

**RSOC 131R      Tantra in Theory and Practice**  
Winter 2009      TR 7:00-8:45 PM      KENNA 107

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Office Hours:         Wed., Thurs. 10:00-11:30 AM

This course will cover the two major traditions of South Asian Tantra, Hindu and Buddhist. Over the course of the quarter, we will explore these traditions over the range of their history, from their origin in the early medieval era (c. 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries), and will explore their development and practice through time up until the present, and through space, from South Asia to Tibet and North America. We will pay particular attention to two issues, namely the centrality of the body in Tantric ritual and meditative practices, the controversial sexual imagery and practices, as well as the status of women within Tantric traditions. We will pay particular attention to the last issue, for the Tantric traditions highlighted the worship of female deities, and also (at various times and places, and in various traditions) apparently accorded female practitioners high status. However, it is an open question whether or not the reverence accorded to female deities and female practitioners in ritual practice has had any impact on the status of women in these societies. We will focus upon these questions as we explore the relatively unknown intricacies of the Tantric traditions.

**COURSE GOALS:**

1. Provide a deeper and richer understanding of the Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions.
2. Cultivate the ability to identify and critically evaluate arguments made in primary and secondary texts.
3. Increased ability in developing one's own arguments, and cogently and convincingly expressing them orally and in writing.

**ASSESSMENT & GRADING:**

One of the primary goals of this course is to provide students with a structured environment to hone their skills in research and writing. In particular, the ability to form an argument, and to cogently argue it in both speech and writing, will be the focus of the class. The class assignments are geared toward the production of a publishable essay, and they thus seek to advance students toward this goal via a gradual, step-by-step progression.

**Abstract and Bibliography (10%)**

The initial assignment will be the formulation of a topic for the final paper. Once a topic has been selected, students will be expected to research the topic, and identify a body of relevant works—books, articles, encyclopedia entries, etc.—which will be the basis of the research for the project. Students will be required to submit a bibliography of these works accompanied by a 250 word (approximately) abstract, which states the topic and the thesis for which one will argue.

### **Conference Paper (20%)**

In preparation for the presentation, each student will be expected to write and submit a draft version of their paper, 7-9 pages in length. These papers are “drafts,” and thus do not have to be fully developed. They should, however, coherently present the argument that the student will make in the final paper, with support from research done thus far. These will be due at the end of week eight.

### **Class Presentation (20%)**

During the last two weeks of class, each student will make a 20 minute presentation on the topic of their final paper to the class. Students can read their paper, or make a powerpoint presentation. Feedback will be provided by the course instructor as well as by several anonymous peer reviewers. Those who make paper presentations are advised to submit their papers to the instructor 24 hours in advance, so that he and the peer reviewers will have the chance to read it prior to the presentation.

### **Final Paper (50%)**

The final paper, the culmination of these assignments, is expected to be a well-edited and fully annotated research paper. All sources used, whether directly quoted or indirectly relied on, should be noted in footnotes. Students can EITHER provide complete bibliographic references in the notes, or provide abbreviated references, with a full bibliography at the end of the paper. There is no fixed minimum or maximum page length; papers should be complete, so the length will be determined by the nature of the topic. The suggested page range is 10-20 pages.

### **Class Participation**

As this is a seminar, it is expected that students will regularly attend class, critically read the class texts, participate in class discussions, and provide classmates with thoughtful feedback during the presentations. Absences will be excused if the instructor is notified in advance, and a good reason is given for the absence. Failure to regularly participate in this fashion will negatively impact one’s grade.

In addition to the graded assignments, each student will be expected to lead the opening discussion for one of the book in a small group of 2-3 students. These discussions will be held on the Tuesday class each week (from week 2-week 8). Each group will be expected to collaboratively compose an outline of the book, and submit it to the instructor 24 hours in advance (by 7 PM Monday), to be posted on Angel. Each group will then be expected to lead the class discussion that day, raising questions and issues that they find to be of interest. During the final two weeks of class, student will also be assigned 2-3 presentations to peer review. Students will be expected to be present for the presentations, and to submit to the instructor their evaluation of the presentation. The instructor will provide these (anonymously) to the presenters.

### **POLICIES:**

#### **Academic Honesty**

Plagiarism or academic dishonesty in any form (as described in the Student Conduct Code) will result in a failed grade for the project, and possibly for the course. All allegations of academic

dishonesty will be reported to the department chair and Office of Student Life. For a full presentation of University policies concerning plagiarism, see:

<http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/resources/academicintegrity/>

In order to avoid the sanctions applied to cases of academic dishonesty, please make sure that you properly cite all sources that you utilize in your writing, including works that are directly quoted or paraphrased, as well as works used as a source of information. This includes both print and online sources. While you are encouraged to work with other students in preparing for class discussions, and are welcome to seek the feedback on your paper drafts from the instructor or your peers, your paper submissions must consist of your own writing, and any direct quotations or paraphrasing from other works must be properly cited.

