

Chapter 19

Buddhism in the Russian Republic of Buryatia: History and Contemporary Developments

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Editor's introduction: As very effectively portrayed by Rustam Sabirov in this chapter, Buddhism in the Russian Republic of Buryatia has had a dynamic and at times turbulent history due to factors beyond its control or influence. These dynamics help both contextualize and throw into relief the well-known suppression of Buddhist practices and leadership in Tibet under Chinese dominance since the 1950s. In Buryatia, a relatively favored geographic position vis-à-vis connections with the Far East led the Russian Empire to allow Buddhism uncharacteristic viability and support. This changed dramatically following the Russian Revolution, with tens of thousands of Buryatians killed and Buddhism violently suppressed from 1929 to 1940.

More recently, with the breakup of the Soviet Union – and the discovery of important Buddhist relics and signs in Buryatia – Buddhism in the Republic has been revitalized. As Dr. Sabirov notes in conclusion, it may even be that as the suppression of Buddhism in Tibet continues, the resurgence of Buddhism in Mongolia and in neighboring Buryatia may assume greater regional and global as well as local significance.

The history of Buddhism in Buryatia can be divided into five stages.

- 1) First Buddhist contact, 16th to early 17th centuries – prior to joining the Russian Empire
- 2) Late 17th to end of 19th centuries – spread of Buddhism, monastery building, publishing

- 3) End of 19th to early 20th century – ‘golden age’ of Buddhism in Buryatia
- 4) 1920s to late 1980s – destruction and persecution
- 5) Late 1980s to present – restoration of the Sangha

The spread of Buddhism in the Baikal Lake region, the Russian Republic of Buryatia, is closely connected with the development of Buddhism in Mongolia to the south. This process was not simultaneous among different Buryat ethnic groups. Those from the more Eastern Selenga region adopted Buddhism earlier than others.

In 1712 a group of some 100 Mongolian and 50 Tibetan monks who fled Mongolia due to an upheaval came to Buryatia. Their arrival accelerated the spread of Buddhism. At that time prayer yurts of nobles and public nomadic temples began to appear. According to Russian statistical data of 1741, there were eleven temples and 150 monks in Buryatia (Lamaism 1983, p.17). The Empress Elizaveta decreed these monks (*lamas*) exempt from taxation and other obligations. Selenga Buryats of that time did not think about establishing an independent Buryat Sangha (congregational community). They did not consider themselves separate from the Buddhist centers of Mongolia and in fact belonged to the Mongolian Sangha.

It was the Russian government that initiated the process of creating an independent Buddhist Sangha in Buryatia. Russian officials were quite aware that the religious policy of the Qing Empire was aimed at control of the population of the Empire. The Russian government wanted to control the foreign religious interaction of the Buryats in order to help consolidate its position in Asia. To achieve this, Russian officials felt it important to accede to the beliefs of Buryats and to establish an independent Buryatian Sangha (Tsyrempilov 2010; Lamaism 1983).

The first wooden temple (*datsan*) in Buryatia was established in 1753 at the initiative of Damba Darzha Zayaev, a young Mongolian nobleman who had studied in Tibet (Lamaism 1983, p.20). It was called the Tsongolsky Datsan. At the same time the Gusinoozersky Datsan was built at the initiative of Zhimba Akhaldaev, who had studied in Urga, Mongolia. Thus two centers of Buddhism in Buryatia appeared. A third emerged in 18th century among the Khori Buryats. All three centers competed for leading positions. Officially all Buddhists of the Transbaikal Region were under control of the head lama of the Tsongolsky datsan. But in reality each of the three centers had their own head lamas confirmed by the Russian government. This competition reflected the interests of different groups of Buryat nobles who sought leading positions in the religious hierarchy for their relatives. High ranks in the Sangha hierarchy allowed important access to power and authority, not only for religious matters, but for worldly ones as well.

