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Ocean of Wit and Wisdom

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Lhamo Thondup was born on July 6, 1935 in Taktster, a small village in the Amdo region of northeast Tibet. But neither his parents — farmers who grew barley, buckwheat and potatoes — nor his three elder brothers and one elder sister (a younger sister and brother came later) were to discover his true identity until a few years later.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama plays with a Japanese kendama (cup-and-ball) toy presented to him by his interviewer during a recent interview with The Japan Times.

Then, when the little boy was 4, a party of senior Buddhist monks and officials from the distant capital of Lhasa arrived in the village searching for the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama — the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, whose title means "ocean of wisdom." The party was led by Kewtsang Rinpoche, a respected monk who had chosen to head northeast as that was the direction in which the face of the embalmed 13th Dalai Lama (known as "the Great 13th"), who died on Dec. 17, 1933 was said to have mysteriously pointed.

Apparently, when these strangers visited the Thondup household, little Lhamo ran up to Rinpoche and grabbed the rosary belonging to the previous Dalai Lama that he was wearing around his neck, saying, "It's mine, it's mine!" The little boy also unerringly chose other items that belonged to the previous Dalai Lama from a mixed assortment of artifacts.

In the winter of 1940, Lhamo was taken to Tibet's seat of government, and the Dalai Lamas' winter seat, the 17th-century Potala Palace in Lhasa, to be officially installed as the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, thereby carrying on a lineage dating from 1391, when the first Dalai Lama was born. Since then, all Dalai Lamas — including the third one, who was born in Mongolia — have been considered to be manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

However, the 14th Dalai Lama's "reign" over Tibet — a country the size of Western Europe that is often referred to as the "roof of the world" due to its average altitude of 3,500 meters — was rudely interrupted in 1950 when the country was invaded by the Chinese army.

After that, despite his intense wish to stay with his people, conditions for the Dalai Lama became increasingly difficult — as they were for Buddhism throughout the country. Finally, with fears for his safety growing, on March 17, 1959 the Dalai Lama was forced to flee the Potala Palace by night with his mother, younger brother and younger sister, senior teachers and advisers.

Guided by Tibetan guerrillas, and constantly in fear of a Chinese ambush, the party — with the Dalai Lama at times disguised as a common soldier with a rifle across his back — made the long, arduous trek over the Himalayas to India. Once there, and granted sanctuary (much to China's ire) by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Dalai Lama set up his government-in-exile in the former British hill station of Dharamsala in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, where it remains to this day.

From this "capital in exile," the Dalai Lama has furthered the democratization he started while still in Tibet. In 2001 and again in 2006, the academic and monk Samdhong Rinpoche was chosen as prime minister in elections stipulated to take place every five years. Hence the Dalai Lama says of

his current status, “I am currently semiretired politically and act like a senior adviser.”

Nevertheless, he continues to tour the world campaigning for Tibet and its Tibetan inhabitants, as well as for his 130,000 fellow exiles. In 1987, he dropped his demand for full independence, and this October restated in his U.S. Congressional Gold Medal acceptance speech that he “is seeking a meaningful autonomy for the Tibetan people within the People's Republic of China.”

However, during the Chinese occupation to date, some 1.2 million people — many of them monks and nuns — have reportedly died due to torture, starvation or imprisonment, and around 6,000 Buddhist temples and monasteries have been destroyed. Additionally, in the last decade in particular, there has been such a huge immigration of Han Chinese, the ethnic majority in China, to what Beijing calls the Tibet Autonomous Region (of the People's Republic of China) that the 3.6 million Tibetans must now share their homeland with around 7.5 million Chinese. The threat of cultural annihilation intensified with last year's opening of the Quinghai-Tibet railway line providing a cheap and easy way into Lhasa.

When he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama said, "I believe the prize is a recognition of the true values of altruism, love, compassion and nonviolence which I try to practice." This policy, however, has come under fire from Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet, especially the radical nonreligious Tibetan Youth Congress, for not being proactive enough.

