

## From Birth to Exile

From Birth to Journey into Exile

Source: Dalailama.com

His Holiness the Dalai Lama was born on 6 July 1935, and named Lhamo Thondup, to a poor family in the small village of Taktser in the province of Amdo. The name, Lhamo Thondup, literally means 'Wish-Fulfilling Goddess'. Taktser (Roaring Tiger) was a small and poor settlement that stood on a hill overlooking a broad valley. Its pastures had not been settled or farmed for long, only grazed by nomads. The reason for this was the unpredictability of the weather in that area, His Holiness writes in his autobiography *Freedom in Exile*. 'During my early childhood, my family was one of twenty or so making a precarious living from the land there.'

His Holiness' parents were small farmers who mostly grew barley, buckwheat and potatoes. His father was a man of medium height with a very quick temper. 'I remember pulling at his moustache once and being hit hard for my trouble,' recalls His Holiness. 'Yet he was a kind man too and he never bore grudges.' His Holiness recalls his mother as 'undoubtedly one of the kindest people I have ever known.' She had a total of sixteen children, of whom seven lived.

His Holiness had two sisters and four brothers who survived their infancy. Tsering Dolma, the eldest child, was eighteen years older than His Holiness. 'At the time of my birth she helped my mother run the house and acted as my midwife. When she delivered me, she noticed that one of my eyes was not properly open. Without hesitation she put her thumb on the reluctant lid and forced it wide fortunately without any ill effect,' His Holiness writes. His Holiness' three elder brothers were Thupten Jigme Norbu - the eldest, who was recognised as the reincarnation of a high lama, Taktser Rinpoche - Gyalo Thondup and Lobsang Samten. The youngest brother, Tenzin Cheogyal was also recognised as the reincarnation of another high lama, Ngari Rinpoche.

'Of course, no one had any idea that I might be anything other than an ordinary baby. It was almost unthinkable that more than one tulku (reincarnation) could be born into the same family and certainly my parents had no idea that I would be proclaimed Dalai Lama,' His Holiness writes. Though the remarkable recovery made by His Holiness' father from his critical illness at the time of His Holiness' birth was auspicious, it was not taken to be of great significance. 'I myself likewise had no particular intimation of what lay ahead. My earliest memories are very ordinary.' His Holiness recollects his earliest memory, among others, of observing a group of children fighting and running to join in with the weaker side.

'One thing that I remember enjoying particularly as a very young boy was going into the hen coop to collect the eggs with my mother and then staying behind. I liked to sit in the hens' nest and make clucking noises. Another favourite occupation of mine as an infant was to pack things in a bag as if I was about to go on a long journey. 'I'm going to Lhasa, I'm going to Lhasa,' I would say. This, coupled with my insistence that I be allowed always to sit at the head of the table, was later said to be an indication that I must have known that I was destined for greater things.'

His Holiness is held to be the reincarnation of each of the previous thirteen Dalai Lamas of Tibet (the first having been born in 1351 AD), who are in turn considered to be manifestations of Avalokiteshvara, or Chenrezig, Bodhisattva of Compassion, holder of the White Lotus. Thus His Holiness is also believed to be a manifestation of Chenrezig, in fact the seventy-fourth in a lineage that can be traced back to a Brahmin boy who lived in the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. 'I am often asked whether I truly believe this. The answer is not simple to give. But as a fifty-six year old, when I consider my experience during this present life, and given my Buddhist beliefs, I have no difficulty accepting that I am spiritually connected both to the thirteen previous Dalai Lamas, to Chenrezig and to the Buddha himself.'

