

---

# Buddhism in Mongolia Today

## Introduction

**Zsuzsa Majer**

**Krisztina Teleki**

*Budapest*

**B**uddhism had been flourishing in Mongolia for three centuries before the destruction of monasteries, purges and mass executions in 1937-1938, when almost all the temples of the monastic capital city (present-day Ulaanbaatar) and the more than 1000 monastic sites in the countryside were destroyed. For decades, Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar, partly reopened in 1944, was the only operating assembly in the whole country. Though restrictions gradually became a bit looser after 1970, local people could practice Buddhism freely again only after the democratic changes in 1990, when Buddhist temples and institutes re-opened. The old survivor ex-lamas, who had avoided execution only by being young, not yet highly educated, and not bearing high ranks that time, were the key figures of the religious revival. Funds for reconstruction and for establishing new temples came mostly from alms given by local individuals, foreign organizations and Buddhist institutions. Rinpoches who embraced the Buddhist revival in Mongolia included Gurudeva, a highly esteemed monk of Inner-Mongolian origin, and Kushok Bakula (1917-2003), a Geshe Lharampa from Tibet's Drepung Losaling Monastery and the Indian ambassador to Mongolia beginning in 1989. Both provided important financial and spiritual support for the rebuilding.

Currently, 20 years after the democratic changes, it is estimated that about two hundred monasteries and temples exist in the country. Though several reopened temples, mainly in the countryside, are now closing, foundation of new ones continues, mostly in Ulaanbaatar, where monastic life is quite active. While by and large the old monks have managed to transmit the old traditions, today the most serious problem is how these practices can be preserved and deepen. In the countryside with the passing away of the old masters and the lack of training, motivation and the financial means of supporting new lamas, temples have been completely abandoned as the young lamas go to Ulaanbaatar or secularize and scatter in all directions. Thus, although there

were numerous temples founded after 1990, now it is rather rare that an actively working temple operates in a sub-province.

The two articles below deal with different issues of Mongolian Buddhism today. The first mainly analyses the general features and problems connected with the re-establishment of the Buddhist temples and the extent to which Mongolian Buddhism maintains earlier traditions after a hiatus of 50 years and follows or deviates from Tibetan Buddhist standards. The second article focuses on aspects of the situation in the countryside: the condition of monastic ruins, the memories of old monks, and the operation of the present-day temples.

Since 1999 the authors have been to Mongolia six times for extended periods researching the past and present of Mongolian Buddhism. Many of their observations in the articles are based on the experience obtained in Ulaanbaatar and in three provinces within the framework of the project called Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries organized by the Arts Council of Mongolia (ACM; see [www.mongoliantemples.net](http://www.mongoliantemples.net)) which aims to document the current situation of each former or current monastic site in the country.

## Acknowledgements

The articles are based on the papers the authors presented on 14 November 2008 at the conference 'Contemporary Mongolia - Transitions, Development and Social Transformations' held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. We wish to express our thanks to Professor Julian Dierkes for organizing the conference. Scholarships from the Hungarian Scholarship Board, the Stein Arnold Exploration Fund of the British Academy, the Gate of the Dharma Buddhist Foundation, the Hungarian State Eötvös Fellowship, and the OTKA 62501 research support helped our research work between 1999-2009.

## About the authors

The authors received M.A. degrees in Mongolistics and Tibetology (2002, 2003) and defended their Ph.D.s in Mongolian Linguistics in 2009 at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Their respective e-mails are: <[zsumajer@yahoo.com](mailto:zsumajer@yahoo.com)>; <[krisztina\\_teleki@yahoo.com](mailto:krisztina_teleki@yahoo.com)>.