

The Dalai Lama has it -- but just what is it?

BELIEFS

Certain people possess a special ability to impart a sense of peace in others that can't be explained. Whatever it is, we all seem to want a piece.

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If there was ever someone in need of good vibrations, it was Paul Ekman. The UC San Francisco psychology professor was as gnarly as an old oak, with a face hard-chiseled by a lifelong struggle with impulsive anger.

All that changed one spring day in 2000 after a brief exchange with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

"He held my hands while we talked," Ekman recalled, "and I was filled with a sense of goodness and a unique total body sensation that I have no words to describe."

Now, the noted expert on human emotional expression understands what it actually feels like to be cheery and optimistic almost every day.

"If I was 30 years younger, I'd take it on as a scientific task to try to explain what happened that day," said Ekman, 72. "It was a great gift."

What is that gift?

Mind control? Charisma? A superhuman skill learned in some Tibetan Shangri-La? A touch of magic?

The Dalai Lama prefers not to talk of such things. "I have no extraordinary energy," he insists with a dismissive wave his hand. "I'm just a Buddhist monk."

But some familiar with the Dalai Lama, and those who study religious figures in history, agree that every so often, people emerge who are perceived to offer proof of a higher authority, understanding or wisdom.

"It -- whatever it is -- can't be defined and is not to be confused with stardom or fame," suggested someone who knows a lot about both, Maria Shriver. "I think the Dalai Lama would say look within because it's in you, not someone else. It all comes down to whether you're open to being touched in your heart."

Shriver, a member of the Kennedy clan and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's wife, knows the Dalai Lama and in September appeared onstage with him at a conference in Long Beach on women's issues. She also knew Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II and said they too projected an aura.

In India, one of the most popular spiritual leaders today is Mata Amritanandamayi, a Hindu woman who is said to impart divine energy with a hug. Over the years, according to her followers, the "Mother of Divine Bliss" has hugged more than 20 million people.

"Personally, I don't know what it is she has, but I don't think it's a scam," said Dara Mayers, an author who has written about her travels with the guru. "It reminded me a little of a quality I've seen in some performers and politicians like Bill Clinton, who is famous for making the focus of his attention feel like the only other person in the room."

But as Shriver noted, this quality goes beyond charisma. What these special figures have in common is their effect on others. They are perceived as being able to bring people to a higher state of being through their example, teachings, sufferings or touch.

In Roman Catholicism, the lives of saints offer many examples, whether from the distant past, as in St. Francis of Assisi, who died in 1226, or more recent times. For example, the Italian priest Padre Pio, who died in 1968 and was canonized in 2002, was said to have a remarkable ability to sense people's pains and to provide comfort.

Thomas Craughwell, a devoted Catholic and author of several books on saints, said an unquantifiable quality sets some people apart from the rest of humanity.

"These people are operating at a level most of us are not," he said, "and they're not limited by denominations. The spirit blows where it will.

"We don't run into them very often," he added, "but when we do, we're rattled because it's like a brush with the divine, and because we want a piece of what they have."

That was the case with two visits in September to the Los Angeles area by the Dalai Lama. Hundreds of Tibetans and Mongolians gathered at a Pasadena hotel to receive a personal blessing that some believed would protect them in this life and ensure them a place in heaven.

The Dalai Lama is leader of the world's Buddhists, born in a cowshed in a remote Tibetan village and chosen by a search party of monks at the age of 2 to be head of his people.

B. Allan Wallace, who has served as a translator for the Dalai Lama since 1974, said there is "a field of kindness" surrounding the spiritual leader that is "not hocus-pocus" and was developed "after meditating four to six hours each day for 55 years."

That kind of talk makes some scientists uncomfortable but also hungry to know more.

Anne Harrington, a professor of the history of science at Harvard, still marvels at how her colleagues responded to the Dalai Lama during a meeting with him in India a few years ago.

"There was one physicist who, after a few days with the Dalai Lama, tearfully confessed that his wife had cancer," she recalled. "He wanted a blessing. Specifically, he wanted a red blessing string for his wife."

In late 2003, Harrington attended a two-day conference at MIT between Western scientists and the Dalai Lama, who "radiated an extraordinary openness and humor that was disarming and inconsistent with the pomp and circumstance we normally associate with a world figure."