

the press conference with DEEPAK CHOPRA

In the alternative world of mind, body and spirit Deepak Chopra is something of a legend, a super-guru A-lister with 20 years at the ethereal summit.

He is a publishing phenomenon with 40-plus books published in 35 languages and sales topping 20 million. His plethora of subjects range from complex scientific theories that challenge the ageing process, to self-help guides to love and weight loss, to a golf book that conjures up an imaginary caddie with a spiritually enhanced sweet spot to help you out of those allegorical bunkers.

Chopra, 59, is also a charismatic speaker who has the attention of celebrities and politicians wherever he speaks on his unending sell-out world tour. The day after our interview, he invited me to his one-off London lecture and I watched around 1,500 awestruck followers — including Annie Lennox and Jerry Hall — hang on his every word.

Born in New Delhi, Chopra moved to America in 1970 where he practised as a doctor before branching out. He founded a now famous health centre in California, where he was based until a recent move to New York. He is married with two children in their 30s.

In 1999, *Time* magazine selected Chopra as one of the Top 100 Icons of the 20th Century, describing him as “the poet prophet of alternative medicine”. We meet at the Covent Garden Hotel where the “icon” is considerably low key and modest. In a pastel green Lacoste top and jeans, he talks gently and earnestly, with an unexpectedly strong Indian inflection, given his years in America. The only thing remotely starchy about Chopra is the funky diamante trim on his chunky black-framed spectacles.

An interview with Chopra is fairly rare these days. Naturally, I have a soul-full of questions regarding my own spiritual salvation, but we only have an hour, so enlightenment will have to wait. Damn.

Deepak, tell me, what does someone like yourself make of the British press?
When I was growing up in India, the standard for journalism was always *The Times*. It was part of my upbringing and was always put to us as the Gold Standard, the Holy Grail of journalism. I took some school courses in journalism and for a long time I wanted to be a journalist. When I was a teenager



I lived with my uncle, because my father was in London, training to be a cardiologist. My uncle was a really good journalist who used to write Op-Ed pieces for two or three newspapers. I really admired him and wanted to follow him, but my father wanted me to be a physician. He steered me in that direction, but the ambition to write never left me.

With the tabloids here, it is amazing to me where British journalism has gone. They love sensationalism, to create images of people and then defile those images to sell papers. I hope I don't offend anyone, but I find that Britain in particular has a fascination with debauchery, scandal and hypocrisy. What was it HG Wells said? “Self-righteous morality is just jealousy with a halo.” The English excel at the whole gestalt of jealousy and self-righteousness, which is intriguing and perplexing.

Why do you think there is an obsession with celebrity in our culture and newspapers?
I think we have mythical needs. In traditional

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culture, those needs were actually met with mythology — there were always heroes to look up to, but in modern times there are no heroes. We can name a few: Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and after that, you stop. So celebrities have replaced heroes. I don't know if it is going to fade away, but I wonder how we can make it useful. If Michael Jordan can inspire an Afro-American kid to do great things, or if Madonna can inspire a young artist to write beautiful songs, there is nothing wrong with that. I wish we had more authentic heroes, but celebrities and brands have become the equivalent. It is our new mythology, and I don't know if it is good or bad.

Clearly you have benefited from fame, but how do you square material success with spiritual teachings?
I am very lucky in that I have a wife and children who don't take me seriously at all. That keeps you sober. If you get caught up in your own press, you will

DEEPAK'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers
I read the *New York Times* every day because it is the only newspaper in the United States that has decent world news coverage. It has had a lot of problems with regards to integrity recently, but it has learnt from its mistakes and there is hope for it. Two writers I like are Thomas Friedman, who gives a different perspective in his reports from all over the world, and the political writer Maureen Dowd. I also go online each day to read *The Times* and *The Times of India*, and I check out the *Boston Globe*. I lived in Boston for a long time and I have a lot of respect for that paper. When I am in England, I buy *The Times*, but I am still so shocked to see it as a tabloid.

Magazines
I read *Vanity Fair*. I like their boldness, their courage, their liberal attitude, and I like the fact that they don't shy from calling a spade a spade. I think Graydon Carter is a remarkable man. I have met him a few times and I respect him as a journalist. I also get *Scientific American* magazine regularly.

Radio
I listen to Rush Limbaugh out of fascination at how we have regressed. He is one of the most influential right-wing radio commentators. He earns tens of millions of dollars because he actually influences American public opinion and is a factor in the election of the Conservatives. He was arrested recently and has been accused of everything you can possibly think of, but he is above the law. When he goes to the White House, President Bush actually picks up his luggage — not the staff — and he escorts him to the guest rooms himself. I listen more out of curiosity at the inanity of what he says. Yet America is under the influence of these people who say the most outrageous things. I hate what he says.

Web
I write twice a week for the Huffington Post, which is a wonderful outlet for my journalistic ambitions. My articles get picked up by newspapers all over the world. I do very few interviews these days, unless I am contractually obliged to for a book, so writing for that website is my way of getting into the media with something that is different.

get victimised by it, because it is only occasionally good. Believe your own press and you will never write a good book or do anything authentic.

My press has got better generally, but I have had my share of vicious press. They have called me “con artist”, “peddler of spirituality”, “he makes fools of people”, “Americans are stupid to buy into his philosophy”. There was a time when I was affected by it, but right now it doesn't matter. Everyone has a right to an opinion and if you don't do anything controversial, you will never get anywhere. When I suddenly became well known, I was constantly attacked by organised medicine and the press. I was a very tortured soul, but out of sheer fatigue I decided I had to become immune to both the good and the bad things that are said. That was a turning point.

