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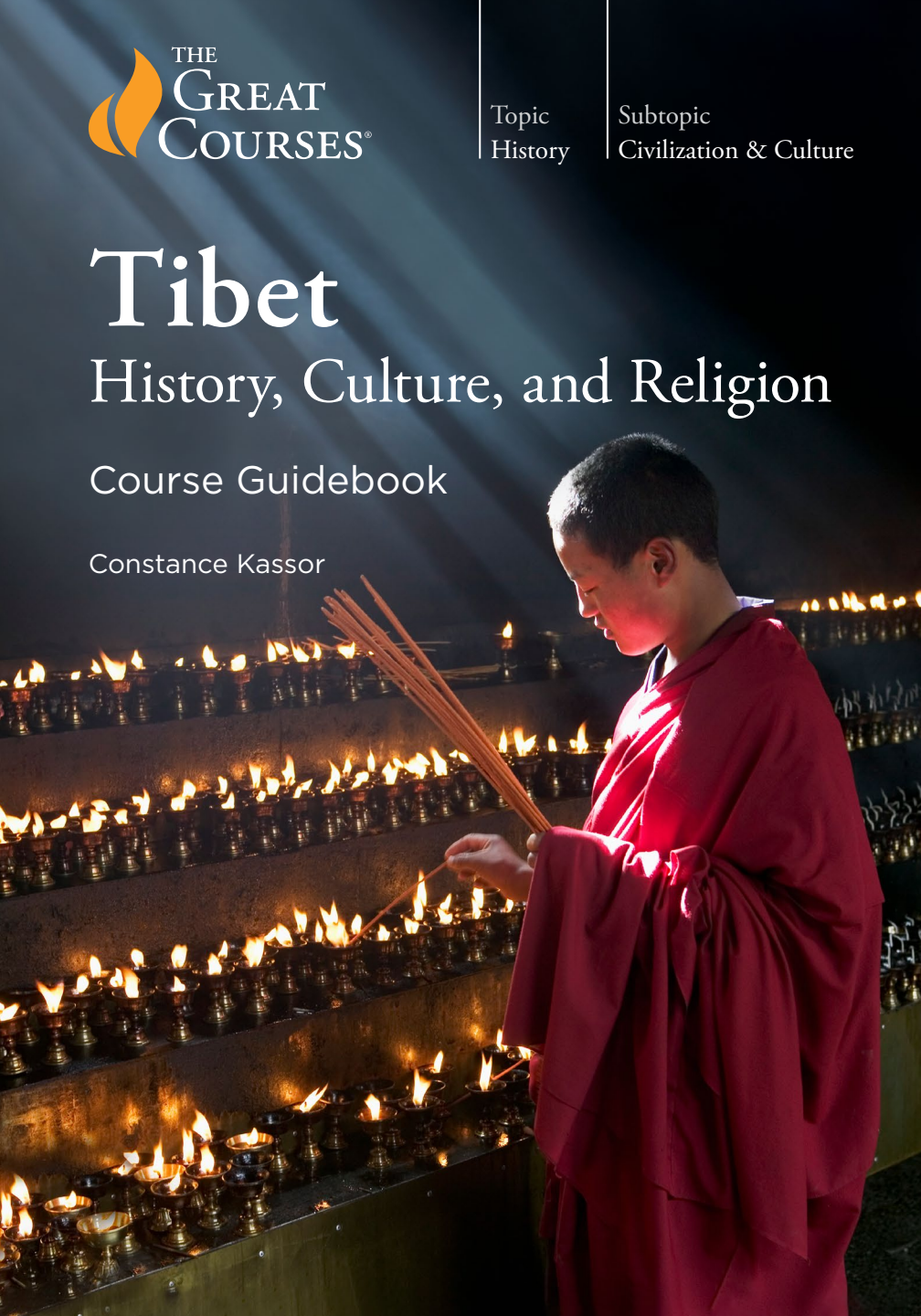
Course Guidebook

Constance Kassor



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Life at the Roof of the World

Tibet is a complex, multifaceted geopolitical intersection that is claimed politically by China, which administers it as the Tibet Autonomous Region, and encircled by India, Nepal, and Bhutan. It is a highland plateau with a long history shaped by ancient kings and kingdoms, Tibetan Buddhism, and 14 incarnations of the spiritual leader known as the Dalai Lama. In this course, you'll embark on a journey to discover more about Tibet's people, history, and culture. In so doing, you'll take a deep dive into issues of Tibetan identity, sovereignty, and survival in the realpolitik context of Tibet's relationship with China and the cracks (as well as the cement) in its people's culture, politics, and religious faith.

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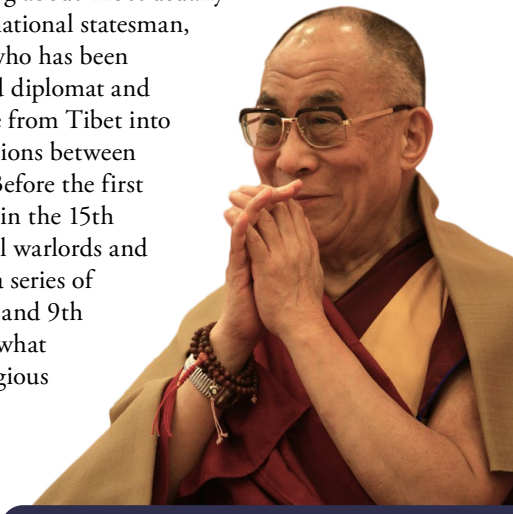
Tibet's Geography

About one and a half times the size of Alaska, Tibet is cradled on Earth's largest and highest plateau. This land mass formed about 50 million years ago when the Indian tectonic plate collided with the Eurasian plate. That buckling of the earth is recognized today as the Himalayan mountain range, and the area north of it is the Tibetan Plateau.

Tibet's mountains encompass tens of thousands of glaciers, massive glacial lakes, and river headwaters, making them a precious ecological resource. However, climate change is having a massive effect. Temperatures are rising at up to four times those of surrounding areas, causing the glaciers to retreat at alarming rates, with potentially devastating impacts on agriculture across Asia.

Tibet's Spiritual Faith

Even people that don't know anything about Tibet usually recognize the Dalai Lama: the international statesman, spiritual leader, and Nobel laureate who has been recognized the world over as a skilled diplomat and brilliant thinker ever since his escape from Tibet into India in 1959, at a time of rising tensions between Tibetans and the Chinese military. Before the first Dalai Lama came to represent Tibet in the 15th century, the region was ruled by local warlords and kingdoms. It became unified under a series of great Tibetan kings between the 7th and 9th centuries, and these kings imported what would become Tibet's dominant religious tradition—Buddhism—from India.



Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

Buddhism is not the only religion practiced by Tibetans, but it informs much of Tibetan history and culture. Broadly, Tibet's religious history can be divided into three categories: the early dissemination, when the early kings introduced Buddhism; the era of fragmentation, after the anti-Buddhist emperor Langdarma was assassinated in 842, when Tibet had no central government and provided no institutional backing of Buddhism; and the later dissemination, during the 10th and 11th centuries, when institutionalized Buddhism made a comeback.

The Khans and Tibetan Buddhism

By the turn of the 13th century, Genghis Khan ruled over the newly created Mongol empire. The khans initially left Tibet alone and then later formed a patron-priest relationship, in which Buddhist leaders from Tibet provided counsel to the great khans in return for the protection of the Tibetan people. One part of this story is the development of a distinct tantric strain of spiritual development that can be described as Tibetan Buddhism but which was also riven by sometimes feuding factions and beliefs. The newest

major sect of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug tradition, was founded in the 14th century and grew quickly. One of its founders became recognized posthumously as the first Dalai Lama. His successors formed close relationships with the Mongol rulers, solidifying the connection between religious and political leadership that dominated Tibetan society for the next half millennium.

By the first half of the 20th century, Tibet's sociopolitical structure resembled a feudalistic society. The Buddhist religious establishment held all of the political power and most of the money. Monastic leaders wielded religious and political authority. The 14th Dalai Lama and his predecessor sought to reform—and, in some ways, modernize—Tibet, but these efforts ran into larger historic forces next door in China: the fall of the 300-year Qing dynasty before World War I and then the triumph of Mao Zedong's communists after World War II.

China and Modern Tibet

In 1951, the Chinese communist government sent its army into Tibet, claiming that ordinary Tibetans would be "peacefully liberated." By the 1960s and 1970s, China's Cultural Revolution had wrought the destruction of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, temples, artwork, and untold numbers of historical texts. Many—if not most—Tibetans still think of the Chinese government as a usurper and occupier.

The estimated 6 million Tibetans who live in Tibet today are sometimes overshadowed by the estimated 150,000 Tibetans who live in diaspora communities around the world. Furthermore, by choice or by necessity, many native Tibetans continue to make an exodus out of the plateau year after year as the future of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China looms more uncertainly than ever before.

2

When the Dalai Lama Broke with China

China annexed Tibet in 1951, later designating it the Tibet Autonomous Region. From the Chinese government's perspective, the region is semiautonomous but by no means independent. In this lecture, you will examine the Dalai Lama's exile from Tibet, his Middle Way approach toward autonomy, and Tibet's stalemate with the Chinese government regarding a potential peace agreement. In addition, you will trace how the Dalai Lama's rise to worldwide fame, combined with the 10th Panchen Lama's sudden death and his initial successor's disappearance, framed the issue of Tibetan independence in the world spotlight.

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Exile and Stalemate

In March 1959, armed clashes broke out between Tibetans and the Chinese People's Liberation Army at the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan leader, took refuge in his summer residence, and an advisor instructed him to flee. That night, disguised as a soldier, he snuck away with his mother, sister, younger brother, and several Tibetan government officials and headed toward Tibet's southeastern border with India. As the group approached the border, the Dalai Lama contacted India's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and requested asylum. With Nehru's consent and the help of the Indian military, the group crossed into northeast India.

On June 20, 1959, the Dalai Lama publicly repudiated a China-sponsored agreement from 1951 that had traded Tibet's explicit sovereignty to China for some religious and political autonomy under the Dalai Lama since China had continued to consolidate its hold over Tibet. India's receptiveness to hosting the Dalai Lama in exile paved the way for the development of an extensive Tibetan refugee community in India—and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. Between 1959 and 1960, an estimated 80,000 Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama to India. In the years since, between 1,000 and 2,500 more Tibetans have slipped across the Indian border each year. Today, an estimated 150,000 Tibetan refugees live in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and elsewhere. The Dalai Lama has never again set foot on Tibetan soil.

During the first two decades of his life in exile, the Dalai Lama advocated for Tibetan independence. Over time, perhaps realizing it was unlikely that China would ever cede control of his homeland, he shifted his attitude. Around 1979, he adopted the Middle Way approach: Tibet would remain part of the People's Republic of China, relying on the Chinese to shepherd economic development and international relations, but maintain meaningful autonomy over its own internal affairs. At the time, China said: "The door is opened for negotiations as long as we don't speak about independence." The two parties remained at a stalemate.

In 1987, the Dalai Lama addressed the US Congress and proposed a peace plan for Tibet that

- recognized Tibet as an international peace zone not subject to armed incursions by Chinese soldiers or police;
- called for the restoration of Tibet's natural environment and environmental protections, along with a pledge that China would abandon its use of Tibet to produce nuclear weapons and/or dump nuclear waste; and
- asked China to abandon its population resettlement program, respect the Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms, and commence earnest negotiations about the future of Tibet.

The next year, China stated that it welcomed the Dalai Lama to have talks with the central government at any time. However, there was one condition: No foreigners should be involved. This signaled that the People's Republic of China wasn't interested in any substantive negotiations and that the reply was simply another part of its propaganda efforts.

On being awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama spoke about establishing Tibet as an "ecologically stable and demilitarized" buffer zone between India and China, which the Nobel committee described as a worthy appeal "to set in motion serious negotiations on the future status of Tibet." However, China rejected the notion, and both sides remained at a stalemate.

The Panchen Lama

Around this time, one of the Dalai Lama's peers and the second most influential Tibetan Buddhist leader—the 10th Panchen Lama—passed away in central Tibet. Decades earlier, he had publicly supported China's claims to sovereignty over Tibet and seemed to genuinely believe that the Chinese government was working in the best interests of the Tibetan people. Hoping that he would serve as an advocate for China in Tibet, the Chinese named him vice chair of China's National People's Congress after the Dalai Lama went into self-imposed exile.

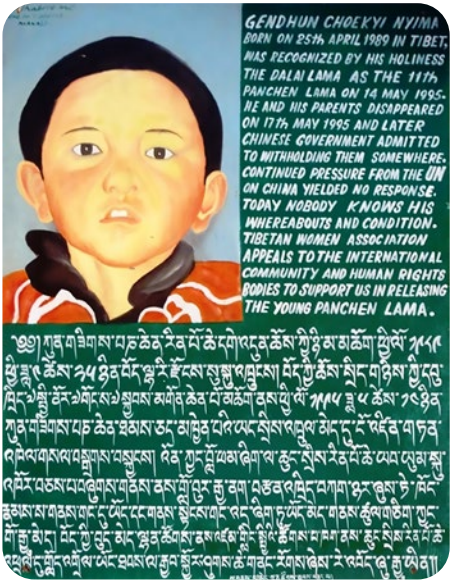
However, after a tour of Tibet in 1962, the Panchen Lama's attitude changed. He wrote to authorities detailing abuses he said he had witnessed by the Chinese against the Tibetan people—abuses of religious freedom, as well as forced abortions, the suppression of protests, and widespread famine. This document came to be known as the 70,000 Character Petition. As a result, the Chinese stripped him of his political authority. He was declared an "enemy of the Tibetan people" in 1964 and imprisoned for 13 years until 1977.

Upon release, the 10th Panchen Lama gave up his monastic vows and married a Han Chinese medical student who was the daughter of a Chinese army general. Considering the union symbolically significant, the Chinese declared him "politically rehabilitated" in 1982. He visited Tibet in 1989, gave a speech criticizing Chinese policies there, and died five days later. His passing presented a new crisis: The next Panchen Lama would almost certainly succeed the Dalai Lama as leader of the Tibetan people, and given the tense relationship between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government, each side hoped to enthrone a Panchen Lama supportive of their cause.

Like the Dalai Lama, each Panchen Lama is traditionally identified according to the *tulku* selection process. It's thought that if the man who holds the institutional office dies, his successor will be a reincarnate whom qualified spiritual authorities can identify. Historically, the Dalai Lama verified the identity of a new Panchen Lama, and the Panchen Lama verified a new Dalai Lama. However, with the 14th Dalai Lama living outside of Tibet—and outside of China—at the time of the Panchen Lama's death, it wasn't entirely clear how the process would continue.

The Chinese government insisted on using a lottery system called the Golden Urn—a divination process in which several potential candidates are identified, their names written down and placed in an urn, and the name selected is the next leader. The process supposedly ensures fairness, with the Chinese arguing that the *tulku* could be easily corrupted. Of course, the Golden Urn system could be easily rigged, too—and in hindsight, there is plenty of evidence to believe that it was.

In 1995, the Chinese government in Beijing announced that it would use the Golden Urn process to identify the next Panchen Lama. Before they could do so, however, the Dalai Lama stepped in to say that the 11th Panchen Lama had already been found—six-year-old Gendun Chökyi Nyima—and his identity confirmed according to traditional Tibetan custom. Three days later, the boy and his family disappeared. The following November, Chinese officials held a Golden Urn ceremony and selected a boy named Gyaincain Norbu.



Independence and Succession

An organization called Students for a Free Tibet formed in New York in 1994, and today it represents an international support network for Tibetan independence. It popularized the Tibetan cause in part through its presence at pop music tours and concerts around the world and pro-Tibet demonstrations in China around the time of the Summer Olympics in Beijing. The Tibetan Youth Congress in Dharamsala—consisting of 30,000 members of the worldwide Tibetan diaspora—has also established itself

as an influential pro-Tibetan independence group. In recent years, these groups have found themselves increasingly at odds with the Middle Way position of the Dalai Lama. Instead, they argue that there is no such thing as meaningful autonomy without complete independence.

As he grew older, the Dalai Lama publicly recognized that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile would need to continue to function after his death and that the Chinese would likely interfere in identifying his successor. In March 2011, he stepped down as the head of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and was succeeded by a Harvard-educated Tibetan American named Lobsang Sangay. In May 2021, an Indian-born Tibetan and former speaker of the Tibetan parliament named Penpa Tsering succeeded Lobsang Sangay after democratic elections held in Tibetan diaspora communities worldwide.

Despite this, the Chinese government has characterized the Dalai Lama's decision to forego power as a "political show." Its official position is that the Tibetan government is illegal and that his retirement is meaningless. China also issued a new law to deal with identifying the Dalai Lama's successor, in which no Tibetan lama (or spiritual leader) is allowed to reincarnate without the expressed consent of the Chinese government. As a result, without government approval, the recognition of *tulkus* is considered illegal and invalid. Although this will likely have little impact on the beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists, it will almost certainly have a significant influence on the institution of the Dalai Lama—and the future.

3

The Birth of Buddhism's Powerful Gelug Sect

Since the 16th century, the Dalai Lamas have been Tibet's most influential leaders. However, the Dalai Lama is not the head of his own Gelug sect, the largest and most powerful body of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide. That role falls to the Ganden Tripa. In this lecture, you'll examine the most recently established Buddhist tradition in Tibet and see how it has done a great deal to update Tibetan Buddhism in ways that are compatible with a modern, global society—including advancing women's rights.

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Gelug Beginnings and Learning

A monk named Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, born in 1359 in northeastern Tibet, is considered the founder of the Gelug school of Buddhism. Tsongkhapa is said to have taken lay vows at age three and novice monastic vows at age eight. As a child, he mastered difficult texts and reportedly had visions of important deities and past masters. When Tsongkhapa turned 16, he left his homeland to continue his studies in central Tibet. He reportedly mastered multiple systems of philosophy and logic and received tantric initiations under the guidance of more than 50 different teachers. He is also credited with writing on topics ranging from logic and ethics to ritual and tantra.

Tsongkhapa's fame as a writer and teacher spread across the Tibetan Plateau, and he gained many followers. In 1409, he instituted the Great Prayer Festival, called Monlam Chenmo, which continues to be celebrated today. In 1410, at Lhasa, Tsongkhapa began to construct the great Ganden Monastery, where he eventually served as abbot. Later, the leader of Ganden Monastery would become known as the Ganden Tripa. Ganden was renowned for its monastic rigor.

When Tsongkhapa died in 1419, one of his students succeeded him. Eleven years later, another of his students became the third Ganden Tripa. Together, these three are credited with establishing and unifying a new sect of Tibetan Buddhism and establishing the "great three" monastic seats of the tradition, Ganden, Sera, and Drepung, all of which are close to Lhasa.

Sera Monastery

In the monastery, Gelugpas begin studying Buddhist philosophy as early as the fourth grade, covering topics including logic, epistemology, and the fundamentals of debate. After completing the equivalent of at least an eighth-grade education, monks spend another decade or so studying the major works of Buddhist philosophy, which they must memorize word for word.

To internalize and understand the memorized teachings, monastics spend hours each day engaged in debate in the monastery courtyard. To succeed at debate, a monk must master the skill of logical reasoning, as studied during his earlier years, and have an exceptional memory to recall exact passages from the memorized texts. He must also have a firm grasp of the philosophical texts' meaning.

After slightly more than a decade of advanced study, monks might choose to end their educations or continue toward the Geshe Lharampa degree, which is roughly equivalent to a PhD in Buddhist philosophy and takes a minimum of six more years to complete. After doing so, monks at the major Gelugpa institutions are expected to study at a tantric college, specializing in esoteric meditative practices, for at least another year. Upon successful completion, they receive the title of Geshe Ngagrampa. However, the number of such titles awarded each year is limited, and some monks spend many more years furthering their studies before they are allowed to stand for the final exam.

Women's Access to the Geshe

Historically, this course of study in Tibet—and, more recently, in India—was limited to male monks at larger (and wealthier) central monastic institutions. Nuns, who lived at the smaller local monasteries, were not expected to pursue these rigorous courses of study. In 1973, the Dalai Lama established the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD) as a place of learning for young Tibetan monks in India who'd already received a primary education and needed a different kind of education than that traditionally offered in the monasteries. Soon, the IBD accommodated nuns, members of the Tibetan diaspora, and, in time, laypeople. The IBD's founding helped to equalize access to a Tibetan monastic education between men and women.

In 2011, the German-born nun Kelsang Wangmo, who studied at the IBS, became the first woman in the Gelug tradition's 500-year-plus history to be awarded the Geshe Lharampa degree. Wangmo progressed through all of the requirements for the degree, but even after 20 years of formal monastic study, no degree was initially conferred upon her, as tradition dictated that women did not become *geshes*. Eventually, however, the Dalai Lama stated that because she had completed the requirements, Wangmo should be awarded the degree like anyone else. By becoming the first female *geshe*—or, rather, the first *geshema* (the feminine form of the title)—Wangmo opened the door for other nuns. Since then, more than 100 *geshemas* have been named in the Gelug tradition.

Sectarianism

Dorje Shugden is a deity understood in Tibetan Buddhism to be a protector. He is a Gyalpo: a wrathful spirit depicted as a king. This idea fits into Tibetan Buddhists' belief in the existence of *dharmapalas*. These spiritual beings are believed to protect Buddhist practitioners—and the Buddhist tradition—from obstacles, harm, and other misfortune. In return, you take care of them by making ritual offerings. As the Gelug tradition developed, Dorje Shugden was adopted as a minor protector and further popularized in the 1930s by a highly influential Gelugpa *geshe* named Pabongkha Rinpoche, who had an unusually large lay following; he was also, apparently, a fierce sectarian.

Pabongkha wished to promote the Gelug tradition over and above other sects, and he therefore advertised Dorje Shugden as a violent protector of the sect that could be employed to defend the Gelugpas against rival sects. However, the 13th Dalai Lama, among others, imposed restrictions on practices associated with Dorje Shugden. Pabongkha issued a statement saying he would refrain from further promotion of the figure, but he continued to advocate for Dorje Shugden in private practice.

Dorje Shugden

In 1975, a Gelugpa teacher named Zimey Rinpoche rekindled the controversy when he published *The Yellow Book*, a record of oral teachings and stories, including accounts of Gelugpa teachers who suffered untimely deaths, supposedly because they engaged in practices that angered Dorje Shugden. The Dalai Lama himself publicly rejected the conclusions drawn from this book. He stated that Dorje Shugden had always been a minor *dharmapala* and that all sects of Tibetan Buddhism were valid. In the early 1980s, he restricted practices associated with Dorje Shugden, saying that they could continue in private but could no longer be performed publicly. This caused an enormous rift. Some monastic and lay Gelugpas had made the propitiation of Dorje Shugden a main component of their practice. Frustrated with the Dalai Lama's position, some of his critics began to break away from him.

A Buddhist monk and scholar named Kelzang Gyatso was among the figures who broke ties with the Dalai Lama—and, eventually, with the Gelug tradition as a whole. In 1991, he established a Buddhist organization for Westerners called the New Kadampa Tradition – International Kadampa Buddhist Union (NKT-IKBU). At its heart, the NKT-IKBU emphasizes the supposed purity of the Gelug lineage, and Dorje Shugden rituals are a main component of its practices. In this, Kelzang Gyatso and his followers align with the early- to mid-20th-century teachings of Pabongkha, who rejected the influence of other sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Predictably, this led to the group and its followers cutting ties with the Dalai Lama and actively opposing him.

In 1996, NKT-IKBU members in London accused the Dalai Lama of obstructing their religious freedom. The next year, a prominent teacher and supporter of the Dalai Lama was brutally murdered along with two of his students, allegedly by NKT-IKBU members. The NKT-IKBU continued to grow around the world, principally in Europe, North America, and Australia. In 2009, Kelzang Gyatso stepped down from an active leadership role in the organization, and in 2013, he disappeared from public view and was never seen again.

