

H.H. Dalai Lama talk
Tuesday, July 29th

Tonight we're going to kick off our series of "Influential Buddhists" in an attempt to ground the Dharma in the lives of individuals who have exemplified these teachings and have provided both inspiration and spiritual guidance to millions around the world. I'm going to lead us off by talking about His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. Easily the most widely-recognized Buddhist, the Dalai Lama acts as both a spiritual and political ambassador: at age 77, he works tirelessly to advocate for the nation of Tibet, as well as to educate Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike about the Dharma and how we can employ the teachings of The Buddha to improve our day-to-day lives.

It is important to understand what it means to be Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhists maintain that he is the manifestation of the Bodhisattva – enlightened being – of compassion, Avalokitesvara. His physical presence on Earth gives him a place akin to that of Jesus for Christians. While the analogy is imperfect, he takes Buddhist teachings out of the abstract and acts as a living resource for all those who will listen.

Born in 1935, Lhamo Dondrub was formally recognized as the 14th Dalai Lama in 1950. He was forced into exile in 1959 after the Chinese response to the Tibetan Uprising made his position there untenable and dangerous. Since then he has run the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, India, as well as travel the globe to meet with world leaders and spread his wisdom to millions of people.

Importance to Practitioners

The Dalai Lama has taken it upon himself to work beyond his formal post as the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people. He has established himself as an influential world leader by expressing nuanced and relatively progressive opinions on a diverse array of topics ranging from sexuality to the environment to economics. When speaking on these topics, he approaches them with compassion in mind first and foremost. While his prescriptions are firmly rooted in The Buddha's teachings, from the mundane – like dealing with day-to-day stress – to global issues like demilitarization, he doesn't slip into esoteric language or cite specific texts that non-Buddhists would find confusing. His advice for healthy and happy living is intended for everyone and finds ears far beyond the Buddhist community. It is this holism and accessibility that makes the Dalai Lama such a popular teacher.

Throughout his reign, the Dalai Lama has been a leader for people facing tremendous strife and adversity, and not only to his fellow Tibetans. Political and cultural differences have set Buddhists at odds in many countries, largely in Southeast Asia. These kinds of conflicts do not get much press in the West, but the Dalai Lama has done much to highlight these struggles.

Recently, the Dalai Lama has stated that he is debating whether or not he will decide to be reborn, due in part to Tibet's political conflicts with China. While the decision to be reborn has always been in the hands of each Dalai Lama, the fact that he is considering the position to

be “obsolete” shows the dynamism and adaptability of Buddhism. Just as in our own practice, the Buddhist community has a whole must hold on to our teachers for as long as they are necessary; beyond then we must let them go.