

# Explaining the Dalai Lama



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A survey conducted last year found that the Pope is the most recognizable religious figure in the world. The second most recognizable is the Dalai Lama. The Pope's high profile is understandable given that he is the head of 1.2 billion Catholic Christians living in more than a hundred countries. But the Dalai Lama? He is from what was until recently a little-known country in central Asia, isolated behind the Himalayas, and he is revered by only 8 million Buddhists in Tibet, Mongolia, Sikkim and Bhutan. How has this monk become so recognizable and so esteemed? And exactly who or what is a Dalai Lama?

Tibet was a unique country in many ways and none more so than in its political institutions. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the heads of the several sects of Tibetan Buddhism, all monks, assumed such power that they became in fact petty monarchs, some actually ruling small de facto states. But of course having a monk as a ruler created a very particular problem. Because these monk-rulers were celibate, they had no sons to inherit their thrones. The need for orderly succession after the death of the ruler was solved in an ingenious way - by drawing on Buddhist doctrine. It was claimed that these monk-rulers were bodhisattvas, spiritual beings who had taken a vow to postpone their complete enlightenment and continue to be reborn until all beings reached enlightenment. So when a monk-ruler died it was believed that he reincarnated as a recently born child who was subsequently discovered, "identified" and then proclaimed to be the old ruler reborn. A regent was appointed to reign until the child reached the age of 20.

Lobsang Gyatso was such a child. Born in 1617 he was proclaimed the reincarnation of a powerful and important monastic ruler of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and took his full ordination as a monk in 1638. Wise and politically astute, and assisted by the equally astute minister Sonam Rabten, Gyatso managed to unify the country's many quarrelling factions, establish the Gelugpa as the dominant sect of Buddhism, and make himself the first ruler of all Tibet for many centuries. He was a prolific writer and won respect as a scholar of remarkable depth and vision. He also made Lhasa the capital of Tibet and built the Potala Palace, one of the world's most recognizable and iconic buildings. After his death he came to be called the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama because he supposedly had four reincarnations before. The title Dalai Lama was bestowed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the line by Altan Kahn, the then ruler of Mongolia; *dalai* being a Mongol word meaning 'ocean' (i.e. ocean of wisdom) and *lama* being a Tibetan word meaning 'teacher' or 'spiritual guide'. The present Dalai Lama is of course the 14<sup>th</sup> in the line.

All Dalai Lamas are believed by Tibetans to be bodhisattvas, specifically Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. The belief that a human can also be a deity is perhaps not as alien as it might at first seem. According to several ancient inscriptions and also the *Mahavamsa*, several Sri Lankan kings claimed to be bodhisattvas. Many Thais believe their king is a manifestation of Vishnu, and many older, more traditional Japanese still believe their emperor is descended from the sun god. Western political theory did not go quite as far as to claim its monarchs were divine, but almost. Until recently most claimed to rule by 'divine right, and even today Queen Elisabeth's full title includes the words 'by the grace of God' (*Dei gratia*) as does that of Spain's king. And according to Catholic doctrine the Pope is infallible on matters of faith, infallibility being a quality usually attributed to, if not divine beings, then to humans with a hot-line to the divine.

After the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the most important one was the 13<sup>th</sup>, another remarkable ruler. In 1913 he abolished capital punishment, decades before several European countries had, and a desiderata still unreached in the US. Some of his other modernizing reforms were less successful due mainly to opposition from conservative monastic hierarchy. His most important political achievement was to proclaim Tibet's independence from China in 1912. He even had some connection with Sri Lanka. It is a little known fact that when Anagarika Dharmapala founded the Mahabodhi Society in 1891 he asked the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to be its patron, a request the lama accepted. While Dharmapala often complained that his own and most other Buddhist countries were slow in giving financial support for the new society, the Dalai Lama was generously forthcoming. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama died in 1933 and his successor, Tenzing Gyatso, is the present title holder.

