

The Bodhisattva Path

Spring 2024

Wednesdays, 2:00-3:50 pm, WPH 104

Prof. Lori Meeks

Many Mahayana Buddhist texts teach that the enlightenment of a Buddha is available to everyone, even ordinary people. To attain Buddhahood, they teach, one must commit to rigorous practice as a bodhisattva, a being dedicated to the “six perfections”: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation, and understanding.

In this course we will undertake close readings of two major works on the bodhisattva path – one written by the great Indian master Śāntideva (8th c.), in verses that have been celebrated throughout Buddhist history, and another by Norman Fischer, a contemporary Zen practitioner who has interpreted the bodhisattva path for modern readers. Both works address how ordinary people can pursue in everyday life the lofty goals of the bodhisattvas, who devote themselves to compassion and wisdom and who embody the concepts of “emptiness” and interconnectedness.

We will begin with Śāntideva's classical work and will then use Fischer's book to consider how the perspective of the bodhisattva path might inspire us to think through the lofty but essential project of self-cultivation and character formation.

Learning Objectives:

This class is meant to be a comfortable and nurturing environment in which you can master skills necessary for success in college, and especially in humanities courses. We will practice the art of close reading intensively, discuss writing style and citation methods, and think through methods for making difficult texts more comprehensible. We will also talk about study skills, office hours, interacting with university faculty, and other strategies for getting the most out of your experience at USC.

At the same time, the course will give you an opportunity to learn about the Buddhist tradition in depth, and to examine how the ideal of the bodhisattva path can help us think about character formation. Specifically, what resources should we turn to as we imagine and work to shape our future selves? What kind of people do we want to be, and how can we go about cultivating ourselves in ways that produce contentment and meaning (for us, and for those around us)? This class will focus on some Buddhist answers to these questions, but our readings will give us the opportunity to think about these crucial questions more broadly as well.

Instructor and Office Hours:

Lori Meeks, Associate Professor of Religion and East Asian Languages and Cultures

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:00-1:50 pm, or by appointment

ACB 129, 825 Bloom Walk (West Tower)

(323) 719-0984, meeks@usc.edu

Books:

There are two required books for the course. Both are available at the USC Bookstore, and if you are able, I recommend that you purchase your own copies. I will also made copies available on Course Reserves at Leavey Library if requested.

- Norman Fischer. *The World Could Be Otherwise: Imagination and the Bodhisattva Path*. Shambhala, 2019.
- Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Oxford World's Classics. Ed., Paul Williams, Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, Translators. Oxford UP, 2008.

Assignments:

This course is graded on a Pass/No Pass basis. To pass the course, you must attend discussions regularly and complete the following assignments:

- **A reading journal, to be evaluated by the instructor every three weeks.** You will be asked to keep a running journal, in a notebook, or as a document, in which you regularly reflect on the course material. You should write about 200 words each week, in response to our reading assignment. Each entry can take a variety of forms: you may use bullet points and write out some “talking points” on a passage; you can record a series of questions you have about the reading; or you can offer a close reading of a particular passage. You will submit your journals to me three times over the course of the term.
- **A final reflection on the course (3-4 pp.), due one week after our last meeting.** This final reflection may incorporate personal insights but should also engage our readings in a substantive way. I will give you more details in the weeks before the assignment is due, but essentially, I will ask you to reflect on one or two ideas from the course (and the readings) that have been meaningful to you. Your response will consider the large ideas of the course while also making specific references to the readings.

Reading Schedule:

January 10

- Week One: **Introduction to the Course: Why Study the Bodhisattva Path?**
- Fischer, Ch. 1, “Imagination,” pp. 1-25.

January 17

- Week Two: **What Is a Bodhisattva?: Śāntideva’s Buddhism**
- “General Introduction: Śāntideva and his World,” by Paul Williams, in Crosby and Skilton, pp. vii-xxvi. (Optional: skim “Translators’ Introduction, by Crosby and Skilton, pp. xxvii-xlii).

January 24

- Week Three: **Śāntideva’s Bodhicaryāvatāra: Structure and Aims**
- Śāntideva (Crosby and Skilton trans.), Chs. 1-4, 10, pp. 3-29, 133-143.

January 31

Week Four:

Generosity

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Generosity," "Practices," 27-54.
- Śāntideva, Ch. 5, "The Guarding of Awareness," 30-44.

Submit reading journal this week.

February 7

Week Five:

Ethical Conduct

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Ethical Conduct," "Practices," 55-82.

February 14

Week Six:

Patience

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Patience," "Practices," 83-112.
- Śāntideva, Ch. 6, "The Perfection of Forbearance," 45-62.

February 21

Week Seven:

Joyful Effort

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Joyful Effort," "Practices," 113-140.
- Śāntideva, Ch. 7, "The Perfection of Vigour," 63-74.

Submit reading journal this week.

February 28

Week Eight:

Meditation I

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Meditation," "Practices," 141-170.

March 6

Week Nine:

Meditation II

- Śāntideva, Ch. 8, "The Perfection of Meditative Absorption," 75-104.

March 11-15: Spring Recess, No Class

March 20

Week Ten:

Understanding

- Fischer, "The Perfection of Understanding," "Practices," 171-199.
- Śāntideva, Ch. 9, "The Perfection of Understanding," 105-132.

Submit reading journal this week.

March 27

Week Eleven:

Putting it All Together: Imagining and Reimagining the Bodhisattva Path

No reading due this week.

Submit final paper by Monday, April 1 (via email)

University Statements on Academic Conduct and Support Systems:

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems

Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call
engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call
engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421
studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776
dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710
studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101
diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost’s Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.