



BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

PHIL213.001 Sample Syllabus

Based on course taught in 2023

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



COURSE INFORMATION

Credit Hours: 3

Pre or Co-Requisites: None

Target Audience: All undergraduates

Meeting Pattern: M/W/F – 11:15-12:05pm

Instructional Format: In person

Classroom: Caldwell Hall 105



INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: Logan Mitchell (they/them)

UNC Email Address: lmittell@unc.edu

Office Location: Caldwell 105C (in the tower!)

Office Hours: In person: Mondays, 1-3pm; Fridays, 10-11am



COURSE CONTENT

Course Description

This is a course on Buddhist philosophy. We will explore key topics in Buddhist philosophy, centered around the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, with a special focus on Buddhist ethical theory and practice. As a philosophy course, we will engage critically with texts—interpreting ideas, evaluating arguments, and developing skills in philosophical analysis and writing. In Buddhist traditions, however, philosophical inquiry is aimed ultimately at liberating beings from suffering. As such, we will also consider in what ways (if any) Buddhist ideas might be applied to students' own lives in ways that align with their values and background beliefs. Readings include primary sources from both early Buddhist discourses and Mahāyāna texts, as well as contemporary interpreters. The writings of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh will serve as a guiding thread throughout the course.

Course Texts & Materials

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*
 - Available at the UNC store or anywhere books are sold
- All other readings available on Canvas

Classroom Expectations

- You may use laptops or tablets to take notes but are expected to pay attention in class (duh!!).
- There will regularly be “screen-free” moments in class, in which all students must immediately close their laptops and put all devices away for minutes at a time when note-taking is not necessary (e.g., during discussion, during a mindfulness practice, when I am making an important point, etc.). If you do not comply with a screen free moment (e.g., you are not paying attention or you are taking a timed quiz for another class) I will deduct 1 attendance point from your attendance grade (i.e., 1% of your final grade)
- Philosophy is in large part about *arguing*, which can help us get a deeper understanding of our own views and those of others. So, please feel free to express disagreement, to invite critical reflection of certain



views and assumptions, and to speak your mind freely while bearing in mind the value of doing so with compassion and respect. It's okay for us to disagree, and for you to disagree with me!

- Throughout this course, we will at times be discussing sensitive and distressing subjects like your inevitable death. In order to help us engage with these topics together with resilience and respect, I will do my best to curate a space that is trauma-sensitive and mindful while also recognizing that sometimes a bit of discomfort can be beneficial for our own personal growth (though too much distress can inhibit proper learning).

Course Goals & Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Explain** basic Buddhist philosophical commitments, in particular the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.
2. **Critically evaluate** key claims in Buddhist philosophy.
3. **Determine** in what ways (if any) Buddhist philosophical ideas can be applied to one's daily life to help one suffer less in a way that aligns with one's own background beliefs and commitments.
4. **Defend** an original philosophical argument on a Buddhist philosophical issue.



COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & SPECIFICATIONS

This course will not be graded based on points, but instead will use **specifications grading**. You will decide in advance which letter grade you are aiming for at the beginning of the semester, and work towards that grade by completing the relevant assignments to the specified level of mastery.

With specifications grading, each assignment receives a grade of either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. For most assignments, you can either revise and resubmit unsatisfactory assignments or complete a new assignment to still get the grade you want. Each assignment has a list of specifications – for most, you must meet all of them for satisfactory performance. For your final paper, you must achieve a specific number depending on which grade you want in the course.

There is evidence that specifications grading increases student motivation, clarifies standards, and improves learning. However, it sets the bar for each assignment high, and you will likely have to work harder for an A than in other classes. This might make the course slightly more stressful, but hopefully this stress is ultimately in service of deeper learning and growth (a moderate amount of challenge-related stress is actually very beneficial for learning!).



Feedback from past students has been overwhelmingly positive about specs grading!

PLEASE NOTE: Canvas is not set up ideally for specifications grading. You will be able to see how many assignments you have passed/failed, but you will have to keep track yourself of how you are doing with regard to each bundle. I have created a possible template for you to copy [here](#).

