

Buddhism in the USSR: Alexander Pyatigorsky Interviewed

Alexander Pyatigorsky, a specialist in ancient Indian religion, was a member of the Institute of Oriental Studies within the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. He himself became a Buddhist believer. In 1974 he emigrated and now lives in London where he teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. Milena Kalinovska, a member of the research staff at the CSRC, conducted the interview which we print below. Ed.

Q. Is Buddhism widespread in the Soviet Union?

A. Buddhism in Russia is a strange and comparatively new phenomenon, but there has been a long tradition of Buddhism in Buryatia¹ where it has flourished for at least 200 years. Compared with the Christian religion, and with the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, Buddhism has very few adherents in Russia, perhaps only a few hundred. But it is nevertheless an important cultural phenomenon. The majority of new converts to Buddhism were recruited among the young intelligentsia, particularly in Moscow and Leningrad, but also in Lithuania and Estonia and in the western parts of the Soviet Union. The appearance of the Buddhist phenomenon in Russia coincided in time with the revival of religious life in the Soviet Union in general, and within the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, during the '60s.

In the middle '60s I visited the main Buddhist temple in Buryatia near Ulan-Ude,² the so-called Ivolga Monastery. It was early summer and the believers were preparing for one of their main religious festivals, Maidari Khural. This festival usually occurs at the beginning of each summer and it celebrates an important Buddha, the Buddha of the future, Buddha Maitreya (pronounced *Maidari* in Buryatia). On this occasion many believers or semi-believers gather from all over Buryatia and the Trans-Baikal region. The Ivolga Monastery is, I think, the largest Buddhist centre in the Soviet Union. It was restored at the end of the Second World War when the authorities decided to show the world that there was religious freedom in the Soviet Union. As a result of the State's change in policy towards religion two Buddhist monasteries were restored, the

Ivolga Monastery and the Aga Monastery near Chita, but compared to the early '30s when about 120 Buddhist monasteries still existed, this was few. Between 1933-38 they had all been destroyed or closed down. The State's post-war policy affected not only Buddhists but also the Russian Orthodox Church and some of the main sectarian movements.

This official permission to some extent helped activate religious life throughout Buryatia, although this area is not a particularly religious one in the Soviet Union. About 6-7 per cent of the Buryat population are active believers who observe traditional forms of Buddhism as transmitted to them from Tibet through Mongolia. Their religion is highly traditional: it preserves all the main forms of Buddhist worship, meditation and temple services, and these are all maintained in the two monasteries.

Q. How do Buddhists relate to other religious groups? Are they tolerant of them and do they have any formal relations with them?

A. Buddhists form a small religious community in Buryatia. I gained the impression that Buddhists were friendly or neutral towards other communities and particularly towards Russian Orthodox believers and Old Believers. In general Buddhism is a tolerant religion, and this is true of Buryatia where Buddhists coexist with the representatives of other religious groups. This attitude is deeply rooted not only in Buddhist philosophy, but also geographically in the Siberian region (Buryatia is culturally and historically a part of Siberia) where many religions co-existed for at least three centuries. Siberia has always been liberal and tolerant in religious matters.

Q. In the mid-'60s many young intellectuals were converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Were there also converts to Buddhism?

A. This wave of conversions to religion began around the end of the 1950s. Of course the scale of conversions to Russian Orthodoxy cannot be compared with the very few converts to Buddhism, but nevertheless this latter phenomenon undoubtedly forms part of the religious renaissance in Russia which still continues today. It is difficult to define the causes of this religious renaissance: there were many cultural reasons; perhaps the most important reason was the ideological vacuum which became evident by the end of the '50s. Marxism-Leninism was by then dead and devoid of any real meaning.

Q. Was Marxism-Leninism still alive before the end of the 1950s, and if so amongst whom?

A. To some extent it was still alive, although in a simplified form, among young people. Then the young reacted against all forms of social and political ideology. This was true particularly of students and young specialists and intellectuals in the USSR, first of all in Moscow, Leningrad,

Tbilisi and Kiev. This rejection of ideology – including Marxism-Leninism – led many to search for an alternative. Many were attracted to religion because it was devoid of direct political and social meaning. Buddhism attracted the young mainly because it is a religious philosophy first of all, containing at the same time a considerable element of practical mysticism, of yoga and the ancient practice of meditation.

Q. Were they attracted to Buddhism as a religion or as a philosophy?

A. It was not only the philosophical content of Buddhism but also the strong mystical element in Mahayana and Tantrist Buddhism (these exist in Soviet Buryatia) which attracted them.

Q. How did these young intellectuals hear of Buddhism? Through groups or individuals or books?

A. First of all mainly through books in most cases. Although this was a secondary source, and in my view often an unreliable one, it served to arouse an initial interest in Buddhism. Then at the end of the '50s Professor Rerich, a great Buddhologist, returned from emigration in India to the Soviet Union. A group of young scholars gathered around him and some important Buddhist sources were published at that time. In addition, some young intellectuals made direct contact with exponents of Buryat Mahayanist Buddhism. This direct contact with native Buddhists, and above all with the great Buddhist teacher Bidiya Dandaron, was undoubtedly the strongest factor which promoted conversions to Buddhism.

