

I strongly wish self-immolations would stop soon

By Lalita Panicker
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New Delhi, India -- Self-immolation for the cause of Tibet has claimed 28 lives in November alone. The total number of deaths since this trend began is 90. But not all Tibetan spiritual leaders agree with this method of protest.

"I am shocked that Tibetans are taking such actions. I strongly feel this (self-immolations) should stop, this is definitely not a practice of Buddhism," said Karmapa Gyalwa Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje in an interview to Hindustan Times.

In a nation-wide exclusive interview with the Hindustan Times, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje, head of the Karma Kagya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism said the escalating number of self-immolations was a cause of great concern to him.

"This is definitely not a practice of Buddhism. I strongly wish this would soon stop. The practice of Buddhist dharma is our greatest inheritance as Tibetans. This enjoins upon us to preserve the human existence. It is through this ... that we are able to achieve liberation."

He said the Buddha himself had said that we must sustain this body and have a clear conscience. Self-immolation not only harms oneself but also creates confusion in the minds of others. "The human existence is like a temple. We have to look at non-violent methods... One needs to calm one's mind, when there are negative emotions, the mind becomes heated leading to violent actions."

Karmapa said he has very little knowledge or interest in politics be it that of India or China and feels that true devotion to Buddhist practices with its compassion and wisdom will show everyone a way out of their dilemmas.

When asked if he feels a sense of regret that the Dalai Lama does not recognise him as a reincarnation of the Karmapa Lama - he supports Ugyen Trinley Dorje who lives in Dharamshala - he said he had immense respect for the Dalai Lama's scholarship of Buddhism.

When asked whether there was a conflict of interest between him and the other Karmapa, he said there were some issues, but said that his primary concern today was the practice of self-immolation and this is what he was most concerned about.

You can read the interview below:

There have been 90 self-immolations so far by Tibets protesting for the cause of freeing Tibet from Chinese rule. In November alone, there were 28 deaths. What is your view on this?

As a Tibetan born in Tibet, this escalation in self-immolations is a cause of concern for me. We Tibetans are known for our spirituality, for our practice of compassion and wisdom, our practice of Buddhist dharma. This is our greatest inheritance. I am shocked that Tibetans are taking such actions. I strongly feel this should stop, this is definitely not a practice of Buddhism.

Why do you think more and more people are taking to this method of protest?

I would say that we take these drastic measures when our mind is heated by emotions. We lose touch with our spiritual inheritance. We need to calm the mind so that we can tackle these situations.

What form of protest do you advocate?

Again, I have to speak from a spiritual perspective. We need to fall back on our spiritual practices. When we feel unclear and confused we must try to apply our spirituality to this and try and work out meaningful ways.

How can you draw attention to the cause this way?

When the mind is clear, when the tools we apply are transparent, we can achieve what we want. We need to fall back on our Tibetan way of life to bring clarity and happiness. If we can do, this we can achieve anything we want.

Does it bother you that the Dalai Lama does not recognise you as an authentic incarnation?

As a Tibetan born in Tibet, I have the highest respect for the Dalai Lama. He is a learned scholar of Buddhist philosophy, he is a learned scholar in general.

Why are you so vehement about how wrong self-immolations are?

In the experience of Buddhist dharma, we are taught to preserve the human existence. Through this existence, we are able to achieve wondrous things, achieve liberation. The Buddha himself said that we must sustain this body and maintain a clear conscience. Self-immolations not only harm oneself but also create confusion in the minds of others. We need to remind ourselves where we come from. We need to remember our philosophy. Non-violence cannot evolve from such drastic methods. The human existence is like a temple, as long as we remain in human existence, we must develop this physical being.

The Tibetan prime minister in exile has also while not endorsing self-immolation said that it is the sacred duty of every Tibetan to support self-immolations for the cause. What do you feel about this?

I am sure he has every right intention. But my life is one of spirituality. Tibetans are known for their spirituality and compassion howsoever mundane these may be, howsoever limited. Because of our following Buddhism, we have come this far in understanding and peace. At the moment, the general awareness of self-immolations is very strong. My voice might be just one raised against this. As a fellow Tibetan, it is my duty to offer my thoughts and perspective on this.

You have been in India for a long time, what has been your experience?

I have enjoyed wonderful hospitality here. I have the freedom to practice my spirituality which is for me the greatest freedom.

Do you think the new dispensation in China will change things for the better in Tibet or not?

I have very little knowledge or interest in politics. I am a spiritual practitioner.

People treat you as a living god, how do you deal with this?

Life itself is impermanent, one may experience different ways of life. I try to follow my practice to the best of my ability, but yes, it is very challenging. When the mind gets heated, it is best to apply spiritual practices.

Has there been a conflict of interest between you and the other Karmapa?

There have been issues, but my primary concern at the moment is self-immolation. I cannot picture any life besides spirituality.

You were only one and half years old when you declared that you were the Karmapa. Do you have any recollections of that time?

I have recollections, yes. It is a part of our spirituality. We have memories of rebirths, reincarnations. Through meditation, one can recall past lives. Unfortunately, we are sometimes too busy to meditate and remember past lives.

Do you ever have doubts about your mission, yourself?

Yes, there are doubts, anxieties, fears, it is all part of this world. We cannot give in to doubt, if we do then we may take drastic steps. It is important to focus as much as possible on the positive to balance oneself.

Is Buddhism according to you a religion or a philosophy?

There are many different perspectives. There is a ritualistic aspect to Buddhism. But it is also a way of life. We need to bring about an understanding of the meaning of one's life, what benefit one can bring about. We need to simplify things, focus on what is important. We must know our priorities, we must help others and keep our mind and body away from disturbing actions and emotions.

You have spoken about the three poisons, greed, ignorance and anger. How do you overcome these?

Through spirituality. Through meditation. One sees things clearer this way. Like still water, without ripples, without bubbles. We need to be calm to analyse things. It is important to understand ethics. We need to apply this when it comes to issues like self-immolation.

Does the belief in reincarnation reduce the fear of death?

This is a temporary solution. We have to reach a state of consciousness where we know no fear. We should have no fear whether or not there is a rebirth. If it helps to believe in rebirth to reduce fear, it is fine. We have to believe however that we will reach that state of no fear at all.

What is your message today to the Chinese, Indians, Tibetans?

We have to have kind thoughts and positive actions. We have to continue on the path of virtue.

Do you think Tibet will ever be free?

It depends on how we apply our spiritual inheritance, we need to adopt kind means, not drastic means.

What do you do in your spare time?

I don't have much spare time. But I try to keep up with entertainment and the news so I can connect better with my fellow spiritual practitioners.