



**HAL**  
open science

# Can we say prayers in our own language? The Transmission of Tibetan Bon Religious Practices to the West

Mara Lisa Arizaga

► **To cite this version:**

Mara Lisa Arizaga. Can we say prayers in our own language? The Transmission of Tibetan Bon Religious Practices to the West. History. Université Paris sciences et lettres; Université de Berne, 2019. English. NNT: 2019PSLEP039 . tel-04762923

**HAL Id: tel-04762923**

**<https://theses.hal.science/tel-04762923v1>**

Submitted on 1 Nov 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**THÈSE DE DOCTORAT  
DE L'UNIVERSITÉ PSL**

Préparée à l'École Pratique des Hautes Études  
Dans le cadre d'une cotutelle avec l'Université de Berne

**Pouvons-nous faire des prières dans notre propre  
langue? La transmission des pratiques religieuses  
tibétaines Bon en Occident.**

Can we say prayers in our own language? The  
Transmission of Tibetan Bon Religious Practices to the  
West.

Soutenue par  
**Mara Lisa ARIZAGA**  
Le 04 10 2019

École doctorale n° 472  
**École doctorale de l'École  
Pratique des Hautes Études**

Spécialité  
**Histoire des religions et  
anthropologie religieuse**

Composition du jury :

Andrea, ROTA Directeur de recherche, Université de Berne	<i>Président</i>
Fabienne, JAGOU Maître de conférences, EFEO	<i>Examineur</i>
Karénina, KOLLMAR-PAULENZ Directeur d'études, Université de Berne	<i>Co-directeur de thèse</i>
Charles, RAMBLE Directeur d'études, EPHE	<i>Directeur de thèse</i>

# CAN WE SAY PRAYERS IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE? THE TRANSMISSION OF TIBETAN BON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES TO THE WEST

**Mara Arizaga**

Universität Bern, Faculty of Humanities, Institute for the Study