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LOVE HIM, HER & MYSELF

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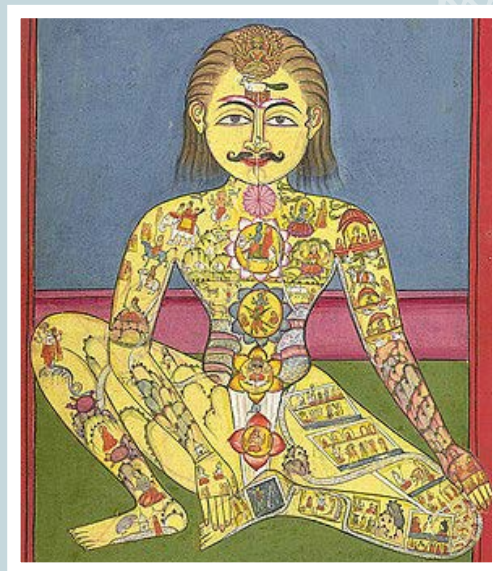
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A WEEKEND OF virtual tantra

Words: Mary-Lou Aitken

I am proud to share with my fellow yogis a hidden gem (although hidden for not much longer I predict). It turns out that the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies shares its world-class teaching and research via a diverse range of online courses, many of which directly relate to the mat. Wherever I can, I look to pass on to my students teachings I have received from an authoritative source as well as to continuously deepen and develop my own practice. Therefore, I was delighted to find that a trusted source might guide me through a subject which, for some time, has intrigued and fascinated me, from the comfort of my own armchair.

Like many in the West, I inherited certain preconceptions about what Tantra means (for many, Sting springs to mind). *Rethinking Tantra*, the OCHS Online Weekend School (19 & 20 September 2020), a series of digestible presentations given by seven experts from Canada to Oxford itself, kicked off at 12 noon each day and rounded off come dinner time. The lecturers spoke for one hour and, at the conclusion of each talk, we were invited to ask questions; I found these moments



relaxed and inclusive. How often do you get the opportunity to ask an Oxford Professor to clarify an aspect of the Vedic or Tantric texts? The scheduled times were impeccably observed and the Zoom streaming seamless and slick.

The first session began with an unflinching Daniel Simpson who looked us squarely in the eye and, having declared that he “*must have drawn the short straw*”, got straight down to business. His topic: ‘Tantric Sex, the Kāma Sūtra and yoga’ addressed why

sex is “part of Tantra but not the defining aspect”. An experienced foreign correspondent, Daniel was adept at delivering his talk in a no-fuss, relatable manner. His clear and captivating slides illustrated where, when, how, and why sex and sexual matters form part of Tantric practices. Sourced from varied range of ancient texts, these provided an intoxicating dose of opulence and sensuality. Once my blushes had subsided, I began to receive the deeper, more spiritual messages behind the beautifully explained traditions and rituals.



The afternoon sped by in the hands of Dr Raj Balkaran. As a specialist of the *Devi Mahatmya*, Raj's story-telling was authoritative, ravishing, and captivating. This narrative text marks the debut of the Hindu Goddess and shows ultimate divinity presented in 'the feminine'. My desire to know the origins of the Hindu divine mother and where I might look to find the central texts to which these 'creation stories' relate had been deeply satisfied. Indeed, my fears held prior to the course - that I might find it too high-brow or that it was only for those who already had a wide understanding of Hindu traditions and texts - had vanished. With each new speaker, I found myself drawn ever deeper into the fascinating mystery of the world of Tantra, in all its manifestations. When Dr Nicholas Sutton, followed by Dr Janaki Nair spoke about 'Tantra and Indian Religion' and 'Śakteya Mudrās: Hand Gestures in Goddess Tantric Traditions, respectively, I began to wonder how it was possible to

gather so much knowledge and expertise around one organisation. The conversational, inclusive, and wonderfully engaging delivery of both experienced speakers held me riveted.

