

# Teaching the art of happiness

This August, Switzerland will play host to a very special guest. In a first visit to Lausanne, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet will hold a series of public talks and teachings at the Malley Ice Rink. The event, organised by the International Buddhist Rigdzin Community, will include a public talk on "The Art of Happiness". *Swiss News* meets Jon Schmidt, president of the community's Thegchok Ling Buddhist Centre in Lausanne, and one of the organisers behind this unique event.

By Matthew Beattie | Few faces are more internationally recognisable than that of Tenzin Gyatso, Dalai Lama and leader of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in 1935, His Holiness was recognised at age two as the 14<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of a line of “Tulkus” or enlightened Buddhist masters, dating back to 1391.

Until China asserted control over Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama – a title that means “Ocean of Wisdom” – combined his role of spiritual teacher with leadership of the Tibetan government from Tibet’s capital, Lhasa. Although he has been living in exile in India since 1959, His Holiness continues to passionately pursue the interests of his people and his homeland, attracting global admiration – and controversy.

### Mountain haven

Switzerland may seem an unlikely destination for a visit by the Dalai Lama, but this Alpine country’s connections with Tibet go far beyond any passing similarity to landscape. The Swiss traditions of tolerance and religious freedom have enabled a thriving Tibetan Rigdzin Buddhist community to develop here. Although it’s certainly not the largest or most established in Europe, it plays an important role in maintaining the unique philosophy and traditions of the Tibetan faith.

Besides the many Tibetans who now call Switzerland home, Lama Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche has been living here since his exile from Tibet in 2002. It is under his direction that the International Buddhist Rigdzin Community, an association of Buddhist centres in Nepal, Tibet, Switzerland, Sweden, Lithuania, Spain and the Netherlands, has flourished.

I arranged to meet Jon Schmidt at the railway station in Lausanne. After introductions, we adjourned to a nearby cafe, where we chatted over coffee about Buddhism in Switzerland and the significance of His Holiness’s visit in August.

“There are three [Rigdzin Community] Dharma Buddhist centres in Switzerland: in Geneva, Lausanne and Rolle,” Schmidt tells me. “These are comprised of about 50 fully practising students of Buddhism, most of whom live in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Although there are [other] groups throughout the country, people choose to be here in order to benefit from the teachings of Lama Namkha Rinpoche and because the sites here offer facilities such as temples.”

Compared to many centres elsewhere in the world, the Swiss Rigdzin Community Dharma centres are relatively new: the inauguration of the first site in Rolle took place as recently as 2002. For His Holiness to bestow a visit on such young communities is both unusual, and testimony to the hard work and dedication of Lama Namkha Rinpoche and his Swiss students.

“It is really a huge honour for His Holiness to place his trust in our community and accept our invitation to speak,” Schmidt explains. “The enthusiasm of the Swiss people for His Holiness and his teachings can best be seen through the huge demand for tickets to the Lausanne events.”

Though advance tickets have already sold out, additional tickets will be made available on August 4 and 5. Please refer to the information box for more details.

### History and diplomacy

The public’s reception to past events featuring His Holiness has been consistently and overwhelmingly positive – beginning with his first visit to Switzerland in 1973.

The Dalai Lama last visited Switzerland in 2005, when he gave talks and lessons at Zurich’s Hallenstadion. During that particular visit, around 30,000 people attended over an eight-day period. The Rigdzin community expects this year’s events in Lausanne to prove every bit as successful as the one in 2005.

The 2005 event was organised by The Tibet Institute Rikon in Canton Zurich. Established in the 1960s under the direction of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the Institute is now home to nine Tibetan monks. In addition to supporting the spiritual and cultural needs of Tibetans living in Switzerland, the Institute also aims to provide non-Tibetans with information about Tibetan culture. One of the ways it approaches this is to make the 12,000-plus titles in its library open to the public.

The Dalai Lama and the status of Tibet remains a diplomatic hot potato, which when handled incorrectly, can lead to a distinct chill in relations with China. This was most recently seen when Parisian Mayor Bertrand Delanoë chose to award the Dalai Lama with honorary Paris citizenship this June.

