

Love and Sex in Buddhism
{October 2023 Draft; subject to change}

RELS 3333/6333

ROOM TBA Tuesday, 5:15–8:15 Grad Recitations on (Some) Thursdays, 10:15–11:45

From monastic celibacy to sanctified sex, this course examines the wide variety of attitudes and practices towards love, desire, attachment, and pleasure in the Buddhist tradition. Readings include primary sources from South, Southeast, and East Asia, secondary scholarship on Buddhist social history and doctrine, and theoretical literature on gender, sex, and the body.



Course Overview

↑ [Video syllabus](#) ↑

Buddhism and gender studies have at least three common aims. They relentlessly interrogate the givenness of the self, question conventional binaries, and offer visions of liberation based on these counterintuitive observations. This course juxtaposes these aims, surveying primary texts from within the Buddhist tradition, secondary scholarship on Buddhism, and theoretical literature on gender, sex, the body, the family, and power.

This course is not designed to make you a better Buddhist, nor (it should be obvious) is it designed to make you a better romantic partner. Instead, it is intended to provide sustained engagement with how Buddhists have practiced and problematized desire, pleasure, and attachment. Along the way, we consider how Buddhist conceptions of the body articulate with idealized cultural practices regarding family and sexual intercourse, and we investigate how the ideal of monastic celibacy can be reconciled with ascetic monastics' economic dependence on a larger community of producing (and reproducing) laypeople.

Prerequisites

Undergraduate students should have taken an introductory course in Asian religions, Buddhism, or Gender and Women's Studies. Suitable preliminary courses in RELS include (but are not limited to) RELS 0050 "Gender, Sexuality, and Religion," RELS 0079 "The Religion of Anime," or RELS 1730 "Introduction to Buddhism." An introductory course in South or East Asian studies may also satisfy the prerequisite requirement. Please contact me if you are uncertain about whether you are academically prepared to take the course.

Learning Outcomes

The purpose of a liberal arts education is not merely the accumulation of facts. While ideally you will emerge from this course with more factual knowledge about both Buddhism and gender/sexuality studies, the primary objective of the course is to facilitate opportunities to engage in the transferable and lifelong skills of critical reading, spirited yet civil discussion, and meticulous analytical writing. To that end, you will be given assignments that push you to read extensively and deeply, to discuss contentious topics with decorum, and to write and revise a sophisticated research paper that advances an original argument.

Graduate Section

Graduate students have a separate section that includes a recitation. This is an opportunity to meet separately from undergraduates for a more advanced discussion, including discussions of

readings that the undergraduate students will not have done. (These readings are listed below.) Grad recitation meets roughly every other week on Thursday mornings.

Expectations

You will write early and often in this course. I turn around comments on written assignments as quickly as I can, but please remember that there's only one of me and as many as twenty of you. That said, I promise to give you fair, substantive feedback on all written assignments.

Reading averages about 100–150 pages a week for undergrads, and a little more than a book/week for grad students. Some of the readings are theoretically dense; others may be challenging to people who are unfamiliar with Asian cultures. Please consider other demands on your time, devise a reasonable schedule, and read ahead if you can. (Readings are listed in the order of importance/order in which you should read them.) At the end of the semester the reading load lightens considerably to give you time to focus on your research project.

All required readings for undergraduates are available on Canvas. You may print readings out or view them on a laptop or other electronic device, but please bring them to every class meeting. If you are using an electronic device (laptop, tablet, etc.) in class, you are expected to close all social media, email, and other obviously distracting programs such as games and non-academic websites. Your phone should stay out of sight, silenced, while you are in class.

Because we will all be reading the same books, grad students may need to get some of the grad-level readings via BorrowDirect or ILL. Please plan ahead!

Attendance at all course meetings is mandatory, although I readily grant exceptions for unavoidable conflicts such as illness, bereavement, or academic travel. Don't come to class if you are sick. Just email me and arrange a time for us to meet when you are feeling better.

I recognize that people have varying levels of comfort with public speaking and I assess participation accordingly. Perceptible engagement in class discussion is expected, but that doesn't necessarily mean that engagement is only signaled by speaking. A general expectation is that no student will dominate discussion, and no student will remain entirely silent all term.

Weekly Tasks

Beginning in Week 2 and continuing throughout the semester, one or two designated students will be asked to make a short presentation (~10 minutes) summarizing the main points of the readings for the day. In addition to reminding your classmates of the main points, as presenter you should also come to class with one or two open-ended questions that refer to specific pages in the reading. These discussion questions should not merely be requests for factual information, but should rather elicit your classmates' opinions about a perplexing point in the readings. This will often happen through highlighting apparent contradictions within or across the assigned readings. Note that our authors frequently disagree!

