

Buddhists

Buddhism traces its roots to the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the ‘Awakened One’ (*Buddha*). Although it is difficult to construct a historical record of Siddhartha’s life by modern standards, it is likely that he lived in India between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE and that he renounced his noble standing in order to embrace an ascetic lifestyle in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha achieved this state, and most believe that it is likewise achievable for all those determined to follow the same path toward buddhahood and liberation.

Various schools of Buddhism differ on the specific teachings and practices that lead to enlightenment. There are two major branches of Buddhism that are generally acknowledged by scholars: Theravada Buddhism (*School of the Elders*), which emphasises the foundational texts and teachings, and Mahayana Buddhism (*The Great Vehicle*), which places more importance upon the experience of being on the Buddhist path. The Mahayana tradition accounts for 53.2% of Buddhists today, mostly in East Asia, compared to 35.8% for Theravada, which is found primarily in Southeast Asia. Vajrayana Buddhism, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘third turning of the wheel of dharma’ and largely based upon ancient tantric teachings, comprises only 5.7%.

In total, there are approximately 488 million Buddhists worldwide, according to the Pew Research Center, about half of which are in China, where Tibetan Buddhists are particularly repressed. Hòa Hào Buddhists and members of the United Buddhist Sangha are also persecuted in Vietnam. In both China and Vietnam, Buddhists are in prison for exercising their freedom of religion.

Teachings

Buddhist teachings elaborate the trainings and methods necessary to overcome ignorance, achieve enlightenment, and ensure favourable *samsara*, the endless cycle of rebirth that leads to a state of buddhahood.

The Four Noble Truths are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism and provide a conceptual framework for Buddhist thought. They explain the nature of *dukkha* (often translated as ‘suffering’), its causes, its relation to craving, and how *dukkha* is to be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the interconnected practices and conditions which can lead to the cessation of *dukkha*. They are Right View (or Right Understanding), Right Intention (or Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These elements are not to be understood as successive stages of Buddhist practice but rather essential qualities to be cultivated together on the path toward buddhahood.

Controversies

While it is not possible to link Buddhism too closely to the modern Western concept of human rights, some scholars have referenced Buddhist attitudes of respect, human dignity, and freedom as common markers with human rights thought. These attitudes have fuelled opposition movements among Tibetan Buddhists in China and Buddhist groups in Vietnam, two countries that strictly control religious activity within their borders and view any political dissent as a threat to the stability of their governments.

The status of **Tibet** as an independent state or autonomous region has long been the subject of controversy and sometimes violent struggle. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Tibet was invaded, and Chinese socialism was harshly imposed. The Dalai Lama and more than 80,000 Tibetans went into exile, mostly in India and Nepal. Attempts to resolve the Tibetan issue have yet to reach a political solution.

It is the Dalai Lama's identification with the liberation struggle of Tibet that has led to the government's repression of Tibetan Buddhism. China tightened its control over monasteries under a campaign aimed at undermining the Dalai Lama's influence as a political and spiritual leader. Since 1949, the Chinese have destroyed over 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and shrines. By 1978 only eight monasteries and 970 monks and nuns remained in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Moreover, spiritual leaders have faced difficulties in re-establishing historical monasteries previously destroyed.

In 1995, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was selected by the Dalai Lama to succeed him and become the eleventh Panchen Lama. He was six years old at that time. Three days later, he and his family disappeared and have not been seen in public since. Another child, Gyancaïn Norbu, was later named as the Panchen Lama by the People's Republic of China, a choice rejected by most Tibetan Buddhists. The spiritual void China created by the disappearance of the legitimate Panchen Lama remains a clear example of China's attempt to suppress Tibetan culture and identity.

In Vietnam, government restrictions have sharply limited all religious activities for both registered and non-registered groups. In 1981, all Buddhist organisations came under the government-controlled Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. Those who refused the official sanction to operate as such instead organised as the United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. However, the group was subsequently banned and its activities suppressed.

Buddhists in Prison

China

The *US Congressional Executive Commission on China Political Prisoners Database* carries the documented cases of nearly 3900 Tibetan Buddhists and some 20 non-Tibetan Buddhists. In the long struggle for Tibetan self-determination, it is very difficult to distinguish between activities that are primarily motivated by religion or belief and those that are more rightly considered politically motivated. For this reason *Human Rights Without Frontiers* here documents only a limited number of cases that are more clearly related to the exercise of freedom of religion.¹

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his parents are still detained in a secret location, despite sustained condemnation from the international community. On 17th May 1995, Gendun Choekyi Nyima was kidnapped with his parents by the Chinese authorities three days after he was announced to be the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama. They have not been seen in public since. Another Panchen Lama was chosen by the Chinese government, but he has not been approved by the Buddhist

¹ Others have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms or to death for their involvement in political non-violent or violent activities, according to the Chinese authorities, or as human rights defenders but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow HRWF Int'l to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded. See the documented cases at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

community faithful to the Dalai Lama.

