

The Great Fifth

At the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama's birth in 1617, Tibet was in a state of religious, social and political turmoil. Political power was shared among various factions supported by different Buddhist religious orders who not only wished to propagate their teachings, but also to establish their economic power and political influence. The circumstances and strife surrounding the Fifth Dalai Lama's birth are crucial to understanding the decisive role this exceptional man played in Tibet's reunification.

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In Tibet, religious, political and economic power have always been intertwined. Tibetan political theory is based on a confluence of politics and religion in the form of Lamaism, finding its expression in *choyon*, a 'preceptor-patron' relationship in which both parties are considered equal. The term was often used to designate the relationship between a Tibetan lama and the leader of a foreign country, such as that of Phagpa Lotro Gyaltsen (1235-1280), the head of the Sakya Order, and Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor, in the 13th century.

Turmoil in Tibet

In 1548, the aristocrat Shingzhag Tsheten Dorje was appointed governor of Tsang province by the ruler of Central Tibet, a Rinpung lord. Shingzhag supported the Karma Kagyu Order and took up residence in Samdruptse castle (also called Shigatse), near the Gelug monastery Trashilhunpo. Soon after, he rebelled against the Rinpung lords and proclaimed himself King of Tsang. Together with his nine sons he gradually expanded his kingdom and established control over U and Tsang, Central Tibet's two main provinces.

The new government wanted to revive the institutions of the imperial period and to bring peace and prosperity to the country through a five-point policy, the so-called 'Five Great Actions', supported by various religious orders including the Sakya, the Jonang and the great Karmapa hierarchy. As the legitimate representative of authority, Shingzhag also maintained good relations with the Gelug abbots of Trashilhunpo, though the latter remained suspicious of the new dynasty's intentions.

In 1577-78 the conversion to Buddhism of Altan Khan, the leader of the Tumed Mongols, and all his subjects by Sonam Gyatso (1543-1588), the Abbot of Drepung Monastery (who received the title Dalai Lama from the Khan and was later recognized as the Third Dalai Lama) was a spectacular success for the Gelug Order. The secular government in Samdruptse, however, viewed the event as a politico-religious alliance between the Gelug and a foreign power.

In 1589, the conflict was exacerbated when the Gelug recognized a child born that year to a Mongol family as the reincarnation of the Third Dalai Lama. The royal government took this as a clear indication of the Gelug Order's intentions. After the child was installed in the Ganden Palace in Drepung Monastery and enthroned as its abbot, Mongol intervention in the Gelug Order, and therefore in Tibetan affairs, increased. However, he died shortly thereafter, in 1616, and the royal government forbade the search for his reincarnation.

Against this backdrop of turmoil, in 1617, a son was born to the famous noble Zahor family. Since the 14th century the family had lived in the Tagtse castle, the Tibetan kings' former stronghold. Despite the king's ban, however, officials of the Ganden Palace in Drepung Monastery had not renounced the search for the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. They had secretly selected three children, drawn by lot before the holy image of the Radeng Monastery, as possible reincarnations of the Dalai Lama. The child born to the Zahor family seemed the most convincing candidate. At least two other Buddhist orders sought to claim the child as the reincarnation of one of their lamas who had also died in 1616. The family resisted their demands. In 1618, Dudul Rabten, the child's father, was involved in a plot against the royal government at about the same time the Gelug secretly chose his son as the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama. Meanwhile, Panchen Rinpoche Lobzang Chogyen (1567-1662), abbot of the Trashilhunpo Monastery, persuaded the king to lift the ban on the reincarnation quest. As relations between the king in Tsang, supported by the Karmapa hierarchy, and the Gelug in U, supported by the Mongols, were tense, the king ordered the Zahor family to leave their Tagtse castle and live at court in Samdruptse, but the mother, suspicious of the king's intentions, returned to her own family at the Nakartse castle in Yardrog. The child's father, meanwhile, tried to escape to Eastern Tibet but was caught by royal envoys, brought to Samdruptse and

remained under arrest until his death in 1626, without ever seeing his son again. The ban on the quest for the reincarnation lifted, officials of the Ganden Palace in Drepung sent a delegation to request official recognition of the boy now living at Nakartse as the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama.

