

## ***INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIA: Groups and Their Activity***

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**ABSTRACT:** New religious ideas have gained considerable momentum in Post-Soviet countries in the wake of the collapse of the USSR. People have started to become more involved in religious groups that were not previously active in these regions. Lithuania is no exception. This study is based on fieldwork in Buddhist groups (2012-2013) and attempts to document the development of Buddhism in Lithuania by investigating several Buddhist groups and their activities in contemporary Lithuania.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, group, activity, practice, religion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge of Buddhist teaching became available to larger numbers of people via a gradual spreading to new areas of the world, particularly to the West. Initially, the existence of Buddhism in the West was largely related to the activities of migrant Asian Buddhists. However, starting from the beginning of the second-half of the twentieth century, Buddhism has aroused interest in Westerners themselves (Wallace 2002, 34). Buddhist attitudes towards peace, mindfulness and care for all living creatures appear to be close to the view of life of those Westerners who have started to put this knowledge into practice.

Western attraction to Buddhism represents a surge in the popularity of spirituality rather than a return of religion, with Buddhist spirituality offering a credible response to the anxieties of the modern world (Faure 2009, 139). It should be noted that the main features of Buddhism are taken from the context of traditional culture and transformed into common philosophy. In contrast to ethnic Buddhists coming from Asian countries, Westerners focus more on meditation practice, to the exclusion of socio-cultural activities (Baumann and Prebish 2002, 3)

In the West, one of the characteristic features of Buddhism is plurality and diversity. While in various Asian countries a single school of Buddhism dominates, the trend in the West is to

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have several schools and traditions of Buddhism within one country or even within one city (Keown and Prebish 2006, 198). The features mentioned above also apply to Buddhism in contemporary Lithuania.

The generalised spread of Buddhism in Lithuania started in the early 1990s when Lithuania regained its independence after the collapse of the USSR. However, the first contacts with practicing Buddhists were already established in the 1970s and 1980s (LT\_12, Interview). Officially recognised atheism and the prohibition of religion in the Soviet Union did not lead to a complete loss of interest in religious life in society. Despite the pressure on Christianity, the Soviet regime was more tolerant of Eastern religions and the growing interest of young people in these religions increased over time (Streikus 2012, 55). The distribution of spiritual literature confirms this both in the legal way of reading the available literature in libraries and in the illegal way by distributing the so-called *samizdat* literature<sup>1</sup> among those engaged in the religion. For young people, it was a way to separate from and oppose Marxist ideology (Andrijauskas 2007, 66-67).

Starting from the 1960s-1970s, the interest in Eastern culture, not only as a protest against the Soviet regime but also, for example, for its language, culture and medicine, started to increase. This is confirmed by the establishment of three centres for Eastern Studies in Lithuania's universities: Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University and Klaipeda University, where various aspects of Asian culture are studied (Strmiska 2012). University scholars were not the only ones who had an opportunity to explore Asian culture. Also, Lithuania's incorporation in the USSR provided many students, first, with the possibility to participate in research expeditions and, second, to work after their graduation from the university in the Buryatia and Transbaikalia region and other areas where Buddha believers lived (LT\_29, Interview). Despite the pressure from the USSR against religious practice in this region, Buddhist *dacans*<sup>2</sup> with acting Buddhist teachers – lamas – were still active. In these particular regions, students and other people who were interested in Buddhism could meet actual Buddhists and encounter the Buddhist culture.

In the beginning of the perestroika period, a weakening of the policy on religion gradually led to the proclamation of religious freedom. The main result of the USSR policy in terms of religion was that there was almost a complete destruction of church institutions and religious traditions in general. This led to the deprivation of a religious milieu and the creation of a religious vacuum in society. As a result, in the mid-1980s, a wide range of religious movements began to emerge and spread (Filatov 2002, 470).

By reading spiritual books, which were available more freely and in larger numbers than before, people, especially the younger generation, began to congregate in order to implement knowledge in practice. They often tried to carry out a variety of yoga, meditation techniques, etc. In addition to the increased number of interested people, unofficial religious groups formed, and following the restoration of Lithuania's independence, some of these groups became officially registered organisations. The same can be applied to groups practising Buddhism. Currently, there are several Buddhist groups in Lithuania's cities; they represent a variety of Buddhist teachings and consist only of local people who have converted to Buddhism. Thus, the case of Lithuania is a typical example of so-called Western Buddhism.

