

KRISZTINA TELEKI

Renouncing the World and Taking Ordination – Family Ties of Mongolian Buddhist Novices

*“Blessed One, please explain what is meant by the words
‘taking ordination’.”*

“It is the complete avoidance of all sinful deeds.

It is the perfect elimination of desire, anger and ignorance.

*It is the cleaning away of all the defilements from being
ensconced in the darkness of fighting, battle, blaming,
quarrel, disputation, deception, and dishonesty.*

*It is the basis of all virtues, just as fertile soil is the basis of
all grains.*

It is the source of all precious things.

It is the wish-fulfilling gem of all happiness.

It is the exalted abode of all virtues.

It is what gives relief to all sentient beings.”¹

Introduction

The 20th century brought a number of different periods to the history of Mongolia: the end of the Manchu era (1691–1911), the Bogd xan’s theocratic reign (1911–1921), socialism (1921–1989) and democracy (1990). This article aims to describe what renouncing the world (especially the home and the family), taking ordination, and taking monastic vows meant in two different periods of Mongolian Buddhism: at the turn of the 20th century and a century later. Citation of

¹ *Sūtra of Nanda’s Ordination* (Tib. *dga’bo rab tu byung ba’i mdo*). Degé Kangyur, 328, Vol. 72 (*mdo sde, sa*). 254b–257a. www.84000.co.

interviews reveals the life of novices with a particular emphasis on boys (*band'*) or pre-novices who took ordination (*rawjün*, Tib. *rab byung*), illustrating their family background, connections with family members after ordination, support from and towards the family.² Another aim has been to define the master-disciple relationship (*bagš šaw'*) as honouring the *guru* who transmits his knowledge to a disciple has great significance in Vajrayāna tradition. As few written sources are available to study monks' family ties,³ the research was based on a handful of interviews recorded with old monks who lived in monasteries in their childhood (prior to 1937),⁴ monks who took ordination in 1990, and pre-novices of the current Tantric monastic school of Gandantegčenlin Monastery, the Centre of Mongolian Buddhists.

Mongolian Buddhism

Mongolian Buddhism is of Indian and Tibetan origins, and belongs to the Vajrayāna tradition. Though the Mongolian monastic system has been based on the teachings of the Tibetan Gelugpa stream since the 17th century,⁵ several local, nomadic features and values were involved, generating a special form of Lamaism. After three hundred years of exhaustive spreading and blossoming, all of the approximately 1,000 monastic sites were destroyed around 1937, and after the total cessation of Buddhism during socialism, religious practices could be revived only 50 years later as a result of the democratic changes in 1990. Nowadays, both the Yellow (Gelugpa) and the Red (mostly Nyingmapa) streams are present in Mongolia. The number of monks is approximately 2,500, the majority of which belong to the Yellow stream.⁶

Mongolian monks composed a special social stratum until 1937, having distinct living circumstances, philosophy and beliefs, rules and regulations, and roles and responsibilities in society.⁷ Thousands of monks lived countrywide, comprised of different age groups, education and monastic vows. Men can take four types of vows even nowadays: lay devotee, taking ordination with pre-novice vows, novice, and fully ordained monk.⁸ Only fully-ordained monks

² I would hereby like to express my thanks to the Institute of History and Ethnology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences for hosting my fieldwork in Mongolia.

³ For contemporary religion and society in Mongolia see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018, 2019a.

⁴ For detailed interviews with old monks see Majer-Teleki 2019, Teleki 2019, Teleki 2015: 37–66, Mongolian Temples Project (online).

⁵ On Tibetan monasticism see Goldstein 2010.

⁶ On contemporary Mongolian Buddhism see Birtalan et al. 2015.

⁷ Boldbatar 2010: 65.

⁸ Lay vows (*genen*, Tib. *dge bsnyen*, S. *upāsaka*), taking ordination and pre-novice vows

need live a celibate life. Nunneries have never existed in Mongolia as taking a full ordination is against the basic role of women: giving birth. However, the Red stream included and includes female (married) tantric practitioners, and many elderly ladies “cut their hair” to become Buddhist “nuns” (*čawganc*) when growing old to accumulate merits for future life.⁹

Regarding the main theories of Mongolian Buddhism, “Suffering is not caused by others’ actions, but by our non-virtuous deeds. Happiness does not come from others’ actions but from our virtuous deeds.¹⁰ The basic task of monks is “to love and protect Buddhism and to help all sentient beings of the six realms of existence¹¹ who might have been our mothers in one of our previous lives in *samsāra*” (Ven. M. Nandinbātar born 1979).

Family and Monkhood

Family is the main sphere in the life of the Mongols. Even during socialism, having six children was usual and at present an average family has three children. The concept of family embraces more than just a close circle of family members (including parents, children and maybe grandparents): it also definitely includes uncles, aunts, cousins from both the mother’s and the father’s sides, as well as the family of the spouse.

Close family members share a yurt and thus all domestic interactions, eating, and conversation occur in the same space. There is a respect for old people and support of youngsters is common. This “yurt milieu” is often preserved even in present-day blocks of flats in the capital city: siblings share a room to get to know each other completely and build strong family ties. Naturally, grandparents also live with the family and the younger family members take care of them. Moreover, the relatives of parents or other family members (uncles, siblings, cousins) often live with the immediate family or stay in their homes

(*barmarawjīn* / *barmarawjūn*, Tib. *bar ma rab byung*), novice vows (*gecel*, Tib. *dge tshul*, S. *śrāmaṇera*), and fully ordained monk (*gelen*, Tib. *dge slong*, S. *bhikṣu* with 253 precepts).

