

Aspects of Mongolian Buddhism 2

Mongolian Buddhism in Practice

Edited by Ágnes Birtalan, Krisztina Teleki
with Judit Béres



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Illustration on the cover page: A ritual in Mergen Monastery (Baoutu 2020, from the archive of His Holiness Mönkgebatu, the sixth incarnation of Mergen Gegen *chorji* lineage)

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ABOUT A LETTER OF THE SOVIET BUDDHISTS TO THE THIRTEENTH DALAI LAMA

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Religion and Oppression after the Russian Revolution

The ideology and policy of the Soviet government and the Communist Party were openly antireligious from the first days of the Russian Revolution of 1917. However, it was the Russian Orthodox Church – the state church of the Russian Empire – which was initially the main target of this repressive policy. At the same time, ethnic minorities were regarded as being oppressed by the Czarist regime and were enticed by the new power into becoming supporters of the Revolution. Colonial peoples of the East were regarded as natural allies of the proletarian Revolution. For this reason in the first years after the Revolution religions other than Orthodox Christianity acquired new opportunities for growth. The major area in Russia where Buddhism had already flourished was Eastern Siberia. Direct Soviet rule from Moscow was established there only by 1923. The number of monasteries (*datsans*) founded by the Buryat Mongols increased soon after the Revolution since the former restrictions of the Czars ceased to exist. This is how the state of affairs was described in 1923 by M. N. Yerbanov, the head of the Buryat Mongol Autonomous Republic:

“It seems to me that in no other autonomous republic or region do religious issues have such actual importance and exercise such an influence upon the working masses as in ours. This is easy to explain. However strange it may seem, in some areas of the Far Eastern Autonomous Region between 12 to 17 per cent of the total population are lamas who live in their monasteries (*datsans*) and are not involved at all in working for a living being spongers who are fed entirely with what is produced by the local population. They have methods of assessment of their own, a peculiar taxation system which is, in fact, exercised in a compulsory way. In any case we have to give serious consideration to Lamaism. [...] Religious problems are of utmost importance to us and much depends upon their proper management. We should approach carefully these issues since our Lamaism is linked not only to Mongolia but to Tibet and the Dalai Lama.”¹

¹ *Tajny nacional'noj polimiki CK RKP: «Četvjeretoje sovješčanije CK RKP s otvetstvjenymi rabotnikami nacional'nyh respublik i oblastej v g. Moskvje 9–12 ijunja 1923 g.»*. Stjenografičeskij očetjot. Izdatjel'stvo Insan, Moskva 1992, pp. 182–183, 185.

The Soviet government made attempts to establish contacts with Tibet. Three secret Soviet missions were sent to Tibet in 1922, 1924, and 1927.² Needless to say that any information about the antireligious policy and ideology of the Russian government would have made the establishment of relations with the Dalai Lama's government impossible. Meanwhile, in Soviet Russia, antireligious policy and antireligious propaganda were getting stronger.

Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938), who had the status of the Tibetan envoy and who was a very authoritative lama, made attempts to come to terms with the Soviet government. He became the leader of the “renovationist movement” (Russ. *obnovljenčjeskoje dviženije*) which promulgated the need for the Buddhist clergy to abandon worldly aims and to return to simple living according to Vinaya rules. However, he was opposed by the “conservative” part of the Buddhist clergy. The First Congress of Buddhists of the USSR was convened in Moscow from 20 to 29 January 1927. Agvan Dorzhiev and his fellow renovationists got the upper hand.

The Soviet government planned to send another mission to Tibet headed by Agvan Dorzhiev and staffed by the “renovationists.” They had to counteract the image of Soviet Russia as a country where Buddhism was persecuted and to convince the Dalai Lama that Buddhism in Russia was flourishing.³ The Soviet and Communist Party authorities in the Buryat Mongol Republic were ordered to soft-pedal antireligious propaganda and to avoid personal criticism of Agvan Dorzhiev.

The Third Meeting of the Buryat Mongol Buddhists was convened in August 1928. It appointed the members of the delegation who were supposed to visit Tibet. However, this expedition was refused proper finance and the requested quantity of rifles and machine guns. In October 1928 the Politburo decided to “postpone” sending the mission to Tibet and in fact the mission was cancelled. This was the last attempt of the Soviet authorities to establish contacts with Tibet and their last goodwill approach towards Buddhism, however motivated by political expediency. In the following decade the Soviet policy towards Buddhism became openly hostile which led to the destruction of Buddhist monasteries and repression of lamas.