By 1831 there were listed 4,637 lamas in Buryatia and by 1846 34 monasteries (Lamaism 1983, p.26). It is interesting that the attitude of the Russian government towards Buddhists in Buryatia was different from its attitude toward the Kalmyks and Buryats in the Irkutsk area. Transbaikal was a cross-roads for communication with the Far East, and this was an important reason why the religious policy there was more flexible and careful, whereas in Kalmykia and even the Western Baikal area, it was more repressive. For successful international policy in Mongolia and Tibet, Russia needed a reputation as a country that supported Buddhism. The government preferred to have one centralized structure than many competing monasteries, and one Khambo Lama (Head Lama) rather than several competing. At the same time, the government did not want Buddhists to be integrated too strongly within the Empire. Thus, different ministries controlled the religious life

of Kalmyks and Buryats ((Tsyrempilov 2010).

While the Russian Empire regulated religious affairs of the Buryats, Buddhists, for their part, tried to comprehend the Russian Empire from a Buddhist viewpoint and in Buddhist terms. They declared the Russian Emperor to be a *Cakravartin and Dharmaraja* and declared Ekaterina (Katherine) the Great to be a reincarnation of White Tara in 1767 (Tsyrempilov 2009). It is interesting that the present Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev remembered this tradition when President Medvedev visited Buryatia recently. According to several newspapers, Buryat lamas were planning to recognize Medvedev as White Tara and make prostrations before him (Berezin 2009).

“The Regulations for the Lamaist Clergy” were introduced in 1853 and defined the structure and way of life of the Buddhist Sangha in Buryatia. According to the Regulations, the Khambo Lama was responsible for the adoption of new monks, assigning them to different positions and ranks. But all his decisions were to be confirmed by the Czar’s administration. Officially there were to be no more than 34 monasteries and 285 monks. But in reality there were thousands of monks and new monasteries were built despite restrictions. For political reasons, the Russian government closed its eyes to these increases. Buddhism in Buryatia hence spread under different conditions than in Tibet and Mongolia. In Russia Buddhism had to interact with another world religion – Christianity. Buryats from Irkutsk suffered pressure to Christianize more than others, and baptized Buryats received preferred treatment in taking important positions in the local administration.

The Regulations prohibited many things, but for the Russian government it was more important to have control over the Sangha and retain its loyalty than achieve the fulfillment of all rules. The situation in Transbaikalia was unique and for political reasons the government had to support the Buddhist Sangha, sometimes paying even more attention to the interests

of Buddhists than the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, Buryat Buddhists could not avoid the influence of Christianity. This can be seen in the evolution of the architecture of Buddhist monasteries and temples in Buryatia. In the first part of the 19th century, wooden buildings replaced felt yurts. But first wooden and later stone monasteries were built by the Russian carpenters according to the Russian traditions of religious architecture; they looked increasingly like Christian churches. Buryats often had to rebuild monasteries in the architectural styles of Tibet, China, and Mongolia.

Monasteries survived economically on donations from the laity, on the money given to the monks for performing rituals, and on income from trading and lending money. When the number of monasteries and monks increased, and they lacked adequate Buddhist literature and ritual objects, monasteries began publishing books and making *thangkas* (diety paintings) and various ritual objects from wood and metal. Publishing activity in Buryat monasteries was different from that in the Tibetan and Mongolian monasteries. Buryats did not publish the main canonical books, which they usually brought from Tibet and Mongolia. Instead they published especially ceremonial and educational books, and biographies of Buddhist teachers and saints. It is noticeable that Buryats modernized the Buddhist worldview to some extent in their books. They were generally more acquainted with science of that time than were the “medieval” Tibetans, and they had more knowledge of geography and of different cultures and the world in general. So Buryat lamas excluded from their books what they considered to be absurd and strange things, such as strange or magical creatures or fantastic countries.

At the end of 19th century, the spread of Buddhism in the western parts of Buryatia began. Buddhists confronted local shamans and the Russian Orthodox clergy there. In their struggle with the shamans, Buddhists used different methods

– from reinterpreting local deities and sacred spaces from the Buddhist point of view, and through persecution of shamans, burning their ritual objects and clothes. They assimilated the key and socially significant shamanic ceremonies, public and family cults of clan protectors, and protectors of the various ethnic groups. But it was impossible to successfully resist the Russian Orthodox Church, as it was very strong – and supported by the Russian government, which tried to prevent the further spread of Buddhism.

