BUDDHISM AND ECOLOGY

Course Number: ENVS 296

Institution: University of Vermont

Instructor: Dr. Stephanie Kaza, Assoc. Professor

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Course Description:

A survey of classical texts and modern commentaries relevant to a Buddhist perspective on ecology and the environment. This is a senior level seminar investigating Buddhist foundations for ecological thought, Buddhist ethical and doctrinal questions related to ecological problems, and current challenges in Buddhist thought as it intersects modern ecological science. We will consider classic principles evoked by Buddhist teachers, writers, and activists addressing the complex dilemmas facing the world in 2002. As a culminating exercise, student teams will investigate dimensions of specific environmental problems using formal dialogue methods exchanging scientific and religious perspectives.

Purpose of Course:

1) to explore in-depth the ideas emerging in Buddhism and Ecology;
2) to reflect on the relevance of this for current worldviews of science and religion;
3) to practice formal interperspective dialogue modes of engagement;
4) to integrate scholarly and experiential modes of community learning.

Texts:


5) Selected essays from other sources

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Assignments:

Graded course work consists of oral class participation (40%) and written work (60%).

The oral participation grade will be based on:

- 10% facilitation of half of one class session (Feb 12-March 26)
- 15% dialogue seminar (April 2-30)
- 15% overall discussion contributions in seminar
- 40%

Facilitation will be done in pairs; for each class session, the facilitators should study the readings thoroughly and prepare 1) a brief summary introduction to the work and 2) a series of discussion questions or exercises to involve the group in exploring the material. You may want to supplement the readings with visual or oral materials to enhance understanding.

The written assignments will consist of three 7-8 (double-spaced) page papers:
20%  #1 text commentary (due Feb 12th)

20%  #2 major ideas of a key figure writing in this field (due March 12th)

20%  #3 “applying Buddhist environmental thought to a current issue” (due May 6th)

60%

The scope of each paper will be discussed in class 2-3 weeks before the paper is due. Topics should be cleared with me before proceeding, to be sure enough resource materials are available. Papers are expected to be polished and thoughtful work, reflecting in-depth research and reflection appropriate to a senior level seminar. The last paper will be a final version of the paper you prepare for your dialogue session.

Note on Attendance:

You are expected to attend every class session, especially since the class meets only once a week. Only excused absences permitted; these should be cleared with me by phone or email, i.e. you should receive a specific response indicating I’ve approved the absence. Your final grade will drop one letter for each unexcused absence (please note: this includes the class on March 5th and on May 6th). These penalties are to reinforce the need for full commitment from each individual to creating and supporting the class learning community. Senior seminars are luxurious learning environments; your attendance should reflect your respect for the opportunity to engage in this material in an intimate and challenging way. Participation will be graded on a combination of attendance and contributions to class discussion.

Note on Assignments:

You are expected to have read the readings before class and to be prepared to discuss them in class. This is a seminar, not a lecture course. The caliber of our discussions will directly reflect your thoughtfulness in reading the works with an investigative and attentive mind. Papers and presentations are due at the beginning of class on the dates indicated on the syllabus. Late work will lose one full grade per day late.

WRITTEN PAPERS

Dr. Stephanie Kaza, Assoc. Professor

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Due in class:

#1 Feb 12th

#2 March 12th
#3 May 6th (see next page)

**Purpose:**

1) to explain and discuss Buddhist perspectives as they apply to modern environmental issues;

2) to practice clarity and doctrinal accuracy in articulating aspects of Buddhist philosophy;

3) to develop skill in research, reflection, and articulation of key ideas.

**Assignments:**

**Paper #1: Text Commentary**

The focus of this paper will be your choice of a single Buddhist text, chosen from *Dharma Rain* or an alternate source if desired. The text should be long enough to contain several ideas which you can develop in depth. You will be preparing a modern commentary on a text much like the examples in Section 2 of *Dharma Rain*. You will need to spend time reflecting on the text and determining the important points from an ecological perspective. Then you need to support these points with examples and with thoughts from other Buddhist teachers and texts.

