Buddhism in Buryatia: History and Contemporary Situation

The history of Buddhism among the Buryats is similar to the history of Buddhism in Mongolia in many aspects, but has some significant differences.

Spread of Buddhism in Buryatia began in XVII century under the influence of the Mongols who adopted it earlier. The policy of the Russian government forced the formation of the centralized Buddhist organization among Buryats in order to separate them from the religious influence from abroad. The 2nd part of XVII- XIX centuries were the period of building monasteries and development of Sangha in Buryatia. In the XX century Buddhists in Buryatia faced the same problems as the Mongols. The original Buddhist culture in Buryatia was destroyed after 1917 in spite of the attempts to renovate it by the members of the movement of Buddhism renovation (obnovlenchestvo). Besides it there was a theocratic movement of Lubsan Tsydenov who was going to revive Tantric tradition in Buryatia, but also failed. Only in 1940s two monasteries were open in Buryatia to create the appearance of freedom of religion in the USSR. In 1960-70s Bidia Dandaron, the disciple of Lubsan Tsydenov, tried to follow his teacher and established the tantric group which united people from different parts of the country. Finally he was arrested and died in prison but his activity was very important for spreading Buddhism in the Western parts of Russia. In this sense he was a follower of another famous Buryat – Agyan Dorjiyev, one of the teachers of the Dalai Lama XIII, who was an initiator of building the Buddhist temple in Saint Petersburg.

The process of revival of Buddhism in Buryatia after 1990 is similar to Mongolia: building monasteries, teaching monks and lay people, publishing Buddhist literature, contacts with the colleagues abroad. And it has the same problems (lack of funding, qualified monks and teachers, competition with the other confessions, and etc.). The differences are connected with the place of Buddhism in Russia (it is not a dominating religion as in Mongolia) and with the specific religious situation in Buryatia (strong positions of Shamanism, influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, coexistence of the national and transnational Buddhist organizations). Buddhism plays an important role in the local political life in Buryatia.