⁹ Lay vows (*genemā*, Tib. *dge bsnyen ma*, S. *upāsikā*), pre-novice vows (*barmarawjūn*), *gecelmā* (Tib. *dge tshul ma*, S. *śramāṇerikā*), fully ordained nun (*gelenmā*, Tib. *dge slong ma*, S. *bhikṣuṇī*, 364 precepts). *Emegtei lam* (‘female monk’) or the more honorific *ane* (Tib. *a ne*) are in use for women these days. Before the purges, female practitioners were called *xandmā* (Tib. *mkha’ ’gro ma*, S. *dākinī* / *yoginī* or female sky-goer). At present only one residential nunnery operates for female monks (all with *gecelmā* vow), whilst in the other women’s centres, most of the female monks have only *genemā* or *barmarawjūn* vows.

¹⁰ Boldbātar 2010: 65.

¹¹ Rebirths occur in six realms of existence namely three good realms (heavenly, demi-god, human) and three evil realms (animal, ghosts, hellish).

for a while to share accommodation and living costs, especially during a period of education taking place at a location far from their own abode (e.g. primary school in the district centre, university in the capital city, visiting the capital city or the countryside for work or holiday).

For centuries, family relationships have even been influencing the life of Mongolian Buddhist monks, who took monastic vows in accordance with the teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni prescribed in the Vinaya.¹² Until the beginning of the 20th century Buddhism was the state religion in Mongolia and most families had monk relatives. All households respected Buddhism, possessed sacred texts, rosaries, and venerated holy images at home. Monasteries functioned as the only settled centres among the nomadizing yurts (moving every season), and the nomads often visited local monasteries to prostrate themselves, pray, venerate the Buddhas, visit their monk relatives and provide food for the monastic community. In parallel, parents sent their 6 or 7 years old sons to a monk relative or to their Buddhist master to train him in monasticism. These children shared a yurt with their masters, began to study the Tibetan alphabet as well as the memorization and recitation of sacred texts. After some years they knew the Tibetan script well, could chant sacred texts by heart and had learnt how to live in a monastic milieu without a family. They took ordination and started to participate in ceremonies in monasteries that differed in size: extensive monasteries had about 25 temples and 2,000 monks whilst the smallest ones operated in a temple or yurt with a couple of monks.

Though Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419) Gelugpa teachings prescribe celibacy, its Mongolian version combines the Tibetan tradition with the features of Mongolian nomadic way of life. For instance, the monks who did not live inside the monastery could marry and live in the countryside if their homecoming was required to herd the livestock, maintain the household and the family.¹³ In spite of this phenomena, it seems that at the beginning of the 20th century the majority of Mongolian monks had full ordination and lived a single life inside the walls of monasteries, where they participated in ceremonies, held services, and educated disciples in monasticism.

The monasteries were destroyed and the monks were chased away in 1937: those with rank were slaughtered or imprisoned, while monks aged 18–45 had to join the army to fight in the war at the River Xalx, and children were sent to newly established primary schools. Many disrobed monks became herders or workers after 1940 and got married. Only one monastery, Gandantegčenlin operated with a limited number of monks from 1944–1989. Religious practices were permitted again in 1990 due to the democratic changes: many monasteries

¹² Pozdneyev 1978.

¹³ Pozdneyev 1978.

were rebuilt,¹⁴ former monks dressed in their monk robes once more (being 70–80 years old at that time) and Buddhist services and the admission of pre-novices restarted. Many devotees who practiced their beliefs in secret during socialism sent their sons to the reopened monasteries. The revival became very effective: old monks trained the young monk generation in the 1990s and 2000s based on the knowledge that they had obtained from their masters before 1937.

On the other hand, the remnants of socialist values and the exigencies of modern-day capitalism have “continued” to influence religious practices in Mongolian society. It is true that Buddhism has benefited from the political changes, becoming the state religion once more. Since the 1990s, Buddhist devotees have once again been visiting monasteries to venerate the Buddhas or request the monks to chant sacred texts for the well-being of all sentient beings, as well as to bring health and success to their families. Nonetheless, despite these beneficial developments, a major obstacle for the reintroduction of Buddhism has been that it does not receive much state support; monasteries operate purely on the basis of private donations, though they are tax-exempt. Moreover, like all Mongolian men, monks are obliged to live within new social and economic systems – receive salaries, pay tax and insurance, buy travel tickets, perform compulsory military service, etc. One reason for this is that the majority of Mongolian monks, ordained mainly in the 1990s, got married after having only attained pre-novice vows. Being closer to ordinary Mongolian men in this sense, they had to take responsibility for their immediate families, acting as husbands, fathers, and grandfathers.¹⁵ Sometimes this causes difficulties for monks as they are able to only work ‘part-time’ in monasteries and consequently receive low salaries.

Despite the fact that taking ordination means “go forth from home to homelessness”,¹⁶ at present only a handful of monasteries have dormitories and thus a number of young, middle-aged and old monks live at home with their families and visit the monasteries only for ceremonies and religious services. Their families take care of them and ensure the proper life circumstances to practice Buddhism. Only a few monks are able to take full ordination and focus on vows

¹⁴ Actually one temple building was built on the sites of some ruined monasteries. For details on old and new Mongolian monasteries see Mongolian Temples Project (online). For old photographs of old monks and monasteries see British Library Projects (online).