Again, however, the particular location of Buryatia had an important mitigating effect. Being closer than most other areas of Russia to Far Eastern civilizations, Buryatia attracted attention from some European Russian intellectuals interested in the spirituality and philosophy of the East. At the same time, Buryat intellectuals had an opportunity to learn European sciences and became acquainted with modern ideologies. As a result, at the turn of 20th century, a movement for renewal (*obnovlenchestvo*) of the Buddhist Sangha appeared in Buryatia. Although a similar movement had developed several decades earlier in Mongolia, it was not as active and powerful as in Buryatia. There it exceeded the bounds of the Sangha and evolved into an ideology of the Buryat reformers, responding to social and cultural changes in the world in an attempt to reform the Buryat society along the lines of these new ideals. Also they attempted to change the negative attitude towards “Lamaism” by considering it as a corrupted form of Buddhism. Instead, they proclaimed a return to the ideals of early Buddhism and looked for connections between Buddhism and European science. Well-known Buryat intellectuals Ts. Zhamtsarano, B. Baradiin, G. Tsybikov, E. D. Rinchino, and Agvan Dorjiev, headed this movement. After the revolution of 1917, they tried to save Buddhism from the antireligious campaign of the Soviet government by insisting that early Buddhism was very close to the ideas of Marxism. But their attempts finally failed.

The beginning of the 20th century was ‘the golden age’ of Buddhism in Buryatia. The most eminent Buddhist figures lived at that time, and intriguing developments took place. Agvan Dorjiev (1854-1938), one of the teachers of the 13th Dalai Lama, and a man who earned the highest philosophical degree of *Tsannid Khambo Lkharamba*, served as a diplomat who tried to establish connections between the Russian Empire and Tibet. He met the Emperor Nicolas II and received permission to build a Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg, which became the first Buddhist temple in Europe. Dorjiev was also one of the leaders of the renewal movement in Buryat Buddhism. But he did not survive the antireligious campaign and died in jail in 1938.

Another famous figure of Buddhism in Buryatia was Lubsan Samdan Tsydenov, religious leader, writer and poet, who tried to spread the Tantric Buddhist tradition in Buryatia. At the same time, he was interested in European sciences and world religions. In 1919, the year of the Russian Revolution, he became the head of a local theocratic state based on Buddhist principles. This state included about 13,000 people and lasted a year, until 1920. It is interesting that this state combined a traditional Buddhist model of statehood with European political traditions. For example, the head of the State was the Dharmaraja, but there was also a kind of parliament, as well as a President and Ministers (Tsyrempilov 2007).

By the early 20th century there were more than 40 monasteries and 10,000 lamas in Buryatia. Monasteries became the main religious and cultural centers. In the late 1920s, however, local Soviet authorities began arresting monks and closing and destroying monasteries. (Buryats rebelled against Russian rule in 1929 but the movement was crushed by the Red Army, killing an estimated 35,000 Buryats; many others fled. Fearing Buryat nationalism, Stalinist purges killed an additional estimated 10,000 Buryats following

1937 – purges which spread with yet greater carnage in Mongolia.) This antireligious campaign ended in 1940 when the Buddhist culture in Buryatia ceased to exist. From 1941 until 1946 there were no Buddhist monasteries in Buryatia. But in 1946, Ivolginsky and Aginslky monasteries were reopened for ideological reasons: the Soviet government felt it needed to show that freedom of religion existed in the USSR. While religious activity was under strict control, there were unregistered “wandering lamas” who performed rituals at the request of believers.

