

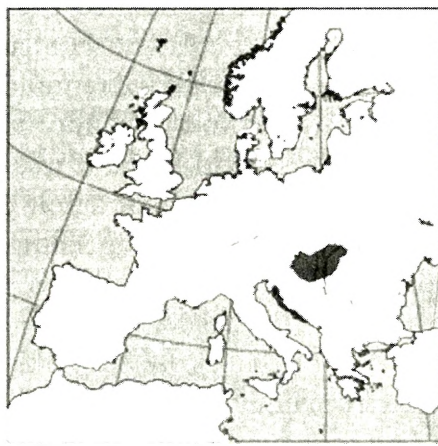
HUNGARY

BUDDHISM IN HUNGARY: THE DHARMA GATE BUDDHIST CHURCH AND COLLEGE

by Tamás Agócs*, Pál Farkas**, Zoltán Cser*** and Gábor Karsai****

1. HUNGARY: INTRODUCTION

A Short History



Hungary: a Country in the Heart of Europe

Hungary is a small country in the middle of Europe. It covers

*. Associate Prof., Dharma Gate Buddhist College

** . Managing Director, Dharma Gate Buddhist College

***. Vice-Dean, Dharma Gate Buddhist College

****. Rector, Dharma Gate Buddhist College

ninety-three thousands square kilometres and has just over ten million inhabitants. For eleven hundred years, since the Hungarian people occupied the land, it has been constantly changing shape and population due to never ending wars and migration. Though there are different theories concerning the ancient homeland of the Hungarians, it is generally accepted that they originally come from the East. The legend of an Asian origin is attested by the oldest chronicles and a unique Hungarian folk culture. Hungarian is one of the few languages in Europe which does not belong to the Indo-European group.

The Hungarian tribes are said to have entered the Carpathian Basin and settled there at the end of the 9th century CE. One hundred years later, King István (Stephen) converted to Christianity and established the Hungarian State. The Kingdom of Hungary became a major economic and political power in Central Europe under the dynasty of Árpád. Lying at the door of Eastern-Europe, the country was repeatedly overrun and devastated by foreign invaders, and was even dominated by the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire for 150 years. After repeated wars of independence, the nation achieved a measure of sovereignty within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867. In the 20th century it suffered extreme losses, when it lost more than two thirds of its territory and approximately one third of its population in the two World Wars. It was in 1989, after the withdrawal of the Soviet Red Army, that a new period began with the change to democracy, culminating in Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004.

RELIGIONS

Evidence gathered from linguistics, ethnography, archaeological excavations and a few scriptural sources suggest that the ancient religion of the Hungarians was a kind of Central Asian Shamanism. Hungary's first king, Saint Stephen, took up Western Christianity, but the conversion of the people was a long and painful process. Hungary remained predominantly Catholic until the 16th century, when the Reformation took place and, as a result, first Lutheranism, then soon afterwards Calvinism became the religion of almost the entire population. In the second half of the 16th century, Jesuits led a successful campaign of counterreformation and by the 17th

century, once again, Hungary became predominantly Catholic. Atheism became widespread in the 20th century, especially in the Communist Era, when people with religious convictions were disadvantaged. After the collapse of the Soviet system Hungary saw a revival of religions, although a large percentage of the people still claim themselves unreligious.

According to a recent poll, 44% of Hungarian citizens responded that “they believe there is a God”. 31% answered that “they believe there is some sort of spirit or life force” and 19% answered that “they do not believe there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force” (Eurobarometer Poll, 2005).

2. BUDDHISM IN HUNGARY

The Appearance of the Buddha-Dharma

The growth of interest in Buddhism in Europe dates back to the mid-19th century. The first translations of Buddhist texts into Western languages were soon followed by books on the Buddha, his Teaching (Dharma), and his Community (Sangha). The first accounts of Buddhism were published by Christian authors from 1890 onwards. The first book that dealt exclusively with Buddhism was the Buddhist Catechism written by Subhadra Bhiksu (alias Friedrich Zimmermann), a German follower of the Buddha, published in the Transylvanian town of Máramarossziget (now in Romania) in 1893. The first monograph on Buddhism: Dhammo, an Introduction to the Teaching of the Buddhho, a thorough and well-documented two-volume book with sutta sections and excerpts translated into Hungarian, was written by Jenő Lénárd. First published in 1911–13, it became a basic source of information on Buddhism for several subsequent decades.