

Tibet - Did You Know?

About the Dalai Lama

A little understanding about who the Dalai Lama is and about the unique stream of Buddhism that he represents helps to explain the depth of a Tibetan's faith.

Dalai Lama means 'ocean of wisdom'. The current Dalai Lama, a highly respected international figure since his move in exile to Dharamsala, is believed to be the fourteenth reincarnation. That is, he has been reborn thirteen times and, motivated by deep compassion, voluntarily elects to remain within the circle of suffering and rebirth so he may help all living beings.

The current Dalai Lama's original name was Lamo Dunduk until the special search party despatched from Lhasa in 1934 found him in his home province of Chamdo. At the time he was four years old. It had taken a full four years of rigorous searching since the thirteenth Dalai Lama's death to find him.

The search party knew they were getting close when they discovered a gumpa near the young boy's home with a roof that appeared the colour turquoise when reflected upon water. When they met the young boy, he spoke knowledgeably of Lhasa, despite having never been there. He knew some of the men in the search party and could even converse with them in their own dialects, yet he had never before met them. When confronted with a selection of items, he selected only those that had been personal possessions of the thirteenth Dalai Lama.

All this is incredible enough for anyone to comprehend. For the search party, it confirmed that they had finally found their fourteenth reincarnate. The boy was renamed Tenzin Gyatso and began his programme of rigorous training, designed to prepare him for his role as the new spiritual leader and God King of Tibet.



Tibetan religious devotion clearly evident at a festival at Tsrphu Gumpa

About Foreign Occupation of Tibet

When the painful realities of the ongoing Chinese occupation are considered, Tibet's refusal to lie down becomes all the more heroic and amazing. To understand the origins of this current occupation requires at least a brief look back into history.

Although the Chinese occupation of recent times has been most devastating of all for the Tibetan people, Tibet had been occupied by foreign invaders before the Chinese. The Mongols first invaded Tibet in 1239. Then the Dzungar Mongols returned in 1706 to occupy Shangri La for 14 years. In 1904 the British also forcibly entered Tibet.

Until the seventh century, only the bravest or most foolhardy crossed Tibet's borders uninvited. Although today the only clues to Tibet's distant warlike past are their national sports of archery and polo, Tibet was once a very warlike nation, conquering many other nations themselves. The Tibetan way reflected their harsh environment. They were tough on themselves and even tougher on their opponents.

All that changed when Indian Buddhism took hold on the roof of the world around 630 AD, under the reign of King Songtsen Gampo. Where there had been soldiers, now there were monks. Where once there were forts, now stood gompas. As the industrialising world passed into the twentieth century, Tibet lay insulated in a time warp. Under a feudalistic order headed by the Lamas, the only way to escape the yoke of serfdom was to become a Buddhist monk, so this is what the eldest son of most families did.

A quarter of Tibet's population were monks, populating 6,000 gompas throughout Tibet. The high proportion of young Tibetan men living as celibate monks was even cited, in part, as a reason for the slow population growth in Tibet.



A Kamba - descendent from a warlike past and still reputed to be a fierce and independent people

So what could Britain possibly have gained by invading Tibet? At the time, even British central government couldn't see any justification for such a move. By the turn of the century Imperialism had become rather politically incorrect and the British establishment in London frowned upon such a blatant act of imperialism.

However, as British Imperialism was grinding to a halt, the last remnants of a game of international intrigue, known as the Great Game, were being played out between Britain and Russia. Although Tibet was not deemed a military threat, her location as a buffer zone between British India, Russia and China was deemed to be strategically crucial.

This view was held, almost to the point of obsession, by the then Viceroy of British India, Lord Curzon, who also had a close association with another Englishman uniquely qualified to lead a British conquest in Tibet. His name was Francis Younghusband.

Younghusband, from a strict Christian family and ill at ease with people, was a small man driven by a passion for adventure and a quest for greatness. He embodied British Imperialism. It seems apt that it was he who led the final major act of British imperialism when he invaded Tibet.

