Course Description
This course will focus on four Asian religious classics in depth: The Bhagavad Gita, The Kamasutra, The Lotus Sutra, and The Life of Milarepa. The course will explore the problems involved in the writing, transmission, and study of these classic sacred texts in Asia and in their reception in the modern west. We will first place these texts in their original Hindu and Buddhist contexts and consider how they were used in medieval India, China and Tibet, before we examine how new meanings and values were discovered when these texts were read and consumed in modern America. We will examine how to read religiously, the relationship between genre, gender and social roles, and how texts “script” religious experience and inform cultural norms. We will investigate how scriptures become the object of veneration, what criteria are used to identify a text as “sacred,” and the ways in which texts create authority. We will also watch films that represent and reinterpret these texts for a contemporary audience. You should treat these films as “texts,” for their content will be discussed in seminar and integrated into the final exam.

The texts and films we will use in this class contain explicit representations of sex, black magic, death, and violence. If you are offended by sexually explicit, morbid, or violent images, or if you feel that discussing such images could unduly exploit or demean you, then this may not be the class for you.

Goals for students enrolled in this course:
• to develop the ability to understand, interpret, and contextualize Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts
• to gain an appreciation for why these Hindu and Buddhist texts have endured as “classics”
• to hone critical skills by reading key works of scholarship by authors who translate and interpret these classic texts
• to foster a reflexive awareness of how scholars’ religious, cultural, and personal presuppositions (including your own) have informed the way in which religious texts are read and valued
• to demonstrate effective writing skills with the ability to craft an argument in defense of a coherent thesis statement using and analyzing supporting evidence from primary and secondary sources

5 Required Texts Available at the CofC Bookstore—Don’t substitute other translations!
1) Bhagavad Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War, trans. by Barbara Stoler Miller $5.95
2) Kamasutra, trans. by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford U. Press. 2002), $12.95
3) The Lotus Sutra, trans. by Burton Watson (Perseus, 1993), $26.95
4) Life of Milarepa, trans. by Andrew Quintman (Penguin USA, 2010), $17.00
5) Love in a Dead Language by Lee Siegel (1999), $22.50. This book offers a translation of the Kamasutra and a postmodern commentary on its Indian commentaries, as well as a love story, a murder mystery, a satire of academia, a bad undergraduate essay on the Kamasutra, a board game, and a proposed CD-ROM. You should be forewarned that its subject matter may seem perverted and perverse; the author’s intent is to subvert our expectations as readers—there are even upside-down pages to be read backwards. Besides being a spoof of scholarship, it’s a study of language, commentary, and Orientalism.

There are also required E-Readings (abbreviated as ER) online, selections of sacred scripture, scholarly articles on the classic Asian texts, and a few creative short stories in pdf available on OAKS under RELS 310. Please print out each ER article and bring it to class for our seminar discussion.

Grading Scale: A 92-96 (4.0) B- 79-81 (2.7) D+ 66-68 (1.3)
A- 89-91 (3.7) C+ 76-78 (2.3) D 62-65 (1.0)
B+ 86-88 (3.3) C 72-75 (2.0) D- 59-61 (.70)
A+ 97-100 (4.0) B 82-85 (3.0) C- 69-71 (1.7) F below 59
Seminar Requirements

This course presumes some previous exposure to Religious Studies in general and to Hinduism and Buddhism in particular. It also has as a requirement the desire to read challenging, unusual, and provocative materials and to engage in conversation and writing about these readings.

- **Attendance Policy**
  
  Attendance records will be kept for each class. There will be 3 allowed absences; 4 or more absences will negatively affect your grade. After 8 absences the student will be dropped. If you have a legitimate excuse (illness, emergency) please let me know and contact the Undergraduate Dean’s Office to document the reason for your absence. You are responsible for making up any absences; please get any notes on missed seminars from classmates.

- **Completion of required reading assignments PRIOR to lecture**
  
  It is strongly recommended that you read the entire assignment before we discuss the topic in class. This will help you understand the lectures and engage in seminar discussion. When there is an assignment from the E-Reading material on OAKS, you should bring it to class with you.

