

Note on the Statement by the Dalai Lama Concerning his Successor.

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Introduction

On September 24 2011 The Dalai Lama issued a statement on “the issue of his reincarnation”. The full text is at <http://dalailama.com/messages/tibet/reincarnation-statement>. It was issued following a meeting of the leaders of the main schools or sects of Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala, Northern India.

The timing is in part a response to the series of announcements by the authorities in Beijing in recent years that only they can select the next Dalai Lama. This claim was formalized in a legal document known “Order No. 5” issued by the State Administration of Religious Affairs in August 2007 (see <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/6231524.html> and http://www.savetibet.de/fileadmin/user_upload/content/berichte/Briefing_Papier_Reinkarnationsgesetz.pdf).

It also relates to the decision by the Dalai Lama this March, formalized on May 29th, to end the “Ganden Phodrang” system. That term had referred to the government led by the Dalai Lamas in Tibet since 1642 and in exile since 1959. Since May, it refers just to the private estate or office of the Dalai Lama. Technically the Dalai Lama is now just a religious figure, and his announcement relates to this new role, addressing the future continuity of his lineage if indeed it is decided that it is beneficial to continue it. But in practice his statement is much greater significance than that, because he remains the symbolic heart of Tibetan nationhood – a role noted in the exiles’ new constitution – and of far greater importance to Tibetan people, and therefore to Chinese policy-makers, than the government.

The fact that announcement would be made after a meeting of Tibetan religious leaders of all schools had been stated by the Dalai Lama at a press conference in the US in May 2011. The arrangement implies that his decision to use the new system was reached in agreement with all the main religious leaders of Tibetan Buddhism, not just those of his own Gelugpa school. This reflects the serious ongoing efforts of the Dalai Lama to counter the strong sectarian tradition among Tibetan Buddhists in the past, which are often found among western followers too. It suggests a discreet effort to remove the position of the Dalai Lama away from the sole orbit of the Gelugpa school.

The statement

The statement says that the announcement of the selection procedure for the Dalai Lama's successor will be postponed for about 14 years. The identity of the recognized person could already have been decided but is not revealed. The statement discusses only the likely methods of selection and not the identity of the person who will be selected.

One of its main messages is that only the Dalai Lama or the authorities or managers of his lineage can decide his successor and the method of selection. Therefore, he says, that decision cannot be made by China or any other person or entity.

The statement also discusses the role of rebirth in Buddhist thought, and argues that this is based on logical reasoning not faith, and it discusses the important role of reincarnation of lamas in the Tibetan traditions.

But in fact, the statement is not about reincarnation. In fact, it is an extremely judiciously worded announcement about the need to modify significantly the reincarnation system, or even a preparation for replacing it. This is discussed in the substantive part the statement towards the end, when it lays out a series of potential selection procedures that are going to be used to identify the Dalai Lama's successor. In particular, it is a detailed discussion of the emanation system in Tibetan Buddhism. Roughly, it indicates - if read carefully - that it is more than likely that his successor will be an emanation (*sprul ba*) not a reincarnation (*sprul sku*). It is possible that both could take place – first an emanation, and then a few years later, a reincarnation as well. But this is not discussed. In effect, the statement announces that for the Dalai Lama's succession, the reincarnation system at least for the time being will be replaced by an emanation system.

The text defines an emanation, in this context, as someone living and identified before the death of the predecessor lama. An emanation can be recognized on the grounds that he or she has the same "mind-stream" (*rgyud chig pa*, a special term in Buddhist philosophy) such as with a ma-ndey trulku (*ma-'das sprul sku*). Or an emanation can be appointed because that person had close personal contact with HH, or for some similar reason. The possibility of a ma-ndey trulku is already well known and has been widely discussed. But the possibility of an appointed sprul ba or emanation is new. By implication, this means that the successor will be most likely identified before the death of the current Dalai Lama, and will be an adult person, not necessarily a trulku or a child.

Recognizing the Emanation

Three possible methods of recognition procedure are listed. They all relate to recognizing an emanation, not to the standard system of recognizing a reincarnation; there is no discussion of the standard reincarnation process involving the search for a child. The statement does not mention several methods that had been raised by the Dalai Lama earlier, such as the "college of cardinals" type of selection procedure. This seems now to have been ruled out. The three procedures that are described are:

1. Emanations who belong to the same mind-stream as the predecessor

The statement says that "ordinary sentient beings generally cannot manifest an emanation before death (ma-dhey tulku), but superior Bodhisattvas, who can manifest themselves in hundreds or thousands of bodies simultaneously, can manifest an emanation before death [because they] belong to the same mind-stream as the predecessor." Note that every Dalai Lama is considered to be an emanation of the Bodhisattva Chenrezig, as well as a reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama. Many high trulkus are considered to be emanations as well as reincarnations. But in this case, this refers to a ma-ndey trulku, a person recognized before death as spiritually identical with the predecessor. This would only apply to a person who is said to have achieved a very high state of realization in which he or she is in effect indistinguishable from the Dalai Lama. The actual explanation in Buddhist terms of this phenomenon is much more complex than can be described here. Technically speaking, the current Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama, Gendun Choekyi Nyima, is sometimes understood to be a ma-ndey trulku because he was born within six months of his predecessor, so his conception took place before the death.