¹⁵ The present article does not describe these roles and family ties.

¹⁶ Various Tibetan expressions describes this act such as ‘abandon one’s land and take ordination’ (Tib. *sa bor nas rab tu byung*), ‘abandon one’s home and take ordination’ (Tib. *khyim rnams bor nas rab tu byung*), ‘going forth for ordination’ (Tib. *rab tu byung bar nges par ’byung ba*), and ‘go forth from home to homelessness’ (Tib. *khyim nas khyim med par rab tu byung*). Cf. *Sūtra of Nanda’s Ordination* (Tib. *dga’ bo rab tu byung ba’i mdo*). Degé Kangyur, 328, Vol. 72 (mdo sde, sa). 254b–257a. www.84000.co.

and precepts. These monks are highly respected by those monks with lower vows and by society in general.

Comparison of Pre-Novice Status in Two Different Periods of Mongolian Buddhism

What follows here is the comparison of monastic life, monks' life circumstances at the beginning of the 20th and 21st centuries. Several traditions remain today, but the different social and economic situation has also resulted in 'innovations'.

1. Monastic Life at the Turn of the 20th Century

Becoming a Monk

At the beginning of the 20th century, Mongolian boys became monks of their own volition and were encouraged to do so by their parents or other family members.

“I remember that I wanted to join the local monastery, Barūn xūrē at the age of 8. My father took me to the monastery to participate in the Kanjur ceremony lasting for some days. Then, we returned home to the countryside and I planned to leave my home in autumn. However, the weather became so harsh in that year of the Pig that I could not move to the monastery, but stayed at home with my family for winter and spring. I moved to the monastery next year, in the year of the Rat. The monks of Barūn xūrē participated in the Maitreya procession of the nearby Erdene jū Monastery. At that time we often spent a night there, but the only thing that I remember is being homesick. As a small child I truly wanted to return to my family” (N. Osor, 1921–2016, Barūn xūrē, Xarxarin district, Öwörxangai province).

Boys started to learn the Tibetan alphabet from a master and memorize the basic Buddhist prayers. Mainly family members or learned local monks became their masters. A bit later they could take ordination.

“A temple and a *stūpa* stood on the bank of the River Ongi. That place called Cagān Suwarga [‘White *stūpa*’] remained as a former site of the monastery of our banner. My parents sent me to Orgoi monk at the age of 6. I became the disciple of this master: I prepared his meals and he taught me the Tibetan alpha-

bet. Then what happened? A woman, called Bor, who used to prepare tea and meals for him, disappeared one day! A man had arrived on a loaded camel. He talked to my master and showed him his load. Being a doctor, my master tried to cure his eyes. They made a dinner: a pile of tasty *būj* dumplings. Then, we went to sleep. Bor and that man woke up early in the morning and left together. Bor came back soon, having been infected with Hepatitis. My teacher went to the hospital, worried about infecting a child. They met, gestured, and talked for a whole day. Next evening someone took me away from there. It happened in wintertime, snow covered the homestead. Camels drank from the well at Tūin on the Northern plateau. They had many camels. When I approached that site to take ice to water the camels, I was told that my master had flown away. I wondered how, looking around to see where he was flying. I was looking toward the nearby *owō* cairn in the north at Mandal: if he was flying there or if he had settled on the line post as a bird. My master closed his eyes forever. He passed away. I do not know where Bor went and became ill. After this event I returned home to my family and played with my younger brother. That winter was without snow so we moved to Caxiagān us before the Lunar New Year. My mother combed her hair and went to greet his older brother for the Lunar New Year. She spent a day there and requested him to teach Tibetan sacred texts to me. He refused, saying that he could not teach me if I stayed with my family. My brother was five years older than me, and he left with our uncle, an educated monk. My mother had nine siblings and he was one of her older brothers, maybe the second oldest one. Soon after, I was sent to Cagān xömsögt's ['with white eyebrows'] family. When my parents decided to send me to study from Cagān xömsögt, they sewed a robe for me. One of our neighbours took me to my new home on horseback. We left in the morning. I took the Tibetan alphabet and the *Going for Refuge* prayer [*Itgel*, Tib. *skyabs 'gro*] with me. We arrived at the white, bright yurt from the north-eastern direction. Cagān xömsögt's family had several cattle, camels, and sheep. He was a son of a learned monk and was born in the countryside and lived as herder. He told me, 'You have studied many sacred texts, now it is time to study herding too.' When I entered the yurt it was crowded with adults. There were no children at all. They talked, drank tea, came in and went out. When I left the yurt all the sheep ran away. There were no children in that family at all. Camels and cows were all wild. That family did not see any children. They had two or three dogs which I had to train. I was 6, no 7 years old at that time. I turned 7 after the Lunar New Year.¹⁷ I lost my master, Orgoi monk at the age of 6, and was given to Cagān xömsögt's family at the age of 7. I spent seven years with them. It absolutely does not mean that I studied Tibetan sacred texts from him. I was

¹⁷ Birthdays did not have much importance in Mongolia, but people's age increases by one at the Lunar New Year in January or February.

coming and going: I spent some days in the nearby monastery, but then I had to return to my master's household. I became a worker, a shepherd. I herded sheep, calf and colt. In summer I herded sheep, handled foals when milking mares, and participated in horseracing. Only adults surrounded me at all times. My master, Cagān xömsögt had a younger brother: a learned monk wearing monk robes. He was not problematic. However, two or three girls also belonged to the family. The two older girls always gave tasks and instructed me. If I think back to them, they did not have any sense of how to handle children. My mother worried a lot about my fate: becoming a servant. I sometimes participated in ceremonies in the nearby monastery, Xutagt lamīn xīd from the age of 7–14. I lived in Xutagt lamīn xīd until the age of 30 when the community was broken up in 1937” (C. Dašdorj, 1908–2015, Xutagt lamīn xīd, Saixan-Owō district, Dundgow’ province).

