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Dalai Lama (the 14th)

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The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is one of the most prominent religious leaders of our times. His widespread popularity has no doubt been enabled by processes of globalisation, which have accelerated the spread of Buddhism internationally. The Dalai Lama has an official website, a Facebook page and Twitter account, which circulate inspirational images and quotations to his numerous followers. His image is widely recognised the world over and synonymous with peace-building and non-violence. Indeed, a recent Australian study investigating the impact of crisis events on culturally and religiously diverse communities noted that while many religious communities had experienced increased levels of discrimination and vilification, Australian Buddhists were typically regarded as non-threatening, largely due to the positive public image of the Dalai Lama.¹ However, Tibetan Buddhists have faced numerous hardships since the 1949/1950 Chinese invasion of Tibet and the recent dramatic rise of instances of self-immolation of Tibetan monks and lay people risk undermining the association between Buddhism and non-violence. In fact, Buddhism, alongside many religious traditions, has perpetuated both cultures of peace and cultures of direct and structural violence throughout history.² The justifications for the use of violence by Buddhists, who also adhere to the principle of non-harm, are discussed in more detail below. In the face of these challenges, the Dalai Lama has maintained his popularity and profile as a global peace-builder through his principled non-violent stance and leadership style which can best be understood through the application of both Western and Buddhist theoretical frameworks of religious leadership.

Ardley describes the Dalai Lama as a charismatic leader, according to a Weberian framework.³ Max Weber stated that the term 'charisma' can be applied:

to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.⁴

According to Weber, these qualities 'are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the

individual concerned is treated as a leader.⁵ While this description can certainly be applied to the 14th Dalai Lama, it is an undeniably Western construct of leadership. In order to gain a better understanding of the Dalai Lama's status and popularity, it is also important to examine the institution of the Dalai Lama, and particularly the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva.

The great Tibetan Buddhist reformer Tsongkhapa (1357–1417) was the founding father of the Dalai Lama institution in the fifteenth century. He established the Gelugpa (Yellow Hats) school of Tibetan Buddhism according to 'the strict mandates of celibacy, discipline, and the practice of basic Buddhist teachings'.⁶ The Gelugpa Sect became extremely popular and attracted many monks leading to the establishment of famous monasteries in Lhasa, Drepung and Sera.⁷

Tsongkhapa proposed the position of Dalai Lama, based on the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, to maintain the leadership of the Gelugpa tradition. However after his death, his nephew and pre-eminent disciple, Gendun Truppa (1391–1474) assumed the Gelugpa leadership. He was followed by Gendun Gyatso (1475–1542) and it was only after his death that the first Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso (1543–1588) was chosen.⁸ The position of Dalai Lama is the 'holiest of offices' in Tibet and one that is acquired through spiritual succession.⁹

The term 'Dalai' refers to 'Ocean-like Wisdom' reached at the 'brink of Nirvana (a state of total bliss)'. The Dalai Lama is thereby seen as an enlightened being, and is revered as being the reincarnation of Chenrezig, 'Bodhisattva of Compassion Avalokitesvara' and 'Patron of Tibet'.¹⁰ In Tibetan belief, the Patron Deity reincarnates as the Dalai Lama by forgoing the state of Nirvana, 'out of a deep compassion for all sentient beings ... [as] altruism compels him to remain as a guide to those still struggling to achieve this state of perfect detachment and happiness.'¹¹ These altruistic beings, who pledge to keep reincarnating until all beings are free from suffering, are called Bodhisattvas and take whatever form may be necessary in order to be of most benefit to others. According to Boyd, 'as the reincarnation of the patron deity of Tibet, Chenrezig, the Dalai Lama's position had a god-like quality attached to it' placing him 'above all human political representatives' thereby making 'his position ... unassailable'.¹²

