The History of Buddhist Philosophy
Fall 2007
Term Paper Assignment: Due Wednesday, December 5th.

Write a 6-10 page (double-spaced) paper on a topic relevant to this course. The paper should include both an exposition of the philosophical teachings as well as your own thoughtful reflection on those teachings. This does not need to be a research paper, but your paper should include appropriately cited quotations from some of the key texts. Short quotations should be placed in quotation marks within the body of a paragraph of your text, longer quotations should be indented and single-spaced. Each citation should be properly referenced.

SAMPLE PAPER TOPICS

1. Buddhism and the Modern World. Do an exposition of the teachings of the Buddha in the Pali Canon and then reflect upon the relevance of these teachings in the world today? Assess to what extent the teachings of the Buddha are pessimistic or not.

2. Mahāyāna Buddhism. Do a general exposition of the distinctive characteristics of Mahāyāna Buddhism. What do you find particularly interesting, relevant or questionable regarding the doctrines and practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism?

3. Emptiness. What is the “Perfection of Wisdom” (prajñāpāramitā) taught in the Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra? How does Nāgārjuna explain sānyatā as consistent with the middle path taught by the Buddha? How is it that Nāgārjuna argues that there is no difference between samsāra and nirvāṇa? What did he mean by this and what are the implications of this view?

4. Tibetan Buddhism. What are the distinctive characteristics, doctrines and practices of Tibetan Buddhism? Why is Tibetan Buddhism referred to as Vajrayāna Buddhism? How are the distinctive teachings of Tibetan Buddhism relevant to the world today? (You may also discuss how the film Kundun illustrated key features of Tibetan Buddhism.)

5. A focus on one of the major schools of East Asian Buddhism: A) T’ien-t’ai/Tendai Buddhism; B) Hua-yen/Kegon Buddhism; Ching-t’u/Jodo Buddhism; C) Shingon Buddhism; D) Nichiren Buddhism; E) Ch’an/Zen Buddhism. Explain the distinctive doctrines and practices of the school. Explain which sūtras are regarded as important and why. What do you find particularly interesting, relevant or questionable regarding the teachings of this school of Buddhism?

6. Engaged Buddhism. What is “engaged Buddhism”? Discuss this notion of engaged Buddhism with reference to the readings by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, Robert Aitken, and Gary Snyder. To what extent is engaged Buddhism consistent with the teachings of the Buddha?

7. Enlightenment. What is nirvāṇa? Do a study in which you explain and reflect on the shifts in the concept of enlightenment in the development of Buddhism.