

Department of Religion and Philosophy  
Berry College  
Religion 326: Goddess Traditions of Asia

**Class Time & Place:**  
T Th 2:00-3:15  
Evans 220

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Office hours: MWF 11-2, 2-4; Th 12:30-1:45

**Course Description**

What or who is a goddess? How is it that a goddess can both be one and multiple? What is the relationship of the one goddess to the many goddesses? Why is goddess worship the most prevalent form of Asian spirituality? What is the relationship of the goddess(es) to the god(s)? What are the means for worshipping the goddess(es)? What are *mantra*, *mandala*, and *mudra* and how do these terms relate to the goddess(es)? Why have goddesses been linked to kingship in many regions of Asia since the early medieval period? What relationship, if any, pertains between Asian and western goddess traditions? What relevance do Asian goddess traditions have today, both in Asia and throughout the world? These and many other questions on the nature of the goddess will drive the intellectual inquiry of our seminar.

**Structure**

The course is divided into four units. Unit 1 focuses on Goddess Traditions in India. In this section we will examine the mythologies, liturgies, theologies, *sadhanas* and artistic representations of over a dozen Indian goddesses, beginning with the ancient goddesses of Harappa and culminating in the goddesses of the high Tantra in the late medieval period. Unit 2 focuses on Goddess Traditions in Nepal, with particular attention on the goddess Tripurasundari. In this section we will seek to understand the goddess as a polyvalent symbol that once lay at the heart of Nepali's socio-political and cultural traditions (which, collectively, were called *Devi-mandala*). In Unit 3 we journey northward to the mountainous region of Tibet where the goddess traditions crystallized by the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the ideal of the Dakini, whose multiple manifestations included, most importantly, those women who attained Buddhahood in their very bodies. Finally, in Unit 4 we will turn our attention to the modern context and consider a number of comparative questions regarding the relevance of Goddess traditions to modern discourse on the self.

The course seeks to mirror the interdisciplinary, dynamic, interactive and multi-media nature of goddess traditions themselves. Towards this end we will interpret medieval scripture, analyze works of religious art, 'decode' and engage in Asian forms of music, critically assess contemporary scholarship on the goddess, ground ourselves in historical data, and dialogue rigorously on the questions germane to our inquiry. For the class to be a success, all of us must participate fully and regularly. For this reason, each class will actively incorporate discussion and creative input. Additionally, we will be joined on occasion by scholars and practitioners of the Goddess traditions and will additionally make a field trip to a local site of Indian goddess practice.

### **Objectives and Expected Outcomes**

There are five objectives for the class. First, the course should introduce students to the rich field of scholarship on Goddess traditions in Asia. Second, it should help deepen their understanding of the theologies, mythologies, and ritual systems of particular goddess traditions in relationship to their respective sociopolitical contexts. Third, it should help students reflect critically on the pluralist position that goddess traditions are ‘alive’ and of relevance to the modern world. The fourth objective of the course is to help students acquire a greater sense of the affective and practical dimensions of the artistic and practical dimensions of goddess traditions. The journal and creative project is designed to assess students’ progress in meeting this goal. Finally, this course, like all religion courses, should help students to become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

### **Readings:**

- DG** *Devi-Gita*. Translated with Commentary by C. McKenzie Brown (Albany: SUNY Press.
- ER** Electronic Reserve.
- GWB** “The Goddess within and beyond the Three Cities: Sakta Tantra and the Paradox of Power in Nepala-Mandala,” by Jeffrey Lidke (Ph.d. Dissertation: UC-Santa Barbara, 2000).
- HG** *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, by David R. Kinsley (SUNY 1988).
- LG** *The Living Goddess: Reclaiming the Tradition of the Mother of the Universe*, by Linda Johnsen (Yes International Publishers.
- SD** *Sky Dancer, The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*, by Keith Dowmen (Penquin Books, 1989).

### **Grading Grid**

The course will not be graded on a curve. All assignments will be given a numerical value on a 100-point scale. The percentage value of each assignment is given below. At the end of the semester we will determine the overall grade by calculating those percentages in order to give a final score according to the following grid:

A	100-94	C+	79-77	F	60 and below
A-	93-90	C	76-74		
B+	89-87	C-	73-70		
B	86-84	D+	69-67		
B-	83-80	D	66-61		

### **Academic Integrity**

Mutual trust among Berry’s students, faculty, and staff is essential to the successful operation of the college. All members of the Berry College community are responsible for working together to uphold an environment conducive to honorable academic endeavor. Any dishonest behavior in connection with class assignments may result in a lower or failing grade for the assignment, or a lower or failing grade for the course. See *Viking Code* for more information.

