Centre of Buddhist Studies
The University of Hong Kong

Master of Buddhist Studies Course list 2019-2020

All courses are offered on credit basis. Candidates must complete eight courses by selecting two compulsory foundation courses, five elective courses, and one course for capstone experience. Candidates have to complete a total of 60 credits for graduation.

1. Foundation Courses (9 credits)

Early Buddhism
Mahayana Buddhism

2. Elective Courses (6 credits each)

2.1 Buddhist Traditions

History of Indian Buddhism: a general survey
History of Chinese Buddhism
Ch’an Buddhism: history, culture and thought
Buddhism in Tibetan contexts: history and doctrines
Japanese Buddhism: history and doctrines

2.2 Buddhist Texts, Thought and Culture

An introduction into the practical Abhidharma study
Philosophy and psychology of Madhyamaka and Yogacara
Reading early Buddhist discourses
Chinese Buddhist art along the Silk Road
Dunhuang Buddhist art and culture
Study of important Buddhist meditation texts

2.3 Applied Buddhism

Buddhism and contemporary society
Counselling and pastoral practice
Buddhist mediation
Buddhist psychology
Buddhist liturgy and rituals
Buddhist ethics

2.4 Buddhist Languages

Pali I
Pali II
Sanskrit I
Sanskrit II
Classical Tibetan I
Classical Tibetan II
3. Capstone Experience (12 credits each)

Capstone Experience: Dissertation
Capstone Experience: An additional elective course and a portfolio

(The list above is subject to change)

1. Foundation Courses

Early Buddhism (9 credits)

This course will be mainly based on the early Buddhist discourses (Pāli Suttas) and is designed to provide an insight into the fundamental doctrines of what is generally known as Early Buddhism. It will begin with a description of the religious and philosophical milieu in which Buddhism arose in order to show how the polarization of intellectual thought into spiritualist and materialist ideologies gave rise to Buddhism. The following themes will be an integral part of this study: analysis of the empiric individuality into khandha, ayatana, and dhatu; the three marks of sentient existence; doctrine of non-self and the problem of over-self; doctrine of dependent origination and its centrality to other Buddhist doctrines; diagnosis of the human condition and definition of suffering as conditioned experience; theory and practice of moral life; psychology and its relevance to Buddhism as a religion; undetermined questions and why were they left undetermined; epistemological standpoint and the Buddhist psychology of ideologies; Buddhism and the God-idea and the nature of Buddhism as a non-theistic religion; Nibbāna as the Buddhist ideal of final emancipation. The course will be concluded with an inquiry into how Buddhism’s “middle position”, both in theory and praxis, determined the nature of Buddhism as a religion.

Mahayana Buddhism (9 credits)

This course aims to provide an introduction to Mahayana Buddhism. After a brief look at the development of Buddhism in India after the death of the Buddha, this course concentrates on the historical, philosophical and practices of Mahayana Buddhism in India. These include the arising of Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhisattva ideal, Trikaya: the three bodies of the Buddha, Pureland Buddhism, and the philosophical systematizations of the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools.

2. Elective Courses

2.1 Buddhist Traditions

History of Indian Buddhism: a general survey (6 credits)

An objective understanding of the development of any Buddhist tradition presupposes a proper historical perspective. The course is designed to provide students with a general, but not superficial, survey of Indian Buddhism from a historical perspective highlighting all the important developments up to the emergence of Mahāyāna. The main themes for the course include: the origins of Buddhism and the Indian Background; process of the compilation of the Canon; the classification of the Buddha’s teachings; the Councils; the popularization of Buddhism; the emergence and development of the major Buddhist sects; King Asoka and his contribution to the Buddhist cause; spread of Buddhism outside India; rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism and other related topics.
History of Chinese Buddhism (6 credits)

This course examines the major events and thoughts in the history of Chinese Buddhism with a particular emphasis on the establishment of Chinese Buddhist Schools. A major aim is to show how Buddhism has been gradually and successfully incorporated into and became one of the three pillars of Chinese thought and culture. The important Chinese Buddhist masters will also be examined against their historical background to show their contribution to the development of Chinese Buddhism.

Ch’an Buddhism: history, culture and thought (6 credits)

The tradition of Chan (meditation) in Chinese Buddhism is arguably the most distinctive feature of sincization of Indian Buddhism. While exerting a great influence on post Song Chinese culture, Chinese Chan is also one of the basic Buddhist elements that made Chinese culture crossed national boundaries in East Asia, giving birth to Korean son and Japanese zen. This course deals with important topics in the history and traditions (practices included) of Chinese Chan Buddhism. Apart from highlighting the connection of early Chinese Buddhist meditational techniques to Indian Buddhist sources, the emphasis will be on the transformation of the Indian elements as well as the Chinese innovation under the influence of other Mahayana Buddhist philosophies and Chinese culture.