Parents’ Advice

People living in the countryside had strong beliefs in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. These nomads were not well-educated in Buddhist philosophy but had deep faith, so sent their sons to the monasteries for education.

“I lived in Öld beisīn xūrē Monastery for four years, from the age of 11 to 14. My mother’s family had several monks. Elderly people educated the younger generation how to be good people. They always told parables to illustrate how to love sentient beings. For example, if we ride a horse, its leg might get sore. My parents loved the livestock very much. From the other hand, they taught me to honour others. If you honour others, they will honour you. Cursing, praising, and insulting others have no sense. The older generations taught us to love, support, and honour others. They used to tell me ‘You are a man and will visit various sites. Help the exhausted, suffering, and sorrowful people! It will have a result. They might return your benefaction even in your next life.’ That is a reason for compassion and loving kindness. For instance, the area where I grew up is abundant in water. The livestock were weakened in spring, after the harsh winter. Some of them got stuck in sludge on the bank of the river, so we removed them. This kind of help to other beings will have a positive result in this life and next lives. This is the karmic law! In parallel, we made efforts for democracy, worked hard for a better way of life with great endeavours, even tormenting our bodies during socialism. It will have positive effects. This body is a container only for this life. Someone who suffers a lot would be happy at the end. My parents used to tell me ‘Don’t spare your body! Go and work hard! Do well and do have well!’” (Š. Tüggj, 1923–2014/2015, Öld beisīn xūrē, Öljīt district, Arxangai province).

Living in the Monastery

Monasteries consisted of temple buildings in the centre surrounded by courtyards with monks' dwellings. Monks participated in ceremonies every day, and spent their spare time studying sacred texts. Children joined first the assembly hall (*Cogčīn dugan*, Tib. *tshogs chen 'du khang*) memorizing basic prayers of the daily chanting. The monasteries provided the catering for the community, serving milk, tea and meals, also dairy products donated by countryside worshippers.

“We used to wake up early in the morning and started the ceremony at 8am. After the ceremony, the monks usually spent their free time at home in their yurts. We got food called *caw* in the monastery. Salary was called *jed*. It could be money which was rare at that time, so mostly silken scarves and other valuable articles were distributed to the monks according to their ranks. High ranking monks took more of such wages as they had more responsible work. This was the way of monastic life. In winter, all monks returned home to the remote countryside to help with the preparation work for winter.¹⁸ These monks brought food from the countryside, so the monastic community had meals even in winter. Firewood, saxaul and cow dung for heating were all collected and provided by the fathers, mothers, and brothers of the monks. In other words, monks' families supplied the monastery. Monks did not leave the monastery unnecessarily, but lived inside keeping their monastic precepts” (G. Galsan, 1916–2011, Usan jūilīn xūrē, Tonxil district, Gow'-Altai province).

Children's Life

Though the main task of pre-novices was to memorize Tibetan prayers, they often played with knucklebones (*šagai*), with football or shuttlecock, wrestled, raced, trapped marmots or turned each other on large prayer wheels until they felt dizzy.

“I was a child, so I just sat there. A child's life is a different thing” (S. Gončig, 1909–2015, Tegšīn xūrē, Cecen-Ūl district, Jawxan province; Bogdīn xūrē, Ulānbātar, interview recorded in 2009).

¹⁸ Winter is extremely cold in Mongolia. Rural households move to their winter dwellings in November, and prepare enough food to survive until the end of spring. For details on traditional Mongolian culture see Birtalan 2008.

“Actually, there was no time for playing. We always learnt. We read the sacred scripts at all times. We played with shuttlecock when we were bored after the suspension of ceremonies and the closure of monasteries” (R. Perenleijamc, 1922–2011, Lū gūnī xūrē, Batcengel district, Arxangai province).

“I took ordination at the age of five. I resided at my master’s place in Ganjūrīn jas Monastery until the age of 13. Persecution started at that time, in 1937. Our masters were seized, and we became disrobed children. If you visit the ruins of the monastery you will see large bronze caldrons buried in the ground. We played with dogs catching them with caldrons” (U. Čoijamc, 1923/1924–?, Ganjūrīn jas, Saincagān district, Dundgow’ province).

Master-Disciple Relationship

Normally, a young pre-novice shared a yurt with his master, an adult monk. The master educated the boy in Tibetan script, recitation, memorizing, proper behaviour, and the boy also learnt housework: he prepared tea and meals for his master, chopped firewood, cleaned the yurt, and did all the work in the household. It was the disciple’s obligation to acquire the master’s knowledge and reimburse him his goodwill.

“Monks lived mainly alone or two of them lived in a yurt. Also there were children, young disciples who studied from them. They prepared their masters’ meals. It was the rule” (G. Galsan, 1916–2011, Usan jūlīn xūrē, Tonxil district, Gow’-Altai province).

