

TESTIMONY OF

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U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

BEFORE THE

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

ON

TIBET: FREEDOM OF RELIGION

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Thank you to the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Representatives Jim McGovern (D-MA), and Randy Hultgren (R-IL), and Commission members for holding today's hearing on "Tibet: Freedom of Religion." I am Tenzin Dorjee, a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Commission uses international standards to monitor the universal right of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the Congress, President and Secretary of State.

I am pleased to be here today with my fellow witnesses: Arjia Rinpoche, Nyima Lhamo, and Todd Stein. This hearing comes at an important time for the Tibetan people. The Chinese government ruthlessly seeks to control Buddhism, restrict the teaching of the Tibetan language, and force Tibetans to assimilate into the dominant Han culture. The bottom line is that the Chinese government's goal is to disappear the Tibetan people by repressing our religion, our culture, and our language. To help achieve these ends, the government has imprisoned an increasing number of prisoners of conscience. In reaction to and in protest of these repressive actions, some Tibetans have chosen to self-immolate.

In my testimony, I will discuss several prisoners of conscience, to shine a light on both their situations and the increasingly dire conditions of Tibetan Buddhists in China. I will begin my testimony by sharing with you my story as a Tibetan refugee. I then will focus on the Panchen Lama, Tashi Wangchuk, and the 150 people who have self-immolated to date. I will end my testimony with recommendations for U.S. government action.

My Refugee Story

I was born in 1960 in the town of Ruthok, near Holy Mt. Kailash, in Western Tibet. I was smuggled out as an infant by my parents when, like tens of thousands of other Tibetans, we were forced to flee Tibet for India due to the brutal 1959 invasion of Tibet by the Chinese Communist People's Liberation Army and the repressive conditions that continue to this day.

While I have no memory of Tibet, I vividly remember what my parents, who now are deceased, told me about why they had to flee after China invaded Tibet. My father, Phuntsok Dhondup, belonged to Lhasa nobility and served as (Tibetan: *Zongpon Kutsab*) Acting District Magistrate of Ruthok District in Independent Tibet. My mother, Miggyur Lekkye, belonged to the richest semi-nomadic family in Ruthok. Chinese government officials imprisoned my father for about ten months and tortured him. By happenstance, he temporarily was released the day I was born, when he named me *Gu Yang Nyima* (Amnesty Sun). Fearing that he would be returned to prison, he planned our escape to India. We were able to flee Tibet two weeks after his release. I remember him telling me that it took us two weeks, on foot and horseback, to reach India. We had to avoid many roadblocks and barely escaped the soldiers who were pursuing us. We finally crossed the Indus River and safely reached Ladakh, India.

After a year in Ladakh, my parents went to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be blessed. At their request, His Holiness named me Tenzin Dorjee (Diamond of Wisdom). My late parents served as foster parents at the Central School for Tibetans, Mt. Abu, in Rajasthan, India. The Indian

government established these separate schools as part of the Central Tibetan School Administration to educate Tibetan children and preserve and promote their culture and heritage.

Understanding the importance of his children being steeped in the Tibetan religion, culture, and language, my father started teaching me when I was six years old. He also taught my younger sister, Tenzin Dolkar – who was born in Rajasthan, India, and my late younger brother Tenzin Losel – who was born in Dharamsala, India. While living as refugees in India, our parents told us stories about their suffering as well as the suffering of our Tibetan brethren under the Chinese Communist regime. They urged us to do our best to preserve our language, religion, and culture along with getting a modern education and continuing to fight for the just cause of Tibet. We are deeply grateful to the Indian government for its decades-long support for the Tibetan people, offering us sanctuary there and allowing us to thrive.

My family largely lived in Bylakuppe, which some refer to as “little Tibet in the heart of Karnataka” in South India. Like my siblings, I grew up working manually in the fields and sometimes had to miss class. My parents admitted me into the Sera Jhe Monastery as a child monk, but also insisted that I complete my secondary education at the Central School for Tibetans, Bylakuppe. Walking on dirt roads for miles to get to school, I completed my schooling in 1977. While I wanted to be a medical doctor, my school could not prepare me for that discipline and my parents did not have the money to send me to a different school. After high school, I studied for several years in Dharamsala at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. I joined the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) as a translator in 1981 at the advice of my late teacher Gen Lobsang Gyatso, the founder of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Dharamsala, and College for Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarah, India. While at the LTWA for over thirteen years, I had the great honor and privilege of translating on many occasions for His Holiness the Dalai Lama and for other eminent Tibetan Buddhist Professors including the late Lati Rinpoche, Debate Assistant to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Since I came to the United States, I have translated voluntarily, on weekends, for twenty-four years at Gaden Shartse Thubten Dhargye Ling in Long Beach, CA. In 2012, I was invited to be the guest translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama during his visit to Hawaii.

