



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Palden Gyatso, Tibetan monk who was tortured and jailed for 33 years, passes away

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The International Campaign for Tibet mourns the loss of Ven. Palden Gyatso, who endured more than 30 years of torture and imprisonment in Chinese prisons and labor camps in Tibet and died today, Nov. 30, in Dharamsala, India, at the age of 85.

The Dalai Lama described Palden's life as "one of the most extraordinary stories of suffering and endurance," saying that he was "an inspiration to us all."

"Individuals like Palden Gyatso," the Dalai Lama wrote in a foreword to Palden's book "Fire Under the Snow," "reveal that the human values of compassion, patience and a sense of responsibility for our own actions that lie at the core of spiritual practice still survive. His story is an inspiration to us all."

In a statement on Nov. 30, Congressman Chris Smith, who was deeply impacted by Palden Gyatso's story (during his testimony in 1995) said, "With the passing of Palden Gyatso the world has lost a powerful voice for freedom and human rights. I once chaired a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing where he delivered moving and unforgettable testimony about his 33 year imprisonment in China. He was horribly tortured, his body scarred and bent, but he forgave his captors then worked tirelessly to expose their misdeeds and the misdeeds committed by the Chinese Communist Party against the Tibetan people. We mourn this loss, but are comforted by the fact that Palden Gyatso left behind a legacy that will live on among Tibetan advocates for freedom and human rights."

Prior to his death, Palden, who passed away peacefully after increasing infirmity, was in Delek Hospital in Dharamsala being cared for by monks at Kirti monastery.

He lived through one of the most harrowing eras in Tibetan history, enduring virtual starvation during the famine from 1959 to 62 and unimaginable torture and maltreatment for his refusal to 'reform' and give up his Buddhist faith and identity.

He was born in Panam in central Tibet, and as a child lived together with an extended family of cousins, aunts and uncles—29 altogether—in a large house. On Palden's release from prison in 1992, most of his family were dead, killed by executions, starvation or torture. None of them had ever been able to visit him during his 33 years in prison.

In prison, Palden said in his 1997 autobiography, written with Tsering Shakya, "We all learned to live as though we were orphans, with no parents or brothers or sisters or even friends in the outside

world.” With typical restraint and understatement, he added: “This was perhaps easier for me as a monk than it was for some other prisoners.”

At the age of 10, Palden became a monk at Gadrug Gompa in Shigatse and studied there until he was 16. He then moved to Drepung, one of the three great monasteries in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. Palden had grown up with an understanding of his country’s tragic history from his father (his mother died a month after his birth). He remembered his father, a devout Buddhist, telling him about an independent Tibet before China’s invasion when he was a small child.

On March 10, 1959, at the age of 28, Palden went to Lhasa on monastic business. He was intercepted by a young government official who had told him that he had been sent to summon all the monks to the Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama’s summer residence.

The Dalai Lama had been attempting wary conciliations with the Chinese rulers of Tibet, but fears had grown that they would attempt to kidnap the Tibetans’ beloved leader. Later in life, Palden remembered how the official’s voice began to tremble when he told them that the Chinese were intending to take the Dalai Lama to China.

When he arrived at the Norbulingka, Palden saw that the entire population of Lhasa was out on the streets. This was the beginning of an uprising. Palden volunteered to be among a group of monks prepared to stand guard and protect His Holiness, and they pasted posters asserting Tibet’s independence. The women of Lhasa held their own protest, led by Kundeling Kunsang— later, in prison, Palden witnessed her execution. There was never a chance to fight back. In a horrifying crackdown, the shelling of the Norbulingka began and Drepung came under attack. The thousands of dead would never know that the beloved leader they were seeking to protect later managed to reach safety in India, unharmed.

Palden and two friends took a 72-year old monk named Gyen, Palden’s mentor and teacher, on their backs and carried him away to a place of safety. This would only be temporary.

In his book, Palden recalls undergoing ‘struggle sessions’ with Chinese officials who came to ‘re-educate’ them in the crackdown after the uprising. Once, Chinese officials showed an elderly monk friend of Palden’s a thick wool gown and asked him where it came from. “Wool – from a sheep,” the monk said, starting to cry because he did not know what was expected of him. His answer was incorrect. He had failed to take into account the labor of the serfs, he was told.

In the chaos of those years, Palden was branded a “reactionary counter-revolutionary” and after undergoing harsh interrogation, involving a gun being put to his head, he was imprisoned in 1960. For around six months of his early imprisonment, he was held in leg irons with a metal bar that made it almost impossible to walk, and he could only move by shuffling. Palden relied on his cellmates for everything; he could not even eat without their assistance. One prisoner would take a handful of tsampa (roasted barley flour) and make it into dough, then put it on the bed next to his mouth, and he would take small bites from it. Even in his 80s, Palden was still moved by the memory of their kindness.

