

Jose Cabezon

File Length: 47:03

SPEAKERS

Jose—Jose Cabezon

Sarah – Sarah Richardson

PRODUCER

Betsy Moss

AUDIO EDITOR

Jesse Whitty

TRANSCRIPT EDITOR

Sam Keravica

INTERVIEW DATE: December 8, 2021

RELEASE DATE: June 21, 2022

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:01:05 - 00:00:10:08

José: Everyone, including me, should maintain that kind of critical stance in regard to the material that's being covered in the class.

00:00:12:06 - 00:01:03:01

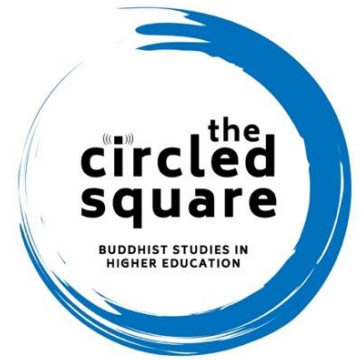
Sarah: Welcome to The Circled Square, this is the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist studies in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson and I teach at the University of Toronto. In this episode I'm meeting with Jose Cabezon who is the Dalai Lama Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and who also served as the president of the American Academy of Religion in 2020. His Research Interests center on the history of religion, scholasticism, sexuality, dreams, and he's published many very cool things, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, and there's a recent study on the monastery of Sera in Tibet and its history. He also teaches a lot and has taught a lot for probably about three decades now. So I'm really delighted and honored that he's here with us today. Hi, Jose .

00:01:04:04 - 00:01:05:20

José: Hi, Sarah. Thank you for having me.

00:01:05:24 - 00:01:30:23

Sarah: Thanks so much for being here. So when we were looking over your website at UCSB, we saw that you teach Religions of Tibet, Guided Readings in Tibetan Buddhist texts, Indian Philosophy, The Practice of Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhist Literature... I was wondering if



you could tell us a bit about what your teaching looks like right now, what it has looked like in recent years, and how that's different from your teaching earlier?

00:01:30:25 - 00:02:35:00

José: Well, right now my teaching is very different from what it usually is because I'm on sabbatical. But even though I'm on sabbatical, I'm continuing to meet with graduate students to work on translations with them. A number of them have projects with the 84000, which is a big project to translate the whole of the Tibetan canon into English. There are several groups that are working on different texts at UCSB and I've been meeting with them. But in a typical year, our teaching load at UCSB is four courses over three quarters. Typically, I do 2, 2, and 0 to give myself one quarter where I can devote more to research. So in a typical year, I will teach one large lower division general course and that's the Religions of Tibet course that typically enrolls about 200 or so students.

00:02:35:02 - 00:02:35:24

Sarah: Wow, big.

00:02:36:19 - 00:02:51:22

José: Yeah, it's big, we have TA's. So that one course typically meets twice a week and then they have sections with the TA's for about an hour a week on top of it.

00:02:51:24 - 00:02:52:09

Sarah: Yeah.

00:02:53:01 - 00:03:21:26

José: So that's one class. Then up to now I've been teaching two advanced Tibetan reading courses, which, in theory, undergraduates can also sign up for, it's a kind of middle undergraduate level, but in fact it ends up being mostly graduate students because there are few undergraduates who have the background to be able to enter into that course, which is basically a text reading course.

00:03:22:09 - 00:03:24:26

Sarah: Right, reading language, reading Tibetan.

00:03:24:28 - 00:03:30:11

José: Right, and then I teach one graduate seminar typically in the year.

00:03:30:13 - 00:03:35:26

Sarah: Okay. The graduate seminar will be what? On a specific kind of new topic of your interest? Or...

00:03:37:01 - 00:04:22:03

José: What I try to do is to cycle through a series of courses that will give graduate students kind of essential background in Tibetan Buddhism. So in one year it may be the history of

Buddhism in Tibet, in another year it may be a class on historiography, the way that Tibet has been studied in the West from the time of the missionaries up to contemporary times, and sometimes I've taught that course on ethnography of religious Tibet. So it kind of varies but occasionally I do teach a topic that's of current interest to me like monasticism, for example, Buddhist monasticism.