In 1991 and 1993 I came to United States for a speaking and translation tour, remaining here to pursue my education, earning my Ph.D. in 2009 in communications at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Since that time, I have been a professor at the California State University – Fullerton and on December 8, 2016, upon the nomination by the Honorable Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, I was appointed as a Commissioner to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Last June, 2017, I had an honor to personally meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Irvine, CA, and he was delighted that Leader Pelosi nominated me to be a Commissioner. He blessed and advised me to do my best in the position.

I have shared my story to highlight the following:

1. My family was forced to flee after the People’s Liberation Army under the new Chinese Communist state brutally invaded Tibet in 1959. Instead of liberation, there was repression and when Tibetans rose up against Beijing, more than 80,000 Tibetans escaped to India. To date,

an estimated 150,000 Tibetans have been forced to flee our homeland. With the borders effectively closed, it is increasingly dangerous to leave without authorization.

2. I am deeply grateful to the Indian government for providing a safe haven to me, my family, and other Tibetan refugees, and for allowing Tibetan Buddhism to flourish there. Like many other Tibetan refugees in India, I was able to receive both a Tibetan and secular education. As refugees, my parents understood the vital importance of preserving the Tibetan religion, language and culture to help ensure the continuation of the Tibetan people. These are precisely what the Chinese government was and is trying to destroy.
3. The Chinese government views His Holiness the Dalai Lama as a threat to their control because officials recognize his central importance to the Tibetan people. In fact, devotion to the Dalai Lama is a core tenant for many Tibetan Buddhists.

The Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, also finding refuge in India. He seeks to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese people through the “Middle-Way” policy. I fully support the Middle Way Policy to peacefully and nonviolently resolve Sino-Tibetan issues via mutual respect and dialogue for mutual benefit. Yet Chinese officials regularly and continually vilify him, viewing him as a threat to their power, even though political authority has belonged since 2011 to the prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile. They accuse him of “blasphemy” and “splittism” and refer to him as a “wolf in monk’s robes.” Officially atheist, the Chinese government absurdly claims the power to select the next Dalai Lama, citing a law that grants the government authority over reincarnations.

The Chinese government also cracks down on anyone suspected of so-called separatist activities and for participating in the “Dalai clique.” Monks and nuns who refuse to denounce the Dalai Lama or do not pledge loyalty to Beijing have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. Beijing also continually seeks to diminish the Dalai Lama’s international influence, issuing thinly veiled threats to other countries, including the United States. After the Dalai Lama delivered a commencement speech last month at the University of California, San Diego, the *Global Times* condemned the university and its chancellor for inviting him to speak, and threatened to withhold visas from the chancellor and future exchanges with the university. Senator Diane Feinstein has called the *Global Times* a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party.

4. The Chinese government implements countless restrictions on Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetans’ peaceful religious activity, which have created an extremely oppressive environment. They implement these restrictions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but also have tightened controls in Tibetan areas of other provinces. These restrictions include: reeducation campaigns; extensive surveillance – through for example, security forces and closed-circuit television, internet and mobile phone monitoring; official presence in monasteries; canceling previously permitted festivals; restricting travel; and imposing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice. The government also quickly suppresses any perceived religious dissent, including through firing at unarmed people.

Between 1987 and 1989, the Chinese government brutally crushed protests. Restrictions further intensified after demonstrations that took place in 2008. On March 10, 2008, the anniversary of the failed 1959 uprising, monks from Drepung monastery peacefully protested against the government's "patriotic education" programs and other restrictions on their freedom of religion or belief. Supportive demonstrations in Lhasa led to property destruction, arrests, and numerous deaths, with demonstrations spreading to Tibetan areas outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. To this day, the Chinese government has not provided full details or a credible accounting of those detained, missing, or "disappeared" for their role or participation in the demonstrations. Those accused have not been given adequate legal representation and their trials—if held at all—were closed.

Since the 2008 demonstrations:

- Provincial authorities monitor the training, assembly, publications, selection, education, and speeches of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders. Monks are directed to attend "patriotic education" sessions consisting of pro-government propaganda.
- Authorities prohibit children from participating in religious holidays, threatening them with expulsion from school if they fail to comply.
- The state controls the movement and education of monks and nuns, the building or repairing of religious venues, and the conducting of large-scale religious gatherings.
- Authorities have installed a heavy security presence at monasteries and nunneries, monitoring and surveilling in and around the properties.
- Just this year, Chinese authorities prevented students and teachers from observing Saka Dawa, a Tibetan holy month, and even restricted their right to observe the holiday in their own homes.

