

## Chapter 8

# Contribution to the Development of Mongolian Buddhism by the Association of Mongolian Devotees

Bayantsagaan Sandag

*Editor's introduction:* Among those promoting the development of Mongolian Buddhism, the devout monk Bayantsagaan has been among the most active, persistent, and humble. In addition to building and expanding the activities of his own temple and retreat center in Terelj Valley – including hanging suspended by ropes on the rock face as he and others paint enormous Buddhist tableaux – Bayantsagaan heads the Association of Mongolian Devotees [of Buddhism] (AMD). In this capacity and more generally, he has advised and helped restore more than seventy of the more than one thousand monasteries and temples that were destroyed in Mongolia during the socialist period.

In his contribution here, Bayantsagaan summarizes his perspective on the revival of Mongolian Buddhism, including a frank appraisal of herculean efforts and contributions as well as the great challenges being faced. Bayantsagaan's linkage of religious development to civil rights and general tolerance is remarkable, especially in light of past repression. His assessment of eight practical challenges as well as eight major contributions of his organization to Buddhist development offers a cogently thought out, balanced, and systematically presented perspective.

---

The most important achievement of Mongolian democratic revolution is that spiritual and religious rights have been reestablished. The Association of Mongolian Devotees (AMD), [Mongolyin Susegtanii Kholboo], was established in March

1990 and directly received appreciation and support from the majority of Mongolians. AMD branch committees organized in all *aimags* (provincial divisions) enabled it to pursue intensive activities throughout Mongolia. An Activity Program adopted at the convention of the Congress of Mongolian Devotees has become a principal document for years now, and has been a touchstone not just activities but for changes in the perceptions and perspectives of modern Mongolians. How we can explain necessity, emergence and intense activities of AMD?

1. It was accompanied by democratic revolution and freedom
2. Mongolians were motivated to seek their religious rights
3. Mongolians were encouraged by the support of democratic countries and by the Dalai Lama
4. Communism had been failing and people were highly aware of its shortcomings
5. It was fortunate that a few senior monks had survived the persecution of the socialist era and were able to revive activities of Buddhist monasteries
6. Though the Buddhist tradition in Mongolia has almost disappeared, a new revival opportunity for it had arrived
7. Freedom and democracy brought great enjoy to Mongolians following the severe regime of the socialist era
8. The population has sincerely wanted to revive Buddhism; their virtue has been great and that have made significant donations to the revival effort
9. During the initial stages of Buddhist revival, there was comparatively less competing religious influence that derived from foreign sources

## Challenges Encountered with Revival of Buddhism

Though I am the head of MDA, many people who have struggled for the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia have faced the special difficulty of not knowing much about their Buddhist religion given the socialist era efforts to eradicate it. Although Communist ideology weakened decisively after the fall of the Soviet Union, it still persisted in some sectors, and especially in countryside. Whole generations of Mongolians had experienced strong atheist ideology through official education and cultural representations, and some people kept their negative attitudes toward religion. However, these challenges didn't stop our activities, and they actually fuelled a more unified power for reviving Buddhism in Mongolia. That Buddhist ritual objects and sutras were rare (almost all of them had been destroyed) was one of the biggest challenges. Much of Buddhist tradition had been lost during socialist modernization, and there were no examples remaining of proper monasteries and monks. In all of Mongolia during the decades of socialism, only the one monastery of Gandetegchilen was permitted to exist, and its activities were quite limited.

## MDA's Program and Its Achievements

1. Since 1990, Mongolians have actively embraced democratic and plural principles along with their religious rights, and during the ensuing period, their views and perceptions of religion have changed significantly. These changes have enabled the activities of MDA and its ability to tackle its many tasks.
2. Although the Buddhist knowledge that had been deeply embodied in Mongolian culture and customs was destroyed, and monks were persecuted during the socialist era, at the beginning of the 1990s we could still meet and learn from

the last figures of the earlier period. These senior monks were our main source for reviving the principles and the rituals of Mongolian Buddhism. They are now deeply honored for having provided us the inheritance to revive our traditional religion.

3. Mongolian devotees never lost hope to see the revival of Buddhism, and their faith has served as great power throughout Mongolia to reestablish former monasteries. With the guidance of AMD, more than seventy monasteries have been founded back in their original locations since 1990-1993, and these now have approximately one thousand monks.

4. The first Buddhist middle school was established in 1991 with the help of AMD, and it has emerged as a place of great activity for the training of Mongolian monks.

5. MDA has also directed its efforts to educate devotees in Buddhist philosophy and knowledge. For this purpose, branches of AMD were established in all *soums* and *aimags*, thus encouraging the sincere faith and devotion of devotees. For instance, the branches have organized public lectures and discussions which have helped devotees to better understand Buddhism.

