

A Conversation with the Dalai Lama

His Holiness on his reincarnation and his decision to step down as head of the Tibetan government

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The sun is shining on Tsuglakhang temple, in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas, and hundreds of Tibetans have gathered in the courtyard for a feast. As Buddhist monks ladle out white rice and stewed vegetables, horns blow and cymbals crash. Such celebrations are common here – the monks often feed local villagers as an act of service to earn karmic merit – but the festive air seems to capture the mood of the man who lives next to the temple. The Dalai Lama, despite many heartfelt petitions by his constituents, has finally been granted his wish for official retirement from government duties.

The Tibetan Parliament had twice urged His Holiness to reconsider, but he had declined even to read a message from them or meet with legislators. His mind was made up. On May 29th, the papers were signed and the Tibetan charter amended. The act marks a remarkable and voluntary separation of church and state: For the first time in more than 350 years, the Dalai Lama is no longer the secular as well as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.

Although the Tibetan government-in-exile has been largely democratic for decades, the Dalai Lama still had the final say in every major political decision within the diaspora. He appointed foreign envoys, determined the scope and timing of negotiations with China, had the power to sign or veto bills and could even dismiss Parliament. Now, with his signature, his formal title has changed from "Head of Nation" to "Protector and Symbol of Tibet and Tibetan People." Many of his political responsibilities will rest on the shoulders of Lobsang Sangay, a 43-year-old Harvard legal scholar who was elected in April to the post of prime minister.

China, dismissing the transfer of power as a "trick", has refused to meet with Sangay. The Communist government believes that the struggle for Tibetan autonomy will die with the Dalai Lama; all they have to do is wait him out. But by turning the reins of government over to the governed, His Holiness is banking on democracy's ability to serve as an effective bulwark against Chinese oppression. At 76, he knows he won't be around to steer the ship of state forever. Tibetans, he believes, must learn to steer it for themselves.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, was born in 1935, the son of a farmer in a small Tibetan village. In accordance with ancient tradition, the dreams and visions of high lamas and oracles eventually led a search party to the boy. At age two, he successfully identified people and possessions from his past life and was officially recognized as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama. At four, he entered the capital of Lhasa and was named the spiritual leader of his people. At 15, he became head of state. In 1959, as tensions with the Chinese army reached a flash point, he fled to India, where he has led the Tibetan diaspora ever since.

Looking back over his 60 years of leadership, he has much to be proud of. He has established a successful and stable government in exile and stood firm against a brutal

regime. As the first Dalai Lama to travel to the West, he has also extolled the virtues of nonviolence to millions, a lifelong effort that earned him a Nobel Peace Prize. As the spiritual leader of Tibet, he remains the personification of his nation's struggle.

I have known His Holiness since 1990, when I wrote *Kundun*, a movie about his childhood directed by Martin Scorsese. Since then, we have developed a lasting friendship. I continue to work as an activist for Tibetan autonomy and serve on the board of the International Campaign for Tibet. Every day I pray for Tenzin Gyatso's long life.

When we meet on June 2nd in his reception area behind the busy main temple in the dusty Indian hill town of McLeod Ganj, he asks if he still looks as healthy as the last time we met. Yes, I tell him – even younger, if possible. But, I add, his eyes look older. "That's right," he says. He wishes to inform me, however, that he hasn't needed to increase his eyeglass prescription "C in part because he doesn't use a computer. "I never even tried," he says, breaking into his distinct, ebullient laugh. "I don't know how!"

Let's start by talking about the day, in 1950, when you became head of government in Tibet. You were only 15 and the Chinese had invaded your country.

It was a very, very difficult situation. When people asked me to take the responsibility, my reaction is, I am one who wants to follow the Dalai Lama traditions, which was to be enthroned at age 18. Age 15 is too early. Then they again asked me. Chamdo [a mountainous region in eastern Tibet] had already been taken over by the Chinese. There was a good deal of anxiety. So I took responsibility. When the Communist Liberation Army reached Lhasa, my first act was to escape from Lhasa to the Indian border. So I think, bad omen or good omen? Almost my first act after I took responsibility is to escape from Lhasa! [Laughs]

So here we are 61 years later, and you've just retired as head of government. You have, in a real way, been preparing for this retirement – a separation of church and state – since you were a child. How was the seed first planted?

