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THE
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LAMA

A BIOGRAPHY



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CONTENTS

<i>Series Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
<i>Timeline of Events in the Life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama</i>	xiii
Chapter 1 The Birth of Lhamo Dhondup	1
Chapter 2 Search for a Fourteenth Ruler	11
Chapter 3 The Road to Lhasa	23
Chapter 4 Assuming the Life of a Monk	35
Chapter 5 The Chinese Invasion	47
Chapter 6 Dealing with the Motherland	63
Chapter 7 Breakdown and Failure of Relations	79
Chapter 8 Escape to India	95
Chapter 9 A More Permanent Home	111
Chapter 10 Charming the World	121
Chapter 11 An Improved Position in the World	137
Chapter 12 The Dalai Lama's Daily Life	149
<i>Glossary</i>	159
<i>Selection of Published Works by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama</i>	161
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	163
<i>Index</i>	167

Photo essay follows page 77.

Chapter 1

THE BIRTH OF LHAMO DHONDUP

In a cold, unyielding province, high in northeastern Tibet, the future Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Lhamo Dhondup, was born on a straw-covered dirt floor on July 6, 1935. His introduction to the world was as mundane as baking bread, although his future was to be as important to Tibet as Christ was to Christmas. To the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama was not only the embodiment of a living god but also Tibet itself. From that July day forward, the country's future, its spiritual strength, and its people rested in his tiny, yet undiscovered, hands.

The name Lhamo Dhonup meant "wish-fulfilling goddess," and as with all Tibetan names, it was unlike those of Western custom, which bear a forename and a surname. In Tibet, only the full essence of the name is significant. In keeping with Tibetan custom, his birth garnered no special attention. He was just another boy born to peasant parents, probably destined for life in a monastery, as was the fate of many other boys born during that time in that particular place.

Even his immediate family was unaware of his birth when it happened, as his mother had simply walked into the barn to deliver him. Most family members would recognize the child only by his cries, or as another mouth at the dinner table, but as time progressed, neighbors would learn of his arrival and bestow small gifts of clothes, blankets, and bread upon him. By these tokens, he was no more extraordinary than any other child born in the village of Takster, and his roots were no nobler.

A MOTHER'S JOURNEY

Diki Tsering, Lhamo Dhondup's mother, was born with the name Sonam Tsomo in the village of Churka, within the eastern province of Amdo in historic Tibet, around 1901. At the age of five, her family immigrated to Guyahu, also in Amdo, to a large farm. As there was no formal education for girls at that time in Tibet, she immediately began to learn domestic duties and to pray, and was taught that her future existed only in a life of marriage and hard work. As a Buddhist, she learned that the road to a full and self-contained life lay in suffering, and she embraced these tenets.

Tibetan parents were very protective of young girls. Diki Tsering's parents kept her very close to home and rarely permitted her to leave the terrace or garden. By age seven, in addition to tending to her personal cleanliness, she was expected to brew tea and to bake bread for the entire family—although to achieve these culinary tasks, she required a chair to reach the cooking surface.

At thirteen, as Tibetan custom dictated, her family arranged her marriage to Choekyong Tsering. Although the bridegroom's family wanted an immediate union, the girl's family insisted that she would not be wed until she was sixteen years old. When that year arrived, astrologers set the wedding date—just as they set all dates of important events in Tibetan culture, which is highly structured with deep roots in spirituality and Tibetan myth. Many traditions pertain to the occasion of marriage.

Just before the wedding, Diki Tsering's in-laws presented her with a trousseau, as it was customary for the bride to wear only clothes handmade by the bridegroom's family from her nuptials onward. On the day of her departure for her husband's home, her mother burned her old wardrobe and ritually wailed into the flames in anguish over losing her daughter.

Sonam Tsomo's journey consisted of a treacherous nine-hour trek on horseback to Choekyong Tsering's family farm in Takster, Amdo. On the day of her arrival, she was presented with a white ceremonial scarf (*kata*), given as a gesture of respect, but did not see her groom. She was fed and entertained by a great deal of ceremonial singing, but two more days would pass before she actually met her prospective husband. On that day, Sonam Tsomo's name changed to Diki Tsering, meaning "ocean of luck."