4

The Zhang Zhung and Yarlung Dynasties

Tibetan prehistory begins with a creation story about the origins of the Tibetan people, who inhabit the highest and largest plateau on earth. Early historical reports of Tibet are frequently infused with fantastic, otherworldly creatures and events. Even if these early accounts are not historically verifiable, some of these stories are essential to Tibetans' sense of identity, nationality, and culture. In this lecture, you'll learn about the most common version of Tibet's creation story, early Tibetan civilizations and legends, and the importance of the Dunhuang caves.

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Origins and Pha Trelgen Changchup Sempa

A long time ago, the earth was covered in water, which slowly evaporated and eventually made way for animal life to develop. One day, a monkey called Pha Trelgen Changchup Sempa, searching for a remote place to follow a life of ascetic discipline and meditation, found his way to Tibet. Not long after, an ogress came to seduce him. When Pha Trelgen refused her advances, she threatened him. She warned that if she couldn't sleep with him, she would have to sleep with a demon instead and conceive little monsters that would destroy all living beings. The monkey went to the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, and asked for permission to give up his vows of chastity and asceticism. Avalokiteshvara granted this permission, and eventually, six little monkeys were born. The monkeys grew up unsupervised in the forest—and 6 quickly became 500.

These 500 monkeys soon found themselves without food because the fruits and berries they foraged for in the forest couldn't sustain all of them. Worried for their survival, Pha Trelgen went back to Avalokiteshvara to ask for help. Avalokiteshvara visited Mount Meru—the mountain that many Tibetans believe to be the center of the universe—and collected some barley. Upon his return, he taught Pha Trelgen how to cultivate agriculture. Soon, the monkeys were planting and harvesting grain. In what might be among the earliest accounts of a Darwinian-type theory of evolution, the monkeys eventually lost their hair and tails and began using tools, building houses, and wearing clothes, becoming the early ancestors of today's Tibetan people.

Avalokiteshvara

The origins of this account predate the 7th century, and the story is obviously mythical in many respects. However, after the introduction of Buddhism, early Tibetan history began to take on a distinctively Buddhist flavor: Pha Trelgen represents an ideal being who follows the Buddhist path, Avalokiteshvara himself is a well-known Buddhist figure, and some believe the ogress to be another bodhisattva in disguise.

Early Civilizations and the Dunhuang Caves

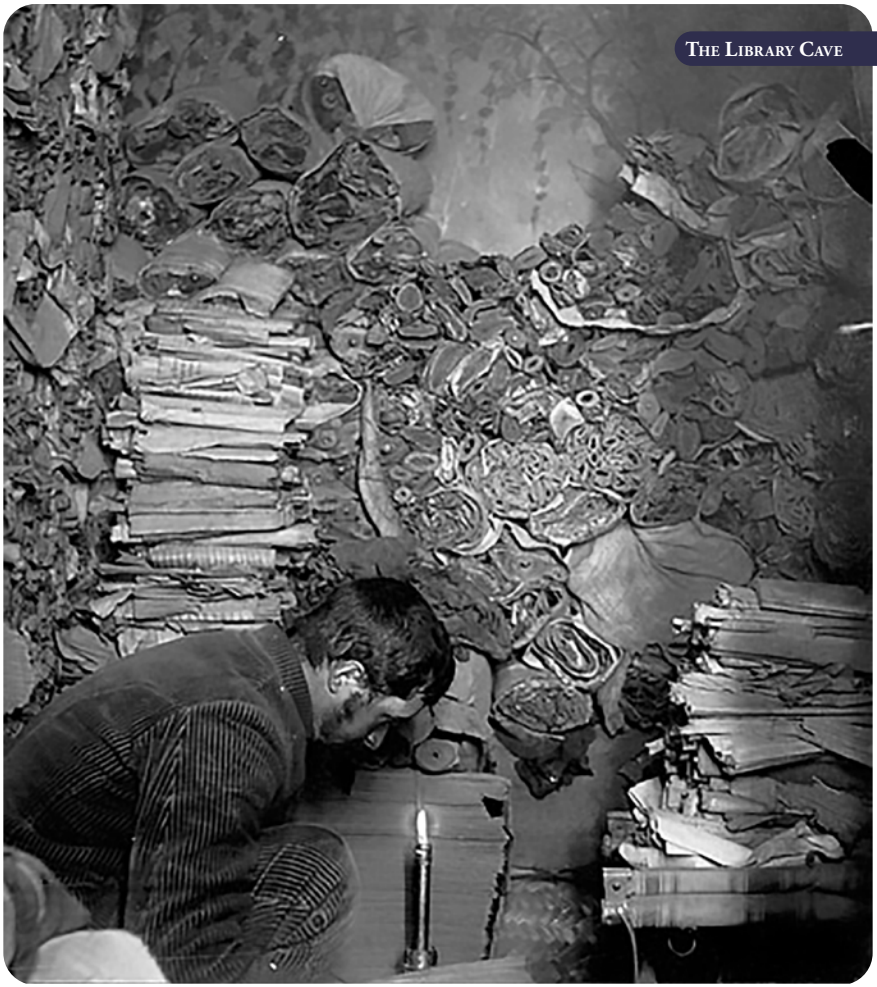
Archaeological evidence paints an inconclusive story of the earliest Tibetan people. Some archaeological evidence suggests that early humans might have passed through Tibet as early as 160,000 years ago. Modern humans possibly inhabited the Tibetan Plateau as early as 21,000 years ago. However, scientists debate about where these people might have come from and whether they stayed in one place or were migrating from one place to another.

Physical evidence suggests there was a once-thriving civilization known as Zhang Zhung in western Tibet, not far from the border with present-day Nepal. Historical and religious texts describe Zhang Zhung as a network of 18 kingdoms in the vicinity of Mount Kailash. It flourished from 500 BCE to 625 CE, eventually covering much of western Tibet, and is believed to have been incredibly influential in laying the foundation for modern Tibetan culture, language, and religion. Zhang Zhung is also an important influence on Tibetan adherents of Bon, who believe that their religion predates Buddhism by thousands of years.

Another kingdom known as the Yarlung dynasty developed around the same time, and much of what researchers know about it comes from two texts, the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* and the *Old Tibetan Annals*, both found during the early 20th century in the Dunhuang caves along China's Silk Road. They are believed to be the only extant written sources detailing Tibetan history prior to the 6th and 7th centuries.

Dunhuang was once an oasis and an important city in the middle of the Gobi Desert, where traders and travelers stopped to exchange goods. Buddhists eventually settled there and established shrines in the caves. In the Mogao Caves, a sealed room was discovered around the year 1900; it contains a massive collection of manuscripts, including the *Old Tibetan*

Chronicle and the *Old Tibetan Annals*. It's believed that this cave—today known as the Library Cave—was sealed off for unknown reasons as long ago as the 11th century. Thanks to the dry desert climate, the manuscripts inside, including Tibetan historical texts, Buddhist scriptures, Daoist texts, and Jewish and Christian texts, were immaculately preserved.



The Library Cave

In 1910, the Chinese Ministry of Education suspected that the texts might have important historical or cultural significance. Therefore, the office sent representatives to take most of the remaining manuscripts from the cave and send them to Beijing to be preserved. Today, the remains of the Dunhuang texts are being digitized and made freely available to anyone through an online resource called the International Dunhuang Project.

The Yarlung Dynasty

According to the Dunhuang manuscripts, the first king of the Yarlung dynasty was Nyatri Tsenpo, who was said to have webbed fingers, eyelids that closed from the bottom up, and a tongue so massive that it could cover his entire face. He is described as having been feared in his homeland and exiled to the Yarlung Valley. When he arrived, the locals supposedly mistook him for a god and made him their king. Even today, Nyatri Tsenpo remains an important figure in Tibet.

Nyatri Tsenpo

Nyatri Tsenpo's palace, the Yumbu Lhakang, is said to have been the first building ever constructed in Tibet. It stands on a hill on the bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo river. Although it was severely damaged during China's Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, it was reconstructed during the 1980s and

has since undergone further restoration. Yumbu Lhakang remained the seat of power in Tibet until the 7th-century reign of Songtsen Gampo—Tibet's first Buddhist king—who moved to Lhasa and repurposed the building as a shrine. Later, during the 17th-century reign of Tibet's fifth Dalai Lama, the building was turned into a monastery. Today, it's a popular tourist attraction on Chinese-led tours of Tibet.

Another important king of the Yarlung dynasty was Drigung Tsenpo, the eighth leader of this dynasty and a known critic of the Zhang Zhung culture and religion. By the time he came to power, Bon priests were active in the Yarlung Valley, and Zhang Zhung traditions, practices, and language were becoming increasingly influential. Drigung Tsenpo tried to expel the Bon priests but was unsuccessful. Eventually, he was assassinated, an important milestone in early Tibetan history.

Prior to Drigung Tsenpo, legend held that Tibetan kings were immortal. They descended to earth on a magical cord from a heavenly realm and were pulled back up to the heavens when their sons were ready to take the throne. However, Drigung Tsenpo is said to have gotten into an argument with someone who, in retaliation, cut his magical cord. From that point on, the Tibetan kings were understood as mortal men who left corpses upon their deaths. Drigung Tsenpo's rule marks the beginning of the period known as Tibetan imperialism—and the beginning of Buddhist rule in Tibet.

5

Tibetan Prehistory in Folktales and Song

The earliest Tibetan storytellers were bards who traveled among communities, sharing stories through song. As their stories were transmitted orally, some narrative elements probably changed from generation to generation and from one community to the next. In this lecture, you'll explore some early Tibetan folktales and stories and how they merged with Buddhist ways of seeing the world over the years and incorporated Buddhist figures and ideas. In addition, you'll explore some important areas of Tibetan artistic culture—poetry, music, and dance—from both traditional and modern perspectives.

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Gesar and Aku Tonpa

One of the most famous Tibetan stories is an epic about the heroic king Gesar from a legendary kingdom called Ling. It is estimated to consist of 1 million lines. In 2009, it was added to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Although the oldest written Tibetan version of the Gesar epic dates to the 18th century, the story is believed to be at least as old as the 12th century. As depicted, Gesar is a mythological figure.

GESAR

A tale as extensive as the Gesar epic is difficult to summarize and yet is rarely told in its entirety. Instead, certain scenes are recited by bards on different occasions, such as births, weddings, or funerals. The people who are trained to perform Gesar chant, sing, dance, and incorporate specific hand gestures as they recount the story. They belong to a long, close-knit lineage in which the methods of telling the story are passed down orally from one generation to the next.

Another popular figure in Tibetan folklore is Aku Tonpa, or "Teacher Uncle." Aku Tonpa is usually portrayed as a trickster who pulls something over on the nobility to teach a broader lesson. The stories have been compared to Aesop's Fables: They're short, memorable, and always contain a moral lesson.

Aku Tonpa stories are not explicitly Buddhist, but because of the influence of Buddhism in Tibetan culture, many of the lessons can be compared to elements found in Buddhist ethics. In some communities, Aku Tonpa is said to have been sent to the world by the bodhisattva of compassion to teach Tibetan Buddhists how to be good people. Such stories have become embedded in the collective consciousness of the Tibetan people.

Folklore, Buddhism, and Poetry

Other Tibetan folktales are more intentionally and deliberately combined into Buddhist ideology. For instance, the canon of Buddhist literature known as Jataka tales is traditionally understood to comprise stories of the Buddha in his previous lives—before he was born as the prince Siddhartha. Some of these stories originated in Buddhist literature, whereas others are believed to be folktales adapted to incorporate Buddhist elements after Buddhism became popularized in Tibet. Some Jataka stories detail the acts of royalty, impoverished people, or even animals. All contain a moral, and the main characters are understood to be the Buddha and other important Buddhist figures.

Poetry is another popular art form enjoyed by Tibetans for centuries. Some of the most famous Tibetan poems are in the form of Buddhist teachings. These philosophical writings and prayers are themselves often composed in verse, modeled after Sanskrit Indian Buddhist texts, to make them easy to memorize and conducive to being passed down from teacher to student. In monastic schools today, Tibetan monks and nuns continue the practice of memorizing long teachings in verse. Generally, before a religious or philosophical text is taught in any detail, a student must first pass an exam to demonstrate they can recite the text from memory. Only after this is the meaning of the text explained.

Other Buddhist teachings conveyed in verse include songs of realization, which are believed to have been spontaneously composed and sung by enlightened tantric masters. They often convey profound teachings with memorable imagery. Short verses, such as the religious texts studied by monastics, can easily be memorized by practitioners as a device to understand some key points about Buddhist meditation.

Some Tibetan poets risk their safety to write and publish. The poet Dhi Lhaden, who originally trained as a monk, began traveling around Tibet—and writing essays and poetry based on the stories of people he met—following mass protests related to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He advocates for nonviolent criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, a strategy he calls "resistance through cooperation with the law." Still, he was detained by Chinese authorities in 2019, presumably in part because of his poetry and essays. In October 2021, he was charged with "disrupting social order" and, after a secret trial, sentenced to four years in prison.

Music and Dance

Music is also an integral part of Tibetan artistic culture. At any Tibetan monastery, you're likely to hear musical instruments being played. Horns, drums, and cymbals of different sizes are commonplace in rituals and prayers. Cymbals and drums are frequently employed in religious ceremonies. Other instruments made out of hollowed-out bones or conch shells are also occasionally used in ritual contexts.

In some monasteries, at certain points during the year, ritual music is accompanied by elaborate dances. Called *cham*, these dances involve elaborate costumes, heavy masks, and complex choreography performed by monks. The costumes that *cham* performers wear are often made of brightly colored silk. The performers' masks depict deities, demons, and other figures. They dance both to protect the area where they perform and to remind observers of the impermanence of all things in this world.

Tibetan operatic tradition—called Ace Lhamo—is believed to have been instituted during the 14th or 15th century. It features elaborate costumes and sometimes conveys Buddhist ideals, but the performances are understood to be secular, detailing important historical figures and past kings through song, dance, and dialogue. Tibetan opera has been added to the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Cham

Ace Lhamo and other performance traditions are currently preserved, studied, and performed at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala, India. The institute was founded by the exiled 14th Dalai Lama during the late 1950s to preserve Tibetan cultural heritage after China's occupation of Tibet and formal absorption of its territory into the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The institute hosts a spring event called the Shoton Festival, at which Tibetans gather and perform operatic performances.

The Modern Evolution of Tibetan Music

Tibetan religious music has evolved throughout the centuries. For example, in the 1990s, the Buddhist nun Choying Drolma and American guitarist Steve Tibbetts produced an album together consisting mostly of Buddhist devotional music and mantras set to music. Since then, Drolma has released more than a dozen albums, been appointed twice as the UNICEF National Goodwill Ambassador for Nepal, founded the Arya Tara School for Buddhist women in Nepal, and spearheaded various humanitarian efforts.

Contemporary Tibetan music extends beyond the religious realm. Tibetan nomads have traditions of folk singing, often accompanied by instruments such as the flute-like *gling-bu* and lute-like *sgra-snyan*. A contemporary Tibetan singer and *dranyen* performer known as Techung has popularized Tibetan folk music during recent decades while traveling around the world.

Many contemporary Tibetan pop singers are influenced by the international music community, drawing on influences from North American popular music, Indian Bollywood ballads, Chinese music, and K-pop. They find audiences globally through YouTube and streaming music services. However, the balance between art and politics remains delicate given China's concerns about the desire of many Tibetans for greater autonomy or independence.

6

How the Tibetan Language Invented an Empire

Spoken by 6 million people, the Tibetan language continues to change and evolve as Tibetan communities establish themselves elsewhere around the world. In this lecture, you'll examine the early development of Tibet's written language, how it paved the way for the transmission of Indian Buddhism into Tibet, its structure and form, and the modern struggle between forces attempting to control—and possibly even eradicate—the Tibetan language and those seeking to protect and preserve it for future generations.

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Early Tibetan Script and Grammar and Indian Buddhism

The Tibetan language did not exist in standard written form until the 7th century, when the king Songtsen Gampo realized that if Tibet could replicate India's literary tradition, it might become a great Buddhist kingdom of its own. Therefore, he recruited and sent a Tibetan scholar from the Thonmi clan south to the Indian plains, where they had already developed numerous complex and sophisticated languages and were actively developing rich religious and literary traditions. According to legend, Thonmi found an Indian Brahman willing to teach him, and he began his studies in earnest.

Thonmi was a diligent student who mastered different scripts and grammars, eventually earning the name Sambhota, or "The Good Tibetan." In time, he developed a script for the Tibetan language that appears to have been derived from the Gupta script of northern India. According to Tibetan lore, Thonmi Sambhota developed various grammatical texts to govern the Tibetan language's written form. When he returned from India to Tibet, he taught the written script to Songtsen Gampo, who is said to have retreated from public view for years to study. On emerging from his seclusion, the king issued—in writing—10 new laws for the Tibetan people to follow.

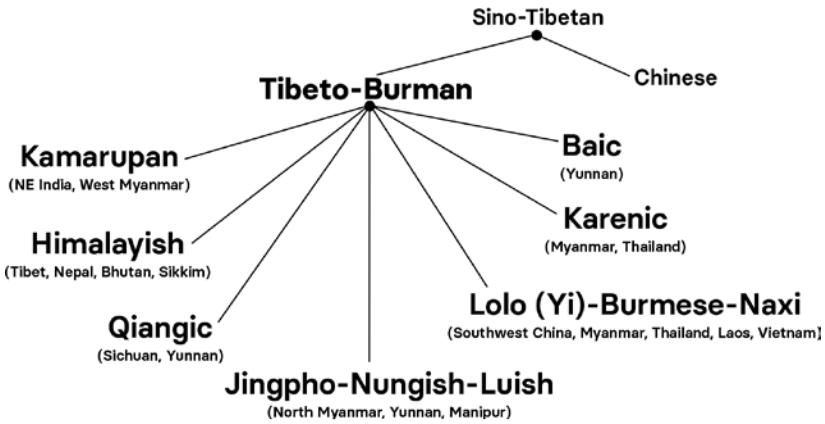
The development of a written language helped Songtsen Gampo consolidate his power and facilitate his rule over the kingdom. It also paved the way for the transmission of Buddhism into Tibet by allowing for Indian Buddhist texts to be translated into Tibetan. This occurred about 100 years after Songtsen Gampo's reign, when Trisong Detsen became king.

Legend states that Trisong Detsen invited Indian Buddhists to Tibet to teach Buddhism and spread its doctrine. The first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, called Samye, was built. As the monastery was established by Buddhists from India, Indian forms of Buddhism were taught and practiced there. Trisong Detsen worked hard to spread Indian Buddhist teachings in Tibet, which is underscored by the massive translation project he orchestrated, using Thonmi Sambhota's alphabet and grammatical system, to convert Indian Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

Trisong Detsen's youngest son and eventual successor supervised the project's continuation after his father's death and eventually established strict rules for translation, resulting in remarkable uniformity in the Tibetan Buddhist texts translated from Sanskrit. The finished product frequently displays strict correspondence between technical Sanskrit and classical Tibetan terms. Eventually, these translated texts solidified into the Tibetan Buddhist canon.

The Tibetan Language

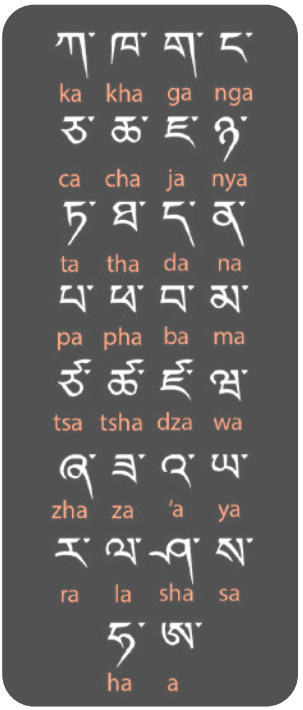
Tibetan, as spoken, is classified as a Tibeto-Burman language, part of the Sino-Tibetan family in East and Southeast Asia. It is most closely related to Burmese, the official language of Myanmar. The written form, however, is more closely related to the Indo-European language of Sanskrit, with its alphabet and grammatical rules coming from northern India. This demonstrates how Tibet occupies an important space between its neighbors in the north, east, south, and west.

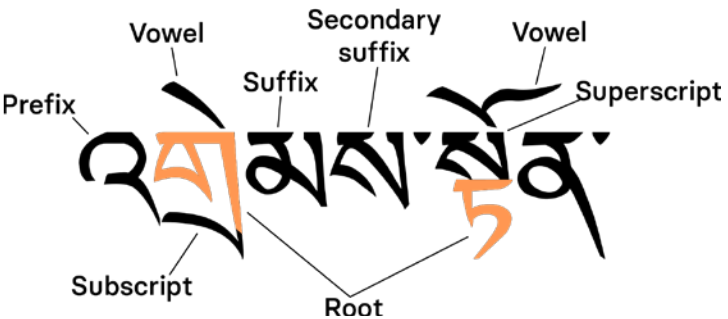


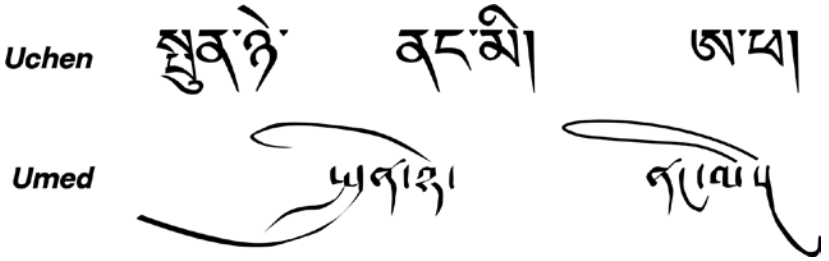
The Tibetan alphabet consists of 30 main letters. You can understand these 30 letters as consonants, although each contains the inherent vowel sound "a." The first four letters are *ka*, *kha*, *ga*, and *nga*, and four additional vowel sounds can be added to any of these 30 main letters: "i," "u," "e," and "o."

Written Tibetan operates as a segmental language system, meaning that letters are combined into discrete segments to form syllables. Syllables consist of one or more letters and are separated by dots, called *tsheg*. There are no spaces between words. Dots separate the syllables, and vertical lines called *shad* mark the ends of phrases.

Beyond the basic combination of consonant letters and vowel sounds, Tibetan syllables can also consist of other letters that may or may not be pronounced depending on where they occur in the syllable. Every syllable contains at least one main letter, which might also have a letter stacked on top of it (a superscript) or a letter underneath it (a subscript). A main letter might also have another letter at its left (a prefix) and one or two additional letters to its right (a suffix and a post-suffix). These superscripts, subscripts, prefixes, and suffixes were probably pronounced in earlier forms of spoken Tibetan. Over time, the language simplified, and many of the letters are now silent.







There are several ways of writing Tibetan script, the most common being *uchen* and *umed* (meaning "with a head" and "without a head," respectively), which roughly correspond to printed letters and cursive. Tibetan also has several elaborate styles of calligraphy that are used for ceremonial or decorative purposes.

Spoken Tibetan has evolved into many distinct dialects across the Tibetan Plateau and among the different Tibetan communities worldwide. Some dialects are so distinct that they are mutually unintelligible. In addition, Tibetan exile communities in India, Nepal, Europe, and North America have each developed dialects that can be regarded as hybrid forms of Tibetan and the local language.

Struggles over the Control and Protection of the Tibetan Language

Within Tibet, political powers are once again attempting to control the language Tibetans speak. In 2002, the Tibet Autonomous Region, controlled by the People's Republic of China, issued a statement decreeing that Tibetan and Mandarin would be given equal weight in the region's schools in terms of language education. A few years later, this official statement disappeared from government literature. In 2015, a Tibetan businessman named Tashi Wangchuk expressed concern about the potential extinction of the Tibetan language in his homeland and asked Chinese leaders to allow for Tibetan language education. Shortly afterward, he was arrested by Chinese authorities on a charge of "separatism" and sentenced to five years in prison.

In 2020, Human Rights Watch reported that Tibetan teachers were required to be fluent in Chinese to continue teaching and that Chinese teachers were being sent to Tibetan regions at an alarming rate. Although China's official position is that a system of bilingual education is in place, Chinese Mandarin appears to have replaced Tibetan as the primary language of instruction in most schools in Tibet. Further, smaller rural schools have closed in recent years, forcing Tibetan families to send their children to boarding schools in urban areas. In these schools, Tibetan students are typically separated from their families and do not have an opportunity to speak Tibetan outside of class.