- **Active Participation in Seminar (10% of final grade)**
  
  Whatever you get out of this course is directly related to how much you put into it. Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas during seminar discussions is a crucial part of this course. Please come to class with ideas and questions that will help us engage in meaningful discussion; you are expected to be an active and informed participant. Grades for participation will be assigned on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in seminar discussions.

- **Weekly Reflection Cards (15%)**
  
  Once each week you are to bring to seminar a thoughtful reflection or question related to the assigned reading for that class. The reflection should be written on a 3x5 card, and be based on an issue that you have found puzzling, thought provoking, challenging, irritating, or interesting. Your reflections and questions should raise issues or express concerns about the topic that you find important.

- **Three Short Essays (Gita essay 10%, Kamasutra and Lotus Sutra essay 12.5% each for 35%)**
  
  These three essays of 3-4 pages will be based upon assigned topics in relation to the first three texts that we examine. The questions that serve as the basis for these assignments are open to different interpretations without a single “correct” answer. Late papers are not accepted since the essay topic will be discussed in class on the day it is due.

- **Term paper on a Hindu or Buddhist Sacred Text (20%)**
  
  For this ten-page term paper you will apply one theoretical perspective from those studied over the course of the semester to a sacred Hindu or Buddhist text. A one-page description with research questions and a bibliography is due on October 23; a complete rough draft is due November 13; the final revised draft is due on December 4.

- **Quiz on November 6 (5%) and Final Exam on December 4 (15%)**
  
  The quiz will consist of key scriptural passages to identify and analyze; the final exam is cumulative and will consist of scriptural passage identification and analysis, and short essays that synthesize the themes of the course. I will provide a Review Sheet with key vocabulary words, sample passages for analysis and possible essay questions to review for both the quiz and final exam.

**Academic Integrity and the Honor Code:** There is a zero-tolerance policy toward plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty in this course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own, or cheating in any other way, will receive a failing grade for the entire course. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. I will provide a handout that discusses the ethics of learning, intellectual honesty, plagiarism, and the College’s Honor Code to remove any ambiguity about what this zero-tolerance policy entails.

**SNAP students:** If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter to me from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information on the SNAP program, see: [http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu](http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu)
Seminar Topics and Reading Assignments for RELS 310

The following abbreviations will be used in listing the required reading material: ER#1 refers to the first E-Reading available on OAKS, BG refers to the Bhagavad Gita, KS to the Kamasutra, LDL to Love in a Dead Language, and LS to the Lotus Sutra, and LM to the Life of Milarepa. RC#1 refers to the first Reflection Card assignment that responds to the assigned reading for that day (ER#1-2). For a complete list of the sources of the assigned electronic readings (ER#1-20) found on OAKS, see below p. 8.

Week 1  What makes a text “sacred?”

8/19  Introduction to Religious Studies and the Academic Study of Sacred Texts

8/21  In the Shadow of God’s Word: What Makes a Text “Sacred” or “Blasphemous?”
      (ER #1-2: “Texts” and “Is Nothing Sacred?”)  RC#1 due

Discussion topics: In ER#1 there is a discussion of a phrase “there is no outside-of-text.” What might this phrase mean for scholars of religion? Both ER#1-2 discuss the relationship between authors, authority, and the “death of an author.” Does The Satanic Verses subvert the Qur’an’s authority? What (if anything) is “sacred” for Rushdie in ER#2? What does he mean when he notes that language and especially the sacred have the “power of totemization?”

Week 2  Interpretive Issues in the Study of Sacred Texts

8/26  How Should We Read Scriptures or Sacred Texts? Reading Religiously or as Consumers
      (ER #3: “How Religious People Read”)  RC#2 due

Discussion topics: What are the primary differences in ER#3 between “religious” vs. “consumerist” readings of sacred texts? Is learning to “read religiously” both an edifying project for the faithful and a necessary practice for students of Religious Studies? How does memorization of a sacred text enhance “religious reading?”

