

JustComment

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Buddhism beyond Australia's borders

Buddhism is an ancient

belief system which focuses on personal spiritual development and the pursuit of harmony, wisdom and compassion. The importance of showing concern for others and living a morally responsible life lie at the heart of Buddhist teachings. While the Buddhist faith is thriving in Australia, this peaceful religion and its homeland of Tibet are threatened by Chinese Government repression and control.

Buddhism in Australia

It is official: there are now more Buddhists in Australia per capita than anywhere else in the Western world. The 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed that there are 418,800 Buddhist followers in Australia, representing 2.1% of the Australian population. This makes Buddhism Australia's largest non-Christian religious affiliation, ahead of Islam (1.7%) and Hinduism (0.7%).

The number of Australian Buddhists has doubled since 1996. This substantial growth is partly due to patterns of immigration from traditionally Buddhist countries in Asia and the Indian Sub-Continent, but it is also an indication of Australia's growing interest in non-Christian spirituality. Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditation, reflection and awareness, is thought to provide an antidote to the materialism and consumption which dominate Western society.

Academics suggest that many Australians choosing to convert to Buddhism feel dissatisfied or disillusioned with established religions, which they consider to be too rigid or intolerant. In contrast, Buddhism offers a more casual approach to

membership, a feature which also makes official head-counting difficult. Unlike the world's other major faiths, Buddhism is non-theistic (meaning there is no central God figure) and there are no formal doctrines in the sense that other religions use this term. As a result, many argue that Buddhism could be defined as a philosophy or 'way of life' rather than a formal religion.

But while Buddhism is flourishing in Australia it is faltering in Tibet – a region which, until a few decades ago, was a Buddhist theocracy with an almost totally Buddhist population.

Persecution of the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is considered to be the leading authority in Buddhism. The present Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, claims to be the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people yet has lived in exile since the People's Republic of China (PRC) took control of Tibet in 1959. Chinese authorities regard the Dalai Lama as a counter-revolutionary endangering state security. Authorities continue to suppress any religious activity venerating him, as they believe this would promote 'splittism.' In 1996 the Chinese Government announced that total war was to be waged against the Dalai Lama and launched the "Strike Hard" campaign in Tibet against splittists and other political activists. This repression was repeated again in 2001.

The Chinese Government has now banned Tibetan Buddhist monks from reincarnating without official



government permission. In July 2007, the Chinese Government issued "Reincarnation Regulations for Tibetan Living Buddhas," which stated that reincarnation must involve application to and approval from Chinese Government authorities, declaring that "those who violate the Regulations and engage in unauthorized reincarnation of Tibetan living Buddhas may face criminal charges." This effectively gives the Chinese Government the power to select the future Dalai Lama.

Chinese Control of Tibet

This 'war' against the Dalai Lama is part of a broader, sustained attempt by Chinese authorities to stamp out Buddhism in Tibet. Bordering India, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma, the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region encompasses half of historic Tibet and was created in 1965 by the Chinese government, with the rest of historic Tibet being annexed to adjacent

Chinese provinces. The Tibet Autonomous Region is home to approximately 2.4 million Tibetans. Following the Chinese invasion, Tibet's ancient semi-feudal government was dismantled, institutions of the Dalai Lama were torn apart and almost all of Tibet's Buddhist monasteries were destroyed. Buddhism, once the heart of the Tibetan people's belief system, culture and everyday life, is losing ground to the Maoist principles of the Chinese administration.

Human Rights and Religious Repression

Officially, Chinese authorities recognise that freedom of religion represents a basic human right contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18 of both these instruments guarantees every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the freedom to practise his or her religion in teaching, worship and observance.

China claims that freedom of religion is protected by the Chinese Constitution and in legislation in ways which are consistent with international agreements. The President of the People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao has said that "people of all ethnic groups [in Tibet] are fully enjoying political, economic, cultural and other rights and have complete control over their destiny"

It is clear, however, that China's constitutional, legal and administrative structures are actually restricting, rather than protecting, religious freedom in Tibet. The authorities interpret "fervent religious practice" among Tibetans as an obstacle to economic progress and a rallying point for terrorists or "splittists". Human rights violations in Tibet are justified by the Chinese authorities because they supposedly protect 'national unity' or 'national security'.

Since invading Tibet the Chinese Government has restricted religious ceremonies and maintained prohibitions against celebrating important dates on the Buddhist calendar, such as Saka Dawa, and the birthdays of the Dalai Lama and of the 11th Panchen Lama. Authorities closely monitor the activities and education of monks and nuns and require that they denounce the Dalai Lama as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Monks are forced to study Communist Party-approved texts and attend patriotic re-education classes, leaving little time for the study of Buddhist scriptures. In addition, religious publications are controlled by the Chinese government, and monasteries are run by government-approved management committees.

The destruction of monasteries has served not only to disrupt religious teaching, but has also seriously dislocated the traditional Tibetan economy. Monasteries have long been part of Tibet's financial and trading networks and have formed the basis of the country's welfare system. Monasteries have traditionally provided loans and support for the development of farms and businesses and distributed food to families affected by poor harvest or illness. The destruction of these monasteries has been a major cause of poverty in rural Tibet, where most of the population live.

Suspected "separatists," many of whom come from monasteries, are routinely imprisoned. Sonam Gyalpo, a former monk, was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment in mid-2006 for "endangering state security" after authorities found videos of the Dalai Lama in his house. In June 2006, five Tibetans, including two nuns, were detained for publishing and distributing independence leaflets. There are an estimated 116 political prisoners in Tibet, 70% of which are monks or nuns. Use of torture and denial of

rights to practice their religion are widespread.

Future Prospects for Buddhism in Tibet

The introduction of specific regulations on religious affairs in 2007 has worsened religious repression in Tibet. While Chinese authorities announced that the regulations were "a significant step forward in the protection of Chinese citizens' religious freedom," in reality they paved the way for greater government intervention in religious affairs. Chinese officials continue to detain and arrest religious believers, close religious sites, and impose restrictions on the movements, contacts, visits, and correspondence of religious personnel.

It has been argued that the deliberate and sustained attacks on Buddhists and the Dalai Lama could constitute cultural imperialism, racial and religious discrimination and perhaps even genocide. The UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the crime of genocide, which China ratified in April 1983, defines genocide as "any act committed with the intent to destroy in whole, or part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." Since 1959, the Chinese occupation has resulted in up to 1.2 million Tibetan deaths.

While the Dalai Lama has worked to publicise the plight of the Tibetan people and their religion on the world stage, it will take forceful and sustained international pressure to convince China to reverse its practices and improve its human rights record.

Just Action

- To learn more about Buddhism go to: www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/schools.htm
- For more information on the state of human rights in Tibet, visit: www.tchrd.org/

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