

**Philosophies of India (PHIL 212)**  
**MWF 10:10-11 am**  
**TBD**

**Instructor Information**

Professor Matthew R. Dasti

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**Course Description**

Classical Indian thought has long fascinated the Western world as a source of insight into fundamental questions of human existence. It is often characterized as one of the three great historical traditions of philosophy, along with those found in China and Greece. Contemporary thinkers are now widely recognizing that the Indian tradition is a great storehouse of sophisticated philosophical reflection and is worthy of significant study. This course meant to provide such a study, suitable for undergraduates, by examining the core issues, texts, and debates that shape traditional Indian thought.

We start by examining philosophical themes within ancient foundational works like the *Upaniṣads* and the Sermons of the Buddha. Then, engaging with the mature philosophical schools of the classical period, we consider epistemological questions of belief, justification, and skepticism. We then focus on metaphysical debates: is there a real, independent world? is there an enduring self? Is there a creator God or ultimate ground of being? Finally, we will consider ethical issues developed in concert with Indian theories of meditation and contemplative action.

This is a study in the history of philosophy. In terms of *history* one of our goals is to understand properly the original thinkers and texts in their own context, learning about a part of the world that is at some distance temporally and geographically from our own. In terms of *philosophy*, one of our goals is to understand the arguments and perspectives of the original thinkers by critically reflecting on their timeless philosophical relevance. To this end, our study will not only focus on ancient Indian thinkers, but the modern scholars and philosophers in India who continue developing their legacy.

**Course outcomes**

- The student will be able to identify and explain major philosophical contributions from leading philosophers in India and South Asia more generally.
- The student will be able to articulate coherent reasons for her positions on various philosophical issues discussed in class and explain such reasons using a philosophical vocabulary developed from our readings and class discussion.

**Required readings**

- *The Bhagavad-gītā* (Note: I don't care which translation you use. If you have one, use it, and if you need to buy one, there are a number of inexpensive translations. I will suggest a few in class).
- *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries*, by Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips (Hackett 2017). Available at BSU's bookstore.
- *Buddhism as Philosophy*, by Mark Siderits (Hackett 2007). Available at BSU's bookstore.

- PDFs of short articles and sections of books, which will be uploaded to the Blackboard site. *You must print these individually, read them ahead of time, and bring the printed copies to relevant classes. If you prefer to read these electronically, please talk to me.*

### Grade Calculation

10% Participation  
30% Exam #1  
30% Exam #2  
10% Final quiz  
20% Final Paper

The **participation** grade is based on how well you participate in classroom discussion. 10/10 is consistent, thoughtful participation. 0/10 is complete lack of participation. I do not have a separate grade for attendance, but after 5 unexcused absences, you will fail the course. If you miss class for some reason and are not sure if it should be excused or not, please check with me.

The **exams** are in-class, mainly short-answer exams which cover the course topics. The **quiz** will have the same sorts of questions as the exams, but will be shorter.

There will be a **final paper**, 4-6 pages in length. Students will start by choosing a topic and short outline that I must approve before they begin their paper.

### Tentative schedule and readings

Topic 1: Introduction and ancient origins (2 weeks)

- What is philosophy? What is the history of philosophy as a discipline? What is philosophy in India?
  - Supplementary reading: Indian Philosophy, a Historical Overview, by J. Mohanty (PDF)
- What is selfhood and why does it matter? How does self-knowledge relate to living well?
  - Reading: selections from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*
  - Supplementary Reading: “The Upanishads” by J. Brereton (PDF)
  - Reading: *Buddhism as Philosophy* pp 15-18
  - Reading: sermons of the Buddha: “Setting in motion the wheel of truth,” “The Fire Sermon,” and “Universal Love,” translated by W. Rahula. (PDF)
- What were the major schools of mature Indian thought?
  - Reading: handout on the major Indian schools of Philosophy (PDF)

Topic 2: Epistemology (2-3 weeks)

- How do we know things? What are our sources of knowledge?
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra* chapter 1 and chapter 9
  - Reading: *Buddhism as Philosophy* chapter 10
- How can we be sure that we know anything?

- Reading: Nagarjuna's attack on Pramana theory, by Dasti (PDF)
- Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra*, chapter 2

## EXAM 1

### Topic 3: Metaphysics (6-8) weeks

- Is the world real?
  - Reading: *Buddhism as Philosophy*, chapter 8
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra*, chapter 3
  - Reading: *Buddhism as Philosophy*, chapter 10
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra* chapter 5
- What is a self? Is there a deep self? Or any real self at all?
  - Reading: select verses from the *Bhagavad-gītā* on the deep self
  - Reading: commentaries on *Bhagavad-gītā*, by Śaṅkara (PDF) and Rāmānuja (PDF)
  - Reading: passages from *The Questions of King Milinda*, translated by Rhys-Davids (PDF)
  - Reading: "Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*: the critique of the soul," by C. Goodman (PDF)
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra*, chapter 4
- Is there a God? What would God be like?
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra*, chapter 6
  - Reading: "Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition," by R. Hayes (PDF)
  - Supplementary reading: "Theism in Asian Philosophy," by M. Dasti

