

Buddhism Spreads in North America

The Dalai Lama's recent visit spotlighted the religion's popularity in the U.S. and Canada

The highly-publicized visit in April of Tibetan Buddhism's leader, the Dalai Lama, to Pasadena, Calif., and three major Canadian cities motivated some Christians to pray and raised others' awareness of the growing presence of a previously ignored religion.

When he landed in Los Angeles, the Dalai Lama was met by Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky and later whisked away to host three days of Buddhist teaching at the sold-out, 3,000-seat Pasadena Civic Auditorium. He also spoke to 4,500 school children, lectured 5,000 university students and dispensed advice—at \$100 a head—to a crowd of business executives.

James Stephens, a doctoral student at Fuller Theological Seminary who was a devout Buddhist for 14 years, says the spiritual threat of Buddhism influencing unsuspecting "seekers," even some who consider themselves Christians, is very real.

"I call [the Dalai Lama] the 'pluralist pope' because he advocates exploring Buddhism while staying within the security of your professed religion. And he attracts huge crowds and all kinds of funding from movie stars, teaching institutions, governments and churches," said Stephens, who leads the Sonrise Center for Buddhist Studies, which teaches Christians how to evangelize Buddhists.

Tibetan Buddhism, one of four main types of Buddhism, has almost 4 million adherents in that portion of China commonly known as Tibet, and 135,000 followers outside the region. Tibetan Buddhists in North America are clustered on California's north coast and farther up into Vancouver, British Columbia, eastward into Toronto, and along the northeastern seaboard of the United States.

Despite the Dalai Lama's immense popularity, he is spiritual leader to Tibetan Buddhists only. The Kalachakra, or initiation ceremony to allow one to practice the tenets of the religion, is often the Dalai Lama's core teaching when he is on foreign turf.

Known as the "wheel of time," the Kalachakra introduces people to a unique way of seeing cycles of time or multiple reincarnations, which the religion's adherents claim is the basis of its system of liberation and enlightenment. Sand mandalas, or spirit houses made of finely painted sand crystals where area spirits are invited to enter, are usually constructed during the Kalachakra.

There are an estimated 10 million Buddhists in the United States and 305,000 in Canada, according to the latest figures from Statistics Canada.

While in Canada, where the Dalai Lama presided over the first Kalachakra initiation ceremony ever to be performed in the country, the Tibetan leader-in-exile was warmly received by Prime Minister Paul Martin and presented with an honorary degree of laws from the University of Toronto. Despite pouring rain, a sold-out crowd of 30,000 packed Toronto's SkyDome arena for a teaching on compassion, and thousands of others attended 10 days of Kalachakra teaching at the city's National

Trade Centre and a Tibetan cultural festival on Toronto's waterfront.

A mandala, constructed during the 10 days of Kalachakra teaching, was then ritually destroyed and its contents poured into nearby Lake Ontario, two acts that symbolize a release of the mandala's spiritual powers into the surrounding land and waters.

"When the mandala's sand was poured into Lake Ontario, the spiritual forces contained within it flowed through the Great Lakes and, eventually, to all the waterways of North America," said David Carson, director of Intercessors for Canada, which is based in Vancouver. "Those spirits carry a spiritual contamination wherever they go. The only way to contend with them is to increase the forces of God through intercession and praise."

House of the King, a Toronto-based prayer and worship movement of almost 2,500 intercessors and volunteers, was set up specifically for the Dalai Lama's 12-day visit. Supported by a variety of Toronto churches and denominations, the focus of the event was 24-hour worship and praise held at Agape Ministries, a small, west-end charismatic church.

House of the King commissioned shifts of prayer-walkers to intercede at key spiritual locations around the city, while friendship evangelists were posted in a Tibetan teahouse and art gallery set up inside a downtown church.

"The Dalai Lama's visit gave us a chance to represent Jesus to the visiting Tibetans, who responded very positively," said Hany Boghossian, communications coordinator for House of the

King. "Tibetans usually get saved relationally, and the average length of time for one to convert is eight or nine years."

While visiting Vancouver, the Dalai Lama was feted by Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell, residents of Vancouver and self-proclaimed Buddhists, at the Orpheum Concert Hall, and received an honorary doctorate from two Vancouver universities. He also taught tenets of his religion to 16,000 attendees at the Vancouver Coliseum, presided over an interfaith service at a congregation affiliated with the United Church of Canada and engaged in an interfaith dialogue panel at an Anglican cathedral.

A 16-story temple with a 150-foot statue of the Buddha in front is slated for construction in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond. The structure is rumored to be destined as a world center for Buddhism, Carson said.

Elaine Robson, a Christian advocate of inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Tibetan Buddhists and a post-graduate student at the University of London in England, spent several years working with Tibetan Buddhists in northern India. She was invited by House of the King to be an adviser during the 12 days the Dalai Lama spent in Toronto.

Tibetan Buddhism has made inroads to North American culture partly because its "freedom of absolutes ... has greatly appealed to a lot of seekers from the 1960s on," said Robson, editor of . "They saw Christianity and its perceived narrowness and moral imperatives as a killjoy."

She said Tibetan Buddhists use "skillful means" to draw the

curious into their religion. One such technique is the Dalai Lama's advice even to curious Christians to begin meditating on what's familiar—like a statue of a saint or Jesus on the cross. "Once a person goes further into Tibetan Buddhism, though, they meditate on that religion's deities and visualize themselves as one with those deities. They draw closer to the enlightened state ... where all creatures and objects are one [energy] force," Robson said. "The problem with this is that person can then open themselves up to any variety of spiritual forces."

Called His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, 69-year-old Tenzin Gyatso was crowned as spiritual leader at 5 years old. When China began occupation of Tibet in 1959, he fled to northern India where, to this day, he has led a Tibetan government-in-exile. The recipient of almost 60 honorary doctorates and awards, including the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama is renowned for cultivating relationships with key world leaders, an activity some critics view as a ploy to help free Tibet from Chinese occupation.

Josie Newman in Toronto