Class sessions will be divided equally between student presentations (10–15 minutes), short lectures providing background information, collective work on critical reading, training in research methods and writing strategies, reviewing technical vocabulary, and open discussion. Every student is responsible for having done the readings in preparation for discussion.

A Note on Decorum

This course deals quite explicitly with issues of sexuality and gender. It also deals directly with religion. These are all things about which people tend to have very strong, and often unexamined, feelings. By participating in the course you are agreeing to come to class prepared to discuss the material in an academic mode, with appropriate respect for the feelings of others, and with an openness to changing your opinions and interpretations. You are also acknowledging at the outset that some of what we read and discuss may seem shocking, traumatic, or titillating. Consider yourself duly warned: we will read about incest, pregnancy, abortion, menstruation, rape, gender transitions (miraculous and surgical), pederasty, necrophilia, bestiality, masturbation, sodomy, and much more from the multifarious world of gender and sexuality. If you think this will make you uncomfortable to the extent that it will militate against your ability to do the work, please consider another course.

If you have discomfort around a specific topic but would like to take the course anyway, please let me know ahead of time that you might need to step out of the room during some discussions (you are not required to disclose specifics). Please use this option sparingly and only when it is required for your well-being; it is not an excuse to skip out on class discussions.

If you cannot discuss sexuality without overstepping the bounds of common courtesy and academic protocol, this course is not for you. Honest mistakes are to be expected; aggressive or insulting behavior will not be tolerated and may be grounds for dismissal from the course.

Assessment

I promise to grade your work fairly and to provide regular feedback on your progress. You will be assessed on attendance and engagement, the clarity of your oral presentations, and the persuasiveness of your written assignments. I provide rubrics in advance that enumerate the criteria I use in assessing each assignment.

There are two types of written assignment in this course. In the first four sections of the course, you will write four short response papers of 500–1000 words apiece. The questions are listed in the course schedule below so that you can hold them in mind as you do the reading each week. Throughout the semester, you will also gradually work on one longer writing assignment of 3000–4000 words. You may choose from the assigned topics (listed at the end of this syllabus) or you may pursue an independent research paper in consultation with me, but your final paper should be a thesis-driven piece of original scholarship. You are expected to do all research and writing yourself; plagiarism will result in a failing grade on the assignment, which could mean a failing grade for the course.

Grading rubric

Participation: 10%
Oral presentation: 10%
Response paper #1: 10%
Response paper #2: 10%
Response paper #3: 10%
Response paper #4: 10%
Research paper: 40%
 Bibliography: 5%
 Abstract: 5%
 Peer review: 10%
 Final paper: 20%

I encourage you to contact me immediately if you feel a writing assignment is unclear or if you are struggling with the mechanics of writing an academic paper. I will also set aside time in class to discuss strategies for effective research and scholarly communication.

That said, this course assumes that you have the basics of academic writing down. That means that you should be able to write an essay that has an argument, marshals evidence effectively, is grammatically coherent, has the absolute minimum number of typos, includes citations of any and all ideas that are not your own, and comes with a comprehensive bibliography of all of the works you have cited in support of your argument.

Use of generative AI such as ChatGPT is prohibited. There is a simple reason for this: Writing for an academic audience is a special kind of thinking. You need to have the experience of coming up with your own ideas and working to make them clear through language in order to have the full experience of this course.

Finally, the course is an introduction to the peer review process. You will be sharing your writing with your peers, so be prepared to offer and receive constructive criticism on drafts!

If anything above does not make sense to you, please make a point of seeing me during drop-in hours early in the semester.

Resources

The [Digital Dictionary of Buddhism](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/) (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>) is the go-to source for learning technical vocabulary. Anyone can log in as “guest” and search up to 10 words per day.

