

Paper Abstract for the session:

The Strange Self:
Exploration of Mind through Spirits, Prayer, Meditation, and Death

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**The Strangest Self:
Transcending Self-Other Distinctions in Tantric Buddhism**

If Anthropology defamiliarizes the taken-for-granted and makes comprehensible alternative Otherness, tantric Buddhism arguably takes Anthropology a step further.

Many religions augur to transcend or defamiliarize cultural selves through varieties of epiphany, spirit possession, and altered states of consciousness. In Tibetan tantric Buddhism, a nuanced and detailed philosophy of non-self-existence has been carefully refined for 1,500 years, rendering not just problematic but absurd the notion that self-hood may in *any* sense inherently exist.

As if doing Geertz and even Baudillard a radical step better—and beyond the recently described “Ontological Turn”—Tibetan Buddhism systematically de-reifies not only cultural realities or ontologies but Western notions of ontology itself.

Whereas social constructionist views of selfhood tend to reduce to relativism, and deconstructive or postmodern ones to nihilism, Tibetan Buddhist tantras augur to experientially apprehend phenomena in practically efficient ways that are compassionate towards constructed social and imputed cultural realities without assuming their inherent reality. A deep respect for the causes and conditions of quotidian suffering hence does not entail embracing presumed objectivity of their inherent existence. Instead, supercession of presumptive selfhood and ultimate annihilation of its self-grasping are cultivated step-wise by envisaging a transcendent reality that is conceptually unapprehendable but approximated through meditation on emptiness, visualization of transcendent reality, and the internalization of “divine” states that are at the same time known to be the heuristic projection of one’s own awareness.

At larger issue is the practical relationship between tantric Buddhism and the challenges posed by ostensibly autonomous modern selfhoods in the 21st century – and the potentials for ratcheting contemporary anthropological relativism to deeper and more subjectively nuanced levels.