

Spring 2025 RLG2045H



Clockwise from bottom left to right: Naomi Appleton reading Vanessa Sasson's *Yashodhara*; cover of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*; Lincoln-themed biographical collage; Tibetan mandala representing the bardo; Shyam Selvadurai in Benares; Volga; Ninon-Ausländer Hesse and Herman Hesse; cover of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*; cover of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*; detail of the cover of *Nixon under the Bodhi Tree*; cover of the English translation of Michio Takeyama's *Harp of Burma*. Centre cover of Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light*. Centre back: still from the film "Lost Horizon."

Modern Buddhist Fiction

Time: Mondays, 3-5pm

Place: JHB 213

Instructor: Christoph Emmrich

Email: christoph.emmrich@utoronto.ca

Office: Centre for the Study of Religion, 170 St. George St.,
Jackman Humanities Building, Room 203

Office hours: by appointment

A. Description and guidelines

Course description

Buddhism, the Buddha, and indeed a Buddhist twist on storytelling have shaped modern world literature from its very beginnings. One could in fact argue that one of the many beginnings of modern fiction in many parts of the world is Buddhist and further that Buddhism has consistently played a role in recurring renewals of how to write fiction since the onset of modernity. In this course students will explore that role by analysing key works, in English or in English translation and written between 1879 and today, which either modernize motifs drawn from premodern Buddhist texts or process contemporary material by adopting a Buddhist aesthetic or philosophical stance. That will involve not only reading modern religious fiction in its own right and within the context of its composition and reception in mind, but also confronting the works with the classical sources, both narrative or doctrinal, which they draw from. Students will explore: the beginnings of modern Buddhist fiction in Europe and Asia with Edwin Arnold's *The Light of*

Asia (1879), Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), and Niṣṭhānanda Vajrācārya's *Lalitavistara* (1914), confronting European Orientalist aesthetics with religious reform literature in Asia, the secularization of Buddhist hagiography in Dalit and Marxist 1940-50s narrative literature by B. R. Ambedkar and D. D. Kosambi, 1920s and 1950's Germanophone and US-American counterculture Buddhist literature with Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958), the emergence of post-war Japanese modernism through the processing of WWII in Michio Takeyama's *Burmese Harp* (1946), the influence of Buddhism on postmodernist and experimental writing in Roger Zelazny's SF classic *Lord of Light* (1967), the collection *Nixon under the Bodhi Tree* (2004), and in George Saunders' much-acclaimed *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), right up to recent feminist and queer retellings of the life of the Buddha's wife *Yashodhara* in the homonymous novels in Telugu and in Canadian English by Volga (2017) and Vanessa Sasson (2021), respectively, as well as, staying with Canadian literature, in Shyam Selvadurai's latest novel *Mansions of the Moon* (2022).

Each session will focus on one book which will be embedded in select readings drawn both from related contemporary Buddhist-inflected writing and from classical Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and Newar Buddhist sources in translation. The larger question this course will ask is about the importance of religion for poetics and the role of the novel as a space in which authors and readers can experiment globally with both with religious hybridity and literary innovation. "Modern Buddhist Fiction" is a contribution towards connecting the study of the premodern Asian Buddhist classics with modernist, political, avantgarde, and popular fiction from around the world, including Canada, and allowing students to discover the interconnectedness of these worlds and implicit or explicit religious forms of writing academic readers of modern fiction should be made aware of. While keeping in mind Buddhist Studies students' need to engage with premodern Buddhist literature, it's core is conceived of as a crossover between the study of religion and the study of literature, reaching out to students who are interested in the literary aspects of religion more broadly, but also speaking to students in English and Comparative Literature, fields in which religion has begun to play an increasingly important role.

Readings and viewings

All texts and visual materials are made available either through the course website or through the links provided in the syllabus.

Requirements

This course will be conducted as a seminar. In order to be graded, students must prepare the required reading assignments in due time, attend classes regularly, participate actively in the sessions, lead one discussion, submit the discussion statement notes, and submit one essay.

Participating in class

The weekly assignments consist of familiarizing yourself with a book (which could include reading it cover-to-cover, or strategically, or cursorily) and the reading of one supplementary study on the book itself, on an aspect of the book or on a related topic, or the viewing of a film or a piece of footage, as specified by the syllabus. Please check the Course Calendar below to find out which texts should be prepared for each session. In addition to a constant participation in in-class discussions, each student should prepare a minimum of 3 questions or critical remarks relating to the material read for each session. Students will be expected to independently raise these questions or make these remarks and react to comments made by other members of the class. The instructor will take notes on the quantity and quality of these oral contributions.