With his objective being to secure Tibet for Britain so that Russia could not take charge in her place, Younghusband entered Tibet in 1903, via Darjeeling. By the end of 1904 there had been 3,000 deaths, 95% of whom were Tibetans, gompas had been looted and the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, had fled Tibet for Mongolia.

What had the invasion achieved? Apart from destruction and mayhem, a treaty was signed between Britain and Tibet. Several years later, this treaty was completely dissolved by the British because it had never been sanctioned by central government. Younghusband discovered that Curzon's paranoia was unfounded. The Russians had not advanced into Tibet and did not have spies stationed throughout the high plateau.

As an aside, Younghusband also made a profound, personal discovery.

He discovered, like many who had preceded him and have subsequently done so, that if the roof of the world touches your heart, it will change your life. One day while gazing at mountains under a clear blue sky, Younghusband had a spiritual revelation that was indeed to change his life. That moment marked, for him, the beginning of a gradual but fundamental metamorphosis from conservative imperialist to liberal mystic.

A great irony of the Younghusband invasion was its ultimate outcome. Because the British occupied Tibet, this forced the Russians to negotiate with China over Tibetan matters. Because the British central government never sanctioned the invasion, when they dissolved Younghusband's treaty, they also opted to

negotiate with China over Tibetan matters. Both nations effectively sanctioned China's claim on Tibet, possibly helping to set the scene for a far more brutal and devastating invasion of Tibet in 1949.

Since the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, intellectualism and spiritualism replaced armed aggression as a peaceful defence mechanism for Tibet. The wisdom and teachings of the Lamas were sought after by Tibet's neighbours, including China, obliging them to respect Tibet's borders. The people's revolution in China violently disregarded all this.



The Gyantse Dzong, site of the last stand against Younghusband's invading force in 1904

To the revolutionaries, Tibet suddenly stood for all that was hated - intellectualism, spiritualism, feudalism and Lamaism.

Comparisons between Younghusband's invasion and the more recent Chinese effort can be made in terms of entry by force, the spilling of Tibetan blood and spiritual infringement.

The two invasions can not however, be compared in terms of scale, magnitude of brutality, extent of disregard for culture or duration of occupation. When asked about the British invasion, one old Tibetan monk exiled in India replied "when you have seen the scorpion, you look on the frog as divine."

The Chinese have proved to be a vast horde of the most tenacious scorpions. Since 1949 one sixth of Tibetans have been massacred, 1.2 million individuals. In 1959, when the Tibetan people rose up against their oppressors, 89,000 deaths finally prompted the Dalai Lama to flee his homeland. Ten years of atrocities finally became too much to bear.

Today, about six million Tibetans survive in Tibet, struggling to retain their identity amongst the 7 million Han Chinese who have been stationed there to culturally assimilate them. The alternative for hundreds of thousands of Tibetans has been to flee, with their beloved Dalai Lama, over the high mountain passes into Nepal, India and Bhutan.

300,000 Chinese soldiers controlled the comings and goings on the Tibetan Plateau. They also manned six airstrips, five missile bases and 17 radar installations. Nuclear weapons factories and their corresponding nuclear waste dumps also feature. The Tibetan buffer zone has indeed proved to be strategically significant, but not for the Russians and British. Today it is the Chinese and Indians who gaze down the barrels of their automatic weapons at each other.

The Origins, Development and Impact of Tibetan Buddhism

Buddhism originated in the lands bordering Northern India and Nepal about 2,500 years ago. An Indian Prince, Guatana, gave up the pleasures of his material world in search of enlightenment, or Nirvana.



A statue of a protector in the Jokhang, Lhasa

Many years after Guatana's death, in the third century BC, two distinct streams of Buddhism had formed. Hinayana, meaning 'Lesser Form', was a purist approach favouring the strict teachings of Guatana. It took root in Southern India and South East Asia. Mahayana, meaning 'Greater Form', pursued a more liberal interpretation of Guatana's teachings and took root in Northern India and North Asia.