As a teenager, around 13 or 14, living in Lhasa, I had very intimate sort of contact with ordinary people. Mainly, the sweepers at the Potala Palace as well as at Norbulingka [the Dalai Lama's summer residence in Lhasa]. I always played with them and sometimes dined with them. I got the information from the servants as to what was really going on in Lhasa. I often heard of the injustices the people experienced. So I began to understand that our system – the power in the hands of a few people – that's wrong.

So soon after you took power, you decided you wanted to implement reform to the old system?

In 1952, I think, I set up a reform committee. I wanted to start some kind of change. But I faced a major reform obstacle – the Chinese officials wanted reform according to their own pattern, their own way, which they had already implemented in China proper. The Chinese felt that if Tibetan reform was initiated by Tibetans themselves, it might be a hindrance to their own way of reform. So it became difficult.

You traveled to China in 1954 and saw firsthand what Communist reform looked like. Was it what you had envisioned for Tibet?

I went to China as one of the members of the Tibetan delegation at the Congress of the

People's Republic of China. The parliament in Peking was very disciplined! I noticed that all the members barely dared make a suggestion. They would make a point, but only little corrections in wording [*laughs*]. Nobody really discussed meaning.

Then, in 1956, I had the opportunity to come to India. And here, too, I had the opportunity to visit Indian Parliament. I found big contrast. In Indian Parliament, lots of noise. No discipline. This was a clear sign of complete freedom of expression. Indian parliamentarians, they love to criticize their government. So I realized, this is the meaning of democracy – freedom of speech. I was so impressed with the democratic system.

You liked the messiness and noise of democracy?

In 1959, when we decided to raise the Tibetan issue at the U.N., I asked Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru if he would sponsor our cause. He declined. He felt there was no use to raise Tibetan issue. He told me that America will not carry out war with China over Tibet. Later, I met with Nehru again, and I was a little bit anxious [*laughs*]. But when I met him, he was completely normal! I learned, yes – this is a leader practicing democracy. Disagreement is something normal.

In 1960, after I reached India, many Tibetans came to Bodh Gaya for my teaching. It was there we decided on a representative government – the first step for democratization. Since then, as refugees, we go step by step toward full democratization. In the past 10 years, I have continued acting like a senior adviser. I called mine a semiretired position. Since 2009, on many occasions, I expressed, "Now I'm looking forward to complete retirement." This year, on March 10th, I officially stated that now the time has come for me to retire; I'm going to hand over all my political authority to the Tibetan administration.

Most people around the world are anxious to get rid of their leaders. But the Tibetans have been very reluctant to let you retire. Why?

Emotionally, spiritually, still they look up to me. After I announced my retirement, they requested that I should carry responsibilities as I have, continuously. I declined. Then they asked if I would consider at least carrying a title, like a ceremonial sort of head. A ceremonial role? I don't like it. To be like the British sort of queen. Of course, I personally very much admire her. Wonderful. But the system? [*Laughs*] If you carry some sort of ceremonial head, then you should do something! Otherwise, I would just be a figurehead. A statement is written by someone, then I just read? I know the word – a puppet.

Only since the fifth Dalai Lama, 350 years ago, has the institution taken on real political responsibility. The early incarnations were only spiritual leaders. I always believe the rule by king or official leader is outdated. Now we must catch up with the modern world. So now I have handed over my political authority to an elected government. I feel happy. They carry full responsibility. I want to be just a pure spiritual leader. But in case my services are needed, I am still available.

Do you also have personal reasons for retirement?

I always tell people that religious institutions and political institutions should be separate. So while I'm telling people this, I myself continue with them combined. Hypocrisy! [*Laughs*] So what I am telling others I must implement for myself.