8/28  Exploring Faith in Fiction and How to Read a Religious Text Critically
      (ER#4-4.5: “In Good Faith” and “How to Read a Religious Text”)

Discussion topics: Does Rushdie’s defense of The Satanic Verses (in ER#4) convince you that his work explores “the nature of revelation and the power of faith” through fiction? What role does creativity play in the reading and writing of sacred texts? What is gained by reducing a religious text (like the Chandogya Upanishad in ER#4.5) to a human product?

Week 3  The Bhagavad Gita: Hindu Content and Context

9/2  On Doing One’s Duty: Dharma and Discipline
      (ER #5: “Introduction to the Universal Gita” and BG: Introduction, Chapters 1-6)  RC#3 due

Discussion topics: Re-read the discussion in ER#1:159-162 of various translations of the Gita’s chapter 3 verse 35 and compare to Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation: how do various translations interpret dharma? Does Krishna’s teaching on Dharma and disciplined action (karma) resolve Arjuna’s dilemma and his distaste for violence?

9/4  On Devotion to God and a Terrifying Theophany
      (BG: Chapters 7-12 and ER #6: “Kurukshetra in Context”)

Discussion topics: What effect does Arjuna’s vision of Krishna have on him (and on you as a reader)? Does Arjuna’s terrifying theophany justify apocalyptic violence? Do you find Krishna’s four arguments that urge Arjuna to fight compelling on moral grounds? Does surrender to God here justify subsequent acts of violence?

Week 4  Modern and Western Readings of the Gita

9/9  Does the Gita Sanction War or Promote Non-Violence?
      (BG: Chapters 13-18; ER #7: “Gandhi, Non-Violence and the Gita”)  RC#4 due

Discussion topics: According the ER#7 what are the chief interpretive strategies that Gandhi used to read the Gita? Do you find his reading of the Gita persuasive? Can the ideal of “selfless action” and non-attachment support both
violence and non-violence (himsa/ahimsa)? Or does the transcendence of all dualities (including war and peace) make this debate irrelevant?

9/11 American Romantic-Transcendentalist Readings of the Gita: Emerson & Thoreau (BG: Afterward; ER #8: “Romantics and Transcendentalists”) Essay#1 on the Gita due

Discussion topics: What ethical values does Krishna promote when he urges Arjuna to act? Does the Bhagavad Gita sanction war and justify violence, or does it promote non-violence (ahimsa), the pursuit of peace, and the transcendence of duality in the worship of God?

Week 5 The Kamasutra: Hindu Content and Indian Context

9/16 Introducing the Kamasutra: Author and Genre (KS: Introduction pp. xi-xxviii; ER #10: The Ascetic of Desire) RC#5 due

Discussion topics: In the “Introduction” to the KS we learn that “virtually nothing is known about the author;” yet ER#10 can’t help but imaginatively “flesh out” the author of the KS. Does the fictional portrait of Vatsyayana and his world in ER#10 help you enter into the world of the Kamasutra? How does the “scientific” genre of the KS, its preoccupation with systematic order and detailed lists, affect the presentation of desire and pleasure?


Discussion topics: What is the relationship of religion, power, and desire in the KS? Are Desire (kama) and Dharma compatible ideals? ER#10 describes the KS as “a commentator’s delight” that “contains hidden meanings;” Love in a Dead Language also presents numerous commentaries on the KS, which Anang Saighal tries to map out, e.g. in his detailed footnotes. Do the various commentaries illuminate or cast shadows on the KS? What notable differences can you discern between the translations of the KS by Doniger & Kakar and Leopold Roth?

Week 6 Gender Roles in the Kamasutra


Discussion topics: What is the social milieu of the “man-about-town” in the KS? Does Leopold Roth seem like a modern day “man-about-town” (or a “player”) in his pursuit of Lalita? Does the “boring” dinner party that Roth arranges seem like a contest “worthy of the wit of Vatsyayana’s man-about-town?”