00:04:22:05 - 00:04:51:27

Sarah: Yeah. I wanted to ask more about this big enrollment religions of Tibet course that you do. How have you built a course that attracts 200 some students in a year? That's a huge course. I mean, for us at the University of Toronto, it would be pretty amazing to get 200 people in a room for a religions of Tibet course. So I'm wondering, how has that grown? Did it start off big or did it grow to be big? Then how do you also get students interested? Like what's bringing them in the door? What do you think?

00:04:52:10 - 00:05:46:19

José: I think that in general students are interested in religion of any kind and I think there's still quite a bit of interest, though over the years, it has kind of waxed and waned, but I think there is kind of a persistent amount of interest in Buddhism. We're helped in the enrollment in this case because it fulfills a general education requirement, so students can enroll for that class and fulfill their... I can't remember exactly what the gen-ed is called, but it's something like "cultures of the world" requirement that they have to take at least one class in. But a lot of them really kind of have prior interest in Buddhism and they want to learn more about Buddhism. Maybe over time the class has also developed a bit of a reputation for being a kind of interesting class.

00:05:48:07 - 00:05:54:29

Sarah: What are the interesting things, do you think, for students about it? How do you structure it or how do you make that material come alive for them?

00:05:55:28 - 00:07:13:28

José: The first thing I do, and this is actually an interesting question in Buddhist pedagogy, if we want to call it that, or the pedagogy of Buddhism, is how to situate yourself at the beginning of a class. In my case, I'm a Buddhist and I have a long background as a Buddhist. Many of my colleagues have said that they'd like to keep students guessing about their own religious background and that this serves a good pedagogical function in the class that kind of keeps students asking questions and wondering what the professors' relationship to the material is. I, from the very beginning, have taken a different tack, and I've kind of come clean at the beginning about what my background is, the fact that I was a Buddhist monk for ten years and I show them pictures of myself in my PowerPoint presentations of me as a monk and translating for the Dalai Lama and so forth. I think this kind of piques their interest in another way, whether to disclose, or for pedagogical purposes to not to disclose.

00:07:14:00 - 00:08:16:01

José: I think those are kind of interesting questions. I mean, in the course evaluations students often say "I really appreciate the fact that you told us a bit about yourself at the beginning of the course". The downside to this is that I think students sometimes assume that because of your background that you're somehow authoritative and that your opinions perhaps weigh more than others' opinions, for example, than the textbook or than their own opinion about the material. So one has to kind of battle against that while acknowledging the fact that I have this long relationship with Buddhism, not only academic relationship but personal relationship, that in fact, everyone, including me, should maintain that kind of critical stance in regard to the material that's being covered in the class.

00:08:17:04 - 00:08:25:15

Sarah: Then why did you call it "Religions of Tibet" instead of "Tibetan Buddhism"? Why is it given that title as a course?

00:08:26:14 - 00:09:05:03

José: Because I cover two minority religions in Tibet. I cover Bon, which is, if we want to call it that, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, indigenous religion, and I cover Tibetan Islam. I do one class on Tibetan Islam, which again, probably 99% of Tibet is Buddhist or maybe 95%, but Bon and Islam are definite parts of the religious landscape in Tibet. I've had an interest in both, but especially in Tibetan Islam and so I like to cover that in at least one class.

00:09:05:08 - 00:09:20:19

Sarah: Great. Then is the class... I'm just curious, is it structured historically like a story of progress marching forward from the seventh century to now? Or is it thematic? How do you organize the weeks of the course?