There are groups and organizations outside of Tibet working to preserve the language for future generations. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, has become one of the most important Tibetan-language libraries in the world. Founded in 1970 by the 14th Dalai Lama, it houses more than 80,000 manuscripts, photographs, artwork, and other artifacts relocated from Tibet as part of the Tibetan exodus to India since 1959. The library supports researchers from all over the world and offers Tibetan language instruction to Tibetans and foreigners alike.

The late E. Gene Smith, an American who worked for the Library of Congress in New Delhi during the late 1960s, collaborated with Tibetans and others from Tibetan-speaking regions elsewhere for more than 20 years to acquire, print, and distribute thousands of Tibetan-language manuscripts. Many of these texts have been digitized and are stored online for anyone to access in the Buddhist Digital Resource Center.

Other institutions around the globe also offer Tibetan language instruction and are working hard to digitize and preserve texts. Today, news broadcasts on Radio Free Asia, feature-length films available for streaming over the internet, and social media groups make it relatively easy to encounter spoken and written Tibetan.

7

The Buddha and the Four Noble Truths

Tibetan Buddhism is a unique branch of Buddhist thought and practice with a long history. The overwhelming majority of Tibetans adhere to some form of Buddhism. In this lecture, you will learn about the Buddha's awakening to the true nature of reality, his Four Noble Truths and path toward eliminating the causes of suffering, and conflicting views from India and China that had a significant impact on the development of Buddhism in Tibet. In doing so, you will explore some of the basics of Buddhist history and doctrine and discover what makes Tibetan Buddhism unique.

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Siddhartha's Encounter with Suffering

The figure referred to as the Buddha was born in the southern part of present-day Nepal about 2,600 years ago. Historians are confident that he was a real person who spent his life teaching in present-day northern India. *Buddha* is a title meaning "the Awakened One," someone who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and come to understand reality as it is.

The story across all Buddhist traditions goes like this: Sometime around the 5th century BCE, King Shuddhodana invited an astrologer to reveal his newborn son's future. The astrologer predicted that he would be a great ruler or a great teacher. Shuddhodana wanted his son, Siddhartha, to follow in his footsteps and therefore made his life as comfortable as possible. As he grew into a young man, Siddhartha was given everything he could possibly want. When he was old enough, he married a beautiful woman named Yashodhara, and they conceived a son.

Siddhartha eventually became curious about life outside the confines of the palace and traveled into the kingdom with a charioteer named Channa. They came upon an old man, wrinkled and hunched over, then a sick person covered in sores, and, finally, a funeral procession. Siddhartha had been so sheltered that he had never seen an old person or seen sickness and death before. Channa explained that old age happens to everyone, that no one can escape getting sick at some point, and that death comes to all—no matter who you are, what kind of family you're born into, or how much privilege you enjoy.

Siddhartha was overwhelmed. He was about 29 years old, and all at once, he had learned about the realities of old age, sickness, and death. He then saw a religious person wearing simple robes, sitting alone and meditating, who seemed to be at peace. Upon returning to the palace, Siddhartha reflected on the things he had seen and realized that his life of luxury wouldn't protect him from old age, sickness, or death. One night, he snuck out of the palace, took off his expensive clothes, cut off his long hair, and wandered into the forest to lead a life of asceticism, in which he would search for a way to overcome suffering.

The Buddha's Awakening and the First Noble Truth

Siddhartha began his new life by renouncing all worldly concerns, including physical comfort, sleep, and even food, as he believed this was the way to overcome suffering. Eventually, he became extremely emaciated and realized that his new life of extreme asceticism wasn't helping him overcome the suffering associated with old age, sickness, and death. He decided that if he was going to find a way to do so, he would have to follow

a middle way between this ascetic extreme and his former life of extreme luxury. Eventually, he did, and this is described as his enlightenment—his awakening—and how he became known as the Awakened One. Basically, he awakened to the true nature of reality and came to see things as they truly are.

With regard to what the true nature of reality is, the Buddha answered this in his first teaching of the Four Noble Truths: four observations about reality that, today, are considered the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism: There is suffering. Suffering has causes. The causes of suffering can be eliminated. There is a path to eliminate the causes of suffering.

Starting with the first truth of suffering, the Buddha taught that as long as we are alive, we suffer, whether we're consciously aware of it or not. He explained this in terms of three different kinds of suffering. The first kind of suffering is the suffering of suffering. This is the ordinary experience of physical, mental, or emotional pain or discomfort. The second kind of suffering is the suffering of change, which occurs when you're confronted with a change in circumstances. Nothing stays the same forever, and when confronted with that reality, we experience suffering.

The third kind of suffering is called all-pervading suffering. The basic idea is that no matter how happy we think we might be in any given moment or situation, we know—on some deeper level—that this happiness is only temporary. Things that supposedly make people happy also come with some anxieties. This all-pervading suffering, sometimes called the suffering of conditioned existence, is the most subtle and constant form of suffering.

People beginning to learn about Buddhism sometimes get stuck here, as they see this emphasis on suffering and conclude that Buddhism is pessimistic—that the only way for Buddhists to get past suffering must be to completely deprive themselves of anything nice or fun. However, understanding Buddhism in this way fails to understand the importance of the other three Noble Truths.

The Second, Third, and Fourth Noble Truths

The second Noble Truth is that suffering has causes. There are three reasons why we experience it: ignorance, attachment, and aversion, commonly called the three poisons. Ignorance about the way things truly are is said to be a cause of suffering. Things are impermanent, and everything we experience throughout our lives is constantly changing, a fact that we ignore most of the time. When we are forced to confront it, we suffer.

Ignorance is also tied to the other causes of suffering: attachment and aversion. People form attachments to the things they enjoy, and losing the object of one's attachment causes suffering. Aversion functions in much the same way. When in uncomfortable situations, such as dealing with the loss of a loved one, we feel that the discomfort will last forever. However, unpleasant experiences change, too. Our ignorance of impermanence causes us to forget that and to suffer.

The third Noble Truth teaches that the causes of suffering can be addressed. If you want to be rid of suffering, it's not enough to smooth it over with temporary happiness. If you don't identify the root of your suffering, it will come back. Instead, the way to eradicate suffering is by eradicating its causes: ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

This is where the fourth Noble Truth comes in, as it outlines a specific path to follow to overcome the suffering associated with old age, sickness, and death. In this regard, the Buddha outlined the Noble Eightfold Path, containing eight things followers can do to eradicate the causes of suffering: cultivating and engaging in the right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Each of these points is spelled out in Buddhist scriptures.

Doctrinal Differences

Before the Buddha died, he told his disciples that no one would replace him as the sole leader of the Buddhist tradition. Instead, followers of his teachings should study and learn for themselves—testing the veracity of his teachings rather than blindly following a single leader. This absence of a single leader allowed Buddhism to spread and flourish across Asia, including

in Tibet. However, as Buddhist teachings spread worldwide and were translated into different languages, certain aspects of the doctrine came to be emphasized over others.

One of the most important doctrinal differences has to do with the different ways that Buddhist communities understand the nature of awakening. Indian Buddhists argue that awakening is a gradual process, perfected over many lifetimes of study and practice. In contrast, Chinese Buddhists believe that because awakening involves transcending ordinary thought and experience, it happens in a sudden moment of realization.

By the 8th century CE—about 1,300 years after the Buddha lived—Indian and Chinese forms of Buddhism had both found their way into Tibet. Representatives of each tradition vied for the favor of the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen, who was interested in Buddhism but left the details of doctrine up to scholars. Religious records tell of a "great debate" between an Indian monk and a Chinese master, who are said to have debated whether Buddhist awakening was a gradual process or a sudden moment of realization. According to Tibetan lore, the Indian monk won the debate, resulting in the official adoption of the Indian version of Buddhism in Tibet.


Trisong Detsen

Regardless, Buddhism in Tibet would go on develop a distinct tradition all its own, reflecting the influences of India and China as well as indigenous religious traditions in Tibet. The result is a vast, varied, and colorful set of beliefs and practices that, at times, bears little resemblance to the Buddhism practiced in other parts of Asia.

8

Christians, Muslims, and Bonpos of Tibet

Some of Tibet's earliest recorded history comes from the three Dharma Kings, who are credited with establishing Buddhism in the region. Tibet's alphabet and grammatical system are derived in part from Buddhist-influenced scholasticism in India. Moreover, the contemporary struggle between Tibetans and the Chinese government is partly over the freedom to practice Buddhism and support the Dalai Lama. However, Buddhism is far from the only religion that Tibetans practice. In this lecture, you will learn about other religious traditions and practices in Tibet—Christianity, Islam, and Bon—and how such beliefs and practices have been alternatively absorbed or resisted by Tibetan Buddhism throughout history.

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The Bon Religion

The most widespread religion among non-Buddhist Tibetans is Bon, often described as pre-Buddhist sets of practices containing elements of shamanism and animism. Although almost all existing Bon-related literature was developed after Buddhism's introduction in Tibet, there are some texts written by Buddhist practitioners who were critical of non-Buddhist practices. They provide insight into the kinds of religious practices observed in Tibet prior to Buddhism. They describe priests performing animal sacrifices as offerings and ceremonies to win the favor of local deities and to guide dying people through death and into the afterlife.

Many of the deities and spirits who were appeased, invoked, or propitiated through these rituals seem to have been connected with the physical world. Some resided in the sky, others underground or in specific mountains, lakes, and trees. Because of the close relationships between these deities and the physical world, one can assume that some rituals sought to ensure good weather for a harvest or favorable conditions for a long journey.

According to sources, Bon practices came under scrutiny during the rule of Trisong Detsen in the 8th century. He worked to establish Buddhism in Tibet and suppress non-Buddhist practices, traditions, and rituals. During this time, many Bon sacred texts were thought to be hidden for safekeeping until it was safe to recover them during the 11th century, when followers of Bon—called Bonpos—began referring to their tradition as Yungdrung Bon, or "Everlasting Bon." This was probably a deliberate strategy to legitimize Bon as a distinct religious tradition. In this regard, although Bon predates Buddhist practices in Tibet, its development and organization into a distinct religious tradition are, in some ways, products of Tibetan Buddhism.

Since the 11th century, Bon has intentionally cast itself as the major non-Buddhist religious tradition in Tibet by adapting to fit into Tibetan Buddhist frameworks. Today, there are Bonpo monks and nuns who live in monasteries, wear maroon robes, and shave their heads like their Buddhist counterparts. There are Bonpo lamas who are teachers and meditation masters and Bonpo scholars called *geshes*. Bonpos engage in debate and have their own systems of philosophy, tantras, and practices.

Tibetan Buddhism has been influenced by pre-Buddhist Bon practices. For example, these practices probably influenced Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and wrathful deities. Similarly, artistic representations of important figures in Tibetan Buddhism likely derive from pre-Buddhist Bonpo iconography.

The main teachings of Bon are not entirely dissimilar from those of Tibetan Buddhism: Humans suffer, and the goal of religious practice is to overcome that suffering. Bonpos also engage in tantric Dzogchen, which involves meditation to realize the nature of one's mind and reality. Bon also has a complex system of philosophy known as the Nine Ways of Bon that takes many years to master. However, unlike Buddhism, Bon teaches that a major cause of human suffering stems from demons and deities who need to be appeased through ritual practices.

At one point, there were an estimated 300 Bon monasteries in Tibet, but almost all were destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution. Today, an estimated 400,000 people on the Tibetan Plateau practice Bon. Historically, many Tibetan Buddhists have marginalized the Bon tradition. However, under the 14th Dalai Lama, Bon has been incorporated into broader considerations of Tibetan identity and religiosity.

Catholic and Protestant Christianity in Tibet

During the late 17th century, Jesuits made their way to Tibet, and Christianity took hold in small communities. The best-known Christian missionary was the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri, who traveled for more than two years from Rome to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in March 1716. He composed a short work in Tibetan on the basics of Catholicism and shared this with the leader, Lhazang Khan, who was impressed by Desideri's writing but urged him to learn more Tibetan language and study Buddhism. Desideri gained entry into one of the most prestigious monastic universities in Tibet, where he learned Buddhist philosophy and debated with the monks. Over the next several years, he traveled between Lhasa and southern Tibet and composed works in Tibetan that attempted to refute key Buddhist doctrines with Christian ideology.

Desideri's arrival in Lhasa coincided with the rule of the fifth Dalai Lama, who had used his favor with the Mongol khans to forcibly convert several Buddhist monasteries to his Gelug sect. Tibetan Buddhists from non-Gelugpa regions worried about this, and some saw the influence of Christianity as a way to resist Gelugpa hegemony. On his return to Rome in 1727, Desideri compiled a manuscript that was the first of its kind to detail aspects of Tibetan culture, including geography, customs, and religion. In time, Gelugpa leadership grew suspicious of the Christian community in Tibet. In 1745, the seventh Dalai Lama ordered all Christian missionaries out of the region.

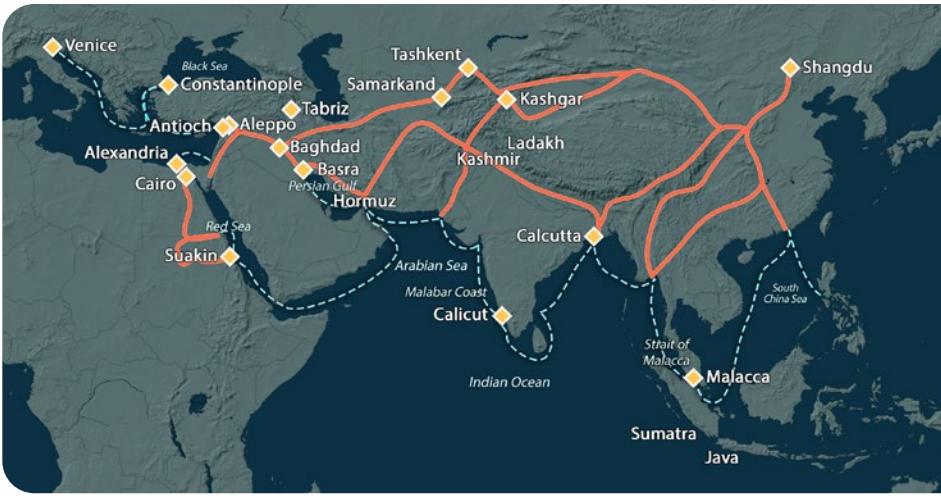
Protestant missionaries came to eastern Tibet during the 19th century. Several attempts were made to translate the Bible into classical Tibetan at this time, but early translations were useful only to scholars and highly educated people. The first complete translation of the Bible into the contemporary Tibetan language was not completed until 1935, and it would be another 13 years until its publication. Today, there are a handful of Tibetan translations of the Bible, just as there are various translations of the Bible in English and other languages.

Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity have had a complicated relationship. On multiple occasions, Tibetan Buddhist monks attacked and murdered Catholic missionaries as well as ethnic Tibetan Catholics during the first half of the 20th century. Shortly after it came to power in 1949, the People's Republic of China severed ties between Chinese Catholics and the Vatican. Still, a small minority of Christians continued to practice there, including during the Cultural Revolution, when all religious practices in Tibet were severely restricted.

Today, a handful of government-supported Christian groups exist on the Tibetan Plateau. There are also groups of Tibetan Christians who do not wish to associate with the state-controlled organizations. Some Tibetan Catholics participate in "underground churches," and a loose network of Protestant communities remains independent of their state-sanctioned group. The Chinese government has remained relatively tolerant of Christianity in Tibet, in part because it provides a counterbalance to Tibetan Buddhism and the influence of the Dalai Lama.

Islam in Tibet

Islam has been practiced in Tibet since at least the 8th or 9th century. The earliest contact between Muslims and Tibetans probably occurred along the Silk Road. Some early Islamic texts mention Tibet and its major exports. In the 14th century, Islam made its way via Kashmir and Ladakh to the western edges of the Tibetan Plateau, and small communities of Tibetan Muslims developed there. In the 17th century, trade between Ladakh and central Tibet brought more Muslims to the region. Eventually, Muslims from the west settled near Lhasa. In time, Muslim migrants married Tibetans and became integrated into Tibetan culture.



On several occasions between 1918 and 1932, Tibetan Buddhists clashed with Chinese Muslims in the Amdo region of northeastern Tibet, with the Tibetan Buddhists being easily defeated each time. Into the early 1940s, Chinese Muslims occupied most of Amdo and destroyed Buddhist temples to consolidate their hold. However, once the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, Tibetan Muslims were subject to the same anti-religious sentiments as Buddhists.

Today, Tibetan Muslims are scattered across the Tibetan Plateau, and many of them have migrated elsewhere, especially to northern India. Typically, they feel as though they are without a homeland. They argue that so much of Tibetan identity is wrapped up in Buddhist and Bon practices that Tibetan Muslims are often excluded from consideration.

An influx of Han Chinese into Tibet has also influenced religious practices on the plateau. Temples dedicated to Chinese gods have been erected in parts of central Tibet where communities of Han Chinese have settled, and Chinese folk religions that combine Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and shamanistic beliefs and rituals are increasingly practiced there—though not by many Tibetans.

In official parlance, China's atheistic ruling communist party allows all Tibetans to practice their religious traditions. In reality, those practices are tightly controlled. Tibetan monasteries, churches, and mosques are under constant surveillance, and public displays of religiosity are forbidden. Despite this, Tibetans find ways to exercise their religious beliefs.

9

Tibetan Tantra and Taboo

Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices can be divided into two broad categories: sutras and tantras. Sutras are general instructions that can be taught to any practitioner, whereas tantras are philosophically complex, esoteric teachings that are generally only shared with highly trained and skilled meditators. In this lecture, you'll explore the theory and practice of Tibetan Buddhist tantra and how tantra can go against common assumptions of what ethical religious practitioners should do. In so doing, you'll see how the secrecy surrounding details of tantric practices, combined with artwork and imagery that depict fierce beings or deities in sexual union, has generated a strange curiosity among Westerners.

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Tantra Theory and Practice

Around the 6th century, Hindus and Buddhists on the Indian subcontinent began to develop tantric theories and practices. Early tantric practices seemed to deliberately transgress religious norms: Tantric practitioners worshipped deities that were fierce or feminine (or both); they consumed religiously forbidden substances such as meat and alcohol; and some even used sexual fluids as ritual substances for offerings to deities. These practices were—and still are—believed to be highly effective at furthering one's spiritual goals and bringing about certain magical abilities and supernatural powers.

In the 8th century, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen sought to institutionalize Buddhism. According to legend, local spirits thwarted his efforts, causing floods, disease, and the repeated destruction of a partially built monastery. The tantric adept Padmasambhava was invited from India to Tibet to help, and he used his supernatural powers to call out the local spirits and subdue them—turning them into protectors of Buddhism. The story of Buddhism's introduction in Tibet offers a window into the influence of tantric practices. In the Tibetan Buddhist conception, tantra is incredibly powerful and must be guarded carefully.

Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices emphasize the connection between teacher and the student, and specific initiation rituals that bond the teacher and student together are often required to begin a particular tantric practice. Also, although tantric rituals and practices are performed with the ultimate goal of attaining liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth, it is believed that residual effects allow tantric practitioners to manipulate their consciousness, environment, or both.

Another aspect of Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice involves visualization and imagination to reconfigure one's orientation to reality. These visualization practices are based on the Buddhist philosophical theory of emptiness, according to which everything we experience is constantly changing in a complex web of interconnectedness. Consequently, reality and the assumptions we make about it are not necessarily as stable or predictable as we might think. From this perspective, everything in the world depends on something else for its existence. Nothing is truly independent of anything else. Tantric visualization practices help one to recognize that the ordinary world is illusory.

If you aren't in the right frame of mind, this can potentially lead to some problems. For this reason, these teachings aren't offered to everyone, and teachers closely guard them before transmitting them to select students. Still, the idea behind tantric visualization is to get a sufficiently prepared practitioner to learn to play with their perceptions of reality—even to manipulate reality itself.

Mandalas

A kind of artwork known as a mandala is sometimes used to aid in such meditations. Mandalas are beautiful geometric displays that are often painted on a *thangka*—a piece of cotton canvas with a cloth border that can be easily rolled up. A mandala is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional idealized place, usually understood as a grand celestial palace.

At the center of the mandala is the deity who occupies the palace, represented by a symbolic image, such as a lotus flower or a sword, or by a set of letters associated with a particular mantra. Representations of lesser deities might appear in a circle around the main deity. Beyond these images, you often see geometric patterns depicting the multiple levels of the main deity's palace. A mandala often rests upon a crossed *vajra*, which represents a solid base for the celestial palace. A circular ring of *vajras* and flames circumscribes the mandala, protecting it and marking it off as a sacred space. Outside of this ring, you might see buddhas, bodhisattvas, or other figures or symbols.

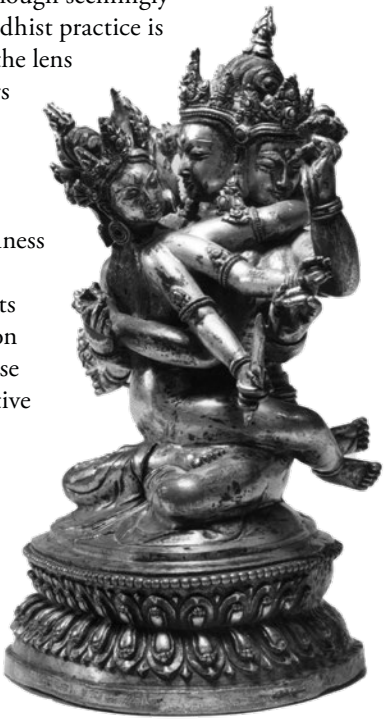
Some artists have gone beyond two-dimensional views to construct 3D models in carvings and sculptures or in computer programming and 3D printing. Sand mandalas are constructed by highly trained Buddhist monks or nuns who painstakingly lay down a few grains of sand at a time over the course of several days or weeks. After the mandala is constructed and consecrated, it is ritually destroyed. This process symbolizes the concept of impermanence and is a reminder of the ever-changing nature of the world.

The Tantric Transformation of Negative into Positive

Certain meditative practices help tantric practitioners break down the distinctions between categories such as good and bad or pure and impure. The tantric path focuses on embracing certain kinds of mental states that one might ordinarily label as negative, such as desire, hatred, or pride, and transforming them into elements that are beneficial on one's spiritual journey.

Understood through a tantric lens, a feeling such as desire, for example, isn't necessarily a bad thing. It can be incredibly powerful, and tantric practice involves embracing the powerful nature of such a feeling and transforming it into something that will help propel the practitioner along a path to awakening. This same line of reasoning extends to seemingly impure ritual activities, such as ingesting meat or alcohol. Rather than avoiding certain acts because they are considered impure or improper, the tantric practitioner might deliberately engage in them in a ritualized expression of emptiness.

In tantric art, deities are sometimes depicted as wrathful, surrounded by flames and in sexual union with a consort. Although seemingly contradicting the compassion and wisdom Buddhist practice is supposed to emphasize, when viewed through the lens of tantra, such wrathful figures aid practitioners in overcoming obstacles and transforming negative mental states into wisdom.



When deities or bodhisattvas are depicted in sexual union, they represent the interconnectedness of compassion and wisdom. The male figure represents compassion, and the female represents wisdom. Buddhists believe both are necessary on the spiritual path to overcoming suffering. These art forms are sometimes used as aids in meditative visualizations, but a small minority of tantric practitioners also engage in ritualized sexual activity as part of their spiritual practice.

The Great Adepts

Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions revere certain practitioners of tantra called *mahasiddhas*, or "great adepts," who are believed to have attained exceptionally high levels of spiritual realization. In all of history, there have been 84 *mahasiddhas*, all likely having lived between the 8th and 12th centuries—many of them with colorful stories reflecting what are believed to be their psychic and supernatural abilities. The great adepts sometimes engaged in conduct that blurred the lines between enlightened activity and more questionable, antisocial kinds of behavior. The following story is one example.