Also, a more selfish reason. Before the Dalai Lama became a political figure, there was almost no controversy. Since the fifth Dalai Lama, some controversy – because of the political aspect, not spiritual. Now, after my retirement, the institution of the Dalai Lama is more pure, more stable. I felt we must separate political responsibility. The Dalai Lama

should not carry that burden. So that is my selfish reason – to protect the old Dalai Lama tradition. It is safer without political involvement.

I have full conviction that Tibetans can carry all their work. Therefore I voluntarily, proudly decide this four-century-old tradition should end.

That does not mean the Dalai Lama ends. The institution remains, as a spiritual role. And not only for my generation. If the Tibetan people want the institution to remain, it will remain continuously.

Does your retirement mean your long-term goals have changed?

The rest of my life, I am fully committed to these things: Promotion of religious harmony. Promotion of human values. Human happiness. Like that.

So you will keep up with your daily routines? I know that every morning you say a prayer for all sentient beings. When you pray for us, what is it that you want for us?

I often tell people that this century should be century of dialogue. Peace will not come from thought or from Buddha. Peace must be built by humans, through action. So that means, whenever we face problem – dialogue. That's the only way. For that, we need inner disarmament. So our work should make a little contribution to materialize a peaceful, compassionate world later this century. That's my wish. It will not come immediately. But we have to make the effort. This moment, it looks only like an idea. But every corner must make the effort. Then there is possibility. Then, if we fail in spite of that effort, no regret.

It might surprise people to know that you really are what you say: a simple monk.

A few days ago, in this very room, the Tibetan political leadership came together to see me. They brought all the amendments to the charter [regarding his retirement]. They explained what was written, and then they asked me please to read it. I responded, "Oh, even if I read it all, I will not understand fully. So, it doesn't matter." I just asked them, "Where I should sign?" [*Laughs*]

That's very dangerous!

That's a sign of a simple Buddhist monk!

Do you worry that some people think your decision to retire is wrong?

Well, some Tibetans, particularly young Tibetans, are very critical.

Is that just fear? Or is it based on a legitimate concern for Tibet?

Some people think that these decisions are taken somewhat in a hurry. They don't know, you see, that I take these ideas step by step over the last few decades.

The Dalai Lamas have long relied on the state oracles for advice. Did you ask the oracles to go into their prophetic trance and advise on your retirement?

I did. They fully support my decision. I know these oracles. I ask them as a sort of adviser. They have observed the last four or five centuries of the Dalai Lama's experiences, so logically, as human beings, I felt they might feel a little bit uncomfortable with the decision. But they said it's very timely. The right decision.

So you feel good about your decision?

Oh, yes. The 19th of March, after I offered a more detailed explanation to the public about

my retirement – that night, my sleep was extraordinarily sound. So it seems some relief. Now we are completely changed from the theocracy of the past. Also, our decision is a real answer to the Chinese Communist accusation that the whole aim of our struggle is the restoration of the old system [in feudal Tibet]. Now they can't make that accusation. I am often saying that the Chinese Communist Party should retire. Now I can tell them, "Do like me. Retire with grace."

Why do the Chinese demonize you by calling you things like a "devil" or a "wolf in monk's robes"? Is there a reason they speak about you in such archaic language?

Generally speaking, such sort of expressions are childish. Those officials who use those words, I think they want to show the Chinese government that the Dalai Lama is so bad. And I think also that they are hoping to reach the Tibetans. They want 100 percent negative. So they use these words. They actually disgrace themselves. I mean, childish! Very foolish! Nobody believes them.

Usually, with human beings, one part of the brain develops common sense. But with those Chinese leaders, particularly the hard-liners, that part of their brain is missing. When I met with President Obama last year, I told him, "You should make a little surgery. Put that part of brain into the Chinese." [Laughs]

What do you think Tibet would be like today if you had been its leader for all these years?

