



The 14th Dalai Lama's Dharma Teachings As A Cultural Ritual: Preserving Tibetan Cultural Identity In Dharamshala, HP. India

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Abstract: The Dharma Teachings given by the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamshala are more than just opportunities to receive Buddhist guidance; This ethnographic analysis explores the teachings as a cultural rite in the Tibetan refugee population and its function in preserving Buddhism and cultural identity in exile. The research was conducted in 2024–2026. Research methods involved participant observation, detailed observation and extensive interviewing of eleven key informants, and constant monitoring of two other community members. The research shows that the teachings affect the everyday lives before, during and after the event, through collective participation, sacred places, intergenerational transmission and collective memories of refugees. They act as a social convention that impacts both participants and nonparticipants, simultaneously offering a setting for the reproduction of language, culture, memory, religious principles, and Tibetan national awareness. The investigation presents the conceptual paradigm "Dalai Lama's Teaching as a Core Ritual," highlighting how these four interwoven dimensions support the sustenance of Tibetan cultural identity in exile.

Keywords: Dharma Teachings of the 14th Dalai Lama; Tibetan Refugee Community; Cultural Identity; Ritual; Dharamshala.

INTRODUCTION

The Dharma Teachings of the 14th Dalai Lama are frequent spiritual gatherings in Dharamshala that attract Tibetans from throughout India and outside. Empirical observations show that the town begins to shift about a week before the event: hotels become fully booked, retail establishments and dining venues see an increase in consumers, and thoroughfares leading to the Main Tibetan Temple have increased traffic. As a result, the teachings have an impact on life outside of the temple.

This study looks into the manifestations, significance, and functions of the Teachings as a cultural ritual, as well as how ritualistic activities preserve Buddhism and strengthen cultural identity in the setting of exile.

Methodology

This qualitative study incorporates ethnographic methods. Fieldwork data were collected from 2024 to 2026 when the researcher lived among Tibetans, studying the Tibetan language and taking part in local religious and cultural events. Participant observation comprised acts performed prior to, during, and following the Teachings, such as preparation, ritual environment, ritual activities, and contextual interactions. Daily actions were closely monitored in order to match documented narratives with actual behavior. Eleven key informants were interviewed in depth, including monks, first-generation Tibetans, businesspeople, social activists, young adults, students, and lay contributors. Two others, an elderly lama and an English instructor, were observed on a regular basis but not formally interviewed. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Field notes, observations, interviews and documentary materials were analyzed through content analysis and anthropological interpretation.

The Teachings as a Ritual That Shapes the Rhythm of Life in the Tibetan Refugee Community

The teachings are not limited to the hours of the ceremony. In the week before the ceremony, Dharamshala saw an influx of Tibetans and Buddhist visitors from all over. Travel routes from New Delhi grew packed as airline tickets, bus fares, and hotel rates nearly quadrupled, bringing a massive wave of customers to Tibetan-owned businesses. Everywhere you went, people were talking about registration, travel plans, and scheduling their attendance. Local shops prepared to close their doors for the event, and families shifted their daily routines around. Ultimately, the religious calendar and the Dalai Lama's schedule became woven directly into the fabric of daily life.

Even everyday greetings centered around the upcoming Teachings. Locals constantly asked one another and foreign residents whether they had registered or secured their Teaching Pass. Having lived and studied Tibetan in the neighborhood for over three years, I ran into this exact situation myself. Before registering, I often told my Tibetan friends that I had already finished the process. I didn't mean to hide the truth; I just wanted to save their time and avoid making them patiently explain the whole procedure over again. This whole dynamic shows how deeply participation has become a shared social norm. Anyone caught unprepared might feel like an outsider, even though no one is actually forcing them to attend.

Once the Teachings wrap up, the conversations naturally shift. People start asking, 'How were the teachings?' or 'What did His Holiness talk about today?' In this way, the ritual lives on through daily chatter long after the actual ceremony ends.

During the event itself, an unusual quiet settles over the streets of the Tibetan refugee community. Tibetan-owned shops lock up, schools pause their classes, and local institutions shut down for the day, even though Indian-owned businesses stay open. Walk down the street before noon, and you will find almost every Tibetan café and restaurant closed. This temporary pause doesn't come from government mandates; it is a collective choice driven by the community's shared sense of moral duty. Ultimately, the Teachings reshape how the community spends its time, putting business, schooling, and daily work on the back burner for a moment.