Buddhism in Tibetan contexts: history and doctrines (6 credits)

In this course we will explore some of the main historical, doctrinal and sociological developments of Buddhism in Tibetan contexts. Lectures will cover the following topics: the historical agents and events leading to the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet; the formation and teachings of various Buddhist schools including their doctrinal differences and manifold socio-political spheres of influence; Tibetan sacred art and symbolism; tantric techniques, mysticism and religious experience.

Assessment: 100% coursework

Japanese Buddhism: history and doctrines (6 credits)

This course introduces students to the history, teachings, practice, and institutional realities of Japanese Buddhism. The course will focus its special attention on the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, Prince Shotoku’s contribution to its spread, the Taika Reforms, the Nara Buddhism, its formation and further development in the Heian and Kamakura periods, its transformation in the Edo period, its encounter with modernity in the Meiji period, and recent developments within Japanese Buddhism since the end of World War II. The founders of different schools of Buddhist thought such as Saicho, Kukai, Honen, Shinran, Eisai, Dogen, Nichiren and others together with their main teachings are also examined. The course will further examine the Buddhist impact upon the ways of thinking of the Japanese people with a view to understanding Japan and her culture.

2.2 Buddhist Texts, Thought and Culture

An introduction into the practical Abhidharma study (6 credits)

To be provided
Philosophy and psychology of Madhyamaka and Yogacara (6 credits)

To be provided

Reading early Buddhist discourses (6 credits)

The discourses of the Buddha called Suttas are preserved in a collection called a ‘basket of discourses’. They offer a rich source of inspirational teachings on compassion, ethical responsibility, mental tranquility, and insight into true state of affairs, that are as relevant today as it was over two and a half millennium ago. In this course selected simple but profound short discourses and verses, prose passages and sections from the large discourses will critically be studied in their English translations supported by the original texts and their Theravāda commentaries in Pali. The readings will take students in a fascinating journey through the Buddha’s progressive teaching while also mastering the linguistic features and literary forms of the Sutta genre. The readings will empower students not only to understand the ethical, psychological and philosophical teachings of the Buddha but also to find their relevance for achieving sustainable happiness by improving behavior in a more considerate and kindly way, nurturing more positive attitudes and states of mind that let go of the causes of stress, and developing a wiser understanding of the nature of life and the world. Knowledge of Pali is not required.

Chinese Buddhist art along the Silk Road (6 credits)

This course introduces students to the splendors of Buddhist art and architecture from the perspective of its historical and cultural heritage. It offers a comprehensive survey of its transmission from India, Central Asia through the Silk Road to China, South, Southeast and East Asia. The major Buddhist caves in China will be examined, and special attention will also be paid to the interaction between Buddhist doctrine and art, literary expressions and images. As a major emphasis, the course will be on exploring the main traditions of Chinese Buddhist art and its interaction with the Western world.

Dunhuang Buddhist art and culture (6 credits)

This course is a theme-based study of Buddhist art and cultural relics preserved in the Dunhuang Grottoes. It will examine the development of Buddhist art in Dunhuang from the historical, iconographical and doctrinal perspectives. The main themes discussed in the course include: the early Buddhist narrative art, the Maitreya cult, the illustration of Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra and Lotus Sūtra, the representation of Pure Land, the Guanyin faith and Bodhisattva path, the development of Esoteric art, Dunhuang art in the Tubo period, Mañjuśrī and Mount Wutai, the sacred calligraphy and printing culture, and some other related topics. The cultural interaction with India, Central Asia, and the impact from central China Ch'ang-an on the development of Dunhuang art and culture will be examined. The course aims to introduce to the students the unique value of Dunhuang Buddhist art and culture as a time capsule of Silk Road history under the influence of Buddhism.

Study of important Buddhist meditation texts (6 credits)

Meditation is an integral part of the study and practice of Buddhism. This course will read and study important Buddhist texts related to the practice of meditation from various traditions. Passages will be selected from texts such as: the Satipatthana Sutta, Visuddhimagga, Sandhinirmochana Sutra (Sutra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets, 解深密經), The Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices《菩提達磨略辨大乘入道四行》, and The Three Statements that Strike the Essential Points by Garab Dorje. Students will also be introduced to the actual practice of meditation.
2.3 Applied Buddhism

Buddhism and contemporary society (6 credits)

This course examines various contemporary social issues from the Buddhist perspectives. It starts with Buddhist attitudes towards society and social issues in order to dispel the misunderstanding that Buddhism has nothing to do with society but only an ascetic tradition for individual salvation. Then followed by discussions on special topics such as the foundation for a peaceful society, war and peace, social ethics, material wealth, environment, family, gender, suicide and euthanasia, death, etc. Each topic is discussed by drawing material from the original Buddhist texts and analyzed in the light of Buddhist thought and practice.