Chinese officials are known to have stated in meetings with Tibetan scholars in 1997 that this practice of pre-death recognition is not allowed by the state.

2. Emanations who are connected to others through the power of karma and prayers

The statement says: "In the case of a Lama who is an ordinary being, ... someone else with connections to that Lama through pure karma and prayers may be recognized as his or her emanation." I think this means that a person can be recognized as the emanation of the Dalai Lama because he or she has or had close connections to the current Dalai Lama. Perhaps this means that if the Dalai Lama dies or becomes incapable before announcing his successor, a person can be appointed by the religious authorities or managers of his lineage on the grounds of their close connection to him. This means that the Dalai Lama does not have to have made the announcement himself, and that the person does not have to be someone with a high level of spiritual realization.

The word "emanation" is used here, not "reincarnation", so it is not so likely that it refers to a child who is recognized as a reincarnation, as in the normal system. An emanation in this statement is used to mean someone who continues the spiritual activity and work of a person who is still alive, though generally it can apply to a person who is recognized after the predecessor has died as well. It appears to mean that a person could be recognized because they appear at the right time as a result of prayers and their karma, before or after the current Dalai Lama dies, without being recognized belonging to or having achieved unity with the Dalai Lama's mind-stream, and without being appointed.

3. Emanations who come as a result of blessings and appointment.

The meaning of this seems relatively clear: it appears to refer to a person who is appointed. The statement says: "it is possible for the Lama to appoint a successor who is either his disciple or someone young who is to be recognized as his emanation." This leaves the Dalai Lama the option of appointing someone who is not a major spiritual figure, and who has not necessarily worked closely with him in the past. It widens further the range of possible people who could be identified as a successor. It may be designed to include the option of appointing someone who is young, and who therefore cannot have worked closely over many years with the current Dalai Lama.

The first method is well known and has been widely discussed. But the other two of these methods – the appointment method and the close connection method – are new, at least to me.

Multiple Successors

There are two important details which are mentioned in the statement. The first appears to be a confirmation that an emanation can be appointed without having to assert that they have an equally high level of realization to the Dalai Lama:

"Since these options are possible in the case of an ordinary being, an emanation before death that is not of the same mind-stream is feasible".

This confirms that an emanation can be appointed by the Dalai Lama, or can be appointed because of their close connection to him by the lineage authorities, without being recognized as having achieved the same mind-stream as the Dalai Lama (ie, without being recognized as a ma-ndey trulku).

The second allows for more than one emanation:

"In some cases one high Lama may have several reincarnations simultaneously, such as incarnations of body, speech and mind and so on."

This is very well known and is quite common with high lamas, but has never happened with the Dalai Lamas before. This was largely because the Dalai Lamas have usually been throne-holders of the Tibetan state until this year, and so having more than one would have been politically problematic.

The Lineage Authorities

A third point is mentioned incidentally but is entirely new: the identity of the lineage authorities is specified. The lineage authorities or managers for most lamas are the staff and monks of their "labrang" or private residence, sometimes referred to as an estate. It is always this office that is in charge of searching for a reincarnation.

Before the Dalai Lamas became rulers of Tibet in the mid-17th century, the labrang of their lineage was based in a building known as the Gaden Phodrang within Drepung Monastery near Lhasa. But since the 5th Dalai Lama took up a political role, until this year, the responsibility for finding his successors was in effect a complex combination of his private monastery, the Tibetan government and other institutions, such as, in exile, his Private Office.

But the statement indicates that the Tibetan Government is no longer involved in the Dalai Lama's lineage: it gives the government no role in the future process. Neither does it specify the Private Office, Namgyal monastery, or the Gelugpa school as such as having a role either. Instead it specifies that management of the lineage in the absence of a Dalai Lama will be in the hands of "the Gaden Phodrang Trust". This body is not previously known to outsiders. It appears to have been recently constituted, and is said to have an office in Dharamsala within the Private Office.