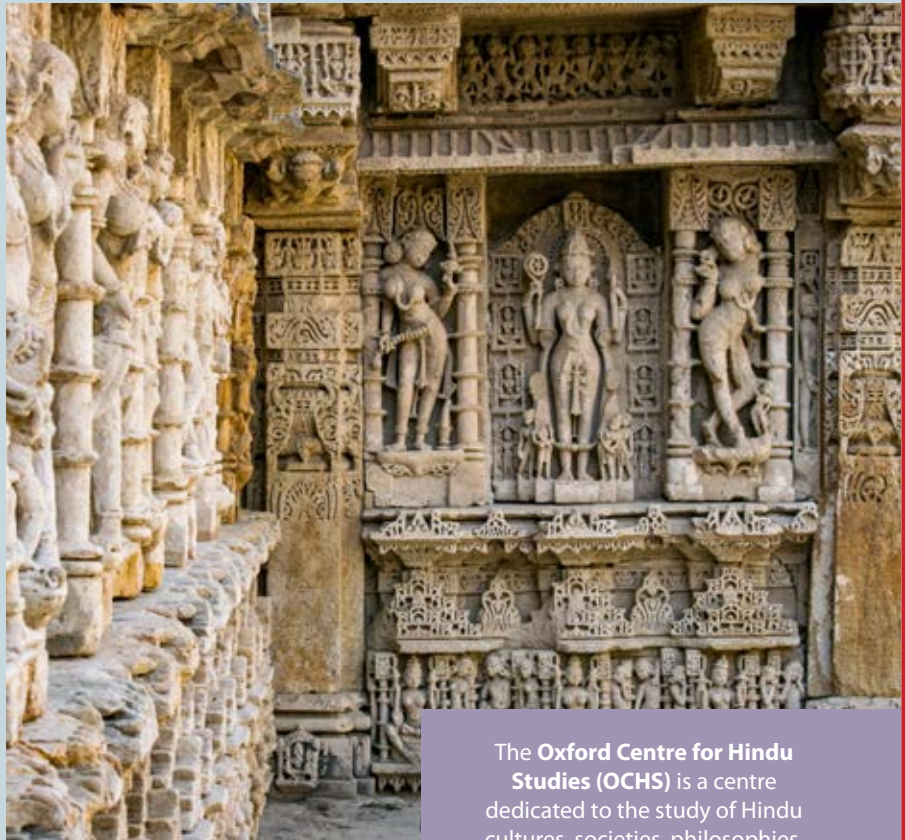
Dr Janaki Nair's expert understanding of mudrās and her research into semiotics - the study of sign process in ancient cultural and religious practices - combined with videos of her own fascinating footage taken in temples and outdoor 'classrooms' in India, offered depth and breadth. These gave an inspirational and privileged glimpse into how an ancient temple art-form and the modern-day yoga mat might connect. Then, the three categories of mudrā were beautifully explained, namely: Kathakali, a classical Indian dance-form, essentially a 'story play'; Veda Mudrā, a pedagogical teaching tool for training in intonation, rhythm, and meaning of the Vedic texts; and Tantric Ritual Mudrā, the temple worship 'art-form'. The footage of a Tantric ritual was spell-binding and the hand gestures used to signify

objects (such as a piece of jewellery to make offerings to the Devi) were fascinating and showed how this "wishful poetry" forms an essential part of a practice which combines imagination with the body, setting in motion an alignment with higher beings.

Professor Gavin Flood's talk on 'The Tantric Body' began day two. He eloquently explained why the body itself is important in Tantra, but in more mysterious ways than one might imagine. It brought me to appreciate more fully the role the body plays as a vehicle for spirituality and by the end of this talk, I had a clearer understanding of how and why the practices of yoga and Tantric traditions are intimately linked. Next, Dr Prema Goet, who works with practitioners from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, documenting and producing works on Tantric rituals, the worship of Goddess(es), and yogic practices, spoke about Aghora Tantra in Kāmākhyā temple in Assam. His visual guides helped me to understand why this temple is

considered one of the śakti pithas (seating place of the śakti – the female principle of divine energy) of the Goddess. Spellbinding, rare, still, and moving images showed the complexities of Tantric rituals to the Goddess. It was interesting to learn that Assam is known as the modern-day ‘womb’ of Tantra, as explained in the presentation by Professor Hugh Urban: ‘The Path of Desire, Living Tantra in Northeast India’. Hugh spends much of his time there mingling with those who practice specific (and sometimes hard to penetrate) areas of Tantra. He shared with us some current research and explained that, whereas in the West, we might associate Tantra with sex, in India, it is often associated with Black Magic. During the discussion held at the conclusion of the talk, a course participant related the story of how a member of her family had employed Tantric techniques in settling a dispute with a neighbour. The methods for this kind of ‘intervention’, it seems are still passed down, often in handwritten note form, from one generation to the next.

Professor Nicholas Sutton closed the weekend with a truly fascinating talk about ‘Kashmir Śaivism: The Tantric Advaita’ (or Trika Śaivism). Kashmir Śaivism, it seems, reveals the Tantric approach to religion as non-dualist. Śankarācārya, generally viewed to be the principal exponent of non-dualism (advaita), teaches transcendence of the manifest world. However, in Kashmir Śaivism we find a form of advaita that is more concerned with the notion of the world as a reality that is Śiva himself. By considering these two expressions of advaita,



I found I could start to identify the fundamental distinctions that exist between the Vedic and Tantric expressions of Hindu spirituality, which consolidated much of the weekend’s learning. This well-rounded, varied, superbly delivered, and approachable course was a wise investment and has already brought incredibly value to my own inner life. The understanding and enjoyment I received from participation in this course has already positively impacted my teaching and inspired some well-received sequencing themes. Further investigation has revealed that an online, yoga-themed ‘Learning Pathway’ is available to me via the OCHS – it seems I can return whenever I so ‘desire’.

The **Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS)** is a centre dedicated to the study of Hindu cultures, societies, philosophies, religions, and languages, in all periods and in all parts of the world with a focus on the preservation of India’s cultural heritage and aimed at promoting a better understanding of it through a comprehensive programme of education, publishing, and research. A ‘Yoga Studies’ learning pathway is available to all as well as a selection of weekend schools on subjects bridging a wide range of subjects from Sanskrit, Philosophy of Yoga, to ‘Women in Hinduism’.

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