At present, one of the most contentious issues between Dharamsala and Beijing is the selection of the reincarnation of Panchen Lama, who is second only to the Dalai Lama in the hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism. Though the Chinese deny the legitimacy of the Dalai Lama's choice, he says that the Chinese themselves refer in private to their own selection as "the fake Panchen."

The Japan Times caught up with the Dalai Lama while he was on a bullet train from Nagoya to Shin-Yokohama during his recent nine-day visit to Japan that ended on Nov. 23. A "simple Buddhist monk" he may be by his own account, but shy and retiring he certainly isn't, and throughout the interview he spoke enthusiastically to this reporter and another from Japan's vernacular press in a voice robust enough to fill the entire carriage. But no matter how serious the subject about which he spoke eloquently in his idiosyncratic but very good English, His Holiness always smiled, laughed or cracked a joke along the way.

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Q: You say you are semiretired, but will you ever retire completely? And how would the next leader of the Tibetan people be chosen if you did?

A: Retirement from the Dalai Lamaship? I cannot retire. (Laughs.) I think when the majority of people do not consider me as the Dalai Lama, then I will retire. (Laughs.) I'm kind of joking.

Since 2001, we have had an elected political leadership; every five years elections take place. So since then I have been semiretired politically. When we were in Tibet, around 1952, I started some changes. That was the beginning of democratization. But we could not carry out these programs inside Tibet because there were a lot of complications. Then after we came to India in 1959 as refugees, we were fully committed toward democracy. In 2001 we achieved an elected political leadership. So since then the main decisions have been in the elected leader's hands and not mine, and I am acting like a senior adviser. Last year Samdhong Rinpoche was re-elected, and there is a limit of two terms, so in four years a new person will come — through elections.

The Dalai Lama center stage at a ceremony in India

I don't consider that it is important to preserve the Dalai Lama institution. I think it is very important to make clear that the preservation of Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism, and the preservation of the Dalai Lama institution, are totally different. This institution, like any other institution, at certain times it will come, and at certain times it will go. But Buddhism, and the Tibetan cultural heritage, will remain as long as Tibetan people remain there.

Then in 1992, I stated that when the time comes for our return to our Tibetan homeland with a certain degree of freedom — that means genuine autonomy — then I will hand over all my legitimate authority as the Dalai Lama to the local Tibetan government.

We have arranged it so that the Tibetan struggle does not depend on one person, but depends on the people. So the people elected their own

leadership. That's logical.

Q: You have reportedly said that your successor can be decided while you are alive. He can be chosen from a group of senior monks, rather than through the centuries-old process of reincarnation. Can you tell me how you will decide your successor?

A: There have already been casual talks on this issue among the spiritual leaders of Tibet's top religious sects, of which there are five or six major traditions, each with its own spiritual leader. From time to time we gather. I also casually mentioned this issue, but we have not yet had serious discussions about it. Eventually, we will have some discussions.

Q: The dominant Liberal Democratic Party in Japan's ruling coalition is trying to overturn the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Constitution. How would you feel if the Buddhist-backed New Komeito Party that is the LDP's coalition partner supported such a policy?

A: That is up to the Japanese. It is not my business. Everybody knows my basic position that I am totally against war. My dream of the future is a demilitarized world. I always say that everywhere I go, although I don't think this will be achieved in our lifetimes. But we should have a blueprint or vision for the future. The ultimate goal is to have the whole planet demilitarized.

Q: But if you say the world should be demilitarized, how do human beings have to change for that to become a reality?

A: We human beings have to become more realistic. That is the only way. At present, many of our viewpoints are unrealistic. That's my view.

Q: What do you mean by unrealistic?