6. AMD founded Lam-rim *dratsang* and established printing outlets in Ulaanbaatar for publishing materials and books on Buddhism. Based on this publishing activity, AMD has proposed to produce Altangerel and Sanduin Jud sutras to each family in all of Mongolia.

7. Following the AMD Activity Program objectives, local AMD branches have initiated projects to protect the environment and to revive rituals that recognize and honor *oboo*, mountains, and other sacred places. The first of these initiated the public worshipping rituals at Bayanzurkh mountain. Such *oboo* and mountain worshipping rituals help

to change young people's attitudes to nature and encourage them to respect the forces and deities that inform and protect our special and sacred places.

8. To foreground the missing role of religion in Mongolian politics, AMD founded Mongolian Democratic Devotees Party.

### **Solutions on Challenges Faced with Mongolian Buddhism**

1. Buddhism develops best when it maintains its internal rules and structure. However, this precious tradition is for the most part no longer existent in contemporary Mongolia – at least in its previous form. We see that in some cases, people may simply make up practices and call them Buddhist. For instance, someone who lives an ordinary lay life may re-construct his residence and call it a monastery. A man claiming to be a monk may break monastic vows and make money by practicing banned activities of prophecy and astrological reading. Such examples illustrate how Buddhism has for some people simply become a means to obtain income and provide subsistence. Commenting on such problems, leading figures and representatives of Mongolian Buddhism sometimes say, “This is a *tsuvuun* (degenerate) time, and there is a lot of confusion.” Under such circumstances, it is not always easy for people to act responsibly with respect to the development of Buddhism, especially given the low popular understanding of Buddhism and superstitious mind of Mongolians. Before socialism, when Buddhism flourished like the sun, special regulations and rules prevented or resisted such problems, and persons who distorted Buddhist principles and practices could be subject to strong judgment and criticism. When AMD launched its activities, a Law of Religious Rights was adopted. However, it seems this was not sufficiently developed or followed to effectively regulate religious affairs in Mongolia.

2. Buddhism persists in advocating and reinforcing elevated moral principles. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, “Who are our monks?” The status of monks is one of the most important issues in Mongolian Buddhism and poses critical dilemmas. According to Buddhist doctrine, a principle feature is the taking and maintaining of monastic Vinai (vows). But there are few gelongas who follow 253 principles of Vinai, and the number of those who do not follow these principles seems to be increasing. Giving vows are now available for lay people as well, but those who take these vows do not always abide by them. Although there are clear rules and vows for monks to follow, their insufficient effort is reducing the value of Mongolian Buddhism.

3. There is an urgent need to develop and pay systematic attention (and develop policies for) the training of Buddhist monks in Mongolia. There are monks who act as a monk in the morning but shift to lay life in the afternoon. There are few teachers and few teachings of Buddhist principles, and the relationship between teacher and disciples, rules of monasteries, and *bramid*, are problematic, especially in the countryside. Therefore, we need to develop criteria for monks to uphold principles of civil and Buddhist education.

4. An additional challenge in Mongolian Buddhism is lack of unified policy; all monasteries and organizations work separately. Given that our goal is to work for the sake of all beings, including for our collective development, Mongolia monasteries and organization need to collaborate with each other. On the other hand, since the 1990s, active devotees have contributed much to the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia, including the restoration of more than seventy monasteries. Amid the challenge that Mongolian Buddhism faces, therefore, we always should remember the great efforts and contributions of devoted people.

5. We now live in a democratic country in which the existence of different religions is allowed. Therefore, Mongolian Buddhists need to understand other religions and their churches, and to collaborate with them for the wellbeing of society. In this regard, initiative should be undertaken to develop an overall corpus of information and data on religions. In this way, religious activities can be better understood and more efficiently directed to promoting social welfare. Also, priority may be placed on further promoting various forms of cooperation of monks with the welfare activities of NGOs.
6. As the center of Mongolian Buddhism, Gandentegchilen monastery should provide the best example to monasteries in the *soum* and *aimags* of Mongolia. To step into a more advanced stage of development, Mongolian Buddhism needs to unify its program for all its monasteries, and an assembly should be held every year to evaluate the implementation of Buddhist objectives.
7. Present day activities of monasteries are limited by daily rituals, sacred services, and prayers. Buddhism admits different stages and levels of development for its practitioners. To cultivate these capacities for growing numbers of persons, we need to pay attention to studies of history, philosophy and the *bramida* of Mongolian Buddhism, and to organize permanent lessons and lectures on meditation and good teachings that devotees can practice in their lives.
8. The economy of current monasteries is almost entirely dependent on the donations of devotees. Resources are thus quite limited. In terms of physical buildings, there is need to promote architectural standards and proper design for the erection of monasteries.