UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

July 13, 2021
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In the Words of the Buddha

The Buddha is said to have delivered some 84,000 teachings. The Tibetan Buddhist canon, all told, is more than 230,000 pages long. A global push to translate it all into English — described as a “100-year project” — has already been underway for several years. That effort now has a new partner to help move them closer to the finish line: UC Santa Barbara.

The university’s Buddhist Studies program and the nonprofit 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, have teamed to launch the Buddhist Texts Translation Initiative at UC Santa Barbara. It’s a major endeavor with enormous, worldwide significance.

“The study of the scripture is central to the academic study of Buddhism, just as the Bible is to the study of Judaism and Christianity,” said José I. Cabezón, director of the new initiative, who holds the Dalai Lama Endowed Chair in the Religious Studies Department at UCSB. “But unlike the Bible, the Buddhist canon is vast. In its Tibetan version, it contains 108 volumes. The 84000 Project is a decades-long initiative to translate the Tibetan Buddhist canon in its entirety. The Buddhist Studies program, part of UCSB’s religious studies department, is excited to partner with the 84000 Project to realize this historic goal of creating an accurate, readable and freely accessible translation of the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures.”

“The UCSB Buddhist Texts Translation Initiative gives students a unique opportunity to study and translate one of the most important collections of texts in the Buddhist world: Tibet’s scriptural canon,” he added. “It prepares them to do independent

research on this understudied collection, and it gives them the experience and expertise to become independent translators of Tibetan sacred literature."

The translation of Tibetan texts, including scriptures, has been central to the training of students at UCSB, explained Cabezón. And in fact several UCSB students have already published translations that are available in the 84000 Reading Room, with others underway. The new partnership formalizes existing strong ties between the campus and 84000, and provides support for training a new generation of translators whose work is grounded in the academic study of Buddhism and the rigorous study of classical texts.

Founded more than a half century ago, UC Santa Barbara's Department of Religious Studies is recognized as one of the best in the nation. Embracing multidisciplinary approaches to understand religions around the world, the department emphasizes the study of religion in diverse global contexts. The study of Buddhism is one of the department's core strengths.

"This new partnership with 84,000 is a fantastic opportunity for our department, not the least because it acknowledges our strong and longstanding commitment to the academic, critical study of original texts of the various religious traditions," said Fabio Rambelli, chair of religious studies. "Often, the academy does not consider translations very highly, but in our case, the accurate understanding of original sources is the basis for our scholarship, and in many cases, original texts cannot be accessed by our students if not in translation. This new translation initiative will further strengthen our commitment to Buddhist Studies on the one hand and to Translation Studies on the other, and hopefully it will encourage more students to engage with translations. It will also give access to Buddhist original sources to many more readers, thus contributing to a better and deeper understanding of the tradition and its cultural components."

The realization of 84000's vast vision to make the 231,000-odd pages of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon available to the Western world is predicated upon engaging a steady stream of qualified translators, scholars and teachers of the living tradition. This partnership complements that effort and underscores its commitment to ensuring that a legion of skilled translators of classical Tibetan, Sanskrit and classical Chinese remains available now and into the future.

“The 84000 is creating a bridge between the past and present and is facilitating the transmission of Buddhist knowledge between different cultural regions and languages,” said Professor Vesna A. Wallace, associate director of the new initiative’s executive committee. “We are delighted to take part in that global initiative and to be able to strengthen and expand the opportunities of our Buddhist Studies program by training and supervising the work of qualified translators into English, and enhancing the scholarly understanding of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist cultures that have expressed themselves in various Asian languages.”

The initiative will welcome two editors from 84000 as visiting scholars: Nathaniel Rich, who earned his Ph.D. at UCSB with an academic focus on the intellectual and institutional history of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism; and Rory Lindsay, an assistant professor of classical Tibetan at the University of Toronto, who conducts research related to the Tibetan Buddhist canon.

Rich and Lindsay will work closely with Cabezón and Wallace in collaborating with various translation groups, and to develop and implement a range of public lectures and workshops that promote the study of canonical Buddhist texts. The initiative will provide funding for students engaged in 84000 translation projects and for programming that investigates and illuminates the translation of Buddhist texts from historical, theoretical and practical perspectives.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.