## THE RESEARCH

The dates presented in the paper are based on fieldwork in several Buddhist groups in Lithuania over a period of several months (the research took place between October, 2012 and April, 2013). The project utilised a qualitative approach and employed a combination of

<sup>1</sup> Samizdat literature – a key form of dissident activity across the Soviet Union in which individuals reproduced censored publications by hand and passed the documents from reader to reader.

<sup>2</sup> Dacan – a Buddhist temple in Buryatia.

ethnographic methods, including participant observations and qualitative interviews. During the fieldwork, the main research aim was to explore the history and activities of Buddhist groups.

During the course of the research, over 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted, fully recorded and transcribed for the purpose of coding and analysis. The respondents were representatives of the two schools of Buddhism which are most represented in Lithuania: Tibetan Buddhism groups and Korean Zen centres. Participant observation was undertaken within several Buddhist groups in weekly meetings, retreats and public activities over the research period. Participation involved taking part in teaching, meditation and prayer sessions and some socialising.

## OVERVIEW OF BUDDHIST GROUPS IN LITHUANIA

### *The Dandaron Group*

The first and oldest Buddhist group in Lithuania is the so-called Dandaron group, which was established during Soviet times. Donatas Butkus (1939), a student from Kaunas studying chemistry and pharmacy at the University of Leningrad (1965-1968), had several opportunities to work and become engaged in research in Ulan Ude, Buryatia and surrounding regions in the late 1960s. At this time, he encountered the Buddhist religion and culture. Following his studies, he returned to Lithuania where he worked at the Vilnius Ethnographic Museum and continued to work on his thesis on aspects of Tibetan medicine. For this reason, he occasionally visited Buryatia. During one of his research expeditions in Buryatia, he met Bydia Dandaron (1914-1974) who was a lay Buddhist teacher in the Gelugpa tradition and worked as a scientific worker in Buryatia's Institute of Social Sciences (LT\_19, Interview). In contrast with other lamas of that time, Bydia Dandaron was also available and open to Russians. As a result, a small Buddhist group was founded by Dandaron's students who came from Saint Petersburg, Moscow (Russia), Tartu (Estonia) and Vilnius (Lithuania) (Poresh, 2002, 386). Since 1970, Donatas Butkus has been a member of this group and became one of Dandaron's students (LT\_19, Interview).

While living and working in Vilnius, Donatas Butkus came into contact with Antanas Danielius (1942-2002) – a lecturer in the Faculty of Psychology at Vilnius University who had an interest in Oriental religious and philosophical teaching. In 1972, he decided to travel to Buryatia, and after a meeting with a teacher, he became one of more than 30 students of Dandaron and received direct teachings from him (LT\_29, Interview).

In the autumn of 1972, Dandaron and a number of his students were arrested. The court sentence was the following: for founding an illegal Buddhist group, the KGB imprisoned Dandaron for five years, but four of his students, among whom was Lithuanian Donatas Butkus, were sentenced to prison in Ulan Ude in Buryatia until February of 1973. Following this, they were sent for compulsory treatment in mental hospitals (Vasilkov i Sorokina, 2003). While in prison (till his death in October 1972), Dandaron continued to be in contact with his closest students, especially with Antanas Danielius from Lithuania, to whom he wrote many letters which contained explanations of the main aspects of Buddhist teaching (LT\_29, Interview). Despite the death of the teacher, ideas of Dandaron remained alive, and in 1970, two young people from Lithuania became Buddhists after being taught by another Buddhist lama from Buryatia whom Dandaron had allowed to give teachings to Europeans (LT\_28, Interview).

A new intellectual generation emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, and several students from Lithuania, who studied in different Soviet institutions of higher education, visited Buryatia and accepted Buddhism as their religious identity. After returning to Lithuania,

these people continued to practice Buddhism and joined the first Buddhist group (LT\_12, Interview). Thus, the circle of practicing Gelugpa Buddhists increased and a group known as the Dandaron group was formed.

At present, there are several students, living and working in Lithuania, whose teachers were well-known lamas from Buryatia and whose contribution to the development of Buddhism in Lithuania has been substantial. These include Donatas Butkus, a pharmacist and scholar of Tibetan medicine; Algirdas Kugevičius<sup>3</sup>, the translator of several Buddhist texts and books in Russian and Lithuanian; Saulius Maceina, the author of the first Lithuanian-Tibetan dictionary and the author of the Tibetan language study book in Lithuanian, as well as a Tibetan language teacher; Petras Arlauskas and Linas Katinas, to name but a few.

