

**HONORS 391A - Honors Seminar 2
Fall 2016**

Honors Seminar Web Address:

<https://www.honors.umass.edu/academics/courses/honors391a>

Course Title: Mindfulness Meditation and Buddhist Teachings: A Path to Insight, Peace, and Wisdom
Course Section: 7
Class meeting days and times: Monday, 2:30 – 3:20 p.m.
Class Location: Elm 212 (moved from Elm 224)
Instructor Name: Richard S. Ellis
Office: LGRT 1428
Office Hours: to be announced
Email: rsellis@math.umass.edu
Phone: 413-253-2492 (home), 413-687-1840 (cell)
Instructor's Course Web Address: http://people.math.umass.edu/~rsellis/Honors391AH/Fall-2016/honors391ah-fall2016.html

Instructor's Course Description

Stress is a major component of academic life, but the huge and obvious question remains unanswered. How can we deal with stress in this environment and perhaps even heal it? In this course students will be introduced to mindfulness meditation, which can heal stress, lead to the end of suffering, and invite us to embrace our lives with equanimity, gratitude, and joy.

This course will also investigate basic Buddhist teachings and will apply them, along with the tools of literary analysis, to Biblical narratives such as the creation story, the Garden of Eden, the life of Jacob, and the Book of Job. This approach reveals unexpected insights into fundamental questions of birth and death, ego and enlightenment, sickness and health, insights that speak in surprisingly relevant ways to spiritual seekers and to those who want to heal themselves. No background in meditation or literature is required.

Mindfulness can help us interpret the narratives of the Torah and decode their wisdom because their mode of exposition is pure mindfulness, the calm and direct awareness, without judgments or concepts or ego, of what the characters are doing and saying. The text offers no analysis, no embellishment, hardly any descriptions, essentially no insight into motive or emotion; it is a text of almost pure observation and sober, nonattached reporting. Why does Abraham agree to sacrifice Isaac? Why does Rebekah favor Jacob over Esau? Why does Isaac allow himself to be duped into giving Jacob the blessing that is intended for his firstborn son Esau? The text gives no answers. The reader must create meaning herself by filtering the text through her own life experiences.

The instructor is a professor of mathematics and an adjunct professor of Judaic studies. He has led many meditation groups and has worked with graduate students in his department on issues of stress. He has also taught many classes on the Hebrew Bible as literature. This honors seminar was first offered by him in the spring semester of 2016.

Required Texts

1) Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand: Essays on Buddhist Mindfulness Practice*, Bookland, Second Edition, 2008.

- [Free download](#)
- [Online edition](#)
- [Print edition at Amazon.com](#)

2) *Commentary on the Torah*, Richard Elliott Friedman, HarperOne, 2003.

- [Print edition at Amazon.com](#)

3) Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman, *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation: Online Course Materials*. Weekly readings from this text will be assigned for discussion in class.

- [Online edition](#)

4) *Book of Job* (whatever translation you have). Here are my two favorites; the second is more scholarly than the first.

- Raymond P. Scheindlin, *The Book of Job: Translation, Introduction, and Notes*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.
- Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation*, Stanford University Press, 1990.

Recommended Text

1) Richard S. Ellis, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*, Rainbow Books, 2011.

- [Information](#)
- [Print edition at Amazon.com](#)

Online Resources

1) Ronald D. Siegel, [The Science of Mindfulness: A Research-Based Path to Well-Being](#), The Teaching Company, 2014

2) [Dharma Seed](#)

3) [Audio Dharma](#)

4) Gil Fronsdal, a) [Meditation Instruction](#) and b) [Other Talks](#)

5) Ines Freedman, a) [Working with Pain and Guided Meditations](#) and b) [Other Talks](#)

6) Joseph Goldstein, a) [Instructions for Sitting and Walking Meditation](#) (link at bottom of screen) and b) [Other Talks](#)

UMass Resource

- [UMass Amherst Religious and Spiritual Life – Meditation](#)

This is a student-led, non-denominational meditation group on campus.

Instructor's Course Requirements. Each week readings will be assigned from text 3) under Required Texts and from the Hebrew Bible and will be discussed in class.

Grading Policy of Commonwealth Honors College (3/24/2016 email from Meredith Lind, Executive Director)

- Only honors courses graded B or better count toward an honors student's honors course requirements.
- Students should earn their grades. If a student is doing less than B work, the instructor is not required to award a B.
- 391AH is repeatable if a student earns less than a B. (And some students take more than one 391AH because they're interested in the topics and want to.)

When I taught this course last semester, every student in the class received a grade of B or better. See [Student Handbook](#) for details about Honors College requirements.

