

August 10, 2015

Department of Religion
Green Street Classroom Annex
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

Dear members of the search committee,

I am writing to apply for the tenure-track position in Asian religious traditions at Lawrence University. As a Lecturer in the Religion Department at Smith College with a Ph.D. from Emory University, I am excited about the possibility of teaching Buddhism and Hinduism to highly motivated undergraduates at a small liberal arts school such as Lawrence.

The focus of my research involves Tibetan and Indian Buddhist philosophy, and religious traditions of the Himalayas. I am currently revising a book manuscript which focuses on the ways in which Tibetan Buddhist traditions understand the relationship between analytical reasoning and nonconceptual meditative states, and places these traditions in dialogue with some contemporary discussions in analytic philosophy. Specifically, this work concerns the 15th-century scholar Gorampa Sonam Senge and the unique ways in which he connects philosophy and meditation in his text, *Synopsis of Madhyamaka (dbu ma'i spyi don)*. In his interpretation of Buddhist theory and practice, Gorampa argues that the aim of philosophy is to eventually undermine philosophy itself. I argue that this view, in addition to challenging and explicitly criticizing the founder of what later became the dominant religious and political sect in Tibet, also complicates ongoing discussions in analytic philosophy concerning ontological commitments, the role of logic, and ways of knowing. In addition to this book project, I am also translating the *Synopsis of Madhyamaka* in collaboration with Dr. Khenpo Ngawang Jorden, director of the International Buddhist Academy in Kathmandu, Nepal.

I have published articles on topics ranging from Tibetan logic to the practice of Buddhism in American prisons. My current research is primarily grounded in textual analysis and philosophical interpretation, but I am also interested more broadly in areas of religious practice, as well as social and political issues in Asia. My plans for future research include a study of modern developments in Tibetan nonsectarianism, and an investigation of the roles that women and low-caste people play in religious rituals in the remote Himalayan region of Kinnaur, India.

I have been living and working in Tibetan, Indian, and Nepali communities for over a decade, dividing my research and teaching between the United States and South Asia. These experiences have enabled me to cultivate working relationships with a wide variety of people from various cultural and educational backgrounds, which have deeply impacted the ways in which I interact with others, both inside and outside of the classroom. The three summers that I spent teaching and living with nuns at the Jampa Choling Nunnery Institute in Kinnaur, for example, provided me with insight into the complex relationships between Hindu and Buddhist practices in Himalayan border regions of India, as well as into inequalities between men and women in Buddhist traditions. The year that I spent on a Fulbright fellowship working with monks at the International Buddhist Academy in Kathmandu, on the other hand, gave me insight into the workings of more privileged Buddhist communities.

As a teacher, I draw on my research and experiences abroad in order to enable students to think critically about the material that they study, and to help them interpret that material in creative ways. My work in South Asia has enabled me to better contextualize course content for students, showing them the real-world implications of the religious traditions that they study. Helping students navigate apparent conflicts

between religious theories contained in books and religious practices carried out in daily life has been one of my favorite activities as a teacher. Introducing these ideas to students enables them to critically re-evaluate their own assumptions about textual authority, not only with respect to religious traditions, but in other fields of study as well.

I have previously taught courses at Emory University, Smith and Hampshire Colleges, and Kathmandu University, covering topics including Buddhist thought and practice; Hindu traditions; religion in the Himalayas; and gender, religion, and popular culture in South Asia. This fall, I am teaching a course on Buddhism in America at Smith, which will introduce students to local Buddhist teachers and organizations, and which will culminate in the publication of an interactive web-based guide to Buddhism in Western Massachusetts. My course at Emory (Spring 2012) incorporated the use of Tibetan mandalas at the Emory Art Museum, on loan from the Rubin Museum of Art. At Kathmandu University (Summer 2013), I taught an introductory course on Buddhism to students from nine different countries, who ranged from recent high school graduates to students with Masters degrees. In addition to readings and class discussions, this course also incorporated visits to a number of Buddhist sites in and around the Kathmandu Valley. At Lawrence, I would like to continue incorporating learning experiences outside of formal classroom settings by working with local Buddhist groups in Appleton and surrounding areas.

In addition to my regular teaching at Smith – where I have worked since Spring 2013 – I also direct the Five College Tibetan Studies in India Program, a month-long study abroad program which takes fifteen students to the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath each January, introducing them to Tibetan history, philosophy, and culture. Additionally, I serve as the director of Smith's Buddhist Studies Concentration, an interdisciplinary program that emphasizes learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Under the auspices of this program, I have taught Tibetan language, helped students secure internships with Buddhist organizations in the U.S. and Asia, and coordinated field trips throughout New England to see well-known Buddhist teachers. In my teaching and administrative roles, I interact with students and faculty across departments to connect the Smith community to organizations outside of the college.

As an educator, I am constantly thinking about ways to utilize new tools and incorporate them into my pedagogical objectives. Collaborative course blogs, online maps, and videos have continued to be regular features of my courses. This has stemmed from my previous experience working as a technology consultant in Emory's Center for Interactive Teaching (2010-2012), where I worked with students, faculty, and staff to enable them to integrate technological tools into their teaching and learning. In addition to leading workshops and training individuals on new technologies, I worked with members of the Emory community to help them think critically about pedagogy, and to provide them with the skills and tools that would best suit their needs in the classroom. Part of my work abroad has also focused on technology and pedagogy; I developed and currently teach an online Classical Tibetan language course through Kathmandu University, which has reached students on five continents since 2012.

My enthusiasm for teaching combined with my research and experiences abroad make me an excellent candidate for the position in Asian religious traditions at Lawrence. Throughout my career, I have worked to develop my skills as a researcher and teacher so that I might work closely with undergraduates in a setting such as Lawrence's, enabling them to critically engage with the study of religion from multiple perspectives. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this position with you further, either at this year's AAR meeting in Atlanta, or at your convenience. I am happy to provide additional materials upon request.

Sincerely,
Constance Kassor