

Buddhism in Russia

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Historically, Buddhism was incorporated into Russian lands in the early 17th century. Buddhism is considered as one of Russia's traditional religions, legally a part of Russian historical heritage. Besides the historical monastic traditions of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, Buddhism is now widespread all over Russia, with many ethnic Russian converts.

The main form of Buddhism in Russia is the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, with other Tibetan schools as minorities. Although Tibetan Buddhism is most often associated with Tibet, it spread into Mongolia, and via Mongolia into Russia.

It primarily spread into the Russian constituent regions geographically and/or culturally adjacent to Mongolia, or inhabited by Mongolian ethnic groups: Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, Tuva, and Kalmykia, the latter being the only Buddhist region in Europe, located to the north of the Caucasus. By 1887, there were already 29 publishing houses and numerous datsans. After the Russian Revolution, the datsans were closed down. By the 1930s, Buddhists were suffering more than any other religious community in the Soviet Union with lamas being expelled and accused of being "Japanese spies" and "the people's enemies".

After the fall of the Soviet Union, a Buddhist revival began in Kalmykia with the election of President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. It was also revived in Buryatia and Tuva and began to spread to Russians in other regions.

In 1992, the Dalai Lama made his first visit to Tuva in Russia.

There are several Tibetan Buddhist university-monasteries throughout Russia, concentrated in Siberia, known as Datsans.

Fyodor Shcherbatskoy, a renowned Russian Indologist who traveled to India and Mongolia during the time of the Russian Empire, is widely considered by many to be responsible for laying the foundations for the study of Buddhism in the Western world.



Areas in Russia with a Buddhist majority



Ivolga monastery

The Kalmyk people are the only people of Europe whose national religion is Buddhism. They live in Kalmykia, a federal subject of the Russian Federation. It borders Dagestan to the south, Stavropol Krai to the southwest, Rostov Oblast to the west, Volgograd Oblast to the northwest and Astrakhan Oblast to the east. The Caspian Sea borders Kalmykia to the southeast.

The Kalmyks are the descendants of Oirats who migrated to Europe during the early part of the 17th century. As Tibetan Buddhists, the Kalmyks regard the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. The Šajin Lama (Supreme Lama) of the Kalmyks is Erdne Ombadykow, a Philadelphia-born man of Kalmykian origin who was brought up as a Buddhist monk in a Tibetan monastery in India from the age of seven and who was recognized by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Buddhist saint Telo Rinpoche. Ombdaykow divides his time between living in Colorado and living in Kalmykia.

Kalmyk political refugees opened the first Buddhist temple in Central Europe, located in Belgrade, Serbia, in the 1920s. Many of their children relocated to the United States in late 1951 and early 1952, where they established several Kalmyk Buddhist temples in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and its environs. Ngawang Wangyal, a Kalmyk Buddhist monk, established the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center and monastery in Washington, New Jersey.

Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni was built in 2005 AD, in southern Russia, in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, at the place sanctified by the Dalai Lama.

Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni is the largest Buddhist temple in Europe.



Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



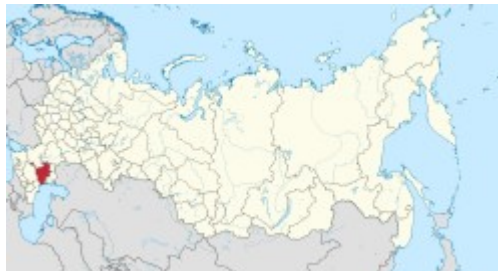
Inside the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



Inside the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista, Kalmykia



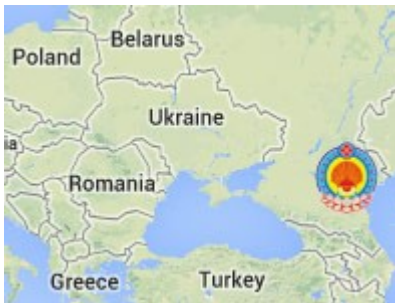
Buddhist Temple in Kalmykia



The Republic of Kalmykia (a federal subject of Russia), the only Buddhist nation in Europe



Map showing location of the Kalmyks in the 1910s



Location of Kalmykia

The Spread of Buddhism into Buryatia

Historical evidence gives reason to believe that, from the 2nd century BCE, proto-Mongol peoples (the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Khitans) were familiar with Buddhism. On the territory of the Ivolginsk Settlement, remains of Buddhist prayer beads were found in a Xiongnu grave.