Rigorous study and practice are very important to the Nalanda Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The Chinese government seeks to strike at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism by attacking the Tibetan religious and educational institute of Larung Gar, the largest Tibetan Buddhist institute in the world which is located in Sichuan Province. Larung Gar is home to more than 10,000 monks, nuns, laypeople, and students of Buddhism from all over the world. In July 2016, the Chinese government launched a sweeping operation to demolish significant parts of this institute. Local officials implementing the demolition order referred to the project as "construction" or "renovation" to reduce the number of residents to no more than 5,000 by the end of September 2017. Many view the plan to separate the educational facility from the monastery as a ruse to facilitate government direct control over every aspect of life and learning at Larung Gar. Thousands of monastics, laypeople, and students have been evicted. Some reportedly were locked out of their homes before they could collect their belongings, or were forced to sign pledges promising never to return. Many others were forced to undergo so-called "patriotic reeducation programs."

The demolition order contains language governing ideology and future religious activities at Larung Gar and gives government officials—who are largely Han Chinese, not Tibetan—greater control and oversight of the institute, including direct control over laypeople. The order also mandates the separation of the monastery from the institute, running counter to the Tibetan tradition of one blended encampment with both religious and lay education. The destruction at Larung Gar exemplifies Beijing’s goal to eviscerate the teachings and study of Tibetan Buddhism that are integral to the practice and traditions of the faith.

In December 2016, Tibet’s Communist Party Chief Wu Yingjie publicly stated that he expects the party’s control over religion in Tibet to increase.

Prisoners of Conscience

Detaining religious prisoners of conscience is one way the Chinese government controls Tibetan Buddhists. I here will focus on two such prisoners: the Panchen Lama, who holds the second highest position in Tibetan Buddhism, and Tashi Wangchuk, an advocate for the Tibetan language being integral to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. While one is a religious leader and the other is a lay activist, the Chinese government has disappeared one and unjustly detained the other.

Please see the appendix for a selected list of other Tibetan prisoners of conscience the Congressional Executive Commission on China has compiled.

The Panchen Lama

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was born on April 25, 1989 in Lhari County, Tibet. After the death of the 10th Panchen Lama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama chose Gedhun on May 15, 1995 to be the 11th Panchen Lama, which is the second highest position in Tibetan Buddhism. Three days after his selection as Panchen Lama, Chinese government authorities kidnapped then six-year-old Gedhun and his family. On November 11, 1995, Chinese authorities announced their own pick to serve as the Panchen Lama: Gyancaïn Norbu. Most Tibetan Buddhists have rejected the government’s selection.

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is now one of the world’s longest-held prisoners of conscience. In the more than 20 years since his abduction, Chinese authorities have provided little information about his whereabouts, alleging that they need to protect him from being “kidnapped by separatists.” In May 2007, Asma Jahangir, then-Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief of the UN Human Rights Council, asked Chinese authorities what measures they had taken to implement the recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and suggested that the government allow an independent expert to visit and confirm Gedhun’s well-being. On July 17, 2007, the Chinese authorities said that he is a “perfectly ordinary Tibetan boy” attending school and leading a normal life, and that he “does not wish to be disturbed.” Authorities say that the state employs both of his parents and that his brothers and sisters are either working or at university.

The Panchen Lama now is 28 years old. By the age of 28, I had received both a Tibetan and modern education, but we know nothing of the Panchen Lama’s life. As part of USCIRF’s Religious Prisoner of Conscience Project, I have chosen to work on behalf of the Panchen Lama,

highlighting his case and the laws and policies of the Chinese government that led to his disappearance.

Tashi Wangchuk

Tashi Wangchuk is a Tibetan entrepreneur and education advocate known for promoting a deeper understanding of the Tibetan language as integral to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Tashi Wangchuk was detained on January 27, 2016 after speaking to the *New York Times* for a [documentary video](#) and two articles on Tibetan education and culture. His relatives did not know he was detained until March 24, despite a Chinese law requiring notification within 24 hours. He was indicted in January 2017 for “inciting separatism,” and could face up to 15 years in prison if found guilty. Based on available information, authorities have not scheduled a trial date.

Tashi Wangchuk recounted that he learned to read and write Tibetan in primary school and from his older brothers who had studied with a monk. He continued studying as a monk himself for three years, and in 2012 took private classes in Yushu for a few months. Tashi Wangchuk called on Tibetans to protect their culture and has focused on the need for bilingual education and Tibetan language instruction across the Tibetan regions of China. He also has asserted that the government violates the Chinese constitution by not using the Tibetan language in government offices.