After the restoration of independence, several of these people gradually established the Centre of Oriental Studies in Vilnius, which has incorporated many other Lithuanian Buddhists. In 1991, several members of this group helped to organise the first visit of the Dalai Lama to Lithuania. In its turn, during the 1990s, they actively participated in the organisation of other Buddhist teachers' visits to Lithuania.

#### *Kwan Um Zen Buddhist community*

Formed towards the end of the 1980s, the Kwan Um Zen School has been one of the first organised Buddhist groups in Lithuania. It is an international organisation of Zen centres and groups that was founded by the first Korean Zen Master in the West – Seung Sahn (1927-2004) – in 1972. The school began its development with the establishment of its international head temple, the Providence Zen Centre, in 1972, shortly after Seung Sahn's first visit to the USA. Since 1983, Kwan Um Zen School groups have also been founded in Europe (Kwan Um School of Zen 2013).

In the late 1980s, one of the current members of this group travelled to Poland where he met and established contacts with an existing Kwan Um Zen School group in Warsaw. During his short stay with this group, he also became involved in Buddhist practices. After his return to Kaunas, a small group of interested people was formed in order to practice Zen Buddhism (LT\_4, Interview).

The lack of acquired knowledge in Poland, as well as information from spiritual books available at that time, did not allow them to practice Zen Buddhism in a proper manner. Owing to established contacts in Warsaw, they were able not only to go there to acquire further knowledge but also to invite a Zen teacher to Lithuania. In 1989, a student of Seung Sahn, a Zen Master named Do Am Sunim, visited Kaunas several times. He led the first teaching of Zen and delivered lectures. But in January of 1991, another spiritual teacher held the first three-day Zen retreat in Kaunas. By the end of this retreat, around 40 participants had taken the five Buddhist precepts. These activities led to the subsequent official registration of the Kaunas Kwan Um Zen community in April, 1991 (Lietuvos Kwan Um Dzen 2013).

In May of 1991, shortly after Lithuania regained its independence, the head of the Kwan Um School, Seung Sahn, visited Lithuania during his European tour (LT\_33, Interview). The community organised a public lecture in the Palace of Trade Unions on Tauras Hill in Vilnius. Some 500 people joined for two days of teaching of Buddhist practice in the sports club "Ritmas" on Labdariu Street. Since then, a small group of students in Vilnius has gathered regularly for Zen practice, and on October 17, 1991 Vilnius International Kwan Um Zen School group was officially registered as a legally religious community in Lithuania. From 1991 to

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<sup>3</sup>One of his leading translations of Russian to Lithuanian is *Большое руководство к этапам пути Пробуждения (Ламрим Ченмо)* (Lamrim: the Gradual Path to Enlightenment) to *Milarepa (Mažoji Tibeto budizmo antologija)* (Milarepa: A Small Tibetan Buddhism Anthology), published in 1998; *Tibeto mirusiuju knyga* (Tibetan Book of The Death), published in 2002.

1999, most Buddhist activities took place in Vilnius. In September, 1999, the Ministry of Justice registered the Kaunas Kwan Um Zen School as a religious organisation (Lietuvos Kwan Um Dzen 2013).

Since its registration, the Kwan Um Zen Buddhist community has continued to develop by gathering people for meditation practice and retreats, periodically welcoming different teachers to Lithuania and sometimes going abroad to visit other Kwan Um Buddhist centres in Europe and Korea. In 2000, the community organised lectures in other Lithuanian cities that resulted in the formation of new groups of Zen practitioners. At present, the Kwan Um Zen Buddhist community in Lithuania consists of six groups in different Lithuanian cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Šiauliai, Panevežys and Šakiai.

In the initial stage of formation, the first members of the Kwan Um Zen group were 20-25 years old, but now, the group's average age exceeds 40 (LT\_1, Interview). These changes have affected the number of practitioners inside the community as well as people interested in Zen meditation. The first lectures in Kaunas and Vilnius in the early 1990s gathered a sufficiently large number of people, but popularity gradually declined until now, and approximately ten people who were present at the group's formation are still active. Data obtained during the research in Lithuania shows that there are approximately 50-60 people active in the Kwan Um Zen School in Lithuania. The largest Kwan Um Zen groups are in Vilnius and Kaunas where approximately 20-25 people are registered, while other groups are smaller with five to ten members (LT\_2, Interview).

