Compassion In the Face of Domination:

The Tragedy and Triumph of the Current Dalai Lama’s Life

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The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of a holy monk who was born over 600 years ago. The current Dalai Lama is the 14th reincarnation of that holy monk. The Dalai Lama’s message has always been influential in Tibet, yet during his lifetime, modern communication has developed a more interconnected world. While the Dalai Lama’s message would have spread around the world without him being exiled and China brutally suppressing Tibet, what made it much more influential to the rest of the world was the grace his Holiness demonstrated during the tragedy. He exemplified living a meaningful life based on peace and harmony, which resonated with a wider audience of non-believers. The triumph of the Dalai Lama’s message of compassion impacting people around the world was a result of it being authenticated and emphasized by the tragedy of the Tibetan people being oppressed and the Dalai Lama’s exile.

**The Dalai Lama’s Reincarnations**

 In Tibetan Buddhism, there are two ways one can be reborn. The most common method is involuntary rebirth, where one is reborn because of their inner desire to continue towards achieving enlightenment. According to Alexander Berzin, the other is for people who are reborn with the purpose of finishing their previous reincarnates work and influencing people with the power of compassion to help them achieve enlightenment. These people are called *tulkus*, who are Tibetan Buddhist Lamas, meaning spiritual leaders. Their reincarnates have the responsibility for a specific lineage of teachings in Tibetan Buddhism. Most reincarnate lamas are the leaders of their monastery.[[1]](#footnote-1) They are religious and, commonly, political leaders that are revered as defined figures with a lot of power. One of the *tulkus* is the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of the 14th century holy monk, Gedun Drupa. A BBC article describes the long process of finding the reincarnate by starting at the beginning of the search when one of the High Lamas, the people who are in charge of finding the reincarnate, has a vision or dream. To find the rebirth, they will often meditate near a holy lake called Lhamo La-Tso, and if the previous Dalai Lama was cremated they will follow the direction of the smoke.[[2]](#footnote-2) Barbara O'Brien says in her article that when they find a boy who they think could be the rebirth, the child endures a variety of tests. These include him identifying belongings or the previous Dalai Lama and a secret set of criteria.[[3]](#footnote-3) The High Lamas then confirm their findings, and the boy begins his preparation for spiritual leadership by relearning the knowledge of the previous Dalai Lamas.

For perspective, it is interesting to highlight some other Dalai Lama reincarnations. The article “Short Biographies of the Previous Dalai Lamas” describes the previous Dalai Lamas, beginning with Gedun Drupa. Born named Pema Dorjee, he was the first Dalai Lama who lived from 1391 to 1474. He intensely studied Tibetan scripts, and at the age of fourteen he took his novice vows which gave him the religious name, Gedun Drupa. He showed a large interest in Buddhism and quickly became famous for combining study and practice. His reincarnation, Sangye Phel, was born in the year 1475 and died in 1542. It is said that when he first learned to speak he told his father that he was Pema Dorjee. When Sangye was eleven, he was recognized as Gedun Drupa’s reincarnate and was eventually given the religious name Gedun Gyatso. Ranu Sicho Pelzang was the third Dalai Lama who was born in 1543. He was recognized as Gedun Drupa’s reincarnation when he was three years old and was given the religious name Sonam Gyatso. He established Phende Lekshe Ling which became the personal monastery for the Dalai Lama, called the Namgyal monastery.[[4]](#footnote-4) A timeline made by New Internationalist conveyed that in 1578, the Mongolian King Altan Khan offered Sonam the title of the Dalai Lama, which gave him spiritual and political power over Tibet. As a result, the previous two reincarnates of Gedun Drupa were also given the titles of Dalai Lamas posthumously.[[5]](#footnote-5) More recently, the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, was born in 1876 and detailed in “Short Biographies of the Previous Dalai Lamas”. He modernized Tibet by strengthening their military and police forces and by establishing Tibetan Medical and Astrology institutions. Thubten died in 1933, prior to completing the modernization of Tibet.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Fourteenth Dalai Lama**

The fourteenth, and current, Dalai Lama was born in Takster, Tibet on July 6, 1935, almost two years after the 13th Dalai Lama’s death, as described in “Birth to Exile”. His birth name was Lhamo Thondup. He was born into a large family that had already been identified with two High Lama reincarnations. His Holiness wrote that “no one had any idea that I might be anything other than an ordinary baby. It was almost unthinkable that more than one *tulku* could be born into the same family.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

