

Vello Vaartnou: Nyingmapa from Estonia

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This work casts a brief glance at the activities of Vello Vaartnou, the Nyingmapa Buddhist, who has been active in Estonian culture, science, Buddhism, art, architecture, politics and social life for decades.

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Vello Vaartnou was born on 17.07.1951 in Estonia (former Soviet Union). He is the founder of Estonian practical Buddhist tradition, builder of stupas and master of thangkas, an internationally recognized artist, founder of Estonian National Independence Party and author of its programme. He is the author of the first Buddhist Encyclopedia in the Estonian language, an online Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia, the author of international Buddhist conference series “Buddhism & Nordland” and “Buddhism & Australia”. He is also the founder and leader of the Estonian First Buddhist Brotherhood and Head of Estonian Nyingma.

When talking about the Estonian-born and now Swedish citizen Vello Vaartnou, one must keep in mind that the starting point for all his actions has always been based on the principles of Buddhism and that he has never let society or the ruling regime dictate his way.

Vaartnou was the only one in the socialist Estonia of 1970 who publicly called himself a Buddhist. Moving around in Tartu and Tallinn, in cultural circles, he enjoyed having disputes with Christians and philosophy students and, what is interesting, many of his conversation partners are nowadays leaders of different religious institutions in Estonia, for example, the archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Andres Põder.

There are many ship captains and the Republic of Estonia military officers in Vaartnou's family. Many of them were killed or imprisoned for several years when the soviet occupation began. The family history set a base also for Vaartnou's political views. When he was 17, he tried to escape to the West to study Buddhism there. This attempt ended with 3 years of imprisonment in Vuktõl prison camp and a lifetime of KGB interest in him. The KGB colonel Movtshan later made a statement that in his case it was obvious that genes had played a greater role than the soviet discipline.¹

Many people in Estonia have tried to depict Vaartnou in different ways, completely ignoring his actions. But, on the other hand, the results of his actions talk for themselves, because they are visible and tangible to everybody. For example, during the Soviet era, the KGB named him a traitor of his homeland. 'Crazy Buddhist' and 'schizophrenic' were the labels he got from a committee headed by Dr. Saarma, his reasoning being that a person who is trying to establish a Buddhist monastery cannot be anything but crazy.² The orientalist Linnart Mäll (Tartu University) named him a village mystic and in the 1970s explained to Vello that Buddhism and Buddhists are of no interest to him.³

The two head lamas of Russia, Hambo Lama Erdineev and Hambo Lama Tsybikov, with whom Vaartnou studied for 8 years, had a different opinion. Also professor Pent Nurmekund from Tartu University wrote proudly in his newspaper articles about his students in Tallinn and Vaartnou, namely, that he was teaching the old Mongolian language to the Estonian Buddhist Brotherhood, which was established by Vaartnou in the 1980s.⁴

The Finnish writer Harri Sirola, who was a frequent visitor of the Brotherhood, wrote articles about Vaartnou as the establisher of Estonian Buddhist tradition in Finnish magazines and later published a novel "Two Cities".⁵ After deportation from Estonia in 1988, Vaartnou was received in Sweden as a freedom-fighter and was named a national hero and a political refugee.⁶

Vaartnou's actions describe him as a person with unusual capabilities and knowledge in Buddhism, science, politics and art. His activities in Estonia for over 40 years are usually characterized using such expressions as 'the first one', 'the only one', founder', leader' etc. In 1982, when all religious activities were forbidden under the communist regime, Vaartnou established the first Estonian Buddhist Sangha and Nyingma movement, the Estonian Buddhist Brotherhood in Tallinn.

Under his guidance the Brotherhood or Taola (meaning something like Tao's place) set the beginnings to practical Buddhist tradition and Nyingma tradition in Estonia. Having studied in Ivolga monastery from 1978 to 1986, he made use of his studies in Estonia: under his guidance four stupas were built in Western Estonia between 1983 and 1985, constituting the first northern stupas and the only stupas erected in the Soviet Union during this time.

Books and other texts (mostly from Buryatia) were obtained and copied, and over 20 voluminous books were translated from French, English and German as More than 40 books were copied into hundreds of copies and a remarkable library was also set up.⁷

Vaartnou's gift in art was put to use in Buddhist thangkas and statues, which were made by him and by the Taola dwellers under his guidance in their Kadrioru apartment.⁸ Vaartnou spread Buddhist teachings to the Brotherhood and conducted the first Buddhist rituals in Estonia, planned and personally led Taola's life and activities during the six years.

It must be mentioned that the wider public in Estonia was unaware of these activities, but the Brotherhood place was popular among the cultural elite. Since officially all kinds of religious activities and propagating religion were banned, public appearance would have also been bad for the Ivolga monastery. The connection was tight between the Brotherhood and the Ivolga monastery – already in the 1980s lamas visited Estonia secretly and the monastery was often visited by the Brotherhood members. Vaartnou recalls:

Taola members were outlaws in the communist-lead occupation of Estonia, since officially no one recognized Taola. On the other hand, the constant presence of KGB cars in front of the house and other surveillance by the authorities hinted that the official system was keenly following every step and word made by Taola. Now the ex-communists say that they had done all this to restore independent Estonia.⁹

In January 1988, Vaartnou established the Estonian National Independence Party, which was the first openly declared opposition party in the Soviet Union. It was an act of bravery unheard of during the absolute soviet rule and a depictive example of the accuracy and proficiency of Buddhist way of thinking. Years later, Tunne Kelam, an Estonian politician and Member of the European Parliament, stated in a speech that timing of this kind of national political alternative was only possible through good instinct and personal risks.¹⁰

Many of today's parliament members refused to sign the application in 1988 saying that the Estonian people would be murdered because the party openly declared to be the first opposition party in the history of the Soviet Union, whose goal was to establish independent Estonia.

