

Keio University Syllabus and Timetable

JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND SOCIAL SUFFERING

Subtitle	Priests and Temples Reviving Human Relationship and Civil Society
Lecturer(s)	WATTS, JONATHAN S.
Credit(s)	2
Academic Year/Semester	2026 Spring (2nd Half)
Day/Period	Wed.3,4
Campus	Mita
Classroom	457
Class Format	Face-to-face classes (conducted mainly in-person)
Registration Number	57875
Faculty/Graduate School	INTERNATIONAL CENTER
Year Level	2, 3, 4
Grade Type	S, A, B, C, D
Course Description	A course to aim to study Buddhism in Japan in a very different way through the actions of Buddhist priests and followers to confront the real life problems and suffering of people in Japan today.
K-Number	CIN-CO-00143-212-08

[▼ Detail](#)

Course Contents/Objectives/Teaching Method/Intended Learning Outcome

This course is offered as a companion course to Buddhism and Social Change in Contemporary Asia 仏教と現代アジアの社会変化 by the same instructor in the first half of the semester. You do not have to take both courses, but it is recommended to do so for a fuller understanding. This course will look at Buddhism in Japan in a very different way – through the actions of Buddhist priests and followers to confront the real life problems and suffering of people in Japan today. We will look at such issues as:

- 1) human relationships in terms of: a) dying and grieving, and b) alienation and suicide;
- 2) economic development in terms of: a) social and economic gaps, aging society, community breakdown and depopulation of the countryside, b) alternatives to globalization and Buddhist economics, and c) alternative energy and the environment;
- 3) politics in terms of: a) nuclear power and peace, and b) Buddhist complicity with war and work for peace.

The creative solutions some individual Buddhists are developing in response to these problems mark an attempt to revive Japanese Buddhism, which has been primarily associated with funerals and tourism. These efforts are trying to remake the temple as a center of community in an increasingly alienated society.

There will be a variety of teaching methods from homework, readings, group processes, in-class videos, and guest speakers. This course will attempt to be as interactive as possible, so students should be ready to reflect on the issues personally as they experience them as residents of Japan, and to express these reflections not only intellectually but emotionally as well. Field trips will be offered on the key issues above so as to deepen appreciation and understanding. As such, THIS COURSE IS LIMITED TO 35 STUDENTS. PLEASE SEE DETAILS BELOW.

Course Taught by Faculty Member with Professional Experience

Applicable

Jonathan Watts has lived in Indonesia, Thailand and Japan for the past 30 years involved in NGO/NPO work with Buddhist based organizations. He has been researching and assisting Japanese Buddhists engaged in a variety of forms of social work. This research forms the basis of this course and was published in two volumes in 2023 as Engaged Buddhism in Japan. He has also written and edited three other books on related issues: Lotus in the Nuclear Sea: Fukushima and the Promise of Buddhism in the Nuclear Age (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2013), Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012) and This Precious Life: Buddhist Tsunami Relief and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Post 3/11 Japan (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2012). Students will have the opportunity to learn from and meet the many Buddhist priests and social activists in Japan and elsewhere whom he has come to know over the years.

Active Learning Methods [Description](#)

Fieldwork

Discussions, Debates

Group work

Flipped classroom

Preparatory Study

There is little week to week work outside of the classroom (beyond the one field trip each student must join). The work becomes somewhat intensive at the very end of the course with a research project (5-10 hours) and a final oram exam (30 mins).

Course Plan

Lesson 1

Unit 1: A Brief History of Japanese Buddhism

Lesson 2

Unit 1: The Civilizational Culture of Buddhism meets Japan's Particular Cultural Identity

Lesson 3

Unit 1: Understanding Japanese Society through a Buddhist Lens & Buddhist Social Analysis

Lesson 4

Unit 1: The Present Crisis in Japanese Society: The Disconnected Society 無縁社会

Lesson 5

Unit 2: The Present Crisis in Japanese Buddhism: Funeral Buddhism & Patriarchy

Lesson 6

Unit 2: Reforming Funeral Buddhism through End-of-Life Care

Lesson 7

Unit 2: The Suicide Prevention Priests of Japan Part I

Lesson 8

Unit 2: The Suicide Prevention Priests of Japan Part II

Lesson 9

Unit 3: Buddhist Kaihotsu 開発 Development to Confront Rural Decline, Migrant Laborers, Poverty & Homelessness

Lesson 10

Unit 3: Nuclear Energy & the Eco-Temple

Lesson 11

Unit 4: Imperial-Way Buddhism 皇道仏教 in the Pre-War Era

Lesson 12

Unit 4: Japanese Buddhist Peace Activism in the Post-War Era

Lesson 13

Unit 5: A Buddhist Vision for Japan: From Social Dukkha to Social Nirvana

Lesson 14

Unit 5: A Buddhist Vision for Japan: From Social Dukkha to Social Nirvana

Other

Concluding session

Method of Evaluation

1. Exam N/A
2. Attendance, Participation (30%)
3. Preparatory study for Oral Interview (40%)
4. Oral Interview (30%)

Generative AI Policy for Classes

In this course, emphasis is placed on students' own thinking and expressive abilities. Therefore, the use of generative AI is, in principle, prohibited. I enjoy hearing students' own voices. Many non-native English speakers have creative and insightful ways of expressing themselves. If you use AI even to correct English grammar issues, you may lose your distinctive voice. A student who hands in assignments that have lost their voice and use a sterilized AI voice will be graded down and in certain cases asked to meet with me separately to clarify their ideas. This course is not an English course and you will not be evaluated on your English level at all. If you are unsure about what is permitted, please consult the lecturer in advance.

Textbooks

None; all readings, homework assignments, and other class details will be available on the class homepage: <https://ogigaya.wordpress.com/>

Reference Books

Watts, Jonathan S. Engaged Buddhism in Japan Vols 1 & 2. (Ottawa: Sumeru Press, 2023)

Lecturer's Comments to Students

This course will be taught as face-to-face only. The number of students in the course is capped at 35. Attendance at the first session is mandatory. If the number of students exceeds the limit, selection will be made by lottery. この授業は英語で行われますが、日本語の教材やビデオを使用することがあります。また、日本語で会話をする機会もあります。しかし最後のレポートは必ず英語で書かなければなりません。日本語・英語、その他の言語でこの授業を楽しみましょう！ While this class is conducted in English, there will be a broad use of Japanese language source texts and videos, and Japanese may be used at times in class. However, all main texts are in English. Translation will be provided during field trips, and the final written report must be done in English. Whether it be Japanese, English or one of the many languages of our international students, let's enjoy communicating together!