Grading Bundles

Grade	Attendance	Daily Reading Responses (Equivalent of 6 pages)	Unit Exams	Reflection Journals	On-Call Days	Final Paper (equivalent of at least 6 pages)	Final Paper Oral Defense	Collaborative Presentation
A	No more than 4 unexcused absences	Pass 15/21 daily reading responses	Get at least 90% on each unit exam	Pass 11/13 reflection journals	Pass 3 On Call Days	Pass paper prep and final paper with all 25 specifications plus 3 bonus specifications	Pass final paper presentation with all specifications	Pass group project with all specifications
A-	No more than 5 unexcused absences	Pass 14 daily reading responses	Get at least 90% on each unit exam	Pass 10 reflection journals	Pass 3 On Call Days	Pass paper prep and final paper with 25 specifications	Pass final paper presentation with all specifications	Pass group project with all specifications
B+	No more than 6 unexcused absences	Pass 13 daily reading responses	Get at least 80% on each unit exam	Pass 8 reflection journals	Pass 2 On Call Days	Pass paper prep and final paper with 23 specifications	Pass final paper presentation with all specifications	Pass group project with all specifications
B	No more than 7 unexcused absences	Pass 11 daily reading responses	Get at least 80% on each unit exam	Pass 6 reflection journals	Pass 2 On Call Days	Pass final paper with 20 specs	Pass final paper presentation with all specifications	Pass group project with all specifications
B-	No more than 8 unexcused absences	Pass 9 daily reading responses	Get at least 80% on each unit exam	Pass 5 reflection journals	Pass 1 On Call Days	Pass final paper with 17 specs	Pass final paper presentation with all specifications	N/A
C	No more than 9 unexcused absences	Pass 7 daily reading responses	Get at least 70% on each unit exam	Pass 4 reflection journals	N/A	Pass final paper with 15 specs	N/A	N/A



D	No more than 9 unexcused absences	Pass 5 daily reading responses	Get at least 60% on each unit exam	Pass 3 reflection journals	N/A	Pass final paper with 10 specs	N/A	N/A
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GRADING SCALE: MORE DETAILS

I will calculate your final grade for the course as follows. I will look at which grade level you met for each of the eight categories above. I will look at your **two lowest scores**. If those scores are right next to each other on the scale (e.g., A & A-), you will get the **lower** score (e.g., A-). If those scores are farther apart (e.g., A & B-), then you will get the **midpoint** of those two scores (e.g., B+). **This means if you want an A in the class, you must meet the A-level for all eight categories above.** I grade this way to incentivize students to consistently produce A-level work and to ensure students don't calculate the lowest possible grade they can get on their final paper and shoot for that.

There is one exception to this rule. In the case that you fall deeply behind in class, you can still get a D provided that you only have F-level grades in four categories or less. If you have F-level grades for five or more categories, you will fail.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Attendance: Depending on what grade you want you can miss 4-9 classes no questions asked. Additional absences must be excused (I will be more flexible than the university, but vacation doesn't count). I will take attendance each class. In order for an absence to count as excused, **you must email me with relevant documentation no later than 72 hours after the class ends (ideally before)**. After this period, any absence will count as unexcused barring extremely unusual circumstances (e.g., you were literally in a coma).

If you have fewer than 4 unexcused absences at the end of the semester, all remaining absences will be converted into extra credit tokens.

On-Call Days: Each student is required to be on-call several times throughout the semester depending on the grade you want. When you are on call, I will expect you to have closely engaged with all of the material for that class and be prepared to discuss each of them in detail. Up to four people can be on-call each day. I will call on each person throughout the class to give their thoughts on various questions, particularly those who do not normally volunteer to speak. You don't need to always be correct to get credit – it just has to be clear you actually did the reading.

If you find a reading particularly challenging, you should prepare some questions that would improve your understanding, and note particular passages, claims, terms, or examples in the text that you found particularly



difficult. If it is clear that you didn't do all of the reading or only did it superficially, then you will not get credit for that day.

If unforeseen circumstances prevent you from attending an on-call day, you can make it up later. We will choose on-call days during the first day of class. [You can sign up for your on-call days here](#) (reference the schedule below to see the corresponding readings for that day).

On-Call Day Revision Policy: If you do not pass your On-Call Day, you can sign up for another one or meet with me to come up with an alternative assignment.

