Buddhism: a Religion or a Way of Life/Thought?

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Abstract:
After the fall of Saigon in 1975 to North Vietnam, millions of Vietnamese people fled the country to find freedom elsewhere. They brought with them Buddhism, a religion which has been rooted in Vietnam since the second century. Today, Buddhist temples are seen everywhere in North America.

To answer the question if Buddhism is a religion or a way of life/thought, this course helps you to understand the historical development of Buddhism from its beginning to present. Students will learn two main Buddhist traditions, Mahayana and Theravada, and the essence of Buddhist teaching. Students are introduced to the Abhidhamma, a Buddhist psychological system, and discuss Mindfulness-Based Intervention programs which help to reduce stress and enhance well-being.

Schedule of topics:

Week 1
History of Buddhism: Students study a 2600 year old religion having its origin in India: the Buddha’s from birth to the enlightenment; what is enlightenment? Students learn the Tripitaka or the three baskets of Buddhist scriptures. The concept of Triple Gem and what it means to take refuge in the Triple Gem. An often asked question such as Buddhism is a religion or a way of life/thought will be discussed.

Suggested readings:
Buddhism: its history and literature by Davids, T. W. Rhys.

Week 2
Buddhist Traditions and its core teachings: two main traditions of Buddhism -- Theravada and Mahayana -- and The Four Noble Trues are explained thoroughly. The different meditation sects such as Zen, Chinese Ch’an, Vipassana are introduced in order to help students in choosing a right technique to practise if they are interested in. Buddhist rituals according to each tradition are explained and demonstrated. Vipassana vs. Self-and Other-Power from the two main traditions.

Suggested readings:
Theravāda Buddhism: a social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo by Gombrich, Richard Francis.
Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations by Paul Williams.
Naturalness in Zen and Shin Buddhism: Before and Beyond Self-and Other-Power by Davis, Bret W.

Week 3
Mahayana and Theravada scriptures: The students will study briefly important discourses taught by the Buddha. These sutras are the path leading to peace, happiness and liberation. They are: The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra, The Mind and Diamond Sutra in Mahayana; Satipatthana Sutra and The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravada.

Suggested readings:
Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Week 4
The Abhidhamma and Mindfulness-based Intervention Programs: introducing students to a system of psychology taught by the Buddha during his 45 years of spreading his way of life/thought. The students will discuss the Mindfulness-based Intervention programs which are currently being used throughout the world. Students will also experience a practical guiding meditation at the beginning of each class.

Suggested readings:

Week 5
Rebirth/Reincarnation and Riding the Waves of Life and Death. Students are explained how Buddhists understand these two concepts. Death according to Buddhism is discussed and how to deal with it. Summary of the course and introduce the next Buddhism courses to study in details discourses mentioned in week 3.

Suggested readings:
Tibetan renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the rebirth of Tibetan culture by Davidson, Ronald M., 2005.
Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a “Naturalized” Buddhism, Westerhoff, Jan.

Week 6
A field trip to visit Buddhist Temple in Ottawa to summarize the course and to experience a guiding sitting meditation (to be discussed)