

## Menstrual practice –a survey of the field

*Friday 24 May 2024 16:15 (30 minutes)*

Menstruation for some is a sacred thread connecting women with their natural rhythms whilst for other, such as Kashmirian tantric brahmins, menstruation is ‘that which could not be suppressed in [the women of the cult], the monthly discharge of their inner depravity’ (Sanderson 1985:202). But it could be halted. Fourteenth century haṭha yoginīs draw up menstrual and sexual fluid inside their bodies to acquire extraordinary powers (Westoby 2021). Sixteenth century practitioners of nūdan, Chinese inner alchemy, halt menstruation as a precursor to gestating a golden spirit embryo and birthing it through the head (Valussi 2003). Twentieth century members of yoga-oriented New Religious Movements (NRMs) practice to halt menstruation. Twenty-first century yoga practitioners use the pill to stop menstruation in order to practice yoga postures.

Scattered accounts of female sexual and menstrual praxis in South Asia stand in stark contrast to the body of scholarship on male asceticism, masculinity and continence. Women’s praxis is obscured by the façade of dangerous female sexuality and the seeming impenetrability of the sources’ misogyny. Modern-day religious and spiritual movements, from leaders to lay-practitioners, have a lot to say about a topic usually treated as private—if not taboo.

This presentation surveys historical research on menstrual practice in Indian religions and compares this with approaches in NRMs and yoga communities. This presentation builds on historical textual sources with pilot interviews and public testimony to sketch the state of the field and propose new research directions: a project to gain an in-depth understanding of peoples’ approaches to and interventions in their own menstrual cycle as informed by spiritual, religious or cultural beliefs and the availability and use of traditional or modern contraceptive technologies.

### Bio

Ruth Westoby is a doctoral researcher in yoga and an Ashtanga practitioner. Ruth is writing up a thesis on the body in early haṭha yoga, ‘Blood, snake, fire: The mighty body of yoga in early haṭha texts’, at SOAS University of London, prepared under the supervision of Dr James Mallinson. Ruth has published early research findings in the peer-reviewed *Religions of South Asia* and numerous public articles. Ruth collaborated with the SOAS Haṭha Yoga Project’s ‘embodied philology’, interpreting postures from an 18th-century text teaching a precursor of modern yoga, the Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati, in 2016 and 2017.

Ruth is Visiting Lecturer in Indian Religions at Roehampton University, teaching postgraduate theory and method in the study of religion and undergraduate contemporary issues in global religions. Ruth serves on the Yoga in Theory and Practice Unit of the American Academy of Religions and served on the steering committee for the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies.

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