

Large print exhibition text



Tantra enlightenment to revolution

The British
Museum

Introduction

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Visitors are advised that the exhibition contains sexually explicit language and imagery.

The erotic plays an important role in Tantra that has been much misunderstood and misinterpreted over time, in particular since the British colonial era in South Asia.

Tantra: Indian rites of ecstasy, 1968

In the 1960s, many artists and filmmakers in India and beyond were inspired by the philosophy of Tantra and its potential to transform how we see and experience the world. These extracts, and the music outside the exhibition, are from a film directed by Nik Douglas in consultation with the art historian Ajit Mookerjee. It is deliberately impressionistic and in the words of Douglas attempted to 'plung[e] the viewer without explanation into the sounds and visual splendour of Tantra art and ritual.'

Duration: 1 minute (original film, 40 minutes)

Director: Nik Douglas; consultant: Ajit Mookerjee;
co-producers: Mick Jagger and Robert Fraser
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Tantra enlightenment to revolution

Tantra is a philosophy that emerged in India around AD 500. It has been linked to successive waves of revolutionary thought, from its early transformation of Hinduism and Buddhism, to the Indian fight for independence and the rise of 1960s counterculture. From its beginnings, Tantra has challenged religious, cultural and political conventions around the world.

Tantra teaches that the material world is not illusory but real and infused with divine feminine power. This limitless power can be channelled through the body and mind to achieve rapid enlightenment in a single lifetime.

This exhibition charts Tantra's radical potential for opening up new ways of seeing and changing the world.

Supported by
Bagri Foundation

Tantras

Tantra is a philosophy rooted in instructional sacred texts called **Tantras**. They take their name from the Sanskrit word **tan**, meaning 'to weave' or 'compose', and are often written in the form of a conversation between a god and goddess.

The **Tantras** outline a variety of ritual practices, including yoga and visualisations of deities. These require guidance from a teacher, or guru, and if carried out successfully are said to grant worldly and supernatural powers, from long life to flight, as well as spiritual transformation.

Many texts contain rituals that transgress existing social and religious conventions. Tantra's 'left-hand' path (**vamachara**) interprets them literally, while its 'right-hand' path (**dakshinachara**) interprets them symbolically. The second ensured Tantra's mainstream acceptance, while the first promised greater power.

1

Mantras: Yoginihridaya (Heart of the Yogini) Tantra

Tantric texts often include mantras – Sanskrit syllables embodying the nature of a deity. Mantras play a fundamental role as ‘power words’ in Tantric practice and are passed from guru to disciple. This **Tantra** outlines a ritual for internalising the power of the Hindu goddess Tripurasundari by pronouncing mantras while touching different parts of the body. By visualising the essence of each syllable a practitioner can adopt the goddess’s cosmic form.

Nepal, 1300–1500

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library (2 folios)

2

Sexual union: Vajramrita (Nectar of the Thunderbolt) Tantra

Some **Tantras** describe sexual rites for achieving enlightenment, which can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. If carried out literally, a couple assumes the role of deities in sexual union, the woman often being the focus of worship. When interpreted symbolically, a practitioner visualises this union within their own body, the deities symbolising qualities such as wisdom and compassion. This **Tantra** recommends the union of the 'thunderbolt' and 'lotus', which can be interpreted as the phallus and vulva.

Nepal, 1162

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

3

Transgression: Vajramrita (Nectar of the Thunderbolt) Tantra

Tantra challenges orthodox Hindu and Buddhist distinctions between purity and impurity by teaching that everything is sacred. By engaging with 'polluted' substances such as human remains, or in this text sexual fluids, a practitioner can overcome obstacles to enlightenment such as disgust, fear and desire by confronting rather than repressing them. Transgression is often at the heart of Tantra, not for its own sake, but because it offers a powerful force for transformation.

Nepal, 1162

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

Introduction

4

The Yogic body: Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) Tantra

According to Tantric texts, all aspects of the body can be embraced and harnessed on the path to enlightenment. Through Tantric yoga, the body can be turned into a sacred instrument. Techniques include visualising a goddess within the body, an individual's source of power. Around her is a network of channels and energy centres that together make up the 'yogic body' described in this **Tantra**.

Nepal, 1000–1100

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library
(2 folios and cover)

The rise of Tantra in India

Tantric practice probably began on the margins of society, among devotees of the Hindu god Shiva, destroyer of the universe, and Shakti, the universe's all-pervasive energy. By the AD 700s the **Tantras** were being studied in Hindu and Buddhist monasteries across India, reflecting the fluid exchanges between Hindu–Buddhist traditions.

By this time, many new kingdoms were vying for power across South Asia after the breakdown of two major dynasties. In a time of political instability, rulers were drawn to Tantra's promise of worldly as well as spiritual power. They supported Tantric masters and commissioned magnificent temples enshrining Tantric deities.

Political rivalry helped to shape not only the ferocious symbolism of many Tantric gods but also many of the **Tantras** themselves. These advised on how best to conquer enemies, which could also

The rise of Tantra in India

represent natural disasters, diseases and inner obstacles to enlightenment, from jealousy to greed.

Image captions left to right:

Devotee at Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam, north-east India.

Photo © Barcroft Media, Contributor via Getty Images, 2015

Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam, north-east India.

Photo © Saurav022, Shutterstock.com, 2018

Map caption:

Modern states of India mentioned in the exhibition.

Quote on the wall:

If a man has been marked by terrible ghosts ... then a tribute should be offered to Bhairava, the lord of the demonic dead.

Netra Tantra, Kashmir, about AD 800–850

The myth of Bhairava the skull-bearer

The story of Tantra begins with the Hindu god Shiva, who delights in defying social and religious boundaries. Hindu deities appear in many manifestations or forms, and Shiva's most Tantric manifestation is as the fearsome Bhairava.

According to myth, Bhairava beheaded the orthodox Hindu god Brahma, who had insulted Shiva. Bhairava wandered across cremation grounds as penance, using Brahma's skull as an alms bowl. The story reveals the tensions between orthodox and Tantric Hindu traditions, the display of Bhairava's strength symbolising the superior powers of the Tantric path.

Early Tantric practitioners imitated Bhairava's appearance and behaviour by carrying their own skull-cups and dwelling in cremation grounds in order to 'become' him. Rulers worshipped him in order to strengthen their political positions.

The rise of Tantra in India

Image caption:

The **mur**ti (icon) of Bhairava at the Kala Bhairava temple, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, northern India.

Photo © Dinodia Photos, Alamy Stock Photo, 2014

Bhairava at the Chola court

Bhairava appears naked, a wild shock of hair streaming out of his head like fire. His arched eyebrows, bulbous eyes and fangs reveal a controlled fury. A dog, one that feeds on decaying flesh, accompanies him.

This stone carving was made for a temple commissioned by a member of the Chola court in southern India. It shows how fierce Tantric deities were brought into the public and popular arena of temple worship during the medieval period. Bhairava and his skull-bearing followers would have been considered great sources of power.

Tamil Nadu, southern India (Chola dynasty),
1000–1100

British Museum

Bhairava and his followers

Here Bhairava clutches Brahma's severed head. In his other hands he holds a trident, a sword and a two-headed drum, which Shiva uses to drum the universe into creation and dissolution. Carvings such as this give us clues about the appearance of early Tantric practitioners. They included Kapalikas (Skull-bearers). Like Bhairava, they dwelt in cremation grounds, covered their bodies in ashes and carried skull-cups, which symbolised their overcoming of disgust, fear and attachment.

Karnataka, southern India (Hoysala dynasty),
about 1200–50

British Museum

Image caption:

12th-century sculpture of Bhairava on the exterior of Hoysaleswara temple, Halebidu, Karnataka, southern India.

Photo © Praveen Indramohan, Dreamstime.com

Karaikkal Ammaiyar (Mother from Karaikkal)

In Tamil Nadu, from about AD 500, a group of poet-saints called the Nayanars (Hounds of Shiva) composed songs to Shiva and Bhairava. One of them was Karaikkal Ammaiyar, shown here holding cymbals. She abandoned her role as an obedient wife to become a follower of Shiva and asked the god to replace her beauty with a demonic appearance. In rejecting her social role and taking on a transgressive one, she achieved an enlightened state. Tantric initiation was open to people from different social backgrounds, including women and those marginalised by society.

This was one of the ways in which Tantra gained popularity and challenged the hierarchical social order, or caste system, within orthodox Hinduism.

Tamil Nadu, southern India (Chola dynasty),
1250–79

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The rise of Tantra in India

**In the cemetery where you hear crackling
noises
and the white pearls fall out of the tall
bamboo,
The ghouls with frizzy hair and drooping
bodies,
shouting with wide-open mouths,
Come together and feast on the corpses.**

Karaikkal Ammaiyar, AD 500s

Chakrasamvara

Like Bhairava, the Tantric Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara holds a trident, skull-cup and drum. His matted hair is piled up on top of his head, and he appears to snarl as he tramples the Hindu god Bhairava under his left foot. According to myth, Chakrasamvara took on the appearance of Bhairava in order to lure and defeat him. This is ultimately carried out compassionately in order to destroy Bhairava's pride and convert him to Buddhism. It also reveals the rivalry between Buddhist and Hindu institutions at the time.

Eastern India (Pala dynasty), 1100s

British Museum

Bhairava's Buddhist transformation

From about the AD 600s in India, Buddhism creatively adapted Hindu Tantric deities. Bhairava became Mahakala, a protector of Buddhist teachings. He wields a sword and skull-cup and

The rise of Tantra in India

wears a garland of heads. Here, kneeling figures present offerings to Mahakala, probably the donors who commissioned the sculpture. Most surviving early Tantric Buddhist images were produced in eastern India, especially under the Pala dynasty, whose rulers funded major monastic establishments that were heavily influenced by Tantric ideas.

Bihar, eastern India (Pala dynasty), 1000–1200

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Image caption:

The archaeological site of Vikramashila monastery in Bihar, founded under the Pala dynasty.

It housed around 1,000 monks and included more than 50 temples enshrining Tantric deities.

Photo © Saurav Sen Tonandada, Wikipedia Commons, 2010

The rise of Tantra in India

Wall image caption:

Vaital Deul temple dedicated to the Tantric goddess Chamunda, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, eastern India.

Photo © Shreekant Jadhav, ephotocorp,
Alamy Stock Photo, 2009

Shakti: the many shades of feminine power

Power is central to Tantra – a power described and visualised as feminine and known as Shakti. All Tantric goddesses are seen as manifestations of Shakti, and they often have overlapping identities.

Tantra introduced many new goddesses into the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons, often ferocious and sexually charged. They challenged traditional models of womanhood as passive and docile in their intertwining of destructive power and maternal strength.

According to many Tantric texts, mortal women are natural embodiments and transmitters of Shakti. This contrasted with earlier orthodox Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which taught that the female body was an impediment to achieving enlightenment.

The rise of Tantra in India

Image caption:

Yogini temple, Hirapur, Odisha, eastern India.

