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Buddhism in Estonia¹

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An accepted view is that Buddhist teaching spread into Europe along two routes, through Germany and England;² but there was also a third route. In the last century northern Buddhism, sometimes also known as Lamaism, spread into Europe through Russia and the European territory then within the tsarist sphere of influence, above all the Baltic States.

Estonian Buddhism, the subject of this article, constitutes a distinct episode in the spread of Buddha's teaching (*Dharma*) into Europe. The first to disseminate Buddhism in Estonia was Karlis August M. Tennisons (1873–1962), also known as the Sangharaja of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia; the Buddhist Archbishop (*sic*); the Baltic Mahatma. There is much in his life which seems baffling, mysterious and even enigmatic.³ Tennisons' biographer was another Estonian Buddhist, his pupil and life-long companion Friedrich V. Lustig (1912–91), a German born in Narva (Estonia). As a 17-year-old student Tennisons was selected in 1890 as a member of the entourage of the heir to the throne, Nikolai Romanov, who was undertaking an extensive journey to the Far East. That is how Tennisons came to be in Buryatia in 1892, in the Barguzin *datsan* (Buddhist monastery) not far from Lake Baikal, where he met the 85-year-old monk Mahacharya Ratnavajra⁴ and became his disciple. On 8 August 1893 Tennisons was ordained a monk.

At the beginning of the century he was studying Buddhist texts in Peking, but the Boxer Rebellion brought his stay in the Middle Kingdom to an end. During the Russo-Japanese war he was involved in humanitarian activities among soldiers of the Russian army in Manchuria. He then travelled back to Europe through Tannu-Tuva and the Altai. In Astrakhan' (Kalmykia)⁵ in May 1907 he met for the first time the Buryat lama tsanit-hambe Agvan Dorzhiyev (1853–1938),⁶ first teacher of the 13th Dalai Lama and Tibetan emissary to the tsarist court. During the following years Tennisons' work was most centred in Petrograd. During the First World War he became a Buddhist chaplain in the Russian army. He managed to survive the first years of the revolution and the civil war in Georgia and in March 1920 he decided to return to Petrograd. At the end of April he was imprisoned in Stavropol' for a short time by the Bolsheviks. After his release he went through Tsaritsyn to Moscow, where he was hoping to meet Dorzhiyev, who meanwhile was already on his way to the Transbaikal region. In a telegram he appointed Tennisons father superior of a Buddhist monastery in Petrograd from 17 June 1920. On reaching Staraya Derevnja, where the temple still stands, Tennisons found the building deserted. According to Lustig Dorzhiyev wrote a letter to the 13th Dalai Lama in 1922 or 1923 asking him for confirmation of Tennisons' status as Buddhist archbishop of the Baltic States,

which were by then independent of Soviet control. While waiting a whole year for a reply, Tennisons worked on a *sovkhos* near Moscow. At the end of 1923 Dorzhiev invited him back to Petrograd since confirmation from Lhasa had apparently arrived. After that Tennisons spent several years in the Baltic States, mainly Estonia, spreading the Buddhist teaching. We know nothing about his contacts with Estonian orientalists and buddhologists during this period. After that, it seems, he spent several years in Western Europe and finally travelled to the East. In the mid-1930s he was to be found again in China and Thailand, and from 1949 in Rangoon (Burma). His pupil Lustig accompanied him on all his travels. In 1956 they both took part in Buddhist celebrations in Delhi. According to Batchelor⁷ Lustig was ordained a monk on 27 November 1930 in the Buddhist Imanta temple in Riga. Lustig died in Rangoon in May 1991.

A new stage in the dissemination of Buddhism in Estonia was initially linked with academic oriental studies and started at the University of Tartu at the end of the 1960s⁸ with the advent of the Estonian linguist, indologist and philosopher Linnart Mäll, who is a pupil of the Buryat Buddhist scholar and lama Bidiya Dandaronovich Dandaron (1914–74).⁹ In the 1970s a group of students gathered around Mäll and under the aegis of an academic student circle turned their attention to the study of Buddhism, Sanskrit and the Tibetan language. From the beginning of the 1980s public lectures on different aspects of the Buddhist religion were held in Tartu; they were well attended by specialists and laymen alike. The year 1983 was a watershed: even before the Gorbachev era, Mäll was rehabilitated politically and professionally; he was allowed to teach again. Even Buddhists were able to work in Estonia under the cover of the Academic Circle for Oriental Studies.

