

## **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha** *(The Majjhima Nikāya)*

Fall 2016\*

The *Middle Length Discourses (Majjhima Nikāya)* is one of the most important anthologies of the teachings and religious practices attributed to the Buddha. Often presented in a narrative account including the circumstances and people that prompted the Buddha's teachings, these rich and dynamic discourses provide context for better understanding the content and nature of early Buddhist teachings. This online course consists of extensive reading of selected discourses (*suttas*) from the *Middle Length Discourses*. The readings will be organized around themes found in the collection including the nature of the Buddha and the path of practice he taught, karma, sensuality and renunciation, the practice of mindfulness and concentration, and Buddhist conceptions of wisdom and spiritual liberation.

**Textbook:** Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005) ISBN 9780861710720<sup>†</sup>

### **Course objectives:**

With the successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Critically and objectively evaluate texts from the early Buddhist tradition.
- Describe, explain and discuss teachings and practices presented in the *Middle Length Discourses* including teachings on the themes of the path of practice, the Buddha, meditation and Nibbāna.
- Describe, explain and discuss different rhetorical devices and narrative structures employed in the *Middle Length Discourses*.
- Analyze the relationship between different concepts, teachings and practices presented in the *Middle Length Discourses*.
- Communicate ideas in a clear, coherent and logical writing style.

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\* This syllabus represents our current thinking, but is subject to change

† Alternative translations by Thanissaro Bhikkhu of many of the discourses can be found at [www.accesstoinight.org](http://www.accesstoinight.org) and alternative translations, often with extensive footnotes, by Piya Tan can be found at [www.dharmafarer.org](http://www.dharmafarer.org).

## **Course format, requirements and evaluation**

### Reading

Each week there will be an Introductory Study Guide introducing the theme for that week. In addition, there will be study guides to support a reading of selected discourses from the *Middle Length Discourses* related to the week's theme. Please read the Introductory Study Guide first and the discourses and study guides in the order listed.

### Weekly forum postings

500-750-word posts discussing the theme for that week and/or the rhetorical strategies used in a discourse are due on the Thursday of each week. The "Questions to Consider" at the end of the Introductory Study Guide may serve as a prompt for the forum postings if desired. In addition, by Saturday of each week, please comment on at least one post from your fellow classmates in a thoughtful and respectful manner. Comments of at least six sentences are recommended. A student may miss one post and one comment during the semester without adversely affecting her grade. No post is required for reading week. Posts and comments are worth 30% of the final grade.

### Mid-term essay

This assignment does not require outside resources or research, but is an exercise in engaging with and analyzing the material in the *Middle Length Discourses*. The recommended topic for the essay will be provided during Week 5 although alternative topics will be considered. (Please email any proposals for alternatives to fronsdal.sati@gmail.com). The recommended length for the paper is 5 pages, double spaced. It is due Oct 31, 2016 and is worth 30% of the final grade. (Late papers not accepted).

Final essay

This assignment requires careful analysis of a theme found in the *Middle Length Discourses*. The essay also requires research and references in at least two books or articles of modern scholarship on the early Buddhist discourses. A suggested topic for the essay will be provided during Week 11 although alternative topics will be considered. (Please email any proposals for alternatives to fronsdal.sati@gmail.com). The recommended length for the paper is 10 pages, double spaced. It is due Dec 16, 2016 and is worth 40% of the final grade. (Late papers not accepted).

Fall 2016 Course Schedule<sup>‡</sup>

**Week 1: Sept 5, 2016 – Introduction to the *Middle Length Discourses***

- Gil Fronsdal, “Introduction to *The Middle Length Discourses*”
- Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Introduction,” in *The Middle Length Discourses*, p. 19-58
- Optional: Bhikkhu Anālayo, excerpt from “Introduction,” in *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-Nikāya*, p. 1-11

Please introduce yourself in the forum

Posts due Thurs, Sept 8; comments on posts due Sat, Sept 10

**Week 2: Sept 12 – Relating to the Teachings**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 95, 100, 58, 63, 22.1-14, 32
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 104.1-5

Posts due Thurs, Sep 15; comments on posts due Sat, Sep 21

**Week 3: Sept 19 – Faith**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 27, 85, 7, 47
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 89, 56, 60

Posts due Thurs Sep 22; comments on posts due Sat, Sep 24

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<sup>‡</sup> As the course progresses, the assigned readings may be revised. The most up to date reading list will always be in the Introductory Study Guide for each week. Please read the discourses in the order provided.

**Week 4: Sep 26 – The Path**

- review: “Introduction” to the *Middle Length Discourses*, pp. 32-8
- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 70, 107, 141, 117, 125
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 24

Posts due Thurs Sep 29; comments on posts due Sat Oct 1

**Week 5: Oct 3 – The Buddha**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 26 and MN 26 Study guide
- Article by Jonathan Walters, “Suttas as History”
- MN 4, 36, 72, 12, 123
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 91, 49, 71, 77

Posts due Thurs Oct 6; comments on posts due Sat Oct 8

**Week 6: Oct 10 – Karma**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 98, 61, 86, 60
- Sutta study guides

Posts due Thurs Oct 13; comments on posts due Sat, Oct 15

**Week 7: Oct 17 – Rebirth**

- review: Introduction to the *Middle Length Discourses*, pp 45-51
- MN 41, 68, 57, 135, 136, 130
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: Piya Tan’s study guide for MN 130; MN 45, 129, 84

Posts due Thurs, Oct 20; comments on posts due Sat, Oct 22

**Week 8: Oct 24 – Reading week**

- *No assignments this week*

**Week 9: Oct 31 – Effort and Training**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 88, 78, 114, 29, 21, 53
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 8, 40

Posts due Thurs Nov 3; comments on posts due Sat Nov 5

*Mid-term essay due Oct 31, 2016*

**Week 10: Nov 7 – Training in Community**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 48, 65, 104, 5, 15
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 69, 142, 3, 103

Posts due Thurs Nov 10; comments on posts due Sat Nov 12

**Week 11: Nov 14 – Happiness, Sensuality and Renunciation**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 45, 46, 59, 13, 14
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: 66, 75, 54, 10.32, 137, 139

Posts due Thurs Nov 17; comments on posts due Sat Nov 19

**Week 12: Nov 21 – Mindfulness**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 62, 20, 10, 118, 119
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 128, “Introduction” to the *Middle Length Discourses*, pp 38-41

Posts due Thurs Nov 24; comments on posts due Sat Nov 26

**Week 13: Nov 28 – Concentration**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 19, 39, 43.18-20, 25, 105, 111
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 128

Posts due Thurs Dec 1; comments on posts due Sat Dec 3

**Week 14: Dec 5 – Wisdom**

- Introductory Study Guide to the topic
- MN 141, 28, 9, 43, 44
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 109

Posts due Thurs Dec 8; comments on posts due Sat Dec 10

**Week 15: Dec 12 – Attainments and Nibbāna**

- Introductory Study Guide to Attainments
- MN 34, 64.1-6, 22.30-36, 73.1-12, 76.51-54
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 116, 68

- Introductory Study Guide to Nibbāna
- MN 143, 147, 11, 102.23, 64.7 140.21-32
- Sutta study guides
- Optional: MN 2, 102, 109

Posts due Thurs Dec 15; comments on posts due Fri 16

*Final paper due Dec 16, 2016. Late papers not accepted.*