

The Fallacy of the Emanation of the Dalai Lamas

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Since the fourteenth century, the Dalai Lama has served as a spiritual leader or guru. In the seventeenth century, this role advanced to that of both a spiritual and political leader. “The practice of selecting a successor, the next Dalai Lama, to a monastic seat by finding the child into which his consciousness has been reborn, who is known as a *tulku*, is a special feature of Tibetan Buddhism.”¹ Around the thirteenth century, Tibetans came to believe that *tulkus* could perpetually hold their estate through the course of their reincarnations. A dying guru, on his deathbed, could choose his rebirth. According to followers of Vajrayana Buddhism, living forever through reincarnation serves to further the religious practices and beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists. Each subsequent Dalai Lama is systematically looked for, carefully chosen, and ceremonially initiated into his divine role, as he is considered an emanation of the deceased guru. While “all varieties of Buddhism hold that the mind continues to exist after death and returns as the embryo of a new sentient being, only in Tibet did this become the mechanism for selecting the successor to a high religious position.”² This careful, deliberate system of identifying his emanation is fundamentally corrupt, and its roots are seeded in political and financial gain while under the guise of perpetuating the Buddhist faith.

Sonam Gyatso was recognized at the age of three as the rebirth of a recently deceased abbot, but it was not until his religious influence for the Gelugpa School was coveted by Altan Khan that he was given the title of Dalai Lama. Sonam Gyatso would become the very first tulku to enter the role of the Dalai Lama simply by virtue of the title that was given to him by his

¹ Sam Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 89.

² *Ibid.*

political ally and Mongol leader, Altan Khan, who was in search of a comrade to aid his agenda of cementing Tibetan Buddhism as the religion of the land. In keeping with the traditions of the patron-priest relationship of his predecessors, Altan Khan declared *himself* the emanation of Kublai Khan, and named Sonam Gyatso the first Dalai Lama. Altan Khan was in search of someone “who could bring Buddhism to the people and prestige to the Mongol court” for the Mongols had forgotten the ways of their Buddhist religion, and the old Mongol rituals, including animal sacrifice, had come to dominate the religious practice of the time.³ For Sonam Gyatso, such an alliance with the Mongols advanced Tibet’s efforts towards preserving Buddhism in Tibet.

Sonam Gyatso bestowed teachings and tantric initiation upon Altan Khan. In return, he received a promise of patronage, and a Mongolian title that was ... shortened by the Tibetans to ‘Dalai’. Thus Sonam Gyatso became the first Tibetan to receive the title Dalai [during his life-time].⁴

Because Tibet’s small armies were no match for the fierce Mongol warriors, peace with them meant financial and military support, and was a superior option to engaging in armed conflict.

For Altan Khan, declaring himself the reincarnation of Kublai Khan meant political reverence and religious backing. Kublai Khan was revered as the fierce Mongol leader of the Yuan Dynasty during the thirteenth century, and was credited with conquering all of China, and “appropriating no fewer than 237 temples in China” by converting them from Daoism into Buddhism.⁵

The other effect of Mongol rule in Tibet was to end the fragmentation of power, and to bring back the idea that some kind of central authority was achievable. The period of complete fragmentation that had followed the collapse of the Tibetan

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Alexander Norman, *Secret Lives of the Dalai Lama: The Untold Story of Holy Men*. (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 121.

imperial line was now over, never to return. There has been a shift of power away from the clans and towards the Buddhist schools. This [brought] a degree of stability [to Tibet].⁶

The Khan maximized the trade of goods along the Silk Road, such as silk and salt, improved the Postal Service along the road, and also increased profits through the establishment of an efficient taxation system.⁷ The Silk Road was a network of interlinking trade routes connecting parts of East, South, and Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East. Though silk was certainly the major trade item from China, many other goods were traded, as were various technologies, religions and philosophies. Tibet had long been influenced by different ideas, rituals and technologies that reached their land from travellers of the Silk Road.

Together, Altan Khan and Sonam Gyatso had more power than each did alone. They could be viewed as the previous power-duo: Kublai and Phagpa, whose relationship saw many advances for Tibetan Buddhism. “Phagpa adapted the Uighur script so that the Buddhist Scriptures could be translated into Mongolian, which, until that time, was an unwritten language.”⁸ With Kublai’s support, Phagpa created a new writing system for the multilingual Yuan Dynasty based on a modified version of traditional Tibetan script, which eventually, albeit short-lived, became the official writing system of the empire, replacing the Chinese Uyghur script.

It was the prestige of coming from a wealthy aristocratic family and his family’s patronage of the Gelugpa School that awarded Ngawang Losang Gyatsos’ official identification as the fifth Dalai Lama despite having failed the monk’s tests. The monk’s method of conducting

⁶ Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 89.

⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁸ Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin M. Turnbull, *Tibet: Its History, Religion and People* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 195.

the tests dictates that the genuine emanation of the previous Dalai Lama should be able to identify objects from his previous life-time. Identifying the correct tulku, the next Dalai Lama, involves presenting him with objects familiar to the deceased; rosaries, tea-cups, books, etc. Additionally, tulku are believed to be able to choose their manner of rebirth, and, on their deathbed, make known the place of their next birth. Sometimes they provide details of their future parents, homeland, etc., to aid the monks in locating them and identifying them as their emanation.

Unfortunately, the future fifth Dalai Lama utterly failed the tests, as he readily admitted in his autobiography: “The Master of Ten showed me the statues and rosaries, but I wasn’t able to identify any that I recognized. Then he went to the door and said, ‘I have great confidence in his recognition.’ In the end he became my tutor. When I wasn’t attentive, he used to say, ‘Oh why didn’t I confess at the time that you couldn’t recognize the objects!’”⁹

From an early age, the fifth Dalai Lama was also a political pawn, chosen for his wealth, to rescue the Gelugpa School from the ruler of Tsang, Karma Puntsog Namgyal. This new leader forced the ruler of U, patron of the Gelugpa School, into submission. Though the school was not dismantled by Namgyal, the Gelugpa School was threatened to be led by a king that also supported many other schools, such as the Sakya, Nyingma and Jonang schools, thereby potentially decreasing their revenue. Namgyal also attempted to ban the Gelugpa monks from appointing a new Dalai Lama, a move that would have secured his political power if successful. Concurrently, the Karma Kagyu School and the Gelugpa School, were bidding for a particular chosen child to be the next Dalai Lama. In what would be a fatal decision, Namgyal allowed the Gelugpa lamas to claim Ngawang Losang Gyatso as their Dalai Lama. Years later, Ngawang Losang Gyatso, the fifth Dalai Lama and Gushi Khan, military warlord of the western Mongol tribe, defeated and killed King Namgyal. This defeat saw the Kagyu monasteries of Tibet

⁹ Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 119.

converted into Gelugpa monasteries, the works of the Jonang and Sakya scholars banned, and followers of the Nyingma School either killed or imprisoned.

Ngawang Losang Gyatso failed the monastic tests required to prove that he was the genuine reincarnation of the fourth Dalai Lama, and therefore he himself would admit he was not a good candidate for the position. Nonetheless, he was given the title of the *Great Fifth Dalai Lama* for his many religious and political achievements:

Under his rule, the Gelugpa schools' influence in Amdo became superior to others and the 'rule of religion' was finally firmly established 'even to the layman, to the nomad, or to the farmer in his fields'. This was not only the supremacy of the Gelugpa School over Bon, or over the other Buddhist schools, but 'the dedication of an entire nation to a religious principle.'¹⁰

Losang Gyatso sought to secure his legacy and that of Tibetan Buddhism for generations when he embarked on constructing the Potala Palace upon the historically significant land that previously housed the Red Palace.¹¹ The Red Palace was a strategically chosen site because Songtsen Gampo, the founder of the Tibetan empire, ordered its construction. His many lasting cultural and political influences for Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism made its location auspicious, since many Tibetan Buddhists credit Songsten Gampo with introducing Buddhism to Tibet by ordering the translation of scriptures. Unfortunately, Losang died before completion of the palace, and it was the Desi, Sangye Gyatso who held the power to complete it. As the holder of the position of Desi, he was a regent considered head of state, only second in command to the king or ruler. He held administrative authority of Tibet and astutely managed the political and religious agendas of Tibetan Buddhism. Sangye knew erecting another palace in such a place would have far-reaching influence. For Tibetans and for their foreign rivals, it came to represent

¹⁰Thubten Jigme Norbu, *Tibet is my Country: Autobiography of Thubten Jigme Norbu, Brother of the Dalai Lama as told to Heinrich Harrer*. (New York: Dutton, 1960).

¹¹ Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 123-4.

a locus of political and religious power and was understood as a physical manifestation of the progress of the Tibetan people.

The Desi chose the sixth Dalai Lama just as strategically as the monks had, for the patronage of the thriving Gelugpa School, and with similar disregard for the validity of the monk's tests. The Desi set his sights on a child from a region that had previously proved unconquerable by the powerful Mongol military: Burma, a resource-rich country that had connections to the profitable Silk Road and a contiguous coastline to the Tibet's southwest. More importantly, the child was from a wealthy family that supported the Gelugpa School. "The Gelug School was only supported by one of the local noble families, and it was a boy from this family who was recognized as the new Dalai Lama."¹² Dominance of Burhma and its routes of trade promised economic, cultural and religious progress for Tibet, and a child chosen from such a wealthy family promised financial backing.