To find the reincarnation of the next holy monk, the High Lamas were given signals from the previous Dalai Lama. The search began when one of the High Lamas had a vision at the holy lake, Lhamo La-Tso. The vision consisted of a gold and turquoise, three-story monastery, a small house with unique guttering, and the three Tibetan letters, Ka, Ma, and Ah. Ka symbolized Kumbum, the gold and turquoise monastery. Ah signaled the northeastern province of Amdo. Interestingly, a Dalai Lama biography claims that when the 13th Dalai Lama’s body was being cremated, his head shifted from facing south to northeast, towards the Amdo province. After an extensive search throughout the Amdo province, the High Lamas discovered a family living in small house matching the unique guttering. The High Lamas spent most of their time with the youngest child, Lhamo Thondup. Lhamo recognized one of the High Lama’s, Kewtsang Rinpoche, and called him Sera, which is the name of Rinpoche’s monastery.[[8]](#footnote-8) To confirm that Lhamo Thondup was the 14th reincarnate of the Dalai Lama, the High Lamas gave Lhamo some of the 13th Dalai Lama’s belongings and some that were not. When asked which belongings were from the previous reincarnate “the child correctly identified those belonging to the 13th Dalai Lama, saying ‘It’s mine. It’s mine.’”[[9]](#footnote-9)

 In the article “Birth to Exile,” young Lhamo in 1940 was taken to the Potala Palace in Lhasa Tibet, where he was officially announced as the spiritual leader of Tibet. He then traveled to the Jokhang temple where he was a part of the Taphue ceremony which is, literally, a hair cutting ceremony. Along with his head being shaved, he also gave up his birth name to adopt the name Tenzin Gyatso. From then on, his Holiness “was to be shaven-headed and attired in maroon monk's robes.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Tragedy**

Tibet has experienced several periods of tragedy as a result of China wanting control over Tibet. The authors of Free Tibet provided China’s perspective by explaining when the Communist regime was established the Chinese wanted to regain control of territory and have direct access to India. China believed that Tibet was more successful under Chinese rule, including government and culture.[[11]](#footnote-11) While China’s perspective is biased, there is reasoning behind it, which Peter Hessler explains that during the mid-1900’s Tibet had a “life expectancy was thirty-six years; 95% of Tibetans were illiterate; 95% of the population was hereditary serfs and slaves owned by monasteries and nobles.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Dalai Lama and Tibet experienced greater tragedy in 1950 when, a brief biography of his holiness says, the Chinese People Liberation Army invaded east Tibet. At the young age of 15, the Dalai Lama was called upon for full political power.[[13]](#footnote-13) In 1951, a successful negotiation resulted in a Seventeen Point Agreement being made between Tibet and China for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. For China “the Tibetan people shall return to the big family of the motherland” was stated in point one of the agreement. Point four obligates that “the Central Authorities will not alter the existing political system in Tibet” along with not altering their culture.[[14]](#footnote-14)

According to New Internationalist, on March 10, 1959 an uprising occurred in Lhasa as a result of the Chinese violating the Seventeen Point Agreement by attempting to get the Dalai Lama to go unaccompanied to a military base. The uprising resulted in the tragedy of the Chinese killing 87,000 Tibetan people in the attempt to control the situation. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government went into exile in India on March 17, 1959. China’s brutal suppression of Tibet resulted in several revolutions, and in 1984 the Tibetan Government in exile announced that about 1.2 million Tibetans had been killed as a direct result of the Chinese since 1950.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**New Connections**

As the tragedy continued and China was gaining control over Tibet, its religion and culture were fading. To prevent this, the Dalai Lama started changing his focus by making the Tibetan government more democratic and by connecting with the world.

