

THE NORTHERN FRONTIERS OF THE BUDDHIST WORLD

By John Blofeld

In ancient times when Buddhism had spread like a flame across Asia, the Wheel of the Dharma was turned from Japan in the east to Afghanistan in the west and from Java in the south to parts of Russia in the north. Since then its influence has receded. In the various Malay-speaking countries, apart from overseas Chinese communities, there are but few remnants of Buddhism; and, excluding certain isolated pockets, the Dharma has vanished from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. At the present day, the Buddhist world consist of three well defined regions – south-east Asia including Ceylon (Theravadin); east Asia (Mahayana); north Asia, i.e. Tibet, Mongolia and certain parts of China, northern India and Russia (Vajarayana-type Mahayana).

At a time when the future of Buddhism in Tibet is very difficult to foresee, it is commonly felt that the Vajarayana School of Buddhism faces virtual extinction except – and this is an immensely important exception – among the refugee Tibetan communities in India, Sikkim and Bhutan headed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Many people take it sadly for granted that Buddhism in communist countries such as the Soviet Union and Mongolia is doomed to extinction, if not already extinct. This writer, however, takes a much less gloomy view, as will be clear from the following brief description of the situation in those two countries, which is based upon a recent visit, during which the writer was afforded every facility for observation and discussion.

The Soviet Union

Since the days of Tsars, there have been three major Buddhist communities living within what is now the USSR – the south of Moscow between Rostow and the Caspian Sea; the Buryats living to the north and east of Lake Baikal in Siberia and the Turinians inhabiting Tanu Tuva just west of Mongolia. St Petersburg itself used to have a Buddhist Temple and many Tsarist Russians (Slav as well as Mongol) took a keen interest in Buddhist mysticism, some of them travelling to Tibet or Mongolia for religious instruction. During the reign of the last Tsar, a Mongolian learned in Tibetan medicine and mysticism had a great vogue in St. Petersburg. This was the famous Badmayev who was keenly sought after for psychological and medical cures.

In the USSR today, the Kalmyks, Buryats and Turinians still practise Buddhism to a considerable extent. Buddhist scholarly institutions have been established among the Buryats in particular and their representative generally comprise the

USSR delegation to Buddhist International conferences. This writer is not familiar enough with the situation to make a firm prognostication, but his observations lead him to suppose that, even among the younger people in these regions, the actual practice of Buddhism is much more widespread than is generally supposed. The Soviet Government does not actively encourage Buddhism, except as a scientific study, but it permits monasteries to function and believers to practise their faith freely. There are three large monasteries in the Ulan Ude and Chita region; the one I saw was well supplied with Lamas and books; there is a large following of pious lay folk, not all of them old, and donations seem to come in readily. In other communist countries, such as Hungary, there are flourishing Buddhist groups even though Buddhism has appeared there very recently; this reinforces the likelihood that the Dharma will continue to flourish to a greater or lesser extent among the traditionally Buddhist communities in the USSR. It certainly behoves the people of the "old Buddhist countries" to welcome and encourage such a trend. Moreover, the standard of Buddhist scholarly studies is high in that country; there are several institutes wholly or partly devoted to this work.

The People's Republic Of Mongolia

In Mongolia, the situation is, of course, quite different, as virtually the entire population was Buddhist in practice and belief until just a few decades ago. When, in 1911, China threw off the yoke of the Manchus and became a republic, Mongolia, also part of the Great Ch'ing (Manchu) Empire, decided to obtain full independence both of the Manchus and the Chinese. This was not easily done and, for more than a decade, the issue seemed in doubt. Later on, the Japanese expansionist policy in Asia also affected the situation and, ultimately, the Mongol nationalist came to regard the USSR as the country best able to protect them from both Chinese and Japanese attempts to control the country. For this and other reasons, they chose the path of communism, although from the time of the original break with China up to 1925, Mongolia was a kingdom ruled by the Head of the Buddhist Church on lines somewhat analogous to the Dalai Lama's rule of Tibet. This Grand Lama was not deposed, but remained King until his death in 1925, where after the People's Assembly decreed that no successor should be found for him.

From 1911 up to the present day, the fortunes of Buddhism in Mongolia have fluctuated. Originally at least a quarter of the male population were Lamas (priests) who, since they belonged largely to the Gelugpa or Yellow Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, were mostly celibate. Moreover, the Buddhist Church was by far the biggest property owner in the country. Mongol patriots thus found themselves in a difficult position. While they might be deeply sincere Buddhists on the one hand, they might also find themselves, for economic and political

reasons, strongly opposed to the Buddhist hierarchy. As a result of this inner conflict, the fortunes of Buddhism rose and fell. Ultimately the Buddhist hierarchy was drastically reduced and dispossessed of most of its remaining wealth. Most of the Lamas were compelled to return to lay life. This process was carried forward to such an extent that there was a period when it seemed as though Buddhism would disappear from the country altogether.

Today the situation is much more encouraging. At Ulan Bator, the capital (formerly Urga), there is a large temple with some eighty Lamas and there are smaller temples functioning elsewhere. Mongolia sends delegates to international Buddhist conferences and has recently held such a conference within its territory. Now that Buddhism is no longer linked in the people's minds either with rightist political tendencies or with monastic "landlordism", there is no reason why it should not flourish in the minds of a people who were for centuries among the most ardent devotees of the Dharma. Properly speaking, Buddhism is not directly concerned with politics; it can flourish under any political regime which allows it to exist and are now grounds for a certain optimism. A few travellers in Mongolia noted that most of those surviving Lamas were men in their eighties. More recently, somewhat younger Lamas have appeared, men who have taken the role after retiring from their professions. Best of all, a college for young would-be Lamas between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three is soon to open. Some of the students will be Buryats from the USSR. The curriculum will include the Dharma, Mongolian, Tibetan and English. On its success depends the continuance of Buddhism in Mongolia as an organised religion. According to the present law, no one may become a Lama until he has had several years of schooling. This in itself may seem a salutary law; but the fact is that the kind of schooling hitherto given was not likely to turn a young man's mind in the direction of the monastery gate – rather on the contrary. The new college may reverse this trend, at least for a small number of youths.

The next few years are crucial. There is plenty of evidence to show that Buddhism is still very alive in Mongolia and that the Government no longer regards it as inimical to the national welfare. For example, many of the herdsmen's yurts (Tents) and farmhouses contain small Buddhist shrines and visiting monks from abroad are eagerly greeted by believers; furthermore the main temple at Ulan Bator is in an excellent state of preservation, adjacent monastic buildings are undergoing renovation and Buddhist rites are held daily. But, unless some young candidates for the monkhood are forthcoming, there will be no one left to carry on the teaching when the elderly Lamas pass away. That Buddhist scholarship and research will along continue in Mongolia is not to be doubted. The next ten years or so will reveal the extent to which Buddhism will continue there as a living religion. Thanks to the more tolerant

attitude now adopted by the Government, there is good reason to hope that the Dharma will flourish there anew.

The Eastern Buddhist.