

Area: humanities

The Buddha, his **Life** and Teaching

Fall, 2008

Mondays and Wednesdays, 5:30-6:50

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*One of the three largest religious traditions in the world, Buddhism also stands out as one with a single, known founder. The Buddha's teaching and the articulation of the religious tradition of Buddhism stem from the particular experience called his "enlightenment"—Buddha means "the enlightened one." We will examine this watershed moment and study how it animates his teaching. We will be able to see in what way Buddhism is a "religion"; each strong and unique religious tradition in some way redefines what religion is. How do enlightenment and nirvana describe "salvation"—better, liberation—in Buddhism? In some ways Buddhism presents a spiritual path, a way of life, **as**, precisely, a way of salvation (or liberation). How is this envisaged?*

*We will try to bring into consideration the Indian world in which the Buddha lived and see how new spiritual directions first sounded in the early Upanishads were taken up literally by the Buddha (desire as the impediment to liberation; the role of the guru; the ascetic path as replacing Brahmanic ritualism), changed (karma and rebirth) and utterly transformed (Brahma, atman). The Buddha rejected outright the Vedic world of ritual sacrifices ("karman") which propitiated the gods and brought prosperity to the patron of the sacrifice. He moved away from the importance of social rituals (also called karman, significant actions) rising out of clan and regional customs which later forms the basis for the celebrated ancient Indian law books and, instead, located the source of meaning of acts in the intentions of the individual human being. He thus created what was one of the earlier **ethical** readings of human life in world history. He founded social movements in his communities of monks and nuns and the laymen and women associated with them. And he gave unique form to incipient yoga movements and practices in ancient India, forming the unique heritage of Buddhist meditation. He himself once described his work as that of a physician—to determine the nature of the illness, to understand its causes, to ascertain whether it could be stopped, and to prescribe the means to put an end to it. The illness he identified was the pains and burdens of human life. His treatment of the illness was a spiritual path of disciplined moral action, meditation purifying consciousness, and wisdom—seeing things as they really are, apart from ego and desire.*

His teachings and the way of life they instituted spread to Sri Lanka and to Southeast Asia, later to China and through China to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and still later to Tibet. New forms sprung up, new understandings animated the ancient texts, new movements like Zen and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism were fashioned from the original inspirations a millennium and more after the death of the Buddha.

We will read Bhikkhu Nanamoli's compilation and translation of sections of the first Buddhist scripture, the Pali Tripitaka, which chronicle the biography of the Buddha and set out his early teaching. We will add to this a reading of the Sutta Nipata, one of the earliest collections of texts in the Pali Suttapitaka (the part of the Tripitaka devoted to "suttas" or talks) in order to see in a somewhat different form how the early teachings were passed on to others. Finally we will explore the way his message impacted women and men of his day as memorialized in the verses of the "Therigatha" and "Theragatha," snapshots of life stories, emotions, and enlightenment of these early followers of the Buddha way.

In a final, short unit we will pass from a focus on the written record to open an exploration into Buddhist art and architecture, concentrating on the earliest work in India and southeast Asia, and its reappearance in the very different artistic traditions of China.

Texts

- o Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*. Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka, 1972. Pariyatti BPS Editions, 2001. 1-928706-12-6.
- H. Saddhatissa, transl. *The Sutta Nipata*. Curzon Press, 1994. 0-7007-0181-8.
- Therigatha (verses of the elders [nuns]) and Theragatha (verses of the elder [monks]). Thanissaro Bhikkhu, transl. Photocopied from www.accesstoinsight.org.
- o Robert E. Fisher. *Buddhist Art and Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, 1993. 0-500-20265-6.

Components

1. **Discussion**, of course, is the substance of learning at Shimer. Some corollaries follow: first, attendance counts—the configuration of discussion changes as those present and absent change. Second, careful preparation ensures the value of the discussion time for all involved. The quantity of pages in each reading in this course will at times be substantial but certainly not massive—the issues sounded by the text call for some time to ponder. It will be important to make time to see clearly just what is being said (and perhaps why) as well as what is not being said. Third, while it is in the nature of things that some students will contribute more than others, those who prefer to remain silent cause all of us to miss their insights and contributions (even questions and confusions contribute!) and thus dilute the very learning process to which we are committed.

