



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Dalai Lama 85th birthday celebrated by ICT, world leaders

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Birthday wishes spread across the globe yesterday as the Dalai Lama turned 85 and world leaders, activists, artists and International Campaign for Tibet members all celebrated the joyful occasion.

ICT—which has served the vision of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people for more than three decades—honored His Holiness’ birthday with a live online event Monday, June 6, 2020, featuring ICT’s first president and several of its longtime members.

ICT also contributed to op-eds about the Dalai Lama in Europe and the United States, while ICT members shared more than 6,500 birthday greetings for His Holiness through the organization’s website.

In addition, numerous Tibetans and Tibet supporters around the world expressed warm wishes for the Dalai Lama.

Among them were a former US president, the current speaker of the House of Representatives and elected officials from many countries.

ICT’s Chairman Richard Gere—the world-famous actor, social activist and philanthropist—also praised the Dalai Lama during a celebration led by the team behind “Inner World,” His Holiness’ first musical album, which came out Monday.

“What an inspiration to all of us,” Gere said, addressing the Dalai Lama by video. “Those of us who are Buddhists and look to you for teachings, specific teachings. And there’s been no better teacher. But even those of us who are not Buddhists, we recognize an extraordinary human being when we see one.”

Dalai Lama’s first trips to US

ICT’s online event—which was part of the organization’s Tibet Talks conversation series—focused on the Dalai Lama’s decades of inspiring people throughout the United States.

During the event, Tenzin Tethong—ICT’s founding president and the Dalai Lama’s representative to North America from 1973-86 and special representative in Washington, DC from 1987-90—described His Holiness’ first visit to the US in 1979.

At the time, Tibetans were unsure how Americans would respond to the seemingly exotic Tibetan Buddhist leader.

However, at one of the Dalai Lama’s first events at an interfaith service in New York City, “the cathedral was packed,” Tethong said, even though organizers did not promote the event to the media.

Attendance at other events also surpassed expectations.

The Dalai Lama's "message and his ability to communicate with people broke through, even though His Holiness was speaking in very halting English ... " Tethong noted. "People felt they were able to connect with this person, as unusual as he seemed."

ICT's current president, Matteo Mecacci, added that the Dalai Lama has "well-known communication skills."

"He's able to connect at the individual level with each person he is able to meet," Mecacci said. "somehow changing the world one at a time."

US political support

The Dalai Lama's ability to relate to others personally soon inspired many Congress members he met with to pass laws to support the Tibetan people, whose homeland the Chinese government annexed in 1959 after forcing the Dalai Lama into exile.

Tethong said one of the first members of Congress to befriend His Holiness was the late Rep. Charlie Rose, D-NC.

Mecacci noted that all these years later, one of Rose's staff members, Keith Pitts, serves on ICT's board of directors.

Tethong said he worked closely with Pitts and other Congressional staffers to make Tibet an important cause in Washington, DC.

"One big reason for attention and success in the Tibet world was because it became totally bipartisan," Tethong added. "Congressman Rose, a Democrat from North Carolina, and gradually his partner on the other end was Benjamin Gilman from New York," a Republican member of the House. "So North, South, right, left."

Mecacci said ICT is proud to continue that tradition of bipartisanship to this day.

He added that he has continued to see the inspiration elected leaders get from the Dalai Lama when they meet him.

"You could see from the other side of the table, on the faces of these very powerful members of Congress who are looking at His Holiness, they really are looking for something," Mecacci said. "They're probably looking for the best of them[selves] when they look at him as an example."

ICT members' lives changed

After Tethong's and Mecacci's conversation, the event shifted to two panel discussions with ICT members from across the US who described what the Dalai Lama has meant to them.

On the first panel were:

- Carol Currier of Virginia, a doctor who, among other things, discussed the Dalai Lama's promotion of science and his successful attempts to introduce ancient Tibetan wisdom to modern scientists.

- Gail Forrest of New Mexico, a longtime educational film producer who spoke about His Holiness' commitment to universal secular ethics and his Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEE Learning) program for K-12 students.
- Claus Radlberger of Massachusetts, an executive coach who addressed the Dalai Lama's three commitments and his statement that his religion is compassion.
- Bertha Rivera-Fubini of Massachusetts, who performs academic fieldwork in India and shared how the Dalai Lama has informed her roles as an academic, researcher and parent, including while staying at home with her grown children during the coronavirus pandemic.

The second panel had:

- Marc Garavaglia of Michigan, a member of the Jewel Heart Tibetan Buddhist center, who talked about how his spiritual leader was a disciple of the Dalai Lama.
- Elaine Holoboff of Colorado, a fiction writer who said she admired how the Dalai Lama is able to speak on a deep, philosophical level and on a level that everyone can understand.
- Rev. Garth Lehman of Kentucky, a Christian hospital chaplain, who explained how the Dalai Lama's benevolent response to China's oppression of Tibetans helps him remain calm while fighting injustice.
- Jane Robinett of Oregon, an emerita professor, who recalled how the Dalai Lama's use of language "not as a weapon" but as a way to create kindness helped transform her relationships with some of her most difficult students.