"Everyone was afraid to sign. I told them that they don't understand the situation. In the autumn of 1987 I realized that something had to be done. Lagle Parek and others started collecting signatures to create a memorial for the victims of Stalinism. Then I thought it was like writing a letter to the czar: may I set up a memorial. And then I thought that this did not help the Estonian people to move on politically. First, let's create a state and then start creating memorials..."¹¹

Estonian authorities have ignored Vaartnou's national actions, since much of the state's power is in the hands of the former communists, who were in power 20 years ago.¹²

In 2010, in the newspaper "Sirp", Jaak Allik asked why Vaartnou was the only one with whom there was no interview in the voluminous book about the history of ENIP¹³, although he was the founder of this party, and why the public was still in the dark about his heroic journey to Moscow in 1988, where he held a press conference for foreign newspapers announcing the creation of the first opposition party, the ENIP, and publicized its programme.¹⁴

This event was broadcast around the world, marking the first signs of the fall of the Soviet Union. It was broadcast by international magazines and newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and others at that time, but not a word appeared in the local press, although the news spread around Estonia very fast.¹⁵

Vaartnou's home and Taola were constantly searched, and thangkas, slides, manuscripts etc. were confiscated. The final result was his deportation in February of 1988 by the personal directive of Gorbachev. After deportation, for five years Vaartnou lived in Nepal and later in Stockholm.

During the last 12 years, Vaartnou has again been educating people in the eastern culture and Buddhism in Estonia, as he had done in the 1980s at Taola, where studying was the main activity and always has been so to say *obligatorily popular*.

In 2005, Vaartnou started the first Estonian Buddhist Encyclopedia online, where by now there are more than 3200 articles containing terminology, explanations, travelogues and scientific articles that make it possible to deal with materials through different approaches.¹⁶ An important Buddhist principle must be mentioned here – Vaartnou has never taken money for his efforts, from his first

activities in the 1970s until today. This principle is applied also to his work with the Buddhist Encyclopedia, which he has been creating for many years till 2005, and also to his work with the series of international conferences “Buddhism & Nordland” of which he is the author and main organizer.

Already during the soviet times Vaartnou was cherishing the idea of scientific conferences at which scientists and Buddhists would work together, researching Buddhism in the Northern countries, but it was impossible to organize such cooperation at the time. So, the first international conference “Buddhism and Nordland” took place in 2007 and now every year it has brought together scientists and Buddhists in Tallinn from the Nordic countries and also from the East.¹⁷

Since 2007 old and new Nyingmapas have been operating under the name of Estonian Nyingma with its roots in the Buddhist Brotherhood under the guidance of the same teacher, Vello Vaartnou. In 2008, Vaartnou built a new big stupa, the fifth in Estonia, with a temple and prayer wheels at the Estonian Nyingma Centre in Pärnumaa.¹⁸

Vaartnou’s gift as an artist can be best appreciated in his thangkas, where his gift as an artist and his knowledge of Buddhism come together perfectly. Vaartnou studied in the Estonian Art Academy with master Sarri and was an acknowledged artist in Estonia already in the 1970s–1980s; some of his thangkas were also exhibited at Tokyo World Exhibition in 1980. Later he had numerous exhibitions in Europe, Asia and America, and he is a member of the Swedish Graphics Union.

In the last decade he has created thangkas using computer graphics. They have already found their way into the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, MC University in Thailand, and the royal family of Thailand has Vaartnou’s thangkas. Many people are producing thangkas by copying them; it is like a certain industry in the eastern countries, but original thangkas, grown from the understanding of Buddhism, can only be made by teachers with a deep knowledge, and Estonia is very lucky to have Vaartnou make their first Estonian thangkas.

In 2011, Vello Vaartnou organized the first annual international conference “Buddhism & Australia” that was held 1–5 February 2012 in Australia at Murdoch University, Perth. The conference involved 32 speakers from 16 countries, the key speaker being Lewis Lancaster from the University of California, Berkeley. The conference was free of charge for the participants and contributed 32 new research papers that are available to the public on the conference website. Vaartnou’s future projects in Australia include an Encyclopedia of Buddhist Australia, an online Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia, establishing Buddhist studies in Perth universities, building Buddhist architecture and the founding of the International Buddhist Educational Centre, Nyingma Monastery in Western Australia.¹⁹

In conclusion, we can say that Buddhism, which reached Estonia over a hundred years ago with Karl Tõnisson, has taken a big step ahead and obtained features of proper Buddhist traditions – there are 5 stupas, temples, thangkas, literature, a Buddhist Encyclopedia and an international conference “Buddhism and Nordland”.

All this has been achieved by one man, Nyingmapa Vello Vaartnou. As Vaartnou says:

I may look like an Estonian, but I’m really more like an Asian in the way of thinking and lifestyle...and I have always buried all my money in Buddhism. I believe that people should get part of this grand cultural heritage offered to us by the Orient. This is my passion, my addiction. These are the only symptoms I have”.²⁰

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Kopsavilkums

Raksts sniedz ieskatu Nyingmapa budista Vello Värtnu (Vello Värtnu) ieguldījumā Igaunijas kultūrā, pētniecībā, mākslā, arhitektūrā, politikā un sabiedriskajā dzīvē vairākos gadu desmitos.

Atslēgvārdi: Vello Värtnu; Igaunijas Njingma; .budisms; thangkas; Budistu brālība; Igaunijas Nacionāla neatkarības partija; stupas; KGB; Budisma enciklopēdija, Burjatija; Ivolga; hambo lama Žambo Erdiņejevs; hambo lama Munko Cibikovs.