The letter to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama which was to have been delivered by the delegation was approved by the Third Meeting of the Buryat Mongol Buddhists. Needless to say that Agvan Dorzhiev and the other lamas could not lie to the Dalai Lama. So this letter contains several facts which – although true – are torn out of historical context. Thus the general picture composed of separate true facts became untrue. For example, the Soviet authorities are praised for exempting lamas from the military service. However true, the reason for such an exemption was the new legislation which proclaimed Buddhist clergy “non-working people” who were also

² See Andrijejev, A. I.: *Tibjet v politike carskoj, sovjetskoj i postsovjetskoj Rossii*. Izdatjel'stvo Sankt-Pjetjeburgskogo universitjeta; Izdatjel'stvo A. Tjerjent'jeva «Nartang», Sankt-Pjetjeburg 2006, pp. 241–247, 261–269, 291–294.

³ About the plans to send a new mission to Tibet see Andrijejev, A. I.: *Tibjet v politikje ...*, pp. 309–315; Sinicyn, F. L.: *Krasnaya burja: Sovjetskoje gosudarstvo i buddizm v 1917–1946 gg*. Izdanije A. Tjerjent'jeva i Fonda «Sohranim Tibjet», Sankt-Pjetjeburg 2013, pp. 49–50, 329–330.

denied the right of voting. Only “working people” could be given arms to defend their socialist homeland.⁴ In any case, this letter never reached Tibet and the Dalai Lama.

The letter was written in both Tibetan and Mongolian and was printed in Leningrad in golden letters on grey paper. (The Buddhist temple founded by Agvan Dorzhiev in Petrograd in 1915 was the home of the Tibetan Mission and the centre of Buddhism in the USSR.) At the end of each version free spaces are left for the signatures of the authorized lamas. The titles of these lamas are given in more detail in the Tibetan version. This letter has never been studied or even mentioned in scholarly works. A copy of this letter is kept in the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg in the Section of Nationalities’ Literatures.

Translation

“[This is] a letter submitted to the ear of the Lord who holds both the religious and temporal power of the Tibetan nation, the greatest of the Victorious Ones, the omniscient great exalted Vajradhara Dalai Lama by the Third Meeting of the Buddhists of the Buryat Mongolian people.

Over the last 300 years during which time the Buddha’s religion has flourished amongst us, the Buryat Mongols, have experienced innumerable sufferings [at the hands of] the Czar’s government, his functionaries and Russian priests. If [we decided] to describe them in full, it would require many volumes.

However, this is what we [can] tell in short.

In accordance with the Decree signed in 1853 by the Russian Czar, the number of lamas [abiding] in the thirty-four *datsans* of the Buryats was limited to 320. If this number was exceeded, the surplus lamas were sent back home. They had to wear lay clothes and were hiding themselves in secret places.⁵

Building or repairing a *datsan* was a difficult thing which demanded much effort. Even if permission was received, during the building works different kinds of officials always interfered. Pretending to be inspecting they used their right to get food and thus caused suffering to all. Besides these officials, Russian Christian priests also caused much harm to our Religion. For example, these priests caused much trouble among the Buryats by beating them and dragging them into their religion and [forcing them] to wear crosses. Not only this: they burnt sacred tumulus⁶ and small shrines⁷ and did other things demonstrating great oppression, as they marched forward with heavy feet.

Due to the fact that after the fall of the Czar’s rule all power came into the hands of the Soviet government, our Religion [received] broad freedom. In October 1922

⁴ Sinicyan, F. L.: *Krasnaya burja*, p. 40.

⁵ About this law see Cyryjempilov, N. V.: *Buddizm i impjerija: Burjatskaja buddijskaja obščina v Rossii (XVIII– nač. XX)*. Institut mongolovedjenija, buddologii i tibjetologii SO RAN, Ulan-Ude 2013, pp. 152–168, 288–300.

⁶ Mong. *oboy-a*, Tib. *lha tho*.

⁷ Mong. *bumqan*, Tib. *bum khang*.

the First Buddhist⁸ Meeting was convened in the Atsagat Chuluutai Monastery. Altogether 102 deputies and scholars gathered there and agreed that new religious regulations were needed, based on the principles of the Vinaya matched with the needs of the present time.

After this in December 1924 the Second Buddhist Meeting was held in Verkhneudinsk.⁹ Its 43 deputies jointly examined the principles accepted by the previous meeting and again confirmed them.

Although the Central Committee for Religious Affairs¹⁰ tried – the best of its abilities – to purify and improve our religion by implementing the principles approved by these two meetings it could not totally implement them.

This is because a small number of monks in some monasteries [who were] under the leadership of rich lamas and former lords were following the reactionary principles of the past and indulged in commerce, drinking alcohol, internecine feuds, gambling and other immoral things. In order to maintain their carefree living, they criticized the principles based on the Vinaya and impeded their implementation. In January 1927 the First Congress of Buddhists of the USSR was convened in Moscow. It was attended by 70 delegates representing [Khalkha] Mongolian, Tibetan, Buryat and Kalmyk peoples.