00:09:22:09 - 00:10:24:05

José: I do a section on history, I begin by surveying Buddhism in India because a lot of the students come into the class and they don't have any notion at all of what Buddhism is or how Buddhism came from India to Tibet. So I do a kind of overview of Buddhism in India very briefly, and give an intro to basic Buddhist doctrines like the four noble truths, the three trainings, I tell them a bit about the life of the Buddha, and I bring it up to the time that Buddhism entered Tibet. Then I have a section on the history of Buddhism in Tibet. So then the history part ends and we will spend four weeks looking at four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, plus Bon, plus Islam. We look at the Nyingma school and the Kagyu school. So for example, when we're studying the Kagyu they read the biography of Milarepa in the class.

00:10:24:29 - 00:10:55:21

José: Then I spend several weeks on one doctrinal, meditative tradition. In this case, I focus on the Tibetan Lamrim, the stages of the path, and they read a text, a translation, and we discuss that for two or three weeks. Then I look at one institution and the institution that I look at, because of my own familiarity with it, is Sera Monastery. So that's kind of the way that I structured the course.

00:10:56:18 - 00:11:09:12

Sarah: When you do something like Lamrim and you read about Lamrim meditation do you invite them, do you do meditation with them or ask them to do that as part of a component of the course? Or is that something you don't do with them?

00:11:10:10 - 00:12:21:28

José: In that class not often. I have, for example, mostly at the beginning of the class when I'm talking about the trīśīkṣā, the three trainings and the training in samadhi, I explain what mental concentration is and I invite them for a minute or so to count their breaths in the class to see how long they can maintain concentration for. But I don't do very much of that in the class. In Canada you probably don't have this concern, but in the States the separation of church and state should be maintained and the question is where exactly does that get breached? I mean, it's an interesting question. I have a colleague who retired recently. She works in the area of religion and cognitive science. We talked about this once, about whether or not it was legally kosher to teach meditation in a public university. Her response to me, I thought it was very interesting that she said "athletes are trained and they're told to do things, so why is this any different?"

00:12:22:11 - 00:12:47:04

Sarah: I mean, it could make a difference certainly in some some people's perspectives. But that doesn't make their perspective necessarily the authoritative one either, right. I mean, meditation can be seen as religion or it can be seen as mental training. Like cultivating the tools of your mind, which isn't so different than what we're supposed to do when we read and write as well, arguably.

00:12:47:09 - 00:13:10:01

José: Yeah. I mean, meditation has been secularized now to the point where it could probably be presented in this way. But when it's being taught in a class on Buddhism, then presumably what you're doing is teaching the specific Buddhist form of meditation within the context of the religion.

00:13:11:06 - 00:13:41:03

Sarah: So when you teach this course to this wonderful group of undergraduates, introducing them to the religions of Tibet across these 16 weeks, what is the big takeaway? What do you want them to come away from the course knowing or having their minds changed about something? Do you think you're to unpack some kinds of expectations or assumptions that they've come to the class with, and what is the big takeaway that you want them to have at the end?

00:13:43:14 - 00:13:49:29

José: Yeah, it's actually not 16 weeks, it's ten weeks because we're in the quarter system and so everything is compressed as a result.

00:13:51:09 - 00:13:53:24

Sarah: Ten weeks is fast! It's a lot to do in ten weeks.

00:13:53:26 - 00:14:52:03

José: It is, it is. I haven't taught the class for a long time, I've kept it kind of lean and mean and I know what works and what doesn't work. This is one of the advantages of teaching a class over and over again, you can fine tune it to make it go well even in a short period of time like 10 weeks. What do I want them to come out of the class with? I don't think it's any one thing or even any combination of things, I think different students do, as a matter of fact, come out of the class with different things. Among those is simply an understanding that there are people in the world who think very differently than they think, who believe that the world is a very different place from what they think the world is.

00:14:53:18 - 00:15:32:21

José: Maybe this is a goal, to have them see the world through a different lens than they're normally used to. I think in the case of Tibet, it is in part to kind of break stereotypes. I mean, the glamorization or the fetishization of Tibet as a kind of magical, mystical place where there's flying lamas and things like that. So a lot of scholarship over the past 30 years has tackled this issue and has shown the origins of this and the problems with this.

