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Religious Studies 603/703  
Fall Semester, 2006  
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## **THERAVADA BUDDHISM, CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

### **Course Description**

This is a graduate seminar focused on several questions that arise when Theravada Buddhism (in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia) is analyzed in relation to its historical, social and cultural contexts, the very contexts in which its monks, ostensibly, normatively renounce. The course is inherently interdisciplinary in nature: aspects of Buddhism will be fielded and weighed from philosophical, psychological, anthropological, historical, political and economic perspectives. Moreover, the course is cross-cultural in scope: it begins with a consideration of Buddhism in Burma, and proceeds to analyses that take the religious cultures of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia as venues. In addition to Laos and the extreme southern portion of Vietnam, these are the specific regions where Theravada Buddhism has been dominant, and the cultures that have become historically and self-professedly Buddhist.

Among the questions to be pursued are the following: How has Buddhism been studied in the past and how can we go about studying it in the present? How have Buddhists “read” the primary religious cultures that they have come dominate? How has Buddhism shaped, informed, and legitimated evolving political cultures in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia? Has Buddhism, itself, been transformed in the process of its politicization or its enculturation? How is Buddhism related to questions of ethnic or national identity? How has the monastic vocation historically changed from its ideal conceptualization? Is this a religion that is centered on metaphysical beliefs or on praxis? How do “precept and practice” relate? Do village Buddhists share in the ethos of an emergent urban, modernistic, “rational” Buddhism? What is happening to the integrated path of *sila* (ethics), *panna* (wisdom) and *samadhi* (concentration/meditation) in various social contexts (village, city, forest?).

In addition to the issues to be discussed that arise from the course of readings provided below, students will also write a term paper on a topic or issue of their choice in consultation with the instructor. They may generate their own sets of questions as well, and conduct research on any aspect (social or cultural) of Theravada Buddhism from any theoretical perspective that is congenial.

## Schedule of Course Meetings and Assignments

- Sept. 14: Introduction to the scope of the course; Film—"Mekong Full Moon Party"
- 21: Theravada Buddhism as soteriological and ritual "systems": an introduction  
**Read:** Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Pp. 3-275
- 28: Buddhism <--->Burmese Society: a symbiotic relation  
**Read:** *Buddhism and Society*, pp. 279-477.
- Oct. 5: A voice of dissent: ethics (not belief) dominate the Sinhala Buddhist village  
**Read:** Martin Southwold, *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism*. Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 1983. Pp. vi-180.
- 12: Who's whoming who? Is Southwold's critique valid? Is his alternative approach worth pursuing?  
**Read:** *Buddhism in Life*, Pp. 181-213.  
**Essay due** (@1,500 words)
- 19: The politicization of the Buddhist Sangha in Contemporary Sri Lanka  
**Read:** H.L. Seneviratne. *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 1-276.
- 26: Is Seneviratne "on target"? Controversies about Sri Lanka's militant monks and how to understand them.  
**Read:** *The Work of Kings*, Pp. 277-348.  
**Essay due** (@750 words)
- Nov. 2: The Forest Monk: a vanishing monastic vocation? Why?  
**Read:** Kamala Tiyanvanich. *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth Century Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997. Pp. 1-225.
- 9: Does religion stand in reflexive relation to society? What factors have contributed to the "disintegration" of religious culture in Thailand?  
**Read:** *Forest Recollections*. Pp. 226-297.  
**Essay due** (@750 words)

16: From Angkor to the Khmer Rouge: a long neglected history  
**Read:** Ian Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*.  
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005. Pp. 1-189.

23: After the Khmer Rouge: Buddhist resilience  
**Read:** *Cambodian Buddhism*, Pp. 190-230.  
**Essay due** (@750 words)

30: Oral critiques of term paper rough drafts

Dec. 7: Oral Critiques of term paper rough drafts

**11: Final draft of term papers due by noon**

### **Course Requirements**

#### Ph.D. students enrolled in 703:

Four short essays (due on October 12, 26, Nov. 2 and 16)	45%
Oral contributions to seminar	10%
4000 word term paper (topic selected in consultation with instructor)	45%

#### M.A. students enrolled in 603:

Three short essays (Oct. 12 is mandatory, & 2 of 3 due Oct. 26, Nov. 2 and 16)	45%
Oral contributions to seminar	10%
2500 word term paper (topic selected in consultation with instructor)	45%