Kukkuripa, "the dog lover," was an Indian tantric master who lived in the 9th or 10th century. He is said to have begun his tantric practice by wandering alone in the countryside. One day, he came upon a young dog who was hungry and sick and could barely stand up. Kukkuripa took pity and carried the dog as he walked. Whatever food he begged and foraged for, he shared with her. Eventually, she regained strength. Kukkuripa found a cave in the countryside that was large enough for both of them, and whenever he left in search of food, the dog stood guard, waiting patiently for his return. Life went on like this, as Kukkuripa devoted himself to tantric practices. After 12 years, he attained a high level of spiritual realization, and the gods invited him to celebrate with them. Flattered, Kukkuripa accepted and ascended to the heavenly realm, while the dog waited for his return.

Kukkuripa occupied himself with feasts, music, and other kinds of sensual pleasures. He often thought of his dog, but the *ḍākinīs*—or goddesses—persuaded him to stay. One day, Kukkuripa looked down and saw that his dog had grown thin and sad but remained outside the cave, waiting patiently for him to return. Upon seeing this, Kukkuripa immediately returned to the cave and was reunited with his dog. Both were overjoyed. Then, the dog disappeared, to be replaced by a *ḍākinī* who praised him for realizing that there are more important things than temptation and sensual enjoyment. With that, Kukkuripa attained the highest levels of spiritual awakening and worked for the benefit of others for the rest of his life.

10

The Good Eating and Fun of Tibetan Cuisine

Tibet's food is intricately linked to the region's high elevation and religious and cultural practices. Vegetables and fruits are difficult to grow at high altitudes, and Tibetans generally believe that it's better to eat larger animals, such as yaks or goats, as opposed to smaller animals, such as chicken or fish. In this lecture, you will learn about some staple Tibetan foods and explore a few ways in which Tibetan cuisine is evolving and changing.

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Meat and Animal Products

In many parts of Tibet, the only vegetables that can be successfully cultivated are hardy, cold-weather crops such as mustard greens, cabbage, onions, turnips, potatoes, and carrots. Barley is the principal grain, and although rice can be grown in low-lying parts of southern Tibet, it is generally eaten only on special occasions. Therefore, meat and animal products are the important staples of a Tibetan diet.

Yak and goat are essential in the Tibetan diet, both for their meat and for the female's milk, which is used in tea, mixed with barley flour, or made into butter, cheese, and yogurt. Dried cheese called *churpi* is another staple for Tibetan nomads; it keeps for a long time and is rock-hard. Another Tibetan cheese is called *chura*, consisting of soft cheese curds made from yogurt and dried cheese mixed with tea. Most Tibetan cheese is fairly bland, although there is one called *churru* that some compare to Limburger or blue cheese because of its pungent smell.

If Tibet had a national dish, it would probably be *momo*—bite-size steamed dumplings filled with meat, spices, garlic, and onions. These days, it's becoming easier to find vegetarian *momo* stuffed with vegetables, egg, potatoes, or cheese. The dumplings are made in several different shapes, can be steamed or lightly panfried, and are often served with a spicy chili-based condiment called *sepen*. However, *momo* generally takes longer to prepare than other foods; therefore, it's not an everyday dish.

Tsampa and Thukpa

Another of the most important staple foods in Tibet is tsampa, or roasted barley flour. Tsampa is so ubiquitous that *tsampa-eater* is a slang word used to describe Tibetan people. Tsampa flour is coarse and generally isn't used to make dough, but it can be mixed with tea, butter, and salt or sugar to make a porridge. More commonly, it's mixed with a little less liquid and squeezed into balls called *pak*, which used to be eaten with virtually every meal.

In some ceremonies and rituals, Tibetans will throw handfuls of tsampa into the air as a celebratory gesture. Another use for tsampa is making ritual cakes called *torma*. In the most basic form, *torma* is a cone-shaped structure made out of tsampa and butter. For special rituals, *torma* can also take on elaborate shapes and be dyed in bright colors. The practice of making and offering *torma* predates Tibetan Buddhism, but it has been incorporated into Tibetan Buddhist practices, being placed on shrines as ritual offerings to deities, buddhas, or bodhisattvas.

Another ubiquitous Tibetan food is *thukpa* soup, which generally consists of meat, vegetables, a clear broth, and noodles or dumplings. There are different kinds of *thukpa*, differentiated primarily based on what kind of noodle is used in the soup. For instance, *thenthuk* soup is made with hand-pulled noodles, whereas *Gyathuk* soup is prepared with Chinese noodles. For the Tibetan new year, a special kind of *thukpa* called *guthuk* is served, made with small, dimpled dough balls. One larger dough ball is placed in each person's bowl; inside is an object or a rolled-up piece of paper intended to reveal some aspect of the diner's personality. For example, a piece of wool means you're a soft and kindhearted person.

Bread, Rice, and a Sweet Treat

In parts of Tibet where wheat is grown, different kinds of bread are common. *Balep* is a round quick bread made with flour, baking powder, and water. The dry ingredients are combined by hand with the water until a smooth dough forms. You pinch off small balls of dough, roll them into flat circles, and cook them in a pan until they puff up. *Balep* is often eaten at breakfast with butter or dunked in tea. Another common Tibetan bread is *tingmo*, which is made of a yeasted dough that's rolled thin and shaped into an elaborate bun. It's steamed, giving it a light, fluffy texture that's excellent

for soaking up sauces or leftover *thukpa* broth. Another popular food is *shapaley*, which translates as "meat bread." It's probably better understood as a meat pie, or empanada, and consists of meat, vegetables, and spices, wrapped in dough and fried.

A rice dish for special occasions is called *dresil*, which is made by mixing rice, butter, a small amount of sugar, nuts, and raisins. Traditionally, *dresil* also contains *droma*: a tiny, slightly sweet root that grows in the grasslands of Tibet. They're labor-intensive to harvest, which is why they're generally eaten only in special circumstances—on holidays or during festivals.

Tibetan food generally isn't sweet. Fruits are hard to come by on the Tibetan Plateau, and sugar was imported along trade routes and therefore used sparingly. However, *khapsey*—a slightly sweet treat that's a cross between a cookie and fried dough—is a common Tibetan food. It is labor-intensive to prepare and generally served around the new year or for other special occasions, such as weddings. People will eat it on its own or dunk it in their tea.

Tea, Chang*, and an Evolving Tibetan Cuisine*

Tea is another element in Tibetan cuisine. As it doesn't grow on the Tibetan Plateau, for centuries, Tibetans relied on imported tea leaves from China and India. Tibetan tea is called *bod cha* and is made with tea, milk or water, salt, and butter. Traditionally, the tea, milk, and salt are boiled together and poured into a long, thin wooden vessel called a *cha-dong*. A heaping portion of yak butter is thrown in, and the beverage is churned until frothy. Butter tea probably developed on the Tibetan Plateau because it's an excellent way to get much-needed calories in a cold, sparse environment.

Another popular Tibetan drink is *chang*—a slightly alcoholic beverage made from fermented barley. It's a mix between wine and beer, with a taste that's sour and sweet at the same time. On special occasions, everyone drinks *chang*. Because of its low alcohol content, parents don't think it harmful for children to drink it in small amounts. During the Tibetan new year, it's common to visit friends, relatives, and neighbors and be offered a small bowl of *chang* mixed with a little sugar and cheese. *Chang* was traditionally believed to have certain health benefits. It's used to treat colds and fevers and to warm up with after being outside too long.

Today, with access to other foods, some Tibetans are cutting meat from their meals. As an example, Tibetan Volunteers for Animals advocates for animals' rights to life, works to abolish animal consumption in Tibetan communities, and promotes vegetarianism and veganism. Although the 14th Dalai Lama used to eat meat, he cut back significantly after relocating to India in 1959 and has urged Tibetans in diaspora communities to do the same.

As Tibet becomes somewhat more industrialized and Tibetans migrate into diaspora communities around the world, its cuisine is changing. Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi, the wife of a leader of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism, follows a vegan diet and is vocal on social media about encouraging Tibetans to reduce their meat intake. Moreover, even high on the Tibetan Plateau, imported foods are becoming easier to obtain. As a result, the traditional staples of yak, goat, and barley flour are being replaced by imported vegetables, prepackaged food, and mass-produced beverages.

11

What Makes Tibetan Buddhism Different?

Laypeople comprise the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhists around the world, and many don't have the time or the ability to engage in serious study of scriptures or meditation. However, that doesn't mean they don't practice Buddhism. Wherever Tibetan Buddhism is observed, you're likely to see people engaged in practices that might be unusual by Western standards. In this lecture, you'll examine some of these practices and explore how Tibetan Buddhism established itself through the three Dharma Kings and survived periods of civil war and fragmentation to become the dominant religion in Tibet.

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Generating Merit

An important concept in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism is merit, or *sonam*—a kind of spiritual good fortune that can help a Buddhist along their religious path. Merit can be generated by performing certain kinds of activities and can be transferred to others through prayers or rituals. It is something that Tibetan Buddhists try to accumulate through their spiritual practices because it is believed to be something that can help you in this life and in the next.

Two of the most common merit-making activities for Tibetan Buddhists are circumambulations and prostrations. You will often see Buddhists walking clockwise around the outside of their temples, monasteries, and other holy places. This practice, called *kora*, is performed as a sign of respect. It's also common to see Tibetan Buddhists prostrating themselves in front of holy places to venerate the Buddha, the dharma (his teachings), and the sangha (the community of Buddhist followers).

Tibetan Buddhists believe that if you circumambulate and prostrate yourself at a holy place with the right intention, you generate merit. Some Tibetan Buddhists even combine circumambulation and prostration on holy days and other special occasions. These practices predate Tibetan Buddhism, and although similar practices can be found elsewhere in Asia, the combination of full-body prostration with circumambulation is distinctly Tibetan.

Another popular merit-making activity involves spinning prayer wheels, or *mani khor lo*. These wheels are cylinders that range in size from an inch or two in diameter to several feet across. They're made of metal, wood, or animal skins, and often have Buddhist mantras—collections of syllables uttered to evoke certain deities or bodhisattvas—written on both the outside and inside of the wheel. When these wheels are turned clockwise, they are believed to generate the same amount of merit as reciting each of the mantras written on or inside them.

Colorful prayer flags are another common sight in Tibetan Buddhist communities. These are also merit-making devices that have mantras or prayers written on them. When a prayer flag flaps in the breeze, it is believed to carry the blessings of the mantras out into the world, for the benefit of all beings. Tall, vertical flags that fly from poles are found outside some monasteries and homes, but far more common are the strings of small rectangular banners that hang off the tops of buildings and are sometimes tied to trees or stretched across canyons.

Tibetan Buddhism and the First Two Dharma Kings

To better understand the unique features of Tibetan Buddhism, one needs to understand more about early Buddhist history in Tibet and the reigns of three important rulers who came to be known as the three Dharma Kings. The first of these was Songtsen Gampo, who lived in the 7th century. As he established his rule, he formed relations with neighboring countries, including China. This is where he met—and is said to have fallen in love with—a princess named Wencheng. After she refused his advances, the king sent troops into China, and Wencheng was offered as a bride, a peace offering.

When Princess Wencheng traveled to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa to be married, she brought a Buddha statue known as the Jowo, which is believed to have been personally blessed by the Buddha himself. According to traditional Tibetan accounts, the arrival of the Jowo marked the

The Jowo

introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. This statue is still enshrined in Lhasa to this day, and Tibetans consider it to be the most sacred image of the Buddha.

Songtsen Gampo also had another wife, Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal, who was a devout Buddhist. The king had multiple temples built for his two wives, the most notable being the sacred Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and the Red Palace. After it was rebuilt into the massive Potala Palace, the latter is where the Dalai Lamas lived until the 20th century. The king's marriages are believed to have brought the influence of Chinese Buddhism and culture—as well as South Asian Buddhism and Newari art forms—to Tibet.

The next king, Trisong Detsen, came to power in the middle of the 8th century, which marks the beginning of the *snga dar*, or the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet. Trisong Detsen was interested in the Buddhist scholasticism of India, and he invited the renowned Indian scholar Shantirakshita and Indian master Padmasambhava to establish the first monastery in Tibet, Samye Monastery.

Shantirakshita ordained the first seven Tibetan monks in the year 779, thereby formally establishing Tibet's Buddhist community. His understanding of Buddhism represented the pinnacle of Indian Buddhist philosophical thought before its eventual disappearance from the Indian subcontinent sometime during the 12th or 13th century. Today, Tibetan

Jokhang Temple

Buddhists see their way of practicing Buddhism as a continuation of the Indian scholastic tradition that traces its origins back to the historical Buddha himself.

However, the scholastic tradition preserved by Shantirakshita wasn't the only type of Buddhism brought into Tibet from India. Padmasambhava was regarded as a master of tantra and was so influential in Tibet that tantra became an important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. Later accounts describe him as possessing all kinds of spiritual powers as a result of his tantric practice. He's believed to have hidden some of these esoteric teachings in the ground in Tibet, to be rediscovered later by people with the appropriate spiritual capacities. These hidden texts have continued to be discovered by so-called treasure finders over the course of the last millennium.

Statues of Padmasambhava in Tibetan Buddhist homes, temples, and monasteries are almost as common as statues of the historical Buddha. All formal depictions of Padmasambhava are based on one statue, the *guru ngadrama*, which resided in Samye Monastery for centuries until it was destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution. Only one black-and-white photo of the statue remains, but reproductions of it can be found on virtually every Tibetan Buddhist altar today.

The Third Dharma King and the Dark Age and Revival of Tibetan Buddhism

The third of the famous Dharma Kings, Ralpachen, lived and ruled over Tibet at the beginning of the 9th century. He brought translators, craftsmen, and others to Tibet to further develop Buddhist traditions and infrastructure. His most important contribution was overseeing the completion of one of the first bilingual dictionaries in any language: the *Mahavyutpatti*. It was a massive undertaking that sought to standardize Tibetan translations of Sanskrit terms and make Indian Buddhism more accessible to Tibetan scholars.

According to Tibetan legend, Ralpachen was assassinated by ministers associated with the Bon religion who didn't appreciate his enthusiasm for Buddhism. He was succeeded by his reportedly anti-Buddhist, pro-Bon brother, Langdarma, who ruled for four years until he was also assassinated by a tantric practitioner and disciple of Padmasambhava. After this, a

dispute about who would succeed Langdarma erupted into civil war. The Tibetan empire collapsed, leading to a period known as Tibet's era of fragmentation. The power of the Tibetan monarchy waned, and leadership devolved to a number of smaller tribes and kingdoms.

For nearly four centuries, warring factions battled for power, and smaller kingdoms developed across different regions. Buddhist histories refer to this period as the dark age. Without a central government to support and promote the new religion, Buddhist monks were met with criticism and threatened with persecution. It is believed that the practice of Tibetan monastics survived only narrowly and only in the remote mountains in eastern Tibet.

Three monks who fled the fighting in central Tibet retreated to a remote mountain in the Amdo region, where they continued to practice and study quietly. One of their disciples, Gongpa Rabsel, is credited with reviving Tibetan Buddhism around the turn of the 11th century through his students, who returned to central Tibet and reintroduced monasticism there. This period is known as the later dissemination, or *spyi dar*, and it marks the point at which Buddhism took root as the dominant religion in Tibet.

New schools, called *sarma*, developed to distinguish themselves from the old school, the Nyingma. Competing monasteries began to war against each other for control and influence. Special groups of soldier monks formed; they armed themselves and defended their monasteries against rivals. In spite of this, a number of unifying elements emerged in Tibetan Buddhist traditions: They all value Shantirakshita and Padmasambhava as key figures who introduced Buddhist monasticism into Tibet; all Tibetan schools of Buddhism stress the importance of intellectual study and meditative practice; and all Tibetan Buddhist sects recognize the importance of the tantric path.

12

Tibetan Buddhism's Oldest Sect: Nyingma

Tibetan Buddhism is not a single, monolithic entity. It's better understood as encompassing different teachings, philosophies, practices, and communities. Broadly speaking, there are four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug. They're often listed this way because that roughly corresponds to the order in which they developed. In this lecture, you will focus on the Nyingma sect—the Buddhist tradition most closely connected to the earliest introduction of Buddhism into Tibet—and explore its teachings, practices, and development over time.

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Padmasambhava and Terma

The Nyingma Buddhist tradition is the set of teachings and practices most closely associated with Padmasambhava, a tantric master who was important for bringing Indian teachings of Buddhism into Tibet. He holds such high status among Tibetan Buddhists that he is often referred to as the Second Buddha. Without his influence, Buddhism is much less likely to have taken hold in Tibet. Padmasambhava is said to have been able to use his spiritual powers to tame demonic forces and turn them into protectors of Buddhism.

For Tibetan Buddhists, Padmasambhava is an ever-present force in the world, basically on par with the Buddha himself. Some of the places where he is believed to have meditated or engaged in significant activities are important pilgrimage sites for devotees. When Padmasambhava came to Tibet, he brought tantric teachings with him from India, but after spending time with Tibetans, he supposedly felt they weren't ready to hear some of what he had to say. Therefore, he wrote down a number of texts in a secret language and hid them in various places across the Tibetan Plateau—to be discovered centuries later. These teachings became known as *terma*, or "treasures," in the 11th century, during the development of the new schools.

The people who discovered or revealed the *terma* are known as *tertons*, or "treasure finders," considered skilled and spiritually advanced enough to comprehend these secret teachings and share them with others. By claiming that these new religious teachings and philosophical ideas had been developed by Padmasambhava centuries earlier, followers of the Nyingma tradition were able to accommodate some religious innovation while also maintaining a connection to centuries-old traditions. Over time, *terma* took the form (in the minds of *tertons*) of objects, relics, and even visions of deities. In this way, the Nyingma tradition asserted itself as a distinct school of Buddhism, separate from the new schools.

Another founding figure of the Nyingma tradition is a woman named Yeshe Tsogyal. According to one story, as a young girl, she was interested in studying Buddhism but was forced into a marriage with the king Trisong Detsen, who had invited Padmasambhava to Tibet. The king was said to give Yeshe Tsogyal to the visitor as an offering and sign of respect.

Padmasambhava is credited with freeing Yeshe Tsogyal from her marriage and making her his main disciple. In turn, she is credited with hiding the *terma* for *tertons* to discover later on.

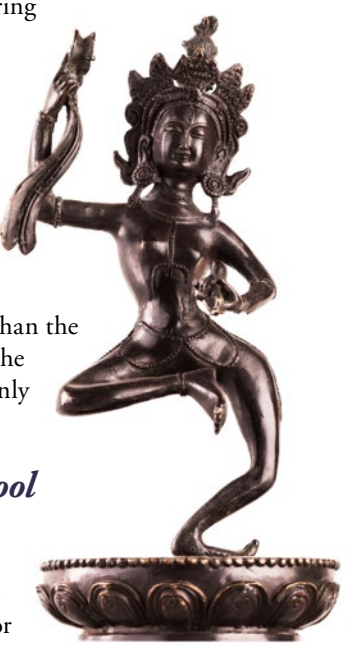
Since many Buddhist traditions consider the female body as impure—or inferior to the male body—and therefore less capable of enlightenment, Yeshe Tsogyal's story is important in illustrating that true enlightenment is beyond the distinctions of male and female. Caves and geological formations around the Tibetan Plateau are associated with Yeshe Tsogyal and are important pilgrimage places for Buddhists.

Dzogchen and Chöd

An important practice associated with the Nyingma tradition is Dzogchen—a complex set of tantric meditation practices encompassing a vast corpus of literature. In basic terms, Dzogchen teaches that the nature of all sentient beings is a pure, all-pervading intrinsic clarity capable of perceiving, experiencing, or expressing everything. The nature of one's mind is like a mirror: Although a mirror is capable of reflecting anything, those reflections don't alter the fundamental nature of the mirror itself. The mirror always maintains its clear, reflective nature. In the same way, Dzogchen teaches that although the mind has thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, it is always and naturally pure. The goal of Dzogchen practice is to directly realize the nature of the mind.

Within Dzogchen, there is a specific exercise called *trekchod*, meaning "cutting through," which involves particular kinds of meditations to cut through one's ordinary perception of the world. It's believed that once you've cut through your ordinary, deluded view of things, you are left with a primordial clarity of mind and can see things as they are. The practice of *trekchod* is described as antithetical to philosophical, conceptual analysis. It is a practice of resting one's mind, without engaging in analysis or getting caught up in thoughts, to see reality as it truly is. Dzogchen practitioners believe this will eventually lead to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists insist that one should study *trekchod* under the supervision of a qualified teacher—that without the right preparation, it will be ineffective at best and can have detrimental effects on the minds of unprepared practitioners.

A related practice is *chöd*, which involves severing one's attachment to the ego. The founder of *chöd* was a woman named Machig Labdrön, believed to be a reincarnation of Yeshe Tsogyal. The practice of *chöd* is particularly popular among Tibetan women, although it can also be practiced by men. It involves one deliberately engaging in activities that induce fear to recognize that the distinctions we make between good and bad—and self and other—are nothing more than the products of our own minds. Like Dzogchen, the practice of *chöd* is intended to be performed only after instruction by a qualified teacher.



Machig Labdrön

Development of the Nyingma School

As Buddhism developed in Tibet and new traditions formed, the Nyingmapas reasserted themselves during the 11th century onward as distinct from adherents of the new schools. For most of its history, the Nyingma tradition was passed down orally, within smaller communities of non-ordained tantric masters. As many of the great Nyingma masters were solitary practitioners, the Nyingmapas didn't have widespread institutional or political support. During the 14th century, however, the Nyingma teachings and tradition were finally systematized into a school of their own. Much later, in the 19th century, Nyingma monasteries were built, and the Nyingma tradition developed scholastic traditions and institutional structures. This was likely in response to the popularity of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism among the newer schools.

Uniquely, the Nyingma school has never had a singular leader or figurehead. Although there have been dozens of important Nyingma teachers, *tertons*, lamas, and other masters, it wasn't until recently that the Nyingmapas attempted to elect a representative head of the lineage. However, monastery leaders agreed that centralized leadership would not serve the tradition well;

therefore, major decisions are made by a committee of monastics and a select group of non-ordained tantric and yogic practitioners. Today, Nyingmapa teachers live and teach all over the world, and some of the most prominent Nyingmapa institutions can be found outside of Tibet.

Jigme Phuntsok and Larung Gar

In 1959, a Nyingmapa practitioner named Jigme Phuntsok retreated into the remote Sertar Mountains of eastern Tibet with a small group of other monks and remained there throughout China's Cultural Revolution. He gave occasional teachings to small groups of people. Over time, his renown spread. In 1980, fewer than a dozen students gathered near his homestead to study. Within a year, several hundred more students arrived and built their own mud huts on the mountainside. This makeshift community developed into a school that came to be called the Sertar Buddhist Institute.

In 1987, Jigme Phuntsok made a pilgrimage to China's Mount Wutai with his students. Along the way, he gave lectures that attracted audiences of thousands. As Jigme Phuntsok's renown grew, still more monks, nuns, and lay students showed up near his home in eastern Tibet. They also built makeshift homes, and the community grew. The Sertar Buddhist Institute was renamed the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy. At its peak, officials estimated the population of Larung Gar at around 10,000 people, whereas unofficial accounts suggest between 20,000 and 40,000.

In 2001, Chinese authorities pressed Jigme Phuntsok to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama, but he refused. Shortly afterward, authorities demolished monastic residences at Larung Gar. Thousands of buildings were destroyed, and many students were evicted by government officials. Jigme Phuntsok was detained and held in secret for a year before being released due to poor health.

In 2003, Jigme Phuntsok became ill while teaching and later died in a military hospital. Afterward, more homes at Larung Gar were demolished, only to be rebuilt and demolished again in a back-and-forth struggle between residents of the community and government authorities. In 2016, the government initiated mass demolitions of the homes at Larung Gar, citing overcrowding and dangerous living conditions.

Authorities established an allowable population of 5,000 residents, and between 2016 and 2018, thousands of monks and nuns were forcibly evicted and reportedly sent to political reeducation centers or back to their hometowns. They were prohibited from joining other monasteries after their relocations. Since 2017, Larung Gar has been under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, which authorities insist is for the protection and well-being of local residents. Tibetans, however, argue that their religious freedoms are being repressed. Today, walls encircle the community, checkpoints are in place to prevent outsiders from visiting, and foreigners are not allowed in.