Take Tenzin (a pseudonym), for example. Now 32, she was born in Tibet and made the grueling trek across the Himalayas to India when she was just 13. Today, she runs a small restaurant on Jogiwara Road, only a short walk from the main Tibetan Temple. Closing her restaurant for half a day causes direct loss of income, yet she said that she has never neglected attending the Teachings since settling in Dharamshala: "It feels as if I have returned home and found a place of spiritual refuge. When I sit in the Main Tibetan Temple, surrounded by the sound of chanting and seeing His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I feel as though I have returned

to Tibet once again” (Tenzin, interview, September 30, 2024). Her decision represents an exchange between economic benefit and psychological value that cannot be measured monetarily. Her “return home” is not physical return to Tibet but re-entry into a space of collective memory and shared identity through ritual.

Although attendance is not formally compulsory, it is widely recognized as a social norm. During the Teachings, very few Tibetans appear in public, and even those who travel to the Main Tibetan Temple generally remain inside their residences.

Take Lobsang (a pseudonym), a 78-year-old lama deeply devoted to Buddhism. Despite spending hours each day chanting, he never attended the Dalai Lama's public teachings, choosing instead to stay inside his monastery. I observed a similar pattern with Tashi (a pseudonym), a 27-year-old English instructor. Although modern-educated and fluent in English, she rarely went to the Teachings, yet she never socialized or went out during the event, choosing to stay indoors instead. Despite their vast differences in age and lifestyle, both reacted the same way. For them, staying away didn't mean carrying on with ordinary public life; it was about quietly adapting their behavior to honor the community's ceremonial atmosphere.

My own fieldwork experiences mirrored this pattern. While I managed to attend over 80% of the teachings, on the days I missed, I stayed home and sometimes even told Tibetan friends I had gone. This was not due to fear of judgment as no one forced attendance but to avoid social friction. Explaining my absence felt like it might disappoint others or make me feel detached from the shared community spirit. Saying 'I already went' simply became the easiest way out

Interestingly, few other foreigners felt this subtle pressure. Several Thai residents in Dharamshala, for instance, maintained their daily routines, viewing nonattendance as a purely personal choice. This contrast indicates that social pressure stemmed from one's integration into the community rather than the ritual itself. Having embedded myself within the Tibetan community-learning the language and building deep ties, Consequently, I absorbed these unwritten norms, experiencing the undercurrents of social pressure just like any group member.

Ultimately, the experiences of Lobsang, Tashi, and myself reveal that the Teachings' authority extends far beyond the temple, shaping the entire community. This aligns with Bell's (1992) concept of ritualization, where specific practices deliberately distinguish certain activities from the mundane to elevate their social significance. By closing shops, pausing lessons, and withdrawing from public view, the community places the Teachings at the apex of its social hierarchy. Foucault's (1977) insights into self-regulation are equally telling; behavior is driven not by formal mandates, but by internalized expectations and the collective social gaze. This explains why even non-attendees altered their routines rather than continuing business as usual. Guided by interpersonal sensitivity and a desire for communal harmony, this self-regulation proves that the ritual exerts power not through institutional coercion, but through the community's own internalized values.

Ritual: A Space for Shared Emotion, Memory, and Healing in the Tibetan Diaspora Community

Ultimately, participating in the Teachings creates a unique space for shared emotion, memory, and healing, allowing Tibetans in exile to collectively express their attachment to a lost homeland. Inside the Main Tibetan Temple, participants clutch white *khata* scarves while waiting to greet the Dalai Lama. As he walks past, they press their hands together, weep openly, and reach out, hoping to catch a brief touch of his hand. I observed that those fortunate enough to touch him would immediately reach back to hold the hands of family or friends, sharing the divine blessing. The true value of the ritual lies not just in doctrinal teachings, but in this active, shared experience that weaves a powerful emotional bond among the people.

As Sangpo (a pseudonym), a 76-year-old first-generation refugee who fled across the Himalayas as a child, beautifully put it: 'When we no longer have a country, the only thing that confirms that we are still Tibetan, and the only thing that no one can take away from us, is our faith in the Dalai Lama and Buddhism' (Sangpo, interview, March 25, 2026). For him, religion goes far beyond personal conviction; it stands as the final remnant of a nation when the physical homeland has been taken away. Consequently, taking part in the Teachings becomes a way to reinforce Tibetan identity through shared religious practice rather than overt political defiance.