**Discovery as Dalai Lama**When Lhamo Thondup was barely three years old, a search party that had been sent out by the Tibetan government to find the new incarnation of the Dalai Lama arrived at Kumbum monastery. It had been led there by a number of signs. One of these concerned the embalmed body of his predecessor, Thupten Gyatso, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who had died aged fifty-seven in 1933. During its period of sitting in state, the head was discovered to have turned from facing south to northeast. Shortly after that the Regent, himself a senior lama, had a vision. Looking into the waters of the sacred lake, Lhamo Lhatso, in southern Tibet, he clearly saw the Tibetan letters Ah, Ka and Ma float into view. These were followed by the image of a three-storied monastery with a turquoise and gold roof and a path running from it to a hill. Finally, he saw a small house with strangely shaped guttering. He was sure that the letter Ah referred to Amdo, the northeastern province, so it was there that the search party was sent.

By the time they reached Kumbum, the members of the search party felt that they were on the right track. It seemed likely that if the letter Ah referred to Amdo, then Ka must indicate the monastery at Kumbum, which was indeed three-storied and turquoise-roofed. They now only needed to locate a hill and a house with peculiar guttering. So they began to search the neighbouring villages. When they saw the gnarled branches of juniper wood on the roof of the His Holiness' parent's house, they were certain that the new Dalai Lama would not be far away. Nevertheless, rather than reveal the purpose of their visit, the group asked only to stay the night. The leader of the party, Kewtsang Rinpoche, then pretended to be a servant and spent much of the evening observing and playing with the youngest child in the house.

The child recognised him and called out ‘Sera lama, Sera lama’. Sera was Kewtsang Rinpoche’s monastery. The next day they left only to return a few days later as a formal deputation. This time they brought with them a number of things that had belonged to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, together with several similar items that did not. In every case, the infant correctly identified those belonging to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama saying, ‘It’s mine. It’s mine.’ This more or less convinced the search party that they had found the new incarnation. It was not long before the boy from Taktser was acknowledged to be the new Dalai Lama. The boy Lhamo Thondup was first taken to Kumbum monastery. ‘There now began a somewhat unhappy period of my life,’ His Holiness was to write later, reflecting on his separation from his parents and the unfamiliar surroundings. ‘However, there were two consolations to life at the monastery.’ First, His Holiness’ immediate elder brother Lobsang Samten was already there. The second consolation was the fact that his teacher was a very kind old monk, who often held his young disciple inside his gown.

Lhamo Thondup was eventually to be reunited with his parents and together they were to journey to Lhasa. This did not come about for some eighteen months, however, because Ma Bufeng, the local Chinese Muslim warlord, refused to let the boy-incarnate be taken to Lhasa without payment of a large ransom. It was not until the summer of 1939 that he left for the capital, Lhasa, in a large party consisting of his parents, his brother Lobsang Samten, members of the search party and other pilgrims.

The journey to Lhasa took three months. ‘I remember very little detail apart from a great sense of wonder at everything I saw: the vast herds of drong (wild yaks) ranging across the plains, the smaller groups of kyang (wild asses) and occasionally a shimmer of gowa and nawa, small deer which were so light and fast they might have been ghosts. I also loved the huge flocks of hooting geese we saw from time to time.’ Lhamo Thondup’s party was received by a group of senior government officials and escorted to Doeguthang plain, two miles outside the gates of the capital. The next day, a ceremony was held in which Lhamo Thondup was conferred the spiritual leadership of his people. Following this, he was taken off with Lobsang Samten to the Norbulingka, the summer palace of His Holiness, which lay just to the west of Lhasa.

During the winter of 1940, Lhamo Thondup was taken to the Potala Palace, where he was officially installed as the spiritual leader of Tibet. Soon after, the newly recognised Dalai Lama was taken to Jokhang temple where His Holiness was inducted as a novice monk in a ceremony known as taphue, meaning ‘cutting of the hair’. ‘From now on, I was to be shaven-headed and attired in maroon monk’s robes.’ In accordance with ancient custom, His Holiness forfeited his name Lhamo Thondup and assumed his new name, Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso. His Holiness then began to receive his primary education. The curriculum - same as that for all monks pursuing a doctorate in Buddhist studies - included logic, Tibetan art and culture, Sanskrit, medicine and Buddhist philosophy. The last and the most important (and most difficult) was subdivided into further five categories: Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom; Madhyamika, the philosophy of the Middle Way; Vinaya, the canon of monastic discipline; Abidharma, metaphysics; and Pramana, logic and epistemology.