Mongolian monks highly respect the master-disciple relationship. Without the guidance of a master, enlightenment cannot be attained. A disciple has the following thoughts: “I am ill. My master is the doctor. His teaching is the medicine. If I follow his teaching I will be cured. The master is the most distinguished holiness. May the Buddhist teaching flourish!”¹⁹ In reality, these views refer to the most distinguished holiness, Buddha Śākyamuni who is represented by the master who guides the disciples on the path to enlightenment.

“I moved to the monastery with this old monk when I was 9. I became his disciple and served him in Delgerexīn xīd Monastery. He taught me the sacred texts.

¹⁹ Boldbātar 2010: 67. For monastic life in 1921 see also Forbāth 1934.

This is his photograph. Oh, my dear, beloved master!” (Š. Sodnomceren, 1916–?, Delgerexin xürē, Darwi district, Xowd province).

Saints and reincarnation (*xutagt xuwilgān*) had even more disciples, the whole community of a monastery and the nearby area.

“The famous reincarnating saint *Manjšir xutagt* had disciples in his monastery. Also his brothers. Monks lived alone in a building or residence with their disciples. Saints and reincarnations were exceptional!” (S. Gončig, 1909–2015, Tegšin xürē, Cecen-Ūl district, Jawxan province; Bogdīn xürē, Ulānbātar, interview recorded in 2010).

Family Ties after Ordination

Many pre-novices studied in local monasteries, and later moved to other monasteries for further education, or to Urga, the monastic capital city which had the most monastic schools.

“Near our Mengetin xid Monastery was a caravan route. I came to Urga with the caravan wearing my monk robes. I liked Urga at first sight! I wasn’t homesick, and did not think about going back to my family. I did not have such thoughts as I had left my home and took ordination” (D. Gončig, 1916–2010, Mengetin xid, Lūs district, Dundgow’ province).

Family ties remained by and large, even over great distances: from time to time family members visited their monk relatives or monks returned home to their parent monasteries after obtaining philosophical degrees in Urga. The Mongols, especially men (including monks) respect their mothers and try to express their thankfulness in every moment of life. Monks try to return the endless maternal love by attaining enlightenment to help all other beings.

“Gandan Monastery in Urga had strict monastic regulations and only monks lived there. Parents and family members came only for veneration. They could enter the monastic area accompanied by a sentinel. A severe “police force” operated at Gandan. Women followed the sentinel, prostrated, and left. They could meet their monk relatives at the large prayer wheels that surrounded the monastic area. They had a common meal from the food these relatives brought from the countryside. They left the other food for the monks” (S. Gončig, 1909–2015,

Tegšīn xūrē, Cecen-Ūl district, Jawxan province; Bogdīn xūrē, Ulānbātar, interview recorded in 2009).

Monks and pious devotees had fundamental roles in saving Buddhist idols during socialism:

“The majority of sacred texts were burnt during the era of persecution. Some monks hid sacred items in mountains and caves. The statues and accessories that remained could not have been on display during socialism. My mother hid such items in her ‘woman box’. Some women preserved sacred books and other items in this way: they placed the religious items into their private boxes called ‘the box at the leg’ as these sat at the end of the bed. It contained women’s stockings, boots, trousers, and other personal belongings. According to Mongolian customs, outsiders cannot even touch it. Therefore, women hid sacred items into these boxes as nobody could check their contents” (Š. Tügj, 1923–2014/2015, Ōld beisīn xūrē, Ōljīt district, Arxangai province).²⁰

2. Monastic Life at the Turn of the 21st Century

Former monks in 1990

During socialism Gandantegčēnlin xīd Monastery operated with restrictions as the only functioning Buddhist monastery in Mongolia. However, after the democratic changes in 1990, many of the monks from the early 20th century began to dress in their monk robes again and to join the reopened monasteries.

“I joined Jūn xūrē Daščoilin xīd Monastery in Ulaanbaatar in 1990, at the age of 83. I wished to become a monk again. I came to the monastery and talked to the abbot, Dambaḗaw. He asked questions about my former monastery and my duties there, and advised me to revisit him after three days. He said, ‘Arrange the case of your party membership and come back in three days’. I gave my party approval back to a person called Cōdol, the head of the party branch, bought red cotton in the State Department Store for an *orximj* scarf to wear on my shoulders. I came back to the monastery wearing a monk’s robe: a *dēl* gown lined with cotton pad. This was my first monastic robe, so I love it very much. After I was told to come

²⁰ Interview recorded on 3 November, 2010 in Lamrim dacan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar. The informant answered the questions of Claire A. Whitaker, an exchange student with Students of International Training Program from Saint Michael’s College, Vermont, USA, who conducted research on ‘Mongolian Buddhism during socialism’.



Fig. 1. An old monk, Ven. L. Išjamc and his disciple. Gandantegčēnlin xīd Monastery, Ulānbātar 2010.

back in three days, my wife sewed a toneless *dēl* gown for me and cut her hair [i.e. she became a *čawganc* nun]. I asked my daughter to sew a new gown, and I joined the ceremonies here in September. Twenty old monks belonged to the monastery at that time, but no children” (C. Dašdorj, 1908–2015, *Xutagt lamīn xīd*, Saixan-Owō district, Dundgow’ province).