Tashi Wangchuk is from Qinghai Province. Schools in that area, which is home to nearly 60 percent of China’s Tibetan population, had taught mainly in the Tibetan language, with much Tibetan poetry and academic writing coming from that area. In 2012, officials largely eliminated Tibetan as a language of instruction in primary and secondary schools and ordered the use of Chinese as the language of instruction. Many Tibetan teachers were laid off, and new Chinese textbooks were introduced that did not include detailed information on Tibetan history or culture. The estimated literacy rate in Tibetan among Tibetans in China currently has fallen well below 20 percent, and continues to decline.

Monasteries, the heart of Tibetan society, had served as vital educational institutions, with monks and nuns among the elite few who could read and write before Tibet came under Chinese Communist rule. Until recently, many monasteries held classes on the written language for ordinary people, and monks often gave lessons while traveling. However, Chinese officials in many parts of the plateau ordered monasteries to end the classes, though Tibetan can still be taught to young monks.

The global importance of Tibetan language preservation lies in the fact that the complete teachings of Buddha, especially, philosophy, science of mind and emotions, and metaphysics are best preserved in the Tibetan language today according to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The disappearance of the Panchen Lama and the imprisonment of Tashi Wangchuk and other prisoners underscore the following concerns:

1. The Chinese government, while officially atheist, believes it has the authority to replace the Panchen Lama with its own selection. As I noted earlier, the government has declared that it also will decide whom will be reincarnated as the next Dalai Lama. In 2016, the government

published online a list of 870 “authentic living Buddhas.” However, the Chinese government does not have the authority to name the reincarnated religious leaders of Tibet.

2. The Chinese government fears Tashi Wangchuk as much as they do the Panchen Lama. The Chinese government unfairly imprisoned Tashi Wangchuk because it believes that Tibetan language acquisition would impede the sinicization of the education system and Tibetan assimilation into the majority Han culture. The Chinese government seeks to systematically destroy the Tibetan language to help facilitate the assimilation of Tibetans, who already face pressure from economic changes and a Chinese government fearful of ethnic and religious separatism, into the dominant ethnic Han culture.
3. The Panchen Lama and Tashi Wangchuk are only two of the many Tibetan prisoners of conscience whom Chinese authorities unfairly have detained. The appendix to this testimony includes other prisoners of conscience. I here want to highlight two who sadly did not survive their brutal imprisonment:
 - Goshul Lobsang: In 2008, authorities arrested Goshul Lobsang for his role in organizing a protest against the government. While in prison, he was subjected to extreme malnourishment and brutal torture, including regular injections and repeated stabbings. In March 2014, following his release, Lobsang died from his horrendous mistreatment.
 - Tenzin Delek Rinpoche: While his niece, Nyima Lhamo, is here today to speak about Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, I would be remiss if I did not discuss this prominent Tibetan religious leader. Chinese authorities arrested him in April 2002, accusing him of being involved in a 2002 bomb attack, and charged him with separatism and terrorism. He initially was given a death sentence with a two-year reprieve. Contingent upon good behavior, the death sentence could be lifted. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and then subsequently to 20 years in prison. However, Tenzin Delek died in prison in 2015. Before his death, he described to family members the torture he had endured in prison, including repeated beatings. The government denied his family’s request that he be granted medial parole, instead arresting those who advocated justice for him.

After his death in prison, Tenzin Delek’s family requested to see his body and that it be returned to them for proper Buddhist burial rites. But Chinese authorities cruelly cremated the body and refused to hand over his ashes, leading many to be suspicious about the cause of his death. Even in death, the Chinese government continued to defame Tenzin Delek, calling him a criminal and a fake religious leader, and authorities banned public memorials in honor of his passing.

Authorities subsequently detained his sister and niece for nearly two weeks after they requested his body be turned over to them. In 2016, Tenzin Delek’s niece, Nyima Lhamo, fled China to seek justice. She has become a powerful advocate for her late uncle and all Tibetan people, speaking earlier this year before the 9th Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, calling on the international community to investigate her uncle’s death. I am proud to testify alongside her.

Self-immolations

At least 150 Tibetans from all walks of life and ages have engaged in self-immolations since 2009. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, 122 are men and 28 are women; 119 are known to have died following their protest; 26 are 18 or under; 13 were monks at Kirti Monastery in Ngaba; 11 were former monks there; and 2 were nuns from Mame Dechen Chokorling nunnery in Ngaba.

