

# Dalai Lama: 'religious rock star' to spread message of peace at O2

The highlight of Tibetan spiritual leader's UK trip, event is expected to attract many non-Buddhists, reflecting a growing trend for do-it-yourself spirituality

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When a diminutive but instantly recognisable figure steps on to the stage of the O2 in London before a near-capacity audience on Saturday, the mood permeating the vast arena is likely to be markedly different from that of last week's Heavy Duty boxing tournament or next week's gig by the standup comedian Michael McIntyre.

Dressed in his customary wine and saffron coloured robes, the Dalai Lama will - if he sticks to form - start by telling the audience: "I am a human being, just one among the 7 billion alive today." His message of compassion, humanity, love, harmony, forgiveness, tolerance and peace - delivered amid beaming smiles - is guaranteed a rapturous reception. At the end of a two-hour performance, he may clasp the hands or caress the faces of a lucky few who will go home feeling blessed.

The O2 gig is the highlight of the Dalai Lama's second trip to the UK in four months. In June, just days before he turned 80, he appeared before tens of thousands at Glastonbury, where Patti Smith led a rendition of Happy Birthday to You.

Next month, he tours the US for the second time this year. In the past six months, he has also ticked off Japan and Australia. The globetrotting religious rock star with celebrity friends in almost every nation has become, his biographer Alexander Norman said this week, "the moral conscience of the world".

For Christine Pitt, a yoga therapist from Surrey, the chance to see him and hear his message in person was not to be missed. "I'm hoping to get an essence of his presence, a sense of him, his energy and inner calm - as well as hear what he has to say," she said. Pitt is not a Buddhist: "I remain very firmly in the non-religious camp, but I do align to the principles of Buddhism and find them quite uplifting."

Although there will be a healthy presence from the UK's 178,000 Buddhists among the audience, many are likely to be non-Buddhists - some reflecting a growing trend for do-it-yourself spirituality, combining elements of different faiths with, perhaps, psychotherapy, mindfulness, volunteering, pilates and yoga.

According to Daniel Goleman, a Californian psychologist and author who has known the Dalai Lama for around 30 years and who will preside at the O2, the event's themes are aimed at the general public, not committed Buddhists: "He embodies a compassionate ethic

which appeals across religious, national and cultural lines. People are attracted to an optimistic view of what the world could become.”

Recently there has been a new old man on this particular block. “Pope Francis is also stepping into this space,” said Goleman. “They are both people who appeal to better human values.”

The Dalai Lama leads an ascetic life, rising before dawn to meditate and spending much of his time reading, thinking and taking long walks before retiring to bed at about 8.30pm. “He’s humble, but also endearing and entertaining, as well as having a serious message about the future of humanity and the planet,” said Fabian Hamilton, the Labour MP for Leeds North East and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tibet. “He always laughs at his own jokes.”

Known to Buddhists as His Holiness, he has been the spiritual leader of Tibet for more than 70 years after being identified as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama at the age of two by Buddhist monks scouring remote villages in the Tibetan countryside. Then Lhamo Dondrub, the infant son of farmers, he has since become the longest-living incumbent and has outstripped most world leaders.

But for almost six decades, he has lived in exile in the Indian Himalayan town of Dharamsala, having fled Tibet in disguise after an uprising against the Chinese regime - which had seized control of the remote territory a decade earlier - was put down. More than 80,000 Tibetan Buddhists followed their spiritual and political leader to establish a refugee mini-state.

Yet, to the dismay of many Tibetans and their supporters, in 1988 the Dalai Lama abandoned the goal of full independence for Tibet, adopting instead a “middle way” of demanding greater autonomy for the region within Chinese borders. Four years ago, he renounced his role as the Tibetans’ political leader in favour of an elected figure.

His devotion to spiritual matters has not endeared him to the Chinese regime, which routinely denounces the Dalai Lama as a “splittist wolf in monk’s clothing”. Heads of state and political leaders are vigorously lobbied by the Chinese to decline invitations to meetings; artists and celebrities who publicly support the Dalai Lama find they are not welcome in China. Beijing was furious when he was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1989.

Despite political retirement, the political and spiritual sides to the Dalai Lama are “completely inseparable”, said Hamilton. “When he speaks, the values of Buddhism are intermixed with the desire of Tibetans to be free. When it’s a criminal offence even to display a picture of the Dalai Lama in Tibet, you can’t separate the two.”

China is poised to intervene when the present Dalai Lama dies - or, as he puts it, has “a change of clothes”. Beijing has said it intends to choose the next spiritual leader, presumably selecting someone rather more compliant. The resulting tensions between the Chinese regime and Tibetan Buddhists - and potential for unrest - will be watched with concern by politicians and diplomats across the world.

Twenty years ago, a six-year-old child chosen by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism, was swiftly whisked away

by the Chinese authorities, who said his selection was invalid. He has not been seen since, although a Chinese official said this month that he was “living a normal life ... and does not wish to be disturbed”.

On the matter of his own succession, the Dalai Lama has possibly muddied the waters by saying, variously, he may be the last to hold the title, his successor could be chosen by referendum, or he may be reincarnated as a woman.

“The Dalai Lama institution will cease one day ... There is no guarantee that some stupid Dalai Lama won’t come next, who will disgrace himself or herself. That would be very sad. So, much better that a centuries-old tradition should cease at the time of a quite popular Dalai Lama,” he told the BBC last December.

But his legions of adherents hope that the political and spiritual fallout from his death is, despite his age, some way off. Five years ago, on the eve of his 75th birthday, the Dalai Lama appeared to give them cause for optimism. “If I don’t commit suicide, then otherwise my body is very healthy,” he told Indian television with a characteristic chortle. “Another 10 to 20 years ... no problem. Maybe 30 years!”

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