The Kwan Um Zen community has a nominated individual responsible for the entire community in Lithuania and deals with the coordination of its activities. Since their establishment, the Vilnius and Kaunas groups have selected abbots from their members whose main duties include administration of the group, financial administration (the groups subsist on membership fees that average 50 LTL), organisation of teaching, and communication with teachers. A dharma status was assigned to some members to give them the right to teach practice to newcomers (LT\_4, Interview).

To conclude the overview of the Kwan Um Zen community in Lithuania, one important fact deserves attention. During its development, some practitioners took vows and went to live in Buddhist monasteries. In 1992, two practitioners from Vilnius took vows and became nuns Myong Hae and Won Bo. One of them currently lives in a Buddhist temple in Korea while the other lives in a temple in Hong Kong. In 1999, another practitioner from this group, Kestutis Marčiulynas (1961) – a former theatre actor in Kaunas, decided to become a monk, and in 2001, he took vows in Korea and became Bo Haeng Sunim (Lietuvos Kwan Um Dzen 2013). Thus, the Kwan Um Zen Buddhist group is the only Buddhist organisation in Lithuania whose members have taken vows.

### *“Dorželingas”*

In the late 1980s, the spiritual literature available for spiritual seekers included a compilation of lectures “Talks in Conway” written by the well-known Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (1938) who represents the Dzogchen teaching, which is a part of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In Moscow, Vilnius and Riga, a small group of interested people was founded and after establishing successful contacts with the author of this book, some of the practitioners left for Conway (MA), USA in 1991 to receive a live transmission of Dzogchen directly from the teacher. During this visit, an invitation letter to visit former countries of the Soviet Union was given to Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, which was accepted (Lietuvos dzogčeno bendruomenė “Dorželingas” 2013).

In 1991, Fabio Andriko, one of the closest students of Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche

who led the first seminar of Yantra yoga<sup>4</sup>, visited Vilnius and other Soviet cities. At the end of May, 1992, Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche visited Vilnius. This was a part of his journey to former USSR countries (LT\_21, Interview). He delivered a lecture course over three days, and approximately 100 people from post-Soviet countries attended this event. Since then, a group of people who accept Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche as their teacher have gathered under the name “Dorželingas” for collective practice and to follow the teaching of Dzogchen. In 2002, it was registered as a religious community by the Ministry of Justice (Lietuvos dzogčeno bendruomenė “Dorželingas” 2013).

This group currently has 30-35 registered members. However, there are fewer active members – 10-15 people, whose average age is about 40-45 years. Every registered community member usually pays an annual membership fee of 50 Euros (LT\_23, Interview).

Several active members are involved in the organisation process of the community. The main form of management – ganchi – is more or less globally similar in all Dzogchen communities founded by Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. This consists of three colour sectors – blue, red and yellow (LT\_32, Interview). Blue symbolises a person’s mind or knowledge. It coordinates teachings and courses, leads practice, supports contacts with other communities and instructors, and takes care of literature. Red symbolises a person’s energy and means movement. Its duties are the technical provision of activities, carrying out improvement work, providing room hire, organising electronic communication within the community and supporting international contacts. Yellow symbolises the body of a person and takes care of material well-being. It fulfils an account of members, provides an account of members’ money and shopping and makes financial reports (Latvian Dzogchen community “Padmaling” 2011). Dzogchen members believe that when these functions are in cooperation, the fulfilment of the tasks of all communities is assured.

#### *Diamond Way – Karma Kagyu Buddhist community*

One of the largest and most active Buddhist communities in Lithuania is the Diamond Way Karma Kagyu Buddhist School. It has four centres and a retreat site. The Lithuanian Karma Kagyu Buddhist community is one of more than 650 Diamond Way Buddhist centres in the world led by a charismatic and controversial Danish Buddhist leader lama Ole Nydahl (1941) under the spiritual guidance of the 17th Karmapa (1983). Though Ole Nydahl’s organisation, Diamond Way Buddhist, represents Tibetan Karma Kagyu Buddhism, it is much less connected with or attached to Tibetan culture. This is one of the reasons that Diamond Way Buddhism attracts people who are uninterested in Asian culture but still have an interest in religious philosophy and this kind of spiritual experience.