00:15:33:16 - 00:16:37:00

José: I find that in the undergraduate classroom, students don't even have enough knowledge of Tibet to be able to fetishize it in this way. So part of my task and part of the goal, I think, is simply to introduce them to a different part of the world that they wouldn't otherwise come into contact with for them to realize that there are people who think very differently than they think, but also to introduce them to some of the great ideas of the religious world, in this case, the Buddhist world, and I think that they appreciate all of those things. They tend to not appreciate the historical part as much as the ideas part. I try to make the case that the two things kind of go hand in hand, that you can't really understand the ideas unless you understand the history and vice versa. But most undergraduates, I think, are interested really more in the ideas than they are in the history.

00:16:38:01 - 00:17:06:16

Sarah: How much does modern politics come into the class? I mean, it's a challenge we all face, how to talk about an area like Tibet where there's ongoing cultural genocide going on in China's Tibet. But how openly do you feel there's space to talk about that with your students? Is it the right space in an undergraduate classroom? How do you deal with that?

00:17:07:06 - 00:18:43:10

José: In part, that comes up naturally in the presentation of the kind of historical sketch of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. We have a fairly large population of foreign students, and especially from China. I don't know what the actual numbers are, but it's something like 20% of the entire undergraduate student body may be Chinese students. So I usually have a fair number of Chinese students in the class. I mean, simply to be able to see the history of Tibet presented, at least until a certain period of time, but more or less independent of Chinese history, that it isn't

the history of a province of China, that Tibet kind of had its own history up until the present. That in itself is kind of eye opening for many students. When we get to the modern period I try to present my view and I use John Powers' textbook, I think it's called *An Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, and the view of the textbook, which is that Tibet is a kind of colonized country and that Tibetan people would like to be able to exercise certain freedoms like religious freedom, and that this is thwarted by the policies of the Chinese government...

00:18:44:18 - 00:18:46:26

Sarah: Linguistic freedom, which is now at stake too.

00:18:47:25 - 00:19:32:27

José: Yeah, that's right. The ability to kind of preserve and teach their own language. I tell students to read the Chinese point of view and throughout the class, especially in the context of teaching about the monastery, I talk about the feudal system that existed in Tibet and the fact that serfs were exploited by landowners, by nobles, aristocrats, and the government. So I try to present a kind of balanced picture and allow students to kind of make their own decision. But again, I make it clear what my own position is.

00:19:34:26 - 00:19:48:04

Sarah: Do you build your course... Like, what kind of assignments are you giving them to generate their learning in this course? Is it like tests or papers or do they do other kinds of things? What are they making for you?

00:19:49:01 - 00:20:35:04

José: It's a combination of things. So very early in the course, I have them watch... What is it, what is it called? It may just be called *The Buddha*, it's a movie that lasts about an hour. I think it was made with funding from the Ho Foundation. They have to write a short paper on that, there are some essays that they have to write in the course, and then there are tests. Because the course is so large there's both a so-called objective section to the test, kind of multiple choice type of thing, but then they also have essays and then the graduate students have a great deal of freedom, what they do in their section. So they often-times give them their own assignments.

00:20:37:25 - 00:21:04:10

Sarah: You also do a lot of teaching of graduate students. I think at this point you're referring to graduate students as your TA's in this course who can exercise some freedom in creating different kinds of assignments, which is great. But can we now pivot a bit to talking about like what is the big difference for you between like how you conceptualize of the kinds of teaching you need to do for an undergraduate classroom versus what's different about training and working with graduate students?

00:21:05:06 - 00:21:41:18

José: I mean, in this undergraduate class and others that are kind of more specialized that I've taught in the past I can't assume that they really know anything at all about Tibet or about

Buddhism. I always have to start from the very beginning. So even if it's supposedly an upper division class, at the very least I have to kind of rehearse what Buddhism is, how Buddhism started, and what the basic doctrines of Buddhism are before then you get into the actual subject matter. Of course, in the graduate classroom you obviously don't have to do that. You have students already specializing in Buddhism who are taking the class.

