

Tibetans in their adopted mountain home.

The Chinese call him a “separatist” and accuse him of inciting controversy. It is illegal to own a photo of him in Tibet, and it is said that Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns are tortured.

To the taunts, he responds respectfully and continues to ask Chinese officials to negotiate a solution, with autonomy for Tibet as an Asian “zone of peace.” In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In October 2007, he received our nation’s highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal. At Emory University, he was to be installed as a Presidential Distinguished Professor, the first position of its kind for him.

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At last, the day came: Sunday, Oct. 21. His Holiness would speak at 9 that morning.

I left my hotel in darkness and arrived at Emory nearly three hours early. Before getting out of my car, I said a short prayer that went something like, “Please don’t let me be disappointed.”

By 7 a.m. the atmosphere was electric in the basketball arena where he was to speak. Tibetan music played and swirling lights overhead bathed us in color. It felt like rock concert — except everyone was so, well, *polite*.

Just before 9 a.m., the cavernous gym fell quiet. My palms clammy, my heart racing, I waited.

There was bustling backstage and then, with a light step, he appeared. He bowed deeply, embraced the monks on stage, even tried to quiet the riotous applause that greeted him.

As for me, I could only stare. He moved briskly, like my grandmother waiting on a house full of guests. He smiled like my grandfather when tending his goats. He joked like my cousin, and to my surprise, wore flip-flops like my sister.

Why, there’s nothing to worry about at all, I realized. I already know this man. I think he’s part of my family.

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Over the next two days I took in his every word. He often speaks English, “my