Weekly Schedule (Subject to Change Until The First Week of Class)

Week/Date/Topic	Undergrad/Required Readings	Grad/Recommended Readings
Part I	Dangerous Desires	
Week 1 1/23/24 Orientations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No readings 	
Week 2 1/30/24 The World of Desire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cabezón, <i>Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism</i>, 1–77; 114–71 (NOTE: You can ignore the extensive discursive footnotes. Actual length is about 70 pp.) Bowden and Mummery, “Sexuality and Desire” in <i>Understanding Feminism</i>, 73–98 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cabezón, <i>Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism</i>, 1–171 (only read the notes that catch your interest or seem most pertinent)
Week 3 2/6/24 The Danger of Desire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wilson, <i>Charming Cadavers</i>, 15–76 Fuhrmann, <i>Ghostly Desires</i>, 47–78 Moerman, “Demonology and Eroticism,” 351–80 MacKinnon, “Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective,” 105–21 	Grad Recitation on 2/8 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faure, <i>The Red Thread</i>, 15–63 Faure, <i>The Power of Denial</i>, 55–90

Response Paper 1 Due Friday of Week 3 2/9/24	<i>If Buddhists and feminists both problematize desire, do they do so in similar ways? If so, how? If not, why not? A complete answer will discuss Buddhist ways of problematizing desire while also bringing in some feminist critiques of desire as found in our readings. 500–1000 words</i>	
Part II	The Three Family Jewels	
Week 4 2/13/24 The Masculine Buddha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powers, <i>A Bull of a Man</i>, 1–66 • Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha?" 33–51 • Balkwill, "Why Does a Woman Need To Become a Man in Order To Become a Buddha?" 1–9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powers, <i>A Bull of a Man</i> (all) • Nattier, "Gender and Hierarchy in the <i>Lotus sūtra</i>," 83–106
Week 5 2/20/24 The Selfless Dharma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, "Suffering, Impermanence, and No-Self," 99–108 • Gethin, <i>The Foundations of Buddhism</i>, 133–62 • Pandey, <i>Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair</i>, 1–6; 10–30 • Butler, <i>Gender Trouble</i>, 194–203 	Grad Recitation on 2/22 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mahmood, <i>Politics of Piety</i>, 1–39 • Langenberg, "On Reading Buddhist Vinaya," 1121–53
Friday of Week 5 2/23/24	<i>This will seem super early, but familiarize yourself with the list of final paper topics included at the end of this document. Think about which of these things you might want to write on for your final paper. Obviously your plans may change; this exercise is just to get you thinking ahead. If you are thinking of pursuing a research paper on an original topic, set up a meeting with me to discuss potential sources and methods.</i>	
Week 6 2/27/24 The Gendered Sangha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, "The Acceptance of Women into the Order," 63–68 • Sponberg, "Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Buddhism," 3–36 • Gutschow, <i>Being a Buddhist Nun</i>, 1–19 • Soucy, <i>The Buddha Side</i>, 60–78; 97–117 	Grad Recitation on 2/29 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salgado, <i>Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice</i>
Response Paper 2 Due Friday of Week 6 3/1/24	<i>Sponberg identifies four Buddhist attitudes towards women and the feminine in Buddhism. What are they, and how do they relate to Buddhist conceptions of liberation? 500–1000 words.</i>	
Spring Break		
Part III	Love, Marriage, and (Re)Birth	

<p>Week 7 3/12/24 The Monastic Son and the Uterine Family</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, "Vessantara," 33–36 • Tambiah, <i>Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand</i>, 141–151 • M. Wolf, <i>Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan</i>, 32–41 • Cole, <i>Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism</i>, 1–55 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schopen, "Filial Piety and the Monk in Indian Buddhism," 110–126
<p>Friday of Week 7 3/15/24</p>	<p><i>By this point you should be actively looking for sources related to your research paper. You may need to order books through interlibrary loan.</i></p>	
<p>Week 8 3/19/24 The Problem of (Re)Birth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glassman, "At the Crossroads of Birth and Death," 175–206 • Langenberg, <i>Birth in Buddhism</i>, 1–55 • Meeks, "Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the Blood Bowl Sutra, Part I: China," 1–14 • Meeks, "Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the Blood Bowl Sutra, Part II: Japan," 1–16 	<p>In lieu of recitation, attend events related to Sara Swenson's visit on 3/21</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ohnuma, <i>Ties That Bind</i> • Blair, "Mothers of the Buddhas"
<p>Thursday of Week 8 3/21/24</p>	<p>Undergraduate Extra Credit: Attend Sara Swenson's lecture at 5:15. Ask a question to earn a point of extra credit. Grad students: Attend Sara Swenson's ethnography workshop at 3:30 and the public lecture at 5:15, schedule permitting.</p>	
<p>Friday of Week 8 3/22/24</p>	<p><i>Submit an annotated bibliography of your research paper. It should include at least five sources, at least three of which should not appear on our syllabus. (If we have read a short section of a book, you may count the whole book as one of your three.) Your notes can be brief (one or two sentences).</i></p>	
<p>Week 9 3/26/24 Marriage and (Social) Reproduction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeks, "The Priesthood as a Family Trade," 253–75 • Starling, <i>Guardians of the Buddha's Home</i>, 1–34; 81–106 • McDaniel, "Beautifully Buddhist and Betrothed: Marriage and Buddhism as Described in the Jātakas," 79–94 	<p>Grad Recitation on 3/28</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read all of Starling, <i>Guardians of the Buddha's Home</i>
<p>Response Paper 3 Due Friday of Week 9 3/29/24</p>	<p><i>What is the relationship between the fact of family life and the ideal of leaving the family for the monastery in the Buddhist communities of South, East, and Southeast Asia? A complete answer will include references to concepts of merit-making, biological and social reproduction, patriarchy, and the uterine family.</i></p>	
<p>Part IV</p>	<p>Lust for Liberation</p>	