Daily Reading Responses (DRRs) (~5-6 pages total): Due at the start of class on days when reading is due (most days), you will be required to do several reading responses over the course of the semester. There are 21 opportunities for reading responses in total. **When we spend more than one day discussing a reading, you may only submit a daily reading response the first day the reading is discussed.**

For each response, you must cite a specific claim defended or example presented in the reading, versus making broad overarching claims about what the paper/chapter is about (like what ChatGPT will do). If you only discuss the broad theme of the chapter, you will not get credit. Here are your instructions. First, present a specific claim the author defends in the reading and explain it in your own words. Second, in a new paragraph, critically evaluate this claim. You can do this through a variety of means. You might tell me why you think it's correct, misunderstood, how you might improve it, another reason to accept/reject it, connecting the claim or idea to another claim we've talked about in class, exploring the practical implications of the claim (and whether this makes the claim less/more plausible), etc. These responses are philosophical in nature. For readings from the textbook, you can take one of the discussion questions as a prompt for a reading response.

Any extra daily reading responses beyond 17 will be converted into extra credit tokens.

Note: Reading responses are *not* the place to tell me about how interesting you thought something was, how you changed your mind, etc. Reading responses are primarily a way for you to engage critically with the material and gain a deeper understanding of the relevant philosophical concepts.

DRR Revision Policy: Provided that (i) you write 200 words, (ii) you present sufficient evidence that you sincerely engaged with the reading, and (iii) turn in your DRR on time, you may revise any DRR that does not pass.

Reflection Journal (RJ): Due each Friday by 11:59pm (on weeks in which we have class on Friday), you will have a reflection journal prompt to answer. These journal entries will be the place to do things like develop metacognitive skills, express emotional reactions to readings and course material, and strategize to ensure your success in the course. There are 14 reflection journal prompts in total.



Any reflection journal entries beyond what is needed for an A will be converted to extra credit tokens.

RJ Revision Policy: Provided that you (i) turn in the RJ on time, you may revise RJs that do not pass.

Paper Prep: You will be required to submit a paper prep document based on a template I will provide you with. You are not required to stick with this thesis or support. **Note:** if you do not pass your paper prep the highest final grade you can get for the course is a B.

Paper Prep Revision Policy: You **must** revise paper preps until they pass if you want a grade above a B.

Final Paper (min ~6 pages): Students will submit a final argumentative paper that draws on outside research and philosophical argumentation. See the specs list for more details.

Final Paper Revision Policy: Provided that it is clear that you, yourself, wrote your paper, you may revise your final paper (and most likely will need to do so several times to get an A).

Final Paper Oral Defense: Students will be required to sign up for a time to answer critical philosophical questions about their paper as a way to demonstrate mastery of material. Students should be prepared to summarize their key claims and the claims of those whom they are engaging with. Students should also be prepared to respond to potential objections or elaborate further on their thinking. Students who genuinely understand the argument they are making should pass this easily! This is not a 'grilling', but rather a structured conversation to help you articulate your thinking and confirm your mastery of the material.

Collaborative Presentation: Towards the end of the semester students will give group presentations where they discuss competing perspectives within Buddhism on an important topics, such as rebirth, nirvana, and ethics. Each presentation should involve a single set of slides. Each group will consist of ~5 people, and the total presentation should be ~15-20 minutes. You are free to divide your labor as you please. You will all fill out a report where you tell me exactly how each of you contributed to the presentation, to ensure that only those who actively participate in the group receive credit. **You may sign up here for your topic on a first-come, first-served basis.** Sign up will remain open for the first few weeks of class, so feel free to change your topic if a spot opens up in another group.

Group Presentation Revision Policy: You should not need to do this. Be a good group member. If your group determines you did not pull your fair weight, you will be required to do a separate presentation on your own.

Unit Exams: At the end of each unit there will be an exam to cover all and only material from that unit. You will be allowed to have one 8.5x11 piece of paper with notes on it for each exam, but otherwise the exam will be closed book and written in a blue book.



The exam will involve some basic comprehension questions and should not be difficult for those who are actively paying attention and taking notes, with perhaps a moderate amount of studying. Exam review questions will be made available, and I will just pick questions from that list, so it will not be a surprise which questions are you asked. Those who have ARS accommodations will need to schedule a time to take the exam there. Those who miss a unit exam due to an absence will be required to schedule a make-up exam within one week of the exam date, which will have different questions selected from the review sheet.

The exam will technically be graded like a normal exam with points, but these points will not count toward your final grade. To get an A in the course you only need to get 90% on each exam, and extra credit tokens can be used to help you if you do poorly.