A FAMILY BEGINS TO SHOW PROMISE

The life of a new daughter-in-law was rigorous in historic Tibet, sometimes requiring twenty hours of work each day. Like many other Tibetan daughters-in-law, Diki Tsering was abused by her mother-in-law, both phys-

ically and emotionally, and was expected to perform most of the menial labor in the household and around the crop and livestock farm. After a few years of hard labor, Diki Tsering's position improved in the family, and eventually, when her in-laws retired, she inherited control of the household.

Strong of character in his straightforwardness and honesty, Choekyong Tsering always enjoyed a good time. He had a quick temper but was also kind and never held grudges. He loved gambling and riding fast horses, which he also knew how to doctor, but he rarely worked in the fields. As Diki Tsering became mistress of the household with his parents' passing, Choekyong Tsering became master of the fields.

The couple had four children by the time Lhamo Dhondup was born—Tsering Dolma, born in 1919; Thubten Jigme Norbu, born in 1922; Gyalo Thondup, born in 1928; and Lobsang Samten, born in 1933. Two more children would be born after Lhamo Dhondup: Jetsun Pema in 1940 and Tendzin Choegyal in 1946. Though Diki Tsering bore a total of sixteen children during her life, only seven would survive past infancy.

Long before the family learned of Lhamo Dhondup's destiny, fate honored another child in the family. His eldest brother, Thubten Jigme Norbu, was elevated to a higher station by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet at that time. Although Thubten Jigme Norbu's influence would not be as extensive as his yet-to-be-born brother's, his position was still well revered by the Tibetan people.

This tribute came to the boy when he was proclaimed the rebirth of the previous high lama from the local monastery. Reincarnation is a central principle of the Buddhist religion, and Tibetans are overwhelmingly Buddhist. They believe that the soul receives corporeal life repeatedly, until a state of enlightenment, or Buddhahood, is reached. A spirit who can choose the time and place of its reincarnation is known as a *tulku*, or an incarnate lama, which means "living teacher." Tulkus are often bestowed with the title Rinpoché, which means "precious one," and many of them are monks, who are said to leave signs leading to the discovery of their next incarnation. Only the Dalai Lama can proclaim a tulku.

The previous Takster Rinpoché was Choekyong Tsering's maternal uncle, who headed the monastery at Kumbum, close to the village of Takster. Kumbum, which means "palace of a thousand images," was the most important monastery in the Amdo region. Built around 1440, the center was a memorial to the birthplace of Tsonkapa, the founder of Tibet's largest Buddhist sect, the Gelugpas, or "Followers of the virtuous way."

When the old Takster Rinpoché died, Choekyong Tsering's mother wished for Diki Tsering to have a male child, hoping he would be the rein-

carnation of her dead brother, but was furious when her son's first child proved to be a girl. The Dalai Lama's advisors found another baby they thought to be the incarnate lama, but the child died before he was a year old. For reasons unclear to all but the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, he had been hesitant to name this first baby successor to Takster Rinpoché, and when the boy died, everyone accepted the Dalai Lama's lack of action as prescience. When Thubten Jigme Norbu was born, his grandmother was elated, and shortly after his first birthday, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama sent a letter to his parents, naming the child Takster Rinpoché and declaring him the reincarnation of the dead abbot. He was soon sent to Kumbum to begin a monastic life.

STRONG INFLUENCES, HUMBLE HOME

Early religious training was customary in Tibet in the early 1920s. Although large families were the norm, parents were often too poor to support them, so they typically sent at least one boy to a monastery. Although the practice was uncommon in outlying districts, in the city of Lhasa—the Tibetan capital—parents of large families often sent girls to nunneries. In these cloisters, children not only received clothing and shelter, but also were trained in reading, writing, and the Buddhist Dharma, or the holy teachings of Buddha.