00:21:43:08 - 00:23:05:17

José: The goal in the undergraduate course, as I said, is to kind of expose them to a culture that's very different from their own and to have them think about what it means that there are people in the world who think in this very different way. In the graduate classroom it's really to prepare them to be experts in Buddhism. We're fortunate at UCSB to have four professors, four buddhologists who each specialize in a different area of the world. We have someone who specializes in Japan, in China, I do Tibet, my colleague Vesna Wallace does both India and Mongolia. So students can kind of gain breadth in regard to the Buddhist tradition by taking different courses from the four of us. But what that means also is that each of us has the luxury to be able to focus on our own specialisation. In my case, my goal is to kind of give them a broad background in doctrines, major doctrines and schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the history of the development of Buddhism, a little bit of the ethnography, and as I mentioned before, the kind of second order historiography of how Tibet has been studied over time.

00:23:05:26 - 00:24:05:27

José: Yeah, that I think is kind of the minimum background that's necessary to give students the wherewithal to be able to call themselves specialists in Tibet, which many of them will do at the end of receiving a PhD. here, and also to prepare them to teach in these fields. So that's kind of the the goal of teaching graduate seminars. Now, the language class is a kind of third component to my teaching that in many ways is my favorite form of teaching because I like reading texts and I like reading texts with the graduate students. Apart from teaching them Tibetan and the nuances of reading classical Tibetan, it's also an opportunity to have them think critically about texts, to teach them to ask questions about what the text is saying.

00:24:05:29 - 00:24:23:28

Sarah: Hmm, yeah. The kinds of questions that are possible. How have your students changed over the years? Are the kinds of conversations you're having around the questions you can bring to a text different than what they were 20 years ago?

00:24:25:17 - 00:24:32:02

José: Yeah. I thought you were going to ask me about undergraduates, and undergraduates have also changed substantially...

00:24:33:10 - 00:24:34:20

Sarah: Well, we can talk about both. I want to know both.

00:24:36:17 - 00:25:38:28

José: Undergraduates have changed insofar as we have fewer majors than we used to, maybe about a third of the majors that we used to have. I think when I first arrived here religious studies had something like 200 majors and now we have maybe 60 or 70. This is true across every discipline of the humanities, it's not just religious studies. In part, I think that's because students are thinking and they're being pushed by parents to think more pragmatically, and they tend to think that humanities degrees, degrees in religious studies aren't useful for future careers. So as a result, they tend to major in something else, but they still love the study of religion and they still love the study of Buddhism. So whenever they get a chance they take electives or they try to fulfill requirements by taking classes in religious studies.

00:25:40:06 - 00:26:41:15

José: But there is a kind of more pragmatic, professionalized mindset among undergraduates now than there was, say, 20 years ago when I first arrived at UCSB. At the graduate level, maybe there's more concern about professional issues, like kind of preparing for the professorhood. I mean, when I was a graduate student, we basically took classes almost in a kind of haphazard way. I think if I saw a syllabus at all throughout my entire graduate training, I don't really remember it. It was mostly the professor would come in and say, "okay, now we're going to read this book" or "now we're going to study this text", and it was very disorganized, but also kind of refreshing.

00:26:43:14 - 00:27:29:15

José: Whereas now, not only is everything kind of laid out very carefully ahead of time so everyone knows what they're doing throughout the quarter through the syllabus, but also on top of that, graduate students expect a certain amount of professional training, you know? How and where to publish, how to apply for jobs, how to interview. Whereas in my generation, there was really none of that. So I think there is a kind of expectation on the part of graduate students to receive a kind of professional formation that didn't used to exist in the past. So that's one of the big differences, I think.

00:27:29:17 - 00:27:37:07

Sarah: Yeah. Though the irony being that there's so many fewer jobs compared to the number of PhD graduates.