During an interview on October 28, 2024, Lhamo, a 26-year-old social activist, stressed that the Teachings help refugees cope with the pain of losing their homeland and family without letting anger take over. This sentiment resonates with Dolma, a 25-year-old volunteer English teacher, who noted that the Dalai Lama's message of compassion allows refugees to shed hatred and navigate displacement with hope. Together, these stories reveal how the ritual does far more than pass down doctrine; it heals collective societal wounds. Viewed through Kleinman et al.'s (1997) lens on social suffering, my field data shows that ritual does not merely house this pain. Instead, it sparks the optimism and moral resilience needed to keep a shared identity alive through active social engagement, where memory, faith, and hope are continually reborn.

For some, this connection is deeply physical. Take Dorje, a middle-aged man who never misses a teaching and shared a simple wish: 'I hope that one day my head will be touched by His Holiness's hand' (Dorje, interview, October 1, 2024). Hearing the words is not enough; he longs for tangible contact. Along the procession path, devotees from various countries stood waiting, white scarves in hand, reflecting that exact yearning. Ultimately, touching the Dalai Lama's hand transcends physical contact; it is a direct encounter with a living symbol of religious and historical continuity, offering a lifeline of enduring hope for the entire refugee community.

This intense emotional bond isn't confined to the first generation. Consider Rinzin (a pseudonym), a 22-year-old born and raised in the Dharamshala refugee community. Although passionate about Tibetan dance and youth culture, he used to attend the Teachings only occasionally. That changed as the Dalai Lama grew older; now, he attends every session. Rinzin explained that his attendance goes beyond earning good karma; it is a profound display of faith and a prayer for the Dalai Lama to live past 113—a milestone His Holiness frequently mentions. For Rinzin, ensuring this continuous spiritual guidance is paramount (Rinzin, interview, March 14, 2025). Ultimately, actions like his tether the community's future to the Dalai Lama's lifespan, anchoring memories of the past while fueling optimism for their future in exile.

The sheer scale of this devotion became obvious the moment the Dalai Lama entered the ceremonial grounds. I watched as hundreds raised white scarves high, many pressing their palms together with tears streaming down their faces, while others softly murmured prayers, pressing as close to the procession path as possible. This wasn't merely respect for a monk; it was a visceral reaction to the living embodiment of Tibetan nationhood, faith, and identity. In the end, taking part in the Teachings actively weaves faith, memory, healing, and hope right into the daily fabric of the Tibetan diaspora.

Listening to the Dalai Lama's Teachings as a Space for the Construction of Young People's Identity

The fieldwork tells a more complex story than the assumption that under globalization younger generations downsize religious participation. Young Tibetans in Dharamshala continue to participate, but their objectives differ from previous generations, who place a greater emphasis on merit and blessings. Many young participants see the Teachings as a way to better grasp what it means to be Tibetan in the modern world, as well as to integrate religion, culture, and the refugee community's future.

During our interview in September 2024, Karma, a 25-year-old woman born and raised in the Tibetan refugee community, pointed out a clear generational shift. While her parents' generation approached the Teachings primarily to pray, receive blessings, and accumulate spiritual merit, younger Tibetans see it differently. For them, it is less about traditional temple rituals and more about mental science and reasoning. She explained that His Holiness teaches them how to question and debate the Dharma, making Tibetan Buddhism feel modern, profoundly relevant, and genuinely helpful for easing the stresses of student life (Karma, interview, September 2024). Through her lens, the younger generation isn't turning away from religion. Instead, they are engaging with Tibetan Buddhism more rationally, filtering it through the realities of modern life. Attending these sessions essentially creates a dynamic learning space where youth can ask questions and weave Buddhist philosophy directly into their daily lives.

Karma's perspective aligns smoothly with Giddens' (1991) theory of the reflexive project of the self, which argues that identity is constantly produced and sustained through ongoing self-interpretation. Rather than blindly inheriting religious rituals, young Tibetans actively analyze and rationalize Buddhist core concepts. By focusing heavily on logic and the science of the mind, the Teachings serve as a perfect example of how ancient traditions can be reinterpreted, finding a powerful and deeply meaningful place in contemporary life.

Tashi (pseudonym), a 17-year-old student at Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), explained that while Tibetan is taught in school, attending the Teachings allows her to experience the language at a deeper level: "We study basic Tibetan through the regular curriculum at school, but during the teachings His Holiness uses profound Tibetan language filled with literature and classical poetry." When our school closes so that we can attend the lectures, it's like attending to the best Tibetan language and literature class taught by the best instructor in the world" (Tashi, interview, October 1, 2024). Beyond spiritual merit, the ceremony passes down a rich tapestry of language, literature, and cultural heritage elements that formal schooling alone can never fully replicate. Indeed, its sacred nature weaves directly into how young people learn their culture and form their own identities.

