

“There is no hurry to die”

Chapter 31

The Dalai Lama bridges the gap of 13 years since our last meeting with one wide smile. He points towards me and says, “Here, my old friend.”

As I enter the room where he normally receives all his guests, I am struck by its air of permanence. Nothing much seems to have changed since 1997, when I conducted a series of interviews with him in his mountaintop bungalow in the early Himalayas. That is odd considering he is the master of an ancient philosophy whose core principle is that everything in life is impermanent. He does not look that different than he did as a 62-year-old. He is 75 now and continues to wear a benignly cheerful expression that never seems to leave him.

“So..” he says more to signal that the interview begin than to embark on pleasantries. Those were taken care of with him clasping my hand and leading me to the sofa.

Since the publication of this biography in February, 2007, a great deal has changed in the China-Tibet context. China has become the world’s second biggest economy overtaking Japan. At the end of 2010 Japan’s economy was \$5.474 trillion, while China's was closer to \$5.8 trillion. Although it is still way less than half of the United States economy at \$14.72 trillion for the same period with four times the population, it has unquestionably become the second most decisive economic force. In 2016, the figures change dramatically as China’s economy rose to \$12 trillion, right behind that of the United States’ at \$19 trillion, while Japan’s appeared to have contracted to \$4.5 trillion.

Beijing also dazzled the world with a spectacularly successful hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games. It is more aware now than ever before of its potential to be a new counterbalance to Washington. That realization has a direct bearing on Tibet and how much negotiating flexibility the Dalai Lama has. The ever constricting negotiating space between the two sides was evident yet again as two envoys of the Dalai Lama went to Beijing for the ninth round of talks in January 2010. The eighth round was in 2008 which broke down in acrimony. Since 2002 the two sides have met nine times without making any headway.

On the personal front, the Dalai Lama has been keeping a remarkably hectic schedule of travels and engagements around the world. He has been to over 20 countries in that period, visiting many of them several times. While he has kept

Tibet as the mainstay of his public theme, he has also consciously positioned himself as a secular advocate of global harmony. Without his ochre robe it would be hard to detect his monastic preoccupations.

In the midst of all that he has had to deal with some health challenges, including a gallbladder surgery in October, 2008 and other hospital visits for a pinched nerve. He also lost his eldest brother Thubten Jigme Norbu, known as Taktser Rinpoche, in September, 2008. The Dalai Lama points at his stomach and says, "Other than my gallbladder, I have been well. My health is good." His comment offers a perfect segue to the larger theme of his succession and Tibet beyond him.

There is no comparable spiritual or temporal leader in the world in whose death and succession so much morbid curiosity is invested as it is in the case of the Dalai Lama. Equally, there is no comparable figure that treats such weighty issues as his own mortality with as much good cheer as Tenzin Gyatso.

Although there is nothing to suggest in the Dalai Lama's health that death is imminent, he is routinely asked by journalists and historians to address the subject if only because they believe the future of Tibet rides on it. The Dalai Lama has never cast himself in the role of Tibet's sole savior, nor has China treated him as one. And yet, as he grows older the subjects of his death and succession have gathered greater urgency, very often at the cost of politeness and good manners.

"There is no hurry (to die). I hope to live for several decades more," he said during an interview in McLeod Ganj in August, 2010.

It is a measure of the importance of the Dalai Lama's institution that even China, which stands to benefit the most from his death and the possible withering away of the institution itself, may still want to appoint its own Dalai Lama as a successor to the 14th whom it can control to its own advantage.

"Obviously the Chinese government will choose another sort of official Dalai Lama. There will be two Dalai Lamas, more complications. Some of these (Communist) hardliners think that they are experts. It is quite strange that Chinese communist hardliners consider me as a demon. At the same time they are very much concerned about a demon's reincarnation," he says breaking into his trademark guffaw. To be precise China has described the Dalai Lama as a "demon with a human face with the heart of a beast."

It is one of those curiosities of the Chinese establishment thinking that while the Communist leadership had no hesitation in appointing its own Panchen Lama and practically imprisoning the one selected by the Dalai Lama, it has avoided creating a parallel Dalai Lama so far. Other than breaking the centuries old tradition of reincarnation, which is not a stretch for the Chinese leadership, Beijing does not have to do much to create and prop up its own official Dalai Lama. The reasons behind China's reluctance to do so have not really been discussed in the public scholarly domain. But one can speculate that they have to do with the uniqueness of the Dalai Lama institution and its centrality to Tibetan life, unlike in the case of the Panchen Lama. For sure, the Panchen Lama is a historically important figure in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon but he has not enjoyed the level of overarching influence that the Dalai Lamas have.