As early as 1983 the Tallinn Buddhist Society built four stupas in western Estonia; they have not yet been consecrated by Buddhist monks. Three of them are copies of *suburgans* (stupas) at the Ivolginsky datsan in Buryatia. The first one is dedicated to the goddess Mahakala, the second to the founder of Tibetan Buddhism Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) and the third to the Dharma. The fourth stupa was erected in a different place, in the south-west of the country, and is dedicated to all the Buddhas. The erection of the stupas under communism in Estonia is evidence of a certain tolerance on the part of the authorities and also of the religious fervour of the believers, who at that time had already established close contacts with Buryat Buddhists of the Transbaikal region.

In August 1988 the academic student circle was renamed the Estonian Academic Society for Oriental Studies, which continues the prewar tradition of oriental studies in Tartu. From 1989 to 1991 it published its own information bulletin.¹⁰ The society collaborates with colleagues in Russia, Mongolia and China, organising study tours to the East, academic conferences, specialist seminars, visits to Buddhist masters and teachers and similar activities. The society now has 36 full members (this category includes only Estonian citizens – scientists, translators, artists, students), 15 corresponding members and seven honorary members. The president is Professor Mäll and the vicepresident a sinologist working at Tartu University, Dr Mart Läänemets. Affiliated to the society is the Mahayana Institute, founded on 17 February 1991 with 19 students, about half of whom graduated successfully in 1994. Although this Buddhist school is institutionally separate from Tartu University, students at the university were able to register for lectures at the Institute and they could then gain credits if studying social sciences or the humanities. Some of these postgraduates participate in the activities of the Tallinn Buddhist Society. The main aim of this Institute is to spread information about Buddhism, mainly Mahayana Buddhism. In

1991 a summer school was organised by the Mahayana Institute, and seminars and lectures were being held even at the time of the putsch in Moscow.

One of the main activities of the Estonian Buddhists is cooperation with Buddhists from St Petersburg, Moscow, Buryatia and Mongolia and the organisation of visits of prominent foreign Buddhist teachers; these are usually combined with lectures, meditations and rituals.

The visit of the 14th Dalai Lama took place at the beginning of October 1991. Everywhere he went on his pilgrimage from the south to the north of Estonia he was greeted by crowds of thousands. In Lithuania and Latvia he was received by the highest state representatives. In Tallinn he met members of the Estonian Congress (representing those aspiring for independence for the Estonian state and nation) as well as some members of the Supreme Soviet (the Soviet parliament still in existence in Estonia at the time). The Dalai Lama gave public lectures in Tartu and Tallinn and a private seminar for 20–30 believers in the Mahayana Institute.

Lama Tarab Talku¹¹ from Denmark, Lama Denis Teundroup¹² from France, Lama Nyichang Rinpoche from Japan and Sakya Trizin¹³ and Dr Alexander Berzin¹⁴ from India are among other distinguished figures who have been guests of the Mahayana Institute.

Today three Buddhist groups are active in Tallinn. The Tibetan cultural centre in Estonia is a small group of friends of Tibetan culture and religion which cooperates with similar Tibetan centres in Moscow and other places in different parts of the world. The Buddhist community of Estonia has direct links with the Swedish branch of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Kagyu; it has about 30–40 members. The third group of Estonian Buddhists is the circle of supporters of Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita.¹⁵