Grading in This Course

	40 points for research paper
	60 points for attendance
	100 points total

- Paper
 - 40 points for a research-based and documented paper, 5–10 pages in length, on a narrative in the Hebrew Bible.
 - Draft #1 and draft #2 are each worth 10 points, and the final version is worth 20 points. Passing in a final version is optional. If a student does not pass in a final version, then the score on the final version equals the score on draft #2.
- Attendance
 - 60 points for attendance. If you attend n out of the total of 12 classes, then your grade for attendance will be $n/12 \times 60$ points.
 - I decided on this grading policy because it is difficult to quantify preparedness and participation in course discussions and activities.
 - Here are the general guidelines of the Honors College.
A portion of the grade (in our case, 60%) should be determined by attendance, preparedness, and participation in course discussions and activities including the following: a) speaking up in full-group discussions, b) taking the lead in small-group activities, c) providing helpful follow-up questions to presenters, d) eliciting comments from other classmates, and d) contributing to the learning of your fellow students.

Contents of [Course Webpage](#)

- This syllabus
- Buddhist Teachings and the Torah: weekly handouts (15 items)
- Additional material on Biblical narratives: to be discussed in class (23 items)

CLASS MEETINGS & WORK SCHEDULE DURING FALL 2016

A number of Buddhist teachings are discussed in Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand: Essays on Buddhist Mindfulness Practice*, and in my book, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*. There are also numerous other print and online resources.

The Biblical narratives that we will read in this course are discussed in *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth*: Jacob in chapter 4 (“Face to Face with Jacob”), the creation and Garden of Eden in chapter 5 (“Conceptual Thinking Banishes Us from Eden”), and Book of Job in chapter 6 (“Becoming Job: Going Beyond Words”). There are also numerous other print and online resources.

For each narrative in Genesis that we discuss in class, if you have time, then please read before the relevant class the commentary by Richard Elliott Friedman in *Commentary on the Torah*.

There are documents listed on the course webpage under “Additional material to be discussed in class.” **These documents are optional. Please read them before the relevant class only if you have time.** Copies will be distributed in class.

Week 1 (September 12)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Your expectations concerning this course
- 2) Introduction to mindfulness meditation and the Four Noble Truths (the Buddha: “I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering [*dukkha*] and the end of suffering.”)
- 3) Introduction to the Torah

Reading:

- 1) *The Issue at Hand*, pages 1–11: the Four Noble Truths
- 2) Genesis, chapter 22 (22:1–24): the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac
- 3) [Blinding Pain, Simple Truth, pages 14–16](#): introduction to the Torah

Week 2 (September 19)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Mindfulness of breathing
- 2) Biblical Hebrew and narrative technique in the Torah
- 3) The life of Jacob, part 1

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 6–18: mindfulness of breathing
- 2) [Blinding Pain, Simple Truth, pages 102–107](#): introduction to Biblical Hebrew
- 3) Genesis 25:19–34: Rebekah’s pregnancy and the early years of Jacob

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of breathing](#)

Week 3 (September 26)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Buddhist teachings: concepts, words, and thoughts; impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anatta*), and suffering (*dukkha*)
- 2) The life of Jacob, part 2

Readings (we will focus on b) and e))

- 1) a) Genesis 27:1–28:9: Jacob deceives Esau

- b) Genesis 28:10–22: Jacob on the way to Haran (dream and ladder)
- c) Genesis 29:16–26: Jacob spends the night with whom?
- d) Genesis 32:4–22: Jacob prepares for confrontation with Esau
- e) Genesis 32:23–33: Jacob and unknown adversary at the Jabbok (anagram)

Week 4 (October 3: no class because of Rosh Hashanah)

Week 5 (October 11: Monday schedule after October 10 holiday)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Mindfulness of the body
- 2) The life of Jacob, part 3

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 19–24: mindfulness of the body
- 2) Genesis, chapter 33 (33:1–20): Jacob confronts Esau

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of the body](#)

Week 6 (October 17)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Metta and loving-kindness meditation
- 2) Creation / *Bereyshit* (translated as “In the beginning [of]”)

Readings:

- 1) *The Issue at Hand*, pages 82–87: metta and loving-kindness meditation
- 2) Genesis 1:1–2:3: creation
- 3) [Blinding Pain, Simple Truth, pages 136–144](#): the profundity of *Bereyshit*, duality as a main structural feature of Genesis, and parallels relating days 1 and 4, days 2 and 5, days 3 and 6

Week 7 (October 24)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Mindfulness of emotions
- 2) Garden of Eden, part 1

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 25–31: mindfulness of emotions
- 2) Genesis 2:4–25: the human, the woman, and the two trees in the Garden of Eden

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of emotions](#)

Week 8 (October 31)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Working with anger and other difficult emotions
- 2) Garden of Eden, part 2

Readings:

- 1) *The Issue at Hand*, pages 72–75: working with anger
- 2) Genesis, chapter 3 (3:1–24): the snake, eating the fruit, the curse, and the expulsion

Work To Be Passed in:

First draft of your research-based and documented paper, 5–10 pages in length, on a narrative in the Hebrew Bible

I am omitting the following topic because there is one less class meeting this semester than last semester. Last semester this topic was covered during week 9.