Photo © Anil Dave, Alamy Stock Photo, 2007

Quote on the wall:

**O Goddess ... you abide in the form of earth.
By you who exist in the form of water, all this
universe is filled up.**

**Devi Mahatmya (Glory of the Goddess), India,
about AD 400–600**

Devi Mahatmya (Glory of the Goddess)

The earliest known text to describe the idea of Shakti – divine feminine power – is the **Devi Mahatmya**. It dates to between AD 400 and 600 and identifies Shakti with the supreme goddess Devi, also known as Durga, from whom all other goddesses emerge. In the **Devi Mahatmya**, Durga is a weapon-wielding, lion-riding warrior who must fight a series of demons that threaten the stability of the universe. She appears, armed and clutching a skull-cup, in this copy from Nepal (above). Famously, she slays the buffalo demon Mahisha, who embodies ignorance and whom the gods had been unable to defeat. She is assisted by other goddesses such as the skeletal Chamunda (below).

Shrivirabhadra (scribe), Nepal, 1669

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

Durga killing the buffalo demon Mahisha

The goddess Durga is often shown dealing a death-blow to Mahisha. Here she snaps back Mahisha's neck and impales his throat with a trident. She looks down at the demon compassionately, having released him from suffering. According to the **Devi Mahatmya** text, Durga's devotees must present offerings to her, including flesh and blood, to satisfy and renew her. In return, she grants wealth, power and freedom. Many rulers adopted her as their guardian and as a source of authority and strength.

Odisha, eastern India (Bhaumakara dynasty),
AD 736–800

British Museum

The Seven Matrikas (Mothers)

The goddess Durga defeats the buffalo demon single-handedly, but she is helped to defeat a host of other demons by the Matrikas. Victorious, they celebrate by becoming drunk on their victims' blood and dancing madly. Here they are joined by Shiva on the far left. Beside him are, from left to right: Brahmi, Maheshvari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda. Rulers harnessed the power of these warlike goddesses to ensure victories on their own battlefields.

The Matrikas are guardians, warriors and custodians of supreme knowledge. This panel was probably once placed above the entrance of a temple, to protect its central deity, who might have been Durga or Shiva.

Madhya Pradesh, central India
(Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty), AD 900–1000

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

Varahi, the sow-headed Mother

Here the Matrika Varahi sits on a buffalo and cradles a child. She is maternal but ferocious, with the ability to cause as well as prevent epidemics. She has the strength to lift the Earth with her sow's snout and tusks, her most lethal weapons in battle. She has a skull-cup and holds a large fish firmly between her teeth. Fish are described in Tantric Hindu texts as one of the five elements used in ritual, along with wine, meat, parched grain and sexual intercourse.

Madhya Pradesh, central India
(Paramara dynasty), AD 800–900

Donated by the Bridge family
British Museum

Chamunda, leader of the Matrikas

Chamunda, the skeletal leader of the Matrikas, burst from Durga's forehead as an embodiment of her battle rage. She is named after two demon-generals that she beheaded in battle, Chanda and Munda. Three of her hands hold a snake, dagger and skull-cup, while her matted hair is held in place by a skull-encrusted headband. Chamunda's ferocious appearance reflects her role as a devourer of the world, driving time's continuous cycle of destruction and recreation.

Madhya Pradesh, central India
(Paramara dynasty), 1000–1100

Donated by the Bridge family
British Museum

Chamunda dancing on a corpse

Chamunda dances after a rampage, shaking the foundations of the universe. She carries a sword of wisdom with which she destroys not only demons but also a devotee's ego – their attachment to a false sense of self. The ego is symbolised by a corpse that turns to look up at her adoringly. The corpse also suggests a cremation ground setting, inhabited by ghosts and demons, where Tantric practitioners meditated to confront their fears and overcome self-attachment.

Madhya Pradesh, central India
(Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty), AD 800–900

Donated by the Bridge family
British Museum

Object detail captions:

Chamunda's ghoulish attendants hold fragments of corpses.

A skull-cup is filled with blood, flesh or wine.

Chamunda wields a sword of wisdom to destroy ignorance.

Chamunda stands on a corpse, which represents the fragile human ego.

Chamunda holds the flayed skin of the elephant demon Gajasura, showing her victory over threats to the cosmic order.

Varahi, a fearsome, sow-headed mother goddess, feasts on the blood that drips into her skull-cup from a decapitated head.

A jackal picks at the corpse's heel, suggesting the setting of a cremation ground at night.

Temple statue of a Yogini goddess

The fangs and earrings of this Yogini goddess, made of a dismembered hand and a cobra, inspire awe and fear, while her wild hair fans out behind her in fiery waves. With her four arms, two of which are decorated with cobra armlets, she holds a skull-cup for alcohol or blood and a skull-topped staff. A broken arm probably once held sacrificial food up to her mouth. Rulers believed that Yoginis could predict the future, protect their kingdoms against disease or enemy armies and help them win new territories. Male Tantric practitioners, whether kings or holy men, aimed to placate Yoginis, while women could actually become them.

Kanchi, Tamil Nadu, southern India
(Rashtrakuta dynasty), AD 939–967

British Museum

Yoginis: shapeshifters of the sky

Yoginis appear in some of the earliest Tantric texts. Seductive yet dangerous, these goddesses could transform into women, birds, snakes, tigers or jackals as the mood took them.

Between the AD 900s and 1300s, royal patrons commissioned Yogini temples across India. These were usually circular and roofless, perhaps in order to attract the Yoginis from the sky into the sacred courtyard. During the day, the temples would have invited public worship from visitors, including offerings of flowers.

Tantric texts state that the ideal time to invoke Yoginis is at night, when initiated and experienced practitioners should make 'impure' offerings of blood, alcohol, flesh or sexual fluids to nourish them. In return Yoginis are said to grant access to their powers, from flight and immortality to control over others.

The rise of Tantra in India

Map caption:

Yogini temples and sites in India.

**Imaginative recreation of Hirapur
Yogini temple, Odisha**

Duration: 3 minutes 10 seconds

This space evokes Hirapur temple, built in eastern India in about AD 900. In the actual temple, 64 Yoginis encircle the interior walls. Many stand and dance upon animals, whose form they can take. Others balance upon corpses and dismembered heads, and some drink from skull-cups. The translations you hear come from Indian Sanskrit texts, written between AD 650 and 1200. The text recited in the original Sanskrit comes from the **Brahmayamala Tantra** (AD 650–750).

The rise of Tantra in India

Image caption:

Below and right: views of the exterior and interior of Hirapur Yogini temple, Odisha, eastern India.

Photos © (below) Francis Leroy, Hemis, Alamy Stock Photo, 2014 and (right) Anil Dave, Alamy Stock Photo, 2007

The role of sex

Erotic imagery played an important role not only in Tantra, but also in orthodox Hinduism. The creation of the universe was believed to be a product of divine sexual union, and the goals of a fulfilling and righteous life were not only duty (**dharma**), prosperity (**artha**) and liberation (**moksha**), but also pleasure and desire (**kama**).

Rather than seeking pleasure as an end in itself, Tantra harnessed the body and sensuality to unite with divinity and achieve transformational power. Tantric sexual rites were also distinguished by their transgressive nature, engaging with the taboo rather than repressing it.

Image caption:

Erotic sculpture on the exterior of a temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, central India.

Photo © Egon Bömsch, imageBROKER, Alamy Stock Photo, 2011

Erotic temple sculpture

Erotic carvings of couples (**mithuna**) were considered to bring good fortune and protection. This sculpture would have once been positioned on the wall of a Hindu temple. Two lovers fondle each other, their lips about to touch. There is nothing particularly Tantric about this sculpture. An architectural manual written in about AD 900 includes the following instruction: '**kama** is the root of the universe ... erotic sculpture panels should be mounted [in temples] in order to delight the general public.'

Rajasthan, north-west India, AD 950–1000

British Museum

Tantric temple frieze sculpture

On the left a man engages in oral sex with a woman. It probably represents the Tantric ritual of **yoni puja** (veneration of the vulva). According to orthodox Hindu codes of conduct, this was transgressive because it threatened reproductive sex and social stability. Female sexual fluids were also regarded as polluting. Tantric practitioners aimed to access the repressed power of the forbidden, transforming it into divine matter.

In Tantric texts, women are described as embodiments of Shakti, and this power could be ritually accessed through their sexual fluids. To venerate the **yoni** (vulva) was to venerate the source of creation itself. When they engaged in sexual rites, practitioners imagined themselves as divine incarnations of Shiva and Shakti.

The rise of Tantra in India

Possibly from one of the Elephanta cave temples dedicated to Shiva, Mumbai, Maharashtra, western India, 1000–1100

British Museum

Couple having sex

This image of a courtly looking couple is one of a series illustrating sexual positions. Such images were influenced by ancient texts dedicated to **kama**, such as the **Kama Sutra**, written by Vatsyayana around the AD 200s. According to this text, sexual pleasure for those living at court was a cultivated 'art'. Tantra had little to do with the pursuit of pleasure. Instead, desire was harnessed in Tantric rites to elevate this very impulse, so that sexual practice became not an end in itself but a means to achieve power and liberation.

Possibly Bikaner, Rajasthan, north-west India (Rajput), about 1690

British Museum

Tantric yoga and the royal courts

The allure of Tantra remained tantalising to those in power between the 1500s and 1800s. One form of Tantric practice that became popular was Hatha yoga ('yoga of force'), which harnessed the body as a sacred instrument.

Techniques included visualising the goddess Kundalini, an individual's source of Shakti (power), as a serpent at the base of the spine, surrounded by **chakras** (energy centres). Through breath control (**pranayama**) and complex postures (**asanas**) Kundalini rises, infusing the **chakras** with power.

The main competing powers in India at this time were the Hindu Rajput rulers of the north-west, the Muslim rulers of independent sultanates to the south and, from 1526, the Mughal rulers of an empire that came to dominate India for the next 200 years. Members of these courts commissioned vibrant paintings representing

The rise of Tantra in India

practitioners of Hatha yoga known as yogis and yoginis.

Image caption:

Raja Mandhata, ruler of the kingdom of Nurpur (Himachal Pradesh), is shown in the Hatha yoga posture of **siddhasana** (perfected pose), about 1690–1700.

Photo © Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art

Quote on the wall:

If diligent, everyone, even the young or the old or the diseased, gradually obtains success in yoga through practice.

Dattatreya Yoga Shastra

(Yoga Treatise of Dattatreya), India, 1200s

Yogi with chakras

Awakening the goddess Kundalini is the ultimate goal of Hatha yoga. In this painting a yogi experiences bliss as Kundalini prepares to move upwards through the **chakras**. As she comes into contact with each deity within, she infuses them with power, enabling the yogi to reach higher spiritual planes. At the crown of the head resides the god Shiva, embodying pure consciousness. They unite and release **amrita** (nectar of immortality), enacting a sexual rite within the yogi's own body. Their union triggers enlightenment and grants access to various powers, from long life to invulnerability.

Rajasthan, north-west India (Rajput), early 1800s

Wellcome Collection, London

Chakras and the rising Kundalini

Here, a scroll in seven parts shows a yogic body with only the **chakras** and accompanying symbols visible. These are linked by a golden channel (**nadi**) running parallel to the spine. It recreates an ascent from the subterranean world of the unconscious, through the terrestrial world of the yogic body, leading to self-deification and identification with the universe in the heavenly world beyond the last **chakra**. The Sanskrit inscriptions reveal this to be a yogic manual, possibly commissioned to support a courtly patron's own practice.