You got the chance to be the guest editor of *The Times of India* last February. What was that experience like?

It was a lot of fun. I spent three days preparing that issue and I was in total charge for one day. Some of the journalists came with this attitude: Oh yeah, how is this New Age guy going to be our editor? But it went well and they let me have my way. I wrote three Op-Ed pieces, and Al Gore was touring India and I know him, so I interviewed him. It was focused on global warming and how it is the crisis of our time. There were 25 journalists in the room during the interview. We started with global warming, but then I got him to condemn US foreign policy and to say that President Bush had committed a crime.

Al got excited and then suddenly realised what he was saying and lost his temper. He said, “I was here to talk about global warming and you tricked me into criticising the president.” I said, “You're a professional politician and I am not even a journalist, so if

I tricked you, that speaks very poorly of you. If you are going to persist in getting angry, then tomorrow's headline is going to be ‘Al Gore Calls George Bush A Criminal’, because you said it.” He immediately backed off. The journalists would not let go of it once we had that piece and we ran it on the front page — but, I admit, quite mildly. Al and I have been good friends for many years and we never spoke after that until recently. He took it personally, but we are still friends. He definitely dislikes George Bush, but when it comes out he worries about his ratings.

I see you as something of a tycoon in that “New Age” world. But I imagine there are many myths that have been built up. Any you want to dispel here?

I have never written anything that is “New Agey”. My attempt has always been to give a scientific explanation to particular things — especially our understanding of consciousness — but you get lumped in with New Age people, crystals and all this stuff that I have never been interested in. It used to irritate me, but then I realised the people who criticised me had never read one of my books.

There are plenty of silly myths — like I am vegetarian or I don't drink coffee. So people get very upset when they hear I eat everything and when they recognise me in Starbucks and I order a double hazelnut latte. My wealth is also a total myth. I really wonder when newspapers report, “Oh, he makes \$20 million a year.” That is basically what is generated by all the activities of all the centres, all the lectures, all the books. Depending on how my books do, my personal income is in the range of \$2-3 million a year, of which half goes in taxes. So, OK, I make \$1-2 million a year. It is reasonable and I am happy with that. I don't have an expensive lifestyle, other than I travel first class. I am moving to New York where I have a small, two-bedroom apartment.

You seem very open about your earnings, so can I ask what is your net worth?
If you counted everything, probably \$10-15 million, but it doesn't matter to me. I have never worried about money and I have never done anything for the sake of money. But this image has been created that I am this huge business person. Where does my income come from? Books — you don't need business acumen for that, you just have to write a book people like to read. My lectures generate a fair amount, but giving lectures is not business. I am not even involved in the other business activities, they just have my name.

I do have a worldwide name recognition, a brand, but if you asked me how I did it, I wouldn't be able to tell you. It happened. I was just singing my song. The brand thing has become so popular that lots of people buy my books and never even read them! I will meet little old ladies in Santa Monica who say,

by Rob McGibbon

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull *The Blistan Plug...* My new book, *Kama Sutra*, is out now, published by Virgin at £20. Find out about *Alliance For A New Humanity* at www.ahglobal.org and make a positive difference to the world.

“Dr Chopra, I love you, you saved my life — but I don't understand a thing you say!” It is very strange.

I enjoyed your *Q&A For Enlightenment* book — but can you explain why my game hasn't improved?
[We discuss my game in, ooh, 15 seconds. He plays off 10.] You are probably too attached to your score. It is only a game, it doesn't matter. [This simplistic soundbite actually resonates. A bright light appears. Sad, oh. Hence, I play my next round with total abandonment... and lose six balls and shoot 100-plus, my worst score in years.]

You have founded a peace movement called ‘Alliance For A New Humanity’. What is that?
I have formed a foundation with some amazing people. We were reading about terrorist cells all over the world and we had the idea to create peace cells, and it is now growing by leaps and bounds. It is a grass-roots movement that will act locally, but connect globally to make a positive difference to the world. I am now 59 years old and I am in the autumn of my life. I have done everything I possibly could for myself and this movement is now my main ambition for the rest of my life.

It must have been pretty cool being named in the Top 100 Icons of the 20th Century?
I called my publisher and said: “How does this happen? Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi — ME!?” They said that some people get around a table and somebody likes you. So, a group of people who happen to be in the right place like you — it doesn't mean anything if you really think about it. You know what, the only thing that gave me a little bit of exultation was that I showed my children and said, “You see!” And they just shrugged their shoulders. Ha!

Back to the press. What do you think of the John Prescott affair (it was all over the papers at the time). And do you think Tony Blair is getting some bad karma for his various actions?
Yes, I think he is. You reap what you sow. I used to admire Tony Blair, but the moment he started to be a lackey of George Bush I lost respect for him. He sold his soul. What is he doing?
John Prescott — a politician has an affair, big deal! When I was a kid in India, the only worthwhile news was the Profumo affair, and nothing has changed. I feel bad for Prescott. [What?] Again, self-righteous morality is jealousy with a halo. Why should it grab our attention so much? Who is he hurting, other than his wife? And that is a private matter. I think the importance given to the whole thing is totally out of proportion to what we really need to focus on. Ever since I got involved with the Alliance, my mind says there are 60,000 children who died of hunger-related causes yesterday. More are going to die today and tomorrow. We are not even bringing everyone's awareness to this fact.

I have been looking at the same headlines for 50 years — this obsession with scandals — but they have nothing to do with the real world. I have respect for journalists, but sometimes they don't realise how much influence they have. They shape public opinion, and public opinion shapes public policy, and public policy ultimately shapes the policy of major governments. So when journalists expose important issues, they do a really good job, but they shouldn't be wasting time on sex scandals.

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