

Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies  
Course Syllabus – Fall 2026

Japanese Buddhism 日本の仏教  
—Beyond within in the here and now—  
Tuesdays & Wednesdays 1:10-2:40

**Instructor**

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**Course Description**

This course presents an introduction to, and an investigation of, specific topics on Japanese Buddhism. Classroom lectures and discussions in Japanese will focus on general Buddhist concepts and ideals both fundamental and particular to Japan.

*Buddha* means an awakened, enlightened, or realized one. The teaching of Buddhism thus aims at the state of mind that realizes the cause of *duḥkha* (suffering) in this world and overcomes its suffering through entering *nirvāṇa*, the goal of Buddhism.

*Nirvāṇa* is understood to be the realm free from *duḥkha* apart from our world. Mahayana Buddhism, however, insists that *nirvāṇa* refers to this world of ours. That is, *nirvāṇa* is in the realm of *samsāra* or birth-and-death with *duḥkha*, where we are living right now. Buddhism claims that “Birth-and-death is thus *nirvāṇa*.”

When one sees that lotus flowers beautifully bloom in the mud but not in the pure water, one may realize the encounter of the two opposites coinciding with each other—the unity of polarity—much of Japanese philosophy dwells on this.

Kamakura-era Buddhism is characterized as the age of selecting a single practice for people by the founders of new sects or denominations. In this course, Shinran (1173-1262) for Pure Land Buddhism and Dōgen (1200-1253) for Zen Buddhism are examined respectively.

**This course will be taught in Japanese at the Intermediate Level** and will use a variety of texts in both Japanese and English. Toward the end of the course, we plan to visit temples of the Pure Land and Zen denominations.

仏陀 *Buddha* は「目覚めた者」という意味で覚者と訳します。仏教の教えは、現実におけるこの世の苦しみ (*duḥkha*) の原因を理解しそれを乗り越えていく境地、つまり涅槃 (*nirvāṇa*) に入ることを目的とします。

そこで、涅槃とはこの世を越えた苦のない世界と理解されますが、大乘仏教 (Mahayana Buddhism) では、この世のことを指していると主張します。つまり生死 (*samsāra*) と呼ばれる四苦八苦の我々が住んでいる世界そのものだと言います。生死即涅槃 (*Samsāra is then nirvāṇa*) がそれにあたります。

蓮の華が清らかな水の中ではなく泥の中で美しく咲くということが見えたとき、真反対のものが呼応し、逆対応しているという矛盾的構造が見えたときに「目覚め」が起こるとされます。これが大乘仏教の醍醐味であり、日本哲学の中核の一つです。

鎌倉仏教（12—3 世紀）の特徴はそれぞれの教祖が一つの道を選び取ったところにあります。このクラスでは、浄土仏教（Pure Land Buddhism）と禅仏教（Zen Buddhism）を取り上げ、浄土教は親鸞（1173-1262）、禅は道元（1200-1253）を学びます。

また、それらの宗派に関わる寺院等を訪れ、体験学習を試みます。

### **Overview and Tentative Schedule** (subject to change)

The course starts with defining the term *buddha* 仏陀, which means, in past passive participle, awakened, enlightened, or realized. *Buddha*, in a noun form, refers to an awakened, enlightened, or realized one 覚者.  $\sqrt{budh}$ , which means to wake 目覚める, is the root verb for *buddha*.

The class then expounds on the basic difference between Theravada Buddhism 上座部仏教 and Mahayana Buddhism 大乘仏教. Early Buddhism maintains that *nirvāṇa* 涅槃, the goal of Buddhism, is outside of this world of *duḥkha* 苦 or suffering. Therefore, one attains *nirvāṇa*, transcending *saṃsāra* or birth-and-death 生死—the six realms of *duḥkha*. Mahayana Buddhism, however, claim one attains *nirvāṇa* in the six realms beyond within, in the here and now. Two opposites—*saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*—coincide with each other, formulating the unity of polarity.

