Schist slab showing one of the Buddha's previous lives as King Sibi sacrificing himself to save the life of a dove, Gandhara, 2nd-3rd C. AD. The British Museum, London.

Course Description:

The story of the life of the Buddha is one of the most important religious narratives with far-reaching influences which has remained important and well-known in all Buddhist traditions across different regions for more than 2200 years. Together with the biographical account of Buddha’s last existence as prince Siddhartha, the Buddhist tradition also celebrates the stories of many of his prior existences recounted in previous lives stories known as jātakas. Those biographical narratives are also at the front and center and the main subject of the earliest Buddhist art and their importance for the Buddhist visual and storytelling tradition and their lasting popularity even until today are uncontested and without parallel.

This course will be especially interesting to both students interested in Buddhist art as well as to students interested in the literature of Buddhist narratives and stories. The materials discussed in the course will be centered on both the narrative of the Buddha’s final life as Shakyamuni and also stories of his prior existences, examining both visual and textual examples from India, Central Asia and China between 2 BCE to around 5-6 c CE with visual examples from famous Buddhist sites such as Sanchi,
Bharhut, Ajanta, Kucha Kizil Caves, Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, Yungang Grottoes, etc.

Through a wide variety of different readings of Buddhist primary texts in translation (canonical and narrative) and iconographic sources, and also complementary secondary works discussing them, employing an interdisciplinary approach we will attempt to explore comparative perspectives, ideas, and approaches concerning a number of issues related to Buddhist narratives. Among the questions and topics that will be examined are the role of visual narratives at Buddhist sites such as stupas and cave temples; different modes of visual narration; the puzzling question of the absence of anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha in early Indian Buddhist narrative art; the ideal body of the Buddha; stories of previous existences of the Buddha as an animal and animals in the Buddha’s life.

Each class will consist of the instructor’s presentation complemented by visual material. There will be at least one scheduled museum group visit to The Metropolitan Museum of Art during the weekend of Week 8 or 9 or at another suitable time for all.

Note:
Familiarity with the story of the life of the Buddha is a must and students should read one of the versions of the Buddhacarita (or Acts of the Buddha by Ashvaghosha) any edition, but preferably at least the longer one translated from Chinese, as early in the beginning of the course as possible.

Students with no prior formal background in studying Buddhism are strongly encouraged to acquire a basic level of familiarity with it by (skim) reading either Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) or Rupert Gethin’s The Foundations of Buddhism. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Course objectives:
Students in this course will come away from it with
(1) an understanding of the history, literature, art, culture, and ideas related to Buddhist narratives and specifically the stories about the previous lives of the Buddha and his final life’s ‘biography’;
(2) an introduction to the problems encountered in studying Buddhism due to remoteness in time and uncertainty of sources’ dating and authorship;
(3) the ability to think reflexively, comparatively, critically and with complexity about visual narratives and stories in Buddhism;
(4) an appreciation of the religious diversity and complexity of the Buddhist tradition;
(5) the ability to read and analyse primary textual and visual sources and be able to evaluate some of their meanings and significance;
(6) the ability to develop critical questions about the visual and reading materials for the class to discuss;
(7) gain a deeper knowledge of one aspect of the subject matter of the course, gained through the opportunity to research and write a final paper.

Course Readings:
Access to the readings is key to this class. It is important that students bring the assigned readings to class each time.
All required readings will be listed for each corresponding week and the students should read and prepare to discuss them in advance before the corresponding class meeting. Reading from the primary required books are listed in **bold**.

In addition, there will be recommended (but not required) further readings marked by asterisk (*) listed for the corresponding week after the required readings. An additional list of generally further recommended titles will also be provided.

**Documentary FILMS:**
- Story of The Buddha's Life  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDgd8LT9AL4
- BBC Seven Wonders of the Buddhist World with Bettany Hughes  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiEADtRLQfs
- The Boy with Divine Powers (Documentary)  
  https://youtu.be/nG5FqQKrKrl
- Nepal: Little Buddha, the return – Documentary  
  https://youtu.be/eDho1Y8MekE

**Required Books:**

**Books to be consulted throughout:**


Strongly recommended, but not required:


The rest of the course readings will be made available on NYU Classes as PDF files or otherwise provided.

**Assignments and Evaluations:**

**Attendance and Participation (15%):** Class attendance and discussion is essential. Students will be expected to attend class having completed all of the required reading. Arriving in class having done all of the reading, thought about it, and developed some questions or comments about it; contributing actively and thoughtfully to class discussions is key. (Students may be asked to write short reading responses most weeks in response to the week’s readings).

Two short paper assignments (6-7 pages each): 2 x 20% (total 40%): These short essay assignments will draw upon specific readings or film documentaries (TBD).