Rajasthan, north-west India (Rajput), 1800–20

National Museum, New Delhi (reproduction)

Object detail captions:

Reading from bottom left: chakras in the yogic body, each in the form of a lotus and with a deity at its centre.

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1. **Cosmic ocean:** linked to the unconscious and inhabited by the king of the serpents.
2. **Area between the anus and genitals: chakra** with the elephant-headed god Ganesh, remover of obstacles.
3. **Genital area: chakra** with Brahma, god of creation.
4. **Base of the spine:** Kundalini coiled and ready to ascend through the **chakras** to the cranium.
5. **Solar plexus: chakra** with Vishnu, god of preservation.
6. **Heart: chakra** with Shiva, god of destruction.
7. **Between the eyebrows:** the junction of the yogic body's three channels.

8. **Forehead:** a white lotus associated with the moon god Chandra.

9. **Kamadhenu:** the nectar of immortality flows from this mythical beast's udders.

10. **Above the forehead: chakra** inhabited by a sacred swan that grants contemplation.

11. **Fish:** symbolising the breath, responsible for setting Kundalini free.

12. **Virat, the Cosmic Being:** within a **chakra** that grants creative power.

13. **Crown of the head: chakra** with Shiva and Shakti, representing consciousness and creative force.

14. **The 'supreme void':**
a state of ultimate liberation that frees the yogi or yogini from the cycle of rebirth.

The rise of Tantra in India

A ruler visits Nath yogis

The Tantric Nath order, founded around the 1100s, popularised Hatha yoga. Naths are shown wearing distinctive cloaks and hats, as well as antelope horns, and are often accompanied by dogs – Bhairava’s companions. Here some make **bhang**, a hallucinogenic preparation made from cannabis, consumed to achieve transcendent states. Naths held political sway with rulers, who often consulted them. Mughal emperors gave land rights to the Naths of Jakhbar in the Punjab in exchange for alchemical medicines promising long life.

Rajasthan, north-west India (Rajput), 1700–1800

British Museum

Nath yogis and alchemy

Naths were famous for practising alchemy using mercury, including it in concoctions that promised long life. This Mughal painting reflects the awe that mercury inspired, with its image of a beautiful woman on horseback luring the silvery liquid from a well. This refers to the belief that mercury was Shiva's seminal fluid, which had fallen to earth at various places and could be captured. Shiva's semen was seen as a major source of his power, and it was believed that Naths were able to harness and distil it into highly valued consumable preparations.

Northern India (Mughal), about 1750

British Museum

Hatha yoga album

This album contains illustrations of Hatha yoga postures, including ones designed to preserve the nectar of immortality (**amrita**) in the skull, which was believed to drip away with age. While Shiva is associated with seminal fluid in the skull, the goddess Kundalini is associated with menstrual and generative fluid at the base of the spine. The goal of Hatha yoga is to direct these fluids, using the breath, until their union at the crown of the head transforms and deifies them, releasing **amrita**.

Rajasthan, north-west India (Rajput), 1800–20

The British Library

Image caption:

Another folio in this album shows the upside-down **tapkara asana** (ascetic's posture), which aims to preserve **amrita** at the crown of the head to prolong life.

Photo © Courtesy of the British Library

The rise of Tantra in India

Ten yogis

Ten yogis are shown performing various postures and ascetic practices to empower the body and expand the mind. One levitates off the ground, a particular goal of Hatha yoga. He pinches his nose to control his breath. Three others balance and hang upside down. These are physical techniques designed to prolong life by preserving **amrita** (nectar of immortality) in the skull to avoid it dripping down the body. The painting was probably made for a European patron with an interest in yogic practices.

Tamil Nadu, southern India, about 1820

British Museum

Sufi mystic with a snake-headed staff

Naths freely interacted and exchanged ideas with others, regardless of religion or caste. This included followers of Sufism (Islamic mysticism), who were present in India from about the 1100s. The appearance of this Sufi mystic echoes that of a wandering yogi. Sufis sought direct and personal experience of God (Allah), using methods designed to obliterate the self or ego, including the recitation of His many names in Arabic. This painting was executed during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), who consulted both Sufis and Nath yogis.

Northern India (Mughal), about 1570

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

A Sufi ascetic or Nath yogi (right)

Many courtly paintings demonstrate a blurring of Sufi–yogi identities. This image of an ascetic may represent a Nath yogi because of the presence of the dog and the pieces of cloth hanging on a strip across his shoulders, an attribute found in other paintings of Nathas. However, it may equally depict a Sufi mystic.

Northern India (Mughal), late 1600s

From Charles Ricketts
British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

A man and woman sharing wine (far right)

A man with his legs bound with a meditation band wears a patchwork cloak (often associated with Sufis), and sits on a tiger skin (associated with the god Shiva). Courtly paintings of both yogis and Sufis during this period show them with these attributes. The man is joined by a richly dressed woman who offers him a cup of wine. The consumption of wine was usually prohibited within mainstream Islam. However, its intoxicating properties were used as metaphors in Persian Sufi poetry to describe the annihilation of the ego and union with the divine.

Deccan, south-west India (Sultanate), late 1600s

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

Yoginis as gurus

Tantric rituals are considered dangerous if carried out incorrectly and so require initiation and guidance from a guru. One **Tantra**, written in about 1600, explains that because women are embodiments of Shakti, 'all are said to be gurus'. Here a noblewoman has travelled a great distance to visit two Nath yoginis to seek initiation or guidance. Abandoning courtly life to pursue a self-disciplined path towards enlightenment was a popular subject in South Asian art and literature.

Northern India (Mughal), about 175

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

A yogini with two disciples

A yogini sits on a tiger skin outside her hut, holding 'eyes of Shiva' (**rudraksha**) beads.

Beside her is a **linga** – a phallic symbol of the god. Her blue skin suggests that she is covered in ashes, and she has matted hair. Two women come seeking guidance and make an offering of flowers. The painting's border contains images of birds, deer, lions, palaces and courtiers, suggesting the meeting of two worlds – the natural, spiritual world of the yogini and the courtly, secular world of the disciples.

Northern India (Mughal), about 1750

British Museum

A yogini walking through a landscape

Yoginis were sometimes shown as mediators of supernatural power, blurring the line between goddesses and mortal women. Here, a bejewelled, ash-covered yogini carries a peacock-feather fan and on her shoulder is a parrot, associated with secrecy. Paintings of yoginis were popular during the reign of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II, the Sultan of Bijapur, who saw them as agents of occult power.

Deccan, south-west India (Bijapur Sultanate),
about 1603–27

From Percival Chater Manuk and Miss G.M. Coles
British Museum

Image caption:

Another Sultanate painting of an ash-covered yogini made during 'Adil Shah II's reign shows her in shimmering finery talking to a mynah bird.

Photo © Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library

Asavari Ragini

A yogini mesmerises snakes, illustrating a classical Indian melody designed to capture the mood of a woman driven to asceticism and longing for her beloved. For a Muslim audience, the figures of lover and beloved could symbolise the worshipper and God, according to the Sufi concept of '**ishq**, or 'divine, fervent love'. In courtly paintings, yoginis assumed different roles, from agents of power to figures of romantic longing. They transcended conventional images of womanhood – as wife, mother or lover.

Deccan, south-west India (probably Hyderabad),
about 1740

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

The goddess Bhairavi with Shiva by the artist Payag (active about 1595–1655)

In this visionary depiction of a Tantric cremation ground, the goddess Bhairavi (Bhairava's female counterpart) sits cross-legged on a corpse, its head violently wrenched off. Blood-red and cackling, she wears a skirt of skulls and has horns in the shape of spearheads. Shiva sits before her as a devotee, or it might be a mortal yogi following the god's example. Surrounding the pair are fires, burning flesh, human bones and dismembered body parts strewn about and picked at by jackals. The painting may have been presented as a courtly gift from the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to the Rajput ruler Maharana Jagat Singh.

Northern India (Mughal), about 1630–35

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Bhairava as the god of desire

The god Shiva in his manifestation as Bhairava appears in many courtly paintings. Here he rides a green parrot that may be Shuka, the vehicle of the god of desire, Kama. Kama is typically depicted with red skin, which may explain why Bhairava is that colour here – he has absorbed Kama's eroticism, resulting in a Tantric fusion of ascetic, macabre and erotic qualities. Indeed, despite Shiva's ascetic nature, Kama is in many respects his alter ego.

Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, north-west India
(Rajput), about 1790–1800

British Museum

Shiva intoxicated with bhang (right)

Many yogis and yoginis consumed **bhang**, made from cannabis, to imitate Shiva, whose divine madness was understood as an intoxication from the drug. Shiva's deliberately disobedient behaviour, exceeding the boundaries of orthodox respectability, informed his identity as a Tantric god. Here his wife Parvati pours him a cup of **bhang** as he leans back, already pleasantly intoxicated. He is shown as a naked yogi with matted hair, a serpent winding itself around his chest. Shiva and Parvati are joined by their sons, Skanda and the elephant-headed Ganesha.

Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, north-west India
(Rajput), about 1775–1800

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

Nath yoginis (far right)

The consumption of **bhang** among yogis and yoginis was a popular subject in courtly painting, represented to allude poetically to its euphoric effects and also sometimes caricatured to suggest the ascetics' stupor. Here two Nath yoginis are shown in states of intoxication. One smokes a **huqqa** (water-pipe) with which she may be inhaling **bhang**, opium or tobacco through scented water. The yogini next to her appears to lurch over, already inebriated.

Northern India (Mughal), 1700s

British Museum

Bhairava with two Matrikas

These two paintings may have functioned as aids to meditation, perhaps commissioned by a patron wishing to identify with Bhairava. Ash-covered Bhairava is shown in an idyllic landscape rather than his usual cremation ground setting. In one, he is joined by the sow-headed goddess Varahi. At first glance, the scene appears romantic until closer inspection reveals grisly details, such as the corpse, skull-cup and thighbone Bhairava holds in three of his hands. In the second image he appears riding an elephant accompanied by the goddess Indrani.

Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, north-west India
(Rajput), about 1790–1800

British Museum

The rise of Tantra in India

Image caption:

Raja Sidh Sen of Mandi, India, 1725, is shown here as Shiva incarnate. The ultimate aim of a Tantric practitioner was to 'become' a deity.

Photo © Museum of Fine Arts Boston,
Keith Mcleod Fund, 2001

The spread of Tantra across Asia

From about AD 600, eastern India was a centre for Tantric Buddhism, known as Vajrayana (Path of the Thunderbolt). Monasteries promoted the study and teaching of the **Tantras**, and attracted scholars, students and pilgrims from across Asia.

Travellers returned home with sculptures, texts and ritual objects, helping to spread Tantric Buddhist teaching via pilgrimage, trade and diplomatic networks. Between the 1000s and 1300s, several schools of Vajrayana thought and practice developed in Tibet, including the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and later Gelug orders. They founded major monasteries, which became the new political players of Tibet, often rivalling one another for influence.

As Buddhism declined in India, partly as a result of its loss of patronage with the rise of Tantric Hinduism, it took on a new life across the rest of Asia.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Image captions left to right:

Statue of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) at the Royal Bhutan monastery, Bodhgaya, Bihar, eastern India.