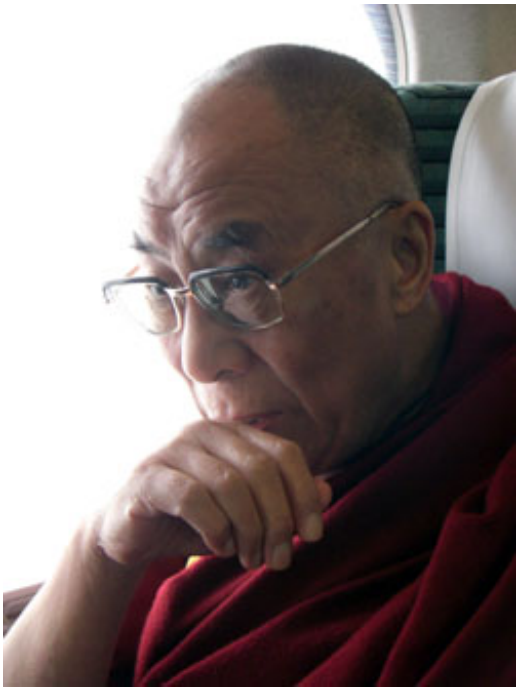
A: What do you gain through war?

Q: Power, land . . .

A: Silly! Today, the whole world belongs to 6 billion human beings. If you go into deep space, there are no marks of different national boundaries on Earth, except some rivers and mountains. And actually in our life, there's a global economy and a global environment. Individual nations cannot solve these things. We have to look at these issues as global issues.

The other day I met some Russian journalists. I put forward a theoretical concept of one world like one entity. I mentioned a demilitarized world and that national interests should be secondary. What are important are the interests of humanity? I said that the vast empty land in Russia should welcome more Chinese. In Tibet's case also, we have a lot of land. Theoretically, they (the Chinese) are most welcome. However, that should be a part of a proper invitation, a full agreement, and a full appreciation of the local people. At this moment, the Chinese are mainly concerned about their own interests, not the interests of 6 billion people. Under these circumstances, the more Chinese who come to Tibet, we do not welcome that. If we come to a mutual agreement, then that is good.

Look at the United States' policy. Their motivation for the restoration of democracy is good. But their methods involve violence, which results in more complications, more distance from Arabs. This is the nature of war. You may solve one thing, so, for example, toppling Saddam Hussein achieved something but created a lot of unexpected problems. Today, destruction of your enemy is destruction of yourself. That is reality. In this reality, everything is interdependent. But to use force to destroy your neighbor is unrealistic. Do you understand now? (Laughs.)



His Holiness deep in thought during his recent Japan Times interview

Q: The U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently stated that 90 percent of global warming is human-induced. U.N. data also shows that 25,000 people die every day from hunger and hunger-related diseases. Do you see a solution?

A: Yes, certainly. It again comes back to being realistic and unrealistic.

There are two things to consider here. Firstly, with regard to the economy, there is a serious problem of the gap between the rich and the poor on a global level and on a national level. Look at the United States: the number of billionaires is increasing, and the poor sometimes become even poorer. I think this gap is also increasing in Japan. Now unfortunately in China also, there is a huge gap between rich and poor, and in Russia too.

In China's case, it is unbelievable. A socialist country led by a communist party and yet still the gap is increasing. In India also.

On a global level, now the northerners, the industrialized nations, have too much consumerism and surplus. In other parts of the world, like Africa, Latin America, and also Asia, the basic necessities are not adequate and in some cases, starvation also exists. It is really terrible. So this gap is not only morally wrong but on a practical level is the source of problems. Now European countries, America, Australia and Japan are facing the problem of (unmanageable levels of) immigration.

His Holiness and others celebrating the Interfaith Forum held in Ise, Mie Prefecture, last month.

Consumerism is an unrealistic attitude to take. It's unrealistic to think that resources are limitless and that consuming more is our basic right. There are limits to natural resources.

So we have to think about our lifestyles in a way that will make us content. This is very much tied up with our moral principles. If other people feel happy, naturally we feel happy. If your neighbor is facing starvation and you don't care and you carry on with your consumerism, it is morally wrong. But it's also a question of practicality. Those nations with higher living standards will eventually face problems. So it is better to know that, and with that knowledge, people will be more content with their lifestyles. Otherwise you always expect a higher, higher, higher income — then one day it will be stuck and you will be totally shocked, and in some cases suicide also occurs.