After the death of a ruling Dalai Lama, a search is begun for the next successive reincarnation. In Tibet this quest was typically guided by the instructions from high lamas, notably 'the Panchen Lama of the Tashilhumpo Monastery and the State Oracle'.¹³ The search followed symbolic signage to identify the place of the reincarnation of the successor, which could be found in nature

such as 'the types of trees that might be found near the home of the young reincarnation', and 'unusual phenomena in nature, perhaps the presence of a comet, or some other celestial body'.¹⁴ This search typically identified a few youngsters who could be the possible reincarnation. The boy who made it through the final test, who correctly identified the previous Dalai Lama's prayer beads and other articles was then brought to the Potala Palace when he was five to seven years old to initiate his training to carry out the duties of the position. This training was conducted under strict supervision of the Tibetan lamas/teachers.¹⁵

As Boyd explains, choosing and training a reincarnated leader has several strategic advantages.¹⁶ Firstly, selecting a young boy, before he reached maturity, would enable him to be trained and moulded according to Gelugpa beliefs and practices. Secondly, it would avoid having to deal with the constraints of hereditary rule and finally, selecting the Dalai Lama as a reincarnation of Chenrezig, Patron of Tibet, would suppress any criticisms of the selection process, given the status of that highest of reincarnations.

However, according to Ardley while this process of recognition was widely accepted in Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama's charismatic 'divine' qualities have proved a drawback when appealing for international political legitimacy, as the accepted notion of leadership in Western democracy is representative, and not 'chosen'.¹⁷ Ardley has argued that the Dalai Lama's realisation of these limitations acted as an 'impetus for democratisation' of the Tibetan Administration in exile, in order to gain recognition from Western societies and the United Nations.¹⁸ This led him to instead adopt more 'rational-legal frameworks in Dharamsala' and to embark on the Tibetan democratisation process.¹⁹ Residing in India, the largest democracy in the world, also influenced the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetans in exile who began to be socialised within a democratic ideology starting from their early years of education.²⁰

The 14th Dalai Lama's life and mission

The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. He was born to a farming family on the 6 July 1935, and was identified as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, when he was two years old. From the age of six he was raised in the elite monastic education system receiving the standard education for monastics, which comprised of Tibetan art and culture, Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit, and medicine. The 14th Dalai Lama became the spiritual and political leader of Tibet in 1950, after the Chinese invasion. He travelled to Beijing for peace talks with Mao

Zedong and other senior leaders in 1954. At the age of 23 the Dalai Lama was awarded the Geshe Lharampa degree with honours, in a course 'equivalent to a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy'. Following the brutal suppression of the 1959 Tibetan national uprising in Lhasa by Chinese troops, the Dalai Lama was forced into exile into India, and has been living in Dharamsala since that time.²¹

During and after the Chinese invasion and the consequent social upheaval, the Dalai Lama continued to advocate for a non-violent resolution to this crisis. In an address to the members to the United States Congress in Washington in 1987, the Dalai Lama proposed a 'Five-Point Peace Plan' to address the problematic relationship between China and Tibet. The five components of the peace plan were:

1. Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace.
2. Abandonment of China's population transfer policy that threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people.
3. Respect for the Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms.
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet's natural environment and the abandonment of China's use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear waste.
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples.²²

The Dalai Lama also developed the Middle-Way Approach, in wide consultation with the Central Tibetan Administration and the Tibetan people. The Middle-Way Approach seeks autonomy rather than independence for Tibet in order to protect and preserve Tibetan 'culture, religion and national identity' and Chinese 'security and territorial integrity of the motherland'.²³ The Dalai Lama's non-violent stance received universal recognition when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. The Dalai Lama has also extended his message of peace and non-violence to the global community, becoming a spiritual leader at an international level. The Dalai Lama, describes himself as a 'simple Buddhist monk', and states that his life is based on 'three-main-commitments' that relate to three levels of his identity as a human being, a religious practitioner, and a Tibetan.²⁴