Photo © Urs Schweitzer, imageBROKER, Alamy Stock Photo, 2007

A Tibetan monk holds two Vajrayana Buddhist ritual instruments, a **vajra** (thunderbolt sceptre) and **ghanta** (bell).

Photo © Thomas Boehm, agefotostock, Alamy Stock Photo, 2009

Map caption:

The spread of Tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana) across Asia, along with other Buddhist traditions.

Quote on the wall:

There is no being that is not enlightened, if it but knows its own true nature.

Hevajra Tantra, India, AD 700–900

The spread of Tantra across Asia

1

Padmasambhava (Lotus Born)

Padmasambhava, one of the earliest Tantric masters to bring Vajrayana teachings from India to Tibet, was invited to visit by King Tri Songdetsen and the monk Shantarakshita in the AD 770s.

He was asked to help complete the building of Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, Samye, which was being disrupted by local spirits. According to legend, he subdued and converted them to Buddhism. In AD 779, Tri Songdetsen adopted Buddhism, especially in its Vajrayana form, as Tibet's state religion. Here, Padmasambhava holds a **vajra** (thunderbolt sceptre) and skull-cup.

Tibet, 1500–1700

British Museum

2

Shiva as Maheshvara (Great Lord)

Maheshvara was adopted as a wrathful protector deity in Tantric Buddhism. He encompasses ferocity (left), feminine power (right) and Shiva himself (centre), in whom all opposites are reconciled. Maheshvara was believed to protect inhabitants from external threats, including epidemics and attacks. This wooden panel was found in a dwelling once inhabited by Buddhist monks in the fortress town of Dandan Oilik in the kingdom of Khotan (north-west China), on a Silk Road trading route.

Dandan Oilik, Khotan, north-west China,
AD 600–800

British Museum

3

Drakpa Gyaltzen (1147–1216)

Tantric gurus in Tibet are known as lamas. Drakpa Gyaltzen was a lama and one of the heads of the Sakya order. In one hand he holds a **vajra** (thunderbolt sceptre) – a Tantric symbol of the unbreakable force of the enlightened state. He also holds a **ghanta** (bell), as a sign that he is embodying the god Vajradhara, who is traditionally shown wielding the instruments in this way. In doing so, Drakpa Gyaltzen seeks to identify his own body, speech and mind with those of Vajradhara.

Tibet or Mustang, Nepal, 1500–1600

Donated by J.N. Schmitt and Mareta Meade
British Museum

4

Thunderbolt sceptre (vajra) and bell (ghanta)

The **vajra** and **ghanta** are important Vajrayana ritual instruments. The **ghanta's** ringing represents the rise of form, while its fading into silence evokes **shunyata** (emptiness). **Shunyata** refers to the concept that all material things are temporary, unfixed and essentially 'empty'. This does not imply that they do not exist, but that they lack autonomy and that everything is instead interconnected. From a Tantric perspective, it implies a fluid world that can be transformed through practice.

Tibet, 1800–1900

Bequeathed by Harry Geoffrey Beasley
British Museum

The divine madness of the Mahasiddhas

The Mahasiddhas (Great Accomplished Ones) were enlightened Tantric masters, who played an important role in the spread of Vajrayana teachings from India to the Himalayas from about AD 700. Their life stories are filled with miraculous events and they became especially popular in Tibet. Many engaged in sexual rites and carried out practices involving impure substances in cremation ground settings. Their goal was to confront limiting emotions such as attachment, fear and disgust. Most are shown as semi-naked and shaggy-haired yogis. Here the Mahasiddha Ananta is shown carrying a skull-cup and wearing human bone ornaments to imitate Tantric deities. He is surrounded by five other Mahasiddhas.

Tibet, 1700–1800

British Museum

The Mahasiddha Saraha

Tibetan paintings on fabric are known as **thangkas**. This one is part of a set of Mahasiddha **thangkas** that may once have hung in a monastic assembly hall. At its centre is Saraha, born in eastern India in the AD 700s. He stressed the importance of the body as a channel to enlightenment: 'Never have I seen a place of pilgrimage and an abode of bliss like my body.' He holds an arrow, symbolic of single-minded concentration and a reference to his guru, who was a female arrow-smith.

Tibet, 1700–1800

British Museum

Image caption:

On the reverse of this **thangka** is the outline of a stupa, a Buddhist shrine as well as a symbol of an enlightened mind. Handprints have been made by a senior lama blessing the **thangka**.

Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

The Mahasiddha Jalandhara

Born around the AD 800s, the Mahasiddha Jalandhara became disillusioned with the endless cycle of death and rebirth (**samsara**). He retreated from society to meditate in cremation grounds and eventually achieved a realisation of the true nature of reality as **shunya** (empty) or interconnected. His thumbs and forefingers create a triangle, evoking the flame-like goddess Chandali (the Buddhist equivalent of Kundalini), who blazes upwards towards the head when released through Tantric yoga. He tramples a corpse symbolising the ego.

Tibet, 1500–1600

The Rubin Museum of Art, New York

Miracles at the Ming court

In 1407 the Fifth Karmapa Dezhin Shegpa, head of the Kagyu Buddhist order in Tibet, visited the Chinese Yongle emperor at his court in Nanjing and became his guru. The emperor presented the Karmapa with this Tantric sceptre (**khatvanga**) – a ceremonial weapon for conquering inner obstacles. It is crowned with three heads: one freshly severed, one decomposing, and a skull. They symbolise impermanence as well as the three ascending states of Buddhahood, from mortal to heavenly and transcendent.

Beijing, China, about 1403–7

British Museum

Image caption:

While in Nanjing, the Karmapa is said to have triggered a series of miraculous displays in the sky, as illustrated in this detail from a 1407 handscroll from the Tibet Museum in Lhasa.

Photo © Tibet Museum, Lhasa

Divine union

According to Vajrayana teachings, the qualities of wisdom (**prajna**) and compassion (**karuna**) must be cultivated on the path to enlightenment.

Tantric texts and images represent these qualities as a goddess (wisdom) and a god (compassion) in sexual union. In Tibet this is known as **yab-yum**, meaning 'father-mother'.

Devata (Deity) yoga is a Vajrayana practice that involves visualising and fully internalising these deities in union within the body, with the aim of embodying their supreme qualities. This practice inspired the creation of **yab-yum** images, which are used to support meditation.

Image caption:

Chakrasamvara in union with Vajrayogini,
Stakna monastery, Ladakh, north-west India.

Photo © Lopamudra Barman, Flickr, 2018

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Quote on the wall:

Thus, attain enlightenment by applying oneself most diligently to the activities of erotic play.

Chakrasamvara (Wheel of Bliss) Tantra, India, about AD 700–800

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Chakrasamvara (Wheel of Bliss) in union with the goddess Vajrayogini (Thunderbolt Yogini)

The **Chakrasamvara Tantra**, composed around the AD 700s, teaches visualisations and yogic techniques for achieving enlightenment. The text inspired visual representations of its teachings such as this Tibetan **thangka** showing two deities embracing. Their red-rimmed, wild eyes and laughing, fanged mouths suggest their immense power. They are deities to be adored as well as emulated. The image evokes the interplay of feminine (wisdom) and masculine (compassion) principles that must be internalised. Both deities hold up weapons with which they destroy misplaced pride, attachment, anger, ignorance and worldly desire.

Tibet, 1700–1800

British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

1

Raktayamari (Red Enemy of Yama) in union with Vajravetali (Thunderbolt Zombie)

Here, two deities conquer the repetitive cycle of rebirth by trampling Yama, the Hindu god of death. **Yab-yum** images such as this were commissioned to aid visualisations during the Tantric practice of Devata yoga. The practitioner internalises the deities and recognises in themselves both the female and male principles (representing wisdom and compassion), merging the two within their own body. Emptied of ego, the practitioner achieves self-deification.

Tibet, 1500–1700

British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

2

Guhyasamaja (Secret Assembly) in union with the goddess Sparshavajri (Thunderbolt Touch)

The **Guhyasamaja Tantra**, from the AD 700s, visualises a series of deities in sexual union. Its teachings are described as revealed by the Buddha himself from within the vaginas of goddesses. The text pronounces that engagement with, rather than repression of, desire is necessary on the path towards enlightenment, advocating the practice of sexual rites with a partner. Both deities here carry a sword and arrows with which to defeat ignorance and illusion.

Tibet, 1700–1800

From William M. Laffan
British Museum

3

**Hevajra (Hey! Thunderbolt) in union
with Nairatmya (Without Self)**

Hevajra is in union with Nairatmya, whose name implies her supreme quality of **shunyata** (emptiness). In his left hands, Hevajra holds skull-cups containing the Hindu gods of earth, water, fire, air, the moon, the sun, death and wealth. On the right his skull-cups contain animals symbolising Dikpalas, or the eight Guardians of the Cardinal Directions (north, south, east and west). They all look to Hevajra, who has mastery over each of them – a mastery that a Tantric practitioner seeks to mirror.

Tibet or Nepal, 1600–1700

From Louis Magrath King
British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

4

Copy of the Hevajra Tantra

The **Hevajra Tantra** dates to the late AD 800s and describes the benefits of engaging in sexual rites in order to elevate and transcend desire itself. On this page are the words: 'by passion the world is bound; by passion too it is released.' Sexual rites should not be 'taught for the sake of enjoyment, but for the examination of one's own thought, whether the mind is steady or wavering.' Even monks and nuns could engage with this method by internalising deities in union through visualisation.

Bengal, eastern India, 1400–1600

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

5

Mortal Tantric practitioners

These figures show Tantric practitioners in sexual union, having internalised the qualities of wisdom and compassion. Sexual yoga was carried out by advanced practitioners in a state of detached, meditative awareness in order to transform emotions such as lust into enlightened states. In the **Chandamaharoshana Tantra** (AD 800–1000), the goddess Vajrayogini reveals that all women are her embodiments and must be worshipped through offerings as well as sexual rites. This echoes the Tantric Hindu concept of Shakti.

Nepal, 1700–1900

From William M. Laffan
British Museum

Thangka with four mandalas

A **mandala** is a circular diagram showing deities and their celestial surroundings. Geometric forms capture their essence. Originating in India, **mandalas** are conceived as sacred ritual spaces, and may be traced on the ground to consecrate an area and invoke deities before an important ritual, such as Tantric initiation. During Devata yoga visualisation, a practitioner imagines entering a **mandala** as though it were a palace, crossing over its outer band and entering through one of the four doors representing north, south, east and west. Each door is protected by guardian deities. The practitioner continues until they encounter the central deity with whom they seek to identify, ultimately merging with them and taking their place at the centre of the **mandala**.

Tibet, 1500–1550

British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Object detail captions:

A row of Mahasiddhas (Great Accomplished Ones), enlightened Tantric masters.

Guardian deities around the outside of the *mandalas* offer protection.

Outer ring marking the point between the sacred and worldly realms, with charnel ground scenes, including corpses, scavenging animals and Tantric practitioners.

Four doors represent north, south, east and west.

At the centre of the *mandalas*, the Tantric god Hevajra and the goddess Nairatmya are shown in sexual union.

Dakinis, fearsome and protective goddesses, dance jubilantly around the deities.

