: Weatherhill. [**Chapters 5 & 7]

Yu, Xue. 2005. *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945*. [**Chapter 2: Buddhism and National Defending]

Additional

Bartholomeusz, T., 1999. "In defense of Dharma: just-war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 6, pp.1-16.

Jerryson, M., 2018. *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*. Oxford University Press. [**Chapter 1: Buddhist Paths to Violence]

Week 11 (Apr 1): Political Ideologies IV (Radical & Emancipatory Approaches)

Required

Founding proclamation of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (April 5, 1931)

Shields, James Mark. 2012. "A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Giro (1889-1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 39, No. 2: 333-351.

Ritzinger, J., 2017. *Anarchy in the pure land: Reinventing the cult of Maitreya in modern Chinese Buddhism*. Oxford University Press. [**Chapter 2: Disorienting Frameworks]

****Final Essay/Project Due****