

Northern Frontiers of Buddhism

The vast spread of Indic philosophy across Asia, since ancient times, is one of the great miracles of history. The concept of *samsara*, of *maya* and *mithya*, the illusory nature of the material world around us, was crystallized in the Upanishads by the 8th or 9th century BC. The high purpose in life was to be able to see beyond this veils of illusion, to the eternal truth which was beyond. Persons who were able to achieve this were known as *Buddhas* or Enlightened Ones and *Tirthankaras* or Victors over the fear of Death.

Over the next two thousand years, this vision of life and of a path to escape from the web of *maya*, spread to the many countries of Asia. It pervaded the culture of present-day Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Tibet, Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan. The Northernmost frontiers to which this philosophic view of life travelled was Buryatia in Siberia and Mongolia. By the 13th century, it is believed that the Vajrayana form of Buddhism, which was born at the Nalanda University and developed to its fulsome height in the Vikramshila University of Bihar, travelled through Tibet to Mongolia. The faith took deep roots here by the 16th century and has survived the turbulence that the centuries brought.

The history of Mongolia's association with the Buddhist faith goes back to the 13th century, when Emperor Kublai Khan (who ruled China then) conferred the title *Dalai Lama* (*Dalai* is a Mongolian word meaning "wide as the ocean") on the head Lama of the Sakya sect of Tibet. In the 16th century, Emperor Altan Khan conferred the title of *Dalai Lama* on the head of the Geluk sect, which continues it till today. Later in the 16th century, the Mongolian ruler Avtai Khan built Buddhist temples at his capital Kharkhorum. It is believed that these temples were made on the foundations of earlier 13th century Buddhist structures here.

The greatest Buddhist king of Mongolia was Zanabazar, of the 17th century. Besides building many temples, he was himself a great artist. The finest Buddhist art which survives in Mongolia is that which was made by him. He was a descendent of the legendary Ghengis Khan and Kublai Khan. He is believed to be the reincarnation of Javzandamba, who was first incarnated as one of the Buddha's original disciples in India. Zanabazar created beautiful images of deities in gilt bronze. He was deeply devoted to the deity Tara and many of the finest images which he made are of her. Tara is seen in Buddhist art from the mid-5th century onwards. The earliest surviving sculpture of her is in the Kanheri Caves of Western India.

His artistic style and conception of deities was influenced by Tibet, which is in turn based upon styles derived directly from India as well as through Nepal and China. The sculptures made by Zanabazar represent a beautiful confluence of these traditions. These sculptures were objects of worship and were consecrated

upon completion. Sacred *mantras*, or prayers inscribed on rolls of paper, were often kept inside the statues

Deities began to be made in Indian Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu art from the 1st century BC – 1st century AD onwards. By the Gupta Period, in the 5th century, the most exquisite sculptures were being made. Indian artistic traditions travelled especially from the 10th century onwards, from the plains of Eastern India and Kashmir, to Nepal and Tibet. These were deeply cherished in both lands and schools of art emanating from the classic Indian sources were developed.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, the great Buddhist centres and universities of India were destroyed by foreign invaders, both in the Eastern Plains and in Kashmir. The roots which fed the Buddhist culture and art of the Himalayas and beyond were cut and eventually Tibet and Nepal were left to preserve this rich heritage on their own. In Tibet, in the vast expanses of the great mountains, the liveliness and joyousness of the art gave place, over the centuries, to a more formal note and somber gravity.

In the Indic philosophy of aesthetics, it is believed that the ecstasy we experience on seeing something truly beautiful, whether it be in nature or in art, is akin to the final bliss of salvation. The moment of the experience of beauty is one of the highest states, in which man senses his kinship with the whole of creation: a state in which the soul shakes off its material attachments. Thus, the ecstatic response to beauty was seen as a glimpse of the realization of truth itself. This philosophy was most fully developed in Kashmir. In the 10th century, around the time when Tibet derived Buddhism from Kashmir, the greatest aesthetician-philosopher of India, Abhinavagupta lived there. In that period, Shaivism and Vajrayana Buddhism in Kashmir were deeply permeated by the philosophy of aesthetics.

The art of the Mongolian monasteries continues this sublime tradition. The art of Zanabazar takes us far from the noise and clamour of the material world to a deep fount of peace and beauty, which lies within each of us.

One of the highest forms of Vajrayana meditation is the Cham masked dance of the lamas. The masks cover the day-to-day nature of the lamas. They meditate for many days before the Cham, so as to lose their own egos and to become the deity, on whom they focus their attention. For, on the day of the Cham, it is the deities who dance and not the lamas. Mongolia had one of the greatest traditions of the Cham in Asia till the 19th century.

In Soviet times, in the first half of the 20th century, the Buddhist culture of this region was temporarily destroyed. Monasteries were razed to the ground and monks were persecuted. However, since the 1990's, the culture has been resurrected with ardent vigor. Monasteries are being reconstructed and the people long for the peace and inner joy which this philosophic vision brings.

Buddhism came to Buryatia in Siberia in the middle of the 17th century, from Mongolia and from Tibet. By 1741, Buddhism was recognized as one of the national religions of Russia. Buddhist temples became centres of learning where Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian languages and manuscripts were studied. By the 17th-18th centuries, the region of Kalmykia, around the river Volga, had become the first Buddhist part of Europe. At the instance of the Buryat Lama Agvan Dorzhiev, in 1915 a Buddhist temple was also built in St. Petersburg.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Buddhism is being revived in Buryatia. Old temples are being restored and new ones built. There is a deep desire of the people to look beyond the mundane material world and to seek spiritual solace in Buddhist traditions.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Lama Itygelov was the Khambo Lama, the head of the Buddhists of Russia. In 1927, this devout *yogi* is believed to have voluntarily left his body for *nirvana*. The body, still seated in meditation, was secretly buried by lamas. In 2002, he was taken out of the ground and placed in the Ivolginsky Temple. Studies conducted on the body since then show that its characteristics are still the same as of a living body. He remains in the sitting position of meditation and the body is warm and soft. This miracle greatly inspires the Buddhists of Buryatia.

It is through monks who have studied in India that Buddhist traditions are being revived today. In historic times, these traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism were taken to many countries by teachers, such as Guru Padmasambhava of the Nalanda University and Atisa of the Vikramshila University. Today again, in keeping with ancient Indian traditions, India has provided the climate for Buddhist universities and monasteries to flower and flourish.

In the middle of the expanses of Siberia, it is most interesting to come across lamas, all of whom speak Hindi, as they have received their Buddhist education in South India. A vision of life, of the search for the truth beyond the illusory nature of the material world, which was created in the First Millennium BC, continues in these distant lands till today. India continues to provide the peace and spiritual sustenance for these traditions.