Some change, some reforms would have happened. But it would not be easy. There would be opposition from within Tibet. Some officials are more modern in their thinking. But there are also some who have an old way of thinking. And then with the Chinese "liberators", of course, there is no freedom at all [laughs].

I really feel that the last 52 years is very sad. Refugees. And the worst thing is the destruction inside Tibet. Despite some construction, some economic progress, the whole picture is very, very sad.

But I have no regret. The last 52 years, because of India's freedom, I really feel that I found the best opportunity to make my life meaningful, to make a contribution. If I had remained in Lhasa, even without the Chinese occupation, I would probably have carried the ceremonial role in some orthodox way.

When you were still a young man, the Nechung Oracle prophesied about you that "the wish-fulfilling jewel will shine in the West." Was the oracle right?

I think it seems that there is some truth. We escaped in 1959 and reached India. To Tibetans, that itself was the West. Then from India, mainly Europe and also America is our West. I have done one thing that I think is a contribution: I helped Buddhist science and modern science combine. No other Buddhist has done that. Other lamas, I don't think they ever pay attention to modern science. Since my childhood, I have a keen interest. As far as inner sciences [science of the mind] are concerned, modern science very young. In the meantime, science in external matters is highly developed. So we Buddhists should learn from that as well.

You have said that Tibet's survival will depend on China changing from within. Are you optimistic that will happen?

When President Hu Jintao expresses that his main interest is the promotion of harmony, I fully support that. I express on many occasions that real harmony should come from the

heart. For that, trust, respect and friendship are all essential. To create a more harmonious society, using force is wrong. After almost 10 years of Hu Jintao's presidency, his aim is very good. But the method – relying more and more on force – is counterproductive. The first important thing is transparency. I am saying that 1.3 billion Chinese people have the right to know the reality. Then 1.3 billion Chinese people also have the ability to judge what is right or what is wrong.

On several occasions, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has expressed that China needs political change. On some occasions, he even mentioned democracy. And around Chinese intellectuals and artists, more and more say they want political change, more freedom. So therefore, it is bound to change. How long it will take, nobody knows. Five years, 10 years, 15 years. It's been now 52 years. In the next 50 years, I think it is almost certain things will change. Whether I live the next 50 years, or whether I don't.

If you had President Hu Jintao's ear and could suggest how to deal with Tibet, what would you ask him to do?

I don't know. I think it's not much use to discuss such things [*laughs*].

Has there been any moment since 1959 when you thought the Chinese would leave Tibet?

Oh, yes. The 10th of March, 1959 – the very day of the Tibetan uprising. I remember very clearly, there were a lot of Lhasa people who came to Norbulingka and blocked all the doors. They were shouting, "You should not go to the Chinese military camp!"

So Tibetans were afraid that an invitation from the Chinese at this tense time was a trick to imprison or assassinate you?

Yes. That day, the sun was very bright. I expressed to Mr. Phala, the Tibetan Lord Chamberlain, "Maybe this day, maybe this is a turning point in history."

"Turning" does not mean "hopeless." In spite of some difficulties, you see a long tunnel – at the end there is light. That feeling has sustained our determination.

I understand you're going to meet with a group of Tibetan spiritual leaders in November to discuss your succession. What issues will be on the table?

On the last few occasions when we get religious leaders together, I raised this issue. Chinese Communists are very much concerned about my reincarnation! [*Laughs*] So we need to discuss.

The concrete decisions are not yet finalized. One thing is quite sure. After all, the Dalai Lama reincarnation means my reincarnation, my rebirth. So logically, this is a matter of my decision. No one else – even spiritual leaders. My next life is entirely up to me.

But the Chinese government says they get to decide on all reincarnations, including yours.

This is quite controversial. The Communists are not only nonbelievers, but they also consider Tibetan Buddhism poisonous. So they deliberately try to minimize Tibetan Buddhism. Should people who try to minimize or eliminate Tibetan Buddhism interfere about rebirth? It's quite strange, really. Quite funny. They are only thinking about political power in Lhasa. That's silly. I think it is better for them to remain completely neutral. Or it would be more logical for the Chinese to say, "There should not be any reincarnation."

