

Buddhism in the Contemporary World

REL 314; ASIAN_LC 390
Spring 2019, Lacy Hall 303



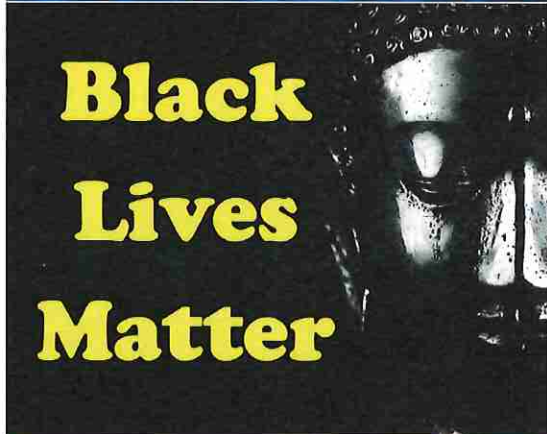
Professor Sarah Jacoby

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Office Hours: Thurs 1-3 or by appointment

Course Description:

Some say America is currently undergoing a process of “Buddhification,” meaning that Buddhism is cropping up everywhere, even in places one would least expect. Tech industry billionaires tout Buddhist mindfulness techniques at the annual Wisdom 2.0 conference, and Google offers mindfulness training courses taught by a Zen abbot. Mindfulness is also being presented as a panacea for those suffering from physical and mental pain, readily available in American hospital settings and psychological counseling services. Buddha images too can be found far from Buddhist temples—at the hip restaurant Buddha-Bar located in many cities around the world one can sip cocktails and dine before a massive Buddha statue while listening to lounge music. And in the Chicago area, one encounters Buddha head sculptures positioned on the ground in parks, by roads, and even in public school playgrounds as part of the Ten Thousand Ripples art project.





How, and why, did aspects of Buddhism enter all of these different social locations? Why does Buddhism receive a pass more often than other religions by the “spiritual but not religious” crowd? Can Buddhism be secular? In what ways is Buddhism compatible with science, and can Buddhist practices be proven effective using scientific methods? Can paying better attention by means of Buddhist meditation practices liberate us from suffering caused by digital distraction? In what ways can Buddhist articulations of interdependence, no self, and compassion be resources for addressing racial and structural injustice, even as sexual abuse, racism, and trans/homophobia continue to traumatize members of some Buddhist communities? These are some of the many questions we will consider through readings by some of the most creative Buddhist leaders, critics, and consumers of our time.

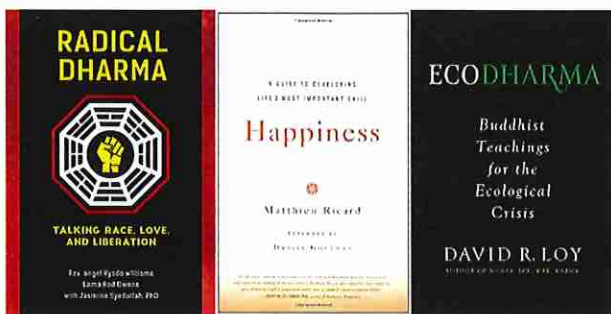


Learning Objectives: By the end of this course, you will be able to...

- Recognize the key features of modern Buddhism
- Critically assess the ways in which Buddhist ideas & images are used in contemporary information sources such as websites, apps, TV/film, YouTube, and so forth
- Evaluate the benefits and the costs of the widespread application of Buddhist mindfulness techniques to secular pursuits, in particular in the contexts of business and medicine
- Consider the ways in which Buddhist conceptions are contributing to social justice and environmentalism
- Gain confidence in speaking through active participation in class and in research and analytical writing through writing assignments

Required Books (available at Norris book store):

1. Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006) ISBN-978-0-316-16725-3
2. Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016) \$12.95, ISBN-13: 978-1623170981
3. David Loy, *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2019) ISBN-978-1614293828



Course Requirements:

1. Attendance and class participation 23%:
Excused absences must be arranged prior to class. More than four unexcused absences will result in course failure.
2. Journal Writing 27%:
Once a week write the equivalent of 1 single-spaced page responding to key themes in the week's readings (not summarizing the reading). The professor will often suggest key questions and themes to write about via email. Due by 10pm on the night before the relevant class (either Mon 10pm or Wed 10pm).
3. Blog Contributions 10%:
We have our own blog page, accessible via Canvas, on the Yellowdig app. Contribute your own links to relevant video, pictures, & websites! Post questions and ideas about Buddhism in the Contemporary World, and respond to your classmates' posts. On the class day that you don't submit a journal entry, by 10pm post one discussion question to my post pinned at the top of the Yellowdig feed. You

accrue points for posting in Yellowdig, which count toward your course grade (see points breakdown in Yellowdig).