The officials who will run this trust, and thus what is in effect the labrang, have not been named, but there is some speculation that they might include the former Prime Minister, Samdong Rinpoche, who recently took up a position in the Private Office.

In addition, the statement says that the decisions of the Gaden Phodrang Trust are to be cleared with the heads of the Tibetan Buddhist school and the main oracles. The decision-making process is thus separated at least in principle from the Tibetan Government and no special status is given to the Gelugpa school; a more ecumenical or non-sectarian approach is indicated. The relevant oracles have always been involved in such decisions, but the involvement of all the leaders of the Tibetan Buddhist schools is new, as far as I know. This could be a significant historical shift, since previously the Dalai Lama lineage was strongly associated with the Gelugpa school even though some individual Dalai Lamas sometimes took up and defended the practices of other schools. It is possible this is also in part a reaction to the damaging and brutal sectarian conflict in recent years within the Gelugpa school concerning the Shugden cult, which the Dalai Lama has banned his followers from joining (see http://info-buddhism.com/dorje_shugden_controversy_von_Brueck.html). Members of the cult, which formerly included many of the most senior Gelugpa lamas, strongly oppose the Dalai Lama or any Gelugpas carrying out rituals or practices of other schools, particularly those of the Nyingmapa school.

Conclusion

In summary, the statement indicates that in future an emanation system will be used for the Dalai Lama lineage, instead of or as well as a trulku system. He is clearly preparing the public for this outcome. The concept of emanation is not a new theory or practice and is already well known in Tibetan Buddhism, with many high lamas also considered to be emanations. But it is very unusual for the recognition of an emanation to be used as a formal succession system. It is entirely new for the Dalai Lama lineage to use this system to identify a successor, instead of waiting for a trulku to appear. It is also new in that we now learn that an emanation can be appointed, without necessarily being seen as highly realized.

An emanation is likely to mean that an adult or young person will be recognized as the successor, and probably before the death of the Dalai Lama. Although three main ways of recognizing that emanation are given, at least for outsiders the differences between them are matters of detail.

The emanation system would avoid the problem of an interregnum, which always occurs in the trulku system. The Dalai Lama had been expected to provide a solution to that problem, and this is clearly it. However, the Tibetan people have not been led for centuries by a person who is an emanation but who is not also a high-ranking reincarnation, and there have been few if any emanations who were not already recognized as very high-ranking reincarnations (except in the Sakya school, which uses a descent, not a reincarnation system).

So some Tibetans have expressed discomfort about the prospect of following a person as their religious or symbolic leader who only has emanation status. In the past, Tibetans attempted to solve the interregnum problem between Dalai Lamas by appointing a Regent, but this almost always failed – the Regents were seen as weak or corrupt, and as lacking authority – even though almost all Regents were “hutuktu” or reincarnations of the highest rank. This time, for the first time in some three centuries, the successor of the Dalai Lama will have no political obligations. But some Tibetans think it will still be hard for his successor to sustain popular support without being a reincarnation.

So this statement says that the Dalai Lama will announce the decision about his successor, or at least the procedure for the recognition, when he is 90, that is, in about 2025. It implies that the successor will be a person who is close to him either through spiritual realization or through work and contact. It implies that he or she will probably be an adult and may take up that role before he dies, though it could also be a “young person”. It says that there could be more than one of these successors. It clearly implies that there is no need to wait for the discovery of a reincarnation. It thus leaves open the possibility, which is not unlikely, that if such a child is found, he or she might take over from the emanated successor once he or she reaches maturity, thus resolving the problem of the interregnum.

The announcement of the introduction of an emanation system will lead to speculation that the Karmapa, leader of the Karma Kagyu school, may be recognized in that role. The statement can be read as pointing towards loosening the rigid traditional Gelugpa affiliation of the Dalai Lamas. But even so, and even in 14 years time, it might be difficult to appoint a non-Gelugpa to that position. There are several other lamas who are less prominent among foreigners but are already being talked about, who could emerge as candidates. The statement is clearly designed to leave the Dalai Lama and his lineage managers a range of possibilities when they come to making their choice, and that seems to be one purpose of it.

This is an intriguing and timely initiative that involves much creative recombining of important but neglected elements of Tibetan Buddhist precedent. It is a complete rejection of the position taken by the current Chinese authorities and will be rejected by them in turn. But it has been presented in a traditional manner that addresses many of the weaknesses of the reincarnation system, though in the long term it may be hard for it to gain deep acceptance from the Tibetan public once the Dalai Lama has died. Nevertheless, it represents another example of the Dalai Lama's skill at carefully adapting religious and cultural traditions to suit modern conditions.

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