Women as Patients and Practitioners in Early Sanskrit Medical Literature

Prof. Martha Ann Selby

Ralph B. Thomas Regents Professor of Asian Studies
University of Texas, Austin

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2015
5:00-6:30 PM
912 Sproul
UC Davis

During the course of this talk, I will discuss the conceptual position of women in early Āyurvedic literature; as objects of practice, but also as medical actors in and of themselves. I will draw upon the written records of early Āyurveda, in which we find abundant material that directly describes and addresses women and their medical concerns. Āyurvedic texts were a part of a larger cultural world: they share information and attitudes with other Sanskrit textual genres, particularly with dharma-śāstras (legal treatises), especially when the subjects in question turn to women and the regulation of their bodies in times of ritual pollution and reproductivity. Although the āyurvedic corpus was beyond a doubt written and shaped by men, we can also uncover assumptions about the women on whose illnesses and experiences they were writing. Just as a society expresses its attitudes towards the female body, as it does towards other phenomena of the natural world, in myths, superstitions, and folk remedies, so do we find these attitudes in literature that we might characterize as “rational,” “scientific,” or “logical” in its formulations. My overall goal is to describe the medical world which women inhabited, amounting to a recovery and reconstruction of female experience through a careful gleaning of the textual record. What I hope to accomplish is to move āyurvedic texts into the integrated domain of cultural history. I have chosen to operate within the realm of an engaged, analytical philology, which begins with close readings of texts and ends in bringing these rich materials into broader conversations with larger social and historical institutions and constructions.

Martha Ann Selby is Ralph B. Thomas Regents Professor of Asian Studies and Chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of Grow Long, Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India (Oxford, 2000), The Circle of Six Seasons: Poems from Sanskrit, Prākrit, and Old Tamil (Penguin, 2003), and Tamil Love Poetry: The Five Hundred Short Poems of the Aṅkūṟunīṟu (Columbia, 2011). Tamil Love Poetry was awarded the A. K. Ramanujan Translation Prize in March, 2014. Her current research interests are in the fields of classical Sanskrit medical literature and Tamil literature from all periods. She has held fellowships and grants from the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Humanities Center, where she was NEH Fellow during the 2010-11 academic year. She most recently held a Fulbright-Nehru Senior Research Fellowship to translate the short fiction of Tamil author D. Dilip Kumar.

This lecture is free and open to the public.

This lecture is sponsored by the Davis Humanities Institute, the Departments of Comparative Literature, Religious Studies, English and Classics, the Graduate Group in the Study of Religion, the Program in Middle East South Asia Studies and the Religions of India Initiative. For further information contact, Archana Venkatesan at avenkatesan@ucdavis.edu