Boys who stayed at home worked in the fields with their fathers and learned farming and animal husbandry. Girls continued to practice household duties and prepared for marriage. In old Tibet, the birth of a girl was considered a hardship or even a curse, because girls did nothing to aid production; they only consumed. In poor families, girls were frequently drowned immediately after birth.

This disregard for the sanctity of life comes from a standard fare of intense hardship and pervasive death. Once, due to a terrible famine in neighboring China, two beggars appeared at Choekyong Tsering's farmhouse door, carrying the body of their dead baby. Diki Tsering offered them food and asked whether they would like help with its burial. When she realized they had no intention of burying the child but intended to eat it instead, Diki Tsering immediately emptied the contents of the household stores and gave all the family's provisions to the couple. This quality of compassion would carry through to little Lhamo Dhondup, who would learn of his great destiny as the incarnation of the god of compassion in years to come.

The boy began his life in eastern Tibet, on the frontier with China. Situated on a caravan trail, Takster began as a nomadic village of black tents,

made from the hair of yaks—wild, shaggy-haired oxen, indigenous to the mountain regions of central Asia. A stream flowed nearby the village, and nomads found healthy pastures where they could farm barley, oats, and vegetables, and they made a permanent settlement. By 1935, Takster was a village of about thirty houses.

In each of these houses, Buddhism was the practiced religion, and in Tibet, Buddhists follow the Mahayana school. This group aims to attain the highest stage of Nirvana, or liberation from bondage of the human form. They seek to eradicate sin and delusion, which are negative karmas (causes and effects), and to attain Buddhahood, which comes to all sentient beings through several lives of service.

Each Buddhist household contains an altar with an image of the Buddha, some scripture, and a stupa or *chorten*. These domed monuments can be large or, in the case of a household altar, small, and may hold relics of departed lamas. Flowers and butter lamps (small bowls that hold yak butter and a wick) surround the family's daily offering to the Buddha. Altars are present in cities and towns, palaces and farms, and all serve the same purpose of reducing mental stress and obtaining guidance.

The farm belonging to Lhamo Dhondup's family was small, and though they were not peasants, neither were they wealthy nobles. They grew barley and buckwheat, which were the main crops throughout Tibet at that time, as well as potatoes. Irrigation was nonexistent, and farmers depended upon rainwater to irrigate their crops, which were often lost to drought or hailstorms. Life was hard, but following the old Buddhist traditions of lifelong hardship, for most Amdowas (the people of Amdo), a strong family and a roof over their heads were blessings enough.

Choekyong Tsering's family farmhouse sat in the middle of a group of three homes on the side of a hill, slightly away from the village of Takster. Built of stone and mud, the single-story house was surrounded by a stone wall, with a gate that was shut at night for security. The farmhouse's flat roof was lined with turquoise tiles, and it had unusual gutters of gouged-out juniper wood to channel rainwater into the courtyard. The front of the house was a windowless wall with a single wooden door, decorated with tridents and dragons. In the adjacent courtyard stood a lone tree and a thirty-foot flagpole holding a ten-foot-high white prayer flag, covered with many written prayers. (Buddhists believe that each time a prayer flag flaps in the wind, its prayers are sent to heaven.) Except for one small black-and-white dog and a large Tibetan mastiff, no animals were permitted in this courtyard.

Inside the house, Choekyong Tsering had lined the door with sheepskin to keep it quiet when it opened and closed. Directly through the en-

trance was the kitchen, where the family spent most of their time; and in the ceiling, beams supported a terra-cotta water tank that was glazed green. At the northern end of the house were the adults' bedroom and a prayer or altar room. To the west were a cowshed, a storeroom, and a guest room. At the southern end lay the stables, where eight cows, chickens, sheep, goats, horses, and yaks, were kept, in addition to seven animals (or *dzomos*) crossbred from yaks and cows. Diki Tsering milked the dzomos and often favored little Lhamo Dhondup with a bowl of warm milk. Before he was two, he was made responsible for collecting eggs from the henhouse.

Living quarters were sparsely furnished, except for some brightly colored cabinets and an area for sleeping, called a *kang*, in each bedroom. Usually made of clay brick, kangs were hollow, raised platforms, which were filled with dried grass and sand, or manure and wood, and lit for warmth. Over the kang, one or more carpets and bedclothes were placed for comfort.