**Short Paper Assignment #1 (20%):** Essay on an assigned topic. Topic will be assigned in Week 4 – the short paper is expected to be handed in in Week 6 (tentative).

**Short Paper Assignment #2 (20%):** Essay on an assigned topic. The short paper is expected to be handed in end of Week 11 (tentative).

**Museum Visit (10%):** There will be at least one planned museum class visit to The Metropolitan Museum of Art probably scheduled outside regular class time. This museum visit is to take place either during the weekend of Week 8 or of Week 9 or at another time suitable to all.

**Final Paper (35%):** Students must write one final paper, 8-10 pages, (longer for graduate students) choosing to discuss one or two images from the Buddhist collections from a major museum in the USA or abroad (preferably a museum which the student has visited in person and experienced the work first hand), analysing and discussing the relevance of the image(s) to the topics and issues discussed in the course. (Any Buddha life narrative image from India, Central Asia or China dated from 2 c BCE to 6 c CE is fine). This paper is due on May 14th, Thursday (tentative).
Papers not handed in on the due date will be marked off a full letter grade each day late.
Note: Both the short assignment essays and the final paper should be submitted via both hard copy and email before the set deadlines. No extensions please.

Other Policies:

Plagiarism:
The minimum penalty for plagiarism will be a “0” for the assignment in question. Penalties may also include a grade of “F” for the entire course, or in particularly serious instances, expulsion from the University. Refer to the University’s plagiarism policy for more information: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity.

Electronic Devices:
All phones and electronic devices must be turned off/silent during our class period. Phones must be put away altogether. I strongly encourage you to also turn off your computer’s wifi to avoid being distracted.

Notetaking—I would prefer it if laptops not be used for notetaking. Research shows that taking notes by hand—i.e. using the body is better https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/
You’re welcome to have a laptop or iPad open for the readings, but not for note-taking. However, that said, of course, please let me and the Moses Center (see below) know if you do need to use the laptop for notes for any specific reasons and we’ll accommodate…

Disability Support Services:
If you have a physical, psychological, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Moses Center for Disabilities at 212-998-4980, or by email, at mosescsd@nyu.edu.
https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/students-with-disabilities/how-to-register.html
The Moses Center for Students with Disabilities stands by to help us make your learning experience all that it can be. See them and also talk to me!

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES:

Week 1 (Jan. 28 and Jan 30):
Welcome and hellos and introduction to the course.

Readings:

# Strong, The Buddha, Introduction.

WATCH A FILM DOCUMENTARY (TBD)

Foucher, Alfred. The Life of the Buddha: according to the ancient texts and monuments of India. Wesleyan University Press, 1963. (Recommended to consult throughout the course)

**Week 2 (Feb. 4 and Feb. 6):**

[I. THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA](#)

### 1. The Buddha’s Life Story

Readings:

- # Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 1.
- # Reynolds, “The many lives of Buddha: a study of sacred biography and Theravada tradition.”

* Gregory Schopen, “If you can't remember, how to make it up: some monastic rules for redacting canonical texts.” In *Buddhist monks and business matters*, 395-407.


**Week 3 (Feb. 11 and Feb. 13):**

### 2. The Buddhist Stupa, Buddhist Cave Temples and the Life of the Buddha

Readings:

- # Seckel, and Andreas Leisinger. Before and beyond the Image Aniconic Symbolism in Buddhist Art. [Read only p. 11-39.]
- # Schopen, "The Fragrance of the Buddha, the Scent of Monuments, and the Odor of Images in Early India," p. 11-30.


Week 4 (Feb 18 and Feb. 20):

II. PILGRIMAGE AND THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

Readings:


* Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims: From China to India (400 AD and 518 AD). Trübner,1869.

Week 5 (Feb. 25 and Feb. 27):

III. A BULL OF A MAN

1. The Buddha

Readings:

# John Powers, “Why Practicing Virtue is Better than Working Out: Bodies and Ethics in Indian Buddhism.”
# John Powers, “You’re Only as Good As You Look: Indian Buddhist Associations of Virtue and Physical Appearance.”
# John Powers, A Bull of a Man - Chapter 1. The Ultimate Man (p. 1-23);


Week 6 (March 3 and March 5):

2. The Bodhisattva

Readings:

# Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 2.
# Meiland, transl.. Garland of the Buddha’s Past Lives by Aryashura. (Stories to read: #2 King Shibi; #28 Kshantivadin; TBD)
# Ohnuma, and Margo Kitts. "To Extract the Essence from this Essenceless Body: Self-Sacrifice and Self-Immolation in Indian Buddhism."