Unit Exam Revision Policy: You can revise and resubmit unit exams to increase on your original grade, provided that you make a good faith attempt at the first exam. **(note: this is painful for everyone involved – please just study!)**

To get a **10% increase**, you must do the following:

For **each** question on the exam that you either did not answer or answered incorrectly, you must (i) explain why you listed the answer you did (or why you did not list an answer), (ii) state the correct answer, (iii) go into detail explaining any and all technical terms or laying out any arguments given (at least a paragraph per answer), (iv) list exactly what course materials, including slide/page numbers you consulted to come up with your answers (you may only use course materials).

To get a **15% increase**, you can do all of the above plus:

(iv) complete a special bonus question which is the equivalent of an additional daily reading response (min 200 words).

To get a **25% increase** (or a total score of **80**, whichever is higher), you can do all of the above plus:

(v) correctly answer each question on the exam review sheet in the manner described above (at least a paragraph per question).

New answers should be **typed**. There is no partial credit for revisions, but you can revise and resubmit answers until they satisfy the desired specifications.

Extra Credit Tokens: I love extra credit, but there are no points in this course. So instead, extra credit will work on a token basis. When you do an extra credit assignment, you will get one (or more) extra credit tokens, which



can then be used in a variety of ways. I will give everyone **two** extra credit tokens for free, which you can use at any point in the semester, up to the start of our final exam period. You can earn as many tokens as you want! Here is what you can use each token for:

- 1 free absence
- 1 daily reading response
- 1 reflection journal
- 5% boost of unit exam of your choice per token
- Opportunity to submit paper prep late (one week per token, please don't do this)
- Opportunity to submit your paper/first revision late (one week per token)
- Revision Fastpass: I will grade a revised assignment within a maximum of 48 business hours instead of a week (see revision policy below), to give you more time to revise a second or third time.
- For **two** tokens, you can pass an On-Call Day
- For **five** tokens, you can pass 1 specification on your final paper that would be the easiest to fix (I will decide which one)

To get extra credit tokens, you can do a variety of things. I will use the same specifications as the long reading responses (unless otherwise noted). Unsatisfactory responses can be revised and resubmitted (if submitted well before the final exam period begins). Here are some ideas:

- Pass an additional longer reading response (on an assigned reading or some other related reading—can be an op-ed, doesn't need to be by a philosopher).
- Watch a movie, listen to a podcast, or watch a TV show with relevant themes and write the equivalent of a long reading response for it.
- Attend a PPE or Parr Center related event (or equivalent) that is at least weakly connected to some of the themes we will be talking about in class (ask me if you aren't sure).
- Do some sort of media project on a relevant theme.
- Do some sort of presentation on a relevant theme.
- Something else that you want to do (talk to me if you have ideas).

REVISION POLICY

For assignments where you can revise and resubmit unsatisfactory work, **you may resubmit assignments as many times as you would like**. However, you will not receive a grade on your revision immediately (it could take up to a week in some rare cases). So, you should be very careful about when to resubmit something, especially with your final papers, since you may need to wait up to a week between each submission.

You officially have until the start of the final exam period to turn in any revisions. However, many students find having more accountability helpful. So, I would recommend aiming to turn in revisions withing **one week**



of receiving your grade back. This will ensure that you don't end up having an absurd number of revisions to do at the end of class.

GRADE FINALITY

Final grades for the course, once assigned, will not be changed. Please do not ask me to change your grade for an assignment, and **definitely** do not ask me to give you a higher course grade at the end of the semester, for any reason whatsoever. You have so many opportunities to get the grade you want! You are responsible for the grade you get, and I am here to help you achieve the high but reasonable standards I am setting.

EXPECTED TIME DEDICATED TO COURSE

For a three-credit-hour PHIL course, 9–12 hours/week is average. This class might take you less time on average, but when it comes to time to writing and revising papers this number might be more accurate. Several of my past students have told me that my class had more homework than any of their other classes, but that they generally found the extra work engaging and beneficial to their learning.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) USE POLICY

Generative AI may be used only for the following tasks: brainstorming. If you use generative AI for brainstorming, you must vet any suggestions via independent research. **Copying ideas, citations, or any text whatsoever directly from generative AI into a graded assignment (or copying such text into a text spinner and then copying it into the assignment) will constitute a violation of the honor code.**

Using generative AI in any capacity to work on a draft of a paper, outline, reading response, or any other assignment will be considered a violation of the honor code and will be sent to the Honor Court.

