

## SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF NINTH *JĚBCUNDAMBA* AND HIS ROLE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM

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The political system change at the beginning of the 1990's created a fundamentally new political and social environment for Buddhism in Mongolia. After the years of socialist influence ended, the people of the newly liberated Mongolia turned towards Buddhism with an almost never before seen enthusiasm. The number of believers went through an explosive growth as well as those numbers who, after the five decades of prohibition, chose the religious path as their careers again.

While the Mongolian Buddhist church tried to survive the oppression in a sort of undead state until the 1990's, during the previous quarter century or so it went through a unique and fast growth, and visibly flourished. Besides the rise in the number of Buddhist monks, more and more monasteries were rebuilt; they reorganized the educational system, established new *dacans*, and continued the education in the old ones.

As we know, the Mongolian Buddhist church leaders, just on the basis of their position alone, were a constant part of Mongolian history. This was predestined partly by their place in Buddhist church and partly by their role in Mongolian society due to that very position. That was what happened at the time of the creation of their title (1650), at the time of the first head of the Mongol Buddhist Church, *Öndör Gegēn Janabajar* and in 1911 as well, when the 8<sup>th</sup> *Bogd Gegēn* became the ruler of Mongolia's secular governance as well. After losing his actual power (1921), he could still singlehandedly save the Buddhist church from the new political power with his mere presence and after his death; those he surrounded himself with arranged the search for the new incarnation according to the *Gelugpa* (Tib. *dge lugs pa*) tradition. The representatives of the Bolshevik rule however banned any attempts to find the new incarnation. What is more, they officially declared that the Leader of the Mongol Buddhist church would not reborn.

In 1924, even though it was prohibited by law to search for the new incarnation of the head of the Mongolian Buddhist church a small group of monks still started their journey towards Tibet. Their mission could not end in success as many of them played for their brave act with their lives and this last effort seemed to signal the end of the history of Mongolia's *Bogd Gegēns*.

The new constitution, adopted by the State Great Hural in August of 1924, legally prevented the Buddhist church from functioning as it did in the past. The process that characterized the work of the anti-clericalist Bolshevik governments in every country they gained power begin in Mongolia as well. The concrete steps of implementation differed everywhere to a certain extent; however, the goal remained the same: to break the prestige of the church, then to turn the believers away from Buddhism by administrative or even, if necessary, by violent means. This process reached its bloody culmination with the great anti-clerical programs of 1937.

However, the almost seventy years old anti-clerical rule's measures were unable to end a tradition that spanned over several centuries. On the other hand, nowadays the Öndör Gegēn's work and role in modern Mongol society is quite controversial. Paradoxically, those very hardships that detain him from claiming his rightful place are the ones that enable him to work for the good of the universal Buddhist church outside of the borders of Mongolia while, at the same time, never forgetting about the Mongolian people.

The ninth Khalkha *Ĵebcundamba* lived in relative obscurity for most of his life. Only a few initiated knew about his true role, while he himself more or less lived the life of an average Tibetan refugee in India. Thereinafter, we will recount the main events of his life based on his short biography published at the Mongolian territories. It is characteristic of his unique situation that even nowadays his biographic information can only be found in a few sources and, what is more, we can discover contradictions – for example regarding his birth date – in several of those. The sources never fail to point out that the Dalai Lama and the *Bogd* already developed a close tie, a friendship during their childhood despite the fact that they were not the same age. This relationship seems to be supported by the tradition as well, as they had a close bond during the periods of their previous incarnations. The first *Bogd* and the fifth Dalai Lama were good friends as well. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama's seventh and the *Bogd Gegēn's* fourth incarnation were born into the same family.

The Ninth *Bogd Gegēn*, (Tib. 'jam dpal nram grol chos kyi rgyal mtshan) was born North of the Ladambirin monastery that could be found at the Ü-Tsang province of Tibet, in Trontsikhang, during the sixteenth 60 year cycle's water monkey (1932), followed by several miraculous signs. His father was Lobsang Jamphel and his mother was Yangchen Lhamo.

The ninetieth *drehor* at the time of Jambalnamdolčoiĵjantsan conception, Ĵambačidag Rinpoche already recognized his exceptional rank when he was born. He declared about the soon to be born child that he was “quite different from the others, a great celestial predecessor” and gave him the Sodnamdariai name.