At the beginning of the 17th century, Tibetan Buddhism penetrated northward from Mongolia to reach the Buryat population of Transbaikalia (the area just east of Lake Baikal). Initially, Buddhism disseminated primarily among the ethnic groups that had recently migrated out of Khalkha Mongolia (the Selenga and Zede Buryats). At the end of the 17th to the beginning of the 18th centuries, it spread throughout the Transbaikal region. A second branch came directly from Tibet, from the Labrang Monastery in Amdo.



Dzogchen Dugan (temple) at the Ivolga Datsan, 2012

The Establishment of Buddhism

In 1701 there were eleven dugans (small Buryat Buddhist temples) in Transbaikalia.

In 1722 the border was delineated between Mongolia and Russia. Buryat tribes living nomadically in the northern part of Mongolia then became part of Russia. The Russian government closed off the border, induced the Buryat nomads to take on a relatively settled lifestyle, and made itself the authority on the region's religious matters.

Buddhist monastic universities, called datsans, were built in Buryatia—including the one at Tsongol, completed in the early 1740s.

In 1741 Empress Elizabeth (Yelizaveta Petrovna) adopted a decree recognizing the existence of a "lamaist faith": She legally recognized the existence of eleven datsans, and with them 150 lamas. Buddhism was formally accepted as an official religion in the Russian Empire. (In July 1991 the Buddhists of Buryatia commemorated 250 years of official recognition of their religion).

For a long time in Buryat Buddhism there was a struggle for dominance between the Tsongol and Tamchinsky (Gusinoozyorsk) datsans. In 1764 the chief lama of the Tsongol Datsan became Supreme Lama of the Buryats of Transbaikalia, having received the title Pandit Hambo Lama ("learned prior"). Starting in 1809, supremacy passed to the priors of the Tamchinsky datsan.

By 1846, thirty-four datsans had been established in Buryatia. Applying a great deal of effort and material resources, the Buryats managed to import from Tibet, China, and Mongolia a large quantity of esoteric literature and to adopt many living traditions from the Gelugpa lineage and other schools of Buddhism.

In 1869, the Mongolian lama Choi-Manramba began to lead instruction in Indo-Tibetan medicine at the Tsugol Datsan, and from there it spread.

In 1878 the Duynhor Kalachakra School was founded at Aga Datsan, and this completed the establishment of the basic schools of spiritual higher education based on the Tibetan model.

Book printing developed quickly. In 1887, twenty-nine print shops were already in operation, which until their destruction in the 1930s published about 2000 book titles, written in Tibetan and Mongolian.

At the end of the 19th century, Buddhism began a thorough penetration into Cisbaikalia (now Northern Buryatia), where it met fierce resistance from shamans and Christian missionaries.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a great renewal movement began in Buryat Buddhism, and it gained additional impetus after the establishment of Soviet power in Buryatia.

To the Present Day

In 1918 a law was adopted, the Decree on the Separation of Church from State and School from Church, which abolished religious education. In Buryatia this law came into effect in 1925. It destroyed the spiritual culture of the peoples of the new Soviet state, and for the Buryats specifically it meant the destruction of their Buddhist culture. Spiritual values created and accumulated over centuries were destroyed and erased in a short period of time. Of the forty-seven datsans and dugans operating at the beginning of the 20th century, almost nothing now remains. One thousand eight hundred and sixty-four highly learned lamas were sent to prison, into exile, or to hard labor; hundreds were shot to death.