Leading a discussion

Students are expected to choose one session in which they will lead the discussion on the assigned required reading(s). This assignment involves (a) familiarizing oneself with the assigned materials really well, (b) giving a short, five-minute statement about the content of the material(s), highlighting the problems, questions, passages that the student would like the discussion to focus on, (d) play a leading role in the discussion, e.g. take initiative if the discussion is faltering, redirect the discussion to issues that in his or her view have not been sufficiently addressed, encourage questions. The specific readings the student should focus on will depend on whether the student is an undergraduate or a graduate student. In addition to the oral part of this assignment, the student is required to send to the instructor one day before the class

(deadline: Tuesdays, 11:59pm) a Word file with his or her notes, comprising a paragraph or two of summary of the sources and a list of the issues he or she would like to raise in the discussion (see above: problems, questions, passages that the student would like the discussion to focus on). The document should be no longer than two pages. The document should be sent as a pdf document to the instructor's email address: christoph.emmrich@utoronto.ca

Writing an essay

For the final take home-essay (12-20 pages) students should choose one from among various topics which should be proposed, discussed and specified in coordination with the course instructor around mid-term. Students may suggest a theme according to their individual interests. This could be a particular text they have found challenging, a question which has come up in one of the readings or in-class discussions, or a topic they would like to explore more in detail. The research essay has to be turned in on the Friday following the final day of class as an electronic file in pdf format attached to a mail addressed to the instructor: christoph.emmrich@utoronto.ca. Possible extensions to the deadline should be discussed with the course instructor well in advance. It is advisable to have at least one meeting with the course instructor to discuss the bibliography, the outline of the essay, the work in progress or to receive feedback on a draft. However, students should keep in mind the deadline, so that they are able to incorporate advice in time. The course instructor will be glad to offer assistance in deciding on the relevant topic, material or method and discuss thoughts and writing.

It is crucial for written assignments that everything you produce has been either formulated by the student or marked and referenced as a quotation if the student uses materials you have taken from a source. As UofT has adopted a firm stance on the issue of plagiarism, students must be aware that, if detected, the course instructor has the duty to report them to university authorities.

Evaluation, weighting, and deadlines

1. regular attendance and the active and informed participation in class before drop date: 15% - ongoing
2. regular attendance and the active and informed participation in class after drop date: 5% - ongoing
3. discussion lead and discussion notes: 30% - ongoing
4. research essay of 15-20 pages: 50% - March 31, 2025

There will be no exams, quizzes, or tests.

Course grading scheme

A+	90-100%	B+	77-79%	F	0-69%
A	85-89%	B	73-76%		
A-	80-84%	B-	70-72%		

Late penalties

Late submissions without prior notice to the instructor will receive a 2% grade deduction per late day. Students are required to contact the instructor 24 hrs before the deadline for discussing the conditions for a grade-deduction-free submission. For a grade-deduction-free submission without prior discussion with the instructor students will need to hand in the appropriate documentation.

Interaction with the course instructor

Address all your requests and queries about the course to the course instructor. Use your utoronto.ca mail address. The mail header should identify the course so that your mail can be quickly identified. Though incoming mails are viewed on a daily basis and though the course instructor will try to address your issues as swiftly as possible, it may take up to three days for the instructor to reply to your mail, so do wait for that period before reacting and do mail in time if you have any urgent requests. Prearrange meetings by email so that they can be scheduled upon request.

B. Topics, Readings, and Schedule

January 6th INTRODUCTION

January 13th STRANGE BUDDHA

Source text:

Sir Edwin Arnold. *The Light of Asia or The Great Renunciation (Mahābhinishkramana), being The Life and the Teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism (As Told in Verse by an Indian Buddhist)[J]*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1879.

Additional reading:

“Śākyamuni: South Asia,” in *Brill Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, edited by Jonathan Silk. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2019, vol. II, pp. 3-31.

January 20nd WISE BUDDHA

Source text:

Rudyard Kipling. *Kim*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co.

Additional reading:

Janice Leoshko. “What Is in Kim? Rudyard Kipling and the Tibetan Buddhist Traditions.” *South Asia Research* 21, 1 (2001), 51-75.