This Congress thoroughly examined these principles and regulations adopted by the Second Buddhist Meeting of the Buryat Mongol People, much praised them and adopted [them]. Meanwhile, [the Congress] approved a resolution which said that along with adopting these principles as foundational and implementing the regulations of religious affairs and principles of monastic life, the active opposition of the reactionaries should be criticized and combated.

During the period of time between the congress in Moscow and the composition of this letter a small group of our Buryat monks who did not want to abandon [their] immoral conduct have been making obstacles in implementing the regulations and principles composed on the basis of the Vinaya. In order [to achieve] this purpose they continue to preach openly or secretly to believers. These monks not only resist the opening of councils at their monasteries in accordance with the regulations, they misrepresent the religious regulations and establishments to the believers. In addition, they are working to hinder the activities of the Central Committee for Religious Affairs. In these fortunate times blessed with the [eight] leisures and [ten] endowments [of the perfect human rebirth],¹¹ let the Central Committee for Religious Affairs and all of us monks, unite and make joint effort. After having got rid of these reactionaries and purified the precious Religion we shall lead the way following the path of righteousness.

If we compare Czarist rule with the situation under Soviet rule, it is obvious that exceptional and unexpected freedom is given to the practice of Religion. On this point we are in agreement.

⁸ Lit. “religious,” Mong. *šajin-u*.

⁹ Mong. Degedü Üde, present-day Ulan-Ude.

¹⁰ Russ. Cjentral’nyj duhovnyj sovet buddistov.

¹¹ Tib. *dal brygad ’byor bcu*.

Incidentally, Soviet power has provided more than broad religious freedom. Having taking into account that those who took vows of *getsul*¹² and *gelong*¹³ are not allowed to take arms, [the government has] decided to spare them from military service.

Let the Lord of Buddhists, the greatest of the Victorious Ones, the omniscient, great, exalted Vajradhara Dalai Lama deign to examine these facts.

In addition, we would like to inform you about the decision to appoint and to send [to Tibet] deputies representing the majority of monks [abiding] in more than forty monasteries so as to personally present before you, the Great Compassionate One, the true condition of Buddhism in our country.

The Chairman of the Third Meeting of the Buryat Mongol Buddhists
*Tsanyid kenpo*¹⁴ Agvang Lobsang [Dorzhiiev]
 Deputy Chairman
 Secretary
 The year of Earth–Dragon [1928], month, date.¹⁵

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¹² Tib. *dge tshul*.

¹³ Tib. *dge slong*.

¹⁴ Tib. *mtshan nyid mkhan po*.

¹⁵ Not given.

ཚོག་པོའི་ཁྲིམས་སྲོལ་བཞིན་གལ་སྟེན་ལྷན་ཡོད་ཕྱིན་ཁྲིམ་ཚས་གྱིན་པ་དང་བོས་ཕྱོལ་སོགས་ཀྱི་མནའ་གཅོད་དབག་མེད་དང་།
 ལྷ་ཁང་གསར་བཞེངས་དང་ཞིག་གསོ་སོགས་ལ་གནང་བ་སྤྱིན་ཡང་དཔོན་སློབ་རྣམས་ནས་ཟླ་སྟོན་མནའ་གཅོད་ཀྱིས་བསྟན་པ་རིན་
 པོ་ཚེའི་དང་རྒྱལ་ལ་གཏོན་ཚབས་ཤིན་ཏུ་ཚེ་བ་དང་། སྟོང་དང་སྟེང་ཡུལ་སྤོངས་དཀྱིལ་དུ་ཏུ་སྟེང་ལྷ་ཁང་བཞེངས་ནས་མི་སེར་
 མོ་མོ་རྣམས་ལ་རྟེན་ལྷན་གིས་བཅས་ཏེ་ཏུ་སྟེང་ཚོས་ལྷན་སྐྱེད་ཤིང་ཀྱིས་འཇུག་བ་དང་། ལྷ་སྟོང་ཁང་བཅེག་བ་སོགས་
 ཁང་འོག་ཏུ་རྗེར་བ་ལྷ་སྟེང་མནའ་གཅོད་དབག་མེད་ཀྱིས་ལུས་དག་ཡིད་གསུམ་མི་བདེ་བས་ཏུས་འདས་ལགས་ཤིང་། ད་ལྟོ་
 རང་བཅོད་རྒྱལ་སྟེང་ལྷན་ནས། མསས་ཅན་བསྟོན་བསྟན་གྱི་རྒྱལ་སྟེང་འོ་མཚེན་སྟེང་ལྷ་སྟེང་བ་བཞེངས་ཏེ་བསྟན་བ་དང་ཚོས་
 ལྷན་པར་དང་སོ་སོའི་ལྷན་པར་ལྷན་པར་འགྲེལ་མེད་བའད་བསྟེན་ཚོག་པོའི་ཁྲིམས་སྲོལ་ཚེད་པོའི་ལྷན་པར་རྗེ་ཡོད་ཏན་ཅན་རྣམས་ཚོགས་ཏེ་དམ་
 ཚོས་འདུལ་བའི་བཅའ་ཁྲིམས་གཞིར་བཟུང་ལྷན་པར་འགྲེལ་ཏུ་སྟེང་ལྷ་སྟེང་པོའི་ནང་ཁྲིམས་གསར་ཏུ་རྒྱུགས་ཤིང་། དེའི་རྗེས་ཚོག་སྟོང་
 དག་བརྒྱ་ཏེར་ལྷ་མང་ཡང་རྗེར་སྟེང་ཚོགས་འདུས་གཉིས་པོ་ཚོགས་ནས་དང་ཁྲིམས་རྣམས་དག་མེར་མཚན་བའི་བཅའ་ཁྲིམས་
 སྟོང་མི་ཉམས་གོང་འབེལ་གྱི་ལས་དོན་ལ་བརྟེན་མཁའ་བོའི་ལས་ཁུངས་ནས་ཀྱང་རང་ཏུས་གང་ཡོད་ཀྱིས་འབད་ཚོལ་རྗེ་ལྷན་