Based on his identity as a human being, his Holiness the Dalai Lama is committed to 'the promotion of human values'. As advocated by the Dalai Lama the basic human values are 'compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, contentment and self-discipline', which he also refers to as 'secular ethics'. At this level, the

Dalai Lama conveys the message that everyone is capable of practising these values in order to become happier and to reduce suffering.²⁵

At the level of his identity as a religious practitioner, the Dalai Lama advocates 'the promotion of religious harmony and understanding among the world's major religious traditions.' In his message of inter-religious harmony, the Dalai Lama conveys the idea that since all religions 'create good human beings,' it is important for the followers from diverse religious faiths to respect one another.²⁶

At the level of his identity as a Tibetan, the Dalai Lama has committed himself to preserving 'Tibet's Buddhist culture, a culture of peace and non-violence.' The current Dalai Lama has spread his message of peace globally, and has received more than 150 awards, including many honorary doctorates, in recognition for his commitment to peace, non-violence, and inter-religious understanding. He is also the author or the co-author of over 110 books, many of which have been bestsellers, thus making him one of the world's most prolific and popular religious leaders.²⁷

The Dalai Lama's contribution to the democratisation of Tibet

Apart from his unique and influential leadership style, the 14th Dalai Lama is also a significant leader in terms of the political structural changes he has initiated in the Tibetan Administration in Exile and the institution of the Dalai Lama. Boyd states that the Dalai Lama was 'quite blunt about the inadequacies' of pre-1950s Tibet.²⁸ Consequently he first drafted a new constitution to democratise the Tibetan system of governance in 1963. He and the Tibetan elites also received extensive advice from Indian constitutional scholars in the transformation of their feudal theoretic governance structure into a modern democratic one.²⁹ Regardless of the fact that international actors do not recognise the legal authority of the administration in exile as the representative of Tibet, it performs important functions such as mediation between exile-Tibetans and foreign non-governmental and governmental organisations.³⁰

In May 1990, The Tibetan Cabinet (Kashag), which previously had been appointed by the Dalai Lama, was dissolved along with the Tenth Assembly of the Tibetan People's Deputies, also known as the Tibetan Parliament in Exile. Later that year, exile Tibetans, living in Dharamsala and all around the world elected 46 members to the Eleventh Tibetan Assembly. This Assembly, then elected the new members of the Tibetan Cabinet. The Charter of Tibetans in Exile was drafted by the Constitution Redrafting Committee and approved by the Assembly on 14 June 1991. It is based on the UN Universal Declaration

of Human Rights and 'guarantees to all Tibetans equality before the law and enjoyment of rights and freedom without discrimination on the basis of sex, religion, race, language and social origin.' It also provides a clear separation of power among the three organs of the Central Tibetan Administration, namely the judiciary, legislature and executive.³¹

In 1992, the Central Tibetan Administration also issued guidelines for the constitution of a free and democratic Tibet. They stated that once Tibet was free of Chinese rule, an interim government would be established that would elect a constitutional assembly to develop and adopt a democratic constitution.³² In September 2001, the Tibetan electorate in exile elected the Kalon Tripa, the senior-most minister of the Tibetan Cabinet. The Kalon Tripa then appointed his Cabinet, which was approved by the Tibetan Assembly. This was the first democratically elected political leadership of Tibet. Once the Kalon Tripa was democratically appointed, the 14th Dalai Lama began describing himself as 'semi-retired'.³³