## EXAM 2

### INITIAL DISCUSSION OF FINAL PAPERS; BEGIN WORK ON THESES AND OUTLINES TO BE APPROVED BY ME

### Topic 4: Ethics (2-3 weeks)

- What is *karma*? How do actions create our future?
  - Reading: "Karma" by P. Olivelle (PDF)
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra* pp. 162-166 on karma.
- How should a good Buddhist live if there is no self?
  - Reading: *Buddhism as Philosophy*, chapter 4
  - Reading: "The Bodhisattva Path: Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*" by W. Edelglass (PDF)
- What is Yoga, and how does someone improve herself through meditation? What is liberation as understood by our thinkers?
  - Reading: selections from the Sermons of the Buddha: "The Foundations of Mindfulness," translated by W. Rahula (PDF)
  - Reading: The *Bhagavad-gītā*
  - Reading: the *Yoga-sūtra*, translated by S. Phillips
  - Reading: Commentaries on *Yoga-sūtra* 1.2, translated by E. Bryant (PDF)
  - Reading: *Nyāya-sūtra*, pp. 168-172

**WORKSHOP ON HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHY PAPER**  
**FINAL QUIZ**  
**FINAL PAPERS DUE**

**How to succeed in this class**

1. Find a few note buddies. . . Let's do this on the first day.
2. Take good notes, and every day spend 20 minutes or so reviewing your notes.
3. Do all the readings in a thoughtful way; write down questions on strange or difficult passages to ask me about them in class.
4. Ask questions in class about things you don't understand.
5. Take advantage of the study questions at the end of every chapter of the *Nyāya-sūtra* and the ones that I put up on Blackboard at the end of every major topic in class.

**Things to note**

1. We will use Blackboard as the web-support for this class. If you are having problems with it, let me know immediately! Technical support for Blackboard is available from BSU's IT Support Services (508.531.2555).
2. If you are caught plagiarizing or cheating, you will fail the course and be reported to the University administration. If you feel lost or concerned about your standing in the course, please talk to me.
3. No cell phone use/ texting, etc. are allowed in class. Please turn off your phones or put them in "airline mode" for the duration of class. If, owing to special circumstances, you need to be on call, please alert me of this fact before class. Violating this rule will result in a deduction in your attendance/participation grade, and continued violation is grounds for failure. Students are not allowed to use computers in class except for the purpose of taking notes. Using social networking sites, etc. on a laptop during class is prohibited.
4. BSU is committed to providing accommodations to disabled students. If a student has a disability requiring accommodations, they need to communicate with the Office of Disability Resources (508.531.2194). I am not authorized to do so on my own, without documentation from the ODR about a student's condition and needs. Such documentation in hand, I will do everything in my power to provide appropriate accommodations.
5. Please take the time to locate every major exit in the building in case of a fire or other emergency. Multiple studies have shown that people who have an exit strategy have a greater likelihood of surviving emergencies.

### A note on decorum, decency, and safety

By its very nature, Philosophy (and education more generally) forces us to reflect on and critique our own assumptions and beliefs, even our most cherished beliefs about the world and about who we are. Amongst Indian thinkers, it is held that philosophy begins with doubt, and a standard catalyst for doubt is when we recognize opposed views on an important issue. Such opposition and doubt are sometimes *threatening*, and generate a certain sense of *dislocation* from our comfortable ideological universe. This is part of the process of becoming deeper and more informed about the world. Often this dislocation leads to greater reflection and depth of our own beliefs as we consider how to respond to important challenges.

Because of its nature, philosophy is fundamentally *unsafe* if by “safety” we mean a world where our own views, even our most deeply-held beliefs, cannot be challenged, critiqued, or nuanced. This holds for *everything we might believe*. Therefore, students in this course should understand that here, we critically reflect on and problematize things like religious beliefs, claims about human nature and the self, and ethical/political/ideological presuppositions, even those commonly assumed by our culture to be the “right” ones. If any student feels somewhat threatened or afraid, this is good! This means you are actually doing philosophy. But if you, or others around you have created an intellectual force field, where any challenge or critique of your own cherished views is interpreted as evil, sinful, or hateful, then this class may not be for you.

At the same time, our classroom is *entirely safe* in the following respect: the fact that here, we critique or challenge people’s views is not an excuse to be spiteful, mean, or bigoted. I will not tolerate disrespectfulness or flippant disdain toward other students. In philosophy, we challenge opposing view through good counter arguments. We don’t slander people or merely cast aspersions. If you disagree with someone, practice doing so respectfully and in the spirit of helping them improve their understanding, not to destroy them or tear them down. People need the opportunity to voice their views, and be part of the debate, whatever their perspective.

For example, if someone argues that the Christian notion of God is incoherent:

Wrong response: “You are a sinner and evil in the eyes of God.”

Right response: “I don’t agree with that. I am going to try to show you that it is more philosophically coherent than you think.”

Or, if someone criticizes a social-constructivist account of sexual differences:

Wrong response: “This is hateful, and you are a Nazi.”

Right response: “I disagree with you. I am going to try to show you that there is a lot of support for the view that sexual differences are entirely socially constructed.”

At the core, we should assume that people who disagree with us are sincere. Immediately casting disagreement as insincerity and evil is not only wrong, it is selfish and destructive. Philosophers in India saw philosophy as a shared pursuit of truth, where we are willing to respectfully (and compassionately!) critique views held by ourselves and those we care about, for the sake of us all becoming more devoted to what is true. Let’s try our best to live up to this ideal.

Finally, my job as a teacher is not to get you to believe any particular ideological view (which would be an abuse of my power), but to help you develop the tools to come to your own conclusions thoughtfully and logically, by reflecting on diverse views and approaches to important issues.