The coming of the Fifth

In 1622 the boy was escorted from Nakartse and brought to the Ganden Palace in Drepung Monastery. He was then enthroned as the Fifth Dalai Lama and received the name Lobzang Gyatso from Panchen Rinpoche, one of his spiritual masters. Owing to Panchen Rinpoche's diplomacy, the king and his government had ceased hostilities against the Gelug. However, the Gelug community in Tsang felt threatened by the establishment of a large Karmapa Monastery near Trashilhunpo. This increased the risk of Mongol intervention on the grounds of protecting Tsang's Gelug community.

The Fifth Dalai Lama retained bitter memories of his childhood during which the philosophical and religious regarding reincarnation served political purposes. In his writings he recalls with irony the political manipulations of his own religious order, which involved the Mongols in all its affairs. He writes in his autobiography: "The official Tsawa Kachu of the Ganden Palace showed me statues and rosaries (that belonged to the Fourth Dalai Lama and other lamas), but I was unable to distinguish between them! When he left the room I heard him tell the people outside that I had successfully passed the tests. Later, when he became my tutor, he would often admonish me and say: "You must work hard, since you were unable to recognize the objects!"



Miniature from the secret visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

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Sonam Chopel (1595-1657), treasurer of the Ganden Palace, was the prime architect of the Gelug's rise to political power. Later he received the title Desi, meaning 'Regent', which he would earn through his efforts to establish Gelugpa power. He sought the support of the Dzungars of Western Mongolia and inspired them with a military strategy of attacking Mongol tribes sympathetic to the king of Tsang, then the eastern Tibetans of Kham, who were also partisans of the royal government, and finally the king and his entourage in Tsang, resulting in Gelugpa political and religious supremacy.

Gushri Khan: king of Mongols, patron to the Dalai Lama

The Dzungars had indeed been actively supporting the Gelug in their own country. In 1636, one of their leaders, Gushri Khan of the Qushot tribe, attacked the Mongol tribe of Chogthur, an ally of the king of Tsang. Originally from Khalkha, Chogthur's tribe had been expelled from Central Mongolia in 1634 and had settled in the Kokonor region in

Amdo, northeastern Tibet. In 1637, having defeated Chogthur and his 40,000 men in Kokonor, Gushri Khan settled there and soon became leader of the region's Mongols. He and several of his men traveled to Central Tibet that year disguised as pilgrims in order not to raise suspicion of other Mongol factions. He received an audience with the Fifth Dalai Lama who, before the holy image of the Buddha in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, bestowed on him the name of Tenzin Chogyal, the King of Religion, the Holder of Doctrine, for having defended Gelug interests in the Kokonor region. The meeting would have far-reaching historical consequences.

In 1641, after a year of fighting in Kham, Gushri Khan defeated the king of Beri, an ally of the king of Tsang and a Bon practitioner. Gushri Khan's prestige as a warrior was now as unequalled among Tibetans as it was among Mongols. During the campaign against Beri, the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Desi discussed whether Gushri Khan and his men should return to Kokonor from Kham. They decided to send an emissary to Kham to contact the Mongol chief. In the presence of both the Dalai Lama and the emissary, the Desi pretended to agree with the Dalai Lama that Gushri Khan should return to Kokonor. But just as the emissary was about to leave, the Desi ordered him to tell Gushri Khan to lead his army against the king of Tsang.

In early 1642, when news of Gushri Khan's victory in eastern Tibet and his army's advance against Tsang reached Lhasa, surprising the Dalai Lama, the Desi finally told him the truth: that he had issued this order in the Dalai Lama's name! The Dalai Lama was dismayed and remarked that the Desi had gone too far. However, it was now out of the question to turn back the Mongols. Shortly after, Gushri Khan's army confronted the king's troops in what was a long and bloody war. Towards the end of 1642, having resisted the Mongols and the Gelug Tibetans for almost a year, the king and his two ministers finally surrendered.

Immediately, the Dalai Lama was invited to Samdruptse castle, where he was enthroned as the temporal leader of Tibet and Gushri Khan offered him his conquests of central and eastern Tibet as a gift. For the first time in Tibetan history, a Dalai Lama, previously merely the abbot of a monastery and leader of one religious order, became the country's leader. Soon after, the Desi took on the function of Regent, and became responsible for government affairs, while Gushri Khan, who never claimed a political position, retained his role as the new government's defender, always ready with his army if the need arose. The Fifth Dalai Lama continued to address him as 'king' because he was still the king of the Mongols of Kokonor (and not because he was the 'king of Tibet' as has often been claimed). Thus the new state's political structure took shape: the Dalai Lama, as head of state, was placed above the *choyon* structure, the 'preceptor-patron' relationship. The Desi assumed the role of preceptor and Gushri Khan that of patron even though he was not really considered a foreigner, since he had established himself in the Tibetan region of Kokonor and placed himself entirely at the service of the Dalai Lama.