The style of the paper can range from poetic to philosophical; it need not be only rational and analytical. Think of the paper as a “teaching” paper, as if you wanted to show someone else how your chosen text could be used to illuminate a critical aspect of the environmental situation. Your examples could be personal, local, regional, or global; most importantly they should be vivid and appropriate. Review Section 2 of *Dharma Rain* for range of styles as inspiration. Do your best to speak in your own voice with authenticity and commitment.

**Paper #2: Key Figure**

The focus here is on the key ideas of one of the major thinkers in the realm of Buddhism and Ecology. You will need to browse through essays or books by these thinkers in enough depth that you can articulate some of their key contributions to the field. People you might work with include:

- Gary Snyder
- Wendy Johnson
- Ruben Habito
- Peter Matthiessen
- H.H. Dalai Lama
- Joanna Macy
- John Daido Loori
- Sulak Sivaraksa
- Ken Kraft
- Thich Nhat Hanh
- John Seed
- Donald Swearer
For your chosen thinker, identify 3-4 important themes and explain these in some detail. If you can, you might put these in the context of the writer’s life and activities as well as their particular Buddhist lineage or practice. Again, use examples, quotes, and thoughtful interpretation to show the significance of the writer. Include a bibliography of literature cited.

Be sure to clear your choice with me in advance so I can provide you with additional materials from my extensive collection. It is unlikely that the internet will be a useful source for this paper. Because this is a small and emerging field, you will need to sleuth to find adequate materials.

**Buddhism and Ecology Dialogue**

(an inter-perspective dialogue between science and religion)

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**Purpose:**

1) to develop an informed capacity to discuss specific environmental issues in depth, engaging other points of view;

2) to practice inquiry, tolerance, and clarity in articulating serious questions and responses;

3) to formulate a personal view on an environmental challenge, drawing on the resources of both religion and science;

4) to develop skill in writing and preparing a paper for formal dialogue.

**Assignment:**

1) **Organize your dialogue.** You should hold a preliminary meeting with your team of four at least four weeks before your presentation date. This will allow enough time for all papers to be well developed. Lay out a detailed timeframe for completion of the various papers and make sure you are committed to your own piece of the process. Two people will write papers from a scientific viewpoint; two will write from a religious (Buddhist) viewpoint. The order will be:

   Paper #1  scientific view

   Paper #2  Buddhist response to the scientific view (i.e. to paper #1)
Paper #3 Buddhist view

Paper #4 scientific response to the Buddhist view (i.e. to paper #3)

As a team, you should confer on the main points you would like to bring out regarding your topic. You may draw extensively on the assigned readings or work in another direction. It is critical, however, that you have adequate resources to develop your points for consideration. Do not try to cover everything! Choose what you can spend some time on and give that in-depth attention. Look for conceptual and practical points that overlap or differ between the scientific and the religious perspective.

2) Writing the papers. Papers #1 and #3 should be completed two weeks before the dialogue, to give the other writers time to prepare their responses. For full readiness, papers #2 and #4 should be available to the other two team members at least 1-2 days before your presentation, so you are all familiar with the material you have prepared. These versions can be considered “drafts” which you will be able to improve on, based on class engagement. The final version of your paper is due during finals week on May 6th. All papers should be handed out or emailed to class members before the dialogue session, so all can participate in the discussion in an informed way.

3) Presenting the dialogue. We will follow a formal dialogue process as developed in Buddhist-Christian encounters. Your team is responsible for the entire class period of your topic (except the first ten minutes). The schedule of papers will be:

- 2:00 announcements and opening practice
- 2:10 introduction of topic and group members
- 2:15 scientific view (paper #1)
- 2:30 Buddhist response (paper #2)
- 2:45 group discussion
- 3:15 break
- 3:30 Buddhist view (paper #3)
- 3:45 scientific response (paper #4)
- 4:00 group discussion
- 4:30 reflection and evaluation

4) Final paper and group reflection. (Due May 6th.) When you turn in the final version of your dialogue paper, please include a 1-2 page reflection on the overall dialogue process for your group. Discuss what went well, what could have been improved, what you learned from this process.

BUDDHISM AND ECOLOGY

Selected Books


**SCIENCE AND RELIGION: General Bibliography**


Rolston, Holmes, III. *Environmental Ethics*. (Temple University, 1989).


