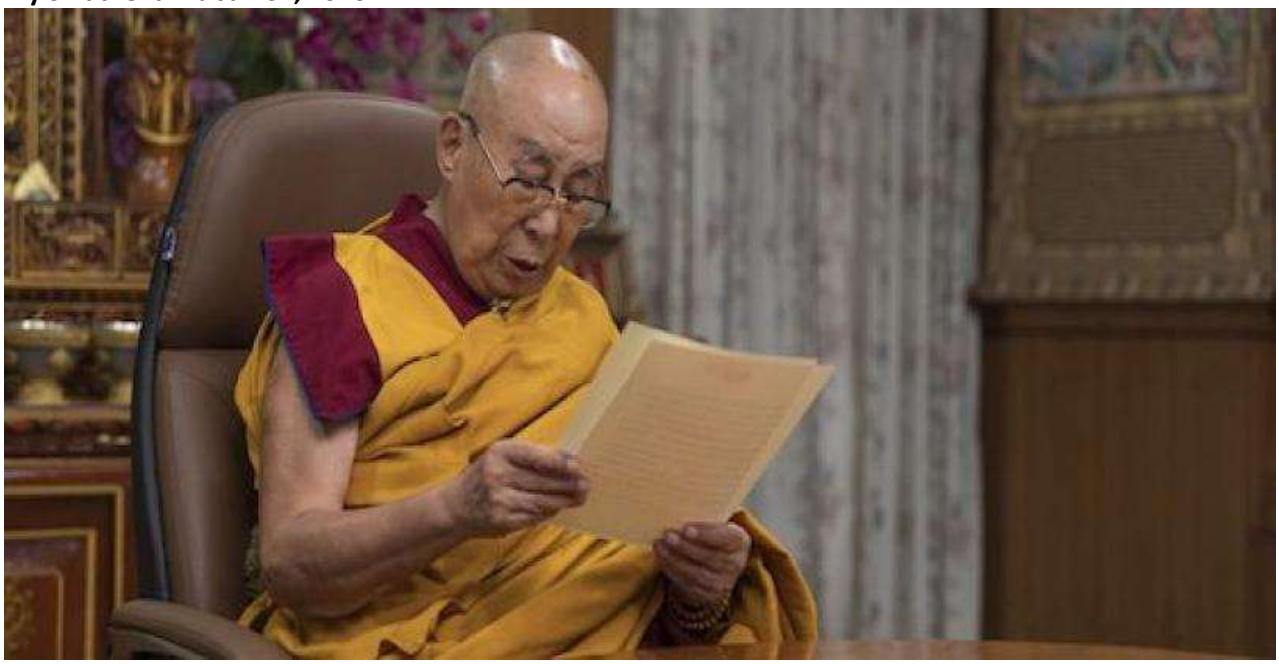
How Not To Read The Dalai Lama's Statement On His Reincarnation

Despite China's might and backing, Gyeltsen Norbu has lacked legitimacy and following among Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists elsewhere, and many suspect the 15th Dalai Lama appointed by Beijing will suffer the same fate. The Dalai Lama has emphasised that China must reach a resolution on the Tibetan question during his lifetime, and many fear that without his moral authority, no solution will have widespread acceptance among the Tibetan people.

By Swati Chawla Jan 07, 2026



The Dalai Lama

In the week that he turned 90, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama made the much-anticipated announcement on his succession along anticipated lines. At the start of the Fifteenth Tibetan Religious Conference in Dharamsala on July 2, he said that the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue after him, and that the responsibility for finding his successor will rest with the Gaden Phodrang Trust, based in his private office in Dharamsala.

Since he came into exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama had been publicly equivocal, often playfully and provocatively so, about the question. He had been saying since 1969 that there would be a reincarnation only if it served the Tibetan people. He also disentangled the shared Buddhist belief in rebirth—namely, that all sentient beings undergo rebirth until they are liberated—from reincarnation, the deliberate, formal process through which the successor is identified and vested with institutional authority. Among his more memorable jibes was throwing down the gauntlet to China—an avowedly atheistic state that, he noted, was more obsessed with his reincarnation than he was: if China were to get involved in the business of recognising the reincarnations of lamas, it should first find reincarnations of its leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping!

At the same time, he conceded that people from all over the world had petitioned him for years to ensure that the lineage continued. This included senior monks from the different Tibetan traditions, Tibetans within and outside Tibet, and Tibetan Buddhists from across the Himalayas and Mongolia.