Lamas associated with the Sakya order.

They reveal that this *thangka* was commissioned by a Sakya monastery in Tibet.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Quote on the wall:

**Terrifying with anger,
which is in fact displayed
out of compassion.**

**Abhidhanottara (Highest Union) Tantra, Nepal,
1100s**

Enlightened protectors

In Tibet, Nepal and Japan, a pantheon of Tantric Buddhist deities thrived. These gods and goddesses appeared ferocious, but for sacred ends.

Dakinis, like Yoginis in Tantric Hinduism, are sky-bound goddesses to be feared as well as venerated. Dharmapalas (Protectors of the Dharma – Buddhist teachings) are wrathful wisdom deities, who act as guides on the Vajrayana path. Many were deities of non-Buddhist origin, such as Hindu or Bön (Tibet's indigenous religious tradition), who were understood to have converted to Buddhism.

Their goal is to free all beings from their demonic enemies, which are often symbols of inner spiritual obstacles. To conquer such destructive forces requires the same weapons and tactics as those used by the enemy – to be 'fearful to fear itself'.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Image caption:

Contemporary rock painting of two Dharmapalas, Yama Dharmaraja and Mahakala, near Sera Monastery, Lhasa.

Photo © Angelo Cavalli, AGF Srl, Alamy Stock Photo

The spread of Tantra across Asia

1

Naro Dakini and the Lords of the Charnel Ground

Vajrayogini, the goddess shown here, is both a ferocious Dakini and a meditational deity. In this lunging form, red and blazing, she is said to have appeared to the Mahasiddha Naropa in a vision, giving her the name Naro Dakini. The two dancing skeletal figures are the Lords of the Charnel Ground, who protect those engaged in Tantric practice and remind us that nothing is permanent, encouraging freedom from attachment.

Tibet, 1700–1900

Donated by J.N. Schmitt and Mareta Meade
British Museum

2

Becoming Naro Dakini

The Buddhist deity Naro Dakini tramples the Hindu gods Bhairava and Chamunda. She looks up towards her raised hand, her open mouth about to taste the blood pouring out of a (now missing) skull-cup, transformed into an elixir of enlightenment. Her right hand would have once held a knife for chopping up negative internal obstacles such as attachments.

Tantric texts describe rituals in which a Tantric practitioner could internalise Naro Dakini by imitating her nature and appearance. They included rites that involved covering the body with real or imagined taboo substances (such as blood and sexual fluids mixed with honey) in order to transcend the apparent contradiction of opposites such as pure and impure.

The ultimate goal is to dissolve the ego and be reborn as the goddess herself.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Tibet, 1800–1900

From Louis Magrath King
British Museum

3

Three-dimensional ritual diagram (yantra)

At the top of this **yantra** the Dakini Vajrayogini dances within an upside-down triangle, a symbol of the **yoni** (vulva) and creative power. **Yantras** are used to invoke deities during Tantric practice, and in rites designed to fulfil spiritual and worldly ambitions. Vajrayogini is positioned at the highest point, representing the cosmic centre from which all things constantly arise and dissolve. The radiating rings contain symbols that suggest Vajrayogini's cremation ground realm, including skulls, pyres, jackals and vultures.

Nepal, 1600–1800

Donated by J.N. Schmitt and Mareta Meade
British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Dakini-ten and Tantra in Japan

Japan's dominant belief system was Shinto, based on the worship of nature deities known as **kami**. In the early AD 800s, a Japanese monk named Kukai brought Vajrayana teachings from China to Japan and established the Shingon (mantra or 'true word') tradition.

The Shinto **kami** Inari merged with the Tantric figure of a Dakini and became Dakini-ten (Dakini-deity). She is often shown riding a fox, here carried aloft by dragons. She holds a sword with a **vajra** handle and flaming wish-fulfilling jewels.

As Inari was a **kami** of the rice harvest, Dakini-ten became associated with fertility, and also with worldly success and power. She was often called upon in imperial ceremonies to promote the legitimacy of Japan's emperors.

Japan, 1336–92

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Ritual dagger with Vajrakilaya in union with Dipta Chakra

This protective ritual dagger is known in Sanskrit as a **kila** (stake), or in Tibetan as a **phurbu**. It embodies the wrathful deity Vajrakilaya, here embracing his wisdom partner Dipta Chakra. The three sides of the blade symbolise the destruction of ignorance, hatred and greed. The dagger is decorated with serpents (**nagas**) – underworld spirits who control the rain and bodies of water. **Kilas** are still often used to affect the weather and purify the land, which sometimes involves bringing the **nagas** under control.

Tibet, 1700–1900

Donated by Col. John Valentine Salvage
British Museum

Ritual dagger in the form of the Dharmapala Hayagriva

A **kila** is wielded to destroy or neutralise obstacles that might obstruct Tantric practice, both internal and external. Groups of **kilas** might also be planted to form a shield round the practitioner. Here the dagger takes the form of Dharmapala Hayagriva, identifiable by his horse's head, who subdues the demonic roots of obstacles with the piercing sound of his neigh. The dagger is made of rock crystal, believed to be a powerful material because of its translucence – a symbol of purity. The god's eyes are inlaid with ruby.

Tibet or Nepal, 1700–1900

Donated by J.N. Schmitt and Mareta Meade
British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Yama Dharmaraja

Yama Dharmaraja is the buffalo-headed Lord of Death and an important Dharmapala (Protector of Buddhist teachings). He is called upon to pacify, drive away and kill enemies, including diseases, natural disasters and spiritual obstacles. This **thangka** may have hung in a monastic chapel. Here Yama wields a skull-topped club and noose, and balances on a buffalo that tramples a human, representing the ego. The corpse is a reminder of the practitioner's own limited sense of self, which is abandoned when they 'become' the deity that conquers it.

Tibet, 1700–1800

Donated by Louis C.G. Clarke
British Museum

Ichikawa Danjuro V as the Dharmapala Fudo Myo-o, 1780

By Katsukawa Shunsho (1726–1793)

Danjuro V was a Japanese actor, shown in this print playing the role of the fearsome Dharmapala Fudo Myo-o on stage, just as his father and grandfather had done before him. All male heirs in his family were believed to embody Fudo Myo-o, who manifested himself through them during theatrical performances. Here Danjuro carries Fudo's sword for cutting through illusion and a rope that binds the enemies of the Dharma. In Japan, as elsewhere, Dharmapalas were called on by rulers to protect the realm.

British Museum

Human remains in Tantric Buddhist practice

ནང་པའི་གསང་སྐྱབས་ཀྱི་ཉམས་ལེན་ནང་མའི་ཕུང་
པོའམ་བམ་ལོ།

The use of human remains in Tantric Buddhist practice is a reminder of the impermanence of the body and the importance of overcoming attachment to the idea of a fixed self. Human remains draw power from the vital force of the deceased person, depending on their status, how spiritually advanced they were or the context of their death. The remains of senior lamas who had achieved enlightened states are regarded as particularly powerful in certain texts. Tibetan practitioners often left their skulls and other bones after their death to a lama and to monasteries in order to gain spiritual merit in the next life.

This section of the exhibition has been developed in consultation with members of the Tibetan community, practitioners and scholars of Tibetan

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Buddhism. Titles of objects are given in Tibetan as well as English.

Image caption:

A Tibetan monk, conducts the annual Six Dharmas of Naropa Ceremony using a **kapala** (skull-cup).

Photo © Eleanor Moseman, www.eleanormoseman.com, 2019

Audio recordings:

Human remains in Tibetan Buddhism today

Members of the Tibetan community discuss their personal perspectives on, and experiences of, Tantra, the use of human remains in Tibetan Buddhism and what these objects mean to them.

1

Venerable Geshe Lhakdor, director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, former religious assistant and translator to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, recorded in India earlier this year discussing the nature of impermanence in Buddhist thought.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

2

Lochoe and Dhondup Samten, wife and husband, members of the lay Tibetan Buddhist community in London.

3

Tenzin Choephel, a former member of a Buddhist monastery and the current instructor of Tibetan language at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

4

Thupten Kelsang, a scholar at Oxford University focusing on Tibetan collections in museums across the UK.

Scan the QR code to listen to these recordings and read the transcripts.

You can also listen at
www.britishmuseum.org/tantra-content

1

Ekajata Rakshasi holding a skull-cup

གཞོན་སྐྱོན་རལ་པ་གཅིག་པས་མིའི་ཐོད་པ་བཟུང་བ།

A skull-cup (**kapala** in Sanskrit) appears as a ritual vessel in many Tantric images of deities, often shown overflowing with blood. Here the divine protector Ekajata Rakshasi brandishes a knife with which to cut through the entrails and flesh of demonic forces such as pride and jealousy. Grinding and blending these in her blood-filled skull-cup, she transforms them into a nectar of enlightenment for her devotees, her fury no match for any obstacles to spiritual awakening.

Tibet, 1800–1900

Bequeathed by Harry Geoffrey Beasley
British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

2

Engraved skull-cup with mantras

ཀོས་རིགས་ཅན་གྱི་མིའི་ཐོད་པར་གཟུངས་སྐྱགས་དང་ལྡན་པ།

In Tantric practice human skull-cups (**kapalas**) are important ritual objects. This one is inscribed inside with mantras in Tibetan. It appears to have been ritually sealed and stored away, perhaps to subdue a negative force. At some point before it was given to the British Museum, the **kapala** was forced open, damaging the rim. As an open skull-cup should never be empty, this one is displayed with grains of rice inside.

Tibet, 1800–1900

From Edward Gilbertson
British Museum

3

Skull-cup with brass base and cover

རག་གི་ཞབས་དང་ཁེབས་ཅན་གྱི་མི་ཐོད་སྐྱམ་པོ། (ཀ་པ་ལ་)

Skull-cups are often ornamented with metal bases and covers. This one may have been used for an ‘inner offering’ rite, during which the practitioner visualises the skull as their own severed head, into which they pour their internal poison-obstacles, such as ‘self-grasping’. The practitioner then imagines the contents brought to boiling point and transformed into a nectar of enlightenment.

As part of the ritual, the consecrated liquid is drunk from the skull-cup, often in the form of alcohol or tea. The ritual serves to unlock the practitioner from attachment to a fixed sense of self and the cravings that result from it.

Tibet, 1800–1900

British Museum

4

Machig Labdron (1055–1149)

མ་གཅིག་ལབ་སྐྱོན་ (1055–1149)

Machig Labdron was a renowned Tibetan Tantric master, shown here wearing an apron made of human bone. She is famous for popularising a practice known as **Chöd** ('cut off'), in which a practitioner visualises their body, and by extension the ego, being dissected and presented to divine spirits as an offering. She advised carrying out **Chöd** at night in frightening places such as charnel grounds, in order to confront and conquer fear. The goal of this practice is to sever and dismember all ties to the idea of a fixed self, which is responsible for generating the feelings of fear and desire, attraction and aversion.