Citing a previous souring of relations between the two countries (which followed a meeting between the Dalai Lama and President Nicolas Sarkozy back in December 2008), China’s statement was unequivocal:

“If the Paris city government does make this award, it will definitely once again meet with the Chinese People’s firm opposition,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu told reporters in May. “We urge the Paris side to stop doing things that interfere in China’s internal affairs and make no further errors on the Tibet-related issue.”

In spite of China’s objections and veiled threats, the ceremony went ahead as planned on June 7. Three days later, China blocked the import of several models of French-made Renault cars after the Chinese safety watchdog allegedly found “severe hidden safety problems”.

### Politics aside

“Even in my daily life, I can say that I spend 80 per cent of my time on spiritual activities and 20 per cent on Tibet as a whole. The spiritual or religious life is something I know and have great interest in. I have some kind of confidence in it, and thus I want to study it more,” the Dalai Lama says, in a statement on his official website.

### Learn from the Dalai Lama in person

#### Tickets

Although all pre-booked tickets to the events have already sold out, additional tickets will be made available for purchase on both days.

#### Agenda

**August 4:** His Holiness will give a teaching on Lama Je Tsongkhapa’s “The Three Principal Aspects of the Path”.

**August 5:** His Holiness will give a morning Medicine Buddha initiation, followed by an afternoon lecture on “World Peace Through Inner Peace”.

The schedule also features lectures and ceremonies to be conducted by other members of the Tibetan community.

For more information, go to: [www.dalailama-lausanne2009.ch](http://www.dalailama-lausanne2009.ch)



Although His Holiness clearly plays an important as well as a symbolic role in representing his people and their plight, the purpose of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner's forthcoming visit to Switzerland is purely spiritual, and to share his wisdom with a wider audience.

"The first day of his visit will concentrate on Buddhist texts and aspects of Buddhism.

The second day will be given over to his public speech on "The Art of Happiness". This second day is very much suited to people, regardless of their religion, who wish to satisfy their curiosity on Buddhism, human values and their application in daily life," Schmidt explains. "Its purpose is not to try and persuade people to convert to Buddhism, but to explore the values that we all share."

On July 6, the Dalai Lama turned 74. Despite his advancing years and the constant demands on his time, His Holiness continues to maintain a punishing schedule of teaching and public speaking, as well as carrying out his religious and political responsibilities.

His work takes him all over the world, often requiring travel across multiple time zones. Immediately after his Swiss visit, His Holiness will head to India, then to the United States and Canada, then back to India, and then on to Australia and New Zealand before the year ends. Since the start of the year, he has journeyed from India to Italy and Germany, back to India, to Japan and the United States, then back to India again before heading to Germany and Switzerland.

In spite of this gruelling schedule, His Holiness always maintains his extensive daily meditation routine. According to his official website, when at home in India, he rises at 3:30 each morning for what are typically 17-hour days beginning and ending with prayer and meditation, and packed in between with prostration, exercise, study, work and interviews.

It is perhaps because of his commitment to meditation that he has been able to continue for so long with a schedule that could beat men half his age.

### Universal magnetism

Swiss-born Jon Schmidt seems an unlikely spokesperson for the Rigdzin community. Yet he is living proof that the Buddhist faith attracts and welcomes people from all backgrounds, cultures and walks of life. I ask him how he became involved.

"Several years ago, a friend from university who had taken up Buddhism during a visit to Nepal invited me along to a talk being given by his Lama here in Switzerland. At the time, I had no special interest in Buddhism, but I went along because he was my friend and I was curious," he recalls.

"What I heard during that talk really made me think and want to find out more ... I never set out to become a Buddhist; rather it was the more I learned about it, the more it seemed to make sense to me."

The following excerpt from the Dalai Lama's message on "Compassion and the Individual" may offer a glimpse of what attendees can expect to hear when His Holiness speaks this August on "The Art of Happiness":

"One great question underlies our experience, whether we think about it consciously or not: What is the purpose of life? I have considered this question and would like to share my thoughts in the hope that they may be of direct, practical benefit to those who read them.

"I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy ... therefore, it is important to discover what will bring about the greatest degree of happiness."

Whatever your religious or political view, the Dalai Lama's visit to Lausanne on August 4 and 5 promises to be a unique and thought-provoking experience for all who attend.

Lama Namkha Rinpoche teaching students at one of Switzerland's Rigdzin Community Dharma Buddhist centres



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