

Still Life Portrait of Tenzin Gyatso, the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet

In early May 1991, my department kindly arranged a private audience with the Dalai Lama for me. It was a day I had long anticipated, especially after having read many books in two years time either about or by His Holiness – including the Dalai Lama's two autobiographies and those on Buddhist philosophy. I also had viewed many videos at the DIIR video archives that covered events and interviews with the Dalai Lama. I dressed in my *chuba* for the occasion. The Dalai Lama warmly greeted me, said he remembered seeing me somewhere before, and asked me a few questions. Kasur Tenzin Geyche Tethong, Private Secretary to H.H. the Dalai Lama, explained about where I was working and about my connection with the Tibetan students who had returned from study in the U.S. I mentioned to him about a small exhibition on a different theme I was soon to present at Namgyal monastery. I then spoke about the main project of portraits and interviews and showed him a few photographs. While the Dalai Lama listened to me, he turned the black and white Tibetan freedom band I wore on my wrist. Finally, I explained my concept about the “still life portrait” that I wanted to take of His Holiness's objects. The Dalai Lama responded positively to the idea and warmly invited me to photograph the items. He would need a little time to decide what to choose though. Kasur Tenzin Geyche later informed me that the photo session would be scheduled at His Holiness's house.

I visited the Dalai Lama's home on a beautiful morning less than a week after the audience. Kalsang came to assist with equipment. We entered the door of a brightly sunlit room where His Holiness was sitting and reading a book. When I entered, he stood up off the sofa and called me over. I enjoyed special moments of conversation. Those moments talking to the Dalai Lama were like walking on air.

The Dalai Lama showed me a few of the items that he had prepared. One was the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's *chabtse* (mustache clipper). I think I spontaneously asked, “Do you still use that?” – forgetting the proper way of addressing the Dalai Lama. His Holiness said something to the affirmative, started clipping with the *chabtse* in the appropriate facial area – right there in front of me, and followed with a strong friendly slap on my back with good laughter. He also showed me one special rosary that he has used since his youth in Lhasa. It had a five-lined pattern on it that he explained was very rare. The Dalai Lama then arranged all of the items, special objects connected to his life, on a large table in one area of the room and talked about them. The following pages include those direct explanations. The objects may help connect one to pieces of this great leader's history and also, a little to the unique personality of the Dalai Lama of Tibet. But the words here do not capture the warm laughter that followed some of the remarks. After leaving the residence that morning, I recall staying dressed for a while in my Tibetan *chuba* and walking on air for the rest of the day.