Kham Province, Tibet, 1800–1900

The Rubin Museum of Art, New York

5

Two-headed drum (**damaru**) and trumpet (**kangling**)

མགོ་གཉིས་ལྡན་གྱི་ཏ་མ་རུ་དང་རྐང་གླིང།

The sounds of the **damaru** and **kangling** invite divine and demonic spirits to devour a practitioner's body during the **Chöd** ritual. The trumpet is made from a human thighbone and produces a howling sound. The drum consists of the tops of two severed skulls. The practitioner holds it in the right hand, twisting the wrist back and forth to swing a pair of attached leather clappers. This creates a rhythmic beat, the fading sound symbolising the impermanent nature of all things.

Tibet, 1800–1900

British Museum

Quote on the wall:

བདེ་སྲིད་ཀྱི་ཐབས་ལམ་ལ་བརྟེན་ནས་སྤང་ལ་ཐར་
པ་རྗེད་དགའ། དེ་ལས་འཇིགས་སྤང་གི་གནས་དང་རི་
ཁོང་དུ་སློམ་སྐྱབ་ཀྱི་བྱ་བར་གཞོལ་བར་ལེགས།
མ་གཅིག་ལ་བསྐྱོན་ (1055–1149)

One cannot attain liberation by means of soothing and pleasing antidotes. Wander in grisly places and mountain retreats...

Machig Labdron, Tibet, 1055–1149

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Audio recordings:

The **Chöd** ritual and human remains

1

Lama Rinzin, a respected Tibetan monk from the Kagyu tradition based in Sheffield, performs an abbreviated version of the **Chöd** ritual using a thighbone trumpet and drum. These rituals can be extended to last hours or even days.

2

Ayesha Fuentes, a scholar of Tibetan human remains at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, discusses the ritual of **Chöd** (pronounced 'Chuh').

Lama Rinzin playing a **kangling** (thighbone trumpet) and **damaru** (drum).

Photo © the Trustees of the British Museum

Scan the QR code to listen to these recordings and read the transcripts.

The spread of Tantra across Asia

You can also listen at

www.britishmuseum.org/tantra-content

Bone apron (rus gyan)

རུས་རྒྱ་སྤྱོད་རུས་སྐྱམ་གྱི་འོག་པག།

Human bone aprons are worn by Tibetan monks and lamas during important ceremonies and public festivals. This includes masked dances known as **Cham**, performed in Tibetan and Himalayan monasteries. Dancers re-enact stories such as the arrival of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet and the defeat of demonic forces by the Mahasiddhas. Its purpose is to generate merit to all those watching and to expel negative obstacles. This intricate apron is decorated with images of Dakinis, Dharmapalas and **yab-yum** deities.

Tibet, 1800–1900

British Museum

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Image caption:

The bone apron on display was acquired by John Claude White, a civil servant in colonial India. In 1891 he visited Talung Monastery in Sikkim, India, where he asked lamas to pose for him, wearing bone aprons (pictured). It is possible he acquired it on this or a similar trip. He was later part of the British military invasion of Tibet (1903–4). Colonial officials often misunderstood Tantric traditions such as **Cham**, associating them with black magic and ‘devil-dancing’. Such stereotyping is explored further in the next section of the exhibition.

Photo © National Geographic Image Collection,
Alamy Stock Photo, 1917

The spread of Tantra across Asia

Wall image caption:

A monk assumes the identity of a Dharmapala during a masked Cham dance, wearing a **rus gyan** (bone apron). Lamayuru monastery, Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Photo © Antonio Ciufu, Alamy Stock Photo, 2016

Tantra and revolution in colonial India

Bengal in eastern India was an early Tantric centre as well as the nucleus of British rule during the colonial period. British influence began through trade, in particular with the growing dominance of the East India Company. By the 1750s the Company had become a military force. Following an uprising in 1857, power was transferred to the British government.

Tantra informed the way many Christian missionaries and colonial officials imagined India, as a subcontinent corrupted by black magic and sexual depravity. Their misconceptions were embodied by the seemingly demonic figure of the Tantric goddess Kali, who was widely worshipped in Bengal.

Bengali revolutionaries harnessed Kali's radical potential, playing on British anxiety and paranoia. They reimagined her and other Tantric goddesses

Tantra and revolution in colonial India

as figureheads of resistance and symbols of an independent India rising up against the British.

Image captions left to right:

Craftsman painting a Kali sculpture made from clay, Kumartuli, Kolkata, eastern India.

Photo © Pacific Press Agency, Alamy Stock Photo, 2018

Processional image of Kali being carried during the Kali Puja, early 1900s, Bengal, eastern India.

Photo © The Keasbury-Gordon Photograph Archive, KGPA Ltd., Alamy Stock Photo, 2013

Quote on the wall:

What is our mother-country? It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation.

Aurobindo Ghose, **Bhawani Mandir**
(The Temple of the Goddess), 1905

Painted Kali yantra

In Bengal, the Tantric goddess Kali remains one of the most popular deities. She is shown here at the centre of a **yantra** – a ritual diagram used to invoke her. At the centre, Kali performs sex with Bhairava, a manifestation of Shiva, on whom Bhairava lies. Below Shiva is a burning corpse. The layering suggests a cosmic hierarchy in which Kali is the supreme creative force, with Bhairava/ Shiva as a foundational support, suggesting the inseparability of sex and death at the heart of human experience.

Bengal, eastern India, about 1850–1900

British Museum

Object detail captions:

Four protective gods, Shiva, Ganesha, Vishnu and Skanda.

An eight-petalled lotus. Each petal contains a Matrika – one of the fearsome mother goddesses. Five inverted triangles, made up of manifestations of Kali wielding swords and skull-cups. The shape symbolises the vulva and evokes divine feminine power.

Kali at the centre performs intercourse with Bhairava, who lies on top of Shiva and a burning corpse – a transgressive hierarchy with the female figure on top.

Print of Ramprasad Sen by P. Chakraborty, 20th century

Ramprasad Sen (about 1718–1775) was a Tantric mystic, who presented Kali as a ruthless yet compassionate mother. Here he sings about Kali, followed by the goddess herself. She carries the sword of wisdom, which symbolises the destruction of the ego. Ramprasad's poetry describes his relationship with Kali as that of lover and beloved: 'She's playing in my heart... All I ask, my crazy Mother / Is that You stay put.' His verse resonated at a time of crisis in Bengal. The East India Company raised land taxes even as crops in the region failed, transferring the wealth to Britain. This led to the Bengal famine of 1770, and to the deaths of over a million people. Kali became an icon of strength, promoted through poetry and public festivals.

British Museum

Kali striding over Shiva

Clay figures such as this were made for the annual Kali Puja festival, which became popular from the 1750s under the Bengali ruler Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray. Kali's earrings are corpses, her mouth is smeared with blood and she sticks out her tongue, as though thirsting for more. Her top right hand displays a gesture of fearlessness, to reassure and protect devotees. Beneath her feet lies the god Shiva.

According to Tantric belief, existence results from the interaction of Shakti as creative force (here embodied as Kali) and Shiva as pure consciousness. Without Kali, Shiva would remain inactive and the universe would perish.

Probably Krishnanagar, Bengal, eastern India,
1890s

British Museum

Stone statue of Kali from the collection of Charles Stuart (about 1757–1828)

In 1698 the East India Company bought three villages in Bengal that grew to become Calcutta (now Kolkata), an English spelling of Kalikata, named after Kali. The city was the seat of British power in India, and also a centre for Kali worship. This sculpture was owned by Charles Stuart, a Company officer from Ireland who settled in Calcutta. An unconventional military man, he praised India's traditions and criticised Christian missionaries. He adopted Hindu practices and collected sculptures of deities, which he was said to worship.

After his death, his collection was shipped to London and sold at auction and was eventually donated to the British Museum in 1872. Several of the sculptures of Tantric goddesses seen earlier in the exhibition come from his collection.

Bengal, eastern India, 1700–1800

Donated by the Bridge family
British Museum

1

**Print of Kali from *The Hindu Pantheon* by
Edward Moor, 1810**

Edward Moor was a Company officer and friend of Charles Stuart. He shared Stuart's interest in collecting sculptures of deities. He went on to write this encyclopedic study of Hindu mythology and imagery, the first for a Western audience. The text accompanying this image of Kali asks the reader to 'picture to himself ... this goddess of horrid form ... of gigantic proportions, smeared with blood ... and imagine ... what a hold such a religion must have on the sensibilities of its followers.'

London, 1810

Given by Mrs A.G. Moor
British Museum

Tantra and revolution in colonial India

Image caption:

In England, Moor's projection of Kali as a powerful and demonic goddess captured the public imagination. The artist William Blake drew on Moor's print in his vision of 'Lucifer', 1824.

Photo © National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Felton Bequest, 1920.

2

Painting of Kalaratri, or Kali

Indian artists, in response to British demand, began to produce illustrations of deities in a Western-influenced style known as the 'Company School' style. This example is forensic in its attention to detail, almost as if a woman in costume has posed for the artist. It represents the goddess Kalaratri, with her four arms holding a sword, knife, skull-cup filled with blood and a severed head, the blood from its neck pooling on the ground.

Patna, Bihar, eastern India, 1800–50

British Museum

3

Sacrificial sword (ramdao)

Kali has historically been presented with offerings including wine and blood. Goats are often offered as extensions of the devotee's own pride and base instincts, to be purged by the goddess. They are ritually beheaded with a **ramdao** to nourish her. Kali herself is often shown wielding the sword to slay ignorance. The eye of the goddess is engraved on the blade to channel her presence at the sacrifice. By the 19th century the sacrifice of 'white' goats had taken on an anti-colonial resonance.

Bengal, eastern India, 1700–1800

British Museum

Tantra and revolution in colonial India

Quote on the wall:

**The symbol of Kali may ... arouse the ...
energies of the nation and lead it on to realise
its highest destiny...**

Bipin Chandra Pal, *New India*, 1907

Model of 'Thugs' strangling and killing travellers

During the 19th century, many British officials claimed that Kali was the chief goddess of roaming gangs of bandits, or 'Thugs'. Although banditry did take place because of social and economic instability, worsened by colonial taxation policies, the British sensationalised Thugs as an ancient cult of stranglers devoted to Kali, who represented a threat to British authority. This stereotype allowed them to impose stricter controls over the local population. There was a demand for vivid images of Thugs strangling travellers with handkerchiefs, as seen in this model made by an Indian craftsman for sale to a British railway owner and later given to the British Museum.

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, southern India, before 1847

British Museum

**Procession with Kali, from Narrative
of the Indian Revolt, by Colin Campbell, 1858**

Colonial fears around Kali grew with the rise of revolutionary movements in Bengal. The Great Rebellion of 1857 began as a military mutiny against the East India Company, and escalated with widespread civilian uprisings. Campbell attempted to de-politicise the uprising by comparing the revolutionaries to Thugs, writing that 'they worship the bloodthirsty goddess Kali, whom they seek to propitiate by sacrificing in cool blood as many unoffending individuals as they can.' The rebellion led to the British government taking over direct rule of India from the Company in 1858.

British Museum

**Kali, frontispiece of Political Trouble in India,
by James Campbell Kerr, 1917**

In 1917 James Campbell Kerr published this confidential report on the anti-colonial activities of Bengali revolutionaries and their allegiance to Kali. In the report he quotes Bipin Chandra Pal, an Indian independence movement activist, who had described Kali's radical potential to readers of the **New India** newspaper in June 1907:

'The symbol of Kali may well be utilised now to arouse the dormant energies of the nation and to lead it on to realise its highest destiny through conflicts and struggles.'