The history of Lithuania’s Karma Kagyu School started in August, 1997 with Lama Ole Nydahl’s first visit. He visited the country to deliver a public lecture, which gathered people from many different cities in Lithuania. The main organiser of this event was an employee from a local radio station who was inspired by Buddhism and lama’s personality after he heard Ole Nydahl’s public lecture in Berlin, Germany in 1995. Since then, he worked on organising Nydahl’s lecture in Lithuania, which took place in 1997 (LT\_15, Interview).

A small group was formed to prepare for Ole Nydahl’s visit to Lithuania, and some of its members later became the first followers of his teaching. In particular, shortly after, this group, along with some other people who had attended the public lecture in Šiauliai, went to

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<sup>4</sup>Yantra Yoga (Tibetan Yoga of Movement) – is one of the oldest recorded systems of yoga in the world. It tries to harmonise the three essential aspects of body, energy and mind. It is a supplementary method of practice in the teaching of Dzogchen that was written in the eighth century. Since the early 1970s, it has been taught in the West by Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche.

Kuchary in Poland to participate in the practice of conscious dying – phowa<sup>5</sup>. These two events became a basis for the establishment of the first regular Diamond Way Karma Kagyu group in Lithuania, which by the end of 1997, was officially registered as a religious community there (LT\_17, Interview).

Though the first Diamond Way Buddhist centre was established in Šiauliai, people from other Lithuanian cities who attended the lecture of Lama in 1997 were also interested in the teachings of Ole Nydahl. To obtain more knowledge about Buddhist teaching, these people periodically came to Šiauliai on weekends where they learned meditation techniques (LT\_17, Interview). They gradually aroused people's interest in Buddhist teachings and consequently established new Karma Kagyu centres in other Lithuania's cities: Vilnius (1998), Kaunas (2000) and Klaipeda (2007). In 2000, the Karma Kagyu community bought a large piece of land of approximately 570 km<sup>2</sup> near Kražiai in Kelmes district to build a retreat place called Stupkalnis (LT\_15, Interview). Gradual construction works have started, and the Karma Kagyu community is currently the only Buddhist organisation in Lithuania with its own retreat site.

A board of five people regulates all activities of the Karma Kagyu community in Lithuania. This group is legally responsible for organisation, solves financial questions and makes important decisions. Despite this, the members of the community maintain that they have a democratic structure based on voluntary principles. To maintain the centres, members of this group pay a monthly membership fee of 50 LTL (LT\_17, Interview).

Since Karma Kagyu's inception in Lithuania, this Buddhist school has found adherents among the young and middle-aged generations; thus, the average age of members in Lithuania is 35, but there are also practitioners who are older than 45 years (LT\_7, Interview). According to information from respondents, there are 50-60 active Karma Kagyu followers in Lithuania who regularly come to the centres for collective meditation and take part in the group's life. In terms of numbers, 10-15 people from the total come from Kaunas (LT\_5, Interview), while 20-25 come from Vilnius. However, the total number of Karma Kagyu practitioners in Lithuania is larger and ranges from 100 to 150 (LT\_17, Interview).

### *Gelugpa Buddhist groups in Lithuania*

There are three small Gelugpa Buddhist groups in Lithuania. Two of these groups are connected with each other because initially, they existed as a united group. After Dalai Lama's second visit to Lithuania<sup>6</sup> in June, 2001, an interest in Tibetan Buddhism increased among people influenced by Oriental and esoteric ideas. During the preparatory work for the Dalai Lamas' visit, an organising group, including practicing Buddhists and others, was formed. This event served as a way to proceed and master knowledge of the Dalai Lama's represented Gelugpa Buddhist tradition by establishing contacts with Buddhists from Russia where centres of the international organisation, Foundation for Preservation of Mahayana tradition (FPMT)<sup>7</sup>, were working in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (LT\_27, Interview).

In 2003, the spiritual leader of the FPMT organisation, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (1946), visited Russia and led teachings for the first time there. Along with Russians, several Buddhists from Lithuania participated in these teachings (LT\_27, Interview), while on July 3-12, 2004, one

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<sup>5</sup> Phowa (Wylie: 'pho ba'; also spelled Powa or Poa phonetically; Sanskrit: samkrānti) – is one of the most profound Tibetan Buddhism meditation practices and may be described as “the practice of conscious dying”, “transference of consciousness at the time of death”.

