Gorampa Sönam Sengé (Go rams pa Bsod nams Seng ge, 1429-1489), one of the most renowned figures in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, was largely ignored within Buddhist Studies until the 1990s, when José Cabezón (the new AAR president) wrote *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa’s "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness*, an exploration of Gorampa’s influential treatise, *Distinguishing the Views* (*lta ba shan ’byed*). This panel picks up some of the key themes in Cabezón’s study of Gorampa and articulates them in terms of recent work in Buddhist Studies and beyond. John Dunne (UW-Madison) examines the explicit and implicit features of Gorampa’s approach to the personal transformation that is the goal of Buddhist practice. In particular, Dunne explains how Gorampa’s approach assumes that, while philosophical argument plays a key role in the transformational process, it must in the end be abandoned, and this abandonment itself points to the therapeutic, rather than simply ontological, goals of Gorampa’s approach. Examining a related theme, Connie Kassor (Lawrence University) discusses Gorampa’s distinction between the two main forms of Madhyamaka philosophy, traditionally considered the pinnacle of Buddhist thought by Tibetans. Kassor argues that in addressing his various audiences, Gorampa pushes the limits of acceptable opinion, and also that he skillfully does so by being subversively radical, while still allowing his views to be considered acceptable among his more mainstream and orthodox contemporaries. Our last presenter, Jeremy Manheim (PhD candidate, UW-Madison), takes up parallel issues by focusing on a particular problem, the notion of “inattentive cognition.” Any student who has taken a basic psychology course has accounted this issue in the case of the “invisible gorilla,” where a video involving a counting task induces more than half of the viewers to not notice a man in a gorilla suit who appears in the midst of the action. The problem of inattention turns out to be a crucial philosophical issue that bears exactly on the question of how far conceptualization—and hence, rationality—must be present in experience. Drawing on contemporary debates within philosophy, Manheim shows how the question forces certain epistemological choices, and how those choices bear in turn on the notion of buddhahood and Tibetan Buddhist soteriological choices. Finally, the panel will end with a response from José Cabezón, whose expertise in Gorampa’s philosophy will surely lead to a lively discussion.

**Panel Participants**

Roger Jackson (Carleton College), Moderator

José Cabezón (UCSB), Respondent


Connie Kassor (Lawrence University), “Walking the Razor’s Edge: Gorampa on the Rhetoric of Madhyamaka Differences.”

Abstracts of Panel Contributions

“Thinking past thought: Exploring Gorampa’s Views on Philosophy and Transformation”
John D. Dunne, UW-Madison

The philosophy of Gorampa Sonam Senge emerges in the 15th century, a vibrant time for Tibetan thought. Much of this era’s intellectual creativity springs from rivalries among Tibetan traditions, most notably Gorampa’s more established Sakya school and the then fledgling Gelugpa tradition founded by the renowned Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419). Gorampa’s critique of Tsongkhapa has proven to be especially influential, and this talk specifically examines how that critique articulates an alternative vision of the role that philosophy plays in the liberative experience of ultimate reality.

To begin, I discuss how, on Tsongkhapa’s view, previous Tibetan traditions did not sufficiently appreciate the extent of the role played by reason in the process of transformation targeted by the Buddhist path. For Tsongkhapa, these traditions failed to recognize that the transformative insight induced by contemplation of ultimate reality must directly counteract the objects of distorted cognitions that induce suffering. Tsongkhapa thus maintains that this insightful experience must be carefully structured by analytical reasoning, such that it can be fully articulated in a determinate, conceptual form.

Tsongkhapa’s emphasis on the rational character of liberative insight became his followers’ rallying cry, but it is likewise the target of Gorampa’s critique. Turning to Gorampa’s view, I will articulate the way that, for Gorampa, the role played by reason in inducing the transformative experience of the ultimate must eventually yield to a dissipation of reason itself in a contemplative state that is completely “free of conceptual structuring” (Tib, spros bral). Gorampa is thus arguing that transformation requires not only a change in the content of one’s beliefs, but also an alteration in the structure of cognition itself. To put it another way, transformation requires not only a change in what one believes, but also how one holds beliefs. Drawing out the implications of Gorampa’s view, I will show how he anticipates related insights in the mechanisms of changes that underlie Cognitive Behavior Therapy.

“Walking the Razor’s Edge: Gorampa on the Rhetoric of Madhyamaka Differences”
Connie Kassor, Lawrence University

This paper explains the ways in which Gorampa distinguishes between the so-called Svātantrika (rang rgyud pa) and Prāsaṅgika (thal ‘gyur ba) subschools of Madhyamaka philosophy in his encyclopedic text, Synopsis of the Middle Way (dub ma’i spyi ston). Gorampa’s understanding of the distinctions between these two subschools differs significantly from that of his rival Tsongkhapa, and has far-reaching implications for each philosopher’s explanation of the way in which the ultimate truth ought to be realized. By comparing these two thinkers’ views on this
issue, I will argue that one’s understanding of the ultimate truth depends on one’s ontological commitments, and results in specific epistemological consequences.

Beyond the philosophical implications of this debate, however, I will also show that Gorampa deliberately employs different kinds of rhetorical strategies in his explanation of the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika divide, and in his refutation of Tsongkhapa. I suspect that Gorampa uses different strategies because he has different audiences in mind. By writing for different audiences within the same text, I argue that Gorampa manages to walk a very fine line between orthodoxy and unconventionality, positioning himself in a way that is subversively radical, while still allowing his views to be considered acceptable among his more mainstream and orthodox contemporaries.

“Does Perception Need to be Conceptualized? Gorampa’s Critique of Inattentive Cognition.” Jeremy Manheim, PhD candidate, UW-Madison

Tibetan epistemologists were deeply concerned with the question of whether perceptual experience necessarily entailed subsequent conceptualization. Their responses had far reaching soteriological implications, for the Buddha’s experience was generally supposed to be non-conceptual. I consider how one influential Tibetan epistemologist, Gorampa (1429-1489), grappled with this question. In particular, I explore the unexpected ways in which his account of inattention (snang la ma nges) sheds light on his view of awakening.

Tibetan debates over whether experience needs to be conceptualized focused on experiences of inattention. Perceptual experience is ordinarily followed by a subsequent conceptualization of that experience. However, when distracted, attention turns to another object and we do not conceptualize our perception. For example, if someone speaks to us while we are overwhelmed by sensory input, we may have no recollection (or any other subsequent conceptualization) that someone spoke to us, let alone what they said.

To account for this phenomenon, some Tibetan scholars added “inattentive states” as a separate category alongside the received taxonomies of the Indian epistemological tradition. On the other extreme, one famously independent minded scholar, Khedrub (1385-1438), chose to deny the existence of such states out right. Gorampa, however, took a third route, showing that such states could be accommodated within preexisting Indian categories.

For these scholars such exegetical questions were intertwined with the more substantive question of whether perceptual experience was always conceptualized. Gorampa, for one, thought that experience does not need to be conceptualized, and that states of inattention were a case in point. Otherwise, he asked, ‘how could we make sense of the unconceptualized experience of the Buddha?’

My paper seeks to shed light on how Gorampa thought about inattention, how he accommodated inattention within his epistemological work, and how he understood the relation between his epistemology and his soteriology.