Does it bother you that people speak so much about your death?

No, not at all. In Newark last month, a French journalist raised the issue. I took off my glasses and ask him, "According to your judgment of my face, the reincarnation question is rather a hurry or not?" And he said, "No hurry!" [Laughs]

Do you find yourself leaning toward a more traditional method of selecting the next Dalai Lama – your reincarnation – similar to the way you were discovered?

At this moment, I feel I can wait another 10 years, 15 years, 20 years. Then we'll see the situation. If the Tibetan people still want to keep this institution, and want to follow the traditional way, then they will use past experience: a search for a young boy who has some special significance.

As far as where the boy is born, that I have made clear. If I die as a refugee, one still carrying the Tibetan struggle, then the reincarnation logically must be found outside of Tibet. The very purpose of reincarnation is to carry on the work started in the previous life. So logically, if the previous person dies outside of Tibet as a refugee, the reincarnation must be found that way. Otherwise, it creates more trouble.

Can you foresee the challenges your successor, the 15th Dalai Lama, might face?

By my resignation, I already made the role separate from the political world. So it will be much safer for the next Dalai Lama. Now, if the 15th Dalai Lama is not fit to be head of government, no problem. Whatever he can do as a spiritual leader, he can do. Not very smart? OK! [Laughs]

Some traditions of Tibetan Buddhism suggest that a boy born before the death of a high lama could actually be his reincarnation. Do you believe that the 15th Dalai Lama could already be alive today?

It is possible. At least two modern lamas before their death said, "This boy who already is alive is my reincarnation." If it fits, after some investigation, then it is possible.

If in fact this boy is alive today, would you take part in his training?

If I'm too old, then I don't know! [Laughs]

You've been keeping a close watch on the uprisings in the Middle East. Do you think that the Arab Spring movement could have implications for Tibet?

That's difficult to say. Authoritarian systems are the same around the world. But in China, economic development really brings some benefit to large number of Chinese people. That is the difference.

Immediately after the crisis in Tunisia and Egypt, there was some sort of impact in the minds of young Chinese intellectuals. So the Chinese government has become very, very nervous. They see danger from within. But the Chinese authoritarian system is quite tight. Their domestic-security budget is more than their budget for national defense.

Many people believe that the coming generation of leadership in China – because of their young age, because of the Internet, because of large number of Chinese students studying abroad – that their knowledge about the outside world is much better. I think definitely things will change. Definitely. That is our view. And also many Chinese have that view.

Do you remember where you were the moment you heard that Osama bin Laden had been killed? What was your reaction?

Long Beach, California. I felt, of course, sad. Then, not that simple. Very complex. Since my childhood, I feel very bad about the death sentence. In 1945 or 1946, when I was 10 years old, they hanged German leaders at the Nuremberg war-crime trials. I saw pictures in *Life* magazine. I felt very sad. Then some Japanese leaders also. These people were already defeated. Killing them was not as a sort of a precaution, but simply revenge. Then when Saddam Hussein hanged, I saw the picture. Very sad. No longer a threat. Old, defeated person. Give mercy rather than kill, I really think.

So the same thinking with bin Laden, also a defeated person. Since the tragedy of September 11th, I express that if handling this problem goes wrong, then today one bin Laden, after some time, 10 bin Ladens, then 100 bin Ladens could be possible. On September 12th, I wrote a letter to President Bush, since I had developed close friendship with him. I expressed my condolences, sadness. Meantime, I also express that handling this problem, I hope nonviolent.

Of course, I know thousands of Americans were killed. Unexpected, in peaceful times. Really, very bad. I know. I can feel what they are feeling. So ordinary person, in the name of justice and also some kind of feeling of revenge, they feel very happy to some extent [about bin Laden]. Another way to look at it, a defeated person has been killed.

The best way to solve these problems is in the spirit of reconciliation. Talk. Listen. And discuss. That's the only way.

Does evil exist in the world?