Shortly after, the child was recognized as a subsequent incarnation of Ĵamyān *corĵ*. The *Bogd* was acknowledged by Reting Rinpoche Tūwdenĵambal-Iš at the age of four as the new incarnation of the eight *Bogd Gegēn*. However, his identity was kept secret because the political environment was absolutely unsuitable at the time to make it public knowledge.

Around the Western parts of Mongolia, at the time of the birth of the ninth *Bogd Gegēn* smaller rebellions broke out, which eventually grew to gain national significance. A few representatives of the Mongol Buddhist church, that was until then primarily confined by administrative means, started to publicly protest for the adoption of measures to better the Mongolian Buddhist church's and its lamas' position. The revolt was bloodily suppressed and in the retaliations that lasted until 1937 tens of thousands of lamas lost their lives, more than 700 monasteries were demolished to the ground and were robbed of their fortunes. To all of this the ideological background was provided by the Manchu's tactic to blame the Buddhist church for every wrong the Mongols suffered during the Manchu rule.

Not even the recognition of the ninth incarnation made it possible for the back than still relatively independent Tibetan leadership to reconcile with Mongolia. The new leaders in Ulānbātar broke their ties with Tibet; thus, making every attempt at normalizing the situation impossible.

Meanwhile, the young Bogd continued his Buddhist studies. He was seven years old when he was placed at the Drepung Gomang monastery, where he studied Buddhist philosophy as a mere apprentice lama. His first tutor was the Mongol scientist *geshe* Thubten nyima (Khalkha Agwančoidan boradi dulba xamba Tüwdennyam, Tib. dge bshes thud stan nyi ma), who lived in the Drepung monastery, but he could consider several other renowned teachers as his tutor as well. From the *Gelugpa* trend, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama were both his tutors. He got acquainted with the teachings of other schools of Buddhism. From the *Nyingma* (Tib. *rnying ma pa*) school Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the *Kagyü* (Tib. *bka' brgyud pa*) school Kalu Rinpoche and from the *Sakyapa* (Tib. *sa skya pa*) school Sakya Trizin were his masters.

He got his *gecül* (Tib. *dge tshul*) title from Reting Rinpoche at the age of eight. According to tradition, he studied Buddhist philosophy at the monastery for 14 years. By the end, he got to the Mādhyamika teachings in his studies. At the age of 21 (1952), he left the monastery and spent his upcoming years living as a penniless wandering monk. He went on a pilgrimage to Tibet's holy sites as a beggar yogi. He performed retreats, *chod* (Tib. *gcod*) exercises and studied Buddhist scripts.

He returned back to the monastic lifestyle at the age of 25. He settled down at the Ganden Puncog Ling (Tib. dga' ldan phun tshogs gling) monastery. This monastery was founded by Tāranātha and was called Takten Puncog Ling (Tib. stag bstan phun tshogs gling) back then. It is located three hours away from Shigatse.

In 1959, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government were forced to leave Tibet in order to flee from the China's People's Liberation Army. The Bogd stayed by the Tibetan borders for almost another year and continued his studies. Later though he was also forced to flee further and found sanctuary in India as many of his peers did. First, he travelled to Darjeeling, then to South India. That was where he finally settled down and started a family, had a child and lived the everyday life of a Tibetan refugee. The Buddhist biographies only sparingly mention this period of his life. In 1981, he returned to the Buddhist church.

In 1986, when he was 47 years old he considered going back to his homeland, to Tibet. In connection with this thought, even the possibility of gaining the current Tibetan government's permission for the trip had come up as a possibility; however, the journey never happened.

Until 1990, he lived in Madhya Pradesh in Central India and worked as a monk among the Tibetan refugees. He performed several retreats and teachings for them. It was around that time that a new need for finding the next incarnation of the religious head of Mongolia became timely. His holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama also gave thought to this issue and in less than a year, after learning about the official Mongolian point of view, he made his decision.