We will examine this characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism from two Kamakura-era Buddhist reformers: Shinran (1173-1262) and Dōgen (1200-1253). As for Shinran, *nembutsu* 念仏 was selected as he followed his teacher Hōnen. On the other hand, Dōgen modeled himself after Shakyamuni the Buddha 釈迦牟尼仏 for the attainment of satori or enlightenment in *zazen* 坐禅 or sitting meditation. *Nembutsu* and *zazen* are different practices and teachings; yet, in terms of religious experience both Shinran and Dōgen are edifying enlightenment taking place in the here and now. In order to experience some practices of the Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, we will visit Nishi Hongwanji and a Sōtō Zen temple in Kyoto/Hikone.

Through attending classes actively and fulfilling various requirements, students should be able to:

- 1) become familiar with Buddhist terminologies in Sanskrit, English, and Japanese;
- 2) explain their meanings in simple Japanese;
- 3) express views over key topics with other students in Japanese; and
- 4) come to appreciate/edify *wabi* わび and *sabi* さび along with the sadness of things もののあわれ—Japanese aesthetics 審美学 revealing in Japanese literature from the Heian-era on.

### **Texts and reference materials**

All readings will be provided by the instructor. Texts, reference materials, quiz notice, and other important information will be sent to students via email in advance.

There will be a short quiz for technical terms at the beginning of each class. Course lecture and discussion will be conducted based on those technical terms. The instructor will elaborate on the meaning of the terms with simple questions and answers and will expect students to share their understanding.

Students will receive a variety of texts in English and Japanese and will do preparation on the topics before coming to class.

### Week 1—Course Orientation

9/08 (T)

**Topic:** Buddhism 仏教

**In-class activity:**

Orientation

9/09 (W)

**Topic:** Buddha 仏陀

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

### Week 2 —The Three Bodies of the Buddha 仏の三身

9/15 (T)

**Topic:** The Three Bodies of the Buddha 仏の三身

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

9/16 (W)

**Topic:** Amida Buddha 阿弥陀仏

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

### Week 3—No classes

9/22 (T) National Holiday

9/23 (W) National Holiday

### Week 4—Dharma and dharma 法

9/29 (T)

**Topic:** Dharma and dharma 法

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

9/30 (W)

**Topic:** The Three Seals of Buddhism 三法印

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

### Week 5—The Four Noble Truths 四諦八正道

10/6 (T)

**Topic:** The Four Noble Truths 四聖諦

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

10/7 (W)

**Topic:** The Eightfold Noble Path 八正道

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

**Week 6— Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism 上座部仏教と大乘仏教**

10/13 (T)

**Topic:** *Samsāra* (the six realms) 生死 (六道)

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

10/14 (W)

**Topic:** *Tathāgata*—如去 *tathā-gata* と如来 *tathā-āgata*

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

**Week 7—Lotus Flowers in the Six Realms 泥沼に咲く蓮の華**

10/20 (T)

**Topic:** Lotus flowers in the mud 泥沼に咲く蓮の華

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

10/21 (W)

**Topic:** *Samsāra* is then *nirvāṇa*. 生死即涅槃

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

**Week 8—Bodhisattva Ideal in the Here and Now 菩薩行、今ここ**

10/27 (T)

**Topic:** Bodhisattva Ideal 菩薩行

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

10/28 (W)

**Topic:** *Pratītya-samutpāda* (interdependent co-arising) 縁起

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

**Week 9—Shinran 親鸞**

11/10 (T)

**Topic:** Flow of Japanese Buddhism 日本仏教の流れ

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

11/11 (W)

**Topic:** Jodo (Pure Land) 浄土

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

**Week 10—Nembutsu (Recitation of the Name of the Buddha) 念仏**

11/17 (T)

**Topic:** Nembutsu (Recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha) 念仏

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

11/18 (W)

**Topic:** Hell is decidedly my destiny. 地獄は一定すみかぞかし

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

**Week 11—Dogen 道元**

11/24 (T)

**Topic:** Dogen 道元

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

11/25 (W)

**Topic:** Flowers yet fall as people lament. 華は愛惜にちり

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

**Week 12—Letting “body-mind” cast off 身心を脱落せしむる**

12/01 (T)