This is related to another important thing. We are part of humanity; Japan is part of the world. If a critical situation occurs in the world economy, the Japanese economy will also suffer. That is today's reality. Therefore you should have a holistic view. Everything is interdependent. Everything is interconnected.

Now the environment issue. Of course, I learned about the environment issue only after I went to India. When I was in Tibet, everything was very pure. I think the nature of god purified our air, our water, our soil. (Laughs heartily.)

His Holiness (below, third from right) in exile in India in the early 1960s, photographed with his mother (far left), his older sister (second left), his three older brothers, his younger sister (second from right) and his younger brother (right).

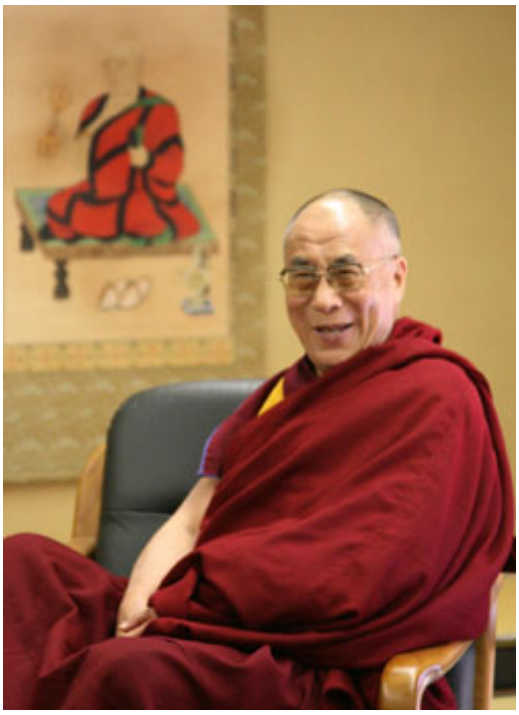
(But) the environment issue is really very, very serious. So through education we must make clear the consequences of the gap between the rich and poor and about consuming limitlessly. These are short-sighted and unrealistic views.

One real problem is the population. There should be a limited population and higher living standards. That's very, very important. I think there are a lot of problems involved.

Q: If the Chinese government decides your successor, what will the Tibetan people do?

A: It's like the issue of the Panchen Lama. There are two Panchen Lamas: there's one official Panchen Lama that the Chinese themselves call Char Panchen, which means "false Panchen." For the Tibetans there is no question: there is one Panchen Lama in their hearts, and one they give lip-service to. So the Chinese government is already thinking about the 15th reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. They may choose one boy who is the government's official Dalai Lama but not the Dalai Lama of the Tibetans' hearts. So there is an additional problem.

Q: In your book “The Art of Happiness,” you say there are many different negative emotions, such as anger, jealousy and hatred. Which emotions do you personally struggle with and why?



The Dalai Lama at Gokokuji Temple in Tokyo during his recent visit, where he was delighted to see this scroll-painting of Nagarajuna, one of Buddah's leading disciples.

Every kind of emotion. I'm a human being. Same brain (points to my head). Everybody has the same brain and the same potential of different emotions. I think that sometimes within 24 hours one emotion is stronger, and the next day another emotion is stronger. As a Buddhist monk, also a Buddhist practitioner, I think that generally speaking an opposing emotion acts as a counterforce to an emotion. The very purpose of Buddhist practices is to act as a counterforce to destructive emotions, so it does work. They are antidotes.

Anger and hatred are destructive. According to medical scientists, strong anger and hatred actually eats away at our immune system. So the counterforce or antidote, the opposing force, is loving kindness. So a more compassionate person's brain functions better, with less stress and lower blood pressure. This is nothing to do with religion; nothing to do with god. But in reality, humans physically require others' affection as soon as we are born. Without a mothers' affection we can't survive. Not only human beings but animals, most animals. So affection — loving kindness — is the ultimate source of our survival.

And because of our own experience we feel tremendously happy when we are receiving affection from our mother, so that cultivates in our mind the potential of affection to others. So we can say these emotions are constructive emotions, while anger, hatred, jealousy, these are destructive emotions judging from their results.