However, the Dalai Lama was technically still the 'head of state', at that time according to 'The Charter of the Tibetans in Exile. On 14 March 2011 the Dalai Lama requested the Tibetan Assembly 'to devolve him of his temporal (political) power'. Draft Amendments to the Charter of Tibetans were deliberated at the national general meeting of Tibetans in Dharamsala in May 2011 and later implemented. This ended the period of dual political and spiritual authority of the Dalai Lamas, reverting to a previous era where the first to fourth Dalai Lamas were only the spiritual leaders of Tibet.³⁴ The Dalai Lamas were conferred with both the spiritual and temporal leadership in the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama Lozang Gyatso (1617–1682). Although the temporal power of the Dalai Lama changed depending on the politics of the times, throughout the history of Dalai Lamas, the Dalai Lama institution always consolidated power relationships between Tibet and other neighbouring countries such as China and Mongolia.³⁵ On the 29 May 2011 the Dalai Lama transferred his temporal power to the democratically elected Kalon Tripa, Dr Lopsang Sangay, formally ending the tradition of the Dalai Lamas as spiritual and political heads of Tibet. However The Gaden Phodrang, the institution of the Dalai Lamas, remains intact, focussing on spiritual leadership only.³⁶

In keeping with his commitment to processes of democratisation, the Dalai Lama has stated that when he is 'about ninety' he will 'consult the high Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public, and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism, and re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not'. He has also added that:

If it is decided that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama should continue and there is a need for the Fifteenth Dalai Lama to be recognized, responsibility for doing so will primarily rest on the concerned officers of the Dalai Lama's Gaden Phodrang Trust. They should consult the various heads of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions and the reliable oath-bound Dharma Protectors who are linked inseparably to the lineage of the Dalai Lamas. They should seek advice and direction from these concerned beings and carry out the procedures of search and recognition in accordance with past tradition. I shall leave clear written instructions about this. Bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China.³⁷

Moreover, the Dalai Lama has said that: 'If a woman reveals herself as more useful the lama could very well be reincarnated in this form' and that he would be pleased if his reincarnation was a woman.³⁸ He has also called himself a feminist and spoken out on numerous occasions in support for women's rights and for gender equality in Buddhism.³⁹

Challenges facing the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration

Upon becoming an exile community in India, the Dalai Lama and the elites who used to be the rulers/political leaders in Tibet were faced with many challenges. Regaining their homeland and campaigning for the rights of people in Tibet became the central focus for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Administration.⁴⁰ As the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people, who were scattered across the world as political exiles as a result of the Chinese invasion, the 14th Dalai Lama was faced with a further difficulty of maintaining a unified connection between the diasporic communities in exile, and those still remaining in Tibet, both of which are comprised of many diverse regional and sectarian groups.⁴¹ According to Brox, the adoption of democracy in exile is 'contained within the framework of what the Tibetans call freedom struggle'⁴² and used as a method for 'internal empowerment aimed at attracting and maintaining a loyal Tibetan community working for the common cause of returning to a self-ruled and democratic Tibet.'⁴³ Brox also notes that 'it is a complex challenge for a stateless people to formulate citizenship beyond the nation state.'⁴⁴ Tibetans live in host countries under various categories such as foreigners, refugees, citizens as well as foreign guests (in the case of India). Whichever

category they belong to, they are subjected to the laws of their host countries. Tibetan citizenship is defined by five fundamental obligations which are: to '(1) believe and trust the country of Tibet; (2) truly respect and practice the Charter and the code of law; (3) struggle for the victory of the Tibet cause; (4) pay taxes in accordance with the code of law; (5) perform responsibilities imposed by law in times of critical danger to country and people.'⁴⁵

According to Ardley, however, the concept of democracy adopted by the Tibetan government-in-exile differs from the dominant idea of democracy in the West.⁴⁶ In 2003, she argued that the 'obstacles to full democratisation' included: 'a lack of competitive elections for the leadership; an absence of political parties in the Tibetan government-in-exile; the conflict of the religious and political roles of the Dalai Lama; a lack of formal opposition; and an unwillingness to embrace diversity within the Tibetan community in exile for fear of harming unity.'⁴⁷ While elections have now been held for leadership positions, and the conflict between political and religious roles is being resolved, the lack of political parties and opposition, and the pressure on maintaining unity, differentiate the Tibetan Administration from a Western democratic political system.

