

# REL 151a

## The Buddha: His Life and Teachings

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Brandeis Summer Session II  
M, T, Th, 1:30–3:50 PM.

### **I. Course Description**

This course will introduce students to the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni, the man known after his enlightenment as the Buddha. We will explore the story of the Buddha's life, his historical context, and the basic tenets of his thought. We will grapple with his thought historically and constructively to make sense of his insights into ethics, metaphysics, and the nature of human existence. Then, in the final two weeks, we will consider the ways his teachings were interpreted by Buddhists in the centuries after his death: first, in the poetry of early Buddhist nuns and in the scholastic philosophy of the Abhidhamma; then, in the Mahāyāna, or the so-called 'Great Vehicle,' which would go on to profoundly influence the religions of India, Tibet, and East Asia.

### **II. Course Materials**

The following books will be made available for purchase and held on reserve at the library:

Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*  
Rupert Gettin, *Sayings of the Buddha*  
Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*  
Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom*

Other readings will be uploaded to the course website or made available in class.

### **III. Course Requirements**

In addition to regular attendance and spirited, respectful participation in class discussion, students will be required to write a midterm and a final paper. Instructions are given below. Class participation will count for 30% of the final grade, the midterm paper will count for 30%, and the final take-home exam 40%.

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

## IV. Schedule

### Week 1: The Buddha's Life

- Monday**      **Four Noble Truths, Five Aggregates, Eightfold Path**  
Introduction to the course: basic categories. In-class reading: 'The First Discourse,' Bhikku Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, 75–78; 'The Characteristic of Nonsself,' *In the Buddha's Words*, 341–342.
- Tuesday**      **The Historical Buddha and the Legendary Buddha**  
Rahula's 'The Buddha,' *What the Buddha Taught*, xv–xvi. Gethin, 'The Buddha: The Story of the Awakened One,' *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 7–34.
- Thursday**      **The 20th-Century Buddha**  
Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*.

### Week 2: The Buddha's Teachings

- Monday**      **The Buddha on Karma and Selflessness**  
'Introduction' to Gethin's *Sayings of the Buddha*; 'The Analysis of Acts,' 'The Chapter on Causes,' 'The Chapter on the Aggregates,' and 'From the Section of Threes' (the 'Kālāma Sutta') from Gethin's *Sayings*; Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, Chapter III.
- Tuesday**      **The Buddha on Meditation**  
'The Fruits of the Ascetic Life' and 'Establishing Mindfulness,' from Gethin's *Sayings*; Sarah Shaw, 'Early Buddhist Guidance on Meditation,' *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation*, 18–40; Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, Chapter VII.
- Thursday**      **The Buddha on Enlightenment**  
'The Buddha's Final Nibbana,' from Gethin's *Sayings*; Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, Chapter IV.

### Week 3: What the Buddha Thought

- Monday**      **Karma in Context**  
Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought*, 1–74.
- Tuesday**      **Selflessness, Causality, and Love**  
Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought*, 75–143.
- Thursday**      **Nirvana, Language, and the Buddha's Style**  
Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought*, 144–201.

## **Midterm Paper Due: Friday, July 27th by 12 Midnight**

For the midterm paper (3–5 pages), choose one of the suttas we read in week 2 and present its main argument, with reference to the text: What point is the Buddha trying to make? What aspect of the human psyche is he elucidating? How do his words serve to make his point? Cite Gombrich as support.

## **Week 4: The Afterlife of the Buddha's Teaching I: Poetry and Scholasticism**

- Monday**      **The Buddhist Community (Sangha)**  
Gethin, 'The Buddhist Community: Monks, Nuns, and Lay Followers,' from *Foundations*, 85–111; 'Introduction' to *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, selections from the poems.
- Tuesday**      **Buddhist Scholasticism (Abhidhamma)**  
Gethin, 'The Abhidharma: The Higher Teaching,' from *Foundations*, 202–223; Heim's 'Introduction,' *The Forerunner of All Things*, 1–33.
- Thursday**      **Action and Intention: Scholasticism in Practice**  
Heim's 'Constructing Experience: Intention in the Suttas' in *The Forerunner of All Things*, 34–82; short selection from Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (Chapter XIX, Bhikku Ñāṇamoli's translation, 621–630).

## **Week 5: The Afterlife of the Buddha's Teaching II: The Mahāyāna or 'Great Vehicle'**

- Monday**      **Universal Salvation: Parables of Skillful Means**  
The *Lotus Sūtra* (BDK), chapters 1–3; Stephen Teiser's and Jacqueline Stone's 'Interpreting the *Lotus Sūtra*,' in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, 1–24; .
- Tuesday**      **The Buddha's Incalculable Lifespan**  
The *Lotus Sūtra* (BDK), chapters 15–16; Carl Bielefeldt's 'Expedient Devices, the One Vehicle, and the Life Span of the Buddha,' in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*.
- Thursday**      **Emptiness and Non-Duality**  
The *Diamond* and the *Heart Sūtras*, in Conze's *Buddhist Wisdom*.

## **Final Take-Home Exam Due: Friday, August 10th by 12 Noon**

Respond to **two** of the following prompts in a total of 5–8 pages:

- 1) In his 'First Discourse,' the Buddha tells us he struggled to find a middle way between pleasure and pain when he practiced asceticism. How is this middle way portrayed in the narratives we read about his life, and how is it related to the Buddha's philosophical insights into human existence? You may draw on both the suttas and Hesse.
- 2) What kind of access do we have to facts about the historical Buddha and his intellectual context, and how important do you think these facts are to the study of Buddhist thought? The Mahāyāna sūtras were almost certainly not spoken by the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Does this make them any less Buddhist?
- 3) Richard Gombrich entitles his book *What the Buddha Thought*. As he notes in his preface, this is a play on the title of Walpola Sri Rahula's famous *What the Buddha Taught*. Do you think there is a difference between what the Buddha *thought* and what he *taught*? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 4) On the basis of our readings of the Buddha's suttas and Maria Heim's discussion of intention, how do you understand the role of action in constituting the human being?
- 5) The *Lotus Sūtra* purports to supplant the teachings of Early Buddhism with the teachings of the Mahāyāna. What are the differences between the Mahāyāna (as represented by the *Lotus*, *Diamond*, and *Heart Sūtras*) and Early Buddhism? What are the similarities? What do you think of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim?