RELG 349
TANTRA:
SEX, POWER, AND BLISS IN SOUTH ASIAN RELIGIONS

Spring 2014
Class location TBD
Monday & Wednesday, time TBD

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Office hours TBA
Email
Phone number

RELG 349 Tantra: Sex, Power, and Bliss in South Asian Religions

3 credits
Investigation of the Buddhist and Hindu religious ideas and practices known as tantra. Topics include tantric views of the human body, freedom, and consciousness; tantric use of sex, imagination, visualization, and manipulation of bodily energy; role of tantric traditions in South Asian religions and cultures.

I. COURSE OVERVIEW
This course is a multifaceted investigation of the remarkable religious ideas and practices known as tantra. Beginning around the fifth century C.E., a shocking new, diverse set of ideas and practices called tantra arose in South Asia and has continued to evolve into the present. Tantra thus forms a major part of South Asian religions. From a tantric view, humans have amazing capacities to enjoy limitless permanent bliss and personal freedom by creatively utilizing the very physical bodies, emotions, and instincts that usually seem to impose painful limitations on experience. This course explores these radical views and the methods conjoined with them. Different forms of tantra may involve many things: the use of imagination and visualization to contact or to become a deity; the manipulation of energy channels and centers in the body through special yoga and meditation; the creation of ideal, secret societies along with their own special languages and signs; the development of extraordinary powers to accomplish ordinary aims (wealth, warfare, seduction); the achievement of total spontaneity and naturalness beyond language and cultural construction; transgressive rituals, including sex acts; a search for extraordinary, lasting bliss in one’s present human body; a complex view of the interrelation among human beings, the universe, and consciousness. In English translation, we study all of these facets of Buddhist and Hindu tantra as found in India and Tibet. We note how (mis)perceptions of tantra have influenced European and American views of India, Tibet, and the surrounding regions. We also pay some attention to how tantric elements have entered into modern American culture, with examples ranging from art to sex manuals to American tantric masters.
**Prerequisites:** None. This course is appropriate for those new to the study of Buddhism, Hinduism, and religion. Previous study of Indian Buddhism or Hinduism would be useful but is not required. Students who have prior familiarity with the study of religion, Buddhism, and/or Hinduism will be able to deepen their knowledge through this course.

**II. GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**Goals**
This course will acquaint students with classic, primary texts and artworks from Buddhist and Hindu tantric traditions in South Asia. Students will understand the complexities and difficulties involved in studying tantra by engaging with secondary scholarship on ritual transgression, post-colonialism, and Orientalism in the study of religion. Students will become familiar with Buddhist and Hindu tantric views of the human body, of consciousness, of yoga, of metaphysics, of utopian societies, transgression, sex, power, and bliss. Students will understand broadly the major ways in which tantra has contributed to South Asian religions and cultures for the past 1,500 years.

**Learning Outcomes**
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate tantric views of the body. These views include tantric notions and uses of energy (prāṇa) and energy centers (cakras); the body as an array or maṇḍala of deities; the body as a locus not only of impurity and pain but also of transcendence and bliss.

2. Explain the metaphysical assumptions and procedures in the tantric use of imaginative visualization and ritual to become a deity. Explain the theory and practice for the dissolution of that constructed process into a state of uncontrived naturalness and pure consciousness.

3. Give examples of tantric transgression, state how transgression functions in tantric schemes of personal liberation, and elucidate how transgression helps tantrikas to form their special identities and societies.

4. Distinguish between the mundane powers often sought by practitioners of tantra and the ultimate soteriological aims valorized by tantric traditions. Distinguish between so-called high and low, domesticated and wild, or right-handed and left-handed forms of tantra.

5. Delineate how European and American (mis)perceptions of tantra have colored and continue to color many modern characterizations of India and the rest of South Asia.

**III. READINGS, FILMS, AND OTHER COURSE MATERIALS**

TANTRA: SEX, POWER, AND BLISS IN SOUTH ASIAN RELIGIONS
readings:
All readings are in English. Primary sources are presented in English translation.

* links to course readings on Blackboard include numerous articles, chapters, and excerpts from primary sources


IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

* 20% — short written responses to weekly readings, due on most weeks as indicated on the course website. The responses will be based on writing prompts posted online. Responses are due at the start of the final class each week. A response should be roughly two-thirds of a page in length, double-spaced. These short reflections provide a valuable opportunity to think about the assigned readings prior to our last class discussion of each week. They will be graded on a credit/no credit basis. Only responses submitted on-time will be accepted.

* 20% — midterm exam [week 7]

* 25% — 4-6 page interpretive essay. The essay is based on prior lectures and readings. Additional reading is not necessary. Students choose a topic from among a set of prompts that will be posted online. Alternatively, students may propose an original topic and have it approved by the instructor in writing at least one week before the due date. The essay will require a close engagement with one or more of our primary sources. It will be evaluated both for quality of thought and quality of expression. (for guidelines and expectations, see the course handout on writing an interpretive essay)
• 35% — comprehensive final exam with an emphasis on course material since the midterm.

• participation — participation forms an important part of the course. Meaningful contributions to class discussions and other in-class activities enhance everyone’s learning experience. Consistent contributions can lift a student’s final grade by as much as one full grade, e.g., from a B+ to an A-. Students should feel free to discuss the quality of their class participation with the instructor at any point during the semester.