Discussion topics: What are the most notable differences between the status and roles for women that are prescribed in the Laws of Manu and in the KS? How does the KS represent gender politics and relationships? Which is more important in the KS: worldly pleasure or social respectability? How do courtesans in the KS make use of the “weapons of the weak?” (KS: xxix)

Week 7 Orientalism and the Exotic East: Western Versions of the Kamasutra

9/30 Weird Words and Weirder Worlds (KS: 161-164, 169-172; Love in a Dead Language: pp. 74, 79-89; 125-131; 331-335) RC#7

Discussion topics: How is raw, instinctual desire “disciplined” in the KS by Vatsyayana, and by those who have offered their commentary on the text? Is it appropriate to designate the teachings and practices found in the KS as the “Discipline of Desire,” along the lines of the three spiritual “Disciplines” taught in the Bhagavad Gita? What is the moral of the story about silence on pp. 331-332 of LDL?

10/2 Translating the Kamasutra for the West: Exoticism and Orientalism (KS: 1-lxvii; Love in a Dead Language, 8 pages btw 92-3; 146-153; 285-295; 318-314; 362-366)

Discussion topics: The eclectic “texts” and mixed genres found in Love in a Dead Language (academic and student essays, board games, CD Rom) raises questions about what is real and what is fictional, what is original and what is
plagiarized. Which interpretations/translations of the KS seem valid and insightful to you? Does Roth read the KS for edification or for titillation? What is Saighal’s dilemma at the end of the book? Has he found his own voice?

**Week 8**  
**Re-viewing Love in a Dead Language and the Kamasutra in modern film**

10/7  
Relating “Religious Reading” to *Love in a Dead Language*: is Roth’s KS sacred or sacrilegious?  
**Essay topic #2 (due in class):** In *Love in a Dead Language* we are introduced to a translation, commentary, and footnotes on the *Kamasutra* by Leopold Roth, Anang Saighal, and others. Using Griffith’s notion of “religious reading” and the “sacred” as a relational category (in ER#3), would you argue that the *Kamasutra* qualifies as “sacred” or “sacriligious” for Roth, or that his interpretation and use of the text is “consumerist?” Your essay should specify what is “sacred” or “sacriligious” about Roth’s translation, interpretation, and use of the KS as well as Griffith’s distinction between “consumerist” and “religious” reading.

10/9  
**Viewing the Kamasutra through a Feminist Lens:** Mira Nair’s film *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* (Review KS: xxxix-xlv)  
**RC#8 due**  
**Discussion topics:** How are knowledge, pleasure, and righteousness interrelated in the KS? Does Nair’s film, subtitled as “a tale of love,” represent “erotic love” or “romantic love?” How faithful is Nair’s film to the world evoked in the original text?

**Week 9**  
**Buddhist Hermeneutics: Recovering the Meaning of the Buddha’s Words**

10/14  
**Memorizing the Buddha, Reading His Teachings as Literature**  
(ER #12-12a: “Fictions of Reading” and “Memorizing the Buddha”)  
**RC#9 due**  
**Discussion topics:** What are some of the “fictions of reading” that inform western readings of Buddhist texts? What ways of reading are proposed in ER#12 to correct western misunderstandings of Buddhist texts? In the (fictional) story told in ER#12a, the Buddha’s teachings have not yet been written down but have been committed to memory by monks and nuns. How is Deva transformed through his awesome act of memorization? What mental qualities are enhanced through accurate memorization? Does desire subvert or reinforce memory?

10/16  
**Buddhist Hermeneutics: What did the Buddha Really Teach?**  
(ER #13: “The Dharma”)  
**Discussion topics:** After reading the story of Deva (in ER#12a), does Buddha’s attendant Ananda seem fictional? How did the Mahayana Sutras’ use of “Thus did I hear” (where the “I” = Ananda) raise questions about authenticity and authority? How does the distinction between “provisional” vs. “definitive” teaching get used in Buddhist hermeneutics? In what ways do stories convey the magical power of Buddha’s words?