Pre-novices in 1990

The old monks reopened, rebuilt, newly built temples and joined Buddhist assemblies, and announced the enrolment of novices. In accordance with the old Buddhist tradition, many families devoted one of their sons to monasticism. These pre-novices, having been teenagers in 1990, are 40–50 years old by now. They have great responsibilities in the maintenance of Mongolian Buddhism as their old masters have now all passed away.

“I was born in Bulgan province, Bürengangai district in 1979. I have three older brothers, a younger brother and a younger sister. My parents were Buddhists. My mother had many monk relatives in former times. Religious practices were freed again after the democratic changes, and our parents taught us the basic Buddhist practices: how to use a rosary [*erx barix*], recite mantras [*mān ’unšix*], and prostrate oneself [*mörgöl xix*]. The statuette of the Green Tārā, the saviouress stood at our home altar. My parents performed smoke-offerings, tea and food offerings to the Buddhas at the Lunar New Year at home and at the nearby *owō*. My parents strictly followed the old traditions. A former monk of our local, ruined monastery, who later became my master, participated in the revival of Jūn xūrē Daščoilin xīd Monastery in Ulaanbaatar in 1990. After returning home in 1991 he reopened our local monastery, Jūn gūnī xūrē Šaddūwdarjālin xīd on 13 June 1991. Monks started the services and announced the enrolment of pre-novices. Local elderly people often said that a monk would be born in my family. As a child I observed curiously the happenings at the reopened assembly. After watching the monks, I imitated them at home, taking a shoulder scarf and a monastic hat. My master to be visited us and my father introduced me to him ‘This is my son who would be a monk.’ My master replied ‘Welcome! He is such a cute boy. He will definitely be a good monk.’ My grandfather shaved my head, and my mother sewed my monastic robe. We visited the master and I took ordination in front of him at the age of 12 or 13. My monastic name became Šīrawjamc. Monks did not move to the monastery at that time as it operated in a yurt, at a 2 or 3 km distance from the district centre. We lived in the district centre, so I took my monastic bag and went to the monastery every single day on foot. Later, a temple building was built but children stayed with their families. After ordination a monk should follow his master’s instructions. As we, pre-novices were only 12 or 13 years old at that time, our master did not teach details on Buddhist philosophy to us. He taught that we were to have to respect, love and protect the Buddha’s teaching. He talked about the history of Buddhism and the history of our monastery. The most special knowledge that we obtained from him was the proper way of life of a Buddhist monk. You know, family ties have primary importance in Mongolian



Fig. 2. Ven. M. Nandinbātār during the *Cam* masked dance. Jūn xūrē Daščoilin xīd Monastery, Ulānbātār 2019.

society. The immediate family lives in a yurt, so all events and conversations are shared. We respect our elders and help children. This harmonious lifestyle still exists in Mongolian rural areas where people live from keeping livestock. Therefore, nomads are open-hearted and love sentient beings. In former times, if someone became a monk he moved to his master's yurt. The master trained him in Tibetan texts, and the disciple ran his household [*Bagšīnxā gal togōg barix*] by cooking, cleaning, and chopping firewood. Old monks lived in yurts even in the 2000s and their disciples assisted them, for example accompanied them to ceremonies. It is an old tradition: disciples receive the master's knowledge, i.e. Buddhism, and try to return his goodwill. Through these tasks we also get acquainted with labour which is beneficial. The master teaches only proper things to his disciples. Are you interested in how my master lived a righteous life? He woke up early in the morning, washed, and then cleaned the Buddhist equipment of his home altar. He offered tea and food offerings to the Buddha, then performed his morning prayers and prostrations. I have seen and learnt all this from living with him and assisting him. This is the right monastic behaviour! I have been a monk for almost 30 years. I arrived to Ulaanbaatar in 1996 and got

a BA degree at the Buddhist College, and an MA degree in religious sciences at the National University of Mongolia. I joined Jūn xūrē Daščoilin xīd Monastery in Ulaanbaatar in 2000, first as a shrine-keeper, then the assistant of the abbot, the bookkeeper of the monastery, and a chanting monk. I have fulfilled the role of assistant to the abbot for more than ten years. I visited my local monastery in 1999, and my old master nominated me as *corj* [Tib. *chos rje*], and I have been the abbot of that rural monastery ever since. We built a new temple building in 2012 in the district centre, and I visit my monastery twice or three times a year for *owō* veneration and other services” (M. Nandinbātar, born 1979).

Pre-novices in contemporary times

Recruitment of the monk community is a pressing issue even nowadays. According to a law introduced a few years ago, besides monastic education, pre-novices must now receive the mandated general state education. Only the wealthiest monasteries have had the resources to employ private teachers. Consequently, the number of pre-novices have decreased in many monasteries in recent years as they have had to enrol in state schools. What follows here is the accounts of four pre-novices (aged 14–18) who study in the Tantric monastic school (*Jūd dacan*, Tib. *rgyud grwa tshang*) of Gandantegčenlin xīd Monastery and live in its dormitory:²¹

“I expressed my wish to become a monk to my parents when I was pupil. They visited their master, who suggested that I study some more classes in primary school and meet him again when I reached 12. So, I took lay vow from that master when I was 12, and after two or three years of study in this tantric monastic school I took ordination in front of Jhado rinpoche” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18).

“A monk was recruiting in our province, Xöwsgöl, and my grandmother liked the idea of sending me to a monastery. I thought it over and agreed to become a monk. I was preparing to leave my home, but my father did not agree with it. Three years passed, and I joined this tantric monastic school at the age of 8 and took ordination” (L. Mönxbātar, 14).