Moreover, Tibetans-in-exile or those inside Tibet are not a homogeneous group⁴⁸ and there have been, and continue to be, many organisations engaged in violent, as well as non-violent, political struggles to win freedom for Tibet since the 1950s, despite the 14th Dalai Lama's adherence to non-violent principles. The Khampa guerrillas fought violently against Chinese occupation from the late 1950s until 1974. They assisted the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet to India and received training and supplies from the CIA to fight communism in China.⁴⁹ However, the CIA withdrew their support after the US–China reconciliation in 1973, and internal factionalism and a plea from the Dalai Lama to end their violent struggle, led to their eventual demise.⁵⁰

The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) conducted hunger strikes in 1977 and 1998, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.⁵¹ The 1977 strike was aimed at the Indian government in order to gain their support for Tibetan independence.⁵² The 1998 protest, conducted on 10 March, the 39th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day targeted the United Nations, demanding:

a discussion of Tibet in the General Assembly; the appointment of a rapporteur to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in Tibet; the appointment of a special envoy on Tibet; and a request that the UN should initiate a supervised plebiscite on the future of Tibet.⁵³

The UN ignored their calls and the hunger strikes were broken up by police on the 26 and 27 April, with protestors force fed in hospital.⁵⁴

On 27 April 1998, an ex-monk and ex-soldier, Thupten Ngodup, who had been planning on joining the hunger strikers, set himself on fire as a protest against the police intervention. Ngodup's self-immolation resulted in 'an outpouring of patriotic fervour' and the TYC declared him a martyr who 'dignified our existence'.⁵⁵ The Tibetan government expressed sorrow about his death and stated that 'self-immolation was not to be encouraged'.⁵⁶

More recently, a large scale political protest took place in Tibet on the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising, on the 10 March 2008. Since then, as at the 21 August 2013, 121 Tibetans have self-immolated in the People's Republic of China since a young monk called Tapey set himself on fire in a market in Ngaba on the 27 February 2009. They include 102 men and 19 women, 24 of whom were 18 or younger. Some 120 self-immolations have occurred since 16 March 2011.⁵⁷ The self-immolators are calling 'for the return of the Dalai Lama and freedom for the Tibetan people'.⁵⁸

According to Tsering Woeser, a prominent Tibetan writer and blogger based in Beijing, 'Since 2008, the whole Tibetan area, particularly Lhasa, has been under virtual martial law. Under these circumstances, group protests are naturally impossible because they can be put down almost immediately'.⁵⁹ Chinese authorities have further intensified their crackdown on any forms of protest and 'hundreds of people associated with the self-immolators have been detained ... sentenced to long prison terms or death'.⁶⁰ While the Dalai Lama has said the self-immolations are 'understandable' and 'very, very sad', he does not encourage them. However, he has not issued a public statement condemning the actions either, which has angered some scholars.⁶¹

In 2000 Ardley made several insightful comments about the justifications for using violence in an article that discussed the Khampa guerrillas, the TYC and the first self-immolation of Thupten Ngodup, that are well-worth revisiting in light of recent events. Firstly, it is worth noting that despite widespread associations linking Buddhism and Tibet with peace and tranquillity, what Ardley calls the 'Shangri-la-ist' image of the Tibetan movement, 'Tibetans often retaliated with violence' in a long history of conflict with China. She also stated that 'Tibetans are as likely to resort to armed struggle as the people of any other oppressed nation'.⁶² Ardley explained how violence can be justified in Buddhism to 'protect the *dharmā*', the teachings of the Buddha. The Tibetan guerrillas were in this sense 'fighting *for* Buddhism' based on instructions in a Buddhist *sutra* that states 'in order to protect the truth of Buddhism it may

be necessary to bear arms and ignore the moral code' of non-violence.⁶³ As a result, they saw themselves as 'defenders of the faith', spurred on by 'Chinese attempts to destroy their religion'.⁶⁴