The Ganden Palace in Drepung Monastery no longer befitted the purposes of the new state, as the monastery could not be considered Tibet's political capital. This was equally true of Gongkar castle, Gushri Khan's residence. So Konchog Chopel (d.1646), one of the Fifth Dalai Lama's spiritual masters, suggested Potala Hill as an ideal site for constructing a palace that could be used as the seat of government, as it was situated between the monasteries of Drepung and Sera and the city of Lhasa. Construction of the Potala palace began in 1645 and the Fifth Dalai Lama and his government moved into its eastern section, the White Palace, in 1649.

The Dalai Lama as leader of Tibet

During this time a new power, the Manchus (who spoke Tungus), emerged in the east. They had conquered China and established their capital in Peking, but felt threatened by Mongolia (today's Outer Mongolia). The Fifth Dalai Lama had considerable religious and political influence not only in Mongolia, whose majority had converted to the Gelug Order, but also



in the Kokonor region. Thus he played an essential role in the maintenance of peace, which the Manchus, fearing Mongol attacks, desperately needed.

After receiving several invitations from the Manchu Emperor Shun-chih to visit Peking, the Fifth Dalai Lama finally accepted in 1652. He set out with an entourage of 3,000 men and the journey lasted nine months. Near Peking, the Manchus built the Yellow Palace specifically for the Dalai Lama to reside in during his visit, which lasted two months and was marked by two grand imperial receptions in his honour.

For having successfully completed this long and hazardous journey, he was welcomed home by all of Lhasa. In return for the Buddhist teachings he provided throughout his journey to Amdo Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus and Chinese, he was given thousands of horses, camels and precious objects.

In 1674, the Fifth Dalai Lama received the Karmapa Choying Dorje (1604-1674) at the Potala Palace, a reconciliation welcomed by both parties after the many conflicts and misunderstandings between 1612 and 1642. But he was not so lenient towards other religious orders, banishing the Jonang from Central Tibet to Amdo, and forcing some Bonpo monasteries to convert to the Gelug tradition. But the new government's attitude was actually determined by political rather than religious considerations.

Two other incidents during the Fifth Dalai Lama's rule provide insight into that era's court intrigues and the link between religion and politics and its effects, which are still felt today. Among the three candidates for the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama was Drappa Gyaltsen, recognized as the reincarnation of another important lama of Drepung Monastery. As a result, he was seen as a rival of the Fifth Dalai Lama even though he invariably proclaimed himself to be his disciple. In 1654 he died under mysterious circumstances. Afterward, it was believed that his spirit had returned as a sort of 'protector of the Buddhist religion'. This marked the beginning of his cult, by the Gelug Order, as a protective deity named Dorje Shugden. However, the cult has been controversial and was recently banned by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in India.

In 1662 Panchen Rinpoche died at age 93 and the Fifth Dalai Lama immediately established the tradition of recognizing the reincarnation of Panchen Rinpoche. He ordered monks of the great monasteries to recite a prayer, which he composed himself, requesting the master 'to return'. The reincarnation was discovered in 1667 in the Dru family, one of the five great lineages of the Bon tradition, probably in a gesture of reconciliation with this religious tradition, which he later recognized as one of Tibet's official religions. Officially establishing the tradition of this particular reincarnation has not always been favourable to the political unity of the Gelug nor of Tibet as a whole. The lamas of this series of reincarnation became known as the Panchen Lamas and were often considered spiritually eminent, but on the political level their relations with the Dalai Lamas were often difficult despite the spiritual mas-

ter-disciple relationship they were supposed to maintain with one another. Moreover, the Panchen Lamas were often used against the Dalai Lamas, first by the Manchu, then by the British in India, and by both the Kuomintang and Communist Chinese.