Notes and References

- ¹ This work was supported by the Research Support Scheme of the Higher Education Support Programme, grant no. 73/1995.
- ² Dušan Lužný, 'Buddhismus v Rakousku', *Religio*, no. 3, 1995, pp. 79–84.
- ³ For instance it is not clear whether he was a Latvian or an Estonian: he was born in northern Latvia; later (in the 1920s and 1930s) he claimed Estonian nationality and citizenship under the Estonian name Karl Tõnisson. The extensive manuscript biography by F. V. Lustig seems to be unreliable, tendentious and in many respects misleading. He claims, for instance, that Buddhism had been practised in the Tennisons family for many generations.
- ⁴ Mahacharya Ratnavajra (his secular name was Kunigaikštis Gedyminas), reputedly a descendant of the Lithuanian royal family, is said to have been educated in the Tibetan monasteries of Ganden, Kumbum and Labrang. According to S. Batchelor (*The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Aquarian, London, 1994), pp. 291–92) he would appear to be the first European after the Greek Dharmarakshita, a contemporary of the king Aśoka, to have joined a Buddhist order. Batchelor points out, however, that the only mention of Gedyminas in literature written in English is by Lustig.
- ⁵ Kalmykia, Buryatia and Tuva are the parts of the Russian Federation where Buddhism of the Tibetan sect Gelugpa became the traditional national religion.
- ⁶ The following information about the life of K. Tennisons is mainly based on two works by John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia: the Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar* (Element, Shaftesbury, Dorset, 1993) and *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Teaching, Practice, History and Schools* (Rider, London, 1987).
- ⁷ Batchelor, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

- ⁸ The emergence of the group of followers of the lama B. D. Dandaron and the tradition of teaching *Dzogchen* in Tartu in 1969 is mentioned by V. Montlevich, 'Dzogchen na vostoke Yevropy', *Garuda*, no. 1, 1992, p. 44.
- ⁹ Further information about him is given in Veronika Zikmundová and Dan Berounský, 'Bidija Dandaron', *Revolver Revue*, no. 28, 1995, pp. 321–25.
- ¹⁰ *Eesti AO Sõnumi tooja*, nos. 1–44, 1989–91. At its peak the number of copies published reached 30,000.
- ¹¹ Tarab Tulku was born in Tibet. He received the highest degree in Buddhist education, the *lharampa geshe* (in Buddhist psychology, philosophy, metaphysics, meditation and Tantric teaching). He is now the head of the Tibetan department of the Royal Library at the University of Copenhagen. He has published many studies on Buddhist psychology and philosophy, given lectures in a number of universities in Europe and overseas and taken part in academic conferences. He has developed an original psychotherapeutic method of esoteric meditation based on Tibetan traditions.
- ¹² Denis Teundroup is the president of the umbrella organisation European Buddhist Union and the lama-superior of the Karma Ling Institute which is situated in the Alps near Grenoble. The institute was founded in 1980 by the Tibetan lama Kalu Rinpoche (1904–89).
- ¹³ Sakya Trizin was born in Tsedong in southern Tibet in 1945. He is descended from the royal Khon family and is the 41st member of a line of lamas unbroken since 1073. At the age of seven he became head of the Sakya tradition (the title Sakya Trizin means 'Holder of the Sakya Throne') and in this tradition he underwent intensive training (study and practice). Jamyang Khyentse, Chokyi Lodro, Ngawang Lodro Shenpen Nyingpo, Chogye Trichen Rinpoche and Khenpo Appey Rinpoche were among his teachers. In 1959 he fled from Tibet before the Chinese invasion. Subsequently he studied Tantric teaching under Chogye Trichen Rinpoche. Sakya Trizin founded many monasteries in India and Eastern Asia and designated Rajpur in India as the centre of the Sakya tradition. He also founded the Sakya College, a school for teaching philosophy, logic and psychology. Since 1974 he has travelled around Europe, the USA and Southeast Asia. See Graham Coleman, *A Handbook of Tibetan Culture: Guide to Tibetan Centres and Resources Throughout the World* (Rider, London, 1994), pp. 243–44.
- ¹⁴ In October 1993 he gave two lectures in Tartu: 'The History of Buddhist Literature' in Tartu University and 'Networks of Western Teachers of Buddhism' in the Mahayana Institute. On 23 October 1993 he spoke in the Drikung Kagyu Ratna Shri Centre in Tallinn on the theme 'Bodhicitta and the Five Wisdoms' (see *Narthag Bulletin*, no. 2, 1993, pp. 16–17, 22). Alexander Berzin was born in 1944 in the USA, received a doctorate in oriental studies from Harvard, and from the early 1970s settled permanently in India (Dharamsala) where he is the private secretary and translator of the Dalai Lama. He has published a number of books about Tibetan Buddhism; he has travelled widely and often visits Buddhists in Russia.
- ¹⁵ His secular name is D. P. E. Lingwood. An English Buddhist monk (born 1925), in 1967 he founded a Buddhist organisation 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order', which is active mainly in Great Britain. He is a writer and poet.