**Course Activities**

Participation	<b>10%</b>
Unit 1 Essay-Exam	<b>10%</b>
Unit 2 Essay-Exam	<b>10%</b>
Unit 3 Essay-Exam	<b>10%</b>
Research Paper	<b>25%</b>
Creative Project	<b>15%</b>
Final	<b>20%</b>

1. A primary expectation for students is regular *attendance*. Multiple absences will naturally impact your grade. The degree of that impact will be determined individually.
2. *Participation* (10%): The best seminars are those in which each student takes responsibility for co-teaching. Towards this end, each of you is charged to complete all assigned readings prior to class. Concretely, each of you is required to bring to each class the following: (i) one thoughtful question based on the reading that is followed by (ii) your own initial answer thereon and (iii) a creative idea for who the goddess(es) is(are) and how one might best study her(them).
3. *Unit Exam-Essays* (10% ea. = 30%): Students will write a 3-4 page take home exam-essays at the culmination of units 1, 2, and 3. These essays should be clearly argued, high quality thesis essays in which you thoughtfully address an issue raised through our discussions and readings for that unit. Exam guidelines will be posted on Viking web no less than two weeks prior to the due date of each exam.
4. *Research Paper* (25%): Students will write a 8-10 page research paper on a goddess traditions selected from the list provided below. This paper should not simply summarize historical origins and development of the particular tradition. Rather, it should be a thoughtful thesis essay that demonstrates your grasp of the relevant primary and secondary sources on the topic and demonstrates an understanding of the tradition in its "lived complexity." The final paper is due in class on April 14th at 5 p.m.. Additional guidelines with a timetable will be posted on Viking Web.
5. *Creative Project* (15%): Students will work in groups of 4 on a creative project that will culminate in an in-class multi-media participatory presentation. These presentations should not merely be lectures (if at all). Rather, they should be viewed as creative, full-bodied artistic presentations in which your understanding of the tradition you are studying is conveyed through extra-intellectual means. Guidelines for these presentations will be posted on Viking Web and discussed in class.
6. *Final* (20%): The final will be in the form of a take home exam. While the exam will focus primarily on the readings and issues raised in the 4<sup>th</sup> Unit, you will be asked to think cumulatively and, accordingly, ground your argument in the data from all of the units. Further guidelines to be discussed and posted on Viking Web. The final will be handed in in-person at our culminating festive gathering, the date for which will be determined by all of us.

**Meeting Places**

Our primary meeting place is Evans 220. However, on occasion, we will meet in the Interfaith Center, my house, or an alternative spot on campus. Additionally, we will make one field trip to the local Hindu temple.

**Possible Research Topics**

## Indian Goddess Traditions

Vedic Goddesses

Tantric Goddesses

Goddesses of the Social Order

Goddesses of War and Destruction

Goddesses and Yoga

Goddesses and Politics

## Nepalese Goddess Traditions

Goddesses of the Sarvamnaya

Goddesses and Art

Impact of Maoist Terrorist movement

## Tibetan Dakini Tradition

The Dakini and Tibetan Culture

Dakini and Feminist Studies

Dakini in Art and Ritual

## Living Goddess Traditions

Contemporary Incarnations of the Goddess

Goddess Traditions and Feminism

Comparison of Pagan and Asian Goddess Traditions

## Course Outline and Reading Schedule

### Unit 1: The Goddess Tradition in India

Tu	1/10	The Body of the Goddess	
Th	1/12	Goddesses in the Veda	HG, 1-18, 55-64, & 212-220.
Tu	1/17	Goddesses of the Earth and Village	HG, 151-160 & 178-211;
Th	1/19	Goddesses of the Social Order Guest Speaker: Sthaneshwar Timalisina	HG, 19-54 & 65-80; DG ix-30.
Tu	1/24	Goddesses of War and Power	HG, 95-131. DG 31-44.
Th	1/26	The Great Goddess	HG 132-150. DG 45-83.
Tu	1/31	Tantric Goddesses	HG 81-94 & 161-177.

### Unit 2: The Goddess Tradition in Nepal

Th	2/02	Entering the Mandala of Tripura	GWB 1-15; DG 85-110.
Tu	2/07	The Devi as Cosmos	GWB 16-47; DG 111-136
Th	2/09	Tantric Sadhana 1	GWB 47-77; DG 137-160.
Tu	2/14	The Goddess As Nation:	DG 161-202.
Th	2/16	The Goddess as Culture 1: Art, Architecture & Ritual	GWB 78-100
Tu	2/21	The Goddess as Culture 2: Music	GWB 101-138;. DG 203-218.
Th	2/23	The Goddess and Politics	GWB 137-186; DG 219-236.
Tu	2/28	Death of the Goddess?	GWB 184-193. DG 263-318.

### Unit 3: The Dakini Tradition of Tibet

Th	3/02	The Birth of the Sky Dancer	SD ixix-14.
Tu	3/07	The Master	SD 15-24.
Th	3/09	Inner Tantra	SD 25-64.
Tu	3/21	Initiation and Practice	SD 25-64.
Th	3/23	Meditation and Spiritual Accomplishment.	SD 65-93.

Tu 3/28	Power and Teachings	SD 94-141.
Th 3/30	Buddhahod	SD 142-187.

#### Unit 4: Living Goddess?

Tu 4/04	Goddess Traditions in the Diaspora	LG (TBA)
Th 4/06	Living Goddesses	LG (TBA)
Tu 4/11	Goddess Theology and contemporary discourse	LG (TBA)
Th 4/13	Ecofeminism	LG (TBA)
Tu 4/18	Are the Goddesses of relevance today?	LG (TBA)
Th 4/20	Recap, conclusions, new beginnings	LG (TBA)

Final Exam: April 28<sup>th</sup>, 8 a.m. (!?)

