Advanced Topics in Philosophy – *Buddhist Metaphysics*

**Meeting time and place**

Mondays and Wednesdays at 4:30 PM – 5:50 PM  
Murray Hall, room 211

**Instructor**

Name: Alexander Skiles (‘Alex’; ‘Professor Skiles’)  
Office: Room 546, Gateway Transit Village (106 Somerset St., 5th floor)  
Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2 PM – 3 PM and by appointment  
Email: alexander.skiles@rutgers.edu

**Course description**

This writing-intensive seminar will explore some of the key metaphysical concepts, positions, and arguments in the Buddhist tradition. Much of the focus will be on formulating and evaluating six notions that are central to Buddhist metaphysics: impermanence, no-self, dependent origination, emptiness, the doctrine of two truths, and the *catuskoti* (or tetralemma). Alongside primary sources translated into English, we will also engage with some highly interesting literature this tradition has recently inspired in contemporary metaphysics.

**Prerequisites**

The only formal requirement is two courses in philosophy. No background in Buddhist philosophy will be presupposed, but most would find the seminar difficult without at least some coursework in formal logic (e.g. at the level of 730:201) and at least some familiarity to the basic concepts and topics of metaphysics (e.g. at the level of 730:215, although the exposure you’d get from 730:103 should suffice).

**Course learning goals**

i. To develop an understanding and appreciation of the main questions, positions, and concepts in Buddhist metaphysics and their relevance to disputes in contemporary metaphysics

ii. To develop your skills at reconstructing and evaluating intriguing and challenging arguments

iii. To develop your critical reading skills, and practice how to present and critique your opinions and those of others clearly, crisply, fairly, and cogently—out loud and in writing

iv. To give you a taste of what graduate school in philosophy looks like and what skills you will need to develop to succeed (e.g. how to present and draft substantial original research)
Course texts

The two books that will form the backbone of the course are:


Any other texts will be distributed through the course website. Unless noted otherwise, assigned readings listed in the schedule below that are not from the Priest or Siderits books will be from the following collection of English translations:


You are required to bring the assigned reading to every session, but you may choose the format: original hard copy, print-out, and electronic PDFs are all fine.

Course assessments

- Online forum portfolio 40%
- Midterm paper (1500-2000 words) 20%
- In-class presentation 10%
- Final paper (2500-3000 words) 30%

Attendance and participation policy

Although not a fixed component of the final grade, I reserve the right to lower your final grade for failure to regularly attend the course and/or meaningful contribute to the discussion (which includes avoiding inappropriate use of electronics. I will be using a sign-in sheet, which I will take up after the first five minutes of the session. If you must be absent due to a University-approved reason, then you must formally report your absence using the Self-Reporting Absence Application (https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra), as well as submit any relevant documentation.

Academic integrity policy

Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic malfeasance come in many forms—if you haven’t already, I would recommend familiarizing yourself with the Academic Integrity Policy (http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/) for a short list of examples. Any
suspected violation—and I am quite talented at detecting these—will be automatically referred to the Office of Judicial Affairs, and can carry penalties up to and including a failing grade in the course or expulsion from the university. Note well: ignorance about what counts as academic malfeasance, or carelessness in acting in accordance with this policy, is not a defense. Thus, if you have any questions about whether you are toeing the line, please do not hesitate to consult with me before you submit your work.

University disability statement

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation. For more info, visit https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus’s disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. In order to begin this process, please register at https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration.

Tentative schedule of topics and readings

I have incorporated some extra time into the schedule in case we need it—and if not, to allow us to explore topics we haven’t discussed in the seminar yet, or to revisit ones we have. I’ll also likely add more texts for us to read here and there.

22 January Introducing the course

Text: Siderits, “Buddhism as Philosophy?”

27 January The history, geography, and basic teaching of Buddhism

Texts: Priest, “General Background”

Siderits, “Early Buddhism: Basic Teachings”

29 January Non-self and impermanence in early Buddhism


Extract from the Mahā-nidāna Sutta (‘The Great Discourse on Causal Links’)’

3 February More on non-self and impermanence

Text: Siderits, “Non-Self: Empty Persons”, pp; 50-68
5 February  The pudgalavādin interpretation of non-self
Texts: Extracts from the Sanfa du lun and Vasumitra’s Tenets of the Different Schools
Extracts from Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa

10 February  Ethical consequences of non-self
Text: Siderits, “Buddhist Ethics”

12 February  Introducing the catuṣkoṭi
Text: Priest, “Quintum Non-Datur” (technical appendix is optional)

17 February  The Naiyāyikan critique of non-self and impermanence
Text: Siderits, “A Nyāya Interlude”

19 February  Abhidharma
Text: Priest, “Well-Founded Metaphysics”

24 February  Abhidharma

26 February  Introducing Mahāyāna
Siderits, “The Rise of Mahāyāna”

2 March  Yogācāra

4 March  Yogācāra

9 March  Madhyamaka
Text: Extracts from Śantarakṣita’s Madhyamakālaṃkāra (‘The Ornament of the Middle Way’)

11 March  Madhyamaka
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 March</td>
<td>NO CLASS</td>
<td>[spring recess]</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 March</td>
<td>NO CLASS</td>
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<td>25 March</td>
<td>Madhyamaka</td>
<td>Texts: Priest, “Emptiness” pp. 53-63</td>
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<td>Priest, “The Fifth Corner” (technical appendix is optional)</td>
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<td>30 March</td>
<td>Madhyamaka</td>
<td>Texts: Priest, “Paradox and Ineffability” (technical appendix is optional)</td>
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<td>1 April</td>
<td>Yogacāra-Sautrāntika</td>
<td>Text: Siderits, “The School of Diśnāga: Buddhist Epistemology”</td>
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<td>6 April</td>
<td>Sānlin</td>
<td>Text: Priest, “And So On” (technical appendix is optional)</td>
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<td>8 April</td>
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<td>13 April</td>
<td>Huayan</td>
<td>Text: Priest, “The Golden Lion”</td>
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<td>20 April</td>
<td>Chan</td>
<td>Text: Priest, “Enlightenment”</td>
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<td>22 April</td>
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<td>27 April</td>
<td>TERM PAPER PRESENTATIONS</td>
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<td>29 April</td>
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