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WHAT IS FALUN DAFA/FALUN GONG?

Falun Gong is an ancient Chinese spiritual discipline in the Buddhist tradition. Pronounced “Fah-loon Gong,” it consists of moral teachings, a meditation, and four gentle exercises that are a truly unique and highly effective way to improve your health and energy levels. Falun Gong is also commonly known as “Falun Dafa.”

At the core of Falun Gong are the values of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance (or in Chinese, Zhen 真, Shan 善, and Ren 忍). Falun Dafa teaches that these are the most fundamental qualities of the universe, and takes them to be a guide for daily life and practice.

In the words of Falun Gong’s founder, Mr. Li Hongzhi, “assimilation to the highest qualities of the universe—Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance—is the foundation of practice. Practice is guided by these supreme qualities, and based on the very laws which underlie the development of the cosmos.”

Falun Gong practitioners doing the sitting meditation in Central Park, New York City.

By 1999, Falun Gong had grown to become the largest and fastest growing practice of the sort in Chinese if not world history. In just seven years since its 1992 introduction to the public, an estimated 100 million people were practicing Falun Gong.

WHY IS FALUN DAFA PERSECUTED IN CHINA?

Falun Gong was introduced to the public by Mr. Li Hongzhi in 1992 and became popular in China throughout the 1990s. By 1999, 70-100 million people had taken up the practice.

The core principles of Falun Gong, truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, are rooted in traditional Chinese culture and resonated deeply with Chinese people across the country. Furthermore, news articles about practitioners’ kind and even heroic acts began popping up around the country.

So why, on July 20, 1999, did the regime begin to violently target Falun Gong?

There are three main reasons: The size of its following made communist leaders fearful of losing control of the people’s hearts and minds. Its guiding principles appeared incompatible with communist, atheist ideology, which the Party had forcibly imposed on the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. In addition, certain communist officials saw Falun Gong as an easy target and used its vilification as a tool for their own political advancement.

1. WIDESPREAD POPULARITY

Falun Gong became immensely popular in the 1990s.

A 1998 study conducted by China’s State Sports Commission estimates that over 70 million persons were practicing Falun Gong in China at that time. China’s own state-run T.V. aired a news program around the same time, in which the anchor tells the audience “over 100 million people are practicing Falun Gong.” That would mean, in a country of 1.3 billion (at that time), 1 and of every 13 people in the country were practicing Falun Gong. Some CCP leaders viewed such large numbers as a threat, especially since these figures exceeded the 60 million members of the CCP.

2. IDEOLOGY, OUTSIDE COMMUNIST CONTROL

Communism is an authoritarian ideology, an “all or nothing” proposition. Its goal is to control all aspects of public and private life, including religion and spirituality. In China, churches, temples, and even health practices are allowed to operate only under the control of the CCP, but Falun Gong operates independently of communist thought and control. Some CCP leaders could not tolerate such independence.

The vast difference between Falun Gong’s tenets and the CCP’s ideology, which is officially atheist and Marxist, was another factor some in the upper echelons of the CCP could not tolerate. Falun Gong conveys belief in the existence of Buddhas, Daos, and gods and the conviction that anyone can reach a divine realm through self-refinement. Thus, some Party leaders saw Falun Gong as being in conflict with Party ideology. They also feared that Falun Gong’s strong moral code undermined the Party’s violent, Leninist tactics for controlling society.

3. ONE MAN’S POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

Then-CCP leader Jiang Zemin personally launched, planned, and executed control over the campaign to eliminate Falun Gong, even though members of the politburo advised him not to do so.

According to the Washington Post, “The crackdown [against Falun Gong] was undertaken to demonstrate and solidify the power of the Chinese leadership ... Communist Party sources said that the standing committee of the Politburo did not unanimously endorse the crackdown and that President Jiang Zemin alone decided that Falun Gong must be eliminated.”

Citing a Party official, the same story noted that, “This obviously is very personal for Jiang.”

By all accounts, Jiang was incensed by Falun Gong’s immense popularity and saw it as undercutting his own legacy. He expected to eradicate the practice within three months after the start of his campaign.

However, Jiang also saw an opportunity to boost his authority, China experts say.

By painting Falun Gong as an enemy of the state, Jiang hoped to mobilize the country into a struggle, with himself at the helm, and thereby consolidate power. In a July 2000 article, then-CNN senior China analyst Willy Lam wrote that Jiang “seems to be using the mass movement to promote allegiance to himself.”

BRUTAL AND WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION

It’s one of the largest campaigns of religious persecution happening in the world over the past 20 years.

Millions of innocent people in China have been fired from their jobs, expelled from school, jailed, tortured, or killed simply for practicing Falun Gong (see Key Statistics for more details).

For the tens of millions of people who practice Falun Gong today in China, each day they live at risk of being taken away by Chinese authorities to be jailed, tortured—or worse.

1. Millions Detained, Imprisoned

For millions of people in China, the most basic reality of the campaign against Falun Gong has been long periods of detention in “reform through labor” camps or prisons – China’s Gulag system – after farcical

or nonexistent trials. Others are held in makeshift detention centers or “black jails” — a network of extralegal detention centers within China.

Detainees are often forced to work up to 20 hours per day, producing – without pay – toys, Christmas tree lights, chopsticks, and soccer balls for export. Those who refuse are tortured (more about arbitrary detention and slavery).

The widespread detention and imprisonment of Falun Gong practitioners has been reported by the United Nations, the U.S. Department of State, Amnesty International, and many Western media outlets.