“My parents are Buddhists. They often recited mantras, but could not teach me Buddhist theory. They still live in the countryside, so we do not really keep in

²¹ I am grateful to Luwsancolmon nun who kindly organized the interview, and the master of the four pre-novices who kindly permitted the interview.

touch. I visit them for the summer holiday as the monastery allows us to go home for holidays such as the *nādam*²² festival” (C. Ganjorig, 14).

“My parents live in Ulaanbaatar, so they often visit me or I go home at the weekends. We can ask for permission to leave from the master. Small children at the age of five or six usually spend a week in the monastery, and a week at home. I keep in touch with my family by phone, too, as after the age of 16 we can possess mobile phones” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18).

“A seamstress sewed our first monastic robes. We had to offer a silken scarf [*xadag*, Tib. *kha btags*], a butter-lamp [*jul*] and an incense stick [*xiij*] to the master at the time of ordination. Taking ordination means that someone becomes a new person. Our clothing, hairstyle, and outer appearance totally change. We have not taken the novice vows yet, but are only pre-novices. Our main vows include avoiding the ten false deeds²³ and to perform the ten virtuous deeds.²⁴ Three objects, namely the rosary [*erx*], the bowl [*tagš*], and sacred texts [*sudar*, S. *sūtra*] are inseparable from a monk. Monastic life is great! We recite and memorize texts with the other children. We learn marvellous things: first, the Tibetan alphabet, then sacred texts by heart. We recite and translate Buddhist texts. Later, we can study philosophical texts, tantric texts, and meditation texts. Monks have various tasks: recitation of sacred texts for the benefit of all sentient beings, accumulating merits, performing compassionate deeds, and attaining enlightenment to help all others” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18).

“We wake up at 6am on weekdays and 7am at weekends. We memorize texts in the morning. Then, we gather in the temple to hold the ceremony with the other monks from 9–11am. We have a short rest around noon, than start the classes of general education. School teachers visit us to hold lessons on Mongolian language and literature, English language, and Mathematics. These lessons take two or three hours in the afternoon. Then, we memorize and recite sacred texts again. We go to sleep at 10pm” (L. Mönxbātar, 14).

“Certainly, we can play with other children, for instance our younger siblings. We also have common ceremonies with the pre-novices of other monastic schools. If

²² National sport festival of the Mongols, including wrestling, horseracing and archery.

²³ Three sins of the body: killing, theft, lust; four sins of the speech: lying, censorious speaking, rude speaking, gossip; three sins of the mind: greed, animosity, false theories.

²⁴ Three virtuous of the body: avoidance of killing, theft and lust; four virtuous of the speech: telling truth, not to speak censoriously, soft speaking, not to gossip; three virtuous of mind: contentment, compassion, right views.

Tibetan rinpoches visit our monastery, we participate in their lectures. Some of them have arrived specifically visiting our temple, for instance Kushog rinpoche, the Dalai Lama and Jhado rinpoche” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18).

“Gandantegčenlin monastery has three philosophical monastic schools and a Kālacakra monastic school. Our monastic school, the tantric monastic school is specialized in secret, tantric teachings [*ag tarnī yos, nūc tarnī yos*]. We chant the prayers included in the *Šarjün* [or *Šarjin*, Tib. *zhar byung*] textbook on a daily basis. We recite the short version of the *Guhyasamāja tantra* [*Sanduin jūd*, Tib. *gsang ’dus kyi rgyud*] every day. Monthly ceremonies include the *Sanduin dagjid* [Tib. *gsang ’dus bdag skyed*], a detailed ceremony of Guhyasamāja on the 15th, and the ceremony of the Dharmapālas on the 29th and 30th days of the lunar month. In addition, we perform *Širnen düdeg* [Tib. *sher snying bdud bzlog*] exorcist rite on certain days such as the 9th and 19th days of the lunar month. Ceremonies last longer on these feast days. For instance, on the day of exorcist rites we recite *Šarjün* in the morning, than we prepare the offering cakes, and begin the ceremony at 6 pm. Our temple has a community of 50 monks: some are fully-ordained and others novices, and 34 are pre-novices or children. Ranking monks direct the temple: the *lowon* [Tib. *slob dpon*] master, the disciplinarian, and the chanting master” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18).

“I am a shrine keeper in our temple, so I prepare and change the offerings and offering cakes on the altar” (C. Ganjorig).

“Our master [*nomīn bagš, nom jādag bagš*] took novice vows and lives with us. He prescribes for us what to learn. We repeat the memorized text to him, and he teaches the melodies, revises our handwriting, and instructs how to play the ceremonial musical instruments. We have to keep his instructions. He decides whether our actions are proper and merciful or not. Our parents do not have any say in how we live as novices. We have a lesson about appropriate life-style, and our dormitory has special rules including cleaning. The master does not teach us in a class but deals with us separately, exclusively. First, we memorize the prayers of the daily chanting of our Gandantegčenlin xīd Monastery [*Cogčīn sudar*, Tib. *tshogs chen*], then the daily chanting of our monastic school called *Šarjün*. Afterwards, we start to learn by heart the texts of the Dharmapālas and the texts of the annual ceremonies. Naturally, we can recite the unknown texts from books, but then we have to learn and recite them by heart. Sometimes we visit households with our master for special requests to perform rituals” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18 and the others).



