

# 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 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and that he renounced his noble status in order to embrace an ascetic lifestyle in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha achieved this state of spiritual enlightenment, 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 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’, is largely based upon ancient tantric teachings and 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. Members of the United Buddhist Sangha, Hòa Hào Buddhists, and other Buddhist groups 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 which 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 via a campaign aimed at undermining the Dalai Lama's influence as a political and spiritual leader. Since 1949, the Chinese have destroyed over six-thousand 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 mandate to operate as such instead organised the United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. However, the group was subsequently banned and its activities suppressed.

## **Buddhists in Prison**

### **China**

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 (approximately twenty) that are more clearly related to the exercise of freedom of religion according to the available information.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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, however 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 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/>. Another database that documents Chinese Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhists is the Congressional-Executive Commission on China's Annual Report 2017: <http://bit.ly/2y4bL17>

**Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his parents** are still detained in a secret location, despite sustained condemnation from the international community. On 17<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. They have not been seen in public since.

**Lobsang Sonam**, twenty-three years old, was arrested in September 2015 and charged with having disclosed state secrets. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016, he was sentenced to **six years in prison**. He was detained incommunicado for more than one year. Until the hearing of his sentence, his family was given no information on the details of his arrest or whereabouts.

**Thardhod Gyaltsen**, who was arrested in December 2013, was sentenced to **eighteen years in prison** for possession of banned images and teachings of the Dalai Lama.

**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, who died in prison after serving thirteen of his twenty-year sentence. Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was heading the Pangri and Puruna Nunneries when he was arrested. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2009, he was sentenced to **8 years and 6 months in prison**.

In November 2015, eight Buddhists were arrested and later sentenced on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2016 for unknown charges: **Drudka** (fourteen years in prison), **Lobsang Gephel** (twelve years in prison), **Lobsang Khedrup** (thirteen years in prison), **Bonko Kyi** (seven years in prison), **Lodroe** (nine years in prison), **Tarey** (eight years in prison), **Tsendra** (eight years in prison) and **Tsultrim** (six years in prison).

For more information about the persecution of Buddhists in China in 2017, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>. For more information about Buddhist prisoners, see <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

## Vietnam

Several Buddhist denominations have been the target of persecution in Vietnam. These include members of the **Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam**, and other Buddhist denominations (**An Dan Dai Dao**, **Bia Son**, **Hoa Hoa** and **Khmer Krom**).<sup>2</sup> These individuals have been arrested for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately thirty cases across Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

**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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Twenty-one, including: One Dan Dai Dao, one Bia Son, five Hoa Hao, two Khmer Krom, one member of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam and others.

he 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 five years in prison. After international pressure, he was released in 1998 but placed directly under house arrest without any formal charges or indictment. He has spent over thirty 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.

**Nguyen Van Huu**, a **Bia Son Buddhist**, was arrested in September 2014. He was accused of allegedly storing, using, and trading explosive materials to overthrow the government. He was ultimately sentenced to **six years in prison**.

**Nguyen Dinh** was arrested on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012 for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government. He was sentenced to **fourteen years in prison**, followed by a five-year probationary period. He is a member of the **An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist** denomination, which was founded in 1969 and prohibited in April 1975 after the Communist regime took over South Vietnam.

**Thach Thuol**, a **Khmer Krom Buddhist**, was arrested in May 2013 for allegedly fleeing abroad to act against the people’s government. In September 2013 he was sentenced to **six years in prison**. He was the head monk of Ta Set Pagoda, often speaking against the authorities’ mistreatment of Khmer Krom Buddhists. This led to an order of the government to defrock him.

**Nguyen Van Minh**, a **Hoa Hao Buddhist**, was arrested in July 2011 and sentenced to **eleven years in prison** for allegedly ‘carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration’ (Penal Code Article 79). Despite the fact that he suffers from low-blood pressure and other illnesses, his family has been prohibited from visiting and supplying him with the minimal necessities.

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## 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 freedom of religion or belief 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. The Tibetan flag and national anthem are strictly banned. Anyone found in possession of a picture of the Dalai Lama can be subjected to arrest, torture and imprisonment.

**Vietnam** has repressive policies toward Buddhists whom authorities consider to be dissident influences in society. Thich Quang Do, the leader of the banned United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, under house arrest since 1998, 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 during an interview. *'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 a state has 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.