

*Information provided by James B. Robinson, associate professor, world religions, University of Northern Iowa*

### **The Dalai Lama Fact Sheet**

The title “Dalai Lama” is given to Tenzin Gyatso, as a particularly exalted personage in Tibetan Buddhism. By analogy to the Pope, the Dalai Lama is customarily referred to as “His Holiness.”

The word “lama” equivalent to the Sanskrit word “guru” means a spiritual teacher.

The word “dalai” is Mongolian for “ocean” and was bestowed by Altan Khan, a powerful Mongolian chieftain, on his Tibetan teacher Sonam Gyatso in 1578. Sonam Gyatso was the abbot of the large Drepung monastery and whose name means “Ocean of Merit.” “Dalai” is a partial translation of that name so an English translation of Dalai Lama might be “Ocean Teacher.”

Since then, all Dalai Lamas have included the name Gyatso or “ocean” in their personal religious names.

Tibetans do not use the term Dalai Lama but call him by various titles such as Precious Victor, the Presence (Kundun), and Inmost One.

Beginning in the 1600s and continuing until the present Dalai Lama was driven into exile in 1959, the Dalai Lamas were considered head of the Tibetan government situated in the Potala Palace, though always with the active assistance of a council of regents. The present DL is the president of the Tibetan government-in-exile, headquartered in Dharamsala in northern India.

Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Beginning in the late 1200s, Tibetan Buddhists began to acknowledge the reincarnations, a bodily continuity of significant teachers and scholars, each of whom, in effect, take up where the previous incarnation left off. In this case, Sonam Gyatso was considered a reincarnation of two previous masters, the first of whom was a prominent disciple of the great scholar-reformer, Tsong Khapa, who founded the Gelugpa school, the most prominent of the four Buddhist schools of Tibet.

Since Sonam Gyatso was held to be the incarnation of these previous figures, the title of DL was applied to them in retrospect. In addition, this series of lamas is also considered to be the repeated incarnation of the great “celestial” bodhisattva, Avalokita, (in Tibetan, Chenrazi) increasing the awe and prestige attached to the figure of the DL.

**Selection Process:** When a Dalai Lama dies, a search for his reincarnation takes place a couple of years later. A regent holds the reins of government until he is found, trained and finally formally installed at his maturity.

There are many clues as to where that incarnation may be found. The previous Dalai Lama may himself give some indications where he will incarnate. The State Oracle will be consulted and certain lamas will gaze into a sacred lake where a vision of his locale

may be found. In the case of the present 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the presiding regent received a vision of a monastery with a jade-green and gold roof, and a house with turquoise roof tiles. Following these clues led them to the home where the four-year old Tenzin Gyatso was living.

However, further tests are necessary. Significant possessions of the previous Dalai Lama are shown to the perspective incarnation but mixed with like objects that are newer and more shiny. If the young child consistently reaches for the previous Dalai Lama's objects, this strengthens the case that the child is the correct incarnation.

### **Three Main Commitments in Life (from HHDL Web site)**

**Firstly**, on the level of a human being, His Holiness's first commitment is the promotion of human values such as compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, contentment and self-discipline. All human beings are the same. We all want happiness and do not want suffering. Even people who do not believe in religion recognize the importance of these human values in making their life happier. His Holiness refers to these human values as secular ethics. He remains committed to talk about the importance of these human values and share them with everyone he meets.

**Secondly**, on the level of a religious practitioner, His Holiness's second commitment is promoting religious harmony and understanding among the world's major religious traditions. Despite philosophical differences, all major world religions have the same potential to create good human beings. It is therefore important for all religious traditions to respect one another and recognize the value of each other's respective traditions. As far as one truth, one religion is concerned, this is relevant on an individual level. However, for community at large, several truths, several religions are necessary.

**Thirdly**, His Holiness is a Tibetan and carries the name of the Dalai Lama. Tibetans place their trust in him. Therefore, his third commitment is to the Tibetan issue. His Holiness has a responsibility to act as the free spokesperson of the Tibetans in their struggle for justice. As far as this third commitment is concerned, it will cease to exist once a mutually beneficial solution is reached between the Tibetans and Chinese.

However, His Holiness will carry on with the first two commitments till his last breath.