

HRHP 8455
Topics in Buddhist Thought
Women, Family, Dharma
Fall 2012

Course Overview

Course Description

This course takes as its premise that the family is the primary locus of religious practice in Asian religions. The tendency to study Buddhism in its monastic forms, and to focus on the achievements of individual men, at best presents only a small part of the tradition and, at worst, creates large gaps in knowledge about this religion. In particular, women are often left out of the picture of Buddhism because of this overwhelming attention to men-centered monastic life and enterprises. Focusing on the family, in which women typically control ritual, finances, and education, will give a drastically different picture of Buddhism. The course will consider such topics as:

- Buddhism as a home-centered (not home-leaving) tradition;
- monks and nuns as sons and daughters, and even as husbands and wives;
- dissolving hard distinctions between “lay” and “monastic”;
- women as developers of Buddhist practices and doctrines;
- family relationships and gender symbolisms as central elements of Buddhism, especially in the East Asian sphere.

The course will consider women in both family and monastic lifestyles (not that the two are necessarily mutually exclusive) and will examine topics such as Buddhist ordination in relation to family (real and fictive); female/feminine imagery in Buddhist doctrine; the importance of “the mother” in the development of Buddhism; Buddhism, unborn children, and abortion; gender symbolisms; the development of Guanyin as female symbol and figure; and women and families in Buddhist practice.

Much of the course material will deal with historical issues of women and Buddhism. In order to introduce contemporary topics, students will create and lead at least three of the class sessions.

Student Learning Objectives

- Students will be asked to shift perspectives, from thinking of Buddhism as mainly monastic and centered on individual practice to considering it as also located in the dynamics of family and community.
- Students will understand how Buddhism has viewed women throughout its history, and how women have both internalized and rejected those views.
- Students will learn that gender imagery in Asian cultures, and thus in Buddhism, is based on different assumptions than western gender imagery and has profoundly influenced the development of Buddhism.
- Students will understand the great importance of family connections and imagery in all aspects of Buddhism, from monasticism to practice and doctrine.

Required Text

Yu, Chun-fang. *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

All other readings will be provided to students.

Assignments

Weekly: All students will participate in online discussion of each week's topics and readings, either through a weekly online voice meeting (via Skype) for lecture OR by posting to the course Moodle site. The voice meeting is expected to take about 90 minutes. Posts to Moodle should be about 1-2 pages in length. Students who post to Moodle will listen to the recorded lecture. These posts will also be discussed in the voice lecture.

Creating a class session: Students will create at least 3 of our class sessions. You may work in groups of 2–3 to do this. Students should decide the topic of their session in consultation with the instructor, select readings for the session, provide some sort of lecture material, and lead the class discussion. This project takes the place of a paper.

Grading

Weekly participation:	60%
Class session:	40%