

9-2002

RELS 233.01: Traditions of Buddhist Meditations

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Sponberg, Alan, "RELS 233.01: Traditions of Buddhist Meditations" (2002). *Syllabi*. 3241.
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Religious Studies 233: Traditions of Buddhist Meditations

SEC. 01 302

Course Objective: To gain a critical and experiential understanding of the place of meditation in the Buddhist Tradition using the phenomenological approach to the study of religion coupled with techniques of participant observation drawn from the discipline of anthropology.

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Some Key Assumptions:

Why have an academic course dealing with Buddhist meditation?

Students taking Biology 101 typically also take the corresponding lab course Biology 102 where they have a hands-on experience of the scientific method as it is applied in scientific research. Year after year, a new batch of students works it way through a standard set of basic experiments and observation, duly recording their findings in their lab reports. No one expects that this lab work will result in any new scientific discoveries nor that the students will become professional biologists as a result of what they learn. The point of taking a lab course is purely pedagogical: Students learn much more about the scientific method and about what it is that scientists do—and why they do it—by having their own hands-on experience in the lab. And this is knowledge they cannot gain by attending the lecture course alone, a fact well recognized in the Natural Science Perspective of our General Education Requirement, which specifies that all students must take at least one science course with a lab course experience.

While the practice of Buddhism is very different from the practice of Western Science, both disciplines employ a systematic and empirical method, (although they do define the term “empirical” somewhat differently). Science applies its method to an exploration of the external, observable world. Whereas Buddhism applies its rather different method to an exploration of how the subjective, observing mind itself works. Just as one will better understand the scientific method developed by scientists by actually employing that method and recording the results, so one will also better understand what it is that Buddhists do by experimentally and critically adopting basic elements of their method of observing the mind.

Perhaps another analogy is also useful. In music appreciation courses and choir classes students study the sacred music of Christianity—not with the expectation that hearing or performing this music will make them Christians, but because doing so will give them a deeper and more experiential sense of the depth and beauty of this important expression of human culture. We will approach our experiments with, and appreciation of, a selected set of Buddhist meditation practices in much the same spirit.

Isn't this like using an academic course to teach people how to pray?

No—in several key respects. The exercises and techniques we will be experimenting with in this class do not involve petitioning or addressing any sort of divine being, whether theistic or polytheistic. They are simple, straightforward practices for observing how the mind functions and how we all have the ability to use this wonderful—and often frustrating—tool more effectively. These exercises do come out of the earliest phase of the Buddhist tradition, but putting them into practice does not entail or require any commitment to Buddhist beliefs and values. They work in quite the same manner for non-Buddhists as for Buddhists. Buddhists do assert that these exercises constitute an effective practice for promoting wisdom and compassion as well as coming to know oneself better. These are truth claims, and thus they may be wrong, even if well-intended. In the best spirit of humanistic inquiry, we will use our “laboratory” to test these true claims to the best of our ability. Whatever the outcome of our experiment, we will learn much about why the Buddhist tradition places so much importance on working directly on one's own mind. and we will also explore some of the many techniques and practices for doing that work devised by Buddhists over the 2,500-year history of the tradition. You are asked only to enter into this experiment with an open mind. There is no expectation (or even likelihood) that doing these exercises will “make you a Buddhist.” Nor do you need to attain Buddhist enlightenment to pass this course!

TRADITIONS OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION

This course offers a critical and experiential approach to understanding the role of meditation in the Buddhist tradition. As an *optional* supplement to RELS 232: Introduction to Buddhism, the course is intended **for students who are concurrently enrolled in RELS 232 or who have taken that course previously**. It is not possible to take this course without taking the Introduction to Buddhism course or its equivalent.

Books Available at the Bookstore:

Kamalashila: *Meditation—the Buddhist Way of Tranquility and Insight*
Tara Bennett-Goleman: *Emotional Alchemy*

We will also have reading assignments from the **Wildmind** website (see below), which was developed by Bodhipaksha, my former Teaching Assistant and collaborator, with funding from the American Council of Learned Societies.