These things have got nothing to do with religious faith. I usually call these “secular ethics.” Irrespective of whether you accept religion or not, this is according to our common sense, our common experience, and also scientific findings. Some emotions are very helpful, very good, therefore we consider them positive. Some emotions have a very negative effect on our health, our society and on our family life, therefore these are considered destructive. Using our common sense is what Buddhists call "analytical meditation."

Analyze. When we talk about emotion, it is a vast field. There are thousands of different emotions. It is important to identify these emotions — what has value, what is negative — then try to reduce the negative emotions and try to increase positive emotions. That's the main practice.

Q: Yes, but which emotion do you personally struggle with the most?

A: Anger. One of my main practices is compassion. The opposite of compassion is anger and hatred. In terms of hatred or ill-feeling toward other people, I almost have none. It's there for a short period of time but then gone. My negative feelings never linger.

One particular Tibetan monk, just as an example, spent 18 years in a Chinese gulag (labor camp) and underwent political indoctrination in the 1960s and '70s. In the early '80s he escaped and came to India. I had known him before 1959 and . . . we talked casually about his experience in the Chinese labor camp. He told me that on a few occasions he faced some problems, some dangers. I asked what danger, and his answer was, “Danger of losing compassion toward the Chinese.” As a result of practice, you see, people can develop that kind of attitude. So they deliberately try to keep compassion toward their enemy. That ultimately brings into their mind more calm, more peace. But if people let anger and hatred develop, it destroys their own physical well-being — and is no harm to the Chinese.

Usually we consider anger comes as a protector, don't we? When we face some problems, anger comes and brings energy. So we welcome some anger, don't we? But that's unrealistic. (Laughs heartily.)

Q: Are there any developments in negotiations between China and . . ?

A: No.

Q: What are the obstacles between you and China?

A: Direct contact with the Chinese government started in 1979. Then in the early '80s there was real hope under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping,

and the general secretary, the really remarkable communist Hu Yaobang, who admitted the past mistakes when he visited Lhasa. Then, in the mid-'80s, a democratic movement started in many Chinese universities, and Hu Yaobang's attitude was very, very open and realistic toward those democratic movements. So finally he was disgraced. The overall Chinese government policy become hardened. Then finally the Tiananmen event happened (in 1989).

At the fifth meeting, the Chinese officials acknowledged that the Dalai Lama's side was not seeking independence. But soon after they intensified accusations against me as a "splitist." Meantime, inside Tibet, suppression was increasing. Then this year, around May or June, at the sixth meeting, the Chinese delegation's attitude was much hardened.

Chinese officials say there is no Tibet issue, that in Tibet everything is very smooth. We said we want to see the reality. If things are really as nice as the Chinese government is saying, then there's no problem. So we asked them to let us see, and also explain to the Tibetan people inside Tibet that we are not seeking independence. We are not splitists. We have a right to tell them the truth. So we are waiting for their response.

Q: One long-standing conflict in the world is that involving Israel, which you could call a conflict of religions. If you had a magic wand, what would you do in Israel?

A: That is a silly question. It's an unrealistic question. I'm of no use. I have been to Israel on a few occasions and each time I deliberately meet Palestinians and Israelis. I always give them encouragement in efforts for dialogue or compromise in a spirit of reconciliation. Quite a number of Israelis agree fully, and some Palestinians I met, some Muslims, really are very good persons. There are some strong organizations really working hard to create closer understanding between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

So wherever I go, from my little capacity I always try to make a contribution. But I have no miracle power; that's nonsense. (Laughs.) If I had that kind of miracle power, I should use it in Tibet, shouldn't I? That's logical. (Laughs.)

I'm Buddhist, I'm a Buddhist practitioner. So actually I think that according to nontheistic Buddhist belief, things are due to causes and conditions. No creator. So I have faith in our actions, not prayer. Action is important. Action is karma. Karma means action. That's an ancient Indian thought. In nontheistic religions, including Buddhism, the emphasis is on our actions rather than god or Buddha. So some people say that Buddhism is a kind of atheism. Some scholars say that Buddhism is not a religion — it's a science of the mind.

