Religious Leaders: Dalai Lama

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.01.16

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**Synopsis:** The Dalai Lama is the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. He was born on July 6, 1935, in Taktser, China, with the name Lhamo Thondup. At age 15, he assumed political power of Tibet as the Dalai Lama. The People's Republic of China invaded that same year. Fearing assassination, he and thousands of followers fled to Dharamsala, India, where they established an alternative government. Since then, the Dalai Lama has taken numerous actions in hopes of establishing an independent Tibetan state within the People's Republic of China. The Dalai Lama has also participated in hundreds of humanitarian efforts worldwide. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In December 2008, the Dalai Lama announced his semi-retirement after having gallstone surgery.

**Early Life**

Lhamo Thondup was born on July 6, 1935, in Taktser, China, northeast of Tibet, to a peasant family. He is the head of state and spiritual leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile based in Dharamsala, India. A government-in-exile means a group claims to be a country’s true government, but it is unable to exercise its power and must live in a foreign country.
Tibetans believe each Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of his predecessor. For nearly 50 years, the Dalai Lama has wanted to establish Tibet as an independent, democratic state. Dalai Lamas are believed to be enlightened beings who have postponed their own afterlife and chosen to be reborn to benefit humanity.

**Buddhist Teachings**

Buddhism is one of the oldest religions practiced today. Originating in India, the religion spread throughout most of eastern and southern Asia. Buddhism is centered on four basic truths: Life is not perfect; people are left unsatisfied by trying to make life perfect; people can realize there is a better way to achieve fulfillment; and by living one’s life through wisdom, ethical conduct and mental discipline, people will reach enlightenment.

Buddhism encourages its followers to explore and test the truths. The Buddhist belief in rebirth is an idea of "renewal" and not exactly reincarnation, which is the rebirth of a soul in a new body.

**Becoming The Dalai Lama**

Young Lhamo was renamed Tenzin Gyatso and proclaimed the 14th Dalai Lama. He began his religious education at age 6. His schooling consisted of logic, Tibetan art and culture, the Indian language of Sanskrit, medicine and Buddhist philosophy, which is divided into five other categories dealing with the perfection of wisdom: monastic discipline, metaphysics, logic and epistemology, or the study of knowledge.

In 1950, at the age of 15, Tenzin assumed full political power as the Dalai Lama. However, his governorship was short. In October of that year, the People’s Republic of China invaded Tibet. The Dalai Lama and his closest advisers believed that the Chinese government was planning to assassinate him. Consequently, he and several thousand followers fled to Dharamsala in northern India and established an alternative government there.

At the time, the People’s Republic of China considered the Dalai Lama to be a symbol of an obsolete religious movement that was not in line with communist principles. More recently, the Chinese government alleges that the Dalai Lama is a separatist and a traitor for advocating Tibetan self-rule, and a terrorist for inciting Tibetan rebellion.

**Conflict With China**

Since the Chinese invasion, the Dalai Lama has taken numerous actions in hopes of establishing an independent Tibetan state within the People’s Republic of China. In 1963, he issued a draft constitution for Tibet containing a number of reforms to democratize the government.
During the 1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded and trained Tibetan forces to resist the Chinese invasion and occupation with the Dalai Lama’s full knowledge and support. The program was a failure as thousands of lives were lost in the resistance.

In September 1987, the Dalai Lama suggested talks between the Chinese and the Tibetans that would lead to an independent, democratic government for Tibet. The democracy would be associated with the People's Republic of China, and the Chinese government would be responsible for Tibet’s foreign policy and defense. But in 1991 the Tibetan government-in-exile declared this proposal invalid because of the Chinese leadership’s negative attitude toward it.

**Humanitarian Work**

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. In the tradition of Bodhisattva, which is a central principle in Buddhism of an enlightened person who helps others, the Dalai Lama has spent his life committed to benefiting humanity. Known as an effective public speaker, the Dalai Lama is often described as charismatic. His message is always one of peace and compassion for people all over the world. During his travels abroad, he has stressed the need for a better understanding of and respect among different faiths of the world.

In 1989, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts for the liberation of Tibet and his concern for global environmental problems. The Committee stated, “The Committee wants to emphasize the fact that the Dalai Lama in his struggle for the liberation of Tibet consistently has opposed the use of violence. He has instead advocated peaceful solutions based upon tolerance and mutual respect in order to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of his people.”

**Working For Peace**

Chinese President Hu Jintao has shown no signs of moving toward peace and reconciliation with Tibet. Some say that the Chinese government is just waiting for the Dalai Lama, now 81, to die. In December 2008, the Dalai Lama announced his semi-retirement after having gallstone surgery.

On March 10, 2011, on the 52nd anniversary of Tibet’s uprising against China, the Dalai Lama announced that he would give up his role as Tibet’s political leader. He said the decision came from a long-held belief that Tibetans need a freely elected leader.