Another prominent Buryat Buddhist figure of the Soviet period was Bidia Dandaron (1913-1974), a famous Buddhologist and recognized a reincarnation of Jayagy Gegen, the former Khambo Lama of Kumbum monastery in Tibet. Dandaron, spiritual son and follower of Lubsan Tsydenov, decided to revive the Buddhist Tantric tradition in Buryatia, and he attracted disciples from different parts of the Soviet Union. Among them were Buryats, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and Estonians. They formed the so-called “Sangha of Dandaron.” Dandaron is known for his neo-Buddhism, a teaching in which he tried to combine Eastern philosophy with modern European science while continuing searches for his teacher. For this activity he was arrested and the ‘Case of Dandaron’ (1971-1973) became the biggest antireligious prosecution in the USSR. Dandaron was put in jail for a second time, for five years, and died in prison. Many of his followers were also persecuted.

The revival of Buddhism in Buryatia began in 1988. That year, Buddhist communities were allowed to be officially registered and governed by the Central Spiritual Board of Buddhists (in 1996 renamed The Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia), residing at Ivolginsky Datsan. By the end of 2003, there were more than 200 Buddhist communities across Russia (Zhukovskaya 2008, p. 13). The process of revival of Buddhism

in Buryatia has included building monasteries, opening the Buddhist Academy ‘Dashi Choinkhorling’, establishing the Association of lay Buddhists, establishing a Buddhist women center, publishing literature, and international connections. Another interesting feature of contemporary Buddhism in Buryatia is the building of small temples (*dugans*) according to clan principles. As a result, the community of each *dugan* can consist of people from a single place or family lineage.

One of the most important challenges for the contemporary Sangha in Buryatia has been finding its own distinctive place in the Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhist world. As Bernstein writes, “Should Buryat Buddhism be understood as adhering to a ‘Tibetan’ model, one most recently advanced through pilgrimages by monks and well funded laypersons to Tibetan monasteries in India? Or, as ethno-nationalists argue, should it downplay its international ties to assert itself as a truly independent ‘Buryat’ religion?” (Bernstein 2011, p. 625). The current head of the Buryat Sangha Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev has always stood for an independent and autonomous Buryat Buddhism.

In this context, the exhumation of the body of Dashi-Dorji Itigelov (1852-1927) in 2002 became an event of great importance. Itigelov was the 12th Pandito Khambo Lama of Buryatia. Upon death, his body, seated in the lotus position, had not deteriorated. Now it is kept at Ivolginsky Datsan, placed in the glass sarcophagus for viewing on special occasions. The phenomenon of Itigelov attracted much attention to Buryatia and was encouraging to many believers. It is credited with starting a chain of events that may yet change the place of Buryat Sangha in the Buddhist world. As Damba Ayusheev puts it, “We, Buryats, received Buddhism thanks to the son of our people, Zayaev, who studied in Tibet The phenomenon of Zayaev allowed for the spread of Buddhism after his return from Tibet. Subsequently, Buryat Buddhism

received autocephaly and its own institution of Khambo Lamas, because when Catherine the Great met Zayaev, she understood that he was a great man” (Bernstein 2011, p. 639). Itigelov was a reincarnation of Zayaev, and Itigelov became a great master though he never traveled abroad to receive initiations from Tibetan lamas. “Why do we Buryats always try to bow in front of foreigners? Look at Itigelov – he never went anywhere,” writes Ayusheev (*ibid.*). Foreign lamas and authorization from abroad are not seen as necessary as they had been previously to the further spread of Buddhism in Buryatia.

Between 2002 and 2004, 450 Buddha statues were found near the ruins of Aninsk monastery, and this has constituted a second important event for the status of Buddhism in contemporary Buryatia (after the Itigelov phenomenon). In 2005 in the Barguzin Valley, the image of the dancing goddess Yanzhima (Sarasvati) was seen to appear on the surface of a large stone. This has become a place of pilgrimage and has changed attitudes towards the Buryat Sangha and the Khambo Lama, giving them an additional source of legitimacy and authority. “In Hindu mythology Saraswati was also a sacred river, worshipped as much as the Ganges. However, due to the coming of ‘dark times,’ the river disappeared underground and was expected to come back at a better time. The coming of Saraswati-Ianzhima to Buryatia is regarded as a sign that the locus of the authentic spirituality had clearly moved northwards from its Indian origins, once again reconfiguring the notions of religious centers and peripheries” (*ibid.* p. 647).