2. Brainwashing and “Transformation”

Be it in labor camps, jails, or in special reeducation centers, detained Falun Gong practitioners are forced to undergo what can only be described as brainwashing. The Chinese Communist Party’s goal is to force these people to renounce their spiritual beliefs and come to view Falun Gong as dangerous, as well as to turn in others who are active in exposing the persecution.

The key ingredients of the brainwashing process, or what the Party calls “transformation,” is sleep deprivation, hours on end of staring at videos vilifying Falun Gong, threats, and Cultural Revolution-style “struggle sessions”. Some particularly “stubborn” individuals who refuse to transform are injected with psychotropic drugs in asylums as treatment for the mental disorder of incorrect political thinking (more about psychological persecution).

In a ground-breaking report by the Washington Post, the paper told the story of one man who had gone through this “transformation.” Upon his release he concluded: “In the past two years, I have seen the worst of what man can do. We really are the worst animals on Earth.”

3. Torture

Since early 2000, the use of torture on Falun Gong detainees has been widely documented by major media, human rights organizations and the United Nations. There are at least 100,000 cases of torture documented by Minghui.org, and reason to believe the true number is several times higher.

Common torture techniques include shocking with electric batons, burning with irons, tying the body in painful positions for days, force-feeding saline solutions through a plastic tube inserted up the nose, and prying out fingernails with bamboo shoots, to name a few. Rape and sexual torture of the Falun Gong in detention are prevalent as well.

4. Organ Harvesting

The Party’s ultimate solution for the vast number of incarcerated Falun Gong adherents, however, is much more terrifying.

Estimates from multiple separate, independent reports indicate tens of thousands (possibly hundreds of thousands) of Falun Gong practitioners may have been killed in order to extract their vital organs, which are used to fuel a booming organ transplantation business in China.

Livers, kidneys, hearts, and cornea are removed from the living, anesthetized Falun Gong adherents with matching blood-types and sold to Party officials and other desperate-yet-wealthy individuals from China

and abroad. Undercover investigators' phone calls to Chinese hospitals have caught doctors boasting about this practice on tape (more about organ harvesting).

5. Censorship and Propaganda Fuel Violence

But, as in every genocide of the twentieth century, extreme violence first required dehumanization of "the other" through propaganda. Indeed, one key measure in the Party's suppression has been to limit, and distort, information about Falun Gong—both in China and elsewhere.

From day one of the suppression, the regime banned all books and informational media produced discussing Falun Gong positively. All websites relating to the practice were immediately blocked. Millions of Falun Gong books were forcibly seized and burned publicly. The regime feared people might learn, if they knew not already, that Falun Gong was a healthy, normal, and positive way of life embraced by millions (more about censorship).

These censorship efforts have, of course, extended to cyberspace, thanks in no small part to Western companies who have enthusiastically sold Internet surveillance technology to the Party's security apparatuses. As a result, Chinese people are now in jail for posting evidence of torture online or simply downloading articles about Falun Gong (more about the persecution and the Internet).

Alongside censorship, the Party has sought to scandalize Falun Gong through an aggressive propaganda blitz. The regime has been determined to paint Falun Gong as dangerous, deviant, and abnormal.

Former Party Chairman Jiang Zemin led the way, attaching onto Falun Gong the label of "cult" three months after his ban as a means to further bend public opinion. Under CCP guidance, various ministries and state media outlets then launched numerous publications, radio and TV shows, and even plays, comic books, and exhibitions meant to demonize Falun Gong (more about this propaganda campaign).

Government officials around the world, meanwhile, report receiving defamatory materials from Party emissaries. These are often accompanied by attempts to pressure the elected officials to stay silent about abuses perpetrated against the Falun Gong, to rescind proclamations in recognition of Falun Gong's contributions to the community, and to block local Falun Gong activities such as parades or conferences.

Business owners, journalists, and scholars have also been subjected to similar pressure tactics and threats (more about pressure overseas), leading to a sometimes eerie silence in Western press and academia (see "Why Haven't I Heard About This?").

6. Social & Economic Impact

With 100 million people targeted for their faith, including business leaders, academics, and government officials, it is hard to overstate the impact on the social and economic well-being of China.

Many Falun Gong practitioners, regardless of role or skill, are fired from their jobs, expelled from universities, stripped of health care and pensions, forced into homelessness, and a range of other forms of discrimination (more about: persecution in the family, persecution at work and school, and destitution).

7. Peaceful, Grassroots Resistance

When the persecution was launched in 1999, tens of millions of Chinese who practiced the meditation discipline were faced with a choice. One option was to again surrender to the Communist Party and abandon a practice that had brought them better health, spiritual guidance, and, invariably, newfound hope. A second option seemed to be to continue practicing quietly at home – but as raids quickly showed, this was impossible even if one were able to turn a blind eye to the persecution of family and friends. A final option was to openly resist the persecution in spite of knowing full well what the painful consequences might be. Whatever the chosen response, Falun Gong adherents have displayed remarkable resilience, with tens of millions still practicing in China today and some new people even joining their ranks.

For those who have chosen to more actively resist, Falun Gong practitioners have been consistent in refusing to adopt violence as an option, focusing instead on using every available peaceful avenue to have their voices heard. Adherents first tried to reason with Communist Party rulers through letters and petitions. When these fell on deaf ears, the Falun Gong turned to Tiananmen Square where – through quietly meditating or displaying banners before being arrested – they sought to call upon the conscience of the Chinese people as well as world leaders. As the persecution continued, the Falun Gong began countering state propaganda by distributing information exposing the persecution through leaflets, VCDs, emails, and phone calls.

Collectively, this resistance movement – composed of bold individual acts in spite of great personal risks – constitutes what is probably today's largest nonviolent movement in the world (see "Peaceful Resistance").