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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID EDWARDS

The Face of Buddha in Mongolia

*Despite the ravages of 70 years
of Communism, Buddhism
is making a comeback in this
ancient land of scholarship and faith*

When Mongolia adopted Mahayana Buddhism as its national religion 600 years ago, its martial face was transformed into the visage of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion. Monasteries and meditation retreats appeared throughout the land, and Mongolian monks became renowned in Lhasa, Tibet, for their scholarship. Religious and cultural links between Mongolia and Tibet become deeply entwined, and remain strong to this day.

With the advent of Communism in 1924, everything changed. Seventy years of persecution followed, with execution or imprisonment of tens of thousands of monks and scholars, and the destruction of all but three of Mongolia's 700 monasteries. In the schools, Mongolia's traditional Buddhist heritage came under further attack. As a young girl, one student was paraded in front of her school assembly and ridiculed for an entire day for wearing a red blessing string given by her uncle.

Since 1990, when Communism gave way to multi-party elections and a more liberal constitution, Buddhism has enjoyed a comeback. Today, 90 percent of Mongolia's 2.7



million people consider themselves Buddhist. The revival, however, remains challenging. One third of the Mongolian people live in the capital, Ulaan Baatar, where urban life is characterized by unemployment, poverty, crime, alcoholism, domestic violence, and inadequate health-care. Government and police corruption is widespread, and the legacy of Communism leaves a lack of initiative and respect for citizens. In addition, the Mongolians are now facing the temptations of modern-world materialism. The lunar New Year, a traditional time for family gatherings, resolution of disputes, and settling of debts, has become a time of compulsory gift exchange, where purchasing consumer goods can put families into debt for six months or more.

Although most towns are rebuilding monasteries destroyed by the Communists, they lack educated monks to teach and guide the young men, much less ordain them. In the provinces, joining a monastery is often seen as a sign of failure in life, and indeed, many who join are high-school dropouts with no other options. They wear the robes of monks, but drink alcohol, get married, and recite prayers for their livelihood. Even in Ulaan Baatar, where the great monasteries are beginning to flourish again, the level of education remains basic, and there are many signs of degenerate behavior.

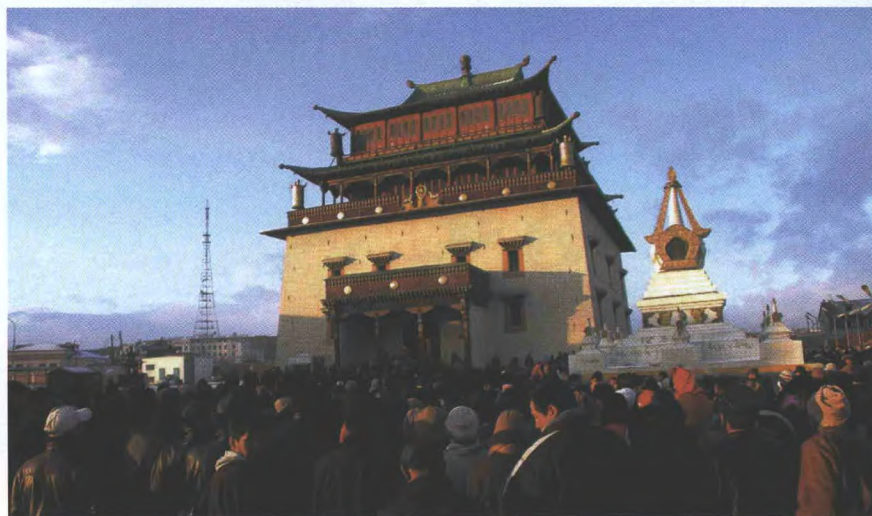
BUDDHIST REVIVAL

Despite the bleak picture, there is hope. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for one, has visited Mongolia five times. In his most recent visit, November 2002, he told the students of the Mongolian Buddhist University that since Mongolia, like Tibet, holds the profound Buddhist tradition of the great scholars of Nalanda University in India, the future of Mongolian Buddhism is very bright. Buddhists from all over the world will pay attention to Mongolian Buddhism, just as they are deeply interested in Tibetan Buddhism, he said.

Moved by stories of the terrible persecution of monks, Ven Bakula Rinpoche from Ladakh established the Pethub Buddhist Institute in Ulaan Baatar, a new monastery where young monks are given traditional Buddhist education and maintain pure vinaya (the monastic code of discipline). Bakula Rinpoche, who served for 10 years as India's ambassador to Mongolia, is considered an emanation of one of the 16 Arhats (beings who have attained liberation from suffering), who promised Buddha to look after his future communities of sangha (monks and nuns).



Above: Traditional yurt tents vie for space in the capital of Ulaan Baatar. Middle and below: The Dalai Lama visits Mongolia's largest Ganden Monastery, as hundreds endure -5 degree C weather to listen to his teachings. Opposite: Young monks are once again learning the Buddha's teachings, after years of repression.







Above: Nomad children face a precarious future, in this land where one-third of the 2.7 million population lives in desert, steppe and mountainous regions. Bottom left and right: Buddhist temples are again opening their doors, as ordained and lay people renew their faith.



In 1999, Lama Zopa Rinpoche established a center for Buddhist study and practice in the heart of the capital. It provides daily classes for ordained and lay people and has published several modern Buddhist books translated from English into Mongolian. These books are distributed for free. The center hosts Geshe Nyima Dorje, one of the main teachers at Gandan Monastery, and is building a new temple for monks at Gandan. It has also established the first community of ordained nuns ever to exist in Mongolia, and is building a new soup kitchen to provide food, medical education, and care for the poor.

Geshe Tashi Gyatso, of Norbulinka Institute, has also done much to revive Buddhism. He has directed the publication of a Dharma newspaper and numerous Dharma books, supervised the education of a group of monks at Gandan, and taught in rural areas. A German charity, Deutsch-Mongolische Gesellschaft, generously funds his activities. Panchen Otrul Rinpoche also spends two months each year teaching Dharma (Buddha's philosophies) in Mongolia. He has been doing so since 1995, when he first accompanied His Holiness on a trip to Mongolia, and was asked to teach there.

POTENTIAL ZONE OF PEACE

Ultimate success in reviving Buddhism, however, depends upon the Mongolian people themselves. They must learn to live in harmony and practice pure Dharma, ignoring political divisions fostered by the Chinese, in their campaign against His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The potential of this country is enormous. As an alternative to Tibet, Mongolia has the possibility of fulfilling the Dalai Lama's dream of a country that models a zone of peace for the entire world. No army, no weapons, and unimpeded freedom for the intellectual and meditational pursuit of spiritual goals.

In his recent visit, His Holiness met with Mongolian students and youth, and stressed the importance of inner peace, compassion and a true understanding of Buddhism through reasoning. His Holiness also praised the Mongolian people's faith and interest in Buddhism. In a country where wrestling is a national sport, he also said that he liked coming to Mongolia, "because I can get good exercise for my arms when wrestling through the crowds." He wasn't joking – he was mobbed everywhere and had to maneuver his way through the crowds!

Australian monk, Ven Thubten Gyatso, is currently the main Buddhist teacher in Mongolia, Ganden Do Ngag Shedrup Ling. He can be contacted at gyatso-mongolia@magicnet.mn