1. To facilitate the process of discussion, we shall depend on **focus statements**, short papers (usually more than one page and less than three full pages) designed to launch our conversation, generally by lifting out highlights in the text and exploring some of their implications by questions, by suggestions, by analysis. Please include in each protocol no fewer than **three explicit references to texts** plus comments, questions, etc. on each. (Note that this is **not** a paragraph or two presenting a single topic from the reading in order to jump-start the class's discussion.)

Failure to prepare and present material on the day for which you volunteer will be seriously reflected not only in the grade for the protocol but in your evaluation for the whole course. It is a basic breach of your role.

2. There will be a **final paper** from five to seven pages in length. Choose a topic, analyze what is said about it in specific parts of *The Life of the Buddha* as well as the *Sutta Nipata* and/or the *Buddhacarita*. Spend some time either comparing these themes to basic tenets of your own religious tradition or discuss how they retain (or have lost) currency in the contemporary western world. Raise questions, suggest interpretations, etc., like a protocol. (It is not meant as a thesis or any kind of final statement.) What I look for (and grade) in the paper is (1) **serious review** of the pertinent material, and (2) a more sophisticated reading thanks to our work together during the semester.

Procedures and policies

1. **Absences.**—Three absences are permitted. More than three absences will make you subject to mandatory withdrawal. After the withdrawal date, you will face the choice of submitting a protocol-like paper for each class missed or receiving an F for the course.

2. **Deadlines**

a. You are expected to present focus statements on the date for which you volunteer. If you are incapacitated, find someone to switch dates with you or who will copy and present the paper you have prepared. To do this is your responsibility. The penalty for missing a protocol is to submit one in writing within two classes after the one missed; you shall also receive no grade for the missed protocol..

b. The deadline for the **final paper** will be determined in class. No paper will be accepted after that date.

3. **Housekeeping**

a. **Lateness** obviously disrupts conversation; excessive lateness—in minutes or in frequency—will count as an absence.

b. **Eating** is not permitted in classrooms.

c. Please take care of **biological needs** between classes; leave a class during discussion *only* in emergency.

4. **Evaluations**

- a. class discussion: 50%
- b. focus statements: 25%
- c. final paper: 25%

Readings

Aug. 25	Michael Pye, <i>The Buddha</i> (photocopied), 1-19, Nanamoli, xi-xviii, 1-9
Aug. 27	Nanamoli, 10-29, struggle for enlightenment
Sept. 1	Labor Day
Sept. 3	Pye, 23-35, Nanamoli, 22-33: enlightenment
Sept. 8	Nanamoli, 30-69: after the enlightenment
Sept. 10	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 1-15 (## 1.1-1.7)
Sept. 15	Nanamoli, 70-108
Sept. 17	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 16-30 (## 1.8-2.4)
Sept. 22	Nanamoli, 109-123, 129-139, 141-143, 147-150, 151-155.
Sept. 24	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 31-45 (## 2.5-2.14)
Sept. 29	Nanamoli, 157-165, 170-171, 173-181, 182-204.
Oct. 1	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 46-68 (## 3.1-7)
Oct. 6	Nanamoli, 206-240, 246-256.
Oct. 8	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 69-90 (## 3.8-12)
Oct. 13	Nanamoli, 240-246, 257-272, 273-285.
Oct. 15	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 91-113 (## 4.1-16)
Oct. 20	Nanamoli, 286-316; Pye, 79-87
Oct. 22	<i>Sutta Nipata</i> , 114-133 (chapter 5)
Oct. 27	Nanamoli, 316-346, Pye, 88-101.
Oct. 29	Suttas to laypersons; kings
Nov. 3	Suttas to laypersons, kings (cont.). <i>Therigatha</i> , I
Nov. 5	<i>Therigatha</i> , II, <i>Theragatha</i> , I
Nov. 10	<i>Theragatha</i> , II
Nov. 12	Life of the Buddha in Art, I
Nov. 17	Life of the Buddha in Art, II
Nov. 24	Life of the Buddha in Art, III