<p>Week 10 4/2/24 The Fact of Sex</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foucault, <i>The History of Sexuality</i>, vol. I, 3–13 • Gyatso, "Sex," 271–90 • Langenberg, "Sex and Sexuality in Buddhism: A Tetralemma," 277–86 • Clarke, "Monks Who Have Sex," 1–43 (grad students can skip this) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarke, <i>Family Matters</i>
<p>Friday of Week 10 4/5/24</p>	<p>Submit an abstract of no more than 150 words outlining the main argument of your research paper and indicating the evidence it uses.</p>	
<p>Week 11 4/9/24 The Sex of Fiction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foucault, <i>The Use of Pleasure</i>, 187–203 • Li, <i>Becoming Guanyin</i>, 1–58 • Schmidt-Hori, <i>Tales of Idolized Boys</i>, 1–28; 78–103 • Schalow, "Kūkai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japanese Buddhism," 215–230 	<p>Grad Recitation on 4/11: Barbara Ambros visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambros, <i>Women in Japanese Religions</i>, pages TBD • Faure, <i>The Red Thread</i>, 207–240
<p>Thursday of Week 11 4/11/24</p>	<p>Undergraduate Extra Credit: Attend Barbara Ambros's talk in RELS at 3:30. Grad students: Attend Barbara Ambros's manuscript workshop at noon and the RELS Colloquium talk at 3:30, schedule permitting</p>	
<p>Week 12 4/16/24 Sexual Healing?</p>	<p>Undergrad-only Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, "The Perfection of Nonduality," 208–210 • Yeshe, <i>Introduction to Tantra</i>, 17–27; 131–41 • M. Shaw, <i>Passionate Enlightenment</i>, 3–19, 140–78 • Gayley, "Revisiting the 'Secret Consort' (gsang yum) in Tibetan Buddhism," 1–21 	<p>Grad Recitation on 4/18</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacoby, <i>Love and Liberation</i>
<p>Response Paper 4 Due Friday of Week 12 4/19/24</p>	<p>What have been some Buddhist techniques for managing sexual desire and the sexual act? Provide at least three different examples of Buddhist approaches to sex, and be sure to clarify salient differences in scholarly understandings of them. A complete answer will address sex as both problem and solution (i.e., as hindrance or aid to achieving awakening).</p>	
<p>Part V</p>	<p>Non-duality</p>	
<p>Week 13 4/23/24 Queer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gyatso, "One Plus One Makes Three," 89–115 • Buckner, "Many Paths to Freedom: Transgender Buddhism in the United States" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabezón, <i>Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism</i>, 297–451 • Langenberg, "Reading against the Grain," 728–34 (critique of Cabezón)

Thursday of Week 13 4/25/24	Undergraduate Extra Credit: Attend Alicia Turner's lecture at 5:15. Ask a question to earn a point of extra credit. Grad students: Attend Alicia Turner manuscript workshop (RELS Colloquium) at 3:30, schedule permitting	
Draft Due for Peer Review on Friday of Week 13 4/26/24	<i>This week you will be workshopping a section of your research paper with another student. This assignment is designed to introduce you to the collaborative nature of the peer review process. Submit a draft of at least 1000 words to your assigned partner in the appropriate place on Canvas.</i>	
Week 14 4/30/24 Free	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vesely-Flad, <i>Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition</i>, 198–229 	
Peer Review Due Friday of Week 14 5/3/24	<i>Give comments to your partner on persuasiveness of argument, mechanics (grammar, spelling, diction), and use and quality of evidence. Your job is to help your partner, not to criticize unnecessarily. Your written comments should balance praise (do this first!) and criticism, and should keep in mind that you are trying to help the person make a persuasive case. You will be assessed on the quality of your comments as part of your grade.</i>	

Final Paper Assignment (Due on 10 May 2024)

Your final paper can perform a critical analysis of existing secondary scholarship on Buddhism, sex, and gender on a specific theme (listed below) or, alternatively, can use primary sources in whatever languages you read to investigate how a particular Buddhist community has understood (or currently understands) sex and gender.