In contrast, the Dalai Lama 'remained fully opposed to violence as a means to liberate Tibet' as the first of the Five Buddhist Precepts is to avoid violence and killing.⁶⁵ However, his position on the hunger strikes was somewhat different. After the Dalai Lama met the hunger strikers on the 2 April 1998 he said: 'I told them I admire their determination and enthusiasm. But I consider hunger strike unto death as a kind of violence ... However, I cannot offer them suggestions for any alternative method ... I am in a state of dilemma.'⁶⁶ According to Ardley, the 'implication of the first part of the statement is that the notion of deliberate self-harm is unacceptable in Tibetan Buddhism, as it is a type of violence'.⁶⁷ Yet, while previously he had called off earlier hunger strikes and requested that the guerrillas lay down their arms, on this occasion he felt 'he was not in a position to intervene'.⁶⁸

Self-immolation is an even more complicated issue. Before Ngodup's self-immolation, Vietnamese Buddhist monks voluntarily burned themselves in protest against the Vietnam war and to bring the world's attention to the suffering of the Vietnamese people.⁶⁹ In chapter twenty-three of the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Bhaisajjaraja set fire to himself, as a dharma offering to the Buddhas, and is praised by them for making this ultimate sacrifice.⁷⁰ Self-immolations therefore can be justified in a Buddhist context, not as killing but rather as an ultimate offering. In addition, there is a story of the Buddha killing a man, in order to prevent him killing others, which the Buddha was able to foresee given his powers of clairvoyance. This is described as 'the doctrine of skilful means', where a Bodhisattva, motivated by compassion, may at times act in an immoral way to save others from greater harm.⁷¹ Violence can therefore also be justified by Buddhists on these grounds in certain circumstances.

Conclusion

While there is no doubt that the Dalai Lama remains one of the most popular and respected leaders of our time, and that he has been responsible for making great strides toward democracy within the Tibetan government in exile, he, the Kalon Tripa and the Tibetan Assembly are still facing many significant challenges from within and beyond Tibetan communities. Tibet remains under repressive Chinese rule and Tibetan people are becoming increasingly frustrated with the severity of restrictions following the March 2008 protests. The recent growing number of self-immolations is of great concern to the

Tibetan and international community, yet China refuses to listen to their cries for freedom. Struggles for autonomy and processes of democratisation, in most cases, take a significant amount of time until they reach a tipping point, peacefully or violently, when change cascades dramatically and long hoped for reforms, which previously seemed impossible, occur at a startling pace. This happened in East Germany, and Russia, and is happening now in the Arab Spring, with uncertain consequences. It remains to be seen what will happen in China, and what effect this will have on Tibet.

What this chapter has demonstrated is that the Dalai Lama, in his global reach and commitment to democratising the Tibetan government in exile, is a proponent of what scholars have called modern Buddhism. David McMahan describes 'a new transnational genre of Buddhism that scholars have called 'Buddhist modernism' which is 'a hybrid religious and cultural form that combines selected elements of Buddhism with the major Western discourses and practices of modernity.'⁷² McMahan states that Buddhism in Asia and the West has been:

shaped by an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity, such as the European Enlightenment, scientific rationalism, Romanticism and its successors, Protestantism, psychology, and modern social and political thought.⁷³

As a result, features of Buddhist modernism include: aligning Buddhist cosmology with a scientific world view, de-emphasising ritual and superstitions, social and political engagement, individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism.⁷⁴ While it is clear that there are issues that remain to be addressed, there is no doubt that the 14th Dalai Lama has been determined to assist Tibet, and Tibetan Buddhism, to adapt to contemporary times. This has ensured the survival of Tibetan culture and religion in exile, despite attempts by Chinese authorities to thwart it locally. It has also made Tibetan Buddhism hugely attractive to Western and Asian audiences, and led to a resurgence of global Buddhism at the turn of the twenty-first century. The 14th Dalai Lama will no doubt be remembered as a great reformer and spiritual leader, and as for the next Dalai Lama, we must wait and see!

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