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Transforming pain

Readings:

- 1) [The Science of Mindfulness, lecture 14](#): transforming chronic pain
- 2) *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth*, introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 (optional): using mindfulness meditation to heal the suffering that accompanies pain

Online Resource:

- 1) Ines Freedman, [working with pain and guided meditations](#)

Week 9 (November 7)

Topics for Discussion

- 1) Mindfulness of thoughts
- 2) Book of Job, part 1

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 32–37: mindfulness of thoughts
- 2) Job, chapters 1 & 2 (1:1–2:13): prologue

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of thoughts](#)

Week 10 (November 14)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Mindfulness of mind
- 2) Book of Job, part 2

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 38–43: mindfulness of mind
- 2) a) Job, chapter 3 (3:1–3:26): “Perish the day on which I was born.”
b) Job, chapter 19 (19:1–29) with emphasis on 19:17–29; translating 19:25

Work To Be Passed in:

Second draft of your research-based and documented paper, 5–10 pages in length, on a narrative in the Hebrew Bible

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of mind](#)

Week 11 (November 21: no class because of Thanksgiving recess)

Week 12 (November 28)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) Mindfulness of daily life
- 2) Book of Job, part 3

Readings:

- 1) *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, pages 44–52: mindfulness of daily life
- 2) a) Job, chapters 38 & 39 (38:1–39:30): God’s speech from the whirlwind, part 1
b) Job, chapters 40 & 41 (40:1–41:26): God’s speech from the whirlwind, part 2

Homework (do not pass in): [homework on mindfulness of daily life](#)

Week 13 (December 5)

Topics for Discussion:

- 1) The promise of enlightenment
- 2) Book of Job, part 4

Readings:

- 1) [The Science of Mindfulness, lecture 22](#): the promise of enlightenment
 - 2) [Blinding Pain, Simple Truth, chapter 8](#) (pages 207–211): finding equanimity on the Massachusetts turnpike
- 2) Job, chapter 42 (42:1–16): Job’s enlightenment and epilogue

Work To Be Passed in:

Final version of your research-based and documented paper, 5–10 pages in length, on a narrative in the Hebrew Bible

Week 14 (December 12)

Topic for Discussion:

Summation. What we have learned about meditation, the Torah, and ourselves

Readings: To be announced

Material required by the Honors College to be included in the syllabus

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Absentee Policy and Extenuating circumstances (illness, death in the family, etc.) for which students must miss a class meeting

While attendance is crucial to participation in the Honors Seminar Series and therefore a significant factor in calculating your final grade in this course, extenuating circumstances may require you to miss a class meeting. Whether an absence is “excused” or counted in calculating participation grades is largely at the discretion of the instructor. Any student absent—whether the absence is “excused” or not—should contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss assignments missed, class discussion, etc.

Student athletes, members of the band, and on occasion, students who are members of other groups will be allowed to miss class for games and other special events and make up work will be assigned. See the University Registrar website for university policies on [class absence](#) and [religious observance](#). (www.umass.edu/registrar/students/policies-and-practices)

EXAM CONFLICTS

University policy on exams scheduled at the same time a student’s Honors Seminar class meets

According to Faculty Senate Document 06-042, certain one-day-a-week courses, including Honors 391AH, have priority over evening exams on Monday and Tuesday evenings. Evening exams (7-9 p.m.) have priority over *all* courses on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings.

Exams scheduled for 6 p.m. or earlier do *not* have priority over Honors 391AH. If you have an exam scheduled during this class, you must be given the chance to make it up by the professor of the other course. If you miss a class because of an exam that has priority over this class (*extremely rare*), you will be given the chance to make up any work you have missed.

PLAGIARISM POLICY

Documenting the Writing, Speaking, and Thinking of Others

In all your writing, and in oral presentations too, it is essential that you acknowledge the ideas of others upon whom your own thinking depends, including ideas obtained from such non-written sources as lectures, interviews, class discussions, and even casual conversations with colleagues and friends. Give credit for ideas that are not your own as well as for passages of text that you summarize, paraphrase, or quote.

If material possessions are the property of our community at large, thoughts and ideas—expressed in speech or writing—constitute the “intellectual property” of our academic community. To take another’s words or ideas and present them as your own is to commit plagiarism, an act of academic theft, and the punishments can be severe (cf. *University of Massachusetts Amherst Academic Regulations*, “Academic Honesty”).

UMass’s Academic Honesty Policy

Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty.

Disability Accommodation Statement:

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, [psychological](#), or [learning disability](#) on file with [Disability Services](#), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. (www.umass.edu/disability/current.html)