Dalai Lama in His Youth On the day before the opera festival in the summer of 1950, His Holiness was just coming out of the bathroom at the Norbulingka when he felt the earth beneath begin to move. As the scale of this natural phenomenon began to sink in, people naturally began to say that this was more than a simple earthquake: it was an omen. Two days later, Regent Tathag received a telegram from the Governor of Kham, based in Chamdo, reporting a raid on a Tibetan post by Chinese soldiers. Already the previous autumn there had been cross-border incursions by Chinese Communists, who stated their intention of liberating Tibet from the hands of imperialist aggressors. ‘It now looked as if the Chinese were making good their threat. If that were so, I was well aware that Tibet was in grave danger for our army mustered no more than 8,500 officers and men. It would be no match for the recently victorious People’s Liberation Army (PLA).’

Two months later, in October, news reached Lhasa that an army of 80,000 soldiers of the PLA had crossed the Driчу river east of Chamdo. ‘So the axe had fallen. And soon, Lhasa must fall.’ As the winter drew on and the news got worse, people began to advocate that His Holiness be given his majority, his full temporal power. The Government consulted the Nechung Oracle, ‘a very tense moment’, who came over to where His Holiness was seated and laid a kata, a white offering scarf, on His Holiness’ lap with the words ‘Thu-la bap’, ‘His time has come.’ At the young age of fifteen, His Holiness was on 17 November 1950 officially enthroned as the temporal leader of Tibet in a ceremony held at the Norbulingka Palace.

At the beginning of November, about a fortnight before the day of His Holiness’ investiture, his eldest brother arrived in Lhasa. ‘As soon as I set eyes on him, I knew that he had suffered greatly. Because Amdo, the province where we were both born, and in which Kumbum is situated, lies so close to China, it had quickly fallen under control of the Communists. He himself was kept virtual prisoner in his monastery. At the same time, the Chinese endeavoured to indoctrinate him in the new Communist way of thinking and try to subvert him. They had a plan whereby they would set him free to go to Lhasa if he would undertake to persuade me to accept Chinese rule. If I resisted, he was to kill me. They would then reward him.’ To mark the occasion of his ascension to power, His Holiness granted general amnesty whereby all the prisoners were set free. ‘I was pleased to have this opportunity, although there were times that I regretted it. When I trained my telescope on the compound, it was empty save for a few dogs scavenging for scraps. It was as if something was missing from my life.’ Shortly after the 15-year-old Dalai Lama found himself the undisputed leader of six million people facing the threat of a full-scale war, His Holiness appointed two new Prime Ministers. Lobsang Tashi became the monk Prime Minister and an experienced lay administrator,

Lukhangwa, the lay Prime Minister. "That done, I decided in consultation with them and the Kashag to send delegations abroad to America, Great Britain and Nepal in the hope of persuading these countries to intervene on our behalf. Another was to go to China in the hope of negotiating a withdrawal. These missions left towards the end of the year. Shortly afterwards, with the Chinese consolidating their forces in the east, we decided that I should move to southern Tibet with the most senior members of the Government. That way, if the situation deteriorated, I could easily seek exile across the border with India. Meanwhile, Lobsang Tashi and Lunkhangwa were to remain in an acting capacity. "While His Holiness was in Dromo, which lay just inside the border with Sikkim, His Holiness received the news that while the delegation to China had reached its destination, each of the others had been turned back. "So it was almost impossible to believe that the British Government was now agreeing that China had some claim to authority over Tibet. "His Holiness was equally saddened by America's reluctance to help. "I remember feeling great sorrow when I realised what this really meant: Tibet must expect to face the entire might of Communist China alone. "Frustrated by the indifference showed to Tibet's case by Great Britain and America, His Holiness, in his last bid to avoid a full-scale Chinese invasion, sent Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, governor of Kham, to Beijing to open a dialogue with the Chinese. The delegation hadn't been given the power to reach at any settlement, apart from its entrusted task of convincing the Chinese leadership against invading Tibet. "However, one evening, as I sat alone... A harsh, crackling voice announced that a Seventeen-Point 'Agreement' for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet had that day (May 23, 1951) been signed by representatives of the Government of the People's Republic of China and what they called the 'Local Government of Tibet.' As it turned out, the Chinese who even forged the Tibetan seal had forced the delegation headed by Ngabo into signing the agreement. The Chinese had in effect secured a major coup by winning Tibetan compliance, albeit at gunpoint, to their terms of returning Tibet to the fold of the motherland. His Holiness returned to Lhasa in the middle of August 1951