****note**** One specification on each written assignment is that the assignment “does not have a robotic tone.” By this, I mean it doesn't sound like ChatGPT could have easily written it. If you do not pass this specification, I am not formally accusing you of academic dishonesty. Rather, I am requiring you to re-write the assignment in a more conversational tone. It might be that I suspect you used ChatGPT, but it also might not be. I will confront you directly if I have convincing evidence that you illicitly used generative AI.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1: The First Three Noble Truths

1. Introduction to the course
 - No reading



2. Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy: Theravada, Mahayana, and More
 - HBT Ch. 1-4
3. First Noble Truth
 - HBT Ch. 5
 - Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, SN 56.11)
4. Second Noble Truth
 - HBT Ch. 6-7
 - The Arrow Sutta (Sallatha Sutta, SN 36.6)
5. The Three Dharma Seals/Characteristics
 - HBT Ch. 18
6. Non-Self + the Five Aggregates
 - HBT Ch. 23
7. Interdependent Co-Arising
 - HBT Ch. 27
 - Discourse on the Middle Way (Kaccānagotta Sutta, SN 12.15)
8. Rebirth: Early Buddhism with Rebirth
 - Bhikku Anālayo, *Rebirth in Early Buddhism*, Ch. 1
9. Rebirth: Early Buddhism without Rebirth
 - Gil Fronsdal, "[Should I believe in Rebirth?](#)"
10. Thich Nhat Hanh on Karma and Rebirth
 - Thich Nhat Hanh, [Short Dharma Talk on Rebirth](#) (21:01)
11. Two Truths
 - HBT Ch. 17 (stop at "this insight liberates us")
 - Heart Sutra (Thich Nhat Hanh's revised translation, option to listen to chant)
12. Two Truths, cont.
 - HBT Ch. 17 (start at "all 'formations' are impermanent")
 - Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)



13. Third Noble Truth

- HBT Ch. 8

14. Sutra Study

- Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, MN 10)

15. Practice Day (no devices allowed!)

Unit 2: The Fourth Noble Truth (the Noble Eightfold Path)

16. Intro to Eightfold Path + Right View

- HBT Intro to Part 2 + Ch. 9

17. Right Thinking

- HBT Ch. 10

18. Right Mindfulness

- HBT Ch. 11 (to page 70, stop after “A perception is a sign, an image in our mind”)

19. Right Mindfulness, cont’d.

- HBT Ch. 11 (p. 70- end, begin at “Investigation of dhammas’ is one of the Seven Factors of Awakening”)

20. Right Speech

- HBT Ch. 12

21. Right Action + The Five Precepts

- HBT Ch. 13

22. Right Diligence/Effort

- HBT Ch. 14

23. Right Concentration

- HBT Ch. 15

24. Right Livelihood

- HBT Ch. 16



25. Four Brahmavihāras/Immeasurable Minds

- HBT Ch. 22
- Discourse on Love (Mettā Sutta, Sutta Nipāta 1.8)

Unit 3: Buddhist Ethics: Theory and Practice

26. Buddhist Ethical Theory

- Jay Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, Ch. 2

27. Buddhist Ethical Theory, cont.

- Garfield Ch. 3

28. Engaged Buddhism: Theory

- Garfield Ch. 12
- **Final paper prep due!**

29. Engaged Buddhism: Climate Change + Extinction

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have*, Ch. 4 + 5

30. Engaged Buddhism: Animals/Food + Paper Peer Review

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have*, Ch. 3
- **Come prepared with an outline or draft of your paper to discuss in groups!**

31. Radical Dharma: Race

- Lama Rod Owens, Rev. angel Kyodo williams, & Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma*, Intro + Ch. 2

32. Radical Dharma: Sexuality

- *Radical Dharma*, Ch. 4

33. Radical Dharma: Liberation + Social Change

- *Radical Dharma*, Ch. 7
- **Paper 2 due!**

34. Buddhism + Feminism

- Jean Byrne, “Why I Am Not a Buddhist Feminist”



35. Love and Rage

- Lama Rod Owens, *Love and Rage*, Intro + Ch. 1

36. Love and Rage cont.

- *Love and Rage*, Ch. 2
- **All papers graded and returned by this date!**

37. Love and Rage cont.

- *Love and Rage*, Ch. 3

38. Practice Day

39. Final Paper Oral Defenses

- **Paper 2 rewrites due!**

40. Final Paper Defenses, cont'd.

41. Final Paper Defenses, cont'd.

42. Final Paper Defenses, cont'd.

Final Exam Period used for Collaborative Presentations