

Religion 330D: Tantric Traditions in Asia and Beyond

Course Description

The word “tantra” conjures many images: ritual feasts on illicit substances, sexual union in the service of religious transformation, alchemical journeys, and explorations of the erotic, the terrifying, and the sublime. But what precisely did tantra look like in practice? Were the worlds of tantra imagined by marginal outcasts? Monastic elites? Or were they just the wild fantasies of Western imperialists?

In this course we will immerse ourselves in the worlds of tantra, through scriptures, ritual manuals, and art. We will read scholarship on tantra to probe the social and philosophical contexts in which tantra thrived. Finally, we will investigate the history of Western encounters with and appropriations of tantra, from Aleister Crowley to Sting.

Course Objectives

Students will work towards the following objectives in this course:

- Master the social, intellectual, and ritual history of the Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions
- Become acquainted with current scholarly debates on the origins and development of the tantric traditions
- Reflect critically on the history and current state of popular and academic Western discourses on Tantra
- Undertake a substantive academic research project
- Communicate effectively with oral presentations and writing

Literacies in the Major Learning Outcomes

In the fulfillment of the above his course will introduce and reinforce key literacies in the Religious Studies curriculum. These include:

Information Literacy

You will learn to cite primary and secondary sources in the *Chicago Manual of Style* citation system.

You will learn how to recognize the purpose and value of different kinds of information, including distinguishing between primary and secondary sources.

You will contribute to the creation of new information by gathering evidence from primary and secondary sources to construct arguments and test hypotheses, synthesizing information into an essay.

You will examine and compare information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, relevance, authority, timeliness, bias, and context.

You will demonstrate understanding that research is inquiry and evolves by drafting a realistic research plan and timeline, developing questions, testing theses, and revising your writing as needed.

Oral Literacy

You will listen closely to oral communication and analyze its content and delivery.

You will participate in discussion, cogently express your ideas, and respond to others respectfully and effectively

You will facilitate discussion, pose generative discussion questions, verbally encourage others' participation, and help to guide the discussion as it unfolds.

You will prepare and deliver an organized and compelling oral presentation using effective delivery techniques and language.

Technology Literacy

You will effectively select and use tools to produce complex, professional printed documents.

Visual Literacy

You will look in a sustained way so as to carefully describe an image or object, noting formal qualities distinct from content.

You will learn how to situate images and objects in their historical contexts, aware of distinctions between representation and presence.

You will communicate effectively using visual media.

Responsibilities

- ***Participation*** in the course is essential. Participation does not mean simply attending class and handing in written assignments. Participation means active involvement in discussion. One need not know all the answers to speak up; the classroom is a space where questions are especially valued. Come to every class prepared with your insights and your questions. It will be assumed that all students will have completed the session's reading BEFORE arriving to class. It is also important that you bring the assigned readings to class for easy reference. You may be called on at any time to contribute to the class with your ideas and questions. Your preparation and participation will be vital for our conversations.
- In order to facilitate discussion, each student will select a day to do a brief ***discussion kickoff***. This is a short (10-15 minutes *at most*) oral presentation in which you share highlights of the readings and key questions to your peers.
- This class features close readings of important primary sources. To help guide our discussions you will write ***three 1000–1500 word critical reflection essays***. In these essays you will engage deeply with Tantric religious texts and with scholarship about Tantra. The quality of our discussions will be determined, in large part, by how seriously you take the task of reading and writing these reflections.
- The world of Tantra is an aesthetic world. Tantric traditions feature significant works of visual and material culture. In order to explore the worlds of Tantra you will engage in two ***art exercises***. In both these exercises you will look closely at images and write brief (250–500 word) reflections on the experience.
- The centerpiece of the class will be a final substantive paper, 3000–4000 words in length, exploring some aspect of Tantric traditions and making use of both translated primary sources and relevant secondary scholarship. The paper should be much more than a book report; it should reflect both your ability to do library research and your ability to

synthesize data and make your own arguments about the material. The paper will be written in three phases:

- A 400–1000 word **proposal** for the final paper. The proposal should contain a brief summary of the paper's topic along with an annotated bibliography of sources you have consulted and plan to consult.
- A **complete rough draft of the final paper (3000–4000 words)**. The more complete and polished the draft, the more likely you are to produce an excellent final draft.
- A brief (5 minutes) **oral presentation** of your final paper to the class. This presentation will force you to think clearly and concisely about your work, in order to communicate effectively about a complex topic.
- The **final paper (3000–4000 words)** will be due via email on Thursday, 19 December, 17:00.

