

Travels in Mongolia

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UNTIL quite recently, little has been known about the actual situation of Buddhism in the Socialist countries, though conjectures of various sort have been made. I was fortunate enough to have been given the rare opportunity of visiting Mongolia in June of this year and of making a round of visits to such cities as Ulan-Bator in Mongolia, Ulan-Ude in the Buryat Self-autonomous Republic, and Irkutsk and Moscow in the USSR. On May 18 I received an official invitation from Khampo-Lama Gombojav of Gangdantekchenling Monastery in Ulan-Bator to an Asian Buddhists' Meeting to be held in Ulan-Bator from June 11th to 13th. The topic was the problem of peace in Asia, especially in Vietnam. While making preparations, I became acquainted with Mr. George E. Komarovskiy, second secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo, who is well known as the author of a book on the sculptor-priest Enkū and whose article on the freedom of religion and conscience in the Soviet Union I had read with great interest in *International Religious News* (Vol. 9, No. 6, 1968). He showed a great interest in the Ulan-Bator Meeting and helped me in many ways with travel arrangements.

I left Haneda Airport on a direct Aeroflot flight for Moscow on June 9, which took ten hours nonstop. As there is not yet diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Japan, travellers must go to Moscow or New Delhi first to get the necessary Mongolian visa. I learned by the time of departure that Rev. Nakayama Riri and I were to be the sole Japanese representatives at the Meeting. It was only after arrival in Moscow that I came to know of the existence in the Soviet Union of a government office concerned with religious problems. It is called the Council of Religious Affairs and has local branches throughout the USSR. In Moscow foreign delegations to the Ulan-Bator Meeting were well taken care of by the officials of the Religious Council, and the visa to Mongolia was readily issued by the Mongolian Consulate in Moscow. Representing the Religious Council in Moscow, Mr. Mikhail Kodukov and Mr. Iffigeny received and treated us cordially.

We flew from Moscow to Irkutsk by an Aeroflot plane, with a one hour stopover at Omsk, our first glimpse of the vast Asiatic part of the USSR. At Irkutsk we changed to a Mongolian Airline plane in which there were Mongolian stewardesses clad in their national costume. Our plane crossed over the fascinatingly beautiful Lake Baikal and arrived at Ulan-Bator at 1:30 P.M. on June 11th.

The first Asian Buddhists' Meeting was held at the Ulan-Bator Hotel from June 11th to 13th, sponsored by the Mongolian Buddhist Center headed by the Most Venerable Gabji S. Gombojav, Khampo-Lama of Gangdantekchenling Monastery in Ulan-Bator. There were about 50 delegates from 10 Buddhist countries: Mongolia, USSR, Vietnam (north and south), Nepal, India, Ceylon, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan. Mr. John Blofeld attended the Meeting as an observer from the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which has headquarters in Bangkok.

The prime motive that led the Mongolian Buddhists to call the first Asian Buddhists' Meeting was the fact that in Asia, especially in Vietnam, large numbers of people are suffering unreasonably from war. The theme of the discussions was naturally focused upon the Vietnam War and finally the Meeting adopted the resolutions to condemn the interference of foreign Imperialist powers in the internal problems of Asia and to call for Asian Buddhists to cooperate with each other to promote peace and understanding among Asian people. Although during the voting session the Japanese, Malaysian and Singapore representatives absented themselves, an atmosphere of warm understanding and friendship prevailed throughout the three day period of the Meeting.

During our stay in Ulan-Bator, Rev. Nakayama Riri and I found an opportunity of visiting the Amlarto cemetery, several kilometers from the city, where 819 Japanese prisoners of war are buried; following the second world war, they died of illness while laboring in the construction of the city of Ulan-Bator. Our visit to the cemetery was kindly approved and arranged by the Mongolian Red Cross Society, through its chairman Dr. (Mrs.) Damdin Tumendelger. We were accompanied by Mrs. Niamsuren, vice-chairman of the Red Cross Society, and Mr. Doyodyn Almaas of the Japan-Mongolian Friendship Society.

The Gangdantekchenlin Monastery with about 110 lamas attached to it is the only functioning Buddhist Monastery in the city of Ulan-Bator. A few other monasteries in the city have either been converted into museums or are used for other purposes. I was told by one of the lamas of Gangdan Monastery, Ven. Munko, who was in constant attendance with the Japanese delegation, that there

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are two kinds of lamas: one is called '*regchin*' or married lamas, and the other '*regmen*' or unmarried lamas; that the present head of Gangdantekchenling Monastery happens to be a *regchin* and the vice-head-priest of the Monastery, Ven. Jamin Chonbal, a *regmen*. Another lama of the Monastery told me that the leader of Mongolian Lamaism is not necessarily a *regmen*, in so far as he is a monk of virtue and erudition, and that this is perfectly in accordance with the so-called Mahayana ideal of not discriminating between monkhood and laity merely by appearance or marital status.