<sup>6</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has visited Lithuania several times: the first visit took place in 1991.

<sup>7</sup> The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) – is an organisation which was founded in 1975 by Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (1946), who began teaching Buddhism to Western students in Nepal. The Foundation is devoted to the transmission of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and values worldwide and encompasses 165 Buddhism centres, projects, and social services in 37 countries.

of the Dalai Lama's recognised Buddhist teachers, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche (1926-2006), who was authorised to give Kalachakra initiation<sup>8</sup>, was hosted in the small Lithuanian city of Alitus (Сайт Лотоса 2013).

In order to organise future visits by Buddhist teachers' to Lithuania, and to practice and receive Buddhist literature from Russia in an easier way, some people have united and have subsequently registered the Buddhist organisation "Tashi Gyephel Ling". This organisation works as a branch of Russia's FPMT centre. Gradually an internal clash of opinions arose in this group which resulted in a split and the subsequent establishment of two groups. Thus, another Gelugpa practitioner group (LT\_27, Interview) was established.

The next Buddhist group from the Gelugpa Buddhist tradition was also established in the early twenty-first century. Its members are the followers of the teaching of Geshe Jampa Tinley (1962) from Russia. In 2008, a couple from Vilnius visited their friends in Sochi and took part in the Geshe's teaching course. After this course, there was a desire to continue studies of Buddhist teaching directly by Jampa Tinley, therefore his followers from Lithuania continued to attend his teachings in Russia. After some time, Geshe Tinley was invited to Lithuania for the first time in 2010 to deliver his teachings. Since then, a small Buddhist group "Chandrakirti" has been active in Vilnius (LT\_31, Interview).

These Gelugpa Buddhist groups are relatively small, each consisting of approximately five to ten people. According to information obtained from the members of these groups, the groups mainly consist of 35-45-year-old people. This age group is similar to that of other Buddhist groups.

#### *"Rigdzin Gatsel Ling"*

Jurga Ivanauskaite, a writer (1961-2007) who started to practice Buddhism in the 1990s, is one of the best-known personalities in Lithuania. Her name was tied to the promotion of Buddhism in Lithuania through a series of books recounting her travels to India and Tibet in early the 1990s<sup>9</sup>, and it can be said that her activity led to the first steps of the formation of the "Rigdzin Gatsel Ling" Buddhist community.

During one of her visits to Dharamsala, India, she met a Buddhist teacher called Rigdzin Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche (1967) who hid from China's military authorities in India. Since Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche planned to go to the USA and intended to travel through Europe, Jurga Ivanauskaite invited him to visit Lithuania. As a result, he spent about a year from 1998-1999 in Vilnius where he taught Eastern religious ideas (Tibeto budizmo bendruomene "Rigdzin Gatsel Ling" 2013) to people interested in them.

After Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche's arrival, some of his students in Vilnius continued to follow his activity in Europe where he established several Buddhist centres and a central meeting place in Switzerland. Approximately in 2007, during one of his lectures in Europe, Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche met one of his first students from Vilnius who invited him to come to Lithuania again. Since then, he has visited Vilnius several times a year. This resulted in the foundation of a permanent Buddhist community "Rigdzin Gatsel Ling" in 1997 (LT\_33,

<sup>8</sup> Kalachakra (Sanskrit: कालचक्र; Tibetan: ངས་ཀྱི་འཁོར་ལོ་; Wylie: dus-kyi 'khor-lo) is a Sanskrit term used in Tantric Buddhism that literary means "time-wheel" or "time-cycles". The word 'Kalachakra' is usually referred to a very complex teaching and practice in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>9</sup> These include *Ištremtas Tibetas* (Tibet in Exile), published in 1996; *Kelione i Šambala* (A Journey to Shambhala), published in 1997; *Prarasta Pažadetoji žeme* (The Lost Promised Land), published in 1999.

Interview). This group comprises about 60-70 people, but its core is smaller, in fact, only 15-20 people. It is also one of the youngest Buddhist groups in Lithuania, with members averaging between 30-35 years (LT\_33, Interview).

## THE ACTIVITY OF BUDDHIST GROUPS

Since there are three different Buddhist traditions and schools represented in Lithuania – Zen, Kagyu, Gelugpa, and Nyingma – and the work of Buddhist groups is based on the teaching of a particular teacher of a specific school or tradition, all Buddhist groups follow their own requirements and each group generally acts independently. The main aim of their activity is to provide a correct understanding of Buddhist teaching to anyone interested in learning about meditation and the spiritual practices of Buddhism. This is achieved by organising different events within every group.

