Course description:
Though arguably the most vigorous movement in Indian Buddhism in the latter half of the first millennium, Indian Esoteric Buddhism (Mantranaya, Vajrayāna) has been rather neglected in Buddhist Studies overall. In this course, we will look more closely at these traditions, and consider some of the many questions concerning their genealogy, history, literature, and practice.

Prerequisites: Preferably at least on course in South Asian religions. Permission of instructor.

Course readings are available for purchase at Seminary Cooperative Bookstore and on electronic reserve at Regenstein Library.

Schedule of Class Meetings:

Week One (7 January 2005): Introduction/Orientation

Week Two (14 January 2005): What is “Tantra?” What is “Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism?”
Readings: Urban, “The Extreme Orient”
Padoux, “What Do We Mean by Tantrism?”
Goudriaan, “Introduction”
La Vallée Poussin, “Tantrism (Buddhist)”
Davidson and Orzech, “Tantra”
Tribe, “Mantranaya/Vajrayāna—Tantric Buddhism in India”

Week Three (21 January 2005): The History and Historiography of Esoteric Buddhism
Readings: Bhattacharyya, Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism, pp. 1-42
Snellgrove, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, pp. 117-141
Wedemeyer, “Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds”
Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism, pp. 1-24 (skim), and 113-168

Week Four (28 January 2005): Syncretism and Varieties in/of Buddhist Esoterism
Readings: Sanderson, “Pious Plagiarism”
Bühnemann, “Buddhist Deities and Mantras in the Hindu Tantras I”
Kapstein, “Scholastic Buddhism and the Mantrayāna”
Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism, pp. 169-235

Week Five (4 February 2005): Hermeneutics or “How to Read a Buddhist Tantra”
Readings: Mitra, “Tathāgata-guhyaka alias Guhya-samāgha”
Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism, pp. 236-292
Thurman, “Vajra Hermeneutics”
Broido, “Killing, Lying, Stealing, and Adultery” (skim)
Wedemeyer, “Beef, Dog, and Other Mythologies”
Week Six (11 February 2005): Ritual Forms: The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa
Readings: Wallis, Mediating the Power of Buddhas (entire)

Week Seven (18 February 2005): Ritual Forms: Vajrayoginī
Readings: English, Vajrayoginī, pp. 109-223

Week Eight (25 February 2005): Yogic Forms: the Lamp that Integrates the Practices
Readings: Wedemeyer, trans., Āryadeva’s “Lamp that Integrates the Practices”

Week Nine (3 March 2005): The Wheel of Time: Kālacakra and the End of Buddhist Tantra in India
Readings: Newman, “Eschatology in the Wheel of Time Tantra”
          Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra”
          Wallace, The Inner Kālacakrantantra, pp. 3-55

Week Ten (10 March): Presentation of Student Projects
Readings: none

Final Paper due Wednesday 16 March 2005 in Swift 201 by 3:00PM.

Course Reading Bibliography (n.b. newer editions may be available and/or used)


Tribe, Anthony. “Mantranaya/Vajrayāna—Tantric Buddhism in India” in Paul Williams, Buddhist Thought (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 192-244

Bhattacharyya, Benoytosh. Chapters I to IV in An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), pp. 1-42