The British Library

Kali by the Ravi Varma Press, about 1910–20

Kali clutches the head of a demon, who lies decapitated by her right foot. This became one of the most popular images produced by the Ravi Varma Press. In 1928 it was reproduced in a Christian missionary text in which the author wrote: “‘What an awful picture!’ we exclaim as we look at the ferocious figure of Kali... I am glad I was not born a Hindu and made to believe in Shiva and Kali, aren’t you?’

The East India Company had generally avoided interfering with local traditions, but this changed from the 1800s under the influence of evangelicals who came to India to carry out missionary work. Many saw Kali as a symbol of India’s so-called depravity.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Print advertising 'Kali cigarettes'

While Kali was regarded by British officials as a threat, Bengali revolutionaries reimagined her as a symbol of resistance. This print by the Calcutta Art Studio continued to circulate after 1905, when Bengal was partitioned by the British to weaken the growing anti-colonial movement.

One writer for a Bengali newspaper proclaimed: 'Rise up, O sons of India ... the Empire draws to an end, for behold! Kali rises in the East.'

A colonial administrator identified the heads in this print as British-looking, leading to its censorship.

Kolkata, Bengal, eastern India, about 1885–95

British Museum

Print of the icon at Kalighat temple

At the heart of Calcutta (now Kolkata) lay Kalighat temple, enshrining an icon (**murti**) of Kali. During the 19th century, visitors to the temple could buy prints and paintings of the goddess to take home as souvenirs. The eyes were particularly important for **darshan** (sacred viewing), involving seeing and being seen by the deity. By 1905, anti-colonial revolutionaries were pledging allegiance and devotion to Kali at Kalighat to draw strength for their cause.

Kolkata, Bengal, eastern India, 1880–90

British Museum

Image caption:

Kalighat temple remains a major sacred site. The Kali **murti** is here adorned with flowers and has a long golden tongue.

Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum

Kalighat painting of Kali

Stalls around Kalighat temple sold huge quantities of watercolour paintings of Kali to pilgrims as sacred souvenirs. They were produced quickly in a bold and simple style. Kali's growing popularity, which had begun a century earlier, became a focus for revolutionary politics in and around Calcutta, the colonial capital and centre of Bengali anti-imperialism.

Kolkata, Bengal, eastern India, 1850–80

Donated by Dr Achinto Sen-Gupta
British Museum

Print of Chinnamasta (She Whose Head is Severed) by Lalashiu Gobin Lal, 1880s

Kali was one of the most important icons for Bengali revolutionaries, but there were others, including the Tantric goddess Chinnamasta. Here she clutches her own severed head, which drinks one of the three streams of blood spurting from her neck. The other two streams nourish her attendants. She stands upon the deities of love and desire, as if to suggest that she transcends desire while also being fundamentally supported by it. The image communicates the inseparability and interdependence of sex, life and death. A Bengali text described Chinnamasta as a symbol of the Motherland, decapitated by the British but preserving her vitality by drinking her own blood, representing an ideal of heroic fearlessness and self-sacrifice.

British Museum

Calcutta Art Studio print of Chinnamasta and Shodashi

This print shows two of the ten Tantric Mahavidya (Great Wisdom) goddesses, Chinnamasta on the right and Shodashi on the left. In 19th-century Bengal the Mahavidyas were associated with the ability to conquer enemies – specifically British enemies. In order to avoid colonial censorship, printmakers often used coded religious imagery. Prints such as this circulated across Bengal, resonating with people who would have been familiar with the revolutionary associations of these goddesses.

Kolkata, Bengal, eastern India, about 1885–90

British Museum

The Mahavidya (Great Wisdom) goddesses and Mother India

This print features two Mahavidyas. Matangi (right) is associated with the impure and socially outcast. Dhumavati (left) is an elderly widow goddess whose appearance disguises her immense power. Images of her circulated after an 1873 Bengali play was staged in Calcutta about Mother India, a new secular goddess for the nationalist cause. In the play Mother India is widowed and impoverished as a result of British rule, but audiences would have recognised the deliberate allusion to the ferocious Dhumavati.

Kolkata, Bengal, eastern India, about 1885–90

British Museum

The Tantric master Bamakhepa, 2017

By Parvathy Baul (born 1976)

Bamakhepa (1837–1911) lived in Bengal beside Tarapith temple, dedicated to the Mahavidya goddess Tara. He was seen as a threat by colonial authorities because of his interactions with Bengali revolutionaries, who were drawn to his power. Bamakhepa persists in the popular imagination as an icon of devotion and transgression. In this woodcut he stands in Tarapith's cremation ground, where he famously had visions of Tara. Smoke from pyres billow behind him and he is surrounded by jackals and human remains, reflecting his rejection of distinctions between purity and impurity.

British Museum

Reimagining Tantra: art and counterculture

Before and after Indian independence from British rule in 1947 and the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent nation states, South Asian artists forged modern national styles rooted in the art of the past.

Several artists were inspired by the Delhi-based writer Ajit Mookerjee, who owned a vast collection of Tantric sculptures and paintings. He emphasised their philosophical content and sought to reclaim Tantra from its colonial-era association with hedonism and black magic. This inspired the Neo-Tantra art movement and went on to have a major impact on perceptions of Tantra in the West.

In the 1960s and 70s, Tantric ideas and imagery inspired global countercultural movements. In Europe and America, Tantra had an important impact on the period's radical politics, where it

Reimagining Tantra: art and counterculture

was interpreted as a movement that could inspire anti-capitalist, ecological and free love ideals.

Image captions left to right:

G.R. Santosh seated under one of his works at an exhibition at Gallery Chanakya, New Delhi.

Photo © Estate of Richard Bartholomew, Photoink, All Rights Reserved

Alice Coltrane and Swami Satchidananda, Los Angeles, California, USA, 1972.

Photo © Philip Melnick, 1972/2008

'Tantra' poster advertising 'an exhibition exploring the Indian cult of ecstasy', the Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 1971.

Photo © Hayward Gallery Archive, Southbank Centre

Quote on the wall:

**Tantra ... for me, was an internal urge,
a call to understand the truth that is the
source and underlying principle of everything.**

Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929–1997)

Mausoleum, about 1944

By Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988)

Born in India to British parents, Colquhoun was inspired by Tantric ideas around gender. She believed that 'the division into male and female' had led to a collective 'split in the psyche'. Her paintings from the 1940s were inspired by Hatha yoga's goal of reconciling feminine and masculine principles within the body. In this watercolour, Colquhoun shows a skeletal figure inside a phallic chrysalis. The lines suggest the feminine and masculine channels of the yogic body, which must be harmonised, resulting in the divine union of Shiva and Shakti.

British Museum

Torso, 1981

By Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988)

Torso explores the concept of the yogic body according to Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Each colour corresponds to a **latifa** – the Sufi equivalent of a **chakra**, an energy centre within the body. The aim of Sufi practice was to spiritually awaken these centres in turn through meditation, breathing techniques and recitations. The arrow here may suggest the order in which to awaken each **latifa**, including the heart (below the left breast), the spirit (below the right breast) and the soul (beneath the navel).

National Trust Collections (The Ithell Colquhoun Collection)

Self Portrait, about 1980

By Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929–1997)

Santosh, a leading artist associated with the Neo-Tantra movement, was born in Kashmir to a Shia Muslim family. He became deeply influenced by Tantric philosophy after visiting a Shiva shrine in the Kashmir Himalayas in 1964. Here his features are abstracted into rhythmic blue lines, evoking a description of enlightenment as a 'luminous sea of subsiding waves' by the 10th-century Kashmiri Tantric master Abhinavagupta. The mysterious emptiness of his eye sockets suggests he is in a meditative state as he becomes one with his surroundings.

Donated by Dr Achinto Sen-Gupta
British Museum

Untitled, 1974

By Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929–1997)

Santosh's work engaged with the symbolism of Tantric sexual rites mirroring the union of Shiva and Shakti. This painting shows two bodies merging in sexual union, indicated by two pairs of legs. The figure on top appears to hold their arms in the air, while a fiery circle at the base of their spine suggests the presence of the goddess Kundalini. At the crown of the figure's head, a third eye of enlightened awakening appears to emerge. As Santosh wrote, 'Sex is elevated to the level of transcendental experience.'

Donated by Dr Achinto Sen-Gupta
British Museum

Untitled, 1970s

By Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929–1997)

Santosh took inspiration from the collection and writings of the Tantric scholar Ajit Mookerjee.

Mookerjee argued that ‘the idea that masculinity and femininity are two different factors is as illusory as the duality of body and soul’.

In this painting, limbs emerge from an oval, egg-like shape to suggest a genderless figure seated in a cross-legged yoga pose, known as the lotus position (**padmasana**). The head is replaced by an orange trident, the emblem of Shiva.

Donated by Dr Achinto Sen-Gupta
British Museum

Untitled, 1974

By Biren De (1926–2011)

Born in present-day Bangladesh, Biren De was inspired by the concentric shapes of **mandalas** and **yantras**, framing luminous central deities. This centre point (**bindu**) is an expression of cosmic creation. De used colour to suggest light and energy flowing from the centre of his own paintings. He was reluctant to be typecast as a Neo-Tantra artist, but acknowledged the impact of Tantric philosophy on his work: 'By making us acknowledge the fragmented state of our existence ... [Tantra] encourages us to strive to transcend these barriers.'

Donated by Dr Achinto Sen-Gupta
British Museum

Kalika, 1974

By Prafulla Mohanti (born 1936)

This painting, drawing on the concept of cosmic energy flowing from the **bindu** (centre point), invokes the goddess Kali (Kalika). Born in Odisha, eastern India, Mohanti uses the **bindu** symbol across his work. As a child, 'while drawing the circles ... I was inviting the divine energies to come and live in them. As I looked around the village I saw the presence of the divine energy everywhere, in people and in the landscape. The circle became the **Bindu** ... which glowed like the rising sun.'

British Museum

Centrovision 299, 1976

By Mahirwan Mamtani (born 1935)

Mamtani was influenced by the writings of Ajit Mookerjee, who argued that the Tantric idea of everything being infused with Shakti or power reflected discoveries in quantum physics, such as the concept that all matter is energy. Mamtani, born in Bhiria, Pakistan, used the symbol of the **bindu**, an expression of cosmic creation, to reflect this idea. **Centrovision** is based on an 'impulse to transform my experience of the world into a vision leading to the **bindu**', resulting in a 'unity, wholeness or merging with the universal consciousness of Self'.

British Museum

Tantric Lovers pull-out poster for Oz magazine, 1968

Designed by Hapshash and the Coloured Coat

Tantric imagery inspired British artists such as Nigel Waymouth and Michael English, who worked under the name Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, to produce psychedelic posters communicating ecological and free-love ideals. By the 1960s Tantra was associated with social, political as well as spiritual liberation, and as a 'cult of ecstasy' that could challenge repressive attitudes to sexuality. This pull-out poster is based on Tibetan **yab-yum** imagery. In the West, many people assumed that erotic Tantric images reflected a liberal approach to sex based on pleasure rather than, or as well as, a means of attaining power and enlightenment.