The famine in Tibet in the 1960s led to thousands of deaths outside prison as well as inside. Palden said all the prisoners were driven by hunger. “We thought of nothing else. Some prisoners would eat

the bones of dead rats or insects they found in the fields. I soaked my leather boots in water and began to chew on them. Soon there was nothing left.”

Palden and other prisoners held in Drapchi at that time were forced to work for nine hours a day, frequently harnessed in a yoke and made to plough the land. Hunger became the cruelest punishment. But prisoners could not stop working, otherwise they would be beaten almost to death.

In the mornings, prisoners did not have the strength to raise their heads without pushing them up with their hands.

Palden remembered that every day Chinese officials would come into the jail with a cart pulled by three horses. They would load the cart with people who had died overnight or in the plough harness. Prisoners could see heads rolling about over the edge.

Palden was compelled to witness many executions during the Cultural Revolution. He said once that some died of fear before they were shot with a bullet to the back of the head. Prisoners were forced to remain completely silent and to show no signs of grief. But often, they wept.

During endless re-education sessions, punishments were cruel and violent. When prisoners adopted a cross-legged posture for the sessions, they were accused of showing feudal respect to the Buddha and were forced to squat, emulating PLA soldiers. Palden was so badly tortured at one point after another prisoner accused him of making a water offering—a ritual in which you dip your finger in water and sprinkle it into the air as an offering to the deities—that he told guards to kill him. They accused him of being an “evil reactionary.”

In 1987, when a group of Drepung monks took to the streets to call for independence—sparking a three-year wave of demonstrations in Lhasa—a new era began in prison. Palden recalled a new atmosphere of camaraderie and defiance, with a younger generation in prison for protesting. Palden marveled: “They had been raised under the Red Flag, yet they had discarded Communism and demanded ‘Bo Rangzen,’ freedom for Tibet.”

Palden became known in the West after visiting Britain, Italy, Portugal and the US in 1995, bringing with him a collection of torture implements, some still stained with blood that he smuggled from Tibet after bribing a Chinese prison official. In April 1995, while in Washington, D.C. he testified before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights on the situation in Tibet. His testimony left a lasting impact on then Chairman of the Subcommittee, Congressman Chris Smith. Similarly, in June 1998 he joined Members of Congress, Tibetan leaders and human rights activists gathered in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. to share his story at the National Day of Action for Tibet.

In a poem called ‘Tibet’s Secret,’ the Tibetan writer Tsering Woesser wrote of the impression he made on her life:

“It was only on the Web I saw, spread out before an old lama,
An array of handcuffs, leg-irons, daggers,
Electrified batons that can be put to various uses.
He had a hollow face, with wrinkles like ravines,

But you could still make out the splendor of his youth
And a beauty not of this world: for when he left home, still a boy,
He had to sublimate his outward charms to the energy of
Lord Buddha.”

His presence made a deep emotional impact on Tibet supporters across the globe, many of whom retained connections with him for many years afterward.

In London, on his first visit, he was taken to the dentist and given an entire set of false teeth. His beaming smile afterward was unforgettable and hard to reconcile with how he had lost his teeth in his last period of imprisonment when a Tibetan guard named Paljor, furious over Palden’s refusal to renounce Tibetan independence, tortured him with an electric shock baton in his mouth. The torture was so brutal that one of the Chinese guards ran out of the room in disgust.

Even so Palden’s spirit remained undimmed. In spring 1991, he and his fellow inmates heard of a foreign delegation visit to inspect Drapchi Prison. They prepared a petition describing the reality of prison life and the use of torture, a story that is fully documented in “Fire Under the Snow.” The visitor was then U.S. Ambassador to China James Lilley. He was given the letter, but within seconds a Chinese girl with the delegation snatched it from his hands. The consequences were terrible. One by one, all the political prisoners were shackled, taken to the interrogation room, beaten and thrown into solitary confinement.

Palden wrote that even so, “The prisoners were unyielding. They said openly that they would prefer to die rather than submit to the Chinese. [...] For those who use brute force, there is nothing more insulting than a victim’s refusal to acknowledge their power. The human body can bear immeasurable pain and yet recover. Wounds can heal. But once your spirit is broken, everything falls apart. So we did not allow ourselves to feel dejected. We draw strength from our convictions and, above all, from our belief that we were fighting for justice and for the freedom of our country.”

As the Dalai Lama notes in his foreword to Palden’s book, having reached the safety of exile, Palden did not give up, but persisted and wasted no opportunity to tell the world the truth about Tibet.

In 2006, Palden, then 74, joined two other Tibetans to go on hunger strike after the International Olympics Committee decided to award the 2008 Games to Beijing. They called for the IOC to pressure China to improve the human rights situation in Tibet and China; for China to disclose the details concerning the whereabouts of the Panchen Lama—the second highest ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism, who was abducted by China as a six-year-old boy in 1995—and for China to unconditionally and immediately release all Tibetan political prisoners.