Grading Scale
100-90 A; 89-87 B+; 86-80 B; 79-77 C+; 76-70 C; 69-67 D+; 66-60 D; 59 and below F

V. COURSE POLICIES

Attendance
Prompt and regular attendance is crucial for success in the course. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. We will follow the university's policy regarding attendance and the effect of unexcused absences on a student's course grade. If you are absent for an excusable reason, be sure to present the needed documentation to the instructor immediately upon your return (e.g., if you are absent for a legitimate medical reason, bring a doctor's note as soon as you come back to class). The University attendance policy specifies that students may miss up to 3 class meetings (10% of class time) without penalty. The 4th absence will result in a grade penalty of one letter grade. The 5th absence will result in a deduction of 2 letter grades.

Expectations for Classroom Behavior
We are all here to learn. Please come to class prepared and on-time. Always be respectful of everyone in class. Any disrespectful or disruptive behavior may result in dismissal from class and/or an academic penalty.

Academic Integrity
Assignments and examination work are expected to be the sole effort of the student submitting the work. Students are expected to follow the University of South Carolina Honor Code and should expect that every instance of a suspected violation will be reported. Students found responsible for violations of the Code will be subject to academic penalties under the Code in addition to whatever disciplinary sanctions are applied. Cheating on a test or copying someone else's work, will result in a 0 for the work, possibly a grade of F in the course, and, in accordance with University policy, be referred to the University Committee for Academic Responsibility and may result in expulsion from the University.

Accommodating Disabilities
Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email
sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services.

VI. COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1 (week of January 13, 2014):
The Historical Background to Tantra: Yoga, Meditation, Asceticism, Ritual, Mantra, Magic

Week 2 (week of January 20, 2014):
A Historical Overview of South Asian Tantra: Synthesizing Scholarship on Meditation Methods and Views, Wild Goddesses, Subtle Bodies, and Politics
    Part Two: Tantra.

Week 3 (week of January 27, 2014):
The Challenges of Defining Tantra: Clarifying the Object of Study
  - Blackboard readings:

Week 4 (week of February 3, 2014):
Wild Goddesses, Transgressive Ritual, Women, and Undomesticated Tantric Sex
  - *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts* by David Gordon White.

Week 5 (week of February 10, 2014):
Wild Goddesses, Transgressive Ritual, Women, and Undomesticated Tantric Sex (continued)
  - *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts* by David Gordon White. (continued)
  - *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* by Wedemeyer. Chapter Four, "The Semiology of Transgression"

Week 6 (week of February 17, 2014):
Mature Formulations of Buddhist Tantra, Part 1: *The Hevajra Tantra*, A Tantric Scripture
The Concealed Essence of the Hevajra Tantra with the Commentary Yogaratnamālā translated and introduced by G.W. Farrow and I. Menon.

Week 7 (week of February 24, 2014):
MIDTERM EXAM
Mature Formulations of Indian Buddhist Tantra, Part 2:
Becoming the Deity through Imaginative Visualization and Sādhanā
- *Chenrezig, Lord of Love: Principles and Methods of Deity Meditation* by Bokar Rinpoche.

Week 8 (week of March 3, 2014):
Mature Formulations of Buddhist Tantra, Part 3: Spontaneity, Simplicity, Naturalness
- Blackboard readings:
  - "Sahaja" by Per Kvaerne

Week of March 10: SPRING BREAK, no classes

Week 9 (week of March 17, 2014):
Mature Formulations of Buddhist Tantra, Part 4: Manipulating Bodily Energy Channels and Energy Centers for Ultimate Bliss, Liberation, and Full Awakening
- *The Bliss of Inner Fire: Heart Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa* by Thubten Yeshe

Week 10 (week of March 24, 2014):
Crazy Wisdom Adepts and Their Stories: Siddhas, the Awakened Tantrikas
- Blackboard readings:

Week 11 (week of March 31, 2014):
Siddhas, Transgression, and Secret Societies
- *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* by Wedemeyer. Chapter Six, "Tantric Buddhist Transgression in Context"
- Blackboard readings:
Week 12 (week of April 7, 2014):
The High Hindu Tantric Synthesis of Kashmir Śaivism
  • *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual
Shaivism of Kashmir* by Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega

Week 13 (week of April 14, 2014):
The High Hindu Tantric Synthesis of Kashmir Śaivism (continued)
  • *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual
Shaivism of Kashmir* by Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega (continued)

Week 14 (week of April 21, 2014):
Tantra Today
  Blackboard readings:
  • "The Cult of Ecstasy: Meldings of East and West in a New Age of Tantra" by Hugh
  • "Remembrances" by David Deida. Part Four of *Finding God through Sex.* Boulder:
Sounds True, 2005.
  • "The Body Module" by Ken Wilbur, Terry Patten, Adam Leonard, and Marco Morelli.
Chapter Six of *Integral Life Practice: A 21st-Century Blueprint for Physical Health,
Emotional Balance, Mental Clarity, and Spiritual Awakening.* Boston: Integral Books,
2008.

Monday, April 28, 2014 Last Day of Classes

April 30-May 7, 2014 FINAL EXAMS (See University exam schedule for date of final
exam.)
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Please see the course syllabus for all of the readings organized on a week by week basis.

LIST OF READINGS

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readings on Blackboard (given in the order in which they are used in the course):


BUDDHIST MEDITATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

READING LIST


"Indian Paths to Immortality" and "Penetration, Perfection, and Immortality" by David Gordon White from The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.