British Museum

**Save Earth Now poster, 1967 (reprinted 1990s)
Designed by Hapshash and the Coloured Coat**

This image by Nigel Waymouth and Michael English reflects their engagement with the environmental movement, and was created as a reaction against the industrial damage inflicted on the planet's ecosystem by unregulated corporations. The central figure resembles Manjushri, a Tantric Buddhist deity, surrounded by dancing figures, trees, sea and mountains. The figure, however, is also an interfaith one. He bears a Pagan talisman and goblet, while the star and crescent around his neck is associated with Islam.

British Museum

Sticky Fingers album, 1971

The Rolling Stones

In 1969 Mick Jagger approached the designer John Pasche and asked him to create a logo for the Rolling Stones' record label, inspired by the Tantric goddess Kali. Pasche's design focused on the goddess's protruding tongue, a feature that originally suggested her ravenous appetite on the battlefield. The logo conveyed the band's rebellious, anti-establishment spirit as well as Jagger's own voluptuous mouth. It was first reproduced on the inner sleeve of the band's **Sticky Fingers** album and became one of the most iconic symbols of the rock era.

Private loan

Rose Devi, 1976 (left)

By Penny Slinger (born 1947)

In 1971 British artist Penny Slinger visited the first major exhibition on the subject of Tantra in the West, at the Hayward Gallery, London. Inspired by paintings of the yogic body with **chakras**, she created her own versions, using her body to produce provocative scrolls with a photocopying machine. Challenging ideas of 'the body as shameful', Slinger was drawn to Tantra as a 'path of the goddess', uniting 'the physical with the spiritual'. Here roses mark her **chakras**, while images of Vajrayogini dance over her pubic area and feet.

Courtesy of the artist, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/
Tokyo and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

Chakra Woman, 1976 (right)

By Penny Slinger (born 1947)

Here, as for **Rose Devi**, photocopying her body allowed Slinger to compose her work from 'slices of my being'. The result is an expression of female sexuality through a Tantric lens, informed by the feminist activism of the period. She sticks out her tongue in imitation of the goddess Kali, harnessing her unrestrained power. Slinger was influenced by Tantra's emphasis on Shakti as feminine power infusing all phenomena, which could be tapped into as an agent of bodily and psychological transformation.

Courtesy of the artist, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/
Tokyo and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

Human Be-In poster, 1967

Designed by Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley

This poster advertises the 'Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In' festival, held in San Francisco. It promoted communal living, ecological awareness and the use of psychedelic drugs to induce altered states of consciousness.

Yoga and meditation were promoted as practices that could inspire revolutionary minds to challenge the status quo. The bottom of the poster reads: 'Bring food to share, bring flowers, beads, costumes, feathers, bells, cymbals, flags'.

The portrait, taken in Nepal, shows how yogis captured the popular imagination in the West as countercultural role models.

British Museum

The Love Book, 1966

By Lenore Kandel (1932–2009)

Tantra influenced Beat Generation poets such as Lenore Kandel. She achieved notoriety in 1966 when she published this collection of poems entitled **The Love Book**, which drew on Tantric sexual imagery. In the West, many women were drawn to Tantric goddesses as powerful agents, who were often shown in sexually dominant positions, challenging patriarchal constructions of the ideal woman as passive and obedient. The governor of California, Ronald Reagan, attempted to ban the book, calling it pornographic. In court, Kandel defended the poems as 'holy erotica'.

Private loan

Image caption:

Lenore Kandel holding **The Love Book**,
San Francisco, California, 1966

Photo © Gordon Peters, San Francisco Oracle, Polaris

Reimagining Tantra: art and counterculture

Quote on the wall:

united in lovescream

sacred our acts and our actions

sacred our parts and our persons

Lenore Kandel, **The Love Book**, 1966

**The Psychedelic Experience: a manual
based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, 1966
(original 1964)**

**By Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard
Alpert**

Leary, an American psychologist, was inspired by the **Bardo Thodol**, known in the West as **The Tibetan Book of the Dead** and attributed to the 8th-century Tantric master Padmasambhava. It describes the hallucinatory stages experienced by the mind after death, during which visionary forms appear before the individual is reborn.

Leary saw these stages as mirroring the experiences of taking the hallucinatory drug LSD, from the 'psychological death' of the ego to 'rebirth'. He believed that LSD (made illegal in the US in 1967) could enable 'instant **nirvana**' or enlightenment, and teach Western society how to unlearn oppressive and moralistic middle-class principles.

Private loan

Hear and Now album, 1976

Don Cherry (1936–1995)

From the 1960s, American jazz music drew on global sources. The decolonisation of territories across Africa and Asia along with the rise of the Black Power movement fostered new forms of black spirituality. The jazz trumpeter Don Cherry was inspired by Tantric traditions and studied under the Indian musician and mystic Pran Nath. Here he is presented as a yogi, with a Buddhist deity above him. He wears a necklace of **mala** beads, used to keep count while reciting mantras.

Private loan

John (1926–67) and Alice Coltrane (1937–2007)

The American jazz musicians John and Alice Coltrane recorded 'Reverend King' in 1966, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. It begins and ends with John's chanting of the mantra 'Om mani padme hum' ('Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus'),

described in the accompanying record jacket as symbolising ‘the truth that humanity is Divinity enshrouded in flesh’. Alice later went on to adopt the Sanskrit name Turiya (‘pure consciousness’) and became the disciple of the Indian guru Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002).

Image caption:

John and Alice Coltrane, Van Gelder Studio, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, USA, 1966.

Photo © Chuck Stewart Photography, LLC/Fireball Entertainment Group

Eden Hashish Centre poster, 1960–70

Throughout the 1960s Europeans and Americans travelled on the overland ‘Hippie Trail’ to Kathmandu, Nepal. Before 1973 cannabis was sold legally there, and one of the most well-known businesses was the Eden Hashish Centre, run by D.D. Sharma. This poster advertises the Centre to tourists, ‘selling’ the idea of **bhang** – an edible preparation of cannabis – as a means

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to enlightenment, associated with the intoxicated god Shiva. In 1973 the Nepalese government outlawed cannabis under pressure from President Nixon's US administration, which feared Kathmandu was becoming a centre for youth radicalism.

Kathmandu, Nepal

British Museum

'Fire that is earth' and 'Water that is heaven' from the Shambhala series, 1974 By Yokoo Tadanori (born 1936)

The Japanese artist Yokoo Tadanori travelled to India in the early 1970s. These prints evoke his fascination with the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, which according to legend was located north of the Himalayas and inhabited by Tantric masters. In one print, a rainbow streams from the head of a meditating yogi, portraying mind and body as a source of light. Another print draws on erotic Indian imagery to suggest that

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Shambhala is a land free of sexual constraints.

Yokoo sought to look within himself to access Shambhala as a state of mind, through yoga and meditation. As he put it, 'Shambhala is ... the center of cosmic consciousness ... which can lead us human beings spiritually.' If each individual could reach this internal state, then a broader social revolution would make Shambhala a reality.

Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund
British Museum

Tantra today

Today, 200 years of shifting interpretations have left many misconceptions about what Tantra is, or what it actually involves. In reality, Tantra is not independent of Hinduism and Buddhism but has pervaded and transformed both traditions.

As a worldview, philosophy and set of practices, Tantra is as alive as ever, and there are many Tantric sites that are actively worshipped. Sects in India, including the Aghoris, Naths and Bauls, reveal the enduring power of the movement. In the contemporary art world, feminist artists have harnessed Tantric goddesses through the bodies of real women.

The rebellious spirit of Tantra, with its potential to disrupt prevailing social, cultural and political establishments, remains ripe for the reimagining.

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Image caption:

Sculpture of the Tantric goddess Chinnamasta and her attendants at the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, India.

Photo © Robert Nickelsberg, Getty Images, 1989

Housewives with Steak-Knives, 1985

By Sutapa Biswas (born 1962)

This work evokes the Tantric goddess Kali in a feminist form. Its title challenges the stereotype of the submissive wife confined to the kitchen. Here the 'housewife' as Kali (who may be Biswas herself) is four-armed and muscular, swinging an enormous blade, her hairy armpits defying traditional expectations of femininity. Biswas describes the garland of heads that Kali wears as figureheads of authoritarian patriarchy.

Kali's lower right hand holds a flag with photocopies of paintings by the Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi. Made in about 1620, they show the biblical story of Judith beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes. Commentators have linked these images of justice to Gentileschi's own struggles as a female artist. They served as inspiration to Biswas in her uniting of cross-cultural, defiant feminine forces.

Courtesy of Bradford Museums & Galleries

And all the while the benevolent slept, 2008
By Bharti Kher (born 1969)

Bharti Kher creates sculptures made from casts of real women to produce dramatic 'urban goddesses'. This figure blurs the boundaries between mortal and divine. We are confronted with the self-decapitated goddess Chinnamasta with copper wires spurting from her neck like jets of blood. She holds a teacup – a witty allusion to British civility – which has become a substitute for a Tantric skull-cup, about to be filled with blood. In her left hand Chinnamasta holds a cast of the skull of 'Lucy', the oldest-known human ancestor. This nod to human origins alludes to Chinnamasta herself as an embodiment of the foundation and cycle of life. She is ambiguously depicted as either penetrating or being penetrated by the log, which represents Shiva. Kher describes the goddesses she is attracted to as androgynous and 'strangely masculine'.

Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Central column:

**Members of Aghori, Nath and Baul sects
Photographs by Dolf Hartsuiker**

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Dutch photographer and writer Dolf Hartsuiker travelled across India and Nepal, meeting yogis and yoginis associated with different sects. His interviews and photographs give us a glimpse into the lives of people still inspired by Tantric philosophy and spiritual practice. The people shown here are associated with the Aghori, Nath and Baul sects.

Aghoris draw on the earliest traditions of Bhairava's followers. They insist on the unity of all existence and the reconciliation of opposites such as purity and impurity, the self and the divine. Naths, represented earlier in the exhibition, remain one of the most important sects of yogis in South Asia.

Today they are still credited with powers attained through their yogic and alchemical practices, from control over the weather to the ability to cure infertility.

Donated by Dolf Hartsuiker
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Kichu Din Mone Mone
Sung by Parvathy Baul, 2011

Duration: 5 minutes, 45 seconds

The Bauls are a sect of singer-poets with close ties to Tantra, mainly based in West Bengal and Bangladesh. They are famous for their mystical songs performed with stringed instruments, centring on the idea that divinity is present and accessible within the human body.

Parvathy Baul, a practitioner and teacher, was drawn towards the Baul way of life at the age of 16: 'Baul freedom is limitless. It gives one such a sense of peace ... [and] goes beyond religion,

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caste, creed and any limited identities.' In this song she casts her relationship with the divine in the Tantric language of the body, evoking the erotic courtship between the god Krishna (Shyam) and his lover Radha.

Film courtesy of Parvathy Baul, The Kabir Project, and www.ajabshahar.org

Wall image caption:

A temporary shrine dedicated to the goddess Kali, assembled during the Kali Puja festival, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Photo © Debarshi Mukherjee, Alamy Stock Photo, 2017

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Consultation

We are grateful to both the participants and coordinators of two workshops at the British Museum on the role, history and care of Tibetan ritual objects made with human remains.

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**Hirapur temple audio recordings recited
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Amina Zia

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