Both streams worked by the law of Karma, seeking to ultimately extinguish karma in order to leave the cycle of life and suffering, thereby entering celestial bliss in Nirvana. Whereas Hinayana followers sought to become Arhat, meaning 'worthy ones', then immediately entered Nirvana, Mahayana followers sought to become Bodhisattvas, meaning 'saviours', then voluntarily remained on earth in the cycle of life and suffering so as to help all sentient beings to reach Nirvana.

Prior to the onset of Buddhism, Tibetans followed a Shamanist religion known as Bon. They worshipped sky, earth and nether-world gods, making animal and sometimes human sacrifices. They believed that their kings were manifestations of sky gods.

The strong message of love and compassion inherent in the Mahayana approach appealed to Tibetans, who first came into contact with Buddhism during their military conquests leading through to the seventh century.

During a period spanning two centuries, what Tibetans now refer to as the 'Earlier Period' involved a struggle between Bon and Buddhism. King Songtsen Gampo initiated this around 630, encouraging compassion, sophistication and learning. Reading came to the high plateau, as people needed to read the scriptures and writing was required, in order to copy them.

To facilitate the adoption of Buddhism by Bon followers, Tibetan Buddhism actually absorbed some of the terrifying sky gods, making them protectors of the faith. Over the next three centuries, Bon in turn absorbed aspects of Buddhism, such as some of the scriptures.

In the eight century, King Trisong Detsen commanded all Bon followers to convert to Buddhism. In 775 he invited Padmasambhava, known to Tibetans as the Guru Rimpoche, meaning the 'Precious Master', from Kashmir and Santarakshita from India, to preach Buddhist law. In 779 they completed Samye Gompa, establishing the first enduring Buddhist establishment in Tibet.

At this crucial time in the evolution of Tibetan Buddhism, a great debate between the Chinese, 'instant salvation' school of Zen and the Indian, 'gradualist salvation' school took place. The Indian team won, setting the scene for Tibetan Buddhism over the next millennium.



Religious devotion, personified by this prostrator in the Barkhor, Lhasa

The Earlier Period went into violent decline in 838, when disgruntled Bon followers could no longer bear the totally one-sided orientation of the monarchy. The then King Ralpachen was murdered by his Bon-supporting brother Lang Darma, who was, in turn, assassinated four years later. A long and prosperous period of military dominance ended as the Tibetan kingdom collapsed into a 150 year period of barbarism. Buddhism was all but snuffed out.

The revival of Buddhism in Tibet has become known as the 'Second Spread'. King Rinchen Zangpo was the catalyst when he invited, in 1042, the great Indian teacher Atisha to help him refine Tibetan Buddhism from the basic faith it had become during the previous 150 years of lawlessness.

This heralded the flourish of widespread Tibetan Buddhism, but not under the control of one King. During the previous 150 years, independent, feudal territories had emerged. Under this climate of fragmentation, characterised by an absence of political unity or military control, Buddhist Lamas established their own independent Buddhist sects in a bid for domination and power. Ultimately, four major sects emerged.

The first sect, Nyingma-pa, meaning 'those of the ancient teachings of Guru Rimpoche', was the only one surviving from the Earlier Period. Nyingma-pa followers are distinguished by their red caps, explaining why they are often referred to as the Red Caps. Their faith is tantric, meaning that it is based on threads of wisdom, passed down directly from the master's mouth, in the form of mantras, to the disciple's ear.

The second and third sects appeared in the eleventh century. The second was the Sakya sect, so named after the sect's founding gompa at Sakya (tawny soil). The founder was Khon Konchog Gyalpo, who based the succession of the sect's head Lama on blood line. Only a member of the Khon family could take the post of Abbot of the Sakyas.

The Sakyas were characterised by red, black and white stripes painted on their buildings, signifying three great bodhisattvas. They consequently became known as the Multicoloured sect.

In the thirteenth century, the Sakyas formed an alliance with the Mongols, successfully converting Kublai Khan to their stream of Buddhism. When Kublai Khan marched into Tibet, he passed control of the feudal nation over to the Sakyas for a period, beginning in 1269.