Love and support

The ICT members were hardly the only ones to honor the Dalai Lama's birthday. Throughout the day, birthday greetings rolled in from many important world figures.

In a video message, former President George W. Bush told the Dalai Lama, "I admire you, I care for you, and I love you."

Bush was the first president to meet with the Dalai Lama in public, doing so in 2007 when he helped present His Holiness with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor that Congress bestows.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.—who helped lead the push for the Dalai Lama to receive the award—issued a statement Monday praising the Dalai Lama as a "messenger of hope" and condemning the Chinese government's persecution of Tibetans.

"In honor of this special day and of the dreams of the Tibetan people," Pelosi said, "America remains committed to opposing the acceleration of Beijing's aggression toward the people of Tibet, as well as its brutal campaign against the Uyghur people, its suppression of free speech and assault on the 'one country, two systems' doctrine in Hong Kong, and its violent efforts to undermine religious freedom and human rights throughout China."

Pelosi also urged the Senate to pass the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which would dramatically upgrade US support for Tibetans and sanction Chinese officials if they carry out their plans to appoint their own successor to the Dalai Lama once His Holiness eventually passes away.

The bipartisan TPSA passed the House by an overwhelming majority in January.

US leaders

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., introduced the TPSA in the House alongside cosponsor Rep. Chris Smith, R-NJ. Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Ben Cardin, D-Md., introduced it in the Senate.

To mark the Dalai Lama's birthday, McGovern tweeted his "continued appreciation of his life's work promoting compassion, peace, and human rights for all of the people of the world."

"He is a source of spiritual inspiration and inner harmony," McGovern said. "He has built bridges between and among different religions and faiths. He has used his position to promote compassion and nonviolence, not only in Tibet, but in many difficult places in the world."

McGovern's fellow House member Andy Levin, D-Mich.—who spoke at ICT's 30th anniversary celebration of the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize in 2019—also shared a birthday greeting for His Holiness:

In addition, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, who met with the Dalai Lama at his exile residence in Dharamsala, India last year, also tweeted a birthday message for the Dalai Lama.

So too did the State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

US, India and Tibet

In its tweet, the bureau thanked India for hosting the Dalai Lama and the world's largest Tibetan exile community for more than 60 years ago.

On Monday, Kenneth Juster, the US ambassador to India, was the chief guest at a celebration of the Dalai Lama's birthday.

In a video address, Juster praised the Dalai Lama for retiring from politics in 2011 so the Tibetan people could fully transition to a democratic system of governance.

"For the American people, your work is in many ways a continuation of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.," Juster said. "Your unwavering sense of purpose calls to our minds the words of Dr. King in his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,' when he wrote that 'human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of [leaders].'"

Juster also spoke of "the deep and enduring affinity between Americans and Tibetans," which includes the US Embassy in New Delhi receiving a Tibetan government delegation in 1946 that congratulated the US on the end of World War II.

Several Indian leaders on Monday also congratulated the Dalai Lama on his birthday, including Ram Madhav, national general secretary of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

His Holiness “has completed 61 years of living in India,” Madhav said. “When he came, he came as a refugee. But today every Indian regards him as an elder in the family.”

85 wishes

The message from Madhav—as well as those from Bush, Pelosi, McGovern and Levin—are included in TibetTV’s “85 wishes on the 85th Birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama” video.

Others who appear in the video include:

- Several high-ranking Tibetan religious leaders.
- Political leaders from Australia, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Switzerland and Taiwan. The foreign ministry of Taiwan recently stated it would welcome a visit from His Holiness to the democratic island country.
- British Conservative Party MP Tim Loughton, who last year introduced in Parliament a version of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which became law in the US in late 2018.
- Chinese civil rights activist Chen Guangcheng, who speaks in Chinese in the video.
- Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi.
- His Holiness’ fellow Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi of India.
- 1989 Nobel Committee member Bishop Gunnar Stålsett of Norway.
- Dalai Lama and Tibet supporters from Brazil, Chile, Japan and elsewhere.
- Former “James Bond” star Pierce Brosnan.

Op-eds

ICT also contributed to several op-eds on Monday that address the Dalai Lama’s future.

Vincent Metten, ICT’s EU Policy Director, wrote an op-ed for EURACTIV warning that China’s plan to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession is likely to cause great unrest in Tibet with the potential to destabilize the surrounding region.

“As the Dalai Lama is aging, it is crucial that the international community anticipates these developments and adopts public positions stating that his succession must be decided by the Tibetan Buddhist community and the intention of the current Dalai Lama only,” Metten says in the piece.

He adds, “At stake is the future of international human rights standards and norms and religious freedom.”

Metten’s op-ed also appears in the French outlet L’Obs and Belgian outlet La Libre, as well as on the website of FIDH, the International Federation for Human Rights.

In addition, Mecacci, ICT's president, provided comments for an op-ed in The National Interest by Gordon G. Chang.

In the piece, Mecacci calls China's plans to appoint its own Dalai Lama "absurd."

"By passing the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, the US would make clear to China that it will not be allowed to annihilate an entire people, including their cultural and spiritual identity, without consequences," Mecacci says in the op-ed.



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