Grading

Attendance and participation	30%
Discussion kickoff	5%
Critical Reflection Essays (3x5%)	15%
Art Exercises (2x5%)	10%
Final paper proposal	5%
Final paper draft	10%
Final paper presentation	5%
Final paper	20%

Course Policies

Course website and syllabus updates: The *Lotus Sūtra* teaches us about *upāyakaūśalya*, “skillfulness in expedient pedagogical techniques.” In the Buddhist tradition, good pedagogy is adaptive, adjusting to the proclivities and needs of particular students. As the semester progresses, I may make changes to the syllabus to ensure that our collective efforts are fruitful. If I do make changes to the syllabus, you will be notified via email, via the course website, and in an announcement in class. *Pay close attention to the course website for updates and announcements!*

Decorum: Texting, cell phone conversations, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Tinder, &c. &c. are simply not welcome in the classroom. If you feel compelled to surrender your privacy to rapacious Silicon Valley marketeers and to feed the engine of what Shoshanna Zuboff has insightfully named “surveillance capitalism,” please do so outside our sacred halls of learning. With that said, you are free to use laptops or tablets, and I feel no need at the outset to monitor, parent, or police you in any way. I assume you are mature and responsible enough to come to the classroom prepared and focused. If you are not mature and responsible enough to be prepared and focused in the classroom, or if you show any signs of jeopardizing our collective learning environment, I will of course intervene to preserve the integrity of our sacred classroom space.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Skidmore College is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator of Student Access Services. You will also need to provide

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documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150 or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center. Please remember that *it is in your interest to initiate these conversations and request accommodation at the beginning of the semester!*

Title IX: Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available.

More information can be found at <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/> or by contacting the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator.

Extracurriculars & Scheduling Conflicts: This syllabus contains the relevant deadlines for major assignments. You must notify me *by the second week of the term* about any known or potential extracurricular conflicts (such as religious observances, graduate or medical school interviews, or sports activities). If you have a conflict on the due date of an assignment, I am happy to accept an assignment turned in ahead of time. *I will not accept assignments which are late due to extracurricular scheduling conflicts.* It is your responsibility to turn in the assignment on or before the due date.

Academic Honesty and Honorable Conduct: As a member of the Skidmore community, you are expected to follow the [Skidmore Honor Code](#). I take very seriously my commitment to teaching you the scholarly values of proper citation and attribution. Accordingly, I will report all incidents of suspected academic dishonesty—without exception—to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. **All instances of plagiarism, no matter how “minor,” will result in failure on the assignment, with the possibility of failure in the course.** You should familiarize yourself with the “Definitions and Guidelines” section of Skidmore's Academic Integrity Guide. These “Definitions and Guidelines” are published online [here](#). *If you have any questions about the proper citation practices, please do not hesitate to contact me.*

S/U Grades: If you are interested in the Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/U) grade option, you are responsible for being aware of the pertinent deadlines set by the Registrar's Office for choosing this option. Please be advised that the college criterion for “Satisfactory” is the equivalent of a C or better. A grade of “C-” or below will result in the student receiving the grade of “Unsatisfactory” or “U” and, as a consequence, the student will receive no credit for the course.

Late Assignments: Late papers will be immediately deducted one step (A to A-, A- to B+, B+ to B, etc.), followed by one additional step every twelve hours.

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Required books

Davidson, Ronald M. *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Jacoby, Sarah H. *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

White, David Gordon. *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in its Asian Contexts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Wedemeyer, Christian. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, & Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Course Outline

Th 5 September: Introductions

T 10 September: Flood’s *Tantric Body I*

Flood, Gavin. *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Read ch 1, pp. 3–30; ch. 3, pp. 48–70

Hallisey, Charles. “The Surprise of Scripture’s Advice.” In *Religious Identity and the Problem of Historical Foundation: The Foundational Character of Authoritative Sources in the History of Christianity and Judaism*, edited by Judith Frishman, Willemien Otten, and Gerard Rouwhorst, 28–44. Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 8. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Recommended reading:

White, David Gordon. “Tantrism: An Overview.” In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 8984–8987. Farmington Hills, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Th 12 September: Flood’s *Tantric Body II*

Flood, Gavin. *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Read ch. 7–8, pp. 146–184

Recommended reading:

Smith, Brian K. “Tantrism: Hindu Tantrism.” In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 8987–8994. Farmington Hills, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Hatley, Shaman. “Tantric Śaivism in Early Medieval India: Recent Research and Future Directions.” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 10 (2010): 615–628.

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T 17 September: Śaiva traditions

Sanderson, Alexis. “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions,” in *The World's Religions*, edited by Stewart Sutherland, Leslie Houlden, Peter Clarke, and Friedhelm Hardy, 660–704. London: Routledge, 1988.

Sanderson, Alexis. “The Śaiva Age.” Handout for Early Tantrism Workshop, Tōkyō, 3–5 October 2005.

Davis, Richard H. “Praises of the Drunken Peacocks” In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 131–145. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Recommended reading:

Sanderson, Alexis. “The Śaiva Age: the Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period.” In *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, edited by Einoo Shingo 永ノ尾信悟, 41–349. Institute of Oriental Culture Special Series 23. Tōkyō 東京: Sankibō Busshorin 山喜房佛書林, 2009.