Among major activities is, first, the implementation of religious practice, including meditation practice, retreats and studies of Buddhist texts. All Buddhist groups have their own schedule: 16th Karmapa meditation takes place in Karma Kagyu groups three to five times per week; sitting meditation is a regular practice in Kwan Um Zen groups; tsog offerings<sup>10</sup> and chöd practice<sup>11</sup> take place in Gelugpa Buddhist and “Rigdzin Gatsel Ling” groups; members of “Dorželingas” gather not only for collective practice but also for Yantra yoga or to perform Vajra dances,<sup>12</sup> etc. Some Buddhist groups organise collective studies and discussions of religious texts.

Buddhist teachers who come to lead different teachings in Buddhist groups visit Lithuania every year. Buddhism is historically Asian, and it is a traditional religion of this region; however, Buddhism teachers’ visits to Lithuania and their teachings are of great significance for the spiritual development of local communities. Teachers deliver lectures, explain main texts, give comments and answers to different questions and deliver sermons regarding collective and individual practices of practitioners.

Visits by spiritual teachers usually include several activities. First, there is teaching on different aspects of Buddhism within every group. Every year, instructors come to the “Dorželingas” community to teach Yantra Yoga and lead the Vajra dance. In 2004, one of the members of the community obtained permission to teach the Vajra dance as an instructor, and in 2000, another practitioner was certified to teach Yantra Yoga. Karma Kagyu community centres provide the most contemporary views on Buddhism teaching by holding lectures on their premises. These lectures are delivered by travelling teachers, who are the closest Ole Nydahl students, once or twice per month. Lithuania is now the only Baltic state with four travelling teachers who are authorised to travel and deliver lectures on different Buddhist topics in other Buddhist centres.

Secondly, teachers’ visits can include participation in larger teachings and retreats. These can be short – from one to three days or a bit longer, one-two weeks. Short retreats are mostly organised on the premises of each Buddhist group, e.g., the Kwan Um Zen Buddhist group organises short retreats on premises of Kaunas or Vilnius centres no less than four times per year. By contrast, premises for long retreat practice in Lithuania’s countryside are rented. For instance, the Kwan Um Zen Buddhist community organises a two-week retreat every summer. It has been held several times in Vepriai. The “Rigdzin Gatsel Ling” community, along with its head teacher, Namkha Gyatso Rinpoche, organises a two-week long annual retreat in the

<sup>10</sup> Tsog offering is a profound part of the Guru Puja in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>11</sup> Chöd (Tibetan: ཁྱོད་ལྷ། Wylie: gcod) – is a spiritual practice found primarily in Tibetan Buddhism. It is also known as “Cutting through the Ego”.

<sup>12</sup> The Vajra dance is a meditation in movement based on the Song of the Vajra and other mantras found in the original tantras of Dzogchen. It is practiced on a mandala representing the correspondence between the inner dimension of the individual and the outer dimension of the world.

summertime. The only exception among the Buddhist groups in Lithuania is the Karma Kagyu community which has its own retreat site in Stupkalnis. Every month, weekend teachings take place on the premises of the retreat site, including major retreats and teachings with spiritual teachers, e.g., Lama Ole Nydahl and Karmapa 17th.

In addition to religious activities, some Buddhist communities occasionally organise other events that aim to inform the society about Buddhism and its tradition. In 2008, the Karma Kagyu community in Lithuania organised a Buddhist art exhibition. It took place in Vilnius, Kaunas and Šiauliai where everyone interested in Buddhism could see Buddhist sculptures, thankas, and sacral Buddhist paintings. It is interesting to note that some of them were about five meters long. In 2010, another project "Buddha in Cinema" took place in seven cities in Lithuania. Within this project, documentary films made by the Karma Kagyu School and Buddhist art were displayed, and the travelling teachers' lectures were delivered. The Kwan Um Zen Buddhist community also organises different public events, e.g., exhibitions of calligraphic art.

With the exception of Buddhist translation activity that was mentioned in relation to the Dandaron community, other Buddhist communities are also involved in translation and publishing of their teachers' books in Lithuanian. Meditation texts are also translated.

