CHAPTER 8

The Dalai Lamas

Among people who take any sort of interest in the Far East in general and Lamaism in particular, virtually the most popular topic is the Dalai Lama, the head of the Lamaist hierarchy. But for all that, in our literature, there is not as yet a single reasonably detailed biographical account of all the Dalai Lamas up to the present. Professor A. M. Pozdneyev, our noted scholar of Mongolian affairs, gives a list of their names in his notes to Baza Bakshi’s Journey to Tibet, along with an indication of when they lived, taken from Waddell; we also find another list in the work of Professor Grünwedel. We collected the material in the Tibetan language necessary to compile biographies of the Dalai Lamas and intend in the future to produce fairly detailed information about them. For now we shall restrict ourselves to a brief review.

The Dalai Lamas are held to be reincarnations of the Bodhisattva called the Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara (Pakpa Chenresi, in Tibetan).

Believers in the cult of reincarnations are fond of dating their origins back to distant times, to the age when Buddha lived, for example. This is true in the present case: the first incarnation is considered to be the Bodhisattva Pakpa Chenresi, the closest disciple of Buddha.

According to accounts in Tibetan works compiled in a later period, the first thirty-seven reincarnations appeared in India, sometimes as rulers who protected the faith, sometimes as teachers and enlighteners. The first to appear in Tibet was Khan Nyati Tsenpo, the thirty-eighth reincarnation, who lived in the third century BC. Subsequent reincarnations were celebrated rulers of Tibet, noted patrons of Buddhism (such as the fortieth—Sontsen Gampo; the forty-first—Trison Detsen; and the forty-second—Adag-tri Rel), or famous scholars (the forty-fifth—Dromtönpa; the forty-sixth—Künga-Nyinpo of the Sakya school, and so on).

The first reincarnation to be an adherent of Tsongkhapa’s teaching is held to be Gedün-dup, who is the fifty-first by the earlier reckoning. He was born in 1391 and died in 1474. He was the founder of the monastery of Tashi-lhünpo in Tsan province and we shall include some biographical details about him when we describe that place. Here we shall only say that at his death he left five volumes of works, the wooden printing-blocks for which are in the Potala print shop in Lhasa. I myself brought these works of his back from Tibet, among the other collections of the works of all the Dalai Lamas that are on sale.
The second reincarnation is believed to have been Gedün-Gyatso, who was born in 1475 in Tsan province to the Red Hat lama Künga-Gyeltser and his wife Künga-Pelmo. In 1486 he took the first spiritual vows in the Tashi-lhünpo monastery and assumed the name Gedün-Gyatso. In 1494 he left for the monastery of Drepun, which is situated near Lhasa. There he studied theology and traveled about in central Tibet to perfect his knowledge of those teachings. In his forty-third year, he attained the position of abbot of Drepun (the tenth to hold the post). This lama was noted for his scholarship and was greatly respected by both the clergy and the laity. They evidently began to regard him as the reincarnation of his fellow-countryman (from Tsan), the celebrated Gedün-dup, but there was as yet no official pronouncement about this. In 1518 the Chinese emperor gave orders for the Ganden-podran palace to be built for him at Drepun. He died in 1542 leaving three volumes of works.

The third reincarnation Sönam-Gyatso came into the world in 1543 as the son of Namgyel-dakpa, the administrator of a dzon, and his wife Peldzom-Buti. As the master of a dzon the father was undoubtedly a very influential man and wanted to declare his son to be the reincarnation of the recently deceased abbot of Drepun, Gedün-Gyatso. He achieved his aim and as early as 1547 his son was elevated to the post of abbot. Sönam-Dakpa (1478–1554), a famous scholar of the period and the fifteenth deputy of Tsongkhapa, took him under his patronage and was the boy’s first teacher. He went on to receive an excellent education. Besides this, his position as abbot of the largest monastery in Tibet and, moreover, as the first reincarnated abbot meant that word of his fame reached Altan Khan, the Tumetu Mongol ruler. In 1576 Altan Khan invited Sönam-Gyatso to visit him in Mongolia. When he arrived in 1578 and had given the ruler various admonitions, Altan Khan accorded him the title Vachira-dara-dalai-lama. It follows then that the title Dalai Lama was first given to the reincarnation of the abbot of Drepun by the Mongol, Altan Khan. The term Dalai Lama has no meaning in itself. In Mongolian it simply means “ocean lama.” The impetus for giving this title was undoubtedly Sönam-Gyatso’s own name, which means “ocean virtue” (sönam is “virtue,” gyatso “ocean”), the last part of the name being taken up in the title. This title has remained attached to the Dalai Lamas only in official papers, while the people and clergy call them kyamgön tamche kyenpa, which means “all-knowing savior.” After the death of Altan Khan, his heirs again issued an invitation to Sönam-Gyatso, who died while visiting Mongolia in 1588. He was acknowledged as “great lama, a living Buddha” by the Ming emperor as well.

The fourth reincarnation, Yonten-Gyatso, was born in Mongolia to Sumer-daichin and his wife Dara on the first day of the first moon of the Year of the Earth Cow, i.e., 1589. Two influential oracles in Tibet, the chökyons Nechun and