

## Advanced Topics in Philosophy – *Buddhist Metaphysics*

### Meeting time and place

Mondays and Wednesday 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., 5<sup>th</sup> floor)  
Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2 PM – 3 PM and by appointment  
Email: [alexander.skiles@rutgers.edu](mailto: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 *catuṣkoṭi* (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:

- Graham Priest, *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi* (2018, Oxford University Press)
- Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (2007, Hackett Publishing)

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:

- William Edelglass and Jay Garfield (eds.), *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (2009, Oxford University Press)

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          | <b>40%</b> |
| - Midterm paper (1500-2000 words) | <b>20%</b> |
| - In-class presentation           | <b>10%</b> |
| - Final paper (2500-3000 words)   | <b>30%</b> |

## 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*

Text:    Siderits, "Non-Self: Empty Persons", pp; 32-50

              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*
- Text: Siderits, "Abhidharma: The Metaphysics of Empty Persons"
- 26 February** *Introducing Mahāyāna*
- Texts: Priest, "Emptiness", pp. 49-53
- Siderits, "The Rise of Mahāyāna"
- 2 March** *Yogācāra*
- Text: Siderits, "Yogācāra: Impressions-Only and the Denial of Physical Objects", pp. 146-158
- 4 March** *Yogācāra*
- Text: Siderits, "Yogācāra: Impressions-Only and the Denial of Physical Objects", pp. 159-179
- 9 March** *Madhyamaka*
- Text: Extracts from Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* ('The Ornament of the Middle Way')
- 11 March** *Madhyamaka*
- Text: Siderits, "Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness", pp. 180-191

- 16 March** NO CLASS [spring recess]
- 18 March** NO CLASS [spring recess]
- 23 March** *Madhyamaka*  
Text: Siderits, “Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness”, pp. 191-207
- 25 March** *Madhyamaka*  
Texts: Priest, “Emptiness” pp. 53-63  
 Priest, “The Fifth Corner” (technical appendix is optional)
- 30 March** *Madhyamaka*  
Texts: Priest, “Paradox and Ineffability” (technical appendix is optional)
- 1 April** *Yogācāra-Sautrāntika*  
Text: Siderits, “The School of Dinnāga: Buddhist Epistemology”
- 6 April** *Sānlùn*  
Text: Priest, “And So On” (technical appendix is optional)
- 8 April** NO CLASS [Pacific APA]
- 13 April** *Huayan*  
Text: Priest, “The Golden Lion”
- 15 April** *Huayan*  
Text: Nicholaos Jones, “Buddhist Reductionism and Emptiness in Huayan Perspective”, in Koji Tanaka, Yasuo Deguchi, and Graham Priest (eds.), *The Moon Points Back* (2015, Oxford University Press)
- 20 April** *Chan*  
Text: Priest, “Enlightenment”
- 22 April** TBD
- 27 April** TERM PAPER PRESENTATIONS
- 29 April** TERM PAPER PRESENTATIONS
- 4 May** TBD