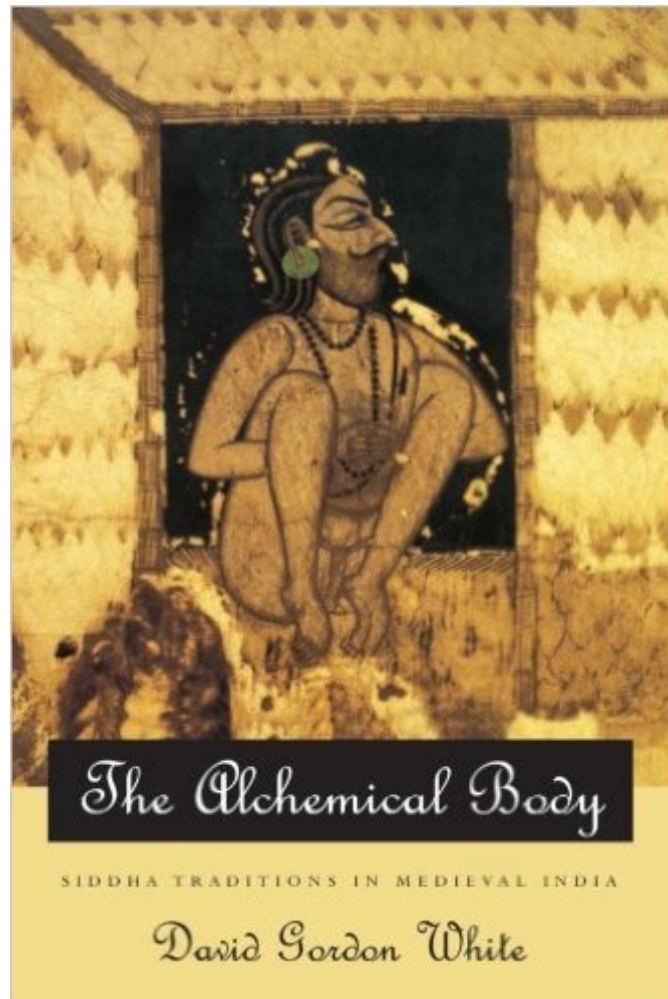


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The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions In Medieval India



Synopsis

The Alchemical Body excavates and centers within its Indian context the lost tradition of the medieval Siddhas. Working from previously unexplored alchemical sources, David Gordon White demonstrates for the first time that the medieval disciplines of Hindu alchemy and hatha yoga were practiced by one and the same people, and that they can be understood only when viewed together. White opens the way to a new and more comprehensive understanding of medieval Indian mysticism, within the broader context of south Asian Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam."White proves a skillful guide in disentangling historical and theoretical complexities that have thus far bedeviled the study of these influential aspects of medieval Indian culture."â "Yoga World"Anyone seriously interested in finding out more about authentic tantra, original hatha yoga, embodied liberation . . . sacred sexuality, paranormal abilities, healing, and of course alchemy will find White's extraordinary book as fascinating as any Tom Clancy thriller."â "Georg Feuerstein, Yoga Journal

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Customer Reviews

Like a master weaver, D.G. White threads his way through an enormous amount of literature on alchemy, hatha yoga and tantra in medieval India. Written with wit, erudition, and non-sectarian distance from (if evident sympathy for) his subject, this work is indispensable for anyone interested in hatha yoga, alchemy, ayurveda or Tantra. Be aware that this is a scholarly work, not a "how-to" users guide-but if only other scholars wrote with such wit and passion! Anyone who still believes that Tantra is about "sacred sexuality" with a loving partner will be cured by reading about the ritual

consumption of semen and menstrual blood in historical Tantric cults, including Abhinavagupta's Trika (pp. 137-139). As the siddhi from this bitter rasayana, one will come to recognize the idealized beautiful bodies adorning the covers of contemporary yoga journals, as descendants of the Siddha alchemical quest for bodily immortality: Hatha yoga is tantric alchemy. The writing can be dense at points-especially the occasionally tedious chapter on "Tantic and Siddha Alchemical Literature". Otherwise, it's a fascinating read, covering everything from the 9 historical Naths to cosmological homologies between geography, bandhas asanas and other aspects of the subtle body in hatha yoga, and various alchemical and Ayurvedic substances and practices. And don't be put off by the size of the book: its 596 pages include fully 178 pages of scholarly notes and another 76 pages of references and index, leaving a mere 352 pages of incredibly fascinating reading. One can only hope that the author, perhaps when older and less bound by scholarly demands-a sannyasin?-might expand upon his fascinating personal experiences seeking alchemists in contemporary Nepal. May his researchs long continue...! [Jjely@Bigfoot.com]

While this book is crammed with erudition, the author seems to assume that his failure to find any real depth in the subject is due to the lack of any real depth in the subject matter itself. It is terribly uninspired, and whatever real insights are to be found in this presentation have to be made by the reader. One really wonders why someone who seems to have such an uninspiring view of this whole body of material would spend so much of their life studying it, because clearly no little effort has been spent in the author's study of this material. I don't really get it. And although I was interested in the book because of my fascination with both Western alchemy and Tantra, I actually only got through about a third of the book before I gave up in boredom. It is sort of like a history of art written by an expert in the chemistry of pigments.

I spent my Labor Day weekend wrapped up in this book... excellent. Despite the frustrating complexity of Tantric ideas, texts, lineages and practices David White does a great job in weaving them together. The very ending, in which he meets a Nath in Thamel, Kathmandu is priceless--very typical of India and I think of esotericism in general, in which years of frustrated study will be summed up and answered by a nonchalant chance encounter... which, of course, only leads to more questions. I'm looking forward to White's upcoming book "Sinister Yogis" quite a lot now...!

This remarkable book illuminates the "body of light" of yogis, tantrikas, and alchemists. The author traveled throughout India and Nepal, spoke with living yogis and alchemists, and combed the yogic,

tantric, and ayurvedic scriptures of Hindu, Nath, Taoist and Buddhist Siddha traditions to reveal their alchemical secrets. White warns readers upfront, in the fifth paragraph of his book, to expect "dizzying multitudinous levels of self-interpretation" from the yogi, tantrika, and alchemist traditions. The notions of the subtle "alchemical" body are complex; they are a morass of myths, beliefs, and rituals developed during three thousand years. Reader beware: "dizziness" is a side-effect of the interpretations of the yogis and siddhis themselves. Did those disgruntled reviewers expect a self-help book packed with feel-good interpretations? The Alchemical Body is an outsiders view of the subtle body system of yogis, tantrikas, and alchemists: an academic attempt to unpack the mysteries of the traditions of the alchemical body. David Gordon White sees the Yogic-Siddhic alchemist as essentially concerned with the creation and intensification of a "body of light" while remaining yet in the phenomenal world. The beliefs and rituals of the yogin, tantrika, and siddha are meant to transform the gross material body into an immortal, divine portal: a sacrificial "oblation" that directs humans heavenward (samadhi) through control of breath, diet, and sex. The Alchemical Body is a study of the language of mystic experience and expression-the multitudinous symbols, rituals, and doctrines of the medieval siddha, yoga, and alchemical traditions.

Although author accepts that he did not meet any authentic siddhars, details in this book is a bit impressive. I would recommend this book strongly to anyone who is interested in knowing basics of Indian alchemy and about siddhars.

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