Counselling and pastoral practice (6 credits)

This course aims at providing students with basic knowledge and understanding of the application of Buddhist theory and practices to counselling, in particular in a health care setting, and personal transformation in the provision of chaplaincy services. With the Four Noble Truths as the groundwork for Buddhist counselling, the course also covers practices of mindfulness and contemplation; basic skills in communication; issues on death and dying; and insights into caring for the dying and their carers. The course comprises lectures, discussions, role-plays and Buddhist practices. In order to acquire an experiential as well as intellectual understanding of the subject, students are expected to participate in class exercises as well as contemplation practices at home.

Buddhist mediation (6 credits)

By integrating the techniques of Solution-focused brief therapy and the mediation process with Buddhist theories and practices, the course will teach a model of conflict resolution which reflects the Mahayana ideal of the practice of the Way of Bodhichitta of benefiting oneself and others in being able to resolve conflicts for oneself and for others and learn about the process of change and transformation through applications of the model. Students will acquire basic knowledge of theories and practices of Buddhism and mediation in an integral approach and apply the appropriate skills to be their own mediator and to mediate other people’s dispute in their peer group or community. The mode of teaching will be by lecture, demonstration by videotapes or role-plays, role-play exercises in small groups and self-reflective learning.
**Buddhist psychology (6 credits)**

This course takes a psychological perspective to introduce Buddhism as a moral and psychologically healthy way of life. The early Buddhist way of life as practiced by the Buddha and his disciples is introduced through selected readings from English translations of the original Pali texts Majjhima Nikaya and Anguttara Nikaya. This source is chosen over other more theoretically oriented secondary sources on the belief that the early Buddhist way of life provided the experiential (and empirical) basis for Buddhist philosophy. The narrative format offers lively and concrete examples of problem solving in daily life that are easily understood by most readers and more importantly- less readily misunderstood. Theories and important concepts in Buddhism are introduced later in the course to bind together the rather loosely organized teachings of the Nikaya texts. Finally, the epistemological foundation of Buddhism is introduced through selected readings from the Yogacara tradition (in particular the Thirty Stanzas) and compared with recent developments in theoretical psychology (in particular social constructionism).

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**Buddhist liturgy and rituals (6 credits)**

Although many claim (based on a selective reading of canonical Buddhist literature) that the Buddha’s “original teaching” involved a rejection of ritual activity, from the very early period and throughout the entire Buddhist history, the Buddhist traditions have adopted indigenous rituals and practices and have devised a great variety of their own rituals. This course provides an introduction to Buddhist ritual practice in different Buddhist tradition to the students who are interested in Buddhist studies. We will begin by exploring several theories and research methods of adopting rituals in anthropology and religious studies. After having grasped the theoretical basis of ritual studies, the students will go further to study the doctrinal, mythic, and other dimensions of Buddhist practice, identify the various sources of ritual power, examine the structural patterns of various rituals, survey the different categories of ceremonies, and analyse the most important groups of rituals, especially different death rituals that are performed to assist the deceased to enable rebirth into the better realms. It will focus on how experiences of ritual site and ritual time will generate meanings that affect individual enlightenment as well as the understanding of Buddhist teaching. As a comparative approach to Buddhist rituals, this course will cover materials such as myths, texts, and video records of rituals. Rituals are studied in some detail by reading ritual texts and conducting fieldwork (or studying rituals by watching video recordings of them) to examine the actual ritual practice.

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**Buddhist ethics (6 credits)**

Buddhism places importance on ethics more than any other great world religions; its core teaching, i.e. the four noble truths, while containing normative ethical instructions, answers the ethical question of ‘what is a meaningful life’, its spiritual training starts with cultivation in morality, and its initial achievement of spiritual practice consists of the Right View, a stand and knowledge of mainly ethical nature. This course provides in-depth discussions of Buddhist ethical teachings in the framework of fundamental ethical questions, including the nature of Buddhist ethics, the Buddhist view of good and bad, a morally meaningful life of Buddhism, the role of moral training in the pursuit of Buddhist spiritual goal, and some aspects of social ethics.
2.4 Buddhist Languages

Pali I (6 credits)

Pāli is the language of Theravāda Buddhism commonly practiced in South and Southeast Asia. This Theravāda school of Buddhism is the only Buddhist school that has preserved a complete canon since the 3rd century B.C.E. This course is meant for those students who have no prior knowledge of the language and who wish to become familiar with Pāli expressions and idioms, and with the basic requirements to understand Pāli Buddhist texts. The main focus of the course is to introduce basic grammar together with exercises, including phonetics, parts of speech, nouns of different gender and their declension, verbs and their conjugations, participles and their functions, syntax and classification of sentences. At the end of the course the students are expected to be able to read simple Pāli sentences and understand their religious and philosophical significance in context.