4. Multimedia Presentation 15%:

Engage with the subject of Buddhism in the Contemporary World through your own investigation of one of our class topics. Presentations will be done during the last week of classes. Post on Yellowdig periodically to give classmates hints at what you're discovering. Here are some ideas:

1. Try some meditation apps and report on your experiences! Here are some [ideas](#) of popular ones. See [this New Yorker article](#) about Headspace, or try Gunatillake's app Buddhify. (Note: these apps are not free so this project idea requires buying a/some of these apps.)

2. Which companies are using Buddhist iconography or concepts to sell things? What logos, brands, & advertisements online or in stores incorporate Buddhism? Collect as many images as you can and analyze how Buddhist concepts are being used.

3. What are the key conversation topics in popular American Buddhist magazines (such as *Tricycle*, *Lion's Roar*, *Buddhadharma*, *Mindful*, and others)? What is being advertised alongside these articles?

4. In what ways are Buddhist concepts, leaders, & institutions appearing in contemporary mainstream media?

5. How are issues of diversity and inclusion, particularly about race/ethnicity, coming up in contemporary conversations about Buddhism? Draw on Buddhist magazines, blogs, YouTube videos, and more to get a sense of what conversations are happening now.

6. Film—how do Buddhist ideas, rituals, priests, and laypeople appear on the silver screen? How have these depictions changed over time?

7. Music- can you find popular music that promotes Buddhist themes? Hint, yes→check

out Beastie Boys song, “Bodhisattva Vow.” How are musicians, including performers in Asia, bringing Buddhist themes into contemporary music?

8. Contemporary Buddhist icons—who’s your 20-21st century Buddhist hero or heroine? Who would you like to learn more about? Become the classroom expert on: The Dalai Lama, The Karmapa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi (a fallen heroine?), Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, angel Kyodo Williams, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Bimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Bernie Glassman, Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratne, Taixu, or someone else.

5. Final Paper (6-7 pages) 25%:

Either develop your presentation into an academic research paper, OR choose one class theme, perhaps one you wrote a journal entry about, and develop that into a research paper.

A paper proposal (worth 5%) is due on **Tues May 28** by 8pm, including a paragraph describing your paper topic, proposed thesis, and a bibliography including at least 6 relevant sources (3 of which can be syllabus readings).

Your final paper (worth 20%) is due on **Monday June 10**, uploaded onto Canvas by 8pm. It should be: 6-7 pages Times New Roman 12-point font, and should have 1-inch margins, a title, bibliography, and footnotes using [Chicago Manual of Style](#) formatting.

Note: Grades for late assignments (including journal entries) will be reduced ½ letter grade per day (5 points out of 100).



Class Laptop Policy:



↑ Let this not be you!

This is a discussion-based 300-level seminar, and conversation is very important for learning. It is difficult to pay attention to what is being said in class when new emails and instant messages and Facebook updates etc. are appearing on your screen, or on the screen in front of you. ***For this reason, no laptop use is permitted in class unless you are briefly referring to electronic course readings.*** Additionally, cell phones should be out of sight and muted for the duration of class.

Grading:

A is 93 to 100; A- is 90-92.9; B+ is 88-89.9; B is 83-87.9; B- is 80-82.9; C+ is 78-79.9; C is 73-77.9; C- is 70-72.9; D is 60-69.9; lower than 60 is failing.

Disability Support:

Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with [AccessibleNU](#) (847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

College Policies:

Academic dishonesty of any sort, including plagiarism, will result in an “F” for an assignment, and may result in an “F” for the course and your dismissal from the university. For further information, visit <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html> and consult the Northwestern University Student Handbook at <http://www.northwestern.edu/handbook/>.

Weekly Schedule:

Week 1: **What is this course about?**

Tues April 2 Introduction to the course

Thurs April 4

Assignments:

1. Thich Nhat Hahn, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Harmony Books, 1998), Part One: The Four Noble Truths, pp. 3-46; Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma pp. 257-261.

Week 2: **What is modern Buddhism? How has it been shaped by racism? What is mindfulness and how has it changed over time?**

Tues April 9

Assignments:

1. David McMahan, "The Spectrum of Tradition and Modernism" (2008), pp. 27-59.
2. Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism" (2016), pp. 35-56.
3. Funie Hsu, "[We've been here all along](#)", *Buddhadharma*, May 17, 2017

Thurs April 11

Assignments:

1. Strong ed., *Satipaṭṭhānasutta (Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness)*
2. Richard King, "'Paying Attention' in a Digital Economy: Reflections on the Role of Analysis and Judgement Within Contemporary Discourses of Mindfulness and Comparisons with Classical Buddhist Accounts of *Sati*" (2016), pp. 27-45.