The seed of evil, from my viewpoint, is hate. On that level, we can say that everyone has that seed. As far as sort of potential of murder is concerned, every person has that potential. Hatred. Anger. Suspicion. These are the potentials of negative acts.

There is also the potential for mercy. Forgiveness. Tolerance. These also, everyone has this potential.

Evil means that the negative potential has become manifest. The positive remains dormant. Those people who actually love hatred, who deliberately always practice anger, hatred – that's evil.

Have you ever felt betrayed personally?

In 1954 and 1955, for at least six months, I lived in Peking. During that period, I met on a number of occasions with Chairman Mao. At first, I was very much nervous. Then – after the second time, third time, fourth time, I can't remember how many times – I develop real admiration for him. I really found him as a great revolutionary. No question. Very straightforward. And his personal behavior – very gentle, like an old farmer's father. Like that. Very simple.

He promised many things. On one occasion, Chairman Mao pointed to two generals who were stationed in Lhasa. Mao said, "I send these generals in order to help you. So if these generals not listen to your wish, then let me know. I will withdraw them."

Then, at my last meeting, at the last moment, he mentioned, "Religion is poison."

At that time, he advised me how to listen, how to collect different views, different suggestions, and then how to lead. Really wonderful sort of advice. He asked me to send telegrams on a personal level, direct to him.

So I return to Tibet full of conviction. On the road, I meet a Chinese general coming from

Lhasa. I told him, "Last year, when I traveled this road, I was full of anxiety, suspicion. Now I'm returning, full of confidence and hope." That was the summer of 1955.

Then, in 1956, there were problems in the eastern part of Tibet under Chinese jurisdiction. So I come to India. Month by month, things become more serious. More trouble. So after I return from India, I wrote at least two letters to Chairman Mao about the situation. No reply. No response. Then I felt, "Oh, his promise is just words."

There are murals in the Potala that depict important moments and people in the lives of past Dalai Lamas. Your life has been so different from the previous Dalai Lamas. Who and what do you imagine might be depicted in a mural of your life?

Ahh, I don't know. Of course, my mother at a young age. Then, my tutor. I never thought about this. That's up to other people.

The important thing is that my daily life should be something useful to others. As soon as I wake up in the morning, I shape my mind. The rest of the day, my body, speech, mind are dedicated to others. That is compulsory as a practitioner, and also that way I gain some kind of inner strength. If I am concerned about my own sort of legacy, a genuine Buddhist practitioner should not think that. If you're concerned much about your legacy, then your work will not become sincere. You are mainly thinking of your own good name. Selfish. Not good. Spoiled.

Do you believe the day will come when you will be allowed to return to Tibet?

The Tibet issue is not an issue about the Dalai Lama. It is about six million Tibetans and their culture. So unless the Chinese government addresses the real issues, talks about my return to Tibet are irrelevant. This is an issue of six million Tibetan people. I am one of them. So naturally, like every Tibetan, I also have the responsibility to serve.

When your time comes, will you be buried at the Potala?

Most probably, if change comes and it is time to return to Tibet, my body will be preserved there. But it doesn't matter. If the airplane I'm on crashes, then finished! Follow bin Laden!
[Laughs]

You have said that Chenrezig – the Buddha of Compassion, of whom all Dalai Lamas are reincarnations – had a master plan for the first and fifth Dalai Lamas. Do you think that the past 50 years of Tibetan history is also part of his master plan?

That I don't know. In the early Sixties, before the Cultural Revolution, I met Chenrezig in one of my dreams at the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. There is a very famous statue of Chenrezig there. In the dream, I enter that room and the statue of Chenrezig is winking and asking me to come closer. And I am very moved. I go and embrace him. Then he starts one sentence, one verse. The meaning is: Keep persevering. The continuation of effort in spite of any obstacle. You should carry all your work in spite of difficulties and obstacles.

At that time, I feel happy. But now, when I think of that, I think that was advice from Chenrezig: "Your life will not be easy. Some difficulties. Quite long period. But no reason to feel discouraged. "