Since the 1990s, the Kwan Um Zen community has translated and published several Zen Buddhism books in Lithuanian. These are as follows: in 1991-1992 one of the members of the Kaunas Zen Kwan Um group translated and published two books on Zen in Lithuanian: *Zen Practice According to Sekid* and *Zen-Do. Zen kelias. 1 dalis* (Zen-Do. The Path of Zen, Part I.); in 1992, a Zen poetry book by Seung Sahn Dae Soen Sa Nim *Visatos ašis* (The Bone of Space); in June, 2000, *Pelenų barstymas ant Budos* (Dropping Ashes on Buddha) by Seung Sahn Dae Soen Sa Nim; in October, 2006, *Zen kompasas* (Zen Compass) by Seung Sahn Dae Soen Sa Nim. In comparison with the Kwan Um Zen community, others are less active in the field of translation. Nevertheless, there are some books that are worth mentioning. In 2004, the Karma Kagyu community published the translation of the main book of Lama Ole Nydahl *Viskas - kaip iš tiesų yra* (The Way Things Are) in Lithuanian, and in 2009, "Dorželingas" published the book *Kristalas ir šviesos kelias* (The Crystal and the Way of Light) by John Shane.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the first Buddhist ideas in Lithuania were already apparent in Soviet times with the first students of Buryat Buddhist teacher, Bydia Dandaron. In spite of this, Buddhism was not available to a wider section of society, and there was limited interest due to the official politics of atheism in the Soviet Union. Only a small group of people who acted as an illegal religious group practiced it.

Changes in the activity of Buddhists in Lithuania started at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s when a new interest in different kinds of spiritual ideas arose among the younger generation. The re-establishment of Lithuanian independence 1991 extended the opportunity not only to freely practice religious activity, but also to establish officially registered religious organisations according to the country's legal system. All this led to the establishment of the first legally practising Buddhist groups in the early 1990s, some of which are still active today.

Since the early 1990s, Lithuania has been visited by a variety of Buddhist teachers, monks and instructors. During this time, with the help of some of them, new Buddhist groups have been formed. As a result, several Buddhist groups are active in Lithuania, and they represent a number of different Buddhist teachings and traditions, e.g., Zen Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists. Although the Buddhist communities are informed about each other's work, they do not cooperate extensively with each other, of course, with the exception of very important events,

such as the organisation of visits by the Dalai Lama to Lithuania. To improve the situation, in 2012, there was an attempt to found the Association of Lithuanian Buddhist Communities, but the desired result is yet to be achieved.

Though members of Buddhist communities state that they do not preach Buddhist ideas and are not involved in missionary work, all communities take interest in the initiation of new members in order to facilitate the future existence of Buddhism in Lithuania. One way to promote Buddhism among the wider society, especially among the younger generation, is their involvement in various types of social activities to inform them about the Buddhist religion, its culture and tradition. A good example are the public lectures delivered by charismatic Buddhist monks (e.g., Bo Haeng Sunim) and leaders (e.g., Ole Nydahl) in various towns in Lithuania.

Despite the fact that Buddhism in Lithuania is not an alien and forbidden religion, it is still not widely spread. It is possible that the Dalai Lama's visit in September, 2013 to Lithuania might be a turning point in the activity of Buddhist communities though it is doubtful that Buddhism would occupy a stable place in the field of religion where Roman Catholics constitute the majority of believers.

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#### **APPENDIX – LIST OF INTERVIEWS**

- LT\_1. Personal interview. 01 October 2012.
- LT\_2. Personal interview. 04 October 2012.
- LT\_4. Personal interview. 18 October 2012.
- LT\_5. Personal interview. 22 October 2012.
- LT\_7. Personal interview. 25 October 2012.
- LT\_12. Personal interview. 19 November 2012.
- LT\_15. Personal interview. 24 November 2012.
- LT\_17. Personal interview. 28 November 2012.
- LT\_19. Personal interview. 12 January 2013.
- LT\_21. Personal interview. 16 January 2013.
- LT\_22. Personal interview. 19 January 2013.
- LT\_23. Personal interview. 19 January 2013.
- LT\_27. Personal interview. 02 March 2013.
- LT\_28. Personal interview. 07 March 2013.
- LT\_29. Personal interview. 15 March 2013.
- LT\_31. Personal interview. 18 March 2013.
- LT\_32. Personal interview. 25 March 2013.
- LT\_33. Personal interview. 25 April 2013.