

# Buddhism and Medicine

RELST-UA 991 • Fall 2024 • Tuesdays 2–4:45pm • 31 Washington Pl (Silver Center) Room 402  
Instructor: William McGrath (Professor Bill)      Email: wmcgrath@nyu.edu

## Course Overview

Ever since Prince Siddhartha left his palace and witnessed the sufferings of sickness and death, Buddhism has featured concerns for health and wellbeing. In Part One of this course, we will consider the relationship between Buddhism and medicine, discussing potential tensions between theories and practices for healing disease on the one hand, and the transcendence of disease and even death itself on the other. In Part Two, we will trace the transmission of medical ideas within Buddhist traditions, from the ethical complexities of medical practice in medieval Tibet to Buddhist biomedicine in the contemporary world. By completing this course, students will learn the basic history, teachings, and practices of Buddhist and Asian medical traditions, while also exploring the relationship between religion and medicine from the time of the Buddha down to the present day.

## Course Objectives

1. **Buddhism:** Students will learn about the scriptures, doctrines, practices, and narratives of Buddhist traditions from across South, East, Southeast, and Central Eurasia.
2. **Medicine:** Students will learn about the premodern medical traditions of Asia, including their theories and methods for the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease.
3. **Religion and Medicine:** Students will learn to reimagine religion and medicine not as two conflicted and non-overlapping domains, but as interdependent and mutually informing spheres of human society.
4. **Communication:** Students will learn to create coherent, compelling, and concise theses about religion that are supported with evidence and that are free of grammatical errors.

## Attendance and Deadlines

The COVID-19 pandemic is officially over (WHO: March 2020 – May 2023), but health complications will continue to persist for many years, so, if you are feeling unwell, please do not come to class. I will take attendance each class and record student absences over the semester, but missing class will only affect your grade if you do not communicate with me about your absence. Missing deadlines will affect your grade, however. Late work will be penalized five percent per day. If you cannot complete an assignment on time, or if you cannot take an exam as scheduled, please contact me in advance (at least twenty-four hours) so we can make alternative plans.

## Grades

The grading scale for this class is: A = 100–93, A- = 92–90, B+ = 89–87, B = 86–83, B- = 82–80, C+ = 79–77, C = 76–73, C- = 72–70. In this course, a “B” means: “Good.” Grades above this reflect a greater degree of creativity, accuracy, insight, energy, and inquiry to the material. Grades below this reflect poorer performance. The assignments that will make up your final grade:

- 1. Participation (15% of total grade):** The success of this class depends on active participation. This means critical, accurate, creative, and thoughtful engagement with the course materials. You should prepare for class so that you are able to discuss the materials, make arguments, and ask questions.
- 2. Seminar Lead (15% of final grade):** Each student will be expected to lead the seminar once this semester, either by oneself or in a group of two. This will begin following the add-drop deadline (9/16).
- 3. Midterm Papers (45% of final grade; 15% each):** In addition to critically discussing the readings in class, you will also be expected to compose three analyses of the course readings (10% of final grade each). Each midterm paper will be a short response to a prompt that will be posted on the Brightspace.
- 4. Final Project (25% of final grade):** A group research project and paper on Buddhism and medicine in the modern world. Interested students will be invited to publish their work on the [Jivaka Project](#). Presentations will be the final class (12/10) and final papers will be due one week later (12/17).

## Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is the misrepresentation of someone else’s work as one’s own, and it is a serious offense. All acts of plagiarism will be punished according to university guidelines. Please carefully review the [Academic Integrity section of the College of Arts and Science website](#). Because this course is designed to help students develop reading, analysis, and writing skills, please do not use [Artificial Intelligence](#) to complete assignments. If you have any questions about these policies, please contact me. See also [this poem](#) by Joseph Fasano.

## Student Support and Information

Here are some resources for academic accommodations, assistance, information, and more:

[Moses Center for Student Accessibility](#)  
[General Information](#)  
[Contact Information](#)

[The Writing Center](#)  
[NYU Policy on Religious Holidays](#)  
[NYU COVID-19 Policies](#)