Q. How was this contact made with Buryat Buddhists, and in particular with Bidiya Dandaron?

A. It was a combination of factors. Bidiya Dandaron sometimes visited Moscow and some Moscow and Leningrad scholars visited Ulan-Ude and even the Mongolian Republic. But the main factor was this strange phenomenon of religious revival in the USSR.

Q. How did you become a Buddhist?

A. I think the first impulse came from Professor Rerich. I was one of his pupils and he was the chief of my department. All those who talked and worked with Professor Rerich were deeply influenced by him. I think this was a powerful stimulus towards Buddhism which was followed by my acquaintance, as well as that of my friends, with Bidiya Dandaron.

Q. Did you belong to some other religion before or not?

A. No. Not only those few who converted to Buddhism, but also most of those who joined the Russian Orthodox Church, came from almost entirely atheist backgrounds. We came to religion from nowhere, and

this is why, I think, Buddhism became possible as one variant of our religious or future religious life.

Q. How do other Soviet citizens react to Buddhism?

A. The majority of Soviet citizens, particularly those living in towns, are atheistic or absolutely indifferent to all religious problems. They believe in nothing. They are not anti-religious, but rather a-religious. So we must not exaggerate the role played by religion now. Furthermore, most Soviet citizens are ideologically indifferent. The terrible predominance of one and the same narrow and closed Marxist-Leninist ideology for over 50 years made them immune to any form of ideology.

Q. What is the attitude of the authorities towards Buddhism?

A. The Moscow central authorities have nothing to do with Buddhism. Their main problem is to deal with the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the many evangelical movements. So Buddhism is peripheral to them. But it is by no means peripheral to the local authorities in Ulan-Ude (Buryatia) and in the Kalmyk national region in the lower Volga where Buddhism remains the predominant religion.

Q. In the autumn of 1972 you and other scholars specializing in oriental religions were searched and interrogated after the arrest of Bidiya Dandaron,³ a research officer of the Buryat Institute of Social Sciences. Could you give us an account of what happened and why Dandaron was arrested?

A. The local authorities in Buryatia, like other local authorities in the Soviet Union, are exceedingly stupid. They did not dream that the arrest of Dandaron and of his pupils would attract attention not only in the Soviet Union but throughout the free world. They wanted to suppress Dandaron's so-called "Buddhist group". It was not in fact a formal group but an informal one consisting of Dandaron's pupils who met to learn about⁴ Buddhist philosophy and meditation. But the Buryat authorities feared the possibility of real religious life in Buryatia. They could tolerate a closely directed form of religious life, like that of the two Buddhist monasteries, but when Buddhism started going westwards, it became dangerous in their eyes.

Q. What do you mean exactly by "westwards"?

A. When some young intellectuals in Moscow and Leningrad were converted to Buddhism they made contact with Buddhists in Ulan-Ude. They visited Ulan-Ude and some Buryats visited Moscow and Leningrad. All these contacts seemed to be ideologically dangerous to the local authorities, and as a result they decided to arrest Bidiya Dandaron and four of his pupils. I think their reaction was almost automatic: the

interrogations of various scholars in Moscow and Leningrad and Tallinn were highly formal. It was a purely bureaucratic reaction, and as such I think it had little to do with a real ideological struggle.

Q. What was Bidiya Dandaron like?

A. He was an extraordinary person: a brilliant man, endowed with deep philosophical knowledge, not only traditional Buddhist knowledge, but knowledge in many other fields too. He was broad-minded, benign and noble in all respects. His arrest and his death in a concentration camp (he died on 26 October 1974) came as a terrible shock not only to the Buddhist movement but to all religious intellectuals in the Soviet Union. Bidiya Dandaron had spent at least 19 years of his life in concentration camps during Stalin's dictatorship. No one imagined that he would be imprisoned again.

Q. What is the position of Buddhism now in the USSR? What will be its future?

A. The main thing is that Buddhism in Buryatia still exists. Even to continue to exist in the Soviet Union means development. I have no information about the Buddhist movement in European Russia (i.e. in Moscow and Leningrad), but I have no reason to suppose that it does not also continue to exist.

¹The Buryat ASSR forms part of the RSFSR. In June 1966 there were approximately 5–6,000 active Buddhist believers in Buryatia, according to Alexander Pyatigorsky's estimate. The total population of Buryatia on 1 January 1966 was 771,000 (*Yezhegodnik 1966*, p. 166, *Bolshaya sovetskaya entsiklopedia*). Ed.

²Capital of the Buryat ASSR. Ed.

³Bidiya Dandaron was arrested in August 1972 and sentenced in December to five years in a labour camp under Art. 227/1 and 147/3 of the RSFSR Criminal Code. He was accused of organizing a Buddhist sect between 1971–72. An anonymous *samizdat* letter (printed in *RCL* Vol. 1, Nos. 4 and 5, 1973, pp. 43–7) dated February 1973 claimed that this so-called "sect" was merely a group of friends who were interested in Buddhism and met for discussions and ritual meals. Ed.