

Brothers First

What's it like being the Dalai Lama's kid brother? Tendzin Choegyal talks with **Lisa Katayama** about his struggles with rebellion, alcoholism, and depression, and the big brother who has stood by him through it all.

Tendzin Choegyal sits across from me on his living room sofa and lights a cigarette. “I got in trouble with my brother once for smoking,” he says, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “He was *on* me.”

It's a cool fall evening in the Himalayas, and I am staying at Kashmir Cottage, a white brick house at the foothills of the Tibetan community-in-exile's hub near Dharamsala. The Dalai Lama's family settled here shortly after their arrival in India in 1959. Choegyal's home is just behind the cottage, on the second floor of a newly constructed building. It's a modest abode with mint-green walls, a large wooden dining table, black-painted doors leading to the bedroom and kitchen, and taupe curtains that match the sofa set on which we sit. Decorations are sparse: a stereo and a rotating globe rest on a wooden chest of drawers, and next to that a shelf is neatly arranged with books ranging from the *World Almanac* to the Koran. The house is filled more with intellect than with spirituality; a single photo of the Dalai Lama hanging above the bookshelf, draped with a silky white *khata* (a ritual offering scarf), only hints at the Dalai Lama's indelible link to the residents of this home.

The first thing you notice when you meet Tendzin Choegyal is that he looks a lot like his famous older brother, although he doesn't have the same creases on his face from smiling and he dresses differently. In contrast with his brother's signature burgundy robe, Choegyal wears beige corduroys, a dark gray fleece, and argyle socks. His thick black hair is a marked contrast to his brother's shaved head.

While the Dalai Lama has become one of the greatest political and spiritual leaders of our generation, Choegyal's path has been a tumultuous journey that is at once raw with humanity and profoundly spiritual. He, too, was chosen as the reincarnation of a holy man, but his monastic education

was cut short when his family escaped Tibet. His life since then has been a wild ride guided by reckless instinct and indispensable advice from his oldest brother; he dropped out of college, joined the Indian army, picked up unhealthy habits like smoking and alcoholism, and proposed radical change to the Tibetan government-in-exile. What is it like to be the black sheep of the holiest family in Tibet? “I'm the doomsday prophet,” Choegyal says, laughing. “Or maybe I'm just a bloody fool.”

When Choegyal was born in Lhasa in 1946, the Dalai Lama was ten years old and already living in a separate compound, training to become the next head of state. The family had just moved from their native Amdo to Central Tibet to be closer to their son, and that's where Choegyal grew up, in a home with his mother, his grandmother, an uncle, and an older brother and sister. His father passed away when he was just a year old.

Growing up, trouble was never far away for young Choegyal. “I was very naughty and active,” he says. One time, he tried to knock down one of the doors in the house so he could use it to build a raft. “Whenever I got into trouble, I ran to my grandmother.”

At the age of four, Choegyal was recognized as the reincarnation of a lama, and three years later he was sent to Tabo, the biggest monastery in Tibet, for his spiritual training. There he devoted most of his time to memorizing texts and attending debate assemblies. “I was too young to understand,” he says. “It was very dreamlike and not that important.” What Choegyal mostly remembers from that period of his life is the summers and holidays he spent at home with his family, just being a kid.

Tenzin Choegyial holding a photograph of himself taken by Heinrich Harrer



ALISON WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

In March, 1959, the Dalai Lama and his family managed to evade capture by Chinese forces and escape from Tibet, traversing the Himalayas to live as refugees in India. The family, along with thousands of Tibetans who later followed, settled in Dharamsala. Choegyial was sent off to a Jesuit boarding school in Darjeeling.

St. Joseph's School was founded by a Belgian priest in the late 1800s. Its location offers breathtaking views of Kangchenjunga, the third-highest mountain peak in the world, and architecturally the school looks more like a castle in Versailles than a place of higher learning. St. Joseph's alumni range from Indian billiards champ Michael Ferreira to the King of Bhutan. Foreseeing the turmoil ahead, wealthy Tibetans had been sending their children there since the 1940s.

By the time Choegyial arrived there at age twelve, there were many non-Christians already studying there. New to the country and not knowing

(Facing page) *Tenzin Choegyial (right), with his brother, the Dalai Lama, during their escape from Lhasa to India in 1959.*

“We’re very, very close. When we’re together, it’s like we’re at the top of the world.” —the Dalai Lama

a word of English, Choegyial had to learn the ABCs and figure out how to fit in. “I was handicapped in math,” he says, “and I wasn’t a very hard-working student. I was very lazy; slothful is the word.”