The Dalai Lama was only 18 when China invaded Tibet in order to “liberate it from the imperialists.” There were exactly seven “imperialists” in the country at the time; three British diplomats, two British trade agents, and two German mountain climbers. The young ruler was still doing his studies at the time and knew little of Tibet’s politics and nothing of the cut-throat and predatory politics of the communists. For nine years he tried to keep on good terms with the Chinese while at the same time endeavouring to restrain his people’s desire to drive them out. On the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1959 resentment over Chinese arrogance towards the Tibetans who they saw as “uncouth, dirty and backward” and their ever-increasing restrictions on Buddhism, spilled over into revolt. The result was inevitable. The revolt, provoked by “sinister outside forces” according to the communists, was brutally crushed and over the next 20 years it has been estimated that a third of Tibet’s population died from hunger and maltreatment, particularly during Mao’s disastrous Cultural Revolution. The Dalai Lama managed to flee, the Chinese initially claiming that he has been kidnapped by yet more “sinister outside forces”. When he turned up in India and condemned the Chinese he suddenly became “a yellow-robed counter revolutionary in the pay of the imperialists”. From then to now approximately 250,000 Tibetans have fled into exile bringing tales of political and religious persecution.

Having lived with Tibetan refugees in India and visited Tibet twice, in 1985 and most recently in 2009, I know something of the situation there. The Chinese claim that most exiles are from the former ruling class who want to return to the old days when they controlled everything. Not true! The overwhelming majority are ordinary folk. They claim that the Dalai Lama wants independence. Not true! He is realistic enough to know that such a goal is no longer attainable. He has publically stated many times that he is simply asking for autonomy within the Chinese state, what the Chinese initially promised to grant when they invaded in 1950. The Chinese claim that the majority of Tibetans are happy under their rule. This is defiantly not true. During my last trip to the country I talked (very carefully) with numerous Tibetans, from monks, to my drivers, to shop owners, to farmers, and after nervously looking around to make sure no one was listening, all who were brave enough to reply whispered that they long for the return of the Dalai Lama.

Today the Chinese reluctantly admit that “mistakes were made” in governing Tibet in the past, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. Those mistakes are still to be seen all over the country; ransacked monasteries, defaced temples and smashed Buddha images, and almost no Tibetans in the upper rank of the public service, the police or the administration. The Chinese know what the Tibetans really think of them and they don’t trust them. The life expectancy of the average Tibetan is nine years less than that of the average Chinese. The Chinese insist that the Tibetans have complete religious freedom. This is completely untrue. The penalty for even possessing a picture of the Dalai Lama is imprisonment. Both in Tibet and China there is more religious freedom than in the past, but all religions are monitored closely and the slightest sign of resistance to government interference is met with the rubber truncheon and the electric cattle prod. And of course the Chinese claim that all such critical observations are nothing more than propaganda by those “sinister outside forces.”

When the Dalai Lama arrived in India in 1959 he was at a loss as to what do. His country had been swallowed up by a huge and belligerent neighbour. Unlike the Palestinians, his people’s cause attracted almost no international interest. He spoke no English. India, anxious not to antagonize Chinese, did its best to isolate the Dalai Lama from all outside contacts. His and his people’s cause seemed grim indeed. But after the Sino-Indian war in 1962 the Dalai Lama was given permission to travel. Haltingly at first but then with more confidence he began to step out into the limelight. He wrote an autobiography, *My Land and My People*, he taught himself English and began travelling overseas. Since then he has met with presidents and prime ministers and was awarded to Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his efforts to free his people through peaceful means. His efforts to promote Buddhism include participating in numerous international conferences where he is eagerly sort for his opinions on inter-religious understanding, meditation, science and the mind, and he has authored more than 30 books.

All Buddhist countries have their religious leaders; Maha Nayakas in Sri Lanka, Sangha Rajas in Thailand, Sangha Nayakas in Cambodia, Chairman of the Buddha Sasana Council in Myanmar, and other monks with various titles in other countries. But all of them are little-known beyond their

respective countries. The Dalai Lama has earned an international audience, not just because of his wisdom but also because of his smiling approachability, his kindness and his very obvious good-will. He is by far Buddhism's best spokesman today.

Some years ago, a hard-nosed journalist for an international newspaper told me that his next assignment was to do an interview with the Dalai Lama. He told me that he was sick of hearing all the accolades heaped on the Dalai Lama and that he was going to ask him some changeling questions and demand answers. For example, "Why was Tibet so backward when you were the ruler?" When the journalist's article was published I read it and it was as fulsome in its praise of the monk as most others. I asked the journalist: "What happened with your determination to be hard with the Dalai Lama". He replied: "I feel sorry for the Chinese. They have to try to convince the world that the Dalai Lama is the Devil incarnate when in fact he is the loveliest person I have ever met."