

Lingnan University
Department of Philosophy

Course Title	: Buddhism in the Contemporary World
Course Code	: PHI4399S
Recommended Study Year	: 2-4 Years
No. of Credits/Term	: 3
Mode of Tuition	: Sectional Approach
Class Contact Hours	: 3.5 hours/week
Category in Major Programme	: Programme Elective – Special Topics
Prerequisite(s)	: N/A
Co-requisite(s)	: N/A
Exclusion(s)	: N/A
Exemption Requirement(s)	: N/A

Brief Course Description

Buddhism is Asia's most widely spread and successful missionary indigenous religion. Originating in Northern India in the sixth century BCE, it was preached, practiced and supported by local lordships across the entire continent, from modern day Sri Lanka in the south to Mongolia in the north, from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east. The propagation of its doctrine, its message of liberation and its political and social models followed Asia's busiest trade routes, by ship across the Indian ocean to Indochina, and overland, along the Silk Road, through the great Central-Asian plains. But, most notably, Buddhism was introduced in new host social contexts through a process of adaptation and integration, often engaging with local existing religious traditions and cults and integrating their distinctive deities and practices into Buddhist doctrine. This process was not always successful in the long term and, for example, the practice of Buddhism entirely, and mysteriously, disappeared from its land of origin, India. Yet, it has also guaranteed the persistence over a period of nearly two thousand years of Buddhist communities across Asia, even through periods of harsh political repression. In large part, this success results from the adaptation of Buddhist doctrine and practices to local social and political contexts, which has led to the development of highly distinctive Buddhist traditions across the continent – like Japan's married clergy, Tibet's lay tantric masters or Thailand's forest monks. Nevertheless, Buddhism's flexibility and intrinsic ability to adapt to new socio-political contexts and to integrate preexisting, as well as new, doctrinal and intellectual trends, faced an unprecedented challenge with the rapid industrialization of Asia's societies in the nineteenth century, the growing Westernization of its customs in the twentieth century, and the fast paced digitalization and globalization of its communities in the last two decades. In a struggle to remain socially and spiritually relevant in its historical settings, contemporary Buddhism has similarly adapted to modern industrialized society, often recasting itself globally as a way of life, a philosophy and a source for psycho-physical techniques to best face and handle today's fast-paced life. But Buddhism has also reasserted its message and presence more locally by recalling and promoting messages of purity of tradition and adherence to past religious ideals. The Buddhism that most of us know today is the contemporary manifestation of this complex dynamic of historical, ideological and economic influences. Overall, whether observed in the form of localized traditions or globalized trends, Buddhism, in all its manifestations, is now facing challenges that question more than ever before its core values and direction.

Aims

This course aims to introduce students to the academic study of Buddhism, its history and doctrine, while also raising their awareness of the influence on various forms of this historically significant pan-Asian religious tradition of social, political and economic globalization. By means of a

preliminary understanding of Buddhist core principles – its theory of liberation, its cosmology and ethics – students will be presented with significant case studies of contemporary Buddhism drawn from different social and geographical contexts. Through the analysis of these selected cases, the students will have an opportunity to study the dynamics of adaptation to modernity and post-modernism adopted and implemented by different Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, by investigating these attempts of survival and promotion of an ancient religious tradition in a contemporary global setting, the students will also be able to explore the underlying tension between perpetration of tradition and orthodoxy, and the commercialization of Buddhism in name of its survival as a significant world religion.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the students will demonstrate:

- 1) A solid grounding in the doctrines and history of Buddhism, including its major doctrinal developments and regional adaptations in Southeast Asia and East Asia.
- 2) An appreciation of the historical and regional development of Buddhism in Asia and the West and its contemporary expressions as examined in the case studies, including its socio-political contexts.
- 3) A good understanding of how contemporary manifestations of Buddhist thought and practice presented in the case studies relate to classical doctrines, and the analytical tools to pursue such analysis for other forms of contemporary Buddhist practices.
- 4) An informed awareness of global Buddhism as introduced by the case studies, and a sense of possible future developments.