This cultural connection resonates deeply with Wangmo, a 23-year-old social activist. She recalled: 'As a child, I was always overjoyed when school was canceled. But as I grew older, I saw why the school placed so much emphasis on attending classes. For Tibetans in exile, Buddhism and Tibetan nationhood are inextricably linked. Sitting together in the temple is like helping to preserve our culture in a faraway land' (Wangmo, interview, September 30, 2024). What Wangmo's journey shows is that young people are not passive onlookers; they actively champion the survival of their community's identity. Ultimately, the Teachings bridge generations by passing along collective memory, deep social bonds, and a resilient sense of Tibetan identity. This transmission doesn't rely on top-down pressure. Instead, it thrives on the genuine, personal meanings that young youth carve out of their daily lives within the diaspora.

The Teaching as a Mechanism for Sustaining the Identity of the Tibetan Refugee Community

The Teachings are an important mechanism for sustaining Tibetan identity in exile. "Going to the Main Tibetan Temple is not just a religious ritual: it constructs and reaffirms a shared sense of being Tibetan. During my time in the field, I noticed that Tibetans living in other parts of India—including refugees from distant states—willingly endured high travel expenses and grueling, multi-day journeys just to reach Dharamshala. Looking past individual travel motivations, the ritual functions as a vital space for people to actively rebuild their ties to faith, nationhood, and community.

This sense of connection is closely tied to worries about the community's shifting demographics. Take JoJo, a 46-year-old travel agent who sells bus, train, and plane tickets. Born and raised in India, he holds Indian citizenship but remains deeply invested in the future of the Tibetan refugee population. He pointed out a

growing trend: many young Tibetans are migrating to Western nations in pursuit of better economic opportunities and a higher quality of life. While he views this relocation as a personal right, he deeply worries that such widespread demographic scattering will stall the transmission of the Tibetan language, culture, and way of life. JoJo stressed that as long as children grow up in Dharamshala or other Tibetan settlements within India, they remain immersed in their heritage visiting temples, attending the Teachings, walking the *kora*, and celebrating religious festivals with family. Rather than relying on textbooks or rigid classrooms, these real-life moments naturally instill Tibetan language, everyday etiquette, customs, and a shared identity through lived experience (JoJo, interview, April 19, 2025).

A similar commitment drew Geshe Norbu, a 50-year-old monk from southern India, to the area. Arriving in Dharamshala to mark the historic occasion of the Dalai Lama's 90th birthday, he rented an apartment for several months just to ensure he wouldn't miss the Teachings and long-life prayer ceremonies. When asked what compelled him to make the journey, he offered a powerful perspective: 'For Tibetans, attending the Teachings is more than just a personal belief. "To keep the Tibetan spirit alive is the work of the whole nation" (Geshe Norbu, interview, March 14, 2025). Ultimately, his journey demonstrates how crossing state lines, dedicating time to ritual, and staying in a sacred space function as deeply symbolic acts, anchoring a profound sense of belonging that defies physical distance. This aligns closely with McGranahan's (2010) argument that refugee identities are continuously forged through everyday practices and interactions. My field findings highlight that the Teachings serve as a cornerstone in this process, offering a unique avenue for Tibetans from far-flung regions to gather, collaborate, and reaffirm their shared allegiance. Far beyond a simple religious gathering, this ceremony stands as a critical shield safeguarding Tibetan language, culture, historical memory, and collective consciousness

Conclusion

Within the Dharamshala refugee community, the 14th Dalai Lama's Dharma Teachings operate as far more than mere Buddhist instruction; they function as a vital cultural mechanism for sustaining Tibetan identity in exile. Active participation in these rituals continually regenerates collective memory, language, and social bonds through everyday community life.

This study underscores that sacred space, collective practice, intergenerational transmission, and shared histories are foundational to this process. Rather than relying on formal institutions or overt politics, identity maintenance remains deeply rooted in religious practices and interpersonal ties. Here, the Main Tibetan Temple anchors the community as a central gathering hub where the Teachings reshape daily social rhythms. Through lived experience rather than textbooks, younger Tibetans absorb language, cultural etiquette, and faith, effectively bridging the community's future with the historical trauma of displacement. Ultimately, these findings suggest that diaspora rituals serve objectives far beyond the spiritual, safeguarding cultural continuity and ethnic survival despite geographical dislocation and the lack of a defined homeland.

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