This course will take the senses as its object and instrument of inquiry. The very foundation of our experience of reality, the senses mediate our relationships with society, material objects, and the wider environment. In the last few decades, the sensorial turn in anthropology (which has since impacted other disciplines) has shown that the senses, far from being just the neutral fruit of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms, are constructed historically, culturally, and politically. A first goal of this course, then, is to explore the particular ways with which individuals in Himalayan cultures relate to their realities through the senses. Its second major goal is to expand the boundaries of experience through the “re-sensualization” of the body of the “ethnographer-in-training.” By stretching the limits of participant observation, it is my hope to instill a fuller sensorial experience.

Having the anthropological literature pertaining to this region as its basis, the course will explore the theoretical insights of sensory anthropology, directly applying them to fieldwork experiences, which will include excursions to religious rituals and festivals, pilgrimage, and other explorations of the area’s urban life. The course will also promote mini-workshops in which local artists and professionals will introduce students to basic notions of statue making, tangkha painting, music, and culinary arts, among other expressive forms. The intention of these workshops is to offer students the opportunity to bodily participate in some of the artistic and practical activities of the Himalayan peoples. Assignments will include an experimental presentation that can be defined as an aesthetic appropriation of the sensible world through multiple media (40%), and a final theoretical essay about this presentation (60%).