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Tibetan Buddhism's Revival

Tibetan religious history can be broadly divided into three categories: the early dissemination, during which Buddhism was introduced into Tibet by the great kings of the 7th and 8th centuries; the era of fragmentation, following the assassination of the king Langdarma in 842, when Tibet had no central government and no institutional backing of any religious tradition; and the later dissemination, beginning in the 11th century, when institutionalized Buddhism made a comeback. In this lecture, you'll focus on how Tibetan Buddhism managed to maintain its unbroken lineage to the historical Buddha through the dark period of Buddhist fragmentation. You will also explore what led to its eventual reemergence and revival throughout the period of later dissemination.

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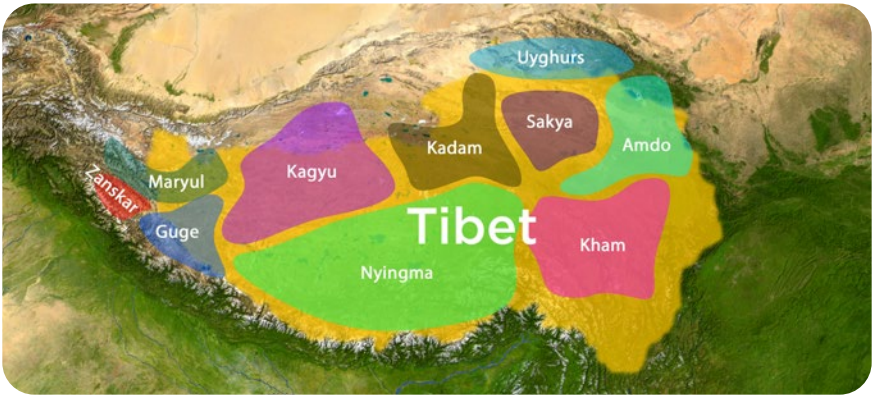
The Unbroken Lineage and Rinchen Zangpo

The last Tibetan emperor, Langdarma, was assassinated in the year 842, and Tibet fell into what scholars call the era of fragmentation. During this time, several local administrative districts emerged, overseen by local leaders who controlled significantly smaller areas than the earlier Tibetan kings. Broad institutional support for Buddhism evaporated due to the lack of a central government. Religious accounts refer to this as the dark period of Tibetan Buddhist history.



After Langdarma was killed, there was no more institutional support for the large monasteries, and many monks had to give up their full-time religious pursuits. Some accounts state that during the middle of the 9th century, three monks left central Tibet for Amdo, in the northeastern corner of Tibet, where they preserved their Buddhist practices, maintained their monastic vows, and ordained students of their own.

In all Buddhist communities worldwide, monastic ordination is grounded in the presumption of an unbroken lineage. Monks and nuns—through their teachers, their teachers' teachers, and so on—can theoretically trace their ordination lineage back to the historical Buddha in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. This is why the story of the three monks who fled to Amdo is so important, as their work connected the earlier introduction of Buddhism in central Tibet to its eventual reemergence later on.

Some monks connected to the original three monks in Amdo eventually made their way back to central Tibet and reestablished Tibetan Buddhist monasteries during the 10th or 11th century. Around the same time, a powerful kingdom in western Tibet called Ngari was ruled by a king named Yeshe Öd, who was a supporter of Buddhism. He sent a group of 21 translators to India to study Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Only two returned, one of whom was Rinchen Zangpo.

Rinchen Zangpo is one of the most important figures in the later dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet and is associated with the main tantric practice lineages of several schools of Buddhism that emerged after his lifetime. He wound up making three trips to India and studying with more than 75 Indian masters. He became a renowned translator who oversaw a team of scholars that translated texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan and is himself credited with translating, editing, or revising more than 150 texts. Rinchen Zangpo also recruited several Indian and Kashmiri scholars and artists to western Tibet to help revive the monastic tradition and to spread Buddhism on Yeshe Öd's behalf. In an area known as the Guge Kingdom, he established various temples and monasteries.

Atīśa and the Revival of Tibetan Buddhism

During Rinchen Zangpo's travels, he learned about a famous Bengali scholar named Atīśa and told King Yeshe Öd—and his nephew and eventual successor, Jangchup Öd—about him. Around the year 1030, Jangchup Öd sent a mission to India to invite Atīśa to Tibet. Eight members of the nine-man mission died along the way, and the one who survived decided to stay in India. A sizable offering of gold that the mission had carried also disappeared.

However, Yeshe Öd was determined to recruit Atīśa to Tibet and set out collecting more gold. Legend has it that the king was then kidnapped by representatives of a neighboring kingdom who demanded the gold as ransom. Yeshe Öd reportedly insisted that he would rather die a prisoner if it meant that Atīśa and the other Buddhist masters could be brought to Tibet.

After Yeshe Öd died, another group of Tibetans traveled to India in 1037. Atīśa wanted to accept their invitation, but his monastery leaders objected. He is said to have lied to the abbot and disguised his departure, insisting

that he wanted to show the Tibetans important Buddhist pilgrimage sites around India. The abbot supposedly saw through the ruse but permitted him to leave on the condition that he return within three years. Atīśa left for Tibet in the year 1040 and, apparently due to political conditions, was unable to return to India three years later as he'd promised. Instead, he reportedly wrote a letter to the abbot asking to remain in Tibet.

In Tibet, Atīśa met Rinchen Zangpo and asked him to list his accomplishments and outline his understanding of Buddhist teachings. Rinchen Zangpo cited all that he had accomplished up to that point. Atīśa supposedly replied, "If there are men like you in Tibet, then there was no need for me to come here!" However, when Rinchen Zangpo was asked about his understanding of tantric traditions, he said that one should practice each tantric lineage independently in its own way. In response, Atīśa stated that the tantras should all be practiced together. He gave Rinchen Zangpo some teachings and instructed him to go into solitary meditation, where he remained for 10 years.

Atīśa

The Later Dissemination and the Mongol Empire

Atīśa's arrival in Tibet—combined with the revival of institutional support for Buddhism by the kings Yeshe Öd and Jangchup Öd—marked a concerted effort to revive Buddhism on the Tibetan Plateau. Tibetans began making the trip to Kashmir and other parts of northern India to study Buddhism with Indian masters. Some Indian masters returned to Tibet with them. This was the beginning of the later dissemination of Buddhism.

This period and the centuries that followed saw the development of other lineages and traditions influenced by other Indian practitioners and scholars. Some built monasteries, and communities formed around them. In time, these communities of Buddhist philosophy and practice solidified and differentiated into new traditions, called *sarma*, that contrasted with the old tradition, or Nyingma, that flourished prior to Langdarma's assassination. The new schools included the Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug traditions.

The older Nyingma tradition—first established in the 8th century and thought to have died out after Langdarma's assassination—also reasserted itself. In addition, practitioners of the indigenous Tibetan pre-Buddhist religious traditions, referred to collectively as Bon, reorganized themselves in the emerging religious landscape. Today, Nyingma and Bon traditions share many similarities, although followers of Bon are not Buddhist.

During the later dissemination, older monasteries, such as Samye, were invigorated with a revived monastic order, and newer monasteries associated with the Nyingma tradition and the new schools were built at accelerated rates. Institutionalized Buddhism flourished anew, although Tibet still didn't have a central government even by the turn of the 12th century. Instead, the Tibetan Plateau continued to be governed by rulers who oversaw smaller, independent territories.

By about the turn of the 13th century, Genghis Khan came to rule over the newly created Mongol empire, and his armies conquered neighboring kingdoms around central and east Asia. One such conquest was the Tangut empire in Amdo. Many leaders of smaller territories in central Tibet who'd had good relations with the Tanguts became worried about the threat of invasion in their own regions. According to Tibetan historical accounts,

a handful of these leaders banded together and sent a delegation to the khan announcing their submission to his rule. As a result, it's said that the Mongol army left these areas alone and didn't invade them.

This is a chapter of Tibetan history that tends to be presented in a neat, orderly way. However, there's little historical evidence to suggest that the different factions of central Tibet that had been warring with one another for centuries would suddenly cooperate in addressing the Mongol court. However, for whatever reason, a period of prolonged interactions between the Mongols and the Tibetans commenced sometime around the end of Genghis Khan's rule. These interactions would eventually pave the way for the consolidation of power in central Tibet once again.

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Tibet's Reincarnation Tradition: *Tulkus*

Today, the 11th-century Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism is the oldest of Tibet's surviving "new schools," or *sarma* traditions. Its origins can be traced to India and a series of human masters with colorful life stories, going back to the teachings of the Buddha. In this lecture, you'll explore the development of the Kagyu tradition in India, the passing of Kagyu Buddhism into Tibet, and some of the tradition's main practices and beliefs. In addition, you'll learn more about Tibet's system for recognizing reincarnated masters, or *tulkus*, and the system's importance for preserving Tibetan Buddhism's unique rules, traditions, and ideologies.

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The Kagyu Tradition—from India to Tibet

Buddhism fell out of official favor in Tibet after the emperor Langdarma was assassinated in 842 and governmental backing of Buddhism was withdrawn. However, it made a serious comeback in the 11th century. During this later period, new schools of Buddhism began to develop, including the Kagyu school. By this time, Indian Buddhism was regarded as the standard against which all other forms of Buddhism were held. Therefore, the teachings of the Kagyu tradition were considered authoritative because of their connection to the Buddha more than a half millennium earlier and the transmission of the Buddha's teachings through India.

The first human teacher of the Kagyu tradition was a master named Tilopa, who was a diligent student of Brahmanical traditions—the core of contemporary Hinduism. One day, he was visited by a female spirit called a *ḍākinī*, who told him he should give up his worldly belongings, become a monastic, and live an itinerant life. Tilopa was soon ordained as a Buddhist monk and spent much of his life traveling and learning from other masters.

One of Tilopa's most important students was Naropa, who had entered the famous Nalanda Monastic University, where he was known as a diligent and extremely bright student. One day while he was studying, a *ḍākinī* in the form of a haggard old woman asked him what he was studying and whether he understood it. Naropa replied that he was studying the words of the Buddha and that he understood everything. However, when Naropa said that he also understood the meaning of the words, the woman revealed herself as a *ḍākinī* and called him a liar, saying that the only person who truly understood the meaning of the Buddha's teachings was Tilopa.

Naropa realized that he needed to meet this master. He left the comfort of the school and went on to study with Tilopa for 12 years, repeatedly enduring difficulties and hardships to purify his negative karma. Naropa eventually attained high states of meditative realization and became a teacher himself. One of his main disciples was a Tibetan named Marpa, although accounts differ as to whether Marpa was a student or only associated with Naropa's lineage of teaching.

Marpa traveled from his home in Tibet across the Himalayas to Nepal and eventually to India, studying with different masters along the way. He was a married layman with his own home. However, it had been predicted that his family line would not continue and that his lineage would need to be carried on by his students instead. As a result, Marpa returned to Tibet and devoted the rest of his life to teaching and translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan. The Kagyu tradition that began in India with Tilopa and Naropa was passed along to Marpa in Tibet.

Milarepa and the Kagyu Tradition

Marpa's chief disciple was a student named Milarepa, who today is among the best-known and most beloved figures in Tibetan Buddhism. Milarepa's father died when he was a child, and he and his mother went to live with an aunt and uncle, who then cheated them out of their inheritance. This forced them to endure lives of servitude. When Milarepa grew older, his mother encouraged him to learn sorcery and black magic, with the intent of getting revenge on his relatives. One day, Milarepa cast a spell on his aunt and uncle, but the sorcery unleashed a wave of destruction that killed his aunt and uncle and many other people. Milarepa set off to find a Buddhist teacher who could help him make up for his misdeeds. Eventually, he found his way to Marpa and asked to become his disciple.

Marpa could see that Milarepa had potential but that he first needed to do much work to purify the negative karma he had accrued from his previous evil deeds. Marpa put Milarepa through a series of long and excruciating ordeals to purify the karma of his past acts and ready him to receive Buddhist teachings. Milarepa studied under Marpa and then devoted himself to a solitary life of meditation. Milarepa didn't travel or try to teach others. However, word of his spiritual accomplishment spread, and many Tibetans came to him for Buddhist instruction.

Milarepa represents the peak of spiritual realization: a tantric master who accurately perceived reality and, thus, felt no need to conform to social conventions. There are various stories about Milarepa behaving in unconventional—even shocking—ways to convey his understanding of the dharma. However, the teachings he conveyed are an important part of the Kagyu tradition.

The main tantric practice in the Kagyu tradition is Mahāmudrā, which means "Great Seal." Like the Dzogchen practice of the earlier Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it's focused on realizing the true nature of reality. However, Mahāmudrā practice differs in terms of the way a practitioner attains this realization. The Dzogchen practice involves relaxing—letting go. By comparison, Mahāmudrā stresses attention and mindfulness to images, sounds, smells, thoughts, and so on. As you pay attention, you come to see these things as mere appearances, and you eventually realize that appearances are not as concrete or solid as you might initially think they are. The end result of the practice, whether Mahāmudrā or Dzogchen, is that the practitioner realizes the nature of reality exactly as it is.

The Kagyu tradition, like the Nyingma tradition before it, began among a loosely connected network of practitioners and a lineage of teachers that could be traced back to Milarepa and Marpa. It wasn't until later that the Kagyu lineage became organized into a school in an institutional sense. Once Kagyu monasteries were established and began to grow, the Kagyu lineage also developed several different subsects. Over time, some of these subsects would vie for political control over central Tibet.

The Tulkus *and the Kagyu Division*

The head of the Karma Kagyu tradition—and the person widely considered to represent the tradition as a whole—is a figure known as the Karmapa. The first Karmapa lived during the 12th century, whereas the second, Karma Pakshi, lived in the 13th century and was believed to be the reincarnation of his predecessor. Karma Pakshi was the first recognized reincarnated lama, or priest, in Tibet. With him, Tibetan Buddhist traditions developed a system of recognizing reincarnated masters. Called *tulkus*, they are believed to be highly realized beings who are continually reborn for the benefit of others. Other important Buddhist leaders, such as the Dalai Lamas, are also believed to be *tulkus*.

Tulkus are identified through several different processes, usually involving a team of people. When a master dies, he might leave behind some information about where his successor—in the form of his next rebirth—will be located. Alternatively, divinations might involve inspecting the remains of the cremated body for clues or consulting an oracle for predictions about the place or family in which the reincarnated master will

be reborn. Close friends and students might also be interviewed to share information about conversations they had with the master in his final days or to report on any dreams that he might have described.

After a couple of years, a team will set out, following whatever clues they have, in search of the reincarnation of the departed master. Often, the reincarnate will be a toddler—someone conceived shortly after the previous master passed away. The identities of suspected *tulkus* are often confirmed by other *tulkus*, who are believed to have such a high level of spiritual realization that they are able to recognize one another's consciousnesses.

This process is not without complications. The Karmapa lineage has been fraught with conflict over the centuries. Today, two different men are believed to be the 17th Karmapa, and this has led to a long and bitter dispute within the Kagyu tradition. Divisions deepened during the early years of the 21st century, compounded by uncertainty over who had a rightful claim to the title and competing Chinese and Indian political interests. In 2018, the two Karmapas met for the first time at a rural location in France and issued a joint statement resolving to work together to heal the divisions in the Kagyu community.

Despite such possible complications, the *tulku* tradition has worked well for Tibetans in many important ways since its inception in the 12th century. By selecting young children as future leaders and training them from an early age, Tibetan Buddhist leadership has preserved its unique rules, traditions, and ideologies.

In recent years, several non-Tibetan children born in Western countries, including Canada, the United States, and Spain, have been identified as reincarnations of previous Tibetan masters. Some of them have been sent off to monasteries in Asia to be educated according to tradition. Others try to live ordinary lives. However, after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the mid-20th century—and with so many Tibetan leaders living today in diaspora communities around the world—it's unclear whether the *tulku* tradition is sustainable.

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Sakya Buddhism: 1,000 Years of Family Rule

Unlike all other major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, one school that developed during the 11th century is—to this day—grounded in family lineage: the Sakya school. In this lecture, you'll trace the beginnings of the Sakya school and how a relationship with the great khans resulted in it becoming the dominant sect of Tibetan Buddhism, ushering in the patron-priest relationship between spiritual leader and ruler across Asia. Finally, you will learn how the Sakyapas were overthrown and removed from involvement in Tibet's political leadership through both the Mongol empire's withdrawal of support and the growing power of other Buddhist sects.

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Beginnings of the Sakya School

Nagendrarakshita, a member of the Khön family, was ordained by the influential Indian Buddhist philosopher Shantirakshita and became one of Tibet's first monks. He was a student of the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava and is closely connected to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. The Khön lineage is also closely associated with Buddhist tantric traditions.

The Khön family practiced following Padmasambhava's tradition until the middle of the 11th century. Then, one day, two Khön brothers named Sherab Tsultrim and Khonchok Gyalpo came across a group of yogis openly practicing secret tantric rituals in public and concluded that their rituals had been corrupted. New tantras were being brought to Tibet from India at this time, and Khonchok Gyalpo set out to study some of these under different teachers. He went on to establish his own small practice center but, after a few years, abandoned it to travel.

In his travels, Khonchok Gyalpo came across a valley in the Tibetan region of Ü-Tsang in an area called Sakya that he thought looked like a fine place to establish a new community. He built a temple there in 1073, and a monastery developed around it. Residents emphasized the practice of the new tantras and guarded them with extreme care.

Khonchok Gyalpo had a son named Kunga Nyingpo. When his son was 11 years old, Khonchok Gyalpo died. The youth was not ready to run the monastery, and he agreed to go into a solitary retreat to meditate on the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri, and develop his intelligence.

After six months, a vision of Manjushri appeared to Kunga Nyingpo, along with a verse of four lines known as "parting from the four attachments." This verse remains one of the most important teachings in Kunga Nyingpo's tradition and summarizes the Buddhist path to enlightenment: If you are attached to anything at all—to this life, to future lives, or to your own enlightenment—then you don't truly understand the Buddha's teachings. The essence of the Buddha's teachings is to let go of all attachments and practice compassion for all beings.

Kunga Nyingpo continued studying and traveling, but he was eventually called home to the Sakya Monastery to take over. He came to be known as Sachen Kunga Nyingpo—*Sachen* means "Great Sakyapa." His tenure marks the beginning of the Sakya tradition. The head of the Sakya sect is called the Sakya Trizin. From Sachen's time until relatively recently, the position of Sakya Trizin was passed down from father to son or in other ways along family lines that made sense.

Internal Conflict and the Khans

Around the time the Sakya school was forming, other new Buddhist sects were developing across the Tibetan Plateau. Many of these sects were associated with particular practice communities, specific monasteries, or, in some cases, local rulers of small, mostly independent territories. The different sects grew in size and influence as monastic institutions affiliated with them. As they grew, however, they began to require increasing material support, which put increasing pressure on laypeople in the surrounding communities.

Generally speaking, Buddhist monastic institutions rely on donations. The laity support monastics with food, money, and other forms of material support. In exchange, they earn merit—a sort of spiritual protection—for engaging in virtuous activities. This exchange has existed throughout much of Buddhism's history across Asia. However, neighboring institutions now found themselves competing for the attention and resources of lay donors, which led to increasing hostility between Tibetan Buddhist sects.

At the turn of the 13th century, the Mongol ruler Genghis Khan came to power, and his armies conquered kingdoms across central and east Asia, including the Tangut empire on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. According to some historical accounts, leaders of smaller kingdoms in central Tibet feared they would suffer the same fate and therefore banded together and sent a delegation to Genghis Khan. Initially, the khan's army kept its distance while on its way to conquer dynasties elsewhere.

Decades later, in 1240, Genghis Khan's nephew Godan sent troops into central Tibet. They looted a Buddhist monastery and destroyed a Buddhist temple. Some scholars believe this was a reconnaissance mission in search of a powerful Tibetan leader to submit to the Mongols. Tibet was—and had been—politically fragmented ever since the assassination of its last emperor,

Langdarma, in the mid-9th century. Because no one Tibetan leader could serve as a proper political prisoner, Godan supposedly sought a religious leader instead.

Sakya Pandita—the fourth of the five founding masters of the Sakya tradition—was summoned to the Mongol court to teach Godan and his subjects about Buddhism. According to Buddhist historical accounts, Sakya Pandita and Godan got along well, and Sakya Pandita wrote a letter to various masters and important laypeople back home declaring that the Mongols now ruled Tibet and that Tibetans shouldn't put up a fight. Competing historical accounts claim that Sakya Pandita had been captured and held prisoner. In this view, the letter was likely coerced.

Sakya Pandita's nephew, Phakpa, succeeded him in 1251. Godan died around the same time, and Kublai Khan eventually came into power. In 1253, Kublai took Phakpa as his Buddhist teacher and allowed him to weigh in on issues related to Tibet. Phakpa also performed a tantric ritual for Kublai and a select group of Mongol ministers. In exchange, Phakpa was given temporal control over central Tibet. Eventually, he was also granted control over eastern Tibet. This relationship between Kublai and Phakpa was the start of what came to be known across Asia as the patron-priest relationship, a beneficial alliance in which a spiritual leader offers guidance to a ruler and, in return, the ruler's armies protect the spiritual leader's people.

Sakya's Dominance and Overthrow

In 1251, Kublai invited the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, to his court. Karma Pakshi was the first *tulku*, or reincarnated master, recognized in Tibet. He arrived in 1255 but ultimately decided not to stay. In the meantime, Kublai bestowed on Phakpa the title of *tishri*, or "imperial preceptor." Khublai wanted to restrict all Buddhist sects in Tibet other than Phakpa's Sakya school, but Phakpa reportedly insisted that the other schools be allowed to continue.

One sect that was wildly popular at the time was the Karma Kagyu school of Karma Pakshi, who had reneged on Kublai's invitation a decade earlier. Kublai had Karma Pakshi arrested and banished to a remote area from which he wasn't allowed to return for five years. As a result, Phakpa's Sakya tradition grew in power, and with the backing of the Mongol army, the Sakya tradition became the dominant sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

Sakya Pandita

Phakpa now returned home to central Tibet, accompanied by his brother Chagna Dorje and some 6,000 Mongol soldiers. Central Tibet was organized into 13 different administrative units, and the eastern regions of Amdo and Kham were subsumed as part of Tibet under Mongol rule. In this way, Phakpa's return began the process of reunifying Tibet.

Four years later, Phakpa died suddenly and mysteriously. Without his leadership, Kagyu forces rose up and burned down a handful of Sakya monasteries, although Mongol troops quickly shut down the fighting and reestablished Sakya control. Kublai Khan died in 1294, and Mongol power in China waned due to corruption and famine. Leadership among the Sakyapas also weakened. Family disputes among the sons of several prominent Sakya families resulted in four factions emerging in the sect, and the Mongols—overextended and weakened—began to withdraw their support.

The Mongols had originally hoped the Sakya sect would facilitate a stable line of succession along family lines. However, once they learned of the *tulku* tradition of reincarnated masters, they began to think that the Karmapas might be a more stable influence. In 1352, a Kagyupa leader launched a military offensive against the Sakyapas in central Tibet. This time, the Mongols didn't step in to help, and the Sakyapas weren't powerful on their own. They were overthrown, and a subsect of the Kagyu tradition came into power for the next 75 years or so.

Meanwhile, a monk named Tsongkhapa—who had received a liberal education from various Sakyapa, Kagyupa, and Kadampa teachers—was working to establish his own monastery called Ganden, founded on the basis of strict monasticism and scholastic integrity. The monks at Ganden eventually broke off to form their own sect, known as the Gelug tradition. A handful of other groups also vied for power. As a result, it wasn't until the middle of the 17th century that Tibet once again had a stable central government, thanks once more to the intervention of the Mongols, in cooperation with the Gelugpas.

Today, the Sakyapas are no longer directly involved in Tibet's political leadership, but religious leadership in the Sakya tradition is still passed down along family lines. Many of its leaders are tantric practitioners who marry and have children. They often have long hair and wear white robes in contrast to their monastic counterparts with shaved heads and maroon

robes. Further, some female members of the family have become prominent worldwide. Since 2014, Sakyapa leaders serve a term of three years. Any qualified person in the family presumably has the opportunity to serve one three-year term. Presumably, this change in leadership structure will pave the way for others to lead—possibly including women.