What struck us from the beginning was the fact that most of the lamas are comparatively elderly, practically none in their twenties or thirties. This is indeed in sharp contrast to Ceylon, Thailand, Burma, Nepal and Japan that are resourceful of youthful candidates for monks and priests. In answer to my question as to the education of future lamas, Ven. Dagvadorje, secretary of the Administration of Gangdantekchenling Monastery, revealed to me the plan of establishing a Buddhist college in the compound of the Gangdan Monastery. According to him, it is expected to be established in September this year and youths of more than eighteen years old, initially numbering about 30, will be invited not only from various parts of Mongolia but also from the Ulan-Ude area in the USSR. The college will have a course of six years. The subjects will include Buddhist philosophy, ritual (from the second year onwards), the constitution of the Mongolian People's Republic, Sanskrit, English, Russian (for the Mongols), and Mongolian (for the Buryat Mongols living in the USSR), to be taught by a faculty comprising lamas and laymen. Ven. Dagvadorje told me that for the establishment and maintenance of the Buddhist college, no Government assistance is expected or needed, because all expenses will be covered by donations from the devotees. What interests me most among this list of subjects is that Tibetan, which had long occupied a very important position in the learning of lamas in the past and even had been a language of privilege enjoyed by lamas to dominate the illiterate people in general, is missing, and that the importance of English along with Russian is apparently recognized by the present leaders of the Mongolian Buddhist society. This latter fact brings to mind the large number of books and articles in English written nowadays by Russian and Mongolian scholars.

After the Meeting in Ulan-Bator we were taken by domestic plane to a town called Alhangai, situated west of Ulan-Bator and north of Kharakhorm, where we

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had a chance to visit a museum that had formerly been a Lamaist temple. We also visited a collective farm, nursery, and a group of *Pao* (*ger* in Mongolian and *yurt* in Russian; a nomadic tent) village. There we were able to see the actual mode of living traditional to the Mongolian nomads. We were then invited by Russian Buddhists to Ulan-Ude and its vicinity. We went back to Irkutsk, changed our plane, and crossing Lake Baikal again, we flew to Ulan-Ude, capital of the Self-Autonomous Republic of Buryat, USSR. Lamaism east of Lake Baikal is flourishing among the Buryat-Mongols. It is said that approximately 300,000 Mongols, or about one tenth of the total Mongolian-speaking population, are living in Buryat-Mongol. At Irkutsk airport, three young correspondents of the Novosti Press joined us and thereafter accompanied the foreign delegation to cover the event for the Soviet press.

Ivolga Monastery is situated about 38 kilometers west of Ulan-Ude, capital of the Self-Autonomous Republic of Buryat. This temple community called *dazan* consists of thirty or thirty-five buildings with two brightly painted temples in the center. The head of this monastery, Bandido Khambo Lama Gomboyev, had invited us foreign Buddhist delegates for a visit after the Ulan-Bator Meeting. He is the head of the Central Theological Administration of Buddhists of the USSR and is also regarded as the head of all Buddhists living in the Soviet Union. We visited this monastery three times during our stay in Ulan-Ude. On our first visit, we attended a grand ceremony jointly conducted by lamas of this monastery and the visiting Nepalese, Ceylonese and Indian monks. Devotees who came from far and near the monastery stood in a long queue to receive blessings from the monks after the ceremony. Their unsophisticated devotional attitude was little different from that of Japanese Buddhists commonly seen in country areas. In the spacious compound there is a library which contains books from Tibet, Mongolia, India and China; 21 volumes of the fifth Dalai Lama's works, works of Tsongkhapa, many volumes by Taranatha, and most important of all, 108 volumes of the *Kanjur* and 225 volumes of the *Tanjur*. There are also stupas, a row of huts containing prayer wheels, and a building equipped with a heater in which Bo trees donated by Ceylonese Buddhists are being grown. The praying wheels bear characters in Mongolian, Sanskrit and Tibetan, which denote the sacred syllables *Om Mani Padme Hūm*. In the devotees' houses to which we were invited, there were rooms devoted to the Buddha, Dalai Lama and other Buddhist deities such as Mahā-kharas and Tārās. On the whole they reminded us of the Japanese Shingon altars.

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In the hands of the devotees rosaries of 108 beads were held and the constant recitation seemed to be "*Om Mani Padme Hum.*" As the Ivolga Monastery is the only functioning monastery in the Ulan-Ude area, some devotees are said to come from areas miles away, either on foot or by bus. In the Aginsk National District of the Chita region there is another Buddhist center—the Aginsk Monastery, built in 1810. We were, however, not favored with the opportunity of visiting it. We were told that in Ulan-Ude Buddhist studies are conducted at the Oriental Department in the Institute of Social Sciences, which is headed by Dr. Bris Vladimirvich Semychov. Although I failed to visit it during my stay in Ulan-Ude due to the prescribed schedule, I was fortunate enough in Moscow to be introduced to Dr. Gerasimova Kseniya Maximovna, who is the senior researcher at the Institute, from whom I was able to get some information about the Buddhist studies conducted at the Institute of Social Sciences in Ulan-Ude. On the whole I got the impression that at present the general interest of Soviet Buddhist scholars lies in the fields of archaeological and bibliographical researches.