**Week 10**  
**The Lotus Sutra: Its Buddhist Context and Content**

10/21  
**Introducing the Lotus Sutra as an Empty Text—the Mahayana Cult of the Book**  
**RC#10**  
**Discussion topics:** Based on the two Introductions to the Lotus Sutra, does the text seem primarily concerned with content or form? With metaphysics or religious pedagogy? In Chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sutra*, has the text become the sublime replacement for the Buddha? Is the devout reader seduced into accepting the text as the encapsulation of Buddhist tradition or does it deny that tradition and replace it with the cult of this text?

10/23  
**The Ethics of Upaya: Is the Buddha Lying?**  
(*Lotus Sutra*, chapters 2-3)  
**Term paper topic and bibliography due**  
**Discussion topics:** What does chapter two mean when it says that there is only One Vehicle? What happened to the other three vehicles of Buddhism? What is the ultimate or final teaching? Is the One Vehicle compatible with the doctrine of *upaya*?

**Week 11**  
**Parables and Narrative in the Lotus Sutra**

10/28  
**Parables of the Lost Son, Medicinal Herbs, and the Phantom City**  
(*Lotus Sutra*, chapters 4-5; chapter 7 pp. 131-142)  
**RC#11 due**
Discussion topics: What are some of the tactful strategies that the father used towards his son in Chapter 4? How does the son’s inferiority complex evoke how a disciple (or “son of the Buddha”) might feel? Why is the father anxious to transmit his “wealth” only to his son? Be prepared to decode and discuss the parable of the Phantom City and explain what the “road,” the conjured “city” and the “treasure” represent in Buddhist terms.

10/30  Enlightened Gender Benders and the Real Buddha of the Lotus Sutra: Upaya Revisited (Lotus Sutra, chapters 12 & 16; ER#15: “Literal Means and Hidden Meanings”) essay#3 due
Lotus Sutra topic: The passages on “skillful means” (upaya) in the Lotus Sutra have an element of self-referentiality, for they often serve as a kind of advertisement about the Sutra’s own efficacy. Speculate on the persuasive power of such statements. How are the doctrines of upaya and the “One Vehicle” complementary in the Lotus Sutra? How do these two doctrines and rhetorical strategies affect the way we read the text? Which Western prejudices (that you can identify in yourself) are challenged by traditional Buddhist readings of skillful means?

Week 12  Devotional & Bodily Readings of the Lotus Sutra in Vietnam

11/4  No Class (election day, prepare for quiz)

11/6  Body as Text: Does the Lotus Sutra Support Suicide or Political Protests in Vietnam? (Lotus Sutra, chapter 23; ER #17-18: “Representing Vietnamese Self-Immolation” and “Self-Immolation of Thich Quang Duc”) RC#12 due  Quiz in class on BG, KS and LS texts
Discussion topics: Does the devotional act of making oneself into a candle through self-immolation serve to embody upaya or deny it by taking the Buddha's word literally? How have most scholars of religion interpreted Quang Duc’s death? Is it a religious or political act? What difference does it make how we answer this question?

Week 13  The Life of Milarepa: Tibetan Context and Buddhist Content

11/11  Milarepa as a Tibetan Buddha: Linking Lives through Lineages (LM: ix-xxxiii; Prologue) RC#13 due
Discussion topics: How does the story of Milarepa seem to mimic the life of the Buddha? What Buddhist ideas enable the past, present, and future to be linked in these biographical narratives? What is the literary and religious purpose of the Prologue that eulogizes Milarepa?

11/13  Milarepa’s Early Life: “Sinning” with Black Magic (LM chapters 1-3) complete draft of term paper due
Discussion topics: What inspires Milarepa to pursue the practice of black magic? How does the efficacy of magic and miraculous power (siddhi) affect social and economic status in Tibet? Are these magical practices compatible with conventional Buddhist ethical values or with Tibetan Tantric values? How do the stories also construct distinct gender roles and values?