Thus these findings and their interpretations have recontextualized the place of Buryatia in the Buddhist world (at least by the Buryats themselves and partially by the Mongols). These developments link Buyatian Buddhism to its Indian origins and to strengthen the legitimacy of its Sangha and the authority of its leaders. This constitutes an important

shift when taking into consideration the uncertain future of the Tibetan community in exile and the institution of the Dalai lamas.

Another specific feature of Buddhism in contemporary Buryatia is that Buddhists actively participate in political life. As was also the case several centuries ago, Buddhism has become an important instrument for gaining political influence in Buryatia (Namsarayeva 2008). Many contemporary lamas have been involved in politics. Among them were Deputies of the Supreme Soviet, the State Duma, and other organizations. Many local politicians also use Buddhism for political purposes. For example, the image of the 14th Dalai Lama was used during the election campaign of the President of Buryatia in 1998 (Namsarayeva 2008, p. 71). Many businessmen and politicians visit Dharamsala and get blessings from the Dalai Lama (*ibid.*).

Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev is a member of Inter-religious Council and the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. He is a rather contradictory figure; many people accuse him of having a disorganized Sangha, of failing to invite the 14th Dalai Lama to visit, and not showing proper respect to the Mongolian Bogdo Gegen (The Ninth Khalkha Jebtsundamba) when he was in Buryatia. They have said that he is rude, does not accept criticism, and has damaged relations with local authorities. But after the exhumation of Itigelov, the finding of relics at Aninsk, and the appearance of Yanzhima, his position became stronger.

Buryatia is a region where the influence of shamans was traditionally strong. Despite the Buddhist's own persecution of shamans before the 20th century, and by the Soviet authorities in the 20th century, shamanism in Buryatia survived and has experienced revival since 1990. The increasing number of shamans and shamanic cults, and their influence on the population, raises some concern among the Buddhists. It is

noticeable that Yanzhima and some other Buddhist relics were found near shamanic sites, thus transforming the religious space of the republic.

In 2000 there were more than 30 Buddhist monasteries and temples in Buryatia. Besides Buryat there are Tibetan lamas (such as Eshe Lodoy Rinpoche and Jampa Tinlei) who teach in the Republic. While the *Gelukpas* hold the preeminent Buddhist position, other Buddhist schools such as Dzogchen, Karma Kagyu, schools of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Buddhism, plus Theravada Buddhism, also have followers in Buryatia. Tibetans and other teachers give lectures and initiations for lay people. They represent a transnational form of Buddhism that has evolved mostly in the West. It implies focus on the essence of Dharma, the teaching of meditation methods, and pays less attention to the ritual and monastic sides of Buddhism. The activities of these centers and teachers raise concerns for Khambo Lama Ayusheev because they are largely beyond the control of the traditional Sangha.

Conclusion

The specific geographic position of the Transbaikal region led the Russian government to create a relatively favorable policy towards Buddhism and thus encourage the spread of Buddhism in Buryatia prior to the Russian Revolution. Being a part of the Russian Empire, Buryatia was under various intellectual and cultural influences not only from the East, but from the West as well. These trends gave encouragement to the late 19th century renewal movement of the Buryat Sangha and made possible the appearance of influential Buryatian Buddhists such as Lubsan Tsydenov and Dandaron. After the collapse of the USSR, Buryat Sangha found itself in a completely different situation. It faced hardships connected with the restoration of monasteries and teaching monks.

Realizing that the Tibetan Buddhist world had changed after the occupation of Tibet by China, Buryats have looked for a new place in the Buddhist world. The events of the last decade (finding Buddhist relics and treasures, Itigelov, Yanzhima, and so forth) have strengthened the position of the Buryat Sangha and given it greater legitimacy and authority. Given the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia and in Buryatia, it may well be that the active center of Tibetan Buddhism is moving north.

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