Th 19 September: Davidson's *Indian Esoteric Buddhism I*

Critical reflection #1 due at beginning of class

Davidson chs. 1–3 [pp. 1–112]

T 24 September: Davidson's *Indian Esoteric Buddhism II*

Davidson chs. 4–5 [pp. 113–235]

Th 26 September: Davidson's *Indian Esoteric Buddhism III*

Davidson chs. 6–8 [pp. 236–340]

T 1 October: Let's talk about (tantric) sex

Biernacki, Loriliai. “Sex Talk and Gender Rites: Women and the Tantric Sex Rite.” *Hindu Studies* 10 (2006): 185–206.

Törzsök, Judit. “Nondualism in Early Śākta Tantras: Transgressive Rites and their Ontological Justification in a Historical Perspective.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 42 (2014): 195–223.

Brooks, Douglas Renfrew. “The Ocean of the Heart: Selections from the *Kularnava Tantra*.” In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 347–360. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Th 3 October: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī I*

Art exercise #1 due at beginning of class

White chs. 1–2 [pp. 1–66]

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T 8 October: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* II

White chs. 3–4 [pp. 67–122]

Th 10 October: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* III

White chs. 5–7 [pp. 123–218]

T 15 October: White's *Kiss of the Yoginī* IV

White chs. 8–9 [pp. 219–272]

Th 17 October: Women and goddesses in Tantra

Critical reflection #2 due at beginning of class

Biernacki, Loriluai. *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Read Introduction + ch. 1, [pp. 3–60].

Goudriaan, Teun. “The Wedding of Siva and the Goddess in the *Kulalikamnaya*.” In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 184–194. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

T 22 October: Buddhist tantra in practice

Kapstein, Matthew I. “King Kunji's Banquet.” In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 52–71. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Bentor, Yael. “The Tibetan Practice of the Mantra Path According to Lce-sgom-pa.” In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, 326–346. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Recommended reading:

Cozort, Daniel. *Highest Yoga Tantra: an introduction to the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet*. 1986. Reprint, Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2005. Read Parts 2 & 3 [pp. 39–114]

Th 24 October: *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra*

Final paper proposal due at beginning of class

George, Christopher S. *The Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra, Chapters I–VIII*. American Oriental Series 56. New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1974.

Read the English translation [pp. 44–85]

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T 29 October: Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism I*

Wedemeyer Introduction + chs. 1–2, pp. 1–67

Th 31 October: Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism II*

Wedemeyer ch. 3 + Appendix I, pp. 68–102, 207–208

T 5 November: Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism III*

Wedemeyer chs. 4–5 + Appendix II, pp. 105–169, 209–210

Th 7 November: Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism IV*

Critical reflection #3 due at beginning of class

Wedemeyer ch. 6 + Conclusion, pp. 170–206

T 12 November: Western appropriations of Tantra: John Woodroffe & Aleister Crowley

Woodroffe, Sir John. *Śakti and Śākta: essays and addresses on the Śākta Tantraśāstra*. 3rd ed. Leeds: Celephaïs Press, 2009 (1929).

Read ch. 3, “What are the tantras and their significance?” and ch. 20, “The Indian *Magna Mater*.”

King, Francis, ed. *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.* New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973.

Read chapter entitled “De Arte Magica, Secundum ritum, Gradus Nonæ O.T.O. Epistola anno belli universalis (1914) ne perdat arcanum scripta.” pp. 169–186 in the PDF.

Th 14 November: Jacoby's *Love and Liberation I*

Art exercise #2 due at beginning of class

Jacoby Intro + ch. 1, pp. 1–75

T 19 November: Jacoby's *Love and Liberation II*

Jacoby ch. 2–3, pp. 76–187

Th 21 November: Jacoby's *Love and Liberation III*

Final paper rough draft due at beginning of class

Jacoby ch. 4, pp. 188–248

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T 26 November: Jacoby's *Love and Liberation IV*

Jacoby ch. 5 + epilogue, pp. 249–324

Th 28 November: *No class—Thanksgiving Recess!*

T 3 December: The *tāntrikas* of Barnes & Noble

Groups in class will report today on one of the following books, all downloadable from the course website:

Hyatt, Christopher S. and Lon Milo DuQuette. *Sex Magic, Tantra & Tarot: The Way of the Secret Lover*. 2nd rev. ed. Tempe, Arizona: New Falcon Publications, 1996.

Mumford, Jonn. *Ecstasy Through Tantra*. 3rd rev. ed. 1988. Reprint, St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2002.

Newcastle, Sienna. *American Tantra: A Modern Guide to Sacred Sex*. New York: iUniverse, 2009.

Th 5 December: Project Presentations

Final paper presentations (5 minutes each, plus 5 minutes Q&A)

T 10 December: Final Thoughts

Th 19 December: Final paper (3000–4000 words) due via email by 17:00 (5 PM)