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Tibetan Nomads under Chinese Centralization

A majority of Tibet's population consists of nomads, farmers, and those who combine nomadic and agricultural lifestyles. Up to 40% of all ethnic Tibetans are said to live nomadic or seminomadic lifestyles, although this is changing. In this lecture, you will explore some important aspects of the traditional nomadic lifestyle and culture on the Tibetan Plateau and how such traditions and ways of life are transforming due to pressures from the Chinese government, state-sponsored resettlement programs, and ever-advancing industrialization and urbanization.

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Tibetan Nomadic Culture

The Tibetan term for farmer is *shingpa*, meaning "people of the fields." Nomads are known as *drokpa*, or "people of the pastures." Those who combine these two traditional lifestyles are known as *samadrok*, meaning "neither earth nor pasture." They include people who occasionally graze their herds away from home for brief periods of time but maintain permanent abodes in one place. The *shingpa* (farmers) and *drokpa* (nomads) intersect via trade.

Nomads played an important role in the early development of Asia's Silk Road during the century or two before the Common Era. They transported goods from one part of Tibet to another as they traveled with their herds, facilitating trade between east and west, and were also known for breeding horses, which were highly valued.

Nomadic culture expanded along with the Silk Road. Between China's 3rd-century Han dynasty and 8th-century Tang dynasty, small nomadic kingdoms developed across the Tibetan Plateau. From the 8th century onward, there is evidence of Tibetan nomads interacting with other nomads across Asia, including those in China and Mongolia.

One reason there are so many nomads in this part of the world has to do with Tibet's landscape and geography. The high elevation and weather patterns of the Tibetan Plateau make it difficult—if not impossible—for agriculture to flourish, and what little vegetation does exist grows slowly. For this reason, it's impractical to raise animals in only one place because the livestock will quickly run out of areas in which to graze.

Over the course of thousands of years, nomads on the Tibetan Plateau developed methods to prevent overgrazing in any single area. Families and communities moved their herds with the seasons, with many of them shifting their herds to high grasslands during the summer months, during which time they lived in tents and tended to the animals. In winter, some nomads returned to more permanent structures and transitioned to indoor activities such as spinning yarn and weaving. This practice continues today. Because these Tibetans aren't on the move constantly, their lifestyle might be better described as seminomadic.

Although nomads tend to live at higher elevations, they maintain links with farming communities at lower elevations and trade animals and animal products with farmers in exchange for grain and other crops. These relationships have likely existed for millennia. However, in recent years, pressure from the Chinese government has pushed some nomads away from the trade economy and toward the use of paper currency.

Not surprisingly, the biodiversity is unique on the Tibetan Plateau, where, over many thousands of years, animals and plants learned to coexist in extremely harsh conditions. The livestock that nomads herd include sheep, yaks, goats, horses, cattle, and yak-cow hybrids called dzo. Smaller animals in a herd graze on specific kinds of herbs, whereas the larger animals mainly eat grass. This allows for different animals to graze in similar areas at the same time.

Because of the extreme elevations, the weather can change suddenly and dramatically. A blast of heavy snow can quickly cover grazing land, making it difficult for a herd to find food, and droughts can result in shorter grasses and less vegetation during warmer months. Over thousands of years, however, Tibetan nomads learned to handle these unpredictable situations. They developed systems of monitoring areas that are good for grazing and ways of cooperating with other nomadic families or communities to prevent overgrazing, season after season.

Yaks and Nomadic Beliefs

One of the most valuable and important domesticated animals that Tibetan nomads rely on is the yak. Stocky and long-haired, these animals are well suited for carrying heavy loads through high, snowy mountainous areas. They are also used to plow fields, and they are valued for their hair, hide, meat, milk, organs, bones, and even feces, which serve as fuel for fires in the home.

The word *yak* refers to the male of this species; females are called *dri* or *yakmo*. These animals are covered in dense fur to protect them from cold and snow, and they have unusually large lungs and highly oxygenated blood, making them well suited to breathing the thinner air at higher altitudes.

Yak fur consists of three different kinds of hair, each of which is used for different purposes. The long outer layer is incredibly thick and strong and is used to make the tents that nomads live in when traveling. The middle layer is thinner and can be woven into rope, clothing, and lightweight tents. The third layer, which grows underneath the two outer layers of fur, can be woven into incredibly soft clothing.

Nomads use the milk of female yaks in various ways, mixing it with salt and adding it to tea, churning it into butter, and turning it into yogurt and cheese. The cheese is called *chura* and can be cut into squares and preserved. The dried cheese eventually becomes so hard that it is impossible to chew. Nomads will hold a piece in their mouth and suck on it for hours as it slowly dissolves.

Yak-hair tents can be quite large, with different areas for cooking, socializing, praying, and sleeping. The kitchen area generally has a stove for cooking and keeping warm. The stove fire is partially fueled with yak dung. Most tents also have a small altar, where daily prayers are recited and offerings made. Although many nomads describe themselves as Buddhists, some observe one of the other religious beliefs and practices that have developed on the Tibetan landscape.

Many nomads ascribe a sacred quality to the surrounding geography. Mountains are believed to be abodes of different deities, whereas lakes serve as homes to the deities' consorts. Many nomads believe that by making ritual offerings to the deities, they will be rewarded with good weather and healthy livestock. The gods can also be angered, resulting in storms or diseases affecting the nomads' animals and even their families. Nomads associate still other spirits or deities with other parts of the earth, wind, and water landscape.

Some of the beliefs involving spirits, deities, and the landscape have come to be connected with Tibetan Buddhism, but many of them predate Buddhism's introduction into Tibet. As Buddhism passed from kings and monks to nomads and other common people, preexisting beliefs and practices were absorbed into the new religious traditions.

Traditions under Threat

Generally, nomads live and travel in groups of 10 to 25 families, each with its own tent. Although the tents are spaced out far enough that each family's animals have their own area in which to graze, the families live near enough to one another to constitute a community in which labor is divided between the men, who generally herd the animals, and the women, who cook, clean, and take care of other domestic duties.

Today, the nomads are no longer as necessary to the trade economy across the Tibetan Plateau as they once were. With the introduction of paved roads, trucks, and trains, rice and grain can more easily be brought into the Tibetan highlands now, and demand for Tibetan salt is no longer as great as it once was. This, combined with the fact that many areas of Tibet are urbanizing under the control of the Chinese government, means that some nomadic customs and traditional ways of life are being transformed.

Chinese officials say that the government-sponsored resettlement programs in Tibet help to improve nomads' lives by giving them greater access to education and jobs. However, such jobs typically require Tibetan workers to speak Mandarin Chinese and leave home. High rates of alcoholism are reported in state-sponsored nomad communities among populations that can't find work or don't want to leave. In addition, although Tibetan children who have been resettled with their families typically enjoy greater access to formal education than previous generations, they are often sent to boarding schools, where they have little opportunity to speak Tibetan or learn about their traditions and ways of life.

The Chinese government contends that it is not prohibiting anyone from maintaining their own culture or customs but is trying to provide Tibet with access to the same health care, education, and structural resources as other parts of China. However, increased industrialization on the Tibetan Plateau does have major impacts on the traditional networks and routes of the nomads. Some places once used for grazing herds are now fenced off, bisected by roads, or occupied by buildings and people.

Furthermore, the Chinese government is pressuring nomad communities to change the makeup of their herds and has constructed entire villages for nomads, providing them with cheap housing and small plots of land for their animals. Resettled populations are able to rent state-owned land for their animals, and they're given money for fencing to keep their animals contained. The Chinese government says that state control over herd sizes and fencing prevents overgrazing.

However, Tibetans who do not wish to adhere to the policies are, according to some sources, met with hefty fines. Moreover, many Tibetan nomads argue that mandatory fencing and the strict control of animal head counts are precisely what's leading to overgrazing and the destruction of the Tibetan Plateau. Human Rights Watch has estimated that more than 2 million Tibetans—most of them farmers and nomads—have been relocated to the planned developments in the past seven years. Despite this, many government-built houses remain empty. Even today, many Tibetan nomads prefer their traditional ways of life.

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The Festivals of Tibet's 354-Day Calendar

The Tibetan calendar operates on a lunisolar system that takes both the lunar and solar calendars into account. In general, there are 12 months, each of which is either 29 or 30 days long. This results in a 354-day year. As a result, every three years or so, a 13th month is added to keep the Tibetan calendar in line with the solar calendar. In this lecture, you will take a deep dive into some of the most important holidays and festivals of Tibet's calendar and explore their traditions and ceremonies and how they are celebrated in different parts of Tibet and in the diaspora community.

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The Tibetan Calendar and Losar

Tibetan years are associated with an animal and an element. There are 12 animals and 5 elements, which can be combined in 60 different ways. Each animal is also associated with a gendered aspect, alternating between male and female. For example, February 21, 2023, marks the beginning of the year of the female water rabbit. In addition, Tibetan years, months, and days correspond to different ideas and energies. Generally speaking, some days are auspicious, and some are inauspicious. The full moon and the new moon—the 15th and 30th of each month, respectively—are considered auspicious days, when the results of your actions are believed to be magnified.

One holiday that is celebrated almost universally by Tibetans is Losar, the Tibetan New Year. It marks a time of celebration, feasting, dancing, visiting family, and honoring religious traditions. It predates the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet and is linked to Bon practices and nomadic traditions. Traditionally, the Tibetan New Year is celebrated for more than two weeks, beginning two days before the new year and lasting until the 15th of the following month. Preparations begin about a week in advance, as families clean their homes for the coming festivities.

The 29th day of the month is reserved for deep cleaning, in part to get rid of any negativity from the previous year. That evening, a special soup called *guthuk* is prepared, and by the end of the next day, a special altar, or *mchod bshams*, is set up in the home. Three items are placed on the altar, although the specifics may be a little different for non-Buddhists: a statue of the Buddha; a scripture; and a small stupa, or reliquary—representing the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, respectively. Around them, you'll often find pictures of important teachers who are part of the family's particular religious tradition; offering bowls filled with water; and candles, or so-called butter lamps.

During Losar, a family might also add a box with dividers called a *chemar bo*. One side of the box is filled with roasted barley seeds or wheat, the other with a mixture of tsampa (roasted barley flour), sugar, and butter. When guests come into the home, they will take a pinch of the flour mixture between their fingers and toss it into the air three times as a way of offering good wishes to the host. Then, they'll indulge in a tiny taste of the flour.

Near the box, you'll often find sculptures made of butter. These days, traditional butter sculptures are sometimes replaced with similar-looking wood carvings that can be reused from year to year. Traditionally, a sheep's head is also placed on the altar. Today, however, it's likely to be a sculpture in the shape of a sheep's head. Incense is burned, and *khatag*—the ubiquitous white Tibetan scarves—are laid across the altar.

Food, Drink, and Celebrations

Arguably, the most important part of a Losar altar is the food. No matter how elaborate or simple, Losar altars always present some kind of food or drink offerings. One example is *khapsey*: deep-fried, lightly sweetened Tibetan cookies. A special kind of *khapsey* called *bhungu amcho* are enormous, crispy pastries you will often find stacked on a Losar altar. Other offerings might include smaller, cookie-sized *khapsey*, candy, fruit, and other sweets.

Traditionally, tea and *chang*—a slightly alcoholic barley beer—are also placed on a Losar altar. You might also find cartons of juice, bottled water, or a bottle of wine. Other offerings include yak butter, bricks of tea, and even sleeves of Oreo cookies. The altar stays up for the duration of the Losar holiday. Afterward, the food is shared among family and friends.

Losar altar

With the altar set up, the New Year celebration begins. The first three days are the most important. On the first day, the head of the family gets up early and goes outside to bring in the first water of the year. Traditionally, this means going to the nearest stream or water source. Next, a drink called *changkol* is prepared; it's a concoction of warm barley beer mixed with barley flour, dried cheese, butter, *khapsey*, and sugar.

Families might then head to the local monastery to pay respects to their lamas or teachers, but they generally stay home. In the afternoon, some family members might visit close friends or neighbors. This is a time when food is politely—but forcefully—offered to anyone who shows up. At any home, you'll be offered tea, *chang*, *khapsey*, or other snacks.

On the second day of Losar, communities hold larger, more official public celebrations. *Momo* dumplings are typically eaten on the second rather than the first day of Losar because the dumplings are pinched closed—and that's considered inauspicious because Losar is supposed to be a time of openness and generosity.

On the third day, new prayer flags are hoisted, and prayer ceremonies are held to honor guardian deities and pray for protection during the new year. Extended family might gather. After this, things become less formal. The fourth day of Losar is for partying and visiting with friends. Things tend to taper off after that. The evening of the 15th marks the official end of Losar celebrations and is traditionally observed by lighting butter lamps.

In recent years, Tibetans have used the occasion to protest what many perceive to be Chinese oppression. Instead of the exuberant, joyful, colorful holiday observed for centuries, some Tibetans have turned Losar into a period of mourning. Outright protests are banned in Tibet, and therefore, some have found a quieter form of protest by refusing to celebrate their most important holiday. The Chinese, in an attempt to demonstrate Tibetan happiness under Chinese occupation, have responded with financial incentives for those who celebrate Losar.

Other Tibetan Festivals and Holidays

From the 4th to the 11th of the first Tibetan month, members of the Buddhist Gelugpa tradition observe the Monlam Chenmo, or "Great Prayer Festival." This was, for a time, one of the largest and most important religious festivals in Tibet. However, during China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Monlam Chenmo was forbidden in Tibet. It was briefly revived during the late 1980s, but in 1990, the Chinese simply refused to allow it to be held in Tibet any longer. However, the tradition continues in diaspora communities around the world.

March 10, known by Tibetans as Uprising Day, is yet another important date that Tibetans pay attention to. It marks the anniversary of the March 1959 protests in Lhasa between Tibetan demonstrators and occupying Chinese soldiers—presaging the Dalai Lama's flight and escape from Tibet.

The most important religious holiday for Tibetan Buddhists is Saka Dawa, which takes place during the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar. It commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and final nirvana. The full moon this month occasions the most important day of the year for Buddhists, when it's believed that the karmic results of any meritorious action at this time are multiplied by 100,000. Therefore, Tibetans make special efforts to circumambulate holy sites and perform acts of kindness and generosity throughout the month.

The Western calendar marks July 6 as the 14th Dalai Lama's birthday. This is not an official holiday, but many Tibetans gather to celebrate it every year. Because the Chinese government perceives the Dalai Lama as a threat, symbolizing the spirit of separatism, it does not condone these celebrations. Even in Tibetan diaspora communities, you may find a higher police presence on this date, reflecting the concerns of local authorities about the possibility of political protest.

The Tashilhunpo Monastery was founded by the first Dalai Lama in 1447 and was the seat of the Gelug tradition's second most influential spiritual leader, the Panchen Lama, prior to the Chinese occupation in 1951. Today, the monastery's completion is celebrated with the unveiling of three massive, embroidered *thangkas*—Tibetan Buddhist paintings portraying important

Buddhist figures—from the 14th to the 16th of the fifth month of the Tibetan calendar. Thousands of pilgrims flock to Tashilhunpo Monastery for this three-day festival, and hundreds of monks spend the days chanting special prayers.

Horse racing festivals are also held at various points of the year and can last from a few days to a couple of weeks. Traditionally, nomads came to town dressed in their finest clothes with their best horses, and competitors raced to establish who owned the best stock and demonstrated various skills. Nowadays, some festivals organize yak races, tug-of-war and rock carrying competitions, archery contests, and demonstrations of singing and dancing.

In contemporary times, Chinese holidays are increasingly being observed in Tibet. For that matter, members of the Tibetan diaspora might celebrate Christmas and other special occasions in their adopted homelands. In addition, some Tibetan holidays and observances in the diaspora community are shifting away from the traditional lunar calendar to reflect how Tibetans interact with other communities around the world. In this regard, although some religious traditions continue to be observed according to the Tibetan calendar, others are moving to times and days more convenient in contemporary life.

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The Dalai Lamas' Mysterious Lives and Deaths

In 1959, at a time of rising tensions between the Chinese military and Tibetan people, Tenzin Gyatso—the 14th Dalai Lama—fled the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. He has lived in exile ever since. However, his status remains undiminished as a leader of Tibetan Buddhists and Tibetan people generally, whereas the Chinese government views him as a political threat and a separatist. In this lecture, you will learn about the Dalai Lamas who came before Tenzin Gyatso, the religious and political contexts surrounding the Dalai Lama tradition, and how the very institution of Dalai Lamas is rife with strife, motivated at least in part by struggles for power and control on the Tibetan Plateau.

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Tsongkhapa, Gendun Drub, and Gendun Gyatso

In 1359, a baby boy was born in the Tsongkha region of Amdo, in northeast Tibet. He came to be known as Tsongkhapa—"the man from Tsongkha." Becoming a monk at a young age, he studied with learned masters in several different Buddhist sects and spent long periods of time in meditation retreats. Eventually, he composed a large corpus of texts on philosophy, tantra, and other topics related to Buddhism. As he studied, practiced, taught, and wrote, his fame spread across Tibet.

During his travels, Tsongkhapa observed that monastic rigor was in decline in Tibet, and he believed that monastic discipline was a key component of Buddhism's continued existence. In 1409, he worked in Lhasa to renovate Jokhang Temple and instituted the Monlam Chenmo (the Great Prayer Festival), which gathered monks from all across Tibet for two weeks of intensive prayer and ritual.

Tsongkhapa then founded a new monastery called Ganden, where monasticism and scholasticism were taken extremely seriously. Members of the Ganden community, called Gandenpas, devoted themselves to studying philosophy and tantra, and they upheld strict monastic vows. Not long

Ganden Monastery

afterward, two of Tsongkhapa's students founded the nearby Drepung and Sera Monasteries. Together, Ganden, Drepung, and Sera became religiously powerful and a dominant influence in central Tibet. Eventually, monks at these institutions were called Gelugpas, or "virtuous ones."

As the Gelug tradition developed, its monks strictly adhered to their vows, studied rigorously, and spent a great deal of time debating. A Tibetan monastic debate is a beautiful, precise, choreographed way of studying philosophy. The idea is to use your understanding of logic and Buddhist philosophical literature to force your opponents to contradict themselves. Relying on this system of study, debate, and practice, Tsongkhapa popularized studies toward the Geshe Lharampa degree—the highest title that can be earned through study in Gelugpa monastic institutions.

Toward the end of his life, Tsongkhapa took on a student named Gendun Drub, who came to serve as the abbot of Ganden Monastery. In 1447, Gendun Drub established another Gelugpa monastery called Tashilhunpo, which grew to house some 3,000 monks. After Gendun Drub passed away in 1474, a four-year-old boy living near Shigatse started telling his parents that he wanted to "go home" to Tashilhunpo to be with his monks. He was said to quote Buddhist texts out of the blue and declare himself to be Gendun Drub. In an unprecedented move, Gelugpa leadership broke from tradition and declared this young boy to be the reincarnation of Gendun Drub. He was ordained, enthroned, and given the monastic name Gendun Gyatso Palsangpo.

Gendun Drub

Gendun Gyatso proved to be an exceptional student. Eventually, he traveled to Lhasa and attracted followers from all over Tibet. The Gelug tradition gained followers and grew in size under his leadership, and he was committed to furthering Gelugpa monasticism as a religious powerhouse. Before he died in 1542, he followed the established practice in the Tibetan Buddhist *tulku* tradition of reincarnation, leaving cryptic predictions as to where his next incarnation would be born.

Sonam Gyatso and the Dalai Lama

The next year, a boy born near Lhasa reportedly claimed—shortly after he could talk—that he was Gendun Gyatso. He came from a family of wealth and nobility connected to the Sakya and Phagmodru sects of Tibetan Buddhism. At age nine, he was given the name Sonam Gyatso, installed as abbot of Drepung Monastery, and enthroned. He became a teacher of many renowned scholars and practitioners and mediated peaceful settlements between rival factions across central Tibet. His stature as a religious leader spread across Tibet and Asia.

In 1577, Sonam Gyatso traveled 1,500 miles to meet the Mongol ruler Altan Khan. Formal relations between the Sakyapas and the Mongols had ended 200 years earlier, but both leaders saw the potential for mutual benefit in reestablishing a patron-priest relationship. Soon, Altan Khan declared Tibetan Buddhism the state religion in Mongolia, and the Gelugpas held special influence.

Altan Khan bestowed a title on Sonam Gyatso that translates to "the wonderous Vajra holder, excellent, splendid, meritorious ocean," which would be shortened to "Ocean," or *Dalai* in Mongolian. Sonam Gyatso became known as the Dalai Lama and was the first Tibetan lama, or teacher, to hold this title. Because he was considered third in a line of incarnations, his predecessors Gendun Gyatso and Gendun Drub were also posthumously given the title of Dalai Lama.

Sonam Gyatso wasted no time in spreading Buddhism in Mongolia. Altan Khan enacted laws to this effect and oversaw the establishment of Mongolia's first Buddhist monasteries. Altan Khan and Sonam Gyatso's relationship solidified the Gelugpa presence in Mongolia and laid the groundwork for Gelugpa dominance across Tibet.

When Sonam Gyatso died in 1588, Altan Khan's grandson, Yonten Gyatso, was recognized as his reincarnation and enthroned as the fourth Dalai Lama. He was the only non-Tibetan ever identified as a Dalai Lama. However, Yonten Gyatso didn't live long; he died mysteriously in 1617 at the age of 27, but his brief tenure had deepened the ties between Mongols and Tibetans.

The fifth Dalai Lama was a youth named Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso. Like his predecessors, he turned out to be an excellent scholar, and he was skilled in the particular Gelugpa ways of doing philosophy, including debate and logic. He also studied tantric practices of the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism and became a renowned tantric practitioner.

Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso entered into a patron-priest relationship with a Mongol prince and tribal leader named Gushri Khan that led to some profound changes. Under the guise of protecting Buddhism, the khan authorized his armies to take control from eastern Tibet to its center, violently clashing with any Buddhist groups unaffiliated with the Gelugpas. Survivors were either imprisoned or forcefully converted to the Gelug sect. Under the supervision of the fifth Dalai Lama, Buddhist philosophical texts that were critical of Tsongkhapa or the Gelugpa tradition were destroyed or suppressed.

Eventually, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, as he came to be called, made his way to Lhasa and declared that it would be Tibet's official capital. He oversaw the construction of a large complex that would become the Potala Palace, which remained the Dalai Lamas' official residence until the 14th Dalai Lama fled from Tibet in 1959. From the 17th century until China's annexation of Tibet in the middle of the 20th century, the Gelugpas remained the dominant religious authority in Tibet.

The Fifth to 14th Dalai Lamas

When the fifth Dalai Lama died in 1682, his death was kept secret for about 15 years. However, when it was made public in 1696, his successor, Tsangyang Gyatso, was quickly identified and enthroned. Unlike the previous Dalai Lamas, the sixth Dalai Lama was an unconventional figure, and he was kidnapped by the 18th-century Mongolian ruler Lazang Khan and replaced by a different lama whom the khan deemed to be the "true" sixth Dalai Lama. Tsangyang Gyatso disappeared shortly afterward, never to be heard from again.

Tibetans asked for help from the Dzungars, a tribe of people in western Mongolia, and together, they killed Lazang Khan and stripped the title of the khan-appointed Dalai Lama. In his place, the seventh Dalai Lama was recognized by Gelugpa leaders as the true incarnation of the missing Tsangyang Gyatso. This Dalai Lama was seven years old when he was recognized in 1715. Because of the contentious nature of his recognition, he was kept under protective custody until he was officially enthroned at the age of 12 in 1720.

Between the end of the seventh Dalai Lama's rule in 1757 and the beginning of the 13th Dalai Lama's rule in 1895, political control in Tibet was largely handled by senior government ministers because the Dalai Lamas were either uninterested or unprepared to serve in their official roles. Throughout this time, although the Gelugpas remained in control, infighting was rampant within the sect, and power struggles continued. It wasn't until the rule of the 13th Dalai Lama, who assumed control in 1895, that the institution stabilized again.