Fig. 3. Ven. L. Mönxbātar in ordinary robes during the excursion in Xöwsgöl province in 2017.

“The monastery provides the meal(s) for the monastic community. Monastic tea is called *manj* [Tib. *mang ja*], and meal is called *caw* [Tib. *tsha ba*]. We usually eat rice with milk [*bres*, Tib. *'bras zas*]. Sometimes our relatives bring dairy products from the countryside, and faithful donors offer fruits, beverage, biscuits, and candies. Monks over 16 receive a wage from the monastery. We also go out for excursions every year. Three years ago we participated in Jhado rinpoche’s teaching in Xöwsgöl province, and in this year in the *Cam* dances in Xöwsgöl and Töw provinces” (C. Lxagwadorj, 18, M. Mönxbātar, 14).

“Currently, seven or eight monks study in India, in Gyume Dratsang. Most of them are adult monks. After their arrival we can go there for five-year studies” (C. Lxagwadorj).

“If someone would like to become a monk we definitely support his decision. We hope that our parents are proud of us” (four pre-novices together).

Monks' Tasks

Monks practice Buddhism and mightily support the life of their own families and others' families.

“In my opinion, enrolment of children has great importance to maintain the Buddhist monastic tradition. However, according to the education law children under 16 cannot leave school, but should study both in the monastery and in primary school. Such a possibility is rare, thus pre-novices' number decreased in the recent years. If someone aims to become a monk, he visits a monastery to meet the monks. First, he begins to learn the Tibetan alphabet and memorize basic Buddhist prayers at home, guided by a master. If the child has some talent in memorization he can continue learning. As we know all children are naive and innocent. Similarly, pre-novices never experience difficulties: they run to the ceremony, memorize sacred texts, drink and eat in the monastery. They do not have other thoughts. Difficulties start when they enter adulthood. For instance, children do not have to pay for travelling on the bus until 16, but then they need to buy a ticket. The question arises how they can gain money to finance their travelling and clothing, whether their families give money to them or not. Living inside the monastery is better to practice monasticism. Taking ordination means that someone leaves his family, leaves his home for homelessness. Accordingly, if someone made the decision to be a monk, it is better to leave his home and family and move to a monastery. Repressing personal wishes and following the master's instructions are easier within the walls of the monastery. If someone stays with his family, difficulties arise: he is not fully a civilian, nor fully monastic. As for me, I have various responsibilities in my own family, and in others' families, too. Regarding my own family,²⁵ we are in daily contact. I have to fulfil all duties related to Buddhism. My family members ask for my advice in decision making, and I help them as much as I can, reciting sacred texts for appropriate circumstances, in the case of choosing a school, moving, and the proper date of a hair-cutting ceremony.²⁶ Regarding society, Buddhist practices of the 1990s differ from those of present day. In 1990 Buddhism still lived in people's heart, thus the revival of Buddhism became successful. Since then, the old, faithful people have all passed away, but the younger generation started to be interested in Buddhism. They have many questions about Buddha's views on the important questions of life. The young generation uses the internet, and in instances where they have further questions they can come to the monastery, join Buddhist centres and foundations. I think that family, old traditions and

²⁵ Family means all close and distant relatives.

²⁶ A boy's hair is first cut at the age of 3 or 5, and girl's hair is first cut at the age of 2 or 4.

innovation are all important. Mongolian customs cannot be understood without Buddhism. A monks' main task is to help sentient beings and spread the teaching of the Buddha. A Buddhist family should practice Buddhism on a daily basis, day by day like water flowing. As it is natural to wash in the morning, we have to clean Buddhist items and make tea or water offerings to the Buddha. Reciting mantras, praying in front of the Buddhist images and getting blessings for the work and life of family members are essential. Besides these, we have to confess the misdeeds we committed during the day. Buddhists or sympathizers can visit the monasteries anytime for prostration and veneration and can also invite monks to their homes to talk about the Buddhist doctrine, to ask for advice, or to make recitals of sacred texts. Astrology composes an ancient science in Buddhism, so people often ask the monks for advice regarding their lives, their children's lives, proper and improper decisions on marriage, moving, hair-cutting, and other important events of life" (M. Nandinbatar, born 1979).

Conclusion

The interviews revealed similarities and differences in monastic life at the beginning and at the end of the 20th century. These have historical reasons: politics, society, economics, and religious practices changed during socialism, and Buddhism could not attain its previous, absolute, dominant role in the last thirty years that have passed since the democratic changes.

Monks' vows and living circumstances also changed over the century: monks lived mostly alone in a yurt or with their disciples a century ago, but nowadays only few monasteries have a dormitory, where mainly pre-novices coming from the countryside live. Even fully ordained monks share a household with their families (e.g. father and mother). On the other hand, family has always had a great role in the life of Mongolian monks, and family members still support their monk relatives, supply the monastic communities by giving alms. We can conclude that traditions and innovations which exist in parallel assist the development of Mongolian Buddhism.

Due to the law on general education, recruitment is a problematic issue. However, thanks to the master-disciple relations, the efforts of recruiting monks, and study possibilities in Tibetan monasteries in India, it is unquestionably possible to maintain and spread Mongolian Buddhism. All monks work for it: recently recognized young members of old reincarnation lineages, fully-ordained monks, novices returning from India and others might allow Buddha's teachings to flourish again.

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