**Topic:** True nothingness is profound being. 真空妙有

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day  
Learn and practice using “terms”  
Lecture

12/02 (W)

**Topic:** To let one's body-mind and other's body-mind cast off

自己および他己の身心をして脱落せしむ

**In-class activity:**

Technical terms (3-5) of the day

Learn and practice using “terms”

Lecture

### **Week13 - Visiting Buddhist Temples** 曹洞宗禅寺、西本願寺

**Topic 1:** Visiting a Soto Zen temple 曹洞宗禅寺 for *zazen* in Kyoto or Hikone

**Topic 2:** Visiting Nishi-Hongwanji 西本願寺 and a local Pure Land temple nearby in Kyoto

\* Dates are to be arranged. Most likely on weekend.

### **Week 14- Winding up**

12/15 (T)

Presentation

### **Assignments**

20% - vocabulary quizzes:

Students will regularly take quizzes on key technical terms. This practice will make it easier for students to understand class and get involved in class activities. Related reading materials—English and Japanese—will be sent to students in advance.

20% - preparation and participation:

Class lecture will be explanatory using simple Japanese. Students are encouraged to ask questions. Discussion in class is expected. When a topic may be difficult to comprehend in a metaphysical or philosophical sense, English will be used in a limited capacity. Students will be evaluated on preparation and class participation.

20% - reflection reports:

Students will be required to write four reflection reports (approx. 400-600 words each) in Japanese, using the technical terms previously learned. Some suggested topics or titles for these reports will be provided in advance, so that students will have time to consider possible topics and organize their thoughts.

20% - presentations:

Toward the end of the course, students will prepare and make 10-minute presentations. Students will be recommended to work together to identify topics and work in small groups to do in-class presentations. Evaluation of the presentation dwells on interest of ideas, organization, and language acquisition.

20% - final reports:

Students will submit a report (about 1,000 words) for the course on a subject of their choice. Students may write about visiting Buddhist temples or another course topic. We will visit Nishi-Hongwanji for Shinran (or the Pure Land Buddhism) and a Soto Zen temple for Dogen (or Zazen). Student reports should strive for a subjective understanding based on objective investigation. Students should present their topic to the instructor for feedback before beginning their report.

**The deadline for submitting the final report is December 16. Students can submit the report to the instructor during class or send it by email by the deadline.**

### **Attendance and Grading**

Attendance: Two unexcused absences will result in a loss of half of the class participation grade (see

below) making any grade higher than a “B” unlikely. Three or more unexcused absences will result in the total loss of the class participation grade making any grade higher than a “C” unlikely.

Grading Policy:

A 100-94  
A- 93.9-90  
B+ 89.9-87  
B 86.9-83  
B- 82.9-80  
C+ 79.9-77  
C 76.9-73  
C- 72.9-70  
D 69.9-60  
F 59.9-

A+ = 4.33  
A = 4.00  
A- = 3.67  
B+ = 3.33  
B = 3.00  
B- = 2.67  
C+ = 2.33  
C = 2.00  
C- = 1.67  
D = 1.00  
F = 0.00

**Make-up Policy and Late Assignments**

An official medical note or a written excuse from Columbia University are the only circumstances considered as excused absences for which make-up quizzes will be permitted or late assignments will be accepted. Make-up quizzes may be different from the original given in class. The instructor reserves the right to give partial credit for writing assignments submitted late.

**Code of conduct text to be included in all KCJS syllabi (May 31, 2023)**

*(Text in bold includes new language)*

As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited. In practical terms, this means that, as students, all work submitted in this course, whether in draft or final form, must be your own. You must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent. Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated.

**The use of ChatGPT or any other AI tools for course assignments (with the exception of artificial neural networks like DeepL for machine translations, duly cited) is tantamount to plagiarism. Any cases of plagiarism or cheating will be reported to Columbia Undergraduate Global Engagement and the academic advisor at your home institution and are subject to the code of**

**academic conduct there. In such cases, your final grade will be determined by your home institution and not by KCJS.**