00:27:38:23 - 00:28:13:16

José: Yeah, I don't know if that's the case. I mean, I think there are more graduates now for sure, but the number of jobs have always been fewer. But it's also been the case that over the past several decades the number of jobs in Buddhist studies has increased because small religious studies departments have realized that it kind of makes sense to have a diverse department and oftentimes to have somebody teaching Buddhism as one of the religions that are covered.

00:28:13:18 - 00:28:14:18

Sarah: Sure, yeah.

00:28:15:12 - 00:28:48:15

José: In the 1970s, 80s, that wasn't always the case. You could have a religious studies department that consisted just of basically Old and New Testament. So with that greater diversification has come opportunities also for jobs. Maybe there are fewer jobs per student who is graduating, because we're producing more PhDs now than we have in the past.

00:28:51:06 - 00:29:47:15

Sarah: So in preparation for this we read your 2020 AAR Presidential Address, *The Study of Buddhism and the AAR*, which was a lovely scientific kind of analysis of like... I loved it. You were using all these data points of where people were trained, where they were placed, where they published. It was like a statistical analysis of watching a field grow and change, which I thought was really lovely. In it you're sort of tracing these shifts, like the paradigm shifts of where Buddhist studies happened, like how it happened, where it happened, the kind of big story being a shift from area studies into religious studies and that that being one of the hallmarks then of what's happened in North American Buddhist studies that's given it the flavor that it has and the specific interests that it has.

00:29:47:28 - 00:31:08:00

Sarah: So I wonder, as you've had time sort of to reflect on this further, do you see this continuing? Do you think religious studies departments are the home, are they going to continue to be the the right... Or I don't know if it's right or wrong, but the appropriate home of where Buddhism is going to be taught in higher education? I'm asking because here in Toronto, we have places in our own university where we have we have Buddhist studies being taught in religion, but we also have these like Buddhism, Psychology and Mental Health programs that are very different actually in their goals. The students who come to those programs have very different goals. They're becoming social workers or therapists or other kinds of things. But Buddhism is in that title too. So we're almost watching these kind of different sort of silos of other places where Buddhism is entering the university, at least in our own case. So I'm wondering if you feel that Buddhist studies in religious studies is going to be the thing that continues for the next few decades? Or if you can imagine kind of other shapes to that?

00:31:09:14 - 00:32:03:04

José: Buddhist studies is a fairly conservative field. It doesn't change easily, even with the shifts that I suggested took place in that article, kind of a more area studies based model to a religious studies model, that didn't happen easily and it didn't happen all at once. It took decades to happen. Even after it happened, I think, Buddhist studies and the old mode that is as kind of focused on texts and focused on doctrines is still kind of the core of the discipline in many ways. But one of the things that I argue in that essay is that religious studies has served to kind of open up buddhologists' worldview.

00:32:03:15 - 00:33:10:12

José: By allowing conversations with other subfields within religion, it has acted to make buddhologists ask and answer a series of questions that they probably wouldn't have outside of the context of those broader conversations. The fact that scholars of Buddhism are, in fact,

availing themselves of those opportunities seem clear from that kind of statistical data that I presented. If you look at the number of papers in Buddhism, I can't remember what the exact number was, what percentage of the papers on Buddhism are presented outside of Buddhism related sections of the AAR... I even found one paper, a Buddhism paper being presented in a Bible section. The diversity of the venues in the AAR where buddhologists present their work is pretty amazing and it's only increased over time. I think that that will continue to be the case.

00:33:11:16 - 00:33:23:17

Sarah: You've talked a lot about the need for Buddhist studies to become a more inclusive field. So what does inclusivity mean? Like what does this vision of inclusivity look like?