Hoping to maintain the stable political climate of the time and the prosperity of Tibetan Buddhism, the Desi chose to keep the death of Losang Gyatso a secret. He also kept silent that his choice for the next Dalai Lama had failed the monk's tests, which were designed to prove that he was the incarnation of the previous Dalai Lama. Pressured to produce a replacement for the fifth Dalai Lama, the Desi allowed the sixth Dalai Lama to read the secret autobiography of his predecessor, "in the hope that the accounts of visions contained therein would awaken memories of his previous life."¹³ This self-serving deception continued, but not without embarrassing the Tibetan leaders.

The new Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, chose to reject both his novice and monastic vows and criticized the Gelugpa School, further reinforcing the impression that was forced to

¹² Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 130.

assume a role he had no intention of playing and further emphasizing that he lacked any divine inspiration to equip him. Further setting him apart was his lifestyle, he failed to uphold the moral code of conduct required not only of monks but especially of a Dalai Lama. In *The Final Teaching of the Buddha*, Siddhartha Gautama was said to exhort his followers “consider your body; think of its impurity; how can you indulge its cravings as you see that both its pain and delight are alike causes of suffering?”¹⁴ yet he indulged in promiscuity and drunkenness. The Buddha continues, “My disciples, the teachings that I have given you are never to be forgotten or abandoned. They are to be treasured, they are to be thought about, and they are to be practiced!”, yet he avoided his tutor and did not study the Buddha’s teachings.¹⁵ Ignoring the Buddha’s command, the sixth Dalai Lama displayed more interest in living a promiscuous life than he did in studying, meditating or working to prosper Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite the fact that Sangye Gyatso provided political and religious tutoring, and the Panchen Lama leadership advisement, Tsangyang, the sixth Dalai Lama had trouble assuming his role as leader of Tibet. This was significant because “the Gelugpa School had placed particular emphasis on monastic vows. All of its reincarnate lamas were monks, and the Dalai Lama was by far the most important of them.”¹⁶ Tsangyang was so disillusioned with his role, he expressed desire to recant his novice and monastic vows. Had the abbots of all the major monasteries not persuaded him to keep, at least, his novice vows, his decision to take neither could have been catastrophic.

While he pacified the public with the occasional, customary meet-and-greet and the abbots of the monastery with his novice vows, he defied other important traditions required of a

¹⁴ Dwight Goddard, ed. and trans. *Buddha, Truth, and Brotherhood* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 8.

¹⁵ Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, *The Teachings of Buddha* (New Delhi: Sterling, 2004).

¹⁶ Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 131.

Dalai Lama; celibacy and sexual self-restraint. In *The Lyric Poems of the Sixth Dalai Lama*, there is evidence of his double life:

The girl of the market place
And I made that “True Love Knot.”
I did not try to untie it,
It untied of its own accord.¹⁷

The new Dalai Lama had no trouble expressing his true interests and ignoring his role as political and spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. His criticism of the Gelugpa School was echoed in one of his poems:

The oath-bound great Buddha’s Protector,
Who lives in the realm of the “Tenth Stage,”
If you have supernatural powers,
Then please kill the enemies of the Sage.¹⁸

The sixth Dalai Lama was plucked from a privileged family for the financial benefits his family could provide despite having failed the tests that, according to the Tibetan tulku system, should have proven he was a true reincarnation of the fifth Dalai Lama. “Whether from fear of the Lhan, or disillusionment with the Dalai Lama, the abbots capitulated and signed a statement that the essence of enlightenment no longer dwelt in this Dalai Lama.”¹⁹ The Desi and the abbots recanted because they could no longer ignore the fact that Tsangyang was not the reincarnation they had proclaimed.

The Tibetan people have overcome many obstacles that threatened their religion by appointing children no different than any other, with the exception of the chosen tulku having profitable family lineage, respectable ancestors or politically savvy potential. Had the system of finding the tulku of the previous Dalai Lama been truly divinely inspired, its focus would not

¹⁷ C.M. Chen, trans., “The Lyric Poems of the Sixth Dalai Lama,”
<http://www.yogichen.org/cw/cw41/bk131.html> (accessed March 23, 2013).

¹⁸ C.M. Chen, “The Lyric Poems of the Sixth Dalai Lama.”

¹⁹ Van Schaik, *Tibet*, 134.

have been directed towards land that provided valuable resources, children selected from wealthy families that promised financial support of Tibetan schools, nor would have monks ignored failed tests. The Dalai Lama's repeated failure of the monk's tests, differing religious beliefs, and criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism have been overlooked because the benefits provided to the land of Tibet and the Buddhist religion fulfilled their abbot's hidden agenda and has allowed the Tibetan religion to survive the threat of annihilation by other schools of Buddhism and other religions that may have otherwise silenced it.