January 27th WHITE BUDDHA

Source text:

Hermann Hesse. *Siddhartha. An Indian Tale. A new translation by Joachim Neugroschel*. New York: Penguin, 1999 (original: *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung*. Berlin: Fischer, 1922).

Additional reading:

Suzanne Marchand. “German Orientalism and the Decline of the West.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Dec., 2001, Vol. 145, No. 4 (Dec., 2001), pp. 465-473

February 3th LOST BUDDHA

Source text:

Hilton, James. *Lost Horizon*. Calcutta: ISSD Press, 1933.

Additional reading:

Donald S. Lopez Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La. Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. University Of Chicago Press, Year: 1998. Introduction, pp. 1-13.

February 10th MARTIAL BUDDHA

Source text:

Takeyama, Michio. *Harp of Burma*. Translated by Howard Hibbett. North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1989 (original: (ビルマの豎琴, Biruma no tategoto, Tokyo, 1948).

Additional viewing:

“The Burmese Harp” (ビルマの豎琴, *Biruma no Tategoto*, a.k.a. *Harp of Burma*), Japan, 1956
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7JygIpLHbs>

February 17th READING WEEK

February 24th BEAT BUDDHA

Source text:

Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: The Viking Press, 1958.

Additional reading:

Michael K. Masatsugu, “Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence”: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years.” *Pacific Historical Review* 77, 3 (August 2008), pp. 423-451

March 3th US PRESIDENT BUDDHA I

Source text:

Kate Wheeler, ed. *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004.

Additional reading:

Kate Wheeler: Foreword, Mark Terrill: preface, & Gerald Reilly: introduction, in *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction*, vii-xviii

Lama Govinda Das, Preface and Keith Katchtik, Introduction, in *You Are Not Here and Other Buddhist Fiction*, pp vii-4.

March 10th US PRESIDENT BUDDHA II

Source text:

George Saunders. *Lincoln in the Bardo*. New York: Random House, 2018

Additional reading:

Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh. “Liminal Spaces and Contested Narratives in Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Parámó* and George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*.” *IJAS Online*, 2018-19, 8 (2018-19), pp. 66-83.

March 17th SUBALTERN BUDDHA

Source text:

Volga. *Yashodhara*. A Novel. 2019 (original Telugu version: *Yashobuddha*, Hyderabad: Navodaya Book House, 2017).

Additional reading:

Joel Tatelman. "The Trials of Yaśodharā: A Critical Edition, Annotated Translation and Study of Bhadrakalpāvadāna II-V." Doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, Trinity, 1996, pp. xxix-lxiv

March 24th FEMINIST BUDDHA

Required reading for all:

Vanessa Sasson. *Yasodhara. A Novel About the Buddha's Wife*. Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2018.

Additional reading:

Natasha Heller. "The princess and the sage. The Buddha's story from his wife's point of view." *Times Literary Supplement*, June 18, 2021: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/religion/religious-culture/yasodhara-and-the-buddha-vanessa-r-sasson-review-natasha-heller>

Additional viewing:

UH Better Tomorrow Speaker Series. George Tanabe interviews Vanessa Sasson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmUzQlc89A0>

MARCH 31ST QUEER BUDDHA

Required reading for all:

Shyam Selvadurai, Shyam. *Mansions of the Moon. A Novel*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022

Additional reading:

"Almost 30 years after their breakout literary successes, Shani Mootoo and Shyam Selvadurai are (mostly) no longer outsiders," *xtra magazine*, June 8, 2022: <https://xtramagazine.com/culture/shani-mootoo-shyam-selvadurai-224473>

Additional viewing:

Yashodhara and Women of the Sangha |Shyam Selvadurai & Vanessa R. Sasson with Arundhati Subramaniam: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqZC2LL1nEk>

FURTHER INDEPENDENT READING:

Johnson, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. Blomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Katchtik, Keith (ed.). *You Are Not Here and Other Buddhist Fiction*. Somerville: Wisdom, 2006.

Kottary, Advait. *Siddhartha. The Boy Who Became the Buddha*. Gurugram: Hachette India, 2023.

Michie, David. *The Dalai Lama's Cat*. Toronto: Hay House Visions, Penguin Random House, 2012.

Zelazny, Roger. *Lord of Light*. New York: Doubleday 1967 (Harper Collins, 2004).