00:33:23:28 - 00:34:28:22

José: Having different voices, people with different perspectives to be able to ask their own sets of questions from their own vantage point. For example, I don't think that I would have been interested in issues of sexuality were it not for the fact that I'm a sexual minority, that I'm a gay man who's wanted to find out what Buddhism has to say about different forms of sexuality. So the fact that you have different people with different concerns asking different types of questions obviously enriches the field. I think that the same thing applies to race and ethnicity and social class. It's only now really that we're beginning to think about it. So the more diversity we have, the different sets of questions that arise, and this is obviously beneficial to the discipline.

00:34:28:24 - 00:34:45:03

Sarah: Yeah, and what directions in the field that you see growing around you are most exciting to you? What do you think kind of holds the most hope for the future, for positive growth?

00:34:46:19 - 00:35:34:29

José: I don't know because I don't know that I really think about growth. I tend to think about what makes for interesting conversations rather than what's going to make the field or the discipline grow. I think people of my generation, in fact, I think all buddhologists in general don't think very much, at least I don't think very much about what the future will bring. I think more about trying to wrap up a project I started a long time ago and try to finish. So I really don't have these kind of broad visions about what the future should be like.

00:35:35:28 - 00:36:05:21

Sarah: Right, and it doesn't have to be one thing. So what are the favorite projects you want to wrap up? What's the heart project that you want to still see? I mean, the book on Sera Monastery came out, which looks like a lot of work, and the website that also a lot of work has gone into it. So what's still on your plate, if you could do it all or if you could just do some what's closest to your heart now?

00:36:07:16 - 00:37:07:23

José: There was a time when I thought of writing a very interdisciplinary book on comparison, on the process of comparison, looking at the way in which different comparative disciplines use

comparison, the discipline of comparative literature, of comparative politics, of comparative religions, and then also to look at the way that cognitive scientists were viewing the act of comparison. I don't know that I'll ever get to that book. There's a section of my library that contains all of the things that I had read at one point. But maybe, who knows? Then there are a number of other things. I'd like to do a book on dreams, on the interpretation of dreams and the function of dreams and the interpretation of dreams in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

00:37:07:25 - 00:37:33:03

Sarah: Yeah, that would be wonderful. I guess just to finish up here, is there anything that you think students who are newly interested in pursuing Buddhist studies in a more sustained way, undergrads who are thinking about going to grad school, what's the thing you would want them to know or what's a piece of advice you could give them?

00:37:37:12 - 00:38:48:12

José: Usually when students like that contact me about maybe applying to UCSB's graduate program, I usually try to have at least a telephone or nowadays a Zoom conversation with them to try and lay out a kind of realistic vision of what it means, what their goals are, why they want to have an advanced degree, and what it will mean for them to do a PhD. Some students don't understand the degree to which language study is kind of central to the field, and even though there are subfields of Buddhism where that is less important, I think it's still pretty essential. For example, the study of Buddhism in America in our institution is done under American religions and is not done under Buddhist studies and I think that that bespeaks something about the nature of Buddhist studies, which is that we're still a kind of language based field.

00:38:48:26 - 00:38:53:19

Sarah: Right. So you tell them to take a pause and go get those languages going.

00:38:54:12 - 00:39:06:09

José: Yeah, and whether or not this is what they had in mind and whether they're willing to kind of make the commitment to doing that over a period of time.

00:39:06:27 - 00:39:30:05

Sarah: Then since it's come up a few times and I want to make sure our podcast listeners have the opportunity to hear it from you, can you tell us kind of the in-a-nutshell, the story of your life, how you got to be where you are? Like how did a Latino gay man come up to be the Dalai Lama professor of Buddhist studies? What's the story there?

00:39:31:27 - 00:40:53:03

José: I was born in Cuba, my parents came to the United States when I was very young, when I was four years old, but I spoke Spanish at home so Spanish was really my first language and I still speak Spanish at home. Raised in Boston, finished high school early and then was really at that point interested in science. So I went to Caltech to study physics. I was there for three years and then in my junior year started reading about Buddhism. A friend on my birthday told

me that I could pick out any book from the Caltech bookstore as my birthday present, and I chose a book on Buddhism, John Blofeld's Tantric Mysticism of Tibet. There weren't that many books on Buddhism back then. That kind of got me hooked and then I started reading more, and then I convinced the school to allow me to spend my last year studying Buddhism. So although I have a degree from Caltech, which is a technical scientific school, my degree is actually three years of science and one year of Buddhism. I spent one semester at the University of Wisconsin and one semester in India at the Library of Tibetan Works in the Archives.

