

Tantra and the body

'Tantric' sex and its like is largely a twentieth century American preoccupation.

-- Hugh Urban, western scholar

Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the Godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

-- David Gordon White, western scholar

The empowering of the body, which means its divinization, is the most important quality in tantric traditions.

-- Gavin Flood, western scholar

IN THIS CLASS we will be exploring the origins of *tantra*, a controversial and widely misunderstood term that is used by western scholars to describe a variety of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions. What sets these traditions apart is their radical affirmation of reality and the physical body, which are both viewed as a manifestation of divinity. Sacred energies of the subtle body (*kundalini*, the *nadis* and *cakras*, etc.) can be accessed and controlled by the practitioner. The path to liberation is engaged through physical and mental practices such as *mantra*, *asana*, visualization, worship, and the use of *mandalas* and *yantras* (physical representations of cosmic truths). In some traditions (referred to as “left-handed”, as opposed to the less transgressive “right-handed” traditions), sexual rituals are used. Sexuality in this context is not the indulgence of sense pleasure, but rather the embodied enactment of perceived truth: the human body is inherently divine, and the universe arises out of the union of masculine and feminine divinity.

Early tantric traditions focused on the cultivation of magical powers through the propitiation of terrifying divinities. Through prolonged interaction with the Indian alchemical tradition, the focus of tantric practice shifted to the transmutation of the body. Ultimately these practices were internalized in a quest to transmute the awareness of the practitioner, so that s/he might directly perceive the divinity of world and body.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENTS:

READ “The Lady Twilight” by William Dalrymple, from his book *Nine Lives: A* travel writer visits Manisha, an elderly *tantrika* who lives in a cremation ground.

DO A SEARCH ON “TANTRA” on the Internet. Bring a printout of one page (not X rated!) to class next week!