In his early years, Lhamo Dhondup slept on such a kang with his mother. Later, he slept with his siblings in the kitchen near the stove, on the planked wooden floor. All interior rooms had this type of floor, except the non-living space in the kitchen, which had an earthen floor. Flat stone paved the corridor between the rooms as well as the courtyard.

TIBETAN DAILY LIFE

The family's farm normally produced only enough food to sustain them, and they did most of the work, with the help of five regular workers, known as the *yuleg*. During sowing and harvesting season, fifteen to forty more workers, known as the *nyohog*, were hired. Choekyong Tsering oversaw them all, and though Diki Tsering also worked in the fields, she was in charge of the house and the children.

When a surplus of goods from their labors accumulated, Choekyong Tsering exchanged the extra crops for tea, sugar, cotton cloth, and other goods not produced by the farm. This barter system was a way of life in outlying regions of Tibet, and even passing nomads or people in nearby towns traded their horses for grain. Choekyong Tsering was widely known for his ability to select and rear fine horses.

After a strenuous day of farm labor, the family settled in for a meal of roasted barley meal, or *tsampa*, which continues as a staple in the Tibetan diet. Combined with a liquid—usually yak butter tea or a Tibetan beer, *chang*—*tsampa* is rolled into small balls with the fingers for consumption; it can also be eaten as a powder. Eating *tsampa*, although an everyday act

for a Tibetan, can be rather daunting. One non-Tibetan commented, “Tsampa is an extremely fine powder of roasted barley that when put in the mouth instantly absorbs all the moisture, forcing you to drink something immediately. I found it impossible to eat with my fingers without getting it all over the place.”¹ By adding meat and vegetables, tsampa also makes a fine stew.

Yak butter tea is the Tibetan national beverage, and an average Tibetan may drink up to sixty small cups per day for nourishment and hydration, which is of utmost importance in the high altitudes of Tibet. To prepare the tea, butter—made from the milk of yaks—is mixed with strong black tea leaves and salt, and churned until thoroughly blended. Because the leaves are scraped from a compressed block of tea, a bit of yak dung is sometimes added to bind the tiny particles together. A recent visitor to Tibet described the drink this way: “Yak butter tea is more like chicken broth (due to oils from the yak butter) than tea. The flavor is sort of musky.”²

Tsampa and yak butter tea are served with every meal, and considered the traditional Tibetan foods, along with meat dumplings (*momos*) and a soup made with thick millet noodles (*thukpa*). Tibetans eat two daily meals, and when meat is served at the late meal, it is either mutton or yak flesh, which peasants sometimes eat raw. Fish and fowl are considered too filthy to eat, and vegetables—aside from potatoes—are scarce, due to poor growing conditions. Unlike Western diets, the Tibetan diet completely lacks sweets.

Tibetan traditional dress is contrary to Western norms as well. Kimono-like robes, called *chubas*, were once worn by all family members, and along with more modern clothing, they are still used in various forms today. “[Chubas are] caught in at the waist with a broad belt of cloth, woven of various colored threads with red predominant. These cloaks are of sheepskin or of woolen cloth or of silk,” wrote Tibetan author Rinchen Lhamo. “The cloak may be worn long or short simply by adjusting it at the belt. Women wear it down to the ankle, men to just above the knee.”³ In winter, chubas are often lined with fur and heavily padded with cotton for warmth. While women wear brightly colored aprons over their chubas in Lhasa, this also varies by region. Inside the chuba, embroidered shirts of cotton or silk accompany trousers of the same material, although men sometimes wear sheepskin pants.

Footwear varies by region. Although both men and women wear knee-high boots, the color and style are different in each province. These boots have flat, yak-leather soles and rise to the knee. Made from felt, cloth, or leather, they are slit at the back, to allow easily access, and are tied at the top with a colored garter.