Week 14-15: Tantric Wisdom in Tibet and in America

11/18  Trials and Tribulations with a Tantric Lama: Milarepa Meets Marpa (LM chapters 4-6; and ER#19: “Words for the West”) RC#14
Discussion topics: How does Marpa embody the iconoclastic spirit and antinomianism of the Tantric master? Does Marpa seem like an enlightened trickster? Without already being enlightened, how can a student of Buddhism assess whether the teacher is qualified as a “spiritual friend,” especially when the Tantric teacher uses upaya? According to Thinley Norbu (ER#19), why is it so difficult for Americans to surrender spiritually to a teacher?

Discussion topics: Compare the early life episodes from The Life of Milarepa with the film directed by Neten Chokling. What important differences can you detect in the literary and visual narratives? Why might they matter?
Crazy Wisdom: The Life and Times of Chogyam Trungpa film shown in class
(ER#20: The Great Naropa Poetry Wars) RC#15 due

Discussion topics: The Great Naropa Poetry Wars describes how Chogyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist lama famous for his ‘crazy wisdom,’ forced a famous American poet to participate in a Halloween party as part of a Tantric retreat. A number of famous American Buddhist poets like Allen Ginsberg defended Trungpa by referencing Tantric literature and practices, whose values challenge American individualism. Is the Tibetan Buddhist veneration of the lama, spiritual hierarchy and non-dual “crazy wisdom” incompatible with American values such as self-esteem, individual dignity, human rights, and democracy?

11/27  Skip School: Give Thanks, Eat Turkey, Complete Course Evaluations

12/4  Final Exam from 8-11 am (final draft of term paper due)

Key Terms and Conceptual Tools for the Study of Asian Texts

Note: These are technical terms that you must know in order to do well on the quiz and final exam. Keep this list handy as you read the assignments, and write down their meanings. This list is subject to change, as the Buddhists say: sarva anityam or “everything is impermanent.”

General Terms for the Study of Sacred Texts

Scripture, bibliomancy, canon, commentary, historical-critical method
Sacred, transcendence, consumerist reading vs. religious reading, hermeneutics
Genre, parable, narrative, allegory, recitation, mnemonic techniques, Orientalist, Protestant bias, hermeneutics, philology, etymology, exegetical vs. isogetical
Cult of the book, numinous experience, interconnection of doctrine and experience, ineffability authority/authenticity, sui generis religion, apocrypha, orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy, canonization

Hinduism

Shruti, Smriti, mantra, guru, Veda, Sanskrit, Upanishads, caste, Four Classes, Dharma
Mahabharata, kshatriya, Arjuna, Krishna, renunciation, sannyasin. moksha
Brahman, Atman, maya, avatar,Vishnu, bhakti, puja vs asceticism, Holi festival
Discipline of Action, Discipline of Knowledge, Discipline of Devotion, Gandhi, ahimsa
Kama, artha, Laws of Manu, Vatsyayana, Anang Saighal, chaya, courtesans de luxe
Charles Wilkins, American Transcendentalism, Annie Besant, Helene Blavatsky, Theosophy

Buddhism

Six Rebirth Realms, Avici hell, kalpa, anuttara samyak sambodhi vs. nirvana as extinction
Saddharma Pundarika, Sutra, Shastra, Mahayana vs. Hinayana, Upaya, One Vehicle, Tathagata, shravaka, pratyekabuddha, bodhisattva, Buddha, Thich Quang Duc, relic, Avalokiteshvara
Vajrayana, Tantra, Naropa-Marpa-Milarepa, siddha and siddhi, guru/lama, mandala, initiation, dakini
Transgressive sacrality, antinomianism, Chogyam Trungpa, Allen Ginsberg, Naropa Institute
**Bibliography of Sources for ER Articles on OAKS**

18. Rollie Hicks, “Self-Immolation of Thich Quang Duc” from *www.uwec.edu/greider/BMRB/culture/student.work/hicksr/*