**Countdown to Escape**The next nine years saw His Holiness trying to evade a full-scale military takeover of Tibet by China on one hand and placating the growing resentment among Tibetan resistance fighters against the Chinese aggressors on the other. His Holiness made a historic visit to China from July 1954 to June 1955 for peace talks and met with Mao Zedong and other Chinese leaders, including Chou En-lai, Chu Teh and Deng Xiaoping. From November 1956 to March 1957 His Holiness visited India to participate in the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations. But disheartening reports of increasing brutality towards his own people continued to pour in when the young Dalai Lama was giving his final monastic examinations in Lhasa in the winter of 1958/59.

**Escape into Exile**One winter day of 1959 (March 10) General Chiang Chin-wu of Communist China extended a seemingly innocent invitation to the Tibetan leader to attend a theatrical show by a Chinese dance troupe. When the invitation was repeated with new conditions that no Tibetan soldiers was to accompany the Dalai Lama and that his bodyguards be unarmed, an acute anxiety befell the Lhasa populace. Soon a crowd of tens of thousands of Tibetans gathered around the Norbulingka Palace, determined to thwart any threat to their young leader's life. On 17 March 1959 during a consultation with Nechung Oracle, His Holiness was given an explicit instruction to leave the country. The Oracle's decision was further confirmed when a divinity performed by His Holiness produced the same answer, even though the odds against making a successful break seemed terrifyingly high. A few minutes before ten o'clock His Holiness, now disguised as a common soldier, slipped past the massive throng of people along with a small escort and proceeded towards Kyichu river, where He was joined by the rest of the entourage, including his immediate family members.

**In Exile**Three weeks after leaving Lhasa, His Holiness and his entourage reached the Indian border from where they were escorted by Indian guards to Bomdila. The Indian government had already agreed to provide asylum to His Holiness and his followers in India. It was in Mussoorie that His Holiness met with the Indian Prime Minister and the two talked about rehabilitating the Tibetan refugees. Realising the importance of modern education for the children of Tibetan refugees, His Holiness impressed upon Nehru to undertake the formation of an independent Society for Tibetan Education within the Indian Ministry of Education. The Indian Government was to bear all the expenses for setting up the schools for the Tibetan children. Thinking the 'time is ripe for me to break my elected silence', His Holiness called a press conference on 20 June 1959 when His Holiness formally repudiated the Seventeen-Point Agreement. In the field of administration, too, I was able to make radical changes. For example, His Holiness saw the creation of various new Tibetan government departments. These included Departments of Information, Education, Home, Security, Religious Affairs and Economic Affairs. Most of the Tibetan refugees, whose number had grown to almost 30,000, were moved to road camps in the hills of northern India. On 10 March 1960 just before leaving for Dharamsala with the eighty or so officials who comprised the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, His Holiness began what is now a tradition by making a statement on the anniversary of the Tibetan People's Uprising. "On this first occasion, I stressed the need for my people to take a long-term view of the situation in Tibet. For those of us in exile, I said that our priority must be resettlement and the continuity of our cultural traditions. As to the future, I stated my belief that, with Truth, Justice and Courage as our weapons, we Tibetans would eventually prevail in regaining freedom for Tibet."