Kirti Monastery in Sichuan Province has been a center of the movement. According to observers, Kirti had been radicalized by the security forces occupying the monastery and turning it into a de facto prison. Ngaba is the county that includes Kirti and the nunnery. During the 2008 uprising, security forces shot protestors there, killing at least 10 people.

The protestors include the following people:

- Tsering Kyi was a 19-year old student in Gansu who, according to her relatives, set fire to herself and died in March 2012 after her high school changed its main language to Chinese. She had joined classmates to protest the new Chinese-language textbooks and the policy limiting Tibetan to one class. Following the protest, several teachers were fired and the headmaster was sent to work on a dam project. The Chinese authorities alleged that she was mentally unstable after hitting her head on a radiator because of which her grades suffered.
- Sonam Tso was a Tibetan mother of five who was believed to be in her fifties. She self-immolated in southwestern China's Sichuan province on March 23, 2016, near a monastery in Dzoeg County in the Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture.
- Dorjee Tsering, a 16-year old Tibetan, set himself on fire on February 29, 2016, the same day that Kalsang Wangdu, an 18-year old monk, self-immolated and died in Nyarong County in Kardze, the Tibetan area of Kham. Dorjee Tsering lived on a Tibetan settlement in northern India. While he survived the protest, he suffered 95 percent burns to his body and died in a hospital in Delhi on March 3. Kalsang Wangdu died while being taken to Sichuan's provincial capital for treatment.
- A young Tibetan monk, Jamyang Losel, set himself on fire on May 19, 2017, near the county hospital in Chentsa in Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai. He was immediately taken to a hospital in Xining, the provincial capital, but died there the same day. According to reports on social media, his body was not returned to his family. This is the latest self-immolation to date that we know about.

These self-immolations reveal the following concerns:

1. The Chinese government would have us believe that these self-immolators committed "terrorist acts in disguise," and/or were manipulated by external cults for their political ends. In fact, the Chinese government views self-immolations as threats to stability and security in a region that is unstable due to severe religious and cultural controls. Instead of acknowledging its role in prompting self-immolations, the Chinese government has criminalized the act and

threatened to charge with murder anyone suspected of assisting or encouraging self-immolations. One prefecture (Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture) issued rules extending criminal penalties to family members, fellow villagers, and monasteries of self-immolators.

2. The Chinese government's response, more repression and more controls, has led to more antipathy from the people and more self-immolations. Why have these people chosen to self-immolate? The Dalai Lama describes them as "desperate acts by people seeking justice and freedom." Others view self-immolation as one of the few available forms of protest given the almost complete securitization of the Tibetan Plateau and the resulting difficulty of collective acts of resistance. Even small peaceful acts of defiance, such as having a picture of the Dalai Lama, can bring detention and disappearance.

Recommendations

USCIRF has recommended that China be designated a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Chief among these violations is the Chinese government's treatment of Tibetan Buddhists. USCIRF also recommends the following:

Congress should:

- Appropriate funds for programs supporting the Tibetan people, including Tibetan language broadcasts, to preserve their distinctive language, religion and culture in accordance with the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002.

Congress and the Administration should:

- Swiftly pass, and the President sign, H.R. 1872/S.821, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which would deny entry into the United States for Chinese government officials responsible for creating or administering restrictions on U.S. government officials, journalists, independent observers, and tourists seeking to travel to Tibetan areas. It is unacceptable the Chinese enjoy broad access to the United States while U.S. citizens' access to Tibet is highly restricted. Mutual access and reciprocity is key to maintaining a viable relationship between the United States and China.
- Raise religious freedom concerns with Chinese officials at every appropriate opportunity, including in the U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue.
- Urge the Chinese government to allow the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet for a visit if he so desires, and permit an independent international investigation into the death of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche.
- Maintain contact with Chinese religious leaders and human rights activists.

- Make inquiries about and seek to meet with religious prisoners of conscience, including those detained for their religious freedom advocacy; work to secure their unconditional release; and press the Chinese government to abide by its commitments under the Convention against Torture.
- Urge the Chinese government to provide video graphic evidence of the well-being of the Panchen Lama.
- Press the Chinese government to restart the dialogue leading to a negotiated agreement on Tibet.

Congress should urge the Administration to:

- As mandated by the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002, appoint a qualified and experienced individual to serve as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the U.S. Department of State and designate this position at the level of an Under Secretary of State.
- Designate China as a CPC with specific sanctions associated with the designation.
- Develop a list of Chinese officials subject to sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act and the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, and seek USCIRF's input for individuals to be sanctioned for their religious freedom violations.