

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



February 1, 2009

## Can You Choose Your Reincarnated Successor?

By [MICHAEL POWELL](#)

The search for the present [Dalai Lama](#) commenced in earnest in 1935 when the embalmed head of his deceased predecessor is said to have wheeled around and pointed toward northeastern Tibet.

Then, the story goes, a giant, star-shaped fungus grew overnight on the east side of the tomb. An auspicious cloud bank formed and a regent saw a vision of letters floating in a mystical lake, one of which — Ah — he took to refer to the northeast province of Amdo.

High lamas set off at a gallop and found a 2-year-old boy in a distant village. This child, they determined after a series of tests, was the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

There is little linear about lama succession in Tibet. And now, as the 14th Dalai Lama journeys into his 74th year, the question of how to pick his successor has come to preoccupy both him and his followers, as Tibet stands at an ever more precarious political pass.

Late last year, the Chinese government again rejected the Dalai Lama's proposal for a rapprochement that would yield greater autonomy for Tibet. In recent days, Chinese troops have raided thousands of homes and detained at least 81 activists ahead of the 50th anniversary in March of the failed uprising that forced the Dalai Lama into exile in India. China seems inclined to tighten its grip and wait out the aging leader, insisting, a bit improbably for a government that is officially [atheist](#), that it has the legal right to designate the Dalai Lama's next reincarnation.

When Tibetan representatives met last autumn at their Parliament in Dharamsala, in the Indian Himalayas, their worries about the future echoed down the corridors. A few argued for a militant line, insisting on independence. A majority heeded the Dalai Lama's counsel to find a pacifist middle way. But the unanswered question remains: How much longer will Tibetans be able to rely on their charismatic and learned spiritual leader, whose persona is so entwined with the destiny of Tibet?

The Dalai Lama has openly speculated about his next life, his reincarnation, musing that he might upend historical and cultural practice and choose his reincarnation before his death, the better to safeguard his exiled people.

But doubts creep in.

Can even so highly evolved a Buddhist as the Dalai Lama select his reincarnation? Will upending the old way of searching for the Dalai Lama's incarnation, in which priests search for omens,

portents and meteorological signs, undermine the legitimacy of his successor?

Since he fled Chinese rule by foot and horseback over the Himalayas in 1959, the Dalai Lama has traveled restlessly and spoken passionately about Tibet. The fruits of his labors are many: The world is spotted with Tibetan centers, and prayer flags flap from Delhi to London to Zurich to Todt Hill in Staten Island. Tibetan culture is celebrated in Hollywood and in popular art. (Exiles number about 130,000; about six million Tibetans live in Tibet and China).

But a darker vision of Tibet's future is easily divined. This Dalai Lama dies and his successor is young and inexperienced and holds no sway in the chambers of the powerful. Slowly, ineluctably, the Tibetans become just another of the globe's landless peoples lost in the shadow of a rising superpower.

"Definitely when someone as charismatic and popular as the Dalai Lama passes away, the Tibetans will suffer from less outside attention," says Tenzin Tethong, a fellow in the Tibetan Studies Initiative at [Stanford University](#). "We will lose a strong unifying symbol."

The Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, is no theocratic traditionalist. Should his people ever reclaim Tibet, he says an elected parliament and prime minister should rule; the Dalai Lama would occupy a religious station.

"He is thinking outside the box about Dalai Lama rule," said Robert Thurman, a professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist studies at [Columbia University](#) and author of "Why the Dalai Lama Matters." "He's trying to get it through the Chinese heads that he's helpful to them. Their waiting for him to die is completely misplaced."

Tibetan Buddhists believe in reincarnation, although not in the sense of an irreducible self passing from body to body. They describe a dying candle lighting a new one; one's essence passes on.

Typically, when the Dalai Lama dies, the royal court appoints a regent who rules until the next reincarnation comes of age. Over the centuries some regents grew fond of their power and some Dalai Lamas expired prematurely, not to mention suspiciously. The sense of the regency as a time of peril persists.

It is within this context that the Dalai Lama speculates about how to pull off his next reincarnation. Perhaps the four sects that constitute Tibetan Buddhism might form a Tibetan version of the Roman Catholic College of Cardinals and pick a successor. Perhaps he will return as a girl, or as a non-Tibetan.

Or perhaps he will pick his future self.

Professor Thurman offers his own speculation. The Dalai Lama, he says, might declare that a younger lama is the reincarnation of his own long-dead regent. Then the Dalai Lama could die and reincarnate as a new baby, which would be identified after the usual study of portents and signs. "Maybe the one he names as the reincarnation of the regent would transfer the Dalai Lama title back to him when his next reincarnation comes of age," Mr. Thurman said.

Who could gainsay that?

Politics might pose a challenge as great as metaphysics. The Chinese insist that their army freed Tibetans from theocratic slavery and that Tibet is inseparable from China. They are not shy about enforcing their writ. In 1995, the Chinese government rejected the Dalai Lama's choice of a 6-year-old boy as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, a spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism's dominant sect, and then appointed its own. The child chosen by the Dalai Lama vanished into Chinese custody.

"The thinking is a bit odd," Mr. Thurman said, "as the Chinese Communists don't believe in former or future lives and it is illegal to propagate religion in China."

Still, China's power grows as the Dalai Lama ages. Han Chinese now crowd out ethnic Tibetans in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and exiles are uneasy, some taken again to searching for portents of what's to come. To find themselves without a transcendent leader at this time is, as D. H. Lawrence once wrote of the Brazilian Indians, to risk being consigned "to the dust where we bury the silent races."

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---