He had a lot of friends and spent most of his school days daydreaming and socializing. When he graduated nine years later, he enrolled in a nearby college in Darjeeling, but he was soon restless and looking to try something new. He applied for and won a scholarship to a community college in Washington State, packed his bags, and moved stateside. His goal was to transfer to Seattle University in a couple of years, but things didn’t go as planned. While he did maintain a B+ average and a strong affinity for Starbucks coffee, an unexpected obstacle befell him. He got homesick. “I had culture shock,” he says, “so I became a college dropout.”

Back home in Dharamsala, he got a teaching job at the Tibetan Children’s Village, a boarding house and school for Tibetan-refugee children founded by his sister, Jetsun Pema. That’s where he met his wife, Rinchen Khando, then a secretary in the administrative office. (She later went on to become the government-in-exile’s minister of education and founder of the highly successful Tibetan Nuns Project.) His daughter was born when he was twenty-eight, and his son fifteen months later. For a few years, Choegyial, a new father, stayed close to home. But he still had an itch to go somewhere new and do something different. So in 1979, he joined the Indian Army and became a member of the Special Frontier Force.

The SFF is a covert unit in charge of gathering intelligence and fighting terrorism at the country’s porous borders. When

Choegyial joined the SFF, it was comprised almost entirely of Tibetans. (Today the SFF ranks are more diversified, but there are still an estimated 10,000 Tibetans serving in the force.)

Two and a half years in the army was enough to destroy Choegyial’s spirit. The once-determined young paratrooper was deeply disillusioned by the blatant corruption among the top ranks of the SFF. He slowly lost all confidence in his commanding officer. “I couldn’t serve under somebody I didn’t respect,” he says, “so I sought premature retirement.” He was thirty-six.

Choegyial’s experience in the army left him with deep emotional scars. He went home to Dharamsala, depressed, and eventually began taking medication to cope with his extreme emotional swings. It took him nearly two years to get well enough to rejoin society. This time, Choegyial went to work for the Tibetan government-in-exile. After a brief stint at the Security Office, Choegyial was chosen to be His Holiness’s private secretary (a post that is currently held by Choegyial’s only son, Tenzin).

Most siblings would scoff at the idea of being their brother’s secretary, but Choegyial occupied the post with sincerity, integrity, and honor. He handled all of the Dalai Lama’s correspondence, kept his schedule, and traveled the world by his side. “I had a wonderful boss to serve,” he says.

When Choegyial talks about the Dalai Lama, the edge in his voice completely dissipates. The sarcasm drops, and the snide jokes are naturally replaced with unmistakable reverence. Without the sharpness, his voice sounds exactly like the Dalai Lama’s. “My sister, myself, and His Holiness get together sometimes. We are the three youngest in the family,” he says, smiling. “First and foremost, we’re brother and sister. But we also have a tremendous interest in the same cause. His Holiness is my teacher; he has made me into what I am today. It probably wasn’t intended.” He takes a moment to reflect on his turbulent past, and laughs. Then he continues, his voice turning to a whisper, “He has affected so many people’s lives. It’s unbelievable. I share his philosophy of life. I share his views wholeheartedly. I mean, the guy cares, you know? Any other guy would be engrossed in just Tibetan problems, but he’s taking all of humanity’s problems as one. World peace and religious harmony are two of his top agendas. The way he treats people amazes me. He treats everyone the same. Being the Dalai Lama hasn’t gone to his head at all. He’s still a simple human being, with a tremendous sense of fun.” He



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pauses thoughtfully, “Of course, my view of His Holiness is completely prejudiced.”

But it’s not all peace and harmony between the two brothers. Every once in a while, they’ll have some words with each other; most of the time, it’s the Dalai Lama chastising Choegyul for little things. “Sometimes, when he says something I don’t agree with, His Holiness says, ‘Oh, look at your face! You’re already making a face!’”

I ask Choegyul what the two call each other. “I call him Your Presence,” he says. “And he calls me”—he puts on a fake scolding voice—“Tenzin Choegyul!” He picks up his pack of Benson and Hedges. “I started smoking when I was nineteen as a gesture of rebellion, and now I’m stuck with it,” he says. “His Holiness used to get mad at me for smoking. Then one day, I said to him, ‘You don’t know it, but I still smoke. I love you, but this is something I find extremely difficult to give up.’”

The Dalai Lama never mentioned Choegyul’s habit again.

The Dalai Lama lets out a low, steady laugh. We are sitting in a greeting room at the top of the hill at the Tibetan Children’s Village, where a ceremony is being held to honor Jetsun Pema, who is retiring after serving forty-two years as the head of the institution. Outside, children in blue school uniforms mill around a multicolored tent decorated with prayer flags, which is shielding the little dancers in traditional garb from the musty heat. The grandstand at the main playing field is filled with Tibetans who are gathering on this Sunday afternoon to enjoy the folk music that streams in from the open windows. “My brother...,” the Dalai Lama says, an amused look on his face. He then does something he rarely does in public: he rewinds his memory back to the day he was born, and talks about each of his siblings with adoration.