In the 1920s some Buryats resettled from Transbaikalia (mostly from Aga) to the Shenehen area of Inner Mongolia, and then continued their Buddhist traditions in addition to those which already existed in the region.

The Council of People's Commissars of the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic passed a resolution on 2 May 1945 to open a Buddhist temple, Hambyn Sume, in a place called Srednyaya Ivolga. Ivolga Datsan in Buryatia and Aga Datsan in the Aga Buryat national district of Chita Oblast, have been open and operational since 1946.

In 1991 a religious institution of higher education called Dashi Choynhorlin was opened at Ivolga Datsan for the training of priests, instructors, translators of canonical texts, artists, and iconographers. Training is carried out in accordance with the Goman Datsan monastic education system. In 1991 the number of operational datsans in Buryatia reached twelve.

Local Characteristics

Buddhism in Buryatia is the northernmost extension of Vajrayana Buddhism in Central Asia. It is primarily the Gelug tradition from Tibet, although there are signs of influence from the Nyingma tradition as well. Buddhist followers in Buryatia revere the founder of the Gelug school, the great guru Tsongkhapa (called Zonhobo in Buryat). Of course, the founder of the entire Buddhist tradition, Shakyamuni Buddha, is supreme. Gelug adherents in Buryatia prefer to either use this self-designation for the tradition, or the general terms "teachings of the Buddha" or "Mahayana doctrine."

Buryat Buddhism shows slight deviations from general Mahayana tradition mainly in its system of religious practice, in its rituals and magical practices, and are due to the influence of traditional, more ancient and archaic beliefs, practices, and rituals of the Tibetans and of the Buryat-Mongols. In particular, the religious system of Buddhism incorporated and assimilated traditional folk ceremonies, rituals, and beliefs associated with the honoring of ovoos, paying homage to spirits of the land, mountains, rivers, and trees. Among monastic religious practices, those of tantric origin, forming the basis of Vajrayana Buddhism, play an important role. In its philosophical, psychological and ethical teachings, Buryat Buddhism does not differ significantly from the fundamental provisions of Mahayana Buddhism as presented in the Tibetan version of the Buddhist canon referred to as the Kangyur (Ganzhuur in Buryat; 108 volumes) and the Tengyur (Danzhuur in Buryat; 225 volumes).

Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on the development of culture and scholarship among the Buryat-Mongols, particularly on the formation and development of philosophical thought, norms of morality, mental development, fictional literature, art, cooking, and aspects of alternative medicine including chronobiology and bioenergetics.

Among the great variety of religious practices at Buryat datsans, there are six large ceremonies that take place: Sagaalgan (New Year); Duynher (Kalachakra); Gandan-Shunserme (the birth, enlightenment and parinirvana of Shakyamuni Buddha); Maidari-Hural (the anticipated coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the next world epoch); Lhabab-Duysen (Buddha's descent from the heaven called Tushita); and Zul-Hural (commemoration of Tsongkhapa).

Temples and Monasteries

Datsans in Buryatia and in the Chita and Irkutsk Oblasts:

