

Palden Gyatso, a Buddhist monk since childhood, was arrested by the Chinese Communist Army in 1959. He spent the next 33 years in prison for the "crimes" of peaceful demonstration and refusal to denounce his apolitical teacher as an Indian spy. He was tortured, starved and sentenced to hard labor. He watched his nation and culture destroyed, his teachers, friends and family displaced, jailed or killed under Chinese occupation.

Fire Under the Snow reaches back to Palden's birth in 1933 and follows him through the Orwellian nightmare that began with the Chinese invasion. We cut back and forth between the past and Palden's present as an activist, living in exile. Our P.O.V. becomes a "third eye" hovering over Palden's current life, haunted by his memories of the past. We explore the escalating cycle of interrogation and physical violation during his years in prison that ended decades later with Palden's escape from Tibet and a cathartic meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The film also investigates the basis of Palden's resilience. He claims that faith in Buddhism helped him survive the 33 years of his imprisonment. Furthermore, he insists that he is not angry with the Chinese. He believes these atrocities befell him due to "karma."

While imprisoned, the mere existence of the Dalai Lama was a beacon of hope to Palden and fellow prisoners-of-conscience. They dreamed of being released from their torment and delivered into his open arms. Today, the Dalai Lama and his supporters advance the idea of a "mutually beneficial" autonomy within China, an idea generated from Buddhist philosophy. Palden Gyatso and a sizable constituency are holding-out for total independence. Thus, a painful schism exists. Through discussions lead by Palden, competing political agendas are revealed within the Tibetan exile community.

At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, we filmed the entirety of Palden's participation in a hunger strike. Using this highly publicized and symbolic event, an attempt is made to draw public attention to Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. International Olympic Committee Vice President Mario Pescante visits the site of the hunger strike to negotiate a cessation of the action, and reveals the impotence of his position. We capture Palden's dedication to the cause, his mentoring of the younger Tibetan hunger strikers, and his emotional recollections of lost comrades. The strike throws into harsh relief the reality that human rights concerns are trampled under by naked economic ambitions.

Despite all, Palden Gyatso remains unbroken, keeping the flame of his spirit ablaze.

Fire Under the Snow reveals the contours of an inspirational story: the survival of a mind and a soul under unthinkable duress.