In 1991, the new democratically elected Mongolian leadership asked for an official position on the question of the person of the religious leader of the Mongolian Buddhist

church. The Mongolian Head of State, D. Očirbat and other important state leaders, conveying the Mongol Buddhist believers' request, they turned to the exiled Tibetan government's Minister of Religious and Cultural Affairs, who worked by the Dalai Lama's side, as he was just then visiting Mongolia with their request. The Mongolian Head of State formulated the request as thus:

“Democracy arrived to us as well. We can now freely choose our religious affiliation and would like to call back to our home the ninth incarnation of the Jebtsundamba Rinpoche. We heard that the next reincarnation of the head of the Khalkha Mongol Buddhist church lives among the Tibetan emigrants in Dharmasthala. We would like to know whether it is the truth or not? I ask His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to examine this case and decide whether he is our Bogd Gegēn.” (Agwadorj 2002: 2)

In response to the request, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama declared in 1991 that the one they know to be the ninth *Jebcundamba* is truly the Khalkha Mongol Öndör Gegēn's reincarnation. The *Bogd Gegēn* only heard about the declaration of the Buddhist church's religious leader in 1992 through the Tibetan government's Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs. After receiving the official notification he traveled to Dharamsala. During that same year, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January the Mongol head lama's inauguration ceremony took place at the Drepung Gomang monastery.

Due to this move, the new Mongolian government entered into a complex political situation. This was the point when it became clear that the assessment of the Mongolian Buddhist church's position cannot be a solely a question of Mongolian internal affairs. Though the only competent figure of the inauguration was the Mongolian church leader himself; however, by asking the head of the Buddhist church about the identity of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bogd Gegeen they got the attention of the Chinese government as well. Sadly, with this the question was diverted to such a political sphere that until this day prevents the new Mongolian church leader from occupying his place among his supporters.

In 1994, following the advice of the Dalai Lama the ninth *Bogd Gegēn* traveled to Tibet, where he studied the *Jonang* (Tib. *jo nang pa*) tradition, then three years later he was constituted as the order's spiritual leader.

After the official recognition of the religious leader, the Mongol Buddhist believers' desire for their spiritual leader to return to Mongolia was well founded. Though, after the system change the Mongolians could make pilgrimages without almost any hindrance – and can do even today – to the Buddhist church's high ranking leaders, to His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama or to the ninth Khalkha *Jebcundamba* in India, the Mongol lamas could and still can study at the religious centers in India; however, these could not compensate for the fact that the head of the Mongolian Buddhist church was forced to remain outside of Mongolia's borders. The Mongolian governments were careful in taking a side in this question after their – that can be described as quite bold in hindsight – stand in 1991.

In 1999, the ninth *Bogd Gegēn* declared in an interview that he has no connection with Mongolia whatsoever. With the Mongolian Buddhists and the Mongolian

monasteries he kept in touch through the pilgrims. Those few months he spent in Mongolia during the summer of 1999 gave him a chance to meet the Mongolian Buddhist congregation. He performed teachings and ceremonies in the capital and several religious centers in the country side. After his Visa expired he was forced to leave the country; however, the Mongol Buddhist church and the congregation did not break all contact with him. Year after year more and more people visited him during their Buddhist pilgrimage in India. Several Mongolian Buddhist monk studied under his guidance, whom returned back to their country after finishing their studies; thus, maintaining contact between the Mongol spiritual leader and the Mongolian Buddhists.

In 2004, a non-profit Buddhist center called the Jebtsundamba Center was established that chose the ninth *Bogd Gegēn* as its cardinal upholder. The declared aim of the center are as follows: the reorganization of the Buddhist religious education and tries to mend the damages caused by the 70 year long period of anti-Buddhist movement with the reconstruction of those monasteries that were demolished during that time.

That the ninth *Jebcundamba* was not allowed to settle down in Mongolia created a unique situation. Due to the fact that most of his time was not filled with managing the Mongolian Buddhist church; he himself became a traveling ambassador of Buddhism similarly to the Dalai Lama. There was no political aspect of his activity. His appearances did not carry the same meaning and content that is inseparable from the Dalai Lama, or from his person. As he travelled the world he performed ceremonies; met the given country's Buddhist congregations; led teachings, meditations and retreats in many countries of the world. He visited the United States, the Russian Federation, Kalmykia and Buryatia – among the Mongols living there –, in Canada, Singapore, Taiwan and Switzerland, but he visited Hungary as well in 2007. Due to this work, he could probably contribute more for familiarizing with and making the world accept Buddhism than if he had “only” led the Mongolian Buddhist church.

After several years, he returned to Mongolia for the Gandan monastery's invitation in 2010. That year he also got his Mongolian citizenship; however, at that time he hadn't settled down permanently there yet. He returned back to Dharamsala for a short while, then, in 2011 he travelled to the Mongolian capital again. Then, he settled down at the central monastery of Mongolian Buddhism, the Gandan monastery and in November he was inaugurated into the office of the head of the Mongolian Buddhist church once more.

He died at Gandan on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March in 2012.

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