00:40:55:02 - 00:42:22:09

José: At that point I was ordained and then I came back to do graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, where I studied under Geshe Sopa for about three years, and then went to Sera Monastery in India and lived in the monastery and studied a bit of the traditional curriculum while I was also writing my dissertation. Then when I got back I wasn't really thinking... When I say that my generation, I don't think that we thought very pragmatically, we kind of just... I mean, in my case is certainly true. I was in a graduate program because it allowed me to study Buddhism and I really wasn't thinking about what my next step is going to be. But when I did finish, thanks to Roger Jackson, actually, he asked me what I was going to do and I said that I had no idea. He said that there was a one year position that was open at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota so I applied for it and I got that and then that kind of started my teaching career. I taught for a year at Carleton and a year at Trinity College in Hartford, a year at Ohio State, and then I taught in Denver at the Iliff School of Theology for 12 years.

00:42:23:18 - 00:43:02:21

José: It was quite a long stint there. It was really a wonderful time in my life because it allowed me to engage in conversations with theologians, mostly theologians, who in many ways broadened my outlook and my views, even in regard to the Buddhist material that I was studying. So after that, after being there for 12 years then I got this the chair, the Dalai Lama chair at UC Santa Barbara, and I've been here for now 20 years, I think this is my 20th year.

00:43:02:23 - 00:43:31:16

Sarah: Oh, wow. I mean, you said at the very outset of this interview that you're very open with your students about your history and about your monastic training and your Buddhist positionality. But was that difficult to navigate? Kind of the difference between academic spaces and academic discourse of what's expected from the professor versus... You took ordination in those years, too, so was there tension there for you or was it straightforward?

00:43:34:15 - 00:44:59:15

José: There probably was some tension at the beginning. The whole idea of approaching religion, approaching Buddhism objectively or scientifically, or maintaining critical distance from Buddhism as an object of study really wasn't as strong as it is today. I mean, today people talk about the insider/outsider question and whether or not insiders are kind of compromised or whether an insider perspective gives you a greater sympathy therefore understanding for the religion. These questions weren't really being asked when I first started, and therefore maybe

we just kind of approached the study of Buddhism naively, in many ways. But at the same time I think that there were many different types of voices. I mean, in my department, for example, at the University of Wisconsin when I was a graduate student, there were historians, ethnographers, there was Geshe Sopa who was a Tibetan lama who taught basically doctrinal texts. Steve Beyer was there for quite a while and he had a more multi-disciplinary point of view.

00:45:00:03 - 00:45:05:27

Sarah: My ears piqued also when you said you had one year at Ohio State, I went to Ohio State for my Masters.

00:45:06:23 - 00:45:07:08

José: Oh, you did?

00:45:07:10 - 00:45:13:04

Sarah: Yeah, and it's right now very close to my mind because I don't know if you heard, but John Huntington just passed away.

00:45:13:17 - 00:45:39:03

José: I did hear that. That's very sad. Yeah, I knew John and Susan, and my time there was really great. It was a great place to be. There was actually no religious studies program. Religion was taught in a place called the Center for Comparative Studies. I don't know whether that's changed or not. It was a very interesting time

00:45:39:20 - 00:45:47:03

Sarah: I mean, when I was there it was just art history with both of them. So we were all their Buddhist art history babies.

00:45:47:23 - 00:45:48:08

José: I see.

00:45:49:13 - 00:45:55:11

Sarah: So thank you so much for your time today, Jose. Thank you so much for talking with us about your teaching.

00:45:56:17 - 00:45:58:02

José: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.