“My oldest brother is now very sick in America,” he starts. “My second brother is mostly in Hong Kong; our relationship has a little bit of distance. Then his father”—he gestures toward his translator, also his nephew, sitting on his right—“we were very, very close. When he passed away, I felt very sad. When I was born, my eldest sister actually opened one of my eyes. And then I had diarrhea on her lap.” The room explodes with laughter. “My mother was a very dignified, warmhearted person. She was very, very gentle—none of my brothers and sisters ever experienced her temper. My father, on the other hand, was quick to lose his.”

“What about your youngest brother?” I ask. The Dalai Lama holds up a finger, gently laughing at my impatience. And then he continues. “My youngest sister [Jetsun Pema] and brother [Choegyul] and I, we are very close. As soon as we get together, it’s just all sorts of nonsense and jokes and teasing and pranks. We’re very, very close; when we’re together, it’s like we’re at the top of the world. I think we’re quite similar, too. Straightforward, openhearted. My younger brother has quite a sharp mind.”

The air around the Dalai Lama has changed. A new layer of affection coats his usual aura of universal compassion. The smile on his face right now, I realize, is one he reserves for his family.

During his eight-year tenure as the Dalai Lama’s private secretary, Choegyul found himself experiencing extreme emotional highs and lows, and it was getting in the way of his work. Finally, feeling the need for serious treatment, he resigned from the post and sought help from the best doctors in the area. It was the beginning of a lifelong dependency on lithium, and the end of his affair with alcohol. “Not everyone knows that bipolar is treatable,” he says. “But with treatment, you can definitely have a certain level of normalcy.”



For Choegyal, normalcy meant running in the elections for Tibetan parliament in 1990. The Tibetan parliament consists of thirteen representatives from different regions of Tibet. Choegyal was chosen to represent the Amdo region, where his parents are from. He served five years in elected office, meeting every six months with other representatives to discuss issues like rehabilitation, cultural preservation, and refugee rights.

Choegyal was often accused of being hawkish; it was his frustration with complacency that made him both a revolutionary and a threat to the pacifist stance of the government-in-exile. “A lot of people think that this model has been a success, but I don’t think we are giving it that extra push,” he says. “I think we can do much more. Whether the Tibetans in exile go back to Tibet is not the issue. Whether the Dalai Lama goes back to Tibet is not the issue. The issue is what kind of fair deal will the Tibetans in occupied Tibet get from the government of China. There’s a tremendous opportunity if you look at how much sympathy we have from the free world, but I don’t think we are utilizing it. We’re just bogged down with solving small problems, when we can be doing much bigger things, like making sure that Tibetans in India have employment, and that nobody is living under the poverty line.”

But Choegyal’s stance was not well received among the rest of the community. “I was rocking the boat,” he says. Feeling out of place and frustrated, he voluntarily left his post in 1995. “We have become complacent. Stagnant is the word.”

On a brisk spring evening in the McLaren conference room at the University of San Francisco, Choegyal sits center stage in front of two dozen students, discussing the meaning of justice with the university’s president. Although it’s meant to be a moderated panel, Choegyal dominates the stage with his charisma and willingness to speak over others if he thinks they don’t make sense. Despite his insistence that he is not a spiritual leader, the audience has come to see the Dalai Lama’s brother; they are seeking his guidance. After an hour of listening to the heated debate, the floor is open to questions

and a woman in the front row stands up to speak. “One of my daughters died in an accident,” she begins, sobbing. “And now, my other is suicidal. What do you suggest I do?”

“Acceptance,” Choegyal says, nodding. “Acceptance.”

A heavyset blond woman from stage left stands up. She is already on the verge of tears. “I went to Tibet,” she sobs, “and saw so much suffering. I don’t know what to do to help. I don’t know how you deal with knowing that your country is in such turmoil.”