The third sect rose, from the master/disciple combination of

Marpa and Milarepa, near the end of the eleventh century. They were known as the Kagyu-pa sect and, like the Nyingma-pas, succession of the head Lama was handed down in a tantric fashion, through mantras and magic. The Kagyu-pas distinguished themselves by painting the walls of their gompas white, consequently becoming referred to as the White sect.



Pilgrims circum-navigate the Kumbum in Gyantse

Milarepa had many disciples, who formed several sub sects. The most notable were the Pagdru or Phamo Drupa, who dominated during the fourteenth century, after superseding the Sakyas; the Karma-pa, who further split into the Black Hats and the Red Hats, both who would actively oppose the fourth main Tibetan sect, the Geluk-pas, when they formed in the latter part of the fourteenth century; and the Druk-pa, who founded an independent theocracy in Bhutan in the seventeenth century.

The fourth and most prolific sect were the Kadam-pas, who later evolved into the Geluk-pas. Kadam means 'Buddha's teachings' and Geluk means 'Virtuous Ones'. The sect favoured strict, monastic discipline in line with the teachings of Atisha, father of the Second Spread. Their founder was Tsongkhapa, who emphasised intellectual excellence and logical debate within a strict monastic hierarchy. Geluk-pas wore very distinctive caps, leading to their other title, the Yellow Caps.

Tsongkharpa founded Ganden, the first Geluk-pa gompa, near Lhasa in 1409. Soon after, his disciples founded Drepung in 1416 and Sera in 1419. All three became significant monastic cities and by the sixteenth century, Geluk-pa gompas were located throughout the Tibetan plateau.

After Tsongkhapa died in 1419, the Geluk-pas faced a problem. How could they chose a successor when they were celibate, therefore succession by bloodline was not possible and they were not tantric, thereby ruling out any form of illogical succession by magical means. Their answer was reincarnation.

This concept held that Tsongkhapa had been a Tulku, a living Buddha and the Bodhisattva Chenresi, also known as Avalokitesvara, meaning 'protector of Tibet'. Successive pontiffs of the Geluk-pa sect were believed to be incarnations of this saintly being.

Like the Sakyas before them, the Geluk-pas struck up an alliance with the Mongols. In the sixteenth century, Altan Khan took control in Tibet and promptly bestowed the title of third Dalai Lama, meaning 'Master Ocean of wisdom', on the Geluk-pa pontiff (the titles of first and second Dalai Lama were bestowed retrospectively on the previous two pontiffs).

By 1652, the fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lozang Gyatso, who became known as the 'Great Fifth' on account of his wide ranging abilities and achievements, had managed to reunite all of Tibet. He also initiated construction of the Potala and bestowed the title of Panchen Lama, meaning 'Precious Great Scholar', on the Abott of Tashillunpo.

At that point, all the fundamental pillars of current day Tibetan Buddhism were in place and the faith thrived under the domination of the Geluk-pas for more than 300 years.



The future of their homeland remains uncertain for the Tibetan people as another sun sets behind the Jokhang

The Chinese attempted spiritual and therefore cultural extinction in Tibet. Of 6,000 gompas only about 50 remain. The destruction has been not only ruthless, but all encompassing, reaching remote places like Rongbuk at the very foot of Chomolungma. Ganden Gompa near Lhasa once housed 5,000 monks in one gigantic complex. Ganden was completely destroyed.

A great irony has been that the genocide in Tibet received virtually no international attention during the most brutal period of Chinese occupation. This may have been due, in part, to the isolationist stance pursued by the Tibetans prior to the initial Chinese invasion. Maybe international attention was also focussed on more monetarily lucrative causes at the time.

It wasn't until the 14th Dalai Lama fled to Dharamsala in 1959, during the Tibetan revolt, that the plight of his people finally gained world attention. Since then, the Dalai Lama has campaigned tirelessly for a peaceful solution in Tibet. For this he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. But the Chinese are still in Tibet and the Dalai Lama is still in exile.