Indicative Content

The five weeks of class will be divided into two sections: 1) a preliminary two weeks of doctrinal and historical overview; and 2) three weeks of case study analysis.

- 1) Doctrinal and Historical Background
 - A. In the first week we will survey Buddhist doctrinal and historical developments over the first five centuries of its history. We will introduce and discuss core Buddhist doctrines (including the ‘Four Noble Truths’, ‘Karma and Rebirth’, ‘Not-Self’ and the ‘Eightfold Path’) and their social implications in ancient India.
 - B. In the second week, we will pursue the doctrinal and historical exploration by examining later Buddhist developments, focusing in particular on the rise of Mahāyāna and its philosophy, and of Vajrayāna and its practices, and the spread and reception of Buddhism through Southeast and Central Asia in the first millennia BCE, paying particular attention to the social and political implications of, and reactions to, the new doctrinal developments.
- 2) Case Studies: the case studies will offer an opportunity to examine how Buddhist doctrines and practices are adapting to the 21st century in specific contexts, including the historical background necessary for a good appreciation and understanding of the case study.
 - A. Renunciation and monasticism: the Thai Forest tradition in Thailand and abroad
 - B. The Path to Nirvāṇa or to Self Improvement? Buddhist Meditation practices in Western therapeutic settings
 - C. Buddhism, Nationalism and Identity: Sri Lanka and Burma
 - D. Compassion and Skilful Means, Socially Engaged Buddhism East and West: Taiwan’s CiJi and North American Buddhist Peace Fellowship.
 - E. Women and Buddhism: The Re-establishment of the Female Ordination Lineage in Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhisms.
 - F. Buddhist Revival: The “Reinvention” of Nepalese Monasticism and Buddhist Death Rituals in Mainland China.

Teaching Method

Lecture and class discussion, with use of audio-visual material and site visits (as possible) as a means to study and explore Buddhism in its contemporary manifestations.

Measurement of Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be expected to prepare readings by responding in writing to a list of questions of weekly readings. These responses will ensure the student's familiarity with the textual sources on which the class lectures and discussions will be based and will contribute towards the student's overall participation grade. [LO 1 and 2]
2. Students will be expected to participate in classroom discussion, in terms of contributing questions and observations during lectures, site visits and as part of small group discussions. [LO 3 and 4]
3. Students will take two class tests that will quantitatively and qualitatively assess their understanding of the material discussed in the preceding weeks. The first test will focus on Buddhism's historical and doctrinal developments, while the second will focus on the case studies (A and B, C and D, E and F). [LO 1, 2 and 3]
4. Students will write and submit a research paper of 1000-1500 words on a contemporary Buddhist case study of their choice that must nevertheless relate to at least one of the themes addressed in the class' case studies. [LO 1, 2, 3 and 4]

Assessment

1. Reading Responses – 50% of participation grade (15% of final grade). [LO 1 and 2]
2. Participation – 30% of final grade. [LO 3 and 4]
3. Two class tests – 40% of final grade. [LO 1, 2 and 3]
4. Research paper – 30% of final grade. [LO 1, 2, 3 and 4]

Required Readings

Engelmajer, P., *Buddhism: All that Matters*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2013.
McMahan, D. (ed.), *Buddhism in the Modern World*, Routledge, 2012.

Supplementary Background Readings

Gethin, R., *The foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 1998.
Williams, P., *Mahāyāna Buddhism: the Doctrinal Foundations. 2nd Edition*, Routledge, 2008.
Williams, P., *Buddhist Thought: a Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition. 2nd Edition*, Routledge, 2012.

In addition, specific scholarly articles related to the case studies will be required reading; these will be decided in late spring to ensure that the latest scholarship is included.

Important Notes

- (1) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (2) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person's work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student's own work”. Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity

and honesty.

- (3) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (4) To enhance students' understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course "Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness" is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>