Course Requirements: You will earn a traditional letter grade for RELS 233 based on:

- **Class attendance:** This is very important given that we meet only once a week. Three missed classes will result automatically in an F for the course. Two missed classes will reduce your course grade one full letter. **If you must miss a class**, arrange to attend the parallel class for the other section of the course. Both meet from 3:10-5, one on Monday and the other on Wednesday.
- **Weekly reports:** Each week you will write and submit a one-page report summarizing your current experience with the meditation exercises. These will be returned with comments and a grade, and you will re-submit them at the end of the semester, so keep them safe.
- **Field-trip reports:** see below

Field-Trips: There are two field-trip exercises required for this course, which together are the equivalent of the third weekly class hour. Note that you must complete both field-trip exercises to pass the course.

The **first field-trip** involves visiting—alone or with others from the class—one of the local Buddhist groups active in Missoula and writing a report (300-500 words) on your experience. You will arrange and schedule this visit at your own convenience, using the handout I will provide with contact information for the different Missoula groups.

The **second Field-trip** experience involves attending a Buddhist meditation retreat of at least one weekend (Friday evening-Sunday afternoon) in length and writing a report (500-750 words) on your experience. I have arranged with one of the local Buddhist groups to offer a retreat especially designed for participants in this course—on Nov. 1-3 (**Fee: \$80**) at the University's Lubrecht Forest Research Facility. I will also consider your request to attend some other Buddhist retreat independent of this course, but only if you check with me first and if I am satisfied that it will give you a comparable experience. Since the November retreat is designed especially for students taking this course (and also because the cost is much lower than most comparable week-end retreats), I will strongly urge you to choose to do it rather than another.

See the attached handout on **Writing Weekly and Field-trip Reports**

Course Website: <http://www.cas.umt.edu/religious/medbud>
WildMind Buddhist Meditation Website: <http://www.wildmind.org>

RELS 233: Class & Reading Schedule

All Reading Assignment to be completed **before** the class assigned (except for Week 2).

Week	Dates	Topics	Reading Assignments
1	M: 9/2 W: 9/4	***No Class***	The class time we miss will be made up on the field-trip weekend.
2	M: 9/9 W: 9/11	Introduction Basics of Meditation	Kamalashila: pp. 3 - 9 Bennett: Chapt. 1-2 Wildmind: "About Meditation" and below
3	M: 9/16 W: 9/18	Working with the Breath Posture	Kamalashila: pp. 121 - 145 Bennett: Chapt. 3 Wildmind: "Posture Workshop" **
4	M: 9/23 W: 9/25	Mindfulness of Breathing	Kamalashila: pp.13 - 22 **"Why Meditate" In RELS 232 FacPac **"The Practice of Recollection" ditto (Also electronic reserve on ERes) Wildmind: "Mindfulness of Breathing" **
5	M: 9/30 W: 10/2	Meditation in Everyday Life Walking Meditation	Kamalashila: pp. 37 - 51; 231-233 Bennett: Chapt. 4 Wildmind; "Walking Meditation" **
6	M: 10/7 W: 10/9	Loving Kindness 1 (Metta-bhavana)	"Facets of Lovingkindness" (electronic reserve on ERes) Bennett: Chapt. 5 Wildmind: "Developing Loving-kindness" **
7	M: 10/14 W: 10/16	Loving Kindness 2 (Metta-bhavana)	Kamalashila: pp. 23 - 36 Bennett: Chapt. 6-7
8	M: 10/21 W: 10/23	Hindrances to Meditation	Kamalashila: pp. 51 - 60 Bennett: Chapt. 8-9
9	M: 10/28 W: 10/30	Antidotes to the Hindrances	Kamalashila: pp. 237-262 Bennett: Chapt. 10-11
	11/1-3	Lubrecht Retreat (Fri-Sun)	
10	M: 11/4 W: 11/6	Levels of Consciousness	Kamalashila: pp. 63 - 66 Bennett: Chapt. 12-13
	M: 11/11	Veterans' Day Holiday	no Monday Class
11 note date changes	W: 11/13 M: 11/18	Access Concentration	Kamalashila: pp. 66 - 70 Bennett: Chapt. 14-15
12	W: 11/20 M: 11/25	Working in Dhyana	Kamalashila: pp.161 - 176 Bennett: Chapt. 16
	W: 11/27	Thanksgiving Holiday	no Wednesday class
13	M: 12/2 W: 12/4	Cultivating the Dhyanic Factors	Kamalashila: pp. 70 - 99 Bennett: Chapt. 17-18
14	M: 12/9 W: 12/11	Samatha and Vipassana meditation	Kamalashila: pp. 177 - 189 Bennett: Chapt. 19
15		No Final Exam	

** Includes also the web pages attached to the assigned page.