The Fifth Dalai Lama's ever increasing diplomatic activities covered not only the Tibetan world, Mongolia, Ladakh and Bhutan, but extended as far as China. The danger of conflict was ever present and the Dalai Lama not only had to ensure the survival of his own government but also to act as mediator between rising political powers threatening to disrupt the established order.

Under the Fifth Dalai Lama's rule, as under the ancient Tibetan empire, Kokonor in Amdo became one of the most strategic regions. He was quick to realize this as he traveled the region in 1652 and 1653. Eight of Gushri Khan's ten sons and their respective tribes had settled there in 1638, after their arrival from western Mongolia, and constantly quarrelled over territory. In 1656 and 1659, the Fifth Dalai Lama sent several governors to Kokonor. Over time the region's Mongols were completely Tibetanized but continued to enjoy prestige among the Tibetans as Gushri Khan's descendants and played a significant role in the Gelug Order's expansion in Amdo.

In 1647, the Desi launched a military campaign against Bhutan that ended in a humiliating defeat for the Gelug and their Mongol allies. But the campaign against Ladakh in 1679 was successful, and the territories of Ngari, in Western Tibet, previously annexed by the kings of Ladakh, were regained. Thus under the Fifth Dalai Lama, Tibet – from Ngari in the west to Dartsedo and Kham in the southeast to Kokonor in Amdo in the northeast – was unified for the first time since the Tibetan empire's 9th century collapse.

A mystic, a humanist, a man of letters

From the age of six until he was 24, the Fifth Dalai Lama studied traditional subjects such as Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit and poetry. He developed a keen interest in Buddhist philosophy and later composed a number of treatises on the subject. At the same time, he also performed his duty as abbot of the monastery. In 1633, he met Konchog Lhundrup, a master of the Nyingma Order, whose teachings the Gelug had not always approved. This meeting was a turning point in his life. He learned about mystical practices and tantric rituals entirely unknown to him and realized that his philosophical training at the monastery alone was not sufficient to attain spiritual enlightenment.

For despite his political achievements, the Fifth Dalai Lama was more concerned with spiritual matters. He loved writing, whether he was traveling or in retreat. In addition to a number of treatises on various subjects, he also wrote about his visionary experiences, which he kept secret owing to the disapproval of such matters by his own religious order. His works fill 24 volumes, including a detailed history of Tibet enthusiastically written at the request of Gushri Khan in 1643.

Using many local words, he wrote in a very free, personal style that allowed him to express his feelings and was at once frank and ironic. His autobiography is characterized by his spontaneity, sarcasm and humorous remarks concerning his own status as a reincarnation and the fundamentalist attitude of his own religious order. Often, unlike traditional Gelug authors, he gives his own independent interpretation of Buddhist doctrines, which he never attempts to impose. Concerning two treatises he had read, he writes: 'When I finished the *Oral teachings of Manjushri* (written in 1658), I had to leave the ranks of the Gelug. Today, having completed the *Oral teachings of the Knowledge-holders* (written in 1674), I will probably have to withdraw from the Nyingma ranks as well!' The second work concerns Dzogchen teachings and both texts are considered masterpieces by all Tibetan Buddhist orders. Thus his approach to the various religious and philosophical traditions was indeed deeply universalist, his reign marked by great tolerance toward the religious orders. To take just one example, after overcoming difficulties at the beginning of his rule, the Bonpo, followers of the Bon religion, Tibet's only non-Buddhist religion, became respected at both doctrinal and political levels.

His exceptional, complex and engaging personality made him one of Tibetan history's most important figures. His legacy had a profound effect on almost every aspect of the country's culture, notably architecture, poetry, historiography, civil administration, painting and, of course, philosophy and meditation. He was remarkable as both statesman and monk, embodying the Buddhist ideal of a 'great being'; Tibetan tradition still venerates him as Ngapa Chenpo, the 'Great Fifth'. His strict monastic discipline concealed his great interest in tantric, magical rituals, and his affinity for mystical meditation, which provided him with visionary experiences throughout his life. These he revealed only in his writings, largely unknown during his lifetime, which show his never ceasing concern for the welfare of his people and country. The Fifth Dalai Lama continued to write until his death, in 1682, at age 65. ◀

For further reading

- Karmay, Samten Gyaltsen. 1988 (reprint 1998). *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama*. London: Serindia Publications.
- ————. 1998. 'The Fifth Dalai Lama and his Reunification of Tibet'. *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, pp. 504-517.

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