1. Hambyn-Hure Datsan of Ulan-Ude: city of Ulan-Ude

2. Aga Datsan: Chita, Aga Buryat Autonomous Area, village of Aginskoye
3. Atsagat Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, village of Atsagat
4. Kurumkan Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Kurumkansky (Huramhaanai in Buryat) District, village of Kurumkan
5. Sartul-Gegetuy Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Jidinsky (Zede) District, village of Gegetuy
6. Atagan-Dyrestuy Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Jidinsky (Zede) District, village of Dyrestuy
7. Tabangut-Ichotuy Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Jidinsky (Zede) District, village of Dodo-Ichotuy
8. Egita Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Yeravninsky (Yaruunyn) District, village of Egita
9. Sanaga Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Zakamensky (Zahaaminai) District, village of Sanaga
10. Ivolga Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Ivolginsky (Ebilge) District, village of Vyerkhnyaya
11. Kizhinga Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Kizhinginsky (Hezhengyn) District, village of Kizhinga
12. Baldan Breybun Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Kyakhtinsky (Hyaagtyn) District, village of Murochi
13. Tugnui Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Mukhorshibirsky (Muhar-Sheber) District, village of Mukhorshibir
14. Okinsky Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Okinsky (Ahyn) District, village of Orlik
15. Tamchinsky (Gusinoozyorsk) Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Selenginsky (Selenge) District, village of Gusinoye Ozero (Tamcha)
16. Kyren Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Tunkinsky (Tünhen) District, village of Kyren
17. Hoymor Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Tunkinsky (Tünhen) District, Arshan resort
18. Ugdan Datsan: Transbaikalia District, Chita Oblast, village of Ugdan
19. Ust-Orda (Abaganat) Datsan: Irkutsk Oblast, village of Ust-Orda
20. Ana Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Khorinsky (Hori) District, village of Ana
21. Chesan Datsan: Republic of Buryatia, Kizhinginsky (Hezhengyn) District, village of Chesan
22. Chita Datsan: Transbaikalia Kray, Chita Oblast, city of Chita
23. Tsugol Datsan: Chita Oblast, village of Tsugol



Tuva

The Tyva Republic (Tyva or Tuva), is a federal subject of Russia (a republic, also defined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation as a state). It lies in the geographical center of Asia, in southern Siberia. The republic borders with the Altai Republic, the Republic of Khakassia,

Krasnoyarsk Krai, Irkutsk Oblast, and the Republic of Buryatia in Russia and with Mongolia to the south. Its capital is the city of Kyzyl. Population: 307,930 (2010 Census).

From 1921 until 1944, Tuva constituted a sovereign, independent nation, under the name of Tannu Tuva, officially, the Tuvan People's Republic, or the People's Republic of Tannu Tuva. The independence of Tannu Tuva, however, was recognized only by its neighbours: the Soviet Union and Mongolia.

A majority of the people are Tyvans, but Russian is also spoken extensively. Tuva is governed by the Great Khural which elects a chairman for a four-year term.

Two religions are widespread among the people of Tyva: Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism. Tibetan Buddhism's present-day spiritual leader is Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. In September 1992, the fourteenth Dalai Lama visited Tyva for three days. On September 20, he blessed and consecrated the new yellow-blue-white flag of Tuva, which had just been officially adopted three days previously.

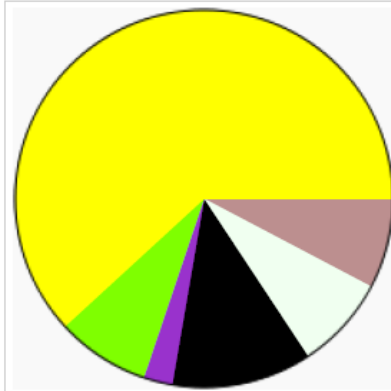
The Tyvan people—along with the Yellow Uyghurs in China—are one of the only two Turkic groups who are mainly adherents to Tibetan Buddhism, combined with native shamanism.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Tibetan Buddhism gained popularity in Tyva. An increasing number of new and restored temples are coming into use, as well as novices being trained as monks and lamas. Religious practice declined under the restrictive policies of the Soviet period but is now flourishing. Shamanism is being revived as well, also in organized Tengrian forms.

As of a 2012 official survey 61.8% of the population of Tyva adheres to Buddhism, 8% to Tengrism or Tyvan shamanism, 1.5% to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Old Believers or other forms of Christianity, 1% to Protestantism. In addition, 7.7% follows other religion or did not give an answer to the survey, 8% of the population declares to be "spiritual but not religious" and 12% to be atheist.



Buddhist temple of Kyzyl



Religion in Tyva (2012)^{[27][28]}