Jampa Choephel, Choedar Dargye, and Gedun Thogphel were arrested in 2003 and sentenced to 12 years in prison for possessing photos of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, conducting prayers for the Dalai Lama while he was ill and possessing a painting of the Tibetan flag.

Runggye Adak was arrested on 1st August 2007 at the Lithang Horse Racing Festival in Tibet. He was charged with provocation to subvert state power after addressing a crowd during a horse racing festival in Lithang. He said, ‘If we cannot invite the Dalai Lama home, we will not have freedom of religion and happiness in Tibet’ and called for the release of the Panchen Lama and Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Tenzin Delek (Rinpoche) was arrested on 7th April 2002. He was accused of masterminding and carrying out the bombing of Tianfu Square in Chengdu, ‘suspicion of inciting secession’ and ‘illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.’ He was first sentenced to death, but in 2005 his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

In 1983, Tenzin Delek had been designated as the reincarnation of Adengpengcuo, the Gexi Lama of Aotuo Temple of Yajiang County. A staunch supporter of the Dalai Lama, he is a monk of high reputation in the Tibetan region and the exiled Tibetan community in India. In December 2009, over 30,000 Tibetans signed and finger-printed a petition calling on the central government to retry his case. Tenzin Delek died in detention on 12th July 2015. He was cremated in prison despite family requests for the 15-day preservation of his body in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Phurbu Tsering was arrested in May 2008 during a nuns’ demonstration in Ganzi in opposition to an official campaign to impose ‘patriotic re-education’ on their convents in which they were required to denounce the Dalai Lama. He was charged of illegal possession of ammunition and embezzlement. He denied the charges.

Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was the first reincarnated lama to be charged with a serious crime since Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. He was heading the Pangri and Puruna Nunneries. On 23rd December 2009, he was sentenced to 8 years and 6 months in prison.

Vietnam

A number of Hao Hoa Buddhists and members of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam² have been arrested for exercising their rights related to freedom of religion or belief.

Thich Quang Do, the 87-year old leader of the banned United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, has been held under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon since 1998, although he

² Other Buddhists have been arrested and sentenced to prison terms as human rights defenders but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow *Human Rights Without Frontiers* to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded in the selected cases.

has not been formally convicted of any crime.

In 1982, he was sent into internal exile in northern Vietnam for protesting against the creation of a state-sponsored Buddhist Church. In 1995, he was charged with ‘undermining national solidarity’ and sentenced to 5 years imprisonment. After international pressure, he was released in 1998 but placed directly under house arrest without any formal charges or indictment. He has spent over 30 years of his life in detention for his advocacy for religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. He was named the Fifth Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Church of Vietnam in November 2011.

Mai Thi Dung was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2007 for allegedly ‘disturbing public order.’ She was released on 17th April 2015, sixteen months prior to the end of her prison term, because she was in very poor health.

Nguyen Van Lia, 71, was arrested in 2011 and sentenced to five years in prison for breaking away from the state-sponsored Buddhist Association. He was released on 24th October 2015.

Bui Van Tham was arrested for opposing the state in July 2012 and sentenced to two years and six months in prison. He was released on 26th January 2015.

Conclusions

China’s suppression of the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism aims to eliminate an integral part of Tibet’s cultural and national identity. In this sense, the Tibetans’ claim to self-determination and independence for their people is closely linked to the preservation of their cultural and religious identity. At the same time, China asserts that Tibet is a part of the People’s Republic and that it rightfully maintains control over the region. In order to ensure this power, China considers it necessary to police all political and religious activities in Tibet. Any mass movement that could lead to Tibet’s independence could ruin business and public relations between the two countries in the future.

Regardless of the political status of Tibet in respect to the Chinese government, it is clear that the freedom of religion is systematically curtailed by the Chinese authorities in the region today. The government actively promotes atheism in an attempt to undermine the Dalai Lama’s influence. Severe controls are imposed on monasteries and nunneries. Religious pilgrimages are limited, and acquiring a religious education remains difficult. Freedom of speech, press, association, and religion are methodically obstructed and restricted.

Moreover, the discrimination faced by Tibetans in terms of education, employment, health care, and legal representation is a consequence of the concerted campaign to marginalise, isolate and assimilate Tibetans in ways that allow the Chinese authorities to control them politically. Even the Tibetan flag and national anthem are banned. Anyone found in possession of a picture of the Dalai Lama can be subjected to torture and imprisonment.

Vietnam has similar policies toward Buddhists whom authorities consider to be dissident influences in society. Thich Quang Do stresses that his situation is not unique for religious and civil society activists in Vietnam: *‘All who dare to speak out for human rights face harassment,*

intimidation, surveillance or detention,' he said. 'Plain-clothed security agents ruthlessly beat young men and women in order to frighten them and reduce them to silence.' Any threat to power, real or perceived, is summarily suppressed.

Authorities sometimes raise the objection that states have a responsibility to ensure the stability of its government and the security of its citizens. However, whenever the state sacrifices fundamental freedoms in order to maintain power, it is a serious breach of democratic principles, at the expense of the people it professes to protect.