Jewelry is not merely accessory but a necessary part of a woman's outfit throughout Tibet. Traditionally, women wore rings on every finger and had two piercings in each ear up to an eighth of an inch in diameter, for heavy earrings of gold or silver. They sometimes wore four or five necklaces at once, embellished with coral or turquoise. Because Tibet is so far from the sea, shells were also highly prized as accessory decorations.

As with clothing, the spoken Tibetan language is diverse in dialect. Written Tibetan has its own distinct alphabet, and was solely a spoken language until a written script, based on the Sanskrit handwriting of India, was devised in the seventh century. Because many Tibetan characters cannot immediately be translated into English, Western spellings of Tibetan words often differ. The Dalai Lama says he does not remember most of his early life in Takster. His first memory involves a camel and the communal toilet. "In middle of my sort of 'engagement,'" he told CNN in self-taught English, "one big camel approaching and I run away." He laughs and says it interrupted his "heavy work" there.⁴

This story is indicative of his easy, warm nature. The spirit of his birth name—Lhamo Dhondup or "wish-fulfilling goddess"—seems to flow through his life, as the embodiment of the god of compassion. Many signs arose in connection with his birth, which indicated that he was destined for a greater purpose.

INDICATORS OF A DALAI LAMA'S STATION

Lhamo Dhondup's family had experienced a particularly rough period just before his arrival. First, all thirteen of the family's horses contracted a fatal contagious illness, which was a devastating personal and financial loss. Then, rather than nurturing rain, only hail fell, which destroyed their crops, bringing on a famine that lasted for three years. Lhamo Dhondup's family remained in Takster although many families migrated to other parts of Tibet. Through the goodness of the monks at Kumbum monastery, who gave them lentils, rice, and peas, the family survived the crisis.

Two months before Lhamo Dhondup's birth, Choekyong Tsering fell victim to a mysterious vertigo, which caused him to lose consciousness each time he tried to stand. Yet when Diki Tsering returned to the house after birthing Lhamo Dhondup, her husband was out of bed, apparently cured completely of his puzzling malady. When she told him that she had borne a son, Choekyong Tsering was elated, saying he was no ordinary boy, and a decision to send the infant to a monastery was made immediately.

Soon, a pair of crows came to perch on the roof of the farmhouse. Buddhists believe that crows are the manifestation of the protective deity Maha Kali, or the Great Black One, and the birds have been associated with the births of several other Dalai Lamas. When the nomad settlement of the First Dalai Lama, Gedun Drub, was overrun with marauders, his parents had no means of taking all their children with them quickly, along with enough food to survive. His mother hid the newborn, and returned the next day to find him safely guarded by a large, black crow. Crows were also associated with the births of the Seventh, Eighth, and Twelfth Dalai Lamas. After Lhamo Dhondup was named Dalai Lama, the appearance of the crows on his rooftop was deemed a certain sign of his station in life.

Other incidents in the toddler's life seem to point in the same direction. "He was always packing his clothes and his little belongings," Diki Tsering wrote. "When I asked what he was doing, he would reply that he was packing to go to Lhasa and would take all of us with him."⁵

She also recounts his remarkable particularities, such as never allowing anyone to handle his teacups except her. He disliked quarrelsome people, and before he was two years old, he tried to beat the offenders with sticks. He also disliked smoking, and flew into rages if anyone lit up. The Dalai Lama's family regarded his imperious behavior as a sign that he was destined for great things.

And so he was. But, the little boy's journey had not yet begun. In Lhasa, his great destiny was only preparing to find him.

NOTES

1. Peter Snow Cao, "Lebrang Monastery," *Spoke Notes*, Bike China Adventures, www.bikechina.com/spoke98.htm, 1999.
2. Sal Towse, interview by author, self@towse.com, 2 January 2002.
3. Rinchen Lhamo, *We Tibetans* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1926), p. 89.
4. Quoted in John Christensen, "The Dalai Lama: Man of Peace Takes His Place on World Stage," *CNN Interactive*, *CNN In-depth Specials—Visions of China—Profiles: The Dalai Lama*, 1999, www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/inside.china/profiles/dalai.lama.
5. Diki Tsering, *Dalai Lama, My Son. A Mother's Story* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 89.