Week 3: **What is happiness according to Buddhist thought?**

Tues April 16

Assignments:

1. Watch Matthieu Ricard's TED talk on "[The Habits of Happiness](#)"
2. Read Ricard's *Happiness*, selections

By 8pm upload onto Canvas a paragraph description of your preferred the multimedia presentation topic

Thurs April 18

Assignments:

1. Ricard's *Happiness*, selections.

Week 4: **Is Mindfulness Good Medicine?**

Tues April 23: Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Assignments:

1. Read Jeff Wilson, "Medicalizing Mindfulness: How is Mindfulness Modified to fit a Scientific and Therapeutic Culture?", *Mindful America* (2014), pp. 75-103.
2. Watch John Kabat-Zinn talk on Youtube, [Mindfulness – Full Catastrophe Living](#) (2:40 min)
3. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013 [1990]), intro (pp. xvii-lxv), ch. 21 & 22 (353-385)
4. check out the [Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society](#) at UMass Medical School website

Thurs April 25: Guest speaker Dr. Robin Nusslock, Department of Psychology, Northwestern U.



Assignments:

1. Ricard, Matthieu, Antoine Lutz, and Richard J. Davidson. "Mind of the meditator." *Scientific American* 311, no. 5 (2014): 38-45.
2. check out Willoughby Britton's lab at Brown U., [The Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory](#) and watch her TEDx talk "[Why a Neuroscientist would study meditation](#)"

Week 5: **Why is the tech industry (and corporate America more broadly) interested in mindfulness?**

Tues April 30

Assignments:

1. Read Chade-Meng Tan, *Search Inside Yourself* (2012), intro (pp. 1-8; ch. 2 pp.

- 29-50; ch. 6 pp. 131-157; ch. 9 pp. 229-241.
2. Check out this website: Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute: <https://siyli.org>
 3. Watch Wisdom 2.0 video “[Chief Mindfulness Officers in Organizations](#)”
 4. Ron Purser and David Loy, “[Beyond McMindfulness](#)”
 5. Ron Purser, “[The Branding of Mindfulness](#)”; “[How to be Mindful of McMindfulness](#)”
 6. Peter Doran, “[McMindfulness: Buddhism as sold to you by neoliberals](#)”

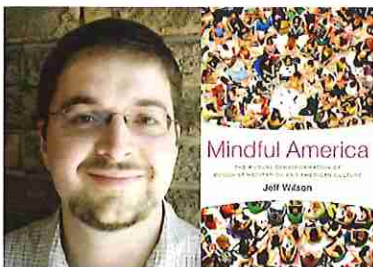
Thurs May 2

Assignments:

1. Learn [about](#) Wisdom 2.0 and listen to the program [highlights](#)
2. Healey, Kevin. "Disrupting wisdom 2.0: The quest for “mindfulness” in Silicon Valley and beyond." *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 4, no. 1 (2015): 67-95.
3. explore former Google ethicist Tristan Harris’s [Center for Humane Technology](#) website; scroll down and watch Tristan’s TED talk

Week 6: Is Buddhism Secular?

Tues May 7 Guest lecture by Jeff Wilson, Professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies, U. of Waterloo



Assignments:

1. Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America*, selections.

Thurs May 9

Assignments:

1. Stephen Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain*

World (Yale UP, 2017), chapters “A Secular Buddhism,” pp. 75-107; “Rebirth: A case for Buddhist Agnosticism,” pp. 111-125; “The Other Enlightenment Project,” pp. 145-150

2. Explore the [Secular Buddhist Association](#) website

Week 7: How can Buddhism contribute to social and racial justice work?

Tues May 14

Assignments:

1. Vesely-Flad, Rima. "Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism." (2017), 9 pages
2. Spend some time exploring (read, watch some clips) of [The Buddhist Peace Fellowship](#)
3. Rev. angel kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, Jasmine Syedullah, PhD, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (2016), selections.

Thurs May 16: A conversation about Radical Dharma led by Aarti Tejuja, Director of the Office of Social Engagement, Shambhala International, and Tameka Lawson, community activist and yoga teacher

Assignment:

1. *Radical Dharma*, selections.

Week 8: How can Buddhism contribute to environmentalism?

Tues May 21

Assignments:

1. David Loy, *Ecodharma*, selections.

Thurs May 23

Assignments:

1. David Loy, *Ecodharma*, selections.

Week 9: Student Presentations

Tues May 28 multimedia presentations I

Assignments:

[By 8pm paper proposal due uploaded to Canvas](#)

Thurs May 30 multimedia presentations II

[Mon June 10 8pm final paper due uploaded to Canvas](#)



Course Policies:

- The conceptualization, structuring, lectures, teaching modalities, pedagogical approaches, scholarly analysis, and framing of this course are the intellectual property of the instructor who designed this course. Thus, posting syllabus, handouts, PowerPoints, assignments sheets, recordings of any kind, and other course materials to student coursework sharing sites on the Internet, to social media sites, or to other media platforms without the instructor's explicit permission constitutes an academic integrity violation and will be treated as such.
- Electronic video and/or audio recording is not permitted during class unless the student obtains explicit permission from the instructor. If permission is granted, any distribution of the recording is prohibited. Students with specific electronic recording accommodations authorized by AccessibleNU [Office of Special Learning Services <http://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/>] do not require instructor permission; however, the instructor must be notified of any such accommodation prior to each and every recording. Any distribution of such recordings is strictly prohibited.