བུས་ན་ཡང་རྒྱ་དངོས་བོར་ཞེན་ཆགས་ཚེ་བའི་བྱ་གན་རྣམས་དང་དཔོན་རྟེན་སོགས་ཀྱིས་ཅབས་དཀྱུགས་བུས་རྒྱེད་གྱིས་བྱ་བ་
 ཏུང་གས་རྣམས་ཁྲིམས་སྲོལ་དེ་དག་ལ་མི་དགའ་ཞིང་ལག་ཏུ་སྤྲོས་སྐྱབས། རྒྱ་སེར་ཚོག་སྟོང་དག་བརྒྱ་ཏེར་བུལ་བའ་
 མསས་ཅན་བསྟོན་བསྟན་གྱི་རྒྱལ་ཁང་ཚེད་པོའི་རྒྱལ་ས་སྟོན་བ་ལ་ཏུ་སྟེང་མངའ་འབངས་དང་བ་སངས་རྒྱལ་བ་མསས་ཅན་ལྷན་
 འཛོམས་ཐོག་རྒྱལ་བསྟན་རིན་པོ་ཚེའི་ཡང་རྒྱས་ཚེད་བསྟོན་བུས་ཚོག་པོའི་གནང་བ་སྤུལ་བ་ལྷན་ཚོགས་འདུས་ཚེད་པོའི་ལ་བོད་
 བ་དང་ཁལ་ཁ་བའི་མི་སྣ་བཅས་ཚོགས་ནས་ཚོགས་འདུས་སྤྱི་གཉིས་ཀྱི་ནང་ཁྲིམས་སྟོང་རྣམས་གསོར་བཞག་ཐོག་རྗེ་ལྷ་བ་
 བཞིན་ཏུ་སྟེང་མངའ་འབངས་དང་བ་རྣམས་མསས་ཅན་ཉམས་སྤྱི་བསྟན་རྒྱ་དང་། ལྷན་པར་རྒྱ་དངོས་བོར་ཞེན་ཆགས་ཤིང་
 འཚལ་ཁྲིམས་ཅན་རྣམས་དང་ཚོད་སྲེང་བཀྱི་ཏེ་བྱ་གས་ནས་འབད་བའི་སོལ་བསྟན་གཏད་ཁལ་བ་དང་། དེ་དག་ནས་ཀྱང་
 འདུལ་ཁྲིམས་དང་མཐུན་པོའི་སོལ་བཟང་བཤིག་པོའི་འབད་ཚོལ་བཀྱིས་བཞིན་བ་དང་། བསྟན་པོའི་སྤྱིན་བདག་རྣམས་ལ་ཡང་
 བསམ་དན་སྟོང་བས་དཀྱུགས་ཤིང་བཀའ་སྟོབས་བདེ་བར་བྱུང་བ་བཟོད་ཀྱིས་མི་ལངས་བ་དང་། དེ་མད་རང་པོའི་བརྟེན་མཁའ་
 པོའི་ལས་ཁུངས་ནས་ཀྱང་རྒྱལ་བསྟན་རིན་པོ་ཚེའི་ཕྱི་ས་སེལ་ནས་རྣམ་བའ་དག་བ་ཞིག་ཡོང་བའི་ཚེད་ཏུས་ནས་ཡང་མཐས་གང་
 དག་གིས་མི་སྟེང་བའི་ཁལ་ཏུ་མཚིས་ལགས། སྟོན་དུས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་བོའི་བཅོད་ཁྲིམས་ལས་བྱོལ་ནས་མསས་ཅན་བསྟོན་བསྟན་གྱི་

