

Chapter 9

Buddhism and the Grand Maitreya Complex Project in Mongolia

Bataa Mishig-Ish

Editor's introduction: As an antidote to the previous Soviet destruction of Mongolia's cultural and religious heritage – including the demolition or degradation of all but one of the country's more than a thousand monasteries and temples – M. Bataa here describes plans for a large Buddha Maitreya complex to be constructed on a hilltop outside the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. Funded by private sources, the project draws on previous experience of successfully constructing a 40 meter Mongolian equestrian statue of Chinggis Khan (tied for the 16th highest statue in the world). The presently planned stupa and Maitreya, at 108m, would be the 4th tallest statue in the world –the other three being statues of Buddha in China, Japan, and Burma.

Amid the palpable drive among many Asian countries to foreground their connection with Buddha and Buddhism generally, many Mongolians feel their country has a special place and claim. (The one surviving main monastery of Gandan still boasts a 26-meter statue of the Avalokitesvara emanation of Buddha that was, upon its completion in 1913, quite possibly the tallest free standing metal statue in the world.) The presently projected Maitreya complex includes inter-denominational Buddhist temples, meditation and retreat facilities, a state-of-the-art ecologically assisted power system, a hotel and commercial establishments, and sport facilities such as tennis courts; as such, it is anticipated to combine aspects of tourism, leisure, theme park, religious and spiritual center, technological marvel, commercial outlet, and resort.

As a former monk, M. Bataa is committed to both the spiritual and the economic viability of the project. In larger

perspective, the project illustrates the challenges, potentials, and alternative choices that Mongolians face as they attempt to utilize but not be overtaken by business aspects of economic growth, modernization, and foreign influence— and as they reconfigure and reassert their distinctive national, cultural, and religious identity.

Historically, Buddhism was briefly introduced to Mongolia 2000 years ago through the Silk Road of Central Asia. Later Buddhism was practiced amongst the royal families of the Mongols from the 13th to 14th centuries. In the 17th century Buddhism had become the dominant faith/religion among the Mongols at the time.

Due to the communist ideology and socialist regime in the 1930s, Buddhism was almost destroyed along with novices, temples, monasteries and scriptures. Thanks to the democratic changes that took place in the society in the early 1990s, Buddhism has been revived not only as the core of the traditional culture but also as indicated in the democratic principle of freedom of religion.

Currently Buddhism is the predominant religion in Mongolia, which is very similar to Tibetan Buddhism and still has many similarities with it. Some statistics suggest that 70-80% of the population is believed to be Buddhists. There are five bigger monastic institutions and several dozens of small and medium size temples housing from a few to dozens of monks throughout Mongolia. There are also several nunneries in Ulaanbaatar city.

Buddhist monks are mostly trained at their respective monasteries if these are large enough to accommodate them. One Buddhist monastic middle school currently operates plus three Buddhist colleges that belong to the three large

monasteries in Ulaanbaatar. Additionally, more than 300 monks are being training at Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions in India. The total number of monks in Mongolia is approximately 2,500.

The Parliament of Mongolia passed the law concerning “State and Church Relations” in 1994. According to this law the registered monastic institutions could be tax exempt. Monastic institution is required to be registered by the City Council of the Local Government and by the Ministry of Law and Internal Affairs.

The Grand Maitreya Project/Complex

To revive Buddhist culture and education in Mongolia, several prominent individuals in Mongolia came together to establish “The Grand Maitreya Foundation” in September 2010. This foundation has been registered by the Ministry of Law and Internal Affairs as a foundation with the status of a non-government organization. The main organizational functions of the foundation are; promote Buddhist cultural and educational activities, support the publication of books with educational purposes, organize cultural and art events for preserving the traditional cultural values, establish effective institutional relations with similar Buddhist institutions overseas, and implement the Grand Maitreya Project, the largest Buddhist complex to be ever built in Mongolia. The Grand Maitreya Project is being implemented under the patronage of the President of Mongolia. The project concept was spearheaded by the Indra Future Foundation, which remains its major supporting private foundation.

The Grand Maitreya Complex will be a unique park offering a peaceful and serene atmosphere. Located on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, it will be the perfect location for a relaxing day spent out of the city with the family. The objective

of the complex is to highlight Mongolia's spiritual assets, capitalizing on the country's ancient history of Buddhism. With this in mind, this private sector initiative has been supported by the above-mentioned two organizations to construct a 108 meter stupa with a standing Maitreya statue of 54 meters.

There is stirring in the hearts and minds of some Mongolians that the time has come to regain some of the glories that Mongolia possessed in Buddhism prior to Soviet occupation. Mongolia has many ancient monasteries that were destroyed during the socialist days—now only a few are left standing, and these not very accessible to the average person.

Historically, Mongolia has a rich history of Buddhism, filled with devotee rituals and spiritual traditions. As a result, the concept of opening the Grand Maitreya complex is a perfect tool to rejuvenate Buddhism in Mongolia, but more importantly promote healthy values that are challenged with the onset of rapid growth fuelled by the mining boom. We think that the Grand Maitreya complex is a good concept.

The complex's location, just outside of Ulaanbaatar, will allow city dwellers to reconnect with their cultural and natural heritage in the Bogd Khan range of mountains. Expectations from the project are centered on the desire to bring Mongolian people together—to enjoy outdoor activities and spend quality time with loved ones. The complex is intended to revitalize interest in Buddhism so more people can learn about the teachings of Buddha and have a peaceful and meaningful existence.

The highlight of the Grand Maitreya complex will be the large stupa and statue of the forthcoming Maitreya Buddha perched on a hilltop (Heart Hill). The approach to the Buddha will lead up a series of steps with gardens on either side. The centre of the complex will have an ornate fountain, with other sections strategically positioned around the complex. There will be a spiritual section which will incorporate

various Mongolian temples; a section for internationally built temples; a knowledge section where people can learn art, yoga or meditation; a meditation hall, amphitheatre, and cinema amongst facilities, plus a food court serving a variety of international and local cuisine; a business service centre; a merchandising outlet; hotels and other services including a bank and tour operator.

Conclusion

We anticipate that the Grand Maitreya project will differentiate itself from other cultural and religious assets in the country and the region, so that it can offer, through its compelling vision, an attraction for many types of national and international visitors.