Q: Do you agree with that?

A: Oh, yes. I even consider Buddha and some of his important followers like Nagarjuna (one of Buddha's leading disciples) to be scientists. Their main method is analytical. Analyze, analyze — not emphasis on faith. And these masters are not magicians. (Jokingly pretends to clip me around the head and laughs.)

Q: Sorry. It was a hypothetical question.

You met German Chancellor Merkel recently, and U.S. President Bush. But Japan's Prime Minister Fukuda has not met you.

A: I have never met any political leader here. Of course, there may naturally be a sensitivity as the next-door neighbor of China. From my side I never want to create any inconvenience. So no problem. My main interest is the promotion of human values and religious harmony. In these two things, the public is more important than government leaders.

So wherever I go, I'm always happy having meetings with the public. Everywhere I go the concerned people organize the public meetings. So with government leaders I have no particular political agenda. If there is a possibility of willingness from the government leaders themselves, without difficulties, to meet with me, I'm happy. If they find little difficulties, no problem.

Q: You have been through many things in your life, many problems. Your country is going through much strife. Yet you still laugh. Your laugh is very infectious. Why can you still laugh?

A: It's my profession. (Laughs.) Generally speaking, Tibetans are not like Japanese (makes an impersonation of an impassive-looking Japanese person) or some Indians also. I think Tibetans are more like Italians. More jovial. Not like Germans or Englishmen, who are a bit reserved. I think generally Tibetans are like that. That's the Tibetan nature.

Then I think of our own sort of family. We come from a small village, not a big town. I think of our daily lifestyle as very closely knit. So it's more jovial, always laughing, teasing and joking; things like that. I think that becomes our habit, firstly.

Then also, as I often say, there's realistic and unrealistic. Of course there are a lot of problems. But if you think only of the negative side, that's no use to solve the problem. It destroys your peace of mind. And everything is relative. Even in the worst sort of tragedy, there could be some positive things. So by taking a holistic view you can also see some positive things there. If you feel some negative thing as something absolute, your worry, your anxiety will increase. If you look at these things more broadly, you can see this is bad, but still OK. That kind of feeling comes, I think, through my practice, through Buddhist concepts. I think they are very helpful.

For example, we have lost our country. We are homeless people. We have difficulties, and there are also a lot of difficulties inside Tibet. Meantime, the homeless experience, the homeless life, also brings lots of positive things, new opportunities such as meeting different people without consideration of formality.

So this morning at my sort of farewell meeting with the organizers of my visit here to Ise Shrine [one of Shinto's most important sites], I spoke in my usual way of talking and my way of conduct was completely informal, so I apologized for my way. I think in Europe one newspaper described my conduct as "radical informality." So I apologized if my complete informality created inconvenience for my Japanese hosts. (Laughs.) My way of communication really fits with the American public. In Germany also, when I talk to a large gathering of 10,000 or something like that, mainly youth, it seems they love my sort of attitude. Open, sincere, frank.

Q: After you received the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal, what was the reaction in Lhasa or elsewhere in Tibet?

A: More restrictions. In fact, that day — Oct. 17 — the Chinese local authorities warned the local Tibetans to not carry out any sort of celebration. Then the public in Lhasa, I think thousands, dressed like it was New Year and went to the temple and prayed. It seems that the Chinese authorities failed to control that because there were too many people. Then at one big monastery where previously there were around 8,000

monks, but where nowadays there are about 1,000, from early morning some monks tried to symbolically whitewash the house. Then local Chinese authorities tried to stop this. Then more monks came, and eventually almost all the 1,000 monks were there. Then the Chinese brought about 4,000 soldiers, and some monks were beaten and arrested. So there are a lot of restrictions. A lot of restrictions.

They (the Chinese) still accuse me of being a splitist and call me an enemy of the people — even an enemy of the Tibetan people. What do you think? Am I here acting as an enemy of the Tibetan people? (Laughs.)

That's ridiculous.

Raju Thakrar is a staff writer for The Japan Times.

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