## Articles, Books, and Book Chapters Available on Brightspace

- Anālayo, Bhikkhu. *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death: Compassionate Advice from Early Buddhist Texts*. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2016.
- Birnbaum, Raoul. *The Healing Buddha*. Boston: Shambhala, 1989 [1979].
- Cheung, Kin, and C. Pierce Salguero. "Interview with a Contemporary Chinese American Healer." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 241–51. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Chu, Shao-Yin, Ting-Chun Tseng, Yun-Chi Ho, Guo-Fang Tseng. "The Impact of a Gross Anatomy Curriculum with Donor Family Interaction: Thematic Analysis of Student Letters to Silent Mentors." *Academic Medicine* 97, no. 7 (2022): 1065–70.
- Ferngren, Gary B. *Medicine and Religion: A Historical Introduction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Fiordalis, David. "Medical Practice as Wrong Livelihood: Selections from the Pāli Discourses, Vinaya, and Commentaries." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 105–12. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Gleig, Ann. "External Mindfulness, Secure (Non)-Attachment, and Healing Relational Trauma: Emerging Models of Wellness for Modern Buddhists and Buddhist Modernism." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 17 (2016): 1–21.
- Granoff, Phyllis. "The Buddha Heals: Past and Present Lives." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 170–79. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Helderman, Ira. *Prescribing the Dharma: Psychotherapists, Buddhist Traditions, and Defining Religion*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.
- Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1988.
- Langenberg, Amy Paris. *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom*. Oxford: Routledge, 2017.
- . "Nuns, Laywomen, and Healing: Three Rules from a Sanskrit Nuns' Disciplinary Code." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 113–17. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- . "Pregnant Words: South Asian Buddhist Tales of Fertility and Child Protection." *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013): 340–69.
- Parfionovitch, Yuri, Fernand Meyer, and Gyurme Dorje. *Tibetan Medical Paintings: Illustrations to the Blue Beryl Treatise of Sangye Gyamtso (1635–1705)*. London: Serindia, 1992.
- Salguero, C. Pierce. *A Global History of Buddhism and Medicine*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022.
- . "Understanding the Doṣa: A Summary of the Art of Medicine from the *Sūtra of Golden Light*." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 30–40. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017.

- Santibañez, Scott, Debra Boudreaux, Guo-Fang Tseng, and Kimberly Konkel. "The Tzu Chi Silent Mentor Program: Application of Buddhist Ethics to Teach Student Physicians Empathy, Compassion, and Self-Sacrifice." *Journal of Religious Health* 55, no. 5 (2016): 1483–94.
- Schaeffer, Kurtis. "Death, Prognosis, and the Physician's Reputation in Tibet." In *Heroes and Saints: The Moment of Death in Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara, 159–72. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- Schopen, Gregory. "The Training and Treatments of an Indian Doctor in a Buddhist Text: A Sanskrit Biography of Jīvaka." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero, 184–204. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Sihlé, Nicholas. "Afterword: Conceptualizing the "Magical" in Tibet and Beyond." In *Tibetan Magic: Past and Present*, edited by Cameron Bailey and Aleksandra Wenta, 221–43. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.
- Skilling, Peter. *Buddha's Words for Tough Times: An Anthology*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2024.
- van Schaik, Sam. *Buddhist Magic: Divination, Healing, and Enchantment Through the Ages*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2020.
- Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Zysk, Kenneth G. *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998 [repr. 1991].

## Part One: The Boundaries of Buddhism and Medicine

### Week 1 (9/3): Introductions

### Week 2 (9/10): On Medicine and Religion

Ferngren, *Medicine and Religion*, 1–13.

Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, 1–30.

### Week 3 (9/17): The Buddha's Physician

Salguero, *A Global History*, 1–32.

Schopen, "Training Treatments," 184–204.

### Week 4 (9/24): Asceticism and Death

Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing*, 3–49.

Anālayo, *Mindfully Facing*, 9–16, 200–207.

**Impermanence Paper Due Thursday (9/26)**

### Week 5 (10/1): Enlightened Healing

Langenberg, "Pregnant Words," 340–69.

Skilling, *Buddha's Words*, 191–203, 331–40.

### Week 6 (10/8): Medicine in the Sangha

Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*, 153–83.

Fiordalis, "Medical Practice as Wrong Livelihood," 105–112.

Langenberg, "Nuns, Laywomen, and Healing," 113–17.

### Week 7 (10/15): No Class

**Fall Break on Mon; Mon classes on Tues**

### Week 8 (10/22): Meditation and Medicine

Helderman, *Prescribing the Dharma*, 1–78.

**Boundaries Paper Due Thursday (10/24)**

## Part Two: Medicine as Buddhism

### Week 9 (10/29): The Bodhisattva Healer

Salguero, *A Global History*, 33–47, 68–85.  
Salguero, “Understanding the *Doṣa*,” 30–40.  
Schaeffer, “Death, Prognosis, and the Physician’s Reputation,” 159–72.

### Week 10 (11/5): The Medicine Buddha

Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha*, 52–72.  
Granoff, “The Buddha Heals,” 170–79.  
Parfionovitch, *Tibetan Medical Paintings*, 17–18, 89–90, 117–22.

### Week 11 (11/12): Medicine and Magic

Salguero, *A Global History*, 48–67.  
van Schaik, *Buddhist Magic*, 129–46.  
Sihlé, “Conceptualizing Magical,” 221–43.  
**Magic Paper Due Thursday (11/14)**

### Week 12 (11/19): Mindful Modernization

Salguero, *A Global History*, 144–58.  
Wilson, *Mindful America*, 75–103, 187–97.

### Week 13 (11/26): The Contemporary World

Hickey, “Two Buddhisms,” 1–25.  
Cheung, “Chinese American,” 241–51.  
Gleig, “Models of Wellness,” 1–21.

### Final Project Outline Due

### [Thanksgiving Break]

### Week 14 (12/3): Biomedicine as Buddhism

Salguero, *A Global History*, 159–82.  
Santibañez et al., “Tzu Chi Silent Mentor Program,” 1483–94.  
Chu et al., “Gross Anatomy,” 1065–70.

### Week 15 (12/10): Project Presentations

### Final Papers Due Tuesday (12/17)