#### Disability Accommodations:

To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disability Resources in the Drahnann Center in Benson, room 214, 408-554-4111, TTY 408-554-5445. Students must provide documentation from Disability Resources prior to receiving accommodations.

#### ASSIGNMENTS

Papers and group presentations are due in class on the day that they are listed on the syllabus, and exams taken on the day they are given, or they will be considered late. Late work will be penalized unless the instructor granted an extension in advance (i.e., at least 24 hours prior to the due date). I will accept all written submissions in either paper “hardcopy” format or as MSWord document email attachments. All documents should be double-spaced with at least 1” margins, in an easily readable 12 pt font. Emailed papers must be in my inbox by the beginning of class on the day they are due; I will send a confirmation email once I have successfully opened the attachment. **IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE SURE THAT EMAILED PAPERS ARE RECEIVED BY ME.** If you do not receive a confirmation email within 24 hours please inform me. Emailed papers will be returned with comments via email once they are graded. The class texts are available both at the bookstore and on reserve.

#### Grading Scale

94.0–100	A	87.0–89.9	B+	77.0–79.9	C+	67.0–69.9	D+
90.0–93.9	A-	83.0–86.9	B	73.0–76.9	C	63.0–66.9	D
		80.0–82.9	B-	70.0–72.9	C-	60.0–62.9	D-

#### Class Texts (Required):

Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (I. B. Tauris, 2005)

Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (U. of CA Press, 2003)

Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (Oxford UP, 2007)

June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford UP, 2004)

Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* (Princeton UP, 1995)

David Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (AIBS/Columbia UP, 2007)

Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms* (Wisdom Publications, 2002)

## **COURSE OUTLINE:**

### **1. INTRODUCTIONS**

Tues. 1/6 During the first class we will engage in the usual introductory rituals, and will discuss the goals of the course, and the ways that we will seek to achieve them.

#### Thurs. 1/8 **Tantra: An Overview**

During this class, we will seek to define the term “tantra,” and broadly survey the range of religious phenomena that this label designates.

- David White “Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition” (ANGEL)

### **2. HINDU TANTRA**

#### Week 2 **The Tantric Body**

T 1/13, R 1/15 In this section we will explore in more depth the structure of the human body as imagined in Hindu tantric traditions, and we will explore how the body becomes both the site of practice, and, through its transformation, the goal of practice as well. We will also explore the tension between asceticism and sensual/sexual cultivation in these traditions.

- Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*

#### Week 3 **Tantra and the Western Colonial Imagination**

T 1/20, R 1/22 During this week we will look at the history of the Western reception of “tantra” and the history of its study in the academy.

- Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*

#### Week 4 **Women and Hindu Tantra**

T 1/27, R 1/29 This week we will explore the roles assigned to female figures in Hindu tantric traditions, both the goddesses who are worshipped as well as the female practitioners who take part in, and often play a major role in, this worship.

- Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra*

#### Week 5 **Goddess Worship in Contemporary Hinduism**

T 2/3, R 2/5 We will conclude our examination of Hindu tantra with an exploration of goddess worship in contemporary India.

- June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*

Paper Abstract and Bibliography due in class on Thurs. 2/5

### **3. BUDDHIST TANTRA**

#### Week 6 **Sexuality and Awakening**

T 2/10, R 2/12 During this week we will read an influential but controversial book that argues that women played a central role in the development of Buddhist tantric traditions that focus on sexuality as a path, rather than obstruction, to awakening.

- Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*

Week 7      **The Cakrasamvara Tantra**

T 2/17, R 2/19 During this week we will read an influential Buddhist tantra, one which was strongly influenced by earlier Hindu traditions, in order to gain a better appreciation for the scriptural bases of the tantric traditions.

• **David Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation***

Week 8      **Vajrayoginī**

T 2/24, R 2/26 We will conclude our study of Buddhist tantra through taking a detailed look at the practice traditions centering around the Buddhist goddess Vajrayoginī, who is one of the most popular deities of contemporary tantric Buddhist traditions.

• **Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms***  
Conference papers due in class, Thurs. 2/26

**4.              PRESENTATIONS**

Week 9      **Class Presentations**

T 3/3, R 3/5

Week 10     **Class Presentations**

T 3/10, R 3/12

**Final Papers due Thurs. 3/19**