Sanskrit I (6 credits)

Sanskrit, being one of the most ancient languages known to humankind, is considered to be a key to understanding human civilization, in particular, the rich cultural, philosophical and religious heritage of India whose influence on our world continues to be felt. Students of history, history of science, comparative literature, general and historical linguistics, philosophy and religions will discover that a basic knowledge of the language greatly enriches their studies. For students who intend to specialize in different aspects of Buddhism, an ability in reading and comprehending of Buddhist Sanskrit texts is essential. This course will give an overview of the history of Sanskrit Buddhist Literature and Basic grammar and of the language, covering topics such as scripts, phonetics, declensions, conjugations, participle and sandhi.

Classical Tibetan I (6 credits)

This is an introductory course on learning how to read literary Tibetan and does not require prior knowledge of the language. In this course students will learn to read and write basic Tibetan, while acquiring a practical understanding of grammar and the ability to translate sentences and short Buddhist passages mainly from Tibetan to English, but also from English to Tibetan.

Pāli II (6 credits)

The main focus of the course is to introduce more practical knowledge of Pāli that enables students to read easy Pāli passages both prose and verse extracted directly from the Pāli texts. It also introduces remaining grammatical components not included in Pāli Language I such as basic grammar together with exercises, including phonetics, parts of speech, nouns of different gender and their declensions, verbs and their conjugations, participles and their functions, syntax and classification of sentences. At the end of the course the students are expected to be able to read simple Pāli sentences and understand their religious and philosophical significance in context.

Sanskrit II (6 credits)

The main focus of the course is to guide students to read Buddhist Sanskrit passages and comprehend Sanskrit Buddhist literature. This course covers Sanskrit grammatical components together with exercises selected from Sanskrit Buddhist texts which are not included in Readings in Sanskrit Buddhist Texts I. This course covers, parts of speech, nouns of different gender and their declensions, verbs and their conjugations, participles and their functions, compound, different forms of past tense, future tense,
locative and genitive absolutes, syntax and classification of sentences.

**Classical Tibetan II (6 credits)**

This course is designed for students with basic knowledge of literary Tibetan and grammar. It will cover advanced features of Tibetan grammar and syntax, complex sentences, and specialised Buddhist vocabulary. Students will be introduced to reading and translating select passages from different genres of Tibetan literature. Tibetan I or an equivalent qualification is required for enrolling in this course.

3. Capstone Experience

**Capstone Experience: Dissertation (12 credits)**

The purpose of the dissertation is to enable candidates to demonstrate the overall knowledge and skills they have learned from the curriculum through a guided independent research of a substantial piece of academic work. Candidates will be assessed on their capacity to define a topic for analysis and examination, to articulate a coherent scheme and logical arguments of the issues involved, to gather the necessary information, and to examine and present their ideas in a satisfactory way. The dissertation shall be 10,000-15,000 words in length. The title of dissertation shall be submitted for approval by January 15 of the final academic year in which the curriculum ends and the dissertation shall be presented by July 31 of the same year. Candidates shall submit a statement that the dissertation represents their own work undertaken after registration as candidates for the degree.

**Capstone Experience: An additional elective course and a portfolio (12 credits)**

This course comprises an additional elective course and the submission of a portfolio. The purpose of this course is to enable candidates to demonstrate the overall knowledge and skills they have learned from the curriculum through the writing of a portfolio. Candidates must complete the elective course concerned (the one shown in the course title) and the related coursework/examination. Candidates will also need to submit a portfolio of 10,000–12,000 words. This elective course should be treated as a major component in preparing the portfolio. The portfolio should be compiled by revising, integrating and consolidating three or four individual papers (of 2,500 to 3,000 words each) from a total of two to four different courses with a mission statement (of 1,000 words) explaining how these essays contributed to the candidates’ understanding of a specific theme in the area of Buddhist Studies within the context of the curriculum. The title of the portfolio shall be submitted for approval by January 15 of the final academic year in which the curriculum ends and the portfolio shall be presented by July 31 of the same year. The elective course will contribute 6 credits while the portfolio will contribute 6 credits in the capstone experience.