You may pursue a research project on a topic other than the ones listed below, but you must get advance permission from me by no later than Week 4. I reserve the right to turn down unrealistic research proposals. (If your project involves ethnography we will need to meet very early to make sure that it complies with university guidelines for research on human subjects.)

You are allowed to incorporate material from your response papers into your final paper as appropriate, but it should show evidence of having been massaged to fit within the paper rather than being a simple cut-and-paste job that boosts your word count.

We will talk in class about the fundamental components of a persuasive argument.

- 1) *How can the Buddhist doctrine of no-self be fruitfully juxtaposed with a gender studies critique of identity as performative? Support your answer with specific examples.*
- 2) *How might Buddhist conceptions of liberation support or challenge the emancipatory projects of LGBTQIA+ rights? Support your answer with specific examples. (This is a descriptive question about what Buddhists **might** do, not a normative one about what Buddhists **should** do. Talk with me if you do not understand the distinction.)*

- 3) *Is there a Buddhist "erotics" or "sexual ethics"? If so, in what does it consist, and on what visions of identity, sexuality, and social position is it based? (This question assumes that you will engage substantively with theoretical literature on sex and sexuality.)*
- 4) *In recent years some Buddhist communities have been rocked by sexual scandals. What has been the response to these scandals in journalism, academia, and the Buddhist communities involved? How can these scandals be understood in light of historical Buddhist understandings of sex, gender, and authority? (This is a current events question that could involve ethnography or sustained engagement with journalism, including the Buddhist press such as Tricycle and Lion's Roar. See also [Buddhist Project Sunshine](#))*
- 5) *Buddhism has arguably been characterized by strong misogynistic and androcentric strains of thought for much of its history. What are contemporary Buddhists doing to address or modify these strains of thought, and what impacts are their activities and activism having on contemporary understandings of Buddhist doctrine? (This is a sociological or ethnographic question that also invites you to address Buddhist doctrine.)*
- 6) *David McMahan (The Making of Buddhist Modernism, 2008) has described the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and D.T. Suzuki (among others) as spokespeople for what he describes as "Buddhist modernism." What is Buddhist modernism, and what vision of love, sex, and gender does it promote, if any? How can a Buddhist modernist sexual ethics be compared and contrasted with traditional Buddhist attitudes towards sex?*
- 7) *Buddhist temples and priests in Japan have provided memorial services for miscarried and aborted fetuses. What is the historical basis for this practice, and what scholarly debates exist about Buddhist approaches to abortion? You may need to make reference to historical practices of infanticide (mabiki) as well as surgical abortion and use of prophylactics in making your answer, and you almost certainly will also need to engage with Buddhist discourses on birth and menstruation. (As with questions above, this question is seeking a descriptive answer from the perspectives of Buddhist doctrine, sociological analysis, or public health. It is NOT an opportunity for you to advance normative claims about whether you think abortion is inherently right or wrong.)*
- 8) *Buddhist societies have sometimes drawn a distinction between sex for pleasure and sex for procreation, allocating each to specific locales, professions, and social positions (for example, courtesans vs. wives or chigo vs. women). What are some concrete examples of this bifurcation of sexual activity, and how does it relate to conceptions of family and patronage in Buddhism and the broader society?*
- 9) *Pick one or more of the translations of precious scrolls by Wilt Idema (Personal Salvation and Filial Piety; Escape from Blood Pond Hell; The Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women). What do these Chinese narratives tell us about the relationships between marriage, gender, and Buddhism in China? You may also want to look at books about women's devotional practices such as Li's Becoming Guanyin.*
- 10) *In recent years women in countries such as Thailand, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan have taken newly visible leadership roles in Buddhist communities. In some cases these*

women “talk past” (Meeks 2010) androcentric Buddhist discourses; in other cases they explicitly reject androcentric or misogynistic language. Pick a leading female figure (or figures) and discuss her/their ways of claiming authority within the Buddhist tradition.

- 11) *You may choose another topic in consultation with the instructor. Please arrange to meet with me to discuss your proposed topic by no later than Week 4; you must have settled on your topic with no further changes by no later than Week 8.*

Papers should be formatted according to the [Chicago Manual of Style](#) and should show evidence of having been edited and proofread.

Plagiarism, including use of generative AI, will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the assignment. Cite your sources carefully and give full attribution for any ideas and wording that are not your own.