 The Dalai Lama drafted a Tibetan constitution in 1963 which was approved by the exiled Tibetan Government in 1991. As stated in his biography, the Tibetan constitution, “The Charter of Tibetans in Exile,” purpose was to further develop the Tibetan Government into a democracy so that the Tibetan people could suffer less suppression and keep their ancient traditions and culture.[[16]](#footnote-16)

On September 21, 1987 the Dalai Lama presented his Five Point Peace Plan to the United States Congress. The purpose of the plan was to help develop Tibet by making it a zone of peace, to end the Chinese influence and the Tibetan people’s suffering. When the Dalai Lama was proposing his Five Point Peace Plan, he concluded by saying “I hope this may contribute to a future of friendship and cooperation with all of our neighbors, including the Chinese people.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The Dalai Lama specifically included the Chinese people in this statement, demonstrating his approach to liberating Tibet as peaceful and non-violent. He saw making Tibet’s government into a democracy as the only way for Tibet to regain its independence and culture, while allowing China to maintain partial control.

**Triumph**

The Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his efforts to preserve Tibet's culture and the triumph from impact of his message of peace and compassion.[[18]](#footnote-18) His work continued when the Charter of Tibetans in Exile was adopted by the Tibetan Government in 1991. The Tibetan Government in Exile stated in the democratic constitution that they support the Dalai Lama in creating a Tibetan democracy so “that the Tibetan people in exile will be able to preserve their ancient traditions of spiritual temporal life" and to provide "political, social and economic rights as well as the attainment of justice and equality for all Tibetan people.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This change allowed for the Tibetan people to develop as a country while maintaining their culture. According to New International’s timeline, the approved constitution required the Tibetan Cabinet and Tibetan Parliament, the Tenth Assembly of the Tibetan People's Deputies, to be removed and to create the Eleventh Assembly of the Tibetan People’s Deputies. The exiled Tibetan people voted on 46 new members and the democracy became Tibet’s new form of government.[[20]](#footnote-20)

His brief biography explains that on March 14, 2011, the Dalai Lama wrote a letter to the Eleventh Assembly of the Tibetan People’s Deputies requesting to be relieved of his political duties and to be only a spiritual leader as to further develop democracy in Tibet. On May 29, 2011, the Dalai Lama signed a contract that gave all of his political powers to the head of the new cabinet, Kalon Tripa. As a result of him giving up his political powers, he ended the 368-year-old tradition of the Dalai Lama being both the spiritual and temporal head of Tibet.[[21]](#footnote-21)

His biography emphasizes that his Holiness has traveled to “more than 67 countries spanning 6 continents...received over 150 awards…[and] authored or co-authored more than 110 books,” including “The Art of Happiness” and “The Book of Joy.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Justin Rowaltt writes that “the books he is writing aim to bring the wisdom of Buddha to a wider audience” so that it may be applied to improving the world.[[23]](#footnote-23) Most of the world has access to the teachings and example of the Dali Lama due to the advances in technology. Yet, his gained fame from the tragedy of his exile and Tibet’s conflict with China being broadcasted to the world caused him to have more influence and the ability to spread his messages to the world. The Dalai Lama’s triumph came through authentically connecting different people from across the world. Today, his Holiness is an influential author, public speaker, and inspiring world leader.

**Legacy**

 In 2011, the Dalai Lama established that in 2025 he will consult the leaders and the Tibetan people to discuss if the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue after him. This is because the Dalai Lama only has spiritual power and his work is finished so there may be no reason for him to reincarnate.

The 14th Dalai Lama became a leader with no country because of tragedy, but instead of running away he fought for his country with compassion and influenced the rest of the world in a way that made him a world leader. He has become more connected and known worldwide compared to any other Dalai Lama before him. While this was enabled by modern technology, his message resonated with people around the world due to China’s invasion. His Holiness and his experiences were highlighted in international news, leading him to becoming very well known, which according to Friend or Follow, made him be in the top one hundred most followed people on Twitter.[[24]](#footnote-24) If the Dalai Lama had not gone into exile then people may have heard about his message of peace, but no impactful triumph would have occurred because people would not feel impacted. It is easy to spread the message of peace during a peaceful time, but the Dalai Lama spread it during a time of tragedy. His demonstration of the power of peace and compassion created triumph by compelling the rest of the world to change. The Nobel Peace Prize quoted when he described universal responsibility as a “feeling for other people’s suffering just as we feel our own. It is the realization that even our enemy is entirely motivated by the quest for happiness. We must recognize that all beings want the same thing that we want. This is the way to achieve a true understanding, unfettered by artificial consideration.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

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