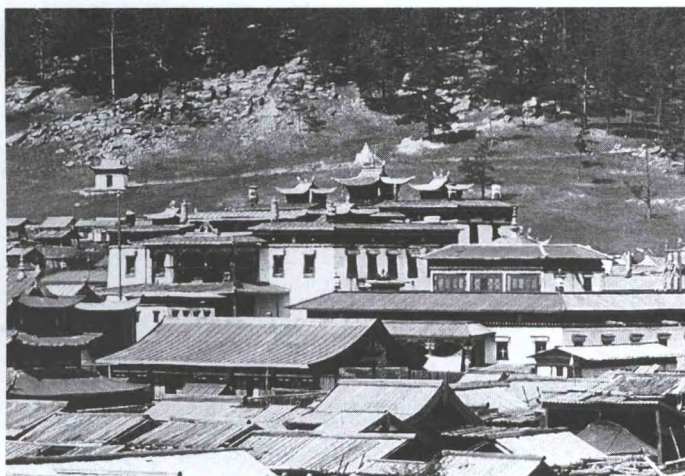


# life among the ruins

**M**urdered monks, an epidemic of a fatal illness, a communist revolution, extraordinarily high taxes – all this and more wiped out a community. Will it arise again? **VEN. THUBTEN GYATSO** tells the story of a man with the determination and vision to restore Baldan Baraivan, and his own sojourn in a glade of flowers.



Baldan Baraivan — historically flourishing

**At the turn of last century**, the Gelug monastery of Baldan Baraivan, 300km east of Ulaan Baatar, housed nearly three thousand monks with another two to three thousand lay practitioners living nearby. First, an epidemic of what sounds like smallpox decimated the inhabitants, then the communist revolution occurred. With no capitalist system to attack in this country of nomads, the communists turned their blind hatred towards the monasteries. First they taxed the lamas at a ridiculous level and then, on the pretext of not paying their taxes, over three years in the 1930s they took all the older monks and leaders of the monasteries away and murdered them. Witnesses tell of a line of yellow lama hats along the top of a ditch dug to receive their bodies – the hats fell off as communist bullets entered the back of their heads. The physically strong monks were sent to work camps in Siberia, and were not heard from again. And the young novice monks were sent home to look after the animals. The communists then removed all usable building materials from the monastery site, which was like a small village, destroyed the holy objects, and burned everything else.



"The Yellow Temple" as it is now

Today, the roofless shell of the main gumpa remains, and little else. Granite foundations show where the monks and lay people lived in their wooden and felt gers and shacks, the ground is littered with broken domestic and religious artifacts, and conifers and silver birch have crept down from the surrounding granite ridges to reclaim their valley. The people have gone and, in early summer, only the sound of cuckoos can be heard in this valley of magnificent rock formations. Clearly, however, the Dharma needs more than auspicious rocks to remain alive.

**A ray of hope for this tragic scene lies in the enthusiasm of Mark Hintzke**, founder of the Cultural Restoration Tourism Project, to rebuild the main gumpa and turn the valley once again into a place of Buddhist study and practice. Mark provides the basic requirements for people from all over the world to come and help the Mongolian people with restoration work. Cultural tourists perform light manual work, and their fees finance the project, along with donations from individuals and clear-sighted organizations. There is also plenty



Photo: Alexander E. Cleworth



The crew assembles the timber scaffolding for work in the main building

of time to explore the magnificent surroundings – the entire valley was once part of Genghis Khan's home territory. And there is time to play, although carefully: I am still recovering from a knee injury sustained during the Baldan Baraivan Olympic sack race of 2001!

I arrived at Baldan Baraivan in mid-June to give some Dharma talks to the local people and to a group of volunteers working on the restoration. For one week, a group of lamas from a main town in the province came to lead the lay people in a *mani* retreat. Some of these lamas, now in their eighties and nineties, had been among the young novices expelled from the monastery before it was destroyed. They had lived as herders and returned to the religious life once freedom was regained from the communists. People arrived on horseback from many miles away and the valley assumed the classic appearance of the generic Mongolian painting. Gers and tents mushroomed, and everywhere there were cooking fires, wood-gatherers, horses, dogs, sheep, goats, cattle, and children at play.

About fifty people, including these lamas, attended my talks in a newly built wooden gumpa beside the main ruins. The old men stamped their feet and spat in agreement with many of the things I had to say about the sad state of affairs in modern Mongolia, and several were openly moved to tears. Their faith is so strong, but none of them, including the lamas, had received any real teachings on Dharma. My talks were supposed to be an hour and a half but they asked me to speak longer. I felt a powerful, joyful energy as if the spirits of the lamas who had given their lives for Dharma were rejoicing that their prayers were being fulfilled and the teachings were returning to the valley. A younger lama sincerely thanked me for explaining how to make a prostration and its meaning.

**I helped the volunteers excavate a half-buried 12-foot statue of Lama Tsong Khapa** that had been carved into a granite cliff overlooking the valley. There was some damage, probably from bullets, but the statue was well preserved with even traces of paint and gilding. We cleaned the rubble from a temple beneath the statue that had

once housed a Maitreya statue. Made of clay, it was easily destroyed by the communists and the weather. Within the rubble, however, we discovered a three-foot statue of Tara carved in granite, and some beautiful tsatsas, one of which, a Lion-Faced Dakini, I was given to take to Australia and place within the replica of the Gyantse Stupa being built at Atisha Centre.

Then I rented a ger and my translator, Gunjiima, and I moved to a quiet, open area about a mile up the valley to do a meditation retreat. We slept in tents, meditated in the ger, and cooked food over an open fire. We camped in the center of a field of flowers – mauve, yellow, white, and pink – with great clumps of wild rhubarb growing around the entrances to marmot warrens. The rhubarb proved an excellent addition to our menu, although we had to send an urgent note to the main camp for more sugar. At night the howling of wolves in the nearby forest moved Gunjiima to say jokingly, "Last night I really became a Buddhist – I took refuge strongly because I thought I was going to be eaten!"

Before starting retreat we walked over the ridge behind our flowery glade to inspect the ruins of a nunnery that had been a special place for yogis and yoginis meditating upon the Heruka and Vajrayogini Tantra. A laywoman, with permission to rebuild the nunnery on the five hectares of very isolated valley, requested our help in this project. There is just so much to do to revive the Dharma in this country, it is difficult to know where best to put one's energy. I placed a photo of His Holiness inside a rocky nook of the ruins, offered a golden *khata*, and prayed strongly for the Vajrayana to return.

The meditation retreat was welcome relief from the scattered energy of Ulaan Baatar. After two weeks we returned to the main camp where I introduced the people to the delights of wild rhubarb and a particularly delicious shelf fungus that grows on the side of rotting logs. I also put an end to a local taboo, and greatly upset a pair of geese, by walking across a mass of thickly matted, floating grass and then swimming across the lake in the center of the valley. It was believed that one would sink into the (non-existent) quicksand and re-emerge in another lake on the other side of the hills because "it once happened to a cow." ☸

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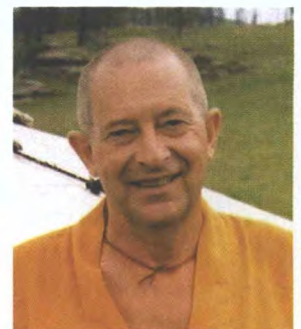


Photo: Kiole Picot