

Dalai Lama charms, uplifts New Jersey

Spiritual leader turns a packed stadium into an intimate gathering

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By Ashanti M. Alvarez

It was a six-year journey for the religious leader, but on Sept. 25, the 14th Dalai Lama finally made it to Rutgers.

It was an informal gathering of 36,000 friends of all ages and many walks of life, seeking the wisdom – and receiving the wit – of one of the world's most revered spiritual thinkers and writers. Those not familiar with his informal, simple approach were charmed by the 70-year-old's disarming humor and modest, gentle nature.

"I have nothing to offer ... new ideas or new views, nothing special," the best-selling author of more than two dozen books said in Tibetan-accented English. "So you may disappoint after listening to my 20, 30 minutes of lecture. If you feel [I am] boring, then I am sorry."

Silence at Rutgers Stadium, however, was a sign that the spectators were more engrossed than bored. Every few minutes, applause or light chuckles punctuated the quiet. The packed house and more than 50 media organizations, some from as far away as Russia, Poland and Germany, were a testament to the Dalai Lama's popularity.

President Richard L. McCormick and Ronald Giaconia, vice chairman of the Rutgers Board of Governors, bestowed an honorary doctorate of humane letters upon the Dalai Lama. Officials at Rutgers had been in touch with the Office of Tibet for the past six years and spent more than a year planning his visit.

"A gifted teacher who is able to convey profound truths in a simple way, you have traveled throughout the world to spread your message of universal responsibility, kindness and loving compassion for all sentient creatures," McCormick said. "Honored spiritual and temporal leader, revered seeker of peace, admired embodiment of compassion, you are an inspiration to millions of peace-seeking people throughout the world."

"It is particularly a joy to receive such a degree without actually having to work hard and study," the Dalai Lama said to laughs.

Periodically relying on a Tibetan translator, the Dalai Lama – born Tenzin Gyatso – told the audience that even if they found him boring "at least today this weather, not hot, not cold, quite pleasant. So just a few minutes you spend here, okay. Not much problem."

His simple nature belied the complexity of his existence. In addition to being a spiritual leader, the Dalai



Credit: Nick Romanenko

The Dalai Lama, wearing his traditional robes underneath an academic hood representing his honorary doctorate of humane letters from Rutgers, talks to some 36,000 people amassed at Rutgers Stadium Sept. 25. He held an informal conversation about the future of war and peace, frequently interrupting his speech to comment about the weather and other light matters.



Credit: Nick Romanenko

An audience member sitting on the field at Rutgers Stadium listens to the Dalai Lama.

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Lama is the head of state of the Tibetan government in exile, located in Dharamsala, India. He led more than 80,000 Tibetans into exile in India, Nepal and Bhutan years after the Chinese government invaded and occupied the Buddhist nation.

His lecture, titled "War, Peace and Reconciliation," did not speak to any particular conflict, past or present. Starting by defining peace as "not just mere absence of violence" but "every movement or action motivated by compassion," the Dalai Lama went on to speak of violence in global generalities. His only specific mention of a peaceful campaign was his signature on Amnesty International's campaign to abolish the death penalty around the world. "Even from a practical point of view I do not see any real benefit to the judicial death sentence because in a situation where a criminal has no potential for reformation, then killing does not solve the problem," he said to audience applause.

During his 45-minute speech, the Dalai Lama sipped tea from a Thermos and spoke of an international community.

"The national boundary is not so important," he said. "This continent depends on other continents. So, North America needs Europe, Europe needs Africa, Africa needs Arab, Arab needs Asia. Everything interdependent. I think our very concept of we and they, I think no longer exists. This whole planet is just us, just we. So therefore, destruction of other areas is essentially destructions of yourself. That's the new reality ... So therefore, the very concept of the destruction of your so-called enemy I think is now an out-of-date concept."

He spoke of the challenges of external disarmament and internal disarmament – of eradicating all the world's weapons and excising the dominant emotions of anger, jealousy, hatred and distrust.
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