* Reiko Ohnuma, from Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood - Chapter 1: The Gift of the Body Genre (p. 26-51) and Chapter 6: Bodies Ordinary and Ideal (p. 199-241)

**Week 7 (March 10 and March 12):**

3. The Prince

Readings:

# Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 3.
# Meiland, transl.. Garland of the Buddha’s Past Lives by Aryashura. (Selected jataka: #9 Vishvantara)
# Max Deeg, The Birth of the Buddha in Chinese Anthologies of the Early Sixth Century.
# Buddhacarita – (re-)read Prince Siddhartha parts.


**SPRING RECESS** (Monday, March 16 - Sunday, March 22) – NO CLASSES

**MUSEUM TRIP TO THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

*Note:* There will be an additionally scheduled class meeting (outside of the regular scheduled class time) for a museum class visit to The MET which will take place either during the weekend of Week 8 or of Week 9 at a time suitable for all.

**Week 8 (March 24 and March 26):**

4. The Renunciant Ascetic

5. The Fully Awakened Buddha – the Enlightenment

Readings:

# Dipankara jataka - version from the Nidāna-kātha. Davids, Buddhist Birth-stories.
# Buddhacarita - re-read Great Departure and the ascetic practices parts.
# Relevant excerpts from the Mahavastu (TBD)
# Buddhacarita - re-read the part about the Enlightenment.
# Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 4.


**Week 9 (March 31 and April 2):**

6. The Buddha as a Teacher

**Readings:**

# Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 5 and 6.
# Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dwāravatī," 79-95.

**Week 10 (April 7 and April 9):**

7. The Buddha’s Nirvana

**Readings:**

# Strong, The Buddha, Ch. 7.

* SN 47.9 “Linked Discourses” Sutta 47: Sick [https://suttacentral.net/sn47.9/en/sujato](https://suttacentral.net/sn47.9/en/sujato)

April 9 (tentative) - Watch a documentary and have a discussion.
* The Boy with Divine Powers (Documentary) [https://youtu.be/nG5FqQKrrHI](https://youtu.be/nG5FqQKrrHI)

**Week 11 (April 14 and April 16):**

IV. BASIC BUDDHIST TENETS AND COSMOLOGY 

EXPLAINED THROUGH THE BUDDHA’S LIFE

**Readings:**

What is karma; cycle(s) of rebirth; realms of existence; gods; the Bodhisattva practice of perfections; giving; suffering; impermanence; the four noble truths; dependent origination; the “Middle Way”; the Eightfold Path; Buddhist ethics of inter-personal relationships, etc.
# "Karma." In Harvey, The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics, 6-28.


**Week 12 (April 21 and April 23):**

### V. ANIMALS IN THE BUDDHA’S LIFE

1. **“Once the Buddha Was a Monkey”** stories about previous lives of the Buddha as an animal

   **Readings:**

   # Garland of the Buddha’s Past Lives by Aryashura.
   (Stories to read: 1 The Tigress; 6 The Hare; 24 The Great Ape; 26 The Antelope; 27 The Great Monkey (King of the Monkeys))

   # The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish: Or, The Ocean of Narratives.
   (Selected stories)

   # Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Arya Sura’s ‘Jatakamala’ (Selected stories).


**Week 13 (April 28 and April 30):**

2. **Animals in the life of the Buddha**

   **Readings:**

   # Brown, “Telling the Story in Art of the Monkey's Gift of Honey to the Buddha.”
   # Selection from Reiko Ohnuma, Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination.
   [Stories about the horse Kanthaka, the elephant Nalagiri, the elephant Parileyyaka and the monkey’s offer of honey.]

**Week 14 (May 5 and May 7):**

### VI. ONCE THE BUDDHA WAS A WOMAN

**Readings:**

# “Rupavati gives away her breasts” in Buddhist Scriptures, p. 159-184.
# Kajiyama, Yuichi “Women in Buddhism,” p.53-70.
# Derris, “When the Buddha Was a Woman,” p.29-44.


May 14th, Thursday (tentative): FINAL PAPERS DUE via hard copy and email by 12PM.

The Ruru Jātaka, or the Tale of the Deer of Nine Colours (mural painting detail), Dunhuang Mogao cave 257.

List of Weekly Readings (with full citations):


A list of further recommended related readings:

- The Play in Full (Lalitavistara), The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra “The Play in Full” (Āryalalitavistaranāmamahāyānasūtra) translated from Tibetan and Sanskrit by The Dharma Chakra Translation Committee, Toh 95, Degé Kangyur, vol. 46 (mdo sde, kha), folios 1b–216b, PDF version.

Dunhuang Mogao Cave 275. King Sibi Jataka (mural painting detail). Northern Liang (421-439)