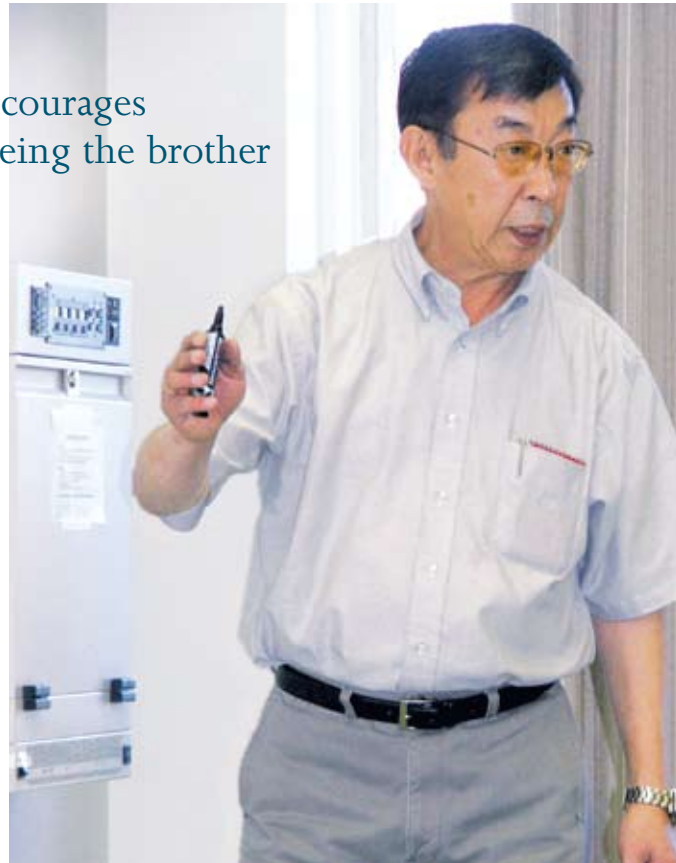
Choegyal interrupts her rambling. “Acceptance,” he says again, letting a slightly inappropriate chuckle slip out. (“You know that one lady who displayed a tremendous amount of emotion?” he says to me later. “I think she was frustrated with her own life and tried to make it look like she was worried about Tibetans.”) The woman sits down, thanking Choegyal profusely for his sage advice.

For the past thirteen years, Choegyal has been enjoying what he calls “big-time retirement.” He spends most of his time at home in Dharamsala reading the *New York Times* and *People’s Daily* online (“I want to know what the Chinese are saying!”) and studying Buddhist and world history. “I used to be into photography and editing film,” he says. “And I was a good mechanic. But now my hobby is reading.” He listens to Handel’s “Messiah” (“It’s very uplifting”), reads the *Heart Sutra* (“The Lord Buddha and his boys are hanging out...”), and watches *Saving Private Ryan* (“That movie is so good at showing how bad war is”).

He occasionally flies to the U.S. for teaching stints at the University of San Francisco, where he used to teach the Buddhist section of a course called Pathways to Spiritual Wisdom. His students call him TC; the nickname is perhaps another way for him to discourage any reverence toward him for being the brother of a holy man. He doesn’t consider himself a teacher either (“I think that’s a very arrogant word”), but rather sees himself as a facilitator who helps people realize that there are different ways to approach a problem.

Choegyal simultaneously exudes large doses of wisdom, peace, and conflict. “I have a very bad temper,” he says. “I’m

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very unstable, and I have very strong likes and dislikes. Really, I'm just a human being trying to figure out how to ease pain and how to become a little bit more acceptable to people around me. We are all uncut diamonds; we've got rough edges."

As for being the reincarnate of a holy man, Choegyal shrugs the notion off completely. "It's bullshit, I don't believe it. As far as I'm concerned, it's the greatest mistake of the century. From a Buddhist perspective, we are all reincarnates. That part I believe. But being a special person is bullshit. I don't consider myself special. I'm just like you. I want happiness. I don't want suffering. I think it was a sheer accident that I was chosen."

Having been raised under the influences of both Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, Choegyal displays a lot of doubt when it comes to the subject of religion. "Religious tradition is here to help us—to help us transform from a rough person to a gentle person, from a selfish person to somebody who can think of other people and develop altruism. It's all there, but it's so twisted. Religion is fossilized and dominated by institutions. The wrong interpretation of freedom can destroy you, your family, and your community," he says. "Say somebody is very angry. He doesn't listen to reason, and his excuse for not restraining himself is to say, 'I'm free. I can do whatever I want.' We are becoming noble savages."

He pauses, then adds thoughtfully, "I am a very humble follower of a guy called Gautama Buddha. What he taught makes sense to me in my experience as a sixty-something-

year-old man. But I don't go to temples, nor do I say prayers at home. Going to the temple every morning is nothing. Even a dog can go to the temple. And anyone with a little bit of money can make an offering. I also don't call myself a Buddhist. By labeling myself, I would have reified something that can be very easily misunderstood." He cites Shakespeare, from *Romeo and Juliet*: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

It's close to midnight, and the tea that Rinchen brought us earlier is cold. "I think we have too many monks here," Choegyal says, referring to the hundreds of robed young Tibetan men who mill the streets outside amid dozens of hippies, lepers, cows, dogs, jewelry stands, and Internet cafes. "They're in monks' robes, but they behave in funny ways. Their hearts are not in it. We are operating in a very peculiar situation—we are in exile. I love Tibet, and I really wish success to our cause and our people, but I'm very concerned with the way we are heading. Whatever we do in life, we have to love it or leave it. If each individual realizes his or her potential and tries to transform and becomes less selfish, I think we'll have a wonderful future, a wonderful Tibet." 