During the period of rule from the seventh to the 13th Dalai Lamas, Tibet maintained a fairly close relationship with the Qing dynasty of China. Tibetans believed—and still believe—that their relationship with Qing rulers was similar to the patron-priest relationships they had cultivated with Mongol khans. However, Qing leaders saw the situation differently. They considered Tibet more of a vassal state or protectorate than an independent nation. The Qing dynasty fell after a prolonged internal conflict that forced the 13th Dalai Lama to take up residence in Sikkim, in northeastern India, for a while.

The new Chinese government issued a formal apology and offered to restore the Dalai Lama to his former position. The Dalai Lama returned to Tibet and sent a reply informing the Chinese that Tibet was, and always had been, independent and free from Chinese rule and that he was, and always had been, Tibet's spiritual and political leader. The Republic of China, which prevailed in China from 1912 to 1949, never accepted or acknowledged this reply. This set the stage for escalating conflicts between China and Tibet throughout the 20th century that would propel Tibet—and the 14th Dalai Lama—into the international spotlight.

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Tibet's Old Traditions Enter a New Century

The newest major sect of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug tradition, grew quickly after its introduction in the 14th century under the monk Gendun Drub, who was a disciple of the tradition's founder, Tsongkhapa. A little more than 100 years after Gendun Drub's death, he became known as the first Dalai Lama, and Tibetan Buddhists have viewed every Dalai Lama since as a reincarnation of this first master. In this lecture, you'll examine the geopolitical context surrounding the rule of the 13th Dalai Lama and the conflicting forces impacting Tibetan reform and independence during this time. In addition, you'll explore how the 14th Dalai Lama was subsequently identified and enthroned as the new leader of the Tibetan people.

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The 13th Dalai Lama and Geopolitics

Thubten Gyatso, the 13th Dalai Lama, was born in 1876 and identified two years later. He was enthroned in 1879 and spent his childhood and adolescence studying Buddhist scriptures, learning philosophy and debate, and developing an understanding of the workings of the Tibetan government. One of his teachers and debate partners was a Russian named Agvan Dorjiev, and the two became close friends.

THUBTEN GYATSO

At this time, two significant geopolitical developments were occurring along Tibet's borders. First, China's Qing dynasty claimed that Tibet belonged to it even though Tibetan authorities maintained that Tibet was independent. Second, the British had taken control of India and, in 1885, attempted to send a military mission to Lhasa. British troops showed up at the border between Sikkim—then a princely state under British authority—and Tibet, but a Tibetan force mobilized to protect the area. British troops returned in 1888, resulting in a bloody dispute. Shortly afterward, the British and Chinese signed a treaty called the Anglo-Chinese Convention Relating to Sikkim and Tibet, which purportedly authorized the British to trade with Tibet, send missions there, and guard the border. However, the Tibetan government disregarded it.

Thubten Gyatso assumed power in 1895 at the age of 18. The next year, the Chinese provincial governor of Sichuan, in southwest China, launched a military campaign to enforce Chinese rule in Tibet. In response, the Dalai Lama appealed directly to the Qing emperor in Beijing, who responded by returning control of the Tibetan Plateau to the Tibetans.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain and Russia were engaged in a confrontation known as the Great Game as they vied for control of central Asia. The Tibetans were wary of possible British encroachment and also realized that Qing China had little interest or ability in defending Tibet against the British. However, the Dalai Lama believed he could persuade the Russians to become a strategic ally based on his close relationship with Agvan Dorjiev.

In 1901, the Dalai Lama sent a letter in care of Dorjiev to the Russian government asking for help in resisting the British. Russian authorities declined the request, but the British interpreted the letter as a threat. In 1904, British forces overpowered the under-equipped Tibetan military and marched from Sikkim toward Lhasa. When they were only a day away, the 13th Dalai Lama fled into northern Tibet and then to the Mongolian capital.

In 1907, Britain and Russia settled some of their differences and agreed that neither would intervene in Tibet. The Dalai Lama left Mongolia for Amdo in northeastern Tibet. A delegation from the capital urged him to return to Lhasa in central Tibet, but he decided to journey on to Beijing. There, he met with the Japanese ambassador and Japanese military advisors, who sent representatives back to Lhasa to help train the Tibetan military.

The Qing Dynasty and the Panchen Lama

In 1909, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa. While he'd been away, Qing forces had employed brute force to kill monks and destroy temples in an attempt to gain control of the Amdo and Kham regions on the eastern edges of the Tibetan Plateau. In Lhasa, the Dalai Lama reorganized the government and improved the military with the help of his Japanese advisors, but Chinese forces soon headed toward Lhasa itself. They promised that the Dalai Lama could retain his religious authority but made no mention of his political authority. He decided to flee for safety yet again—this time to India.

In Sikkim, the British greeted the Dalai Lama and his party with some enthusiasm. The Dalai Lama asked the British for military help to fight off the Chinese. However, the British responded that they were bound by diplomatic treaties and would remain neutral in matters concerning Tibet.

The Qing dynasty was now falling amid the first stage of a Nationalist revolution that predated the rise of the communist Mao Zedong. The Nationalists realized that China, by trying to occupy Tibet, had antagonized Tibetans and driven the Dalai Lama into the arms of the British. This ground-level reality—combined with internal power struggles and fighting in China—enabled the Tibetans to overthrow Chinese forces in Lhasa and regain control of central Tibet. The Chinese, though, retained control over Tibet's eastern regions. Although the British tried to mediate an agreement to clearly define the border between Tibet and China, neither country signed anything.

In 1913, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa and issued a formal proclamation that severed all diplomatic ties with China. He declared Tibet an independent country and initiated a series of military, educational, and medical reforms. Due to continuing tensions between Tibet and China, however, the British withdrew their support for Tibet. Therefore, the Dalai Lama reached out for help to a trusted colleague and leader in the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism known as the Panchen Lama, who had a great deal of authority in Tibet—second to only the Dalai Lama—and controlled significant economic resources.

Faced with fighting the Chinese, the Dalai Lama asked the Panchen Lama to help pay for improvements to the Tibetan military. The Panchen Lama at first agreed but was unable to follow through because of the cost, which caused some strain between the two. The Panchen Lama asked for a personal meeting, and the Dalai Lama suggested he come in secret with a small entourage. Hearing this, the Panchen Lama feared that he might end up a captive in Lhasa and therefore fled to China in 1923. He remained there for the rest of his life, forming close ties with Chinese government officials and making attempts to further reform Tibet from the outside. In turn, the Dalai Lama prohibited any of the Panchen Lama's followers from holding office in central Tibet and imprisoned anyone known to be his follower.

Identifying the 14th Dalai Lama

In 1933, the Dalai Lama succumbed to failing health, leaving many of his ambitious reforms unfulfilled. Three years later, Tibetan Buddhist authorities set out to identify his reincarnation, first consulting with the Panchen Lama. Despite the tense personal and political relationships previously between the 13th Dalai Lama and the ninth Panchen Lama, Gelugpa leaders believed that their spiritual connection remained strong and that the Panchen Lama would be able to assist in their efforts. In fact, the Panchen Lama had already identified three potential candidates. Upon investigation, it was learned that one of the candidates was already dead. Another ran away in tears after being questioned. The third was the child of a farming family in the Amdo village of Taktser, close to the border with China.

A search party went to the third boy's house in disguise. Among the party was a lama from Sera Monastery in Lhasa who wore a string of prayer beads that had belonged to the 13th Dalai Lama. While seated in the family's kitchen, the youth asked for the beads. The man said, "If you know who I am, you can have them." The boy replied, "Sera lama," and began speaking a central Tibetan dialect that no one in his family could speak or understand. Later, the visitors learned that the youth often pretended to be getting ready for a long trip. He would pack his bag and say, "I'm going to Lhasa!"

The search party returned sometime later, having prepared a series of tests for the youth. As an example, they presented a set of prayer beads and a ritual drum that had belonged to the 13th Dalai Lama, along with a

duplicate set of beads and a more beautiful and ornate drum. When these were placed in front of the boy, he immediately selected both objects that had belonged to the Dalai Lama, saying that they belonged to him.

These tests—combined with the Panchen Lama's predictions—affirmed that the youth from Amdo was the 14th Dalai Lama. However, before the search party could relocate him and his family to Lhasa and commence his training, they were stopped by a local warlord named Ma Bufang, who refused to let the search party leave until they provided definitive proof that the boy was the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Upon being told that the boy needed to go to Lhasa for further tests, the warlord relented but only after being paid a considerable amount of silver, which took two years of fundraising and diplomacy.

In 1939, the party was finally permitted to leave. The youth was now four years old and officially declared the 14th Dalai Lama. In Lhasa, he was ordained as a monk, given the name Tenzin Gyatso, and officially enthroned. There are conflicting accounts about the ceremony. Chinese officials claim it was all their own doing and that Tibetan leaders had attempted to obstruct their efforts, whereas Tibetans claim that the ceremony was under the purview of Buddhist monastic leaders and not the Chinese. Regardless, the event was elaborate and widely celebrated, and for a time, the 14th Dalai Lama was universally recognized as the leader of the Tibetan people. He assumed political power in November 1950, at the age of 15, and completed his monastic education at 23. However, the 1950s would mark both the apogee and end of his formal rule.

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World War II, China, and the 14th Dalai Lama

In 1939, at the age of four, the newly installed 14th Dalai Lama was thrust into a web of international conflicts—from Tibet's political clashes with China to the global confrontation of World War II at the country's border. As a result, other officials oversaw the Tibetan government until Tenzin Gyatso was old enough to assume control. In this lecture, you'll trace the political and historical events and tensions, including international isolation, the signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement, and conflict with the People's Republic of China, that led to the creation of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Uprising Day, and the exile of the Dalai Lama from his home country.

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International Isolation

The 14th Dalai Lama's predecessor had undertaken modernization and reform efforts that were not entirely successful, and China had never recognized the 13th Dalai Lama's early 20th-century proclamation declaring Tibet's independence. Furthermore, in the decade and a half since the 13th Dalai Lama's death, Tibet's internal affairs had remained on shaky ground, with infighting and scandals plaguing government offices and monasteries.

In addition, Tibet had pledged to remain neutral during World War II, but its status as an independent nation was not universally agreed upon. Although Tibetan authorities maintained that their country was independent, Chinese authorities argued that Tibet belonged to it. British and Indian officials remained largely silent on the matter. As a result, Tibet was sometimes recognized as an independent nation and, at other times, as a protectorate of China.

Although India formally recognized Tibet as independent in 1947, tensions between China and Tibet remained high. In 1949, China grew stronger when Mao Zedong's communist revolutionaries defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists to end a long-running civil war. The Chinese communists had the goal of unifying national territories under one central authority, and Mao was not shy about his intentions to invade Tibet. Upon learning of this, Tibetan officials sought international support, but Britain, the United States, and India turned them down. Tibet was on its own.

In 1950, the newly formed communist People's Republic of China vowed to "liberate" Tibet from imperialist control, and Tibetan troops assembled in Kham, at the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, to defend the borderland. However, the Chinese People's Liberation Army easily swept in and took control of Kham. It was at this moment, in November 1950, that the Dalai Lama assumed power over his government—five years earlier than he was expected to, at the age of 20. Tibet now appealed to the United Nations for help; again, its pleas went unheeded.

The Seventeen-Point Agreement and Annexation

The Dalai Lama and some of his officials fled to a remote border town in India and sent a senior Tibetan official named Ngapo to Beijing to engage in diplomatic talks. Ngapo told Chinese authorities that China and Tibet had observed a respectful patron-priest relationship that went back centuries. The Chinese negotiator responded that Tibet had always been a part of China and that the matter wasn't subject to negotiations. The Chinese presented a list of 17 points, which they claimed were the only topics of discussion on the table, and what has come to be known as the Seventeen-Point Agreement was signed.

The first point stated that "the Tibetan people shall unite and drive out imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet" and that "the Tibetan people shall return to the family of the Motherland—the People's Republic of China." This demarcated the end of Tibet's claims of independence. The second point stated that "the local government of Tibet shall actively assist the People's Liberation Army to enter Tibet and consolidate the national defenses." This authorized a Chinese military presence in Lhasa.

Other points pledged that Tibet would retain autonomy of its own affairs, Tibetans would be allowed religious freedom, any change would happen gradually, and the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama would maintain their status and leadership roles. Although the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government rejected the arguments, Chinese authorities stated that Tibet had agreed to be peacefully liberated. Tibetan monastic and government leaders now convened to discuss whether to accept the Seventeen-Point Agreement or seek assistance to fight back.

Because Tibet was without any international support, Tibetan authorities decided that the Dalai Lama should return to Lhasa and accept the accord. Shortly afterward, the Dalai Lama met with Chinese officials and indicated that he would endorse the agreement after first meeting with the Tibetan National Assembly. At this meeting, Ngapo stated that he had been pressured into signing the accord and asked the assembly to act in Tibet's best interests and decide whether to accept or repudiate the agreement.

Meanwhile, Chinese troops were making their way into Tibet and advancing toward Lhasa. Tibetan authorities felt they now had no option but to cooperate with the Chinese. On October 24, 1951, a telegram was sent to Mao in the name of the Dalai Lama stating support for the agreement. Today, Tibetan authorities maintain that the message was sent by a Chinese representative and not the Dalai Lama.

Four days later, Chinese troops marched into Lhasa. A human rights organization known as the International Commission of Jurists later declared China's occupation to be an annexation, although the Chinese government maintained that Tibet had always been a part of China. The Chinese now employed Tibetan workers to build roads between Lhasa and China, and China cut off Tibet's trade with other nations. Tibet became reliant on Chinese support, including for government-run schools, a modern hospital, and China-sponsored religious festivals and rituals at the major monasteries. Some of Tibet's upper classes adopted Chinese clothes and entertainment, and the lower classes saw a sudden influx of cash and infrastructure.

Establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region

In 1954, the Dalai Lama traveled to Beijing to represent Tibet in the first session of China's National People's Congress. Some monastic leaders back home didn't approve of this, but the Dalai Lama decided it best for Tibet to be represented. While in Beijing, the Dalai Lama met with Mao Zedong, who made a point of offering his personal support for the Tibetan leader. The Chinese also demonstrated some of their modernization efforts, which impressed the young Dalai Lama a great deal. He became interested in Marxism and compared communist principles to the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva who works for the benefit of others.

The Dalai Lama agreed to a Chinese plan to establish a semiautonomous area under China's control called the Tibet Autonomous Region. Upon the Dalai Lama's return home in early 1955, he assured Tibetans that China would work in Tibet's best interests. Mao skillfully implemented change slowly in central Tibet. However, things were different in the Kham region to the east, where reforms—"collectivizing" the land and creating socialist cooperatives—were swifter and met more resistance, leading to violent confrontations in 1955 and 1956. As a result, the Khampas advocated for Tibet's complete independence from China.

Two factions began forming in Tibet at this time: those who viewed the Chinese presence as a threat to Tibet's existence and those who saw the Chinese more favorably. By March 1957, tensions had ballooned across the country. About 15,000 Khampas assembled at Tibet's southern border and organized to fight. The United States—driven by anti-communist sentiment—offered the CIA to train the rebels. Although Mao had previously pledged gradual reforms in Tibet, he now became much more aggressive, and tensions rose even higher.

Uprising Day and Exile

In March 1959, the 23-year-old Dalai Lama was completing the final exams for his Geshe Lharampa degree when Tibetan leaders in Lhasa became nervous about a Chinese official's plans to host a festival in Lhasa in his honor. The Tibetans feared that the celebration was a ruse to capture their leader and hold him hostage. Early on March 10, a crowd gathered around the Norbulingka Palace to see the Dalai Lama and make sure he was not captured by the Chinese. The gathering turned violent, but the Dalai Lama persuaded the crowd to disperse. Over the next several days, however, demonstrations grew to include monastics and laity, men and women, central Tibetans and Khampas—all advocating for Tibet to be left alone.

On March 12, People's Liberation Army troops made their way to the Lhasa city center, and the Dalai Lama and senior government officials made plans to escape. On the night of March 17, the Dalai Lama snuck out in disguise. Meanwhile, Tibetans in Lhasa gathered their available weapons and aimed them at the Chinese. When the Chinese fired warning shots to disperse the crowd, the Tibetans battled back. Fighting lasted for three days, culminating at Tibet's most sacred temple, the Jokhang, where a bloody confrontation ensued until a Chinese tank entered the temple's main gate. Tibetan accounts suggest that more than 85,000 people died.

Today, the Tibetans refer to the first day of the violent protests, March 10, as Uprising Day, and Tibetan diaspora communities observe this date each year with peaceful protests calling for Tibetan independence. The Chinese refer to it as the Lhasa Rebellion. In 2009, China declared another date, March 28, to be Serfs' Emancipation Day—when the Chinese government deemed the Tibetan government of the Dalai Lama to be illegal.

The Dalai Lama and his entourage reached a fortress along the border between Tibet and India, where they received news of the carnage. Some Khampa rebels whom they had met along the way—and who had been trained by the CIA—had a radio transmitter. Realizing it was impossible to go back to Lhasa, the Dalai Lama used the radio to ask the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru for asylum. With the prime minister's agreement, the Dalai Lama and his entourage then crossed the border into India, where he would live ever after—unable to return home.

21

Tibetan Diaspora: Hardship and New Realities

The Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru granted asylum to tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees in 1959, starting with the Dalai Lama himself. This was the beginning of a human exodus that would transform the Tibetan people at home and in exile. Today, more than 100,000 Tibetans live in at least 40 different countries around the world. In this lecture, you'll explore how this diaspora community has become a massive influence on Tibetan culture as a whole and how it is emblematic of continuing challenges to Tibet's survival, both culturally and politically.

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Tibetan Refugees in India

After the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet in March 1959, a large number of Tibetans followed him into exile in India, which was itself only a few years into independence from the British and still adjusting to the massive resettlement of Hindus, Muslims, and others from the partition that created Pakistan and, eventually, Bangladesh. Agreeing to resettle the Tibetan refugees therefore added to domestic tensions in India and strained relations between the Indian and Chinese governments.

As the Tibetan refugees arrived, the South Indian state of Karnataka was the first to offer a place for them to resettle as a community. Jungle areas were cleared and infrastructure built, and the Tibetans established a settlement there. Other areas of India followed suit, and several small Tibetan communities began to flourish. However, the adjustment to a hotter climate was difficult for many of them, especially in South India.

In addition, many Tibetan children—orphaned or separated from their families on the long journey across the Himalayas—found their way to refugee centers in the northern Indian hill town of Dharamsala. The Indian government agreed to help, and a building was offered to house them. With funding from private donors, the area around this single building eventually developed into something resembling a small village and was registered as the Tibetan Children's Village. During the next decade, multiple branches were established in other parts of India, and today, the Tibetan Children's Village operates multiple residential and day schools, vocational centers and college assistance programs, and youth hostels.

Some monks and nuns who fled Tibet established monasteries in India that replaced some of those destroyed at home by the Chinese. Today, many former great monasteries of Tibet are reconstituted in the exile communities of India and Nepal. In South India, these include the three historical Gelugpa monasteries of Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, representing the main monasteries of the sect of Tibetan Buddhism that the Dalai Lama observes.

In the 1980s, another wave of refugees turned up after China—which was facing international pressure about its human rights policies—partially opened Tibet's borders to trade and tourism. Twenty-five thousand more Tibetans escaped, including thousands of children who were sent off by their families with relatives or hired guides. The Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala grew overcrowded once again as it looked after more than 16,000 children in exile.

Diaspora Communities

For Tibetans who make their way out of Tibet and settle in one of the many diaspora communities worldwide, their goal is to lead something that looks like an ordinary life. However, there is a distinct cultural difference between the more recent refugees and those who have lived in diaspora communities for decades. The earlier refugees have children and grandchildren who were born in exile and whose first languages are Hindi, Nepali, or English. They might not even speak Tibetan. By contrast, most newly arrived refugees speak Mandarin in addition to Tibetan and are referred to pejoratively in Tibetan as *sanjorwa*, which means "newcomer."

A subtle class system has emerged, with long-term residents occupying the top of the social order and newly arrived migrants at the bottom. The social tensions extend to the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, with some representatives being accused of supporting one group of refugees over the other.

Meanwhile, many well-educated Tibetans in India are unemployed or underemployed, due at least in part to Indian labor law and citizenship policy. A 2017 law specifies that Tibetans born in India between 1950 and 1987 are eligible for Indian citizenship. These are mostly children of the first and second migration waves. However, many of them refuse to become citizens because doing so would strip them of their refugee status and deny them access to benefits provided by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, including access to housing in Tibetan settlements. Some Tibetans reject taking Indian citizenship on ideological grounds, believing they would be abandoning hope of Tibet ever becoming free. Regardless, India's labor laws make it difficult for Tibetans to find work without citizenship status. As a result, many Tibetans work for extremely little, taking odd jobs such as selling sweaters in seasonal markets.

The Central Tibetan Administration and Chinese Interference

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile was first formed in Dharamsala in 1959 under the Dalai Lama's leadership, and it claims to represent the Tibetan people both inside and outside of Tibet—although it is not officially recognized as a governing body by any other nation. The Dalai Lama stepped down from an official role in the government in 2011, and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile was renamed the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).

Today, the CTA functions democratically with executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. There is a parliament called the Khashag and a prime minister called the Sikyong. Voting in democratic elections for CTA representatives takes place every five years in more than 30 countries. A total of 45 parliamentarians are elected to represent different Tibetan communities: 30 members represent the three traditional provinces of

Tibet, 10 more represent the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist Bon religion, and another 5 represent Tibetans in the west—2 from Europe, 2 from the Americas, and 1 from Australasia.

Nearly 64,000 Tibetans worldwide voted in a parliamentary election in 2021, representing 77% of the more than 83,000 Tibetans registered to vote. These elections are held despite repeated instances of interference, likely by agents of the Chinese government.

Nepal is home to about 20,000 Tibetan refugees, many of whom live in the town of Boudhanath, east of Kathmandu. In the 2021 election, Nepali police were reported to have confiscated ballots, and five Tibetan election officials in Kathmandu were arrested, almost certainly due to pressure from China. Nepal is a poor country that relies heavily on Chinese economic support and infrastructure development. Chinese pressure also extends beyond periodic elections. Whenever there are large gatherings of Tibetans in Nepal—especially on days such as the Dalai Lama's birthday or Uprising Day—Nepali police in riot gear are visible around Boudhanath. Even flying the Tibetan flag in public is not allowed, and Tibetans suspected of organizing or engaging in protests are routinely detained.

Officially, Nepal allows Tibetan refugees to pass through the country en route to India. However, in reality, incoming buses and cars are routinely checked by police, and anyone suspected of being Tibetan will be asked for identification. Tibetan refugees without identification are often arrested, sometimes robbed, and returned to Chinese authorities at the Tibetan border. Because of this, many Tibetans in Nepal have counterfeit paperwork identifying them as Nepali citizens. In other Tibetan diaspora communities, Chinese government pressure is rarely as extreme, but it persists nevertheless.

22

How Tibetan Art Keeps Heart and Soul Alive

For much of Tibet's history, art was used to convey information about events and religious ideals to a general public that might not have had access to a formal education otherwise. Prior to the Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 to 1976, most Tibetan art was religious in nature. Today, Tibetan artists are creating innovative new work that comments on politics and identity and challenges stereotypes about what it means to be Tibetan. In this lecture, you will focus on the intersection between art and religion and the different forms Tibetan religious art takes, particularly in terms of paintings—whether on scrolls or on cave or temple walls—and statues of varying sizes.

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Thangkas, *Wall Paintings, and Tibetan Hats*

One of the most easily identifiable artifacts of Tibetan art is the *thangka*—an unframed painting, often made on cotton canvas, that can be rolled up for easy storage. Many *thangkas* are mounted on silk brocade and have a silk cover to protect them when not in use. They often depict mandalas, buddhas, bodhisattvas, or lineages of teachers and are used as aids for meditative practices.

Although most *thangkas* are small enough to be rolled up and carried or displayed on the wall of a room, some are truly enormous. Certain large monasteries in Tibet have a *thangka* wall somewhere on a hillside at the edge

Thangka

of the property that is used to display massive *thangkas* during festivals and other special occasions. The larger *thangkas* are made of silk appliqué. They are usually displayed only a few days a year, during which time thousands of Tibetan devotees and tourists come to see them.