A Voice for the Voiceless

For observers of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan movement in exile, there was little doubt that, when the time came, he would acquiesce to growing demands for the continuation of the lineage. The July statement was foreshadowed in a statement from 24 September 2011, and most recently in his 2025 autobiography, Voice for the Voiceless: Over Seven Decades of Struggle with China for My Land and My People.

He stated in the autobiography that the purpose of reincarnation is to continue the work of one's predecessor. And that the "traditional mission of the Dalai Lama… [is] to be the voice for universal compassion, the spiritual

leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and the symbol of Tibet embodying the aspirations of the Tibetan people." It was for that reason that "the new Dalai Lama will be born in the free world" (p. 140, added emphasis). Yet, devoid of this context and historical memory, headlines reduced his reflections to a soundbite—"The Dalai Lama will be reborn in the free world"—followed by frenzied and often superficial speculation about where that might be, along with the reductive interpretation that “free world” simply meant “anywhere but China.”

'Tibetan Buddhism with Chinese characteristics'

In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama opened the chapter on reincarnation, titled "Situation Today and the Path Forward," with accounts of the forced assimilation of Tibetan children in Chinese state-run boarding schools, where their education is conducted almost exclusively in Mandarin—condemned by the European Parliament, the UNHCR, and the US Congress (p. 135). He noted the "significant increase in pervasive surveillance of both everyday life and internet use," and the fact that "any display of the Tibetan national flag or my portrait remains banned" (p. 136). He also mentioned the "tightening around the Tibetan people's religious life," especially in monasteries and nunneries, to bring about the so-called "Tibetan Buddhism with Chinese characteristics" (p. 136). It is noteworthy that weeks after the Dalai Lama's announcement, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Lhasa to mark the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region, where he stressed the need to “guide Tibetan Buddhism in adapting itself to socialist society”.

To read his statement solely as a geopolitical provocation is to miss the deliberate, cautious, but ultimately hopeful nature of the Dalai Lama’s message. It is also stripped of the broader context regarding what his line has historically meant to Tibetans and what he means to them today. To appreciate this context, we must understand how the Dalai Lama established the framework for envisioning the Tibetan struggle. As outlined in the Strasbourg proposal in 1988, and reiterated frequently since, the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) have asked for meaningful autonomy—including the preservation of Tibet's language, culture, and religion—within the People's Republic of China, and not complete independence. They have routinely sounded the alarm on the repercussions of Chinese actions on the fragile ecosystem of the Tibetan plateau, encompassing issues such as excessive deforestation, river damming, excessive mining, water pollution, and the forced relocation of nomadic populations from their traditional habitats.

Rival Dalai Lamas?

It is now widely anticipated that there will be two rival Dalai Lamas, one appointed by Beijing and the other by Tibetans in exile. The succession of senior lamas has frequently been contentious and politically fraught before, including in the Dalai Lama line— disputes over the succession of the Fifth Dalai Lama had lasted for over thirty years. More recently, the Eleventh Panchen Lama Gendun Choekyi Nyima (b. 1989), recognised by the Dalai Lama in 1995, was forcibly disappeared by the Chinese authorities in May that year. Another child, Gyeltsen Norbu (b. 1990), was installed in his stead six months later. Gendun Choekyi Nyima has not been seen in public for thirty years, and Gyeltsen Norbu primarily lives in Beijing.

If the career of the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama is anything to go by, reincarnation, despite the political machinations that accompany it, is still primarily a religious issue for Tibetans. Despite China's might and backing, Gyeltsen Norbu has lacked legitimacy and following among Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists elsewhere, and many suspect the 15th Dalai Lama appointed by Beijing will suffer the same fate. The Dalai Lama has emphasised that China must reach a resolution on the Tibetan question during his lifetime, and many fear that without his moral authority, no solution will have widespread acceptance among the Tibetan people.

And thus, too, it behoves us to read his statement on reincarnation advisedly. Without historical memory, it collapses into a geopolitical one-upmanship; read within it, its wider stakes—especially for those beyond the Tibetan community—come sharply into view. For Tibetan Buddhists in the Himalaya, it concerns the credibility and continuity of institutions that have anchored religious life, with urgent implications for India as the seat of the most important Tibetan Buddhist institutions in exile. And for many watching askance from the corridors of political power, the difference between a careful reading and a reductive one lies in whether reincarnation is understood as a religious and historical process whose authority arises through lived relations between a lineage and its people, rather than through sovereign decree—or is instrumentalised for control and the symbolic display of power.

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