For the past two decades, particularly since he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama's impact as the leader of the Tibetan people and the most high profile advocate of Tibet has depended progressively less on his official position and more on his individual credibility and charisma. So whether or not he remains officially active is unlikely to have any effect on his advocacy of Tibet and promotion of harmony globally.

Chapter 32

The Rise of Secular Diplomacy

For 369 years, the person of the successive Dalai Lamas embodied unassailable political and spiritual powers over Tibet and the Tibetan people. In May, 2011 the Dalai Lama dismantled them without much fanfare because to his mind he was merely fulfilling a commitment he had made soon after arriving in exile in India.

The transfer of the Dalai Lama's political and administrative powers to the office of the elected Tibetan prime minister-in-exile is a historic shift in the Tibetan context. In approving the amendments to the 1991 Charter of the Tibetans in Exile, the Dalai Lama not only made his "semi-retirement" more formal but took a decisive step towards his long cherished role of a global citizen. He approved the amendments on May 29, 2011 in McLeod Ganj in Himachal Pradesh, where he lives.

The approval of the amendments may not have any immediate consequence but is potentially important in the event of the 14th Dalai Lama's death. Now that those powers have been detached from his person and enshrined in an elected government, the transfer empowers the Tibetan administration to take a formal position on the future of Tibet.

It is unlikely that this break from the centuries-old tradition would have any bearing on Beijing's position on Tibet, the region it considers as a fully integrated territory of China. There is always the theoretical possibility that one day the Chinese government may bypass the Dalai Lama and directly engage the Tibetan administration in India to resolve the question of Tibet. The overriding motivation of such an action would be to negotiate down with an unequal partner, unlike the Dalai Lama whose global stature gives him enormous leverage.

As long as the 14 Dalai Lama is alive, the transfer of political and administrative powers is a largely symbolic decision. Of course, the newly empowered office of the Kalon Tripa or Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay can now legally position itself as the representative of the Tibetans in exile. But there is

nothing to suggest that the Dalai Lama's influence over the broad direction of the Tibetan debate is in decline. On the contrary, now that he is free from some of the constraints of his formal power, he might be in a better position to be more creative in his approach.

In August, 2011, some 50,000 Tibetan exile community elected Harvard legal scholar Dr. Sangay as their first genuinely politically empowered prime minister. His rise came barely four months after the Dalai Lama formally divested himself of political and administrative powers. The rise of Dr. Sangay settles to some extent the oft-asked question after the Dalai Lama who in so much as it formalizes where the secular political power resides. It now resides in the office of the prime minister. While Dr. Sangay's rise cannot be seen as in anyway diluting the overriding global appeal of the Dalai Lama personally as well as his effectiveness to keep the issue of Tibet alive in the consciousness of the international community, it does create a well-defined political power structure that is distinct from the Tibetan monk's person.

The Dalai Lama has given up nine major responsibilities, which include signing amendments to the Charter for Tibetans in Exile and its rules and regulations, signing of final budget document, permission for holding exiled parliament session, appointment of top functionaries in the Tibetan government-in-exile, calling for referendums, dissolving the parliament and cabinet, passing ordinances, honoring personalities and addressing the parliament.

Although Dr. Sangay may choose to defer to the Dalai Lama's broad vision about Tibet, his office does enjoy significant independence under the overhaul of the political structure. Unlike the outgoing prime minister Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, who is an ordained Buddhist monk, Dr. Sangay is much closer to both the aspirations and idiom of the younger generation of Tibetans in exile.

In a subtle departure from the Dalai Lama's broadly philosophical approach to the Tibet dispute in recent years, Dr. Sangay said, "Our debt to the Indian government and its people is already enormous. But our work together continues. We humbly appeal for your continued support and kind consideration to treat Tibet as one of the core issues between India and China."

The idea that Tibet be treated as the core issue between China and India is particularly tricky for New Delhi, which has for decades kept it on the diplomatic backburner in the vain hope that somehow it would resolve itself. In New Delhi's dealings with Beijing, Tibet hardly ever, if at all, figures as a

subject of discussion. While successive Indian governments have not said so in such explicit terms, they consider it strategically unwise to stick their necks out over what they believe is a largely lost cause. It has been one of the Dalai Lama's very gently expressed regrets that when it comes to Tibet, India tends to underestimate its own strength with China.

So while it is striking for Dr. Sangay to suggest to New Delhi that Tibet be treated as the core issue of the India-China relationship, I seriously wonder whether it would find any positive response in Delhi. It would be interesting to see how China treats the young new prime minister. Dismissing him as the Dalai Lama's adjunct would be an easy and rather unimaginative approach. It would be much more constructive to seriously engage him and through him set the stage for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet with as much openness that the Chinese system allows. Dr. Sangay's rise presents China a fresh opportunity to resolve the issue once and for all.