A collection of early *thangkas* dating to the middle of the 8th century was found in 1900 in the Library Cave at Dunhuang, in western China. These are some of the only Tibetan *thangkas* that can be traced back to the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, when imperial kings first introduced Buddhism on the Tibetan Plateau. Most of the other older Tibetan *thangkas* that still exist today date to the 11th century and afterward, during the period known as the later dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet.

Murals painted on the walls of caves, temples, and monasteries are generally intended for public consumption. Many of them depict important scenes from Buddhist history, outlining the life story of the Buddha, detailing important scenes from other masters' lives, or illustrating important Buddhist ideas. These murals were likely used as aids to teach common, uneducated people about Buddhist concepts.

Popular paintings, such as important scenes from the Buddha's life, are also found on temple walls. The Jonang Phuntsok Ling Monastery is home to elaborate, well-preserved murals that portray the Buddha's life story. In addition, some paintings found outside monasteries and temples depict heavenly kings—or guardians—that serve to keep evil influences away and protect the buildings on which they are painted.

Important Buddhist teachers are also often depicted in Tibetan temples. Indian masters are usually shown holding books or debating, and they often wear hats. In Tibetan Buddhist monastic culture, different kinds and colors of hats have come to be associated with different sects and used for different purposes. Important teachers from India or Tibet are often depicted wearing the *pandita* hat—a pointed headpiece with long pieces of fabric coming down over the ears and draped over the shoulders. Sometimes, these hats are folded forward, and the long fabric drapes down the back. Other hats look like fuzzy mohawks. They are yellow in the Gelug sect and red in the Sakya sect and some other sects. The Bon tradition also has its own hat styles.

The Wheel of Existence

A painted image frequently found in temples is the "wheel of existence," or *srid pa'i 'khor lo*. This is a diagram—a concise depiction of the entire Buddhist cosmos—that represents samsara, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth that Buddhists subscribe to. A ferocious-looking creature known as Yama, the god of death, holds the giant wheel in his fangs and claws. Everything Yama holds is subject to death and rebirth.

Wheel of Existence

In the center of the wheel are three animals, a rooster, a snake, and a pig, that represent the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance, respectively. The Buddha taught that human suffering boils down to these three states. So long as we harbor greed, hatred, and ignorance, it's thought we will be bound to the cycle of rebirth.

The ring immediately outside of the three animals illustrates the idea of karma: the law of cause and effect. If you do good things in this life, you can ascend to higher states of rebirth. If you do bad things, then you will be reborn in more unfortunate states. The next ring of the wheel illustrates what these different states of rebirth involve and is divided into six main parts. The top three are considered fortunate rebirths—the human, god, and demigod realms—whereas the bottom three are unfortunate rebirths—the realms of the hungry ghosts, hell, and animals. The distinction between fortunate and unfortunate rebirths refers to how much suffering you can expect to experience in each state.

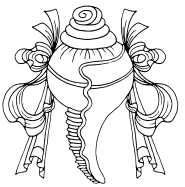
In samsara, nothing lasts forever, not even hell. A being reborn in hell (or in any realm) eventually dies and is reborn based on the karma accrued from actions they performed in previous lives. Therefore, there's the potential for beings born into one of the lower, unfortunate realms to be reborn in one of the three higher realms on the wheel. Compared to the beings in the three lower realms, humans don't suffer that much. However, compared to the gods and the demigods, humans experience just enough suffering to be motivated to practice the dharma and seek a way out of the cycle of rebirth.

The outer ring of the wheel of existence is divided into 12 segments. These depict the "twelve links of dependent origination," following Buddhist theory that accounts for how the law of karma works and how one's deeds and mental states in past lives give rise to one's rebirth in the next. Each step in the 12 links leads to the next, moving clockwise until it begins again.

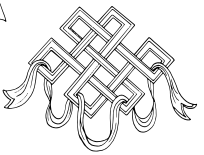
Finally, outside of the wheel, over Yama's shoulder, is the Buddha. He is not in the wheel because he has transcended the cycle of suffering and rebirth. According to Buddhist doctrine, the ultimate goal for all living beings is to stop the cycle of rebirth altogether.

Symbols, Altars, and Statues

A great deal of Tibetan Buddhist art is infused with various symbols. The most easily recognizable are known as the eight auspicious symbols—found in paintings, sculptures, and carvings and printed on ceremonial silk scarves called *khatag*. The eight auspicious symbols are deeply symbolic and represent different aspects of the dharma.



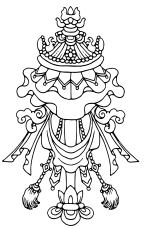
1 A white conch shell represents the teachings of the Buddha.



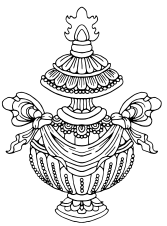
2 A figure called the endless knot represents the interconnected nature of everything in the universe.

3 A pair of golden fish symbolize the potential for the sentient beings in samsara to pursue the Buddha's teachings.

4 A lotus flower depicts the purity of one's mind.



5 An umbrella represents protection.



6 A vase represents wealth.

7 An eight-spoked wheel represents the teachings of the Buddha.

8 Finally, a banner represents the Buddha's victory over ignorance.

Another important, and often misunderstood, symbol common in Tibetan Buddhism is the swastika. Before Nazis co-opted this symbol in the 1930s, the swastika—coming from the word *svastika*, or "conducive to well-being"—was a symbol of good fortune prevalent across several South Asian religious traditions. Tibetan Buddhist communities continue to use the swastika in traditional iconography despite its implications in the West today.

Such imagery and iconography also play an important role on altars, which can vary in size and complexity, ranging from small spaces in a Buddhist's home to massive structures taking up a large space in a temple or monastery. A Tibetan Buddhist altar serves as a focal point for meditative and ritual practice. All Tibetan Buddhist temples have a central altar opposite the main entrance, and on this altar is usually at least one main statue—almost always a Buddha figure—and other smaller statues at the sides of the main image. The statues inside temples can range from a few feet to many meters tall. Images on personal altars in the home are often several inches tall but can also be larger if space and finances allow.

Sakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, is probably the most commonly depicted figure. He is identifiable by the bump atop his head; the mark between his eyebrows; his curled hair and long earlobes; and his calm, peaceful smile. He can be seen sitting, standing, or lying down. When lying down, the Buddha always appears on his right side, with his head propped on his arm. This depicts the moment before he passed into final nirvana—when he was not reborn again. When Sakyamuni is seated with his left hand in his lap and his right hand touching the ground, this symbolizes the moment he attained enlightenment. When he is holding up both hands, touching his thumbs to his index fingers, this symbolizes teaching his first five disciples. If he is sitting or standing, holding his right hand up with his palm facing outward, this is a gesture of reassurance.

Other Buddhas are also commonly depicted in Tibetan art, including Maitreya, believed to be the future Buddha who will arrive after the current teachings of Buddhism have disappeared from this world; the Amitabha Buddha, usually depicted as red; and the Medicine Buddha, who is often blue.

Other figures in Tibetan Buddhist temples can usually be identified based on what they are holding. Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, holds a flaming sword in one hand and a book on a lotus flower in the other. The bodhisattva Tara—who is frequently green or sometimes white—is depicted as sitting, holding a lotus flower in her hand. She is associated with compassion and is one of only a few feminine bodhisattvas regularly depicted in Tibetan Buddhist art.

23

A Future Tibet without the Dalai Lama?

Now more than ever, Tibet's future is uncertain. One reason for this is the rise and success of China. In recent decades, China has grown in terms of size, power, and economy, making it an incredibly influential player in international politics and the world economy. It has become more difficult for other countries to advocate on behalf of Tibet and the Tibetan people. In this lecture, you'll examine the political and historical events that resulted in increased tensions between Tibet and China, the reasons for the United States's involvement and eventual withdrawal from the conflict, and the factors pointing to a potential future vacuum in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's leadership.

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Tibetan Semifeudalism and Chinese "Liberation"

In the first decade of the 20th century, Tibet was effectively a protectorate of China's Qing dynasty; it was largely able to do its own thing while Qing China claimed ultimate control over the region. At this time, Tibetan society resembled a semifeudal state. A small handful of noble families—many directly connected to monasteries—owned much of the land, and others provided labor or other forms of payment to live on the property. Although this sounds like a feudal structure, the heavy influence of Buddhism in Tibetan society precludes an explicit comparison between Tibetan society and the feudal serfdoms of medieval Europe.

In Buddhist tradition, merit is a sort of spiritual currency, and laypeople earn merit by paying monastics the appropriate respect. The parallel to feudalism was therefore that Tibetans paid obeisance to their patrons, but the duty and reward were spiritual rather than primarily material. This way of thinking led to a type of merit-based economy in Tibetan Buddhist cultures. If laypeople had extra food, money, or other resources to donate, they considered it best to donate to the monks. As a result, however, Tibetan monasteries and a small handful of noble families grew increasingly wealthy as ordinary people continued to offer them support with little opportunity themselves to advance.

In 1906, Qing and British leaders signed a treaty that assigned Tibetan sovereignty to China and prohibited other foreign governments from intervening in Tibetan affairs. However, Tibetan officials did not formally submit to Chinese rule. In 1912, the Qing dynasty fell, and the 13th Dalai Lama issued a statement asserting that Tibet was—and would remain—fully independent from China.

In 1949, the Chinese communists declared their intention to "liberate" Tibet from its oppressive domestic structures, insisting that Tibetan religious institutions should not hold the majority of wealth and power. Relying on the description of Tibet as a feudal serfdom, the Chinese argued that backward, superstitious Tibetans needed to be saved from oppressive, controlling religious authorities.

In October 1950, China's People's Liberation Army entered Tibet with the perspective that the land and its people had always been subject to Chinese control. The Chinese crossed Tibet's eastern border at Chamdo

and occupied the city after a quick but bloody battle. In November 1950, the 15-year-old Dalai Lama assumed political power in Tibet. The two sides entered into negotiations mediated by British and Indian authorities, but the talks failed. The Chinese now presented a 17-point proposal offering Tibet some autonomy in exchange for explicit acknowledgement of China's political control. A low-level Tibetan representative was reportedly coerced into signing the pact on May 23, 1951, and China accepted this as an official, binding agreement, resulting in increased tensions during coming years.

US Intervention and Withdrawal

US authorities feared that if China successfully took control of Tibet and imposed its ideology, it would use it to spread communism elsewhere. Therefore, the CIA began a covert operation in Tibet—which would last for nearly two decades—as a strategy to contain the spread of China's communist influence.

In 1956, Tibetan fighters attacked Chinese government offices in Tibet, and the China's People's Liberation Army retaliated by dropping bombs on two monasteries in eastern Tibet. The United States decided to intervene in earnest, and the CIA began a covert training program of selected Tibetans in the United States. All told, 259 Tibetan fighters trained in guerilla tactics, espionage, and radio operations in high-altitude conditions akin to those of the Tibetan Plateau.

In March 1959, clashes in Lhasa between Tibetan protestors and the Chinese military turned violent, and the Dalai Lama fled into exile. Over the next several months, Tibetan trainees from the CIA program were dropped by parachute into Tibet along with weapons and ammunition. The Tibetan resistance estimated that 40,000 people were ready and willing to fight the Chinese, but the CIA supplied only several hundred weapons, mostly World War I–era bolt-action rifles—many of which were damaged in transit.

In 1961, Tibetan guerillas attacked a Chinese convoy, and a sack filled with more than 1,500 documents was recovered from the truck's cab. This provided Washington with its first concrete evidence of Mao Zedong's struggles, including the failure of his Great Leap Forward industrialization

and collectivization program, widespread famine, and problems within the People's Liberation Army. Tibetan fighters also provided other material intelligence to the United States in the years to come, including photographs of Chinese military bases and evidence of China's first nuclear test. Still, US authorities grew weary of supporting the Tibetans, and the CIA officially withdrew support in 1972, days before the American president Richard Nixon met with Mao Zedong to establish friendly relations between the United States and China.

Increasing Tensions and a Potential Leadership Vacuum

Meanwhile, Mao's Cultural Revolution was also underway. This program sought to rid China of old customs, culture, habits, and ideas, and Tibetan Buddhist leaders and institutions were prime targets. More than 6,000 Tibetan monasteries and religious sites were demolished, and tens of thousands of Tibetans died as a result of being subjected to "denunciation rallies" and "struggle sessions" or from being sent to prison camps during the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution, which ended after Mao's death in 1976. It's impossible to know how much Tibetan literature, Buddhist scripture, and text was destroyed during this time.

Tensions came to a head again in 1987 during a series of pro-independence protests led by monks at two of Tibetan Buddhism's major monasteries. The demonstrations were sparked by China's rejection of the Five-Point Peace Plan, which the Dalai Lama had proposed to better ensure Tibetan rights and freedoms. The last large-scale protests in Tibet occurred in March 2008 during the anniversary of the initial mass protests in March 1959. Foreign journalists have not been allowed into central Tibet anytime since unless accompanied by government-approved guides. Consequently, it's difficult to get reliable information about the situation in Tibet today.

Outside of Tibet, some in the diaspora community argue that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (the CTA) is losing its relevance, especially as increasing numbers of Tibetans migrate out of India. Although the CTA has done much to advocate for refugee communities since the 1960s, no foreign government or major international organization has ever formally recognized it as a government-in-exile. Therefore, the international community does not substantively support the CTA, and Chinese leadership will not negotiate with it.

The Dalai Lama stepped down from the CTA in 2011, in part to keep the organization from collapsing after his death. It's widely suspected that once he dies, the Chinese will recognize their own Dalai Lama. However, if a democratically elected leader were in place, even in exile, then perhaps the Dalai Lama's passing would not leave a drastic hole in the exiled Tibetan community's leadership.

Meanwhile, although the CTA maintains the official position that the Chinese illegally occupy Tibet, it no longer advocates for Tibetan independence. Instead, it supports a position the Dalai Lama himself developed: the Middle Way approach, claiming Tibetan autonomy in terms of social and religious issues while acknowledging that the Tibet Autonomous Region is under China state control. However, some Tibetans take a more extreme position, advocating for complete independence from China. They argue that the survival of the Tibetan people, culture, and religion can be guaranteed only by complete independence.

All of this leads to the inescapable conclusion that without the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan people inevitably face a leadership vacuum. In many ways, he has held Tibetans together since the 1950s. He is the reason why many Tibetans advocate for a peaceful resolution with China, and for years, he was the principal reason why people worldwide paid attention to Tibet.

Today, pictures of the Dalai Lama are officially banned in Tibet, but many Tibetans hide depictions of him in secret places in their homes. Their national anthem is outlawed, but Tibetans sing it loudly at gatherings and on holidays. The Tibetan flag is considered a protest symbol by Chinese authorities, but exiled Tibetans display it proudly in diaspora communities. As Chinese authorities continue to crack down, Tibetans grow increasingly desperate. Some Tibetans have even taken to an incredibly extreme form of protest: self-immolation. An estimated 159 Tibetans have set themselves on fire to protest the Chinese government's policies and activities within the previous two decades.

24

The History of Tibet in 24 Questions

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is sometimes described as the best-known and most popular book about Tibetan Buddhism in the world—that is, outside of Tibet. It's said to be based on an esoteric text dictated by the 8th-century Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, who was one of the founding intellects of Tibetan Buddhism. In this last lecture, you will briefly explore the truth about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and take a brief quiz to test some of what you've learned throughout this course.

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The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* became popular with the US counterculture during the 1960s and has inspired dozens of novels, films, and music performances. It purports to outline what happens to a living being's consciousness between death and the next life—an intermediary state called the bardo in Tibetan. The text also prescribes certain meditative practices and rituals that should be performed when death is imminent and readings to guide a dead person's consciousness to the next life.

However, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* has little, if anything, to do with Tibet. According to Donald Lopez, a University of Michigan professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies, the book's author, Walter Evans-Wentz, was an eccentric scholar from Trenton, New Jersey, who never visited Tibet, didn't know the language, and cobbled together some obscure Buddhist texts that had been translated from Tibetan into English in the early 20th century by a northeastern India school headmaster. In 1927, he published these as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Evans-Wentz incorporated several misunderstandings about Buddhist tantra into this publication, resulting in an odd jumble of spiritualism mixed with pseudo-psychology that looks rather bizarre to most Tibetan Buddhists. In this regard, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is an invention that reflects common misunderstandings about Tibet and Buddhism.

Course Quiz

In this course, you've examined many reliable historical, religious, and cultural records of Tibet and the Buddhist faith. Please take the following 24-question quiz to test your knowledge. (Answers can be found starting on page 148.)

1 The Tibetan Plateau is about one and a half times the size of:

- **A** Russia
- **B** Alaska
- **C** Texas
- **D** France

2 Since 1959, the Dalai Lama has primarily lived in:

- **A** Beijing
- **B** Lhasa
- **C** Dharamsala
- **D** Mussoorie

3 Who was Tsongkhapa?

- **A** The first Dalai Lama
- **B** The founder of the Gelug tradition
- **C** One of the Panchen Lamas
- **D** An adviser to the Dalai Lama

4 According to Tibetan folklore, the Tibetan people are derived from which two beings?

- **A** A monkey and an ogress
- **B** A snow lion and a tiger
- **C** A god and a goddess
- **D** A yeti and an elephant

5 The sixth Dalai Lama is principally remembered today for:

- **A** His technological innovations
- **B** His development of the military
- **C** His philosophical prowess
- **D** His poetry

6 Tibetan script and grammar are closest to what other language?

- **A** Burmese
- **B** Sanskrit
- **C** Latin
- **D** Chinese

7 What four scenes inspired Siddhartha, the ancient prince, to follow a spiritual path?

- **A** An old person, a sick person, a dead person, and a religious person
- **B** An old person, a dead person, a baby, and a woman
- **C** A sick person, a dead person, a politician, and a worker
- **D** A priest, a rabbi, an imam, and a monk

8 What is Bon?

- **A** The earliest sect of Tibetan Buddhism
- **B** An indigenous tradition that predates Buddhism
- **C** The Tibetan word for Islam
- **D** The Tibetan word for Buddhism

9 What is a mandala?

- **A** A two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional space
- **B** An aid for specific kinds of meditation
- **C** An elaborate piece of artwork that can be painted with colored sand
- **D** All of the above

10 What food-based slang term is sometimes used to refer to the Tibetan people?

- **A** Yak milkers
- **B** *Momo* eaters
- **C** Tea drinkers
- **D** Tsampa-eaters

11 How did the monk Palgyi Dorje escape detection after he assassinated the 9th-century emperor Langdarma?

- **A** He used his spiritual powers to fly away.
- **B** He disguised himself as a soldier.
- **C** He turned his coat inside out and rode his horse across a river.
- **D** He fled on foot.

12 Why is the Nyingma school of Buddhism considered the "old tradition"?

- **A** It was founded by the tantric master Padmasambhava when he was an extremely old man.
- **B** The name distinguishes it from newer schools that formed later.
- **C** It consists of the most ancient Tibetan religious teachings.
- **D** It's the oldest religion in Tibet.

13 Who is responsible for the later dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet?

- **A** Atīśa
- **B** Yeshe Öd
- **C** Rinchen Zangpo
- **D** All of the above

14 **TRUE** or **FALSE**? The *tulku* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism ensures a clear-cut and unproblematic succession of leadership.

15 The Sakya religious tradition rose to political importance in Tibet with the help of whose empire?

- **A** The Chinese empire
- **B** The Mongol empire
- **C** The British empire
- **D** The Mughal empire

16 Which of the following might be construed as a problem with "yak milk"?

- **A** It isn't fit for human consumption.
- **B** It's used only to make cheese.
- **C** It doesn't really exist, because all yaks are male.
- **D** Yaks aren't real; therefore, it doesn't exist.

17 The Tibetan calendar is:

- **A** Lunar
- **B** Solar
- **C** Lunisolar
- **D** None of the above

18 What sect of Tibetan Buddhism held religious and political authority from the 17th century until the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the mid-20th century?

- **A** Nyingma
- **B** Kagyu
- **C** Sakya
- **D** Gelug

19 Who was Agvan Dorjiev, and what was his importance in Tibet?

- **A** He was a Russian dignitary who tried to form ties with Lhasa.
- **B** He was the 13th Dalai Lama's teacher and debate partner.
- **C** He was a British spy.
- **D** He was an envoy of the Mongol khans.

20 **TRUE** or **FALSE**? The 14th Dalai Lama signed a diplomatic treaty with China known as the Seventeen-Point Agreement.

21 What neighboring country allocated land for exiled Tibetans to build settlements on in the 1960s?

- **A** Bhutan
- **B** Nepal
- **C** China
- **D** India

22 The three animals at the center of the *srid pa'i 'khor lo* Bhavachakra—the "wheel of existence"—are a rooster, a snake, and a pig. What do they represent?

- **A** Lust, gluttony, and sloth
- **B** The Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha
- **C** Greed, hatred, and ignorance
- **D** Suffering, death, and liberation

23 What US government agency secretly trained Tibetan guerrilla fighters during the 1950s?

- **A** The US Army
- **B** The State Department
- **C** The CIA
- **D** None of the above

24 The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is:

- **A** Tibetan?
- **B** A book?
- **C** About death?

Answers to Course Quiz

1 **B.** The Tibetan Plateau is about 965,000 square miles, or one and a half times the size of Alaska.

2 **C.** Since 1959, the Dalai Lama has lived principally in Dharamsala.

3 **B.** Tsongkhapa was the founder of Tibetan Buddhism's Gelug tradition.

4 **A.** According to Tibetan folklore, the Tibetan people are derived from a monkey and an ogress.

5 **D.** The sixth Dalai Lama is remembered today mostly for his love poetry.

6 **B.** Tibetan script and grammar are closest to Sanskrit.

7 **A.** Siddhartha was inspired to follow a spiritual path for himself after witnessing the four sights: an old person, a sick person, a dead person, and a religious person.

8 **B.** Bon is an indigenous tradition that predates Buddhism.

9 **D.** A mandala is a two-dimensional artistic representation of a three-dimensional space. It's an aid for specific kinds of meditation. And sometimes it's painted with colored sand.

10 **D.** The Tibetan people are sometimes called tsampa-eaters because this snack of roasted flour and butter—which can be pretty tough for the rest of us to eat—is ubiquitous on Tibetan dinner tables.

11 **C.** After assassinating the emperor Langdarma, Palgyi Dorje escaped by turning his white coat inside out for its black lining and riding his dark-charcoal-stained horse across a river, leaving it white instead of black.

12 **B.** The Nyingma tradition is "old" in relation to the new schools of Tibetan Buddhism that formed later.

13 **D.** Atīśa, Yeshe Öd, and Rinchen Zangpo are each responsible for helping to revive Buddhism in Tibet during the period that became known as the later dissemination.

14 **FALSE.** The *tulku* tradition of succession by reincarnation is complicated and sometimes confusing, and historically, it has been vulnerable to meddling and manipulation.

15 **B.** The Mongol khans helped the Sakya religious tradition rise to political prominence in Tibet under the so-called patron-priest relationship.

16 C. We call it yak milk, but it comes from a *dri*, a female of the species. A yak is the male—and you probably don't want to try to milk one.

17 C. Lunisolar. The Tibetan calendar is based on the phases of the moon and is 354 days long, but it is occasionally adjusted to correspond to the approximately 365-day solar cycle.

18 D. The Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism, as embodied by the Dalai Lama himself, has traditionally exercised religious and political authority both in Tibet and in exile.

19 B. Agvan Dorjiev was the 13th Dalai Lama's teacher and debate partner.

20 FALSE. A Tibetan official named Ngapo Ngawang signed the Seventeen-Point Agreement under pressure in Beijing. The Dalai Lama accepted the agreement, albeit reluctantly.

21 D. India—under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru—allocated land for exiled Tibetans to build new settlements on, including offices for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

22 C. The rooster, snake, and pig represent greed, hatred, and ignorance.

23 C. The CIA secretly trained Tibetan guerrilla fighters during the 1950s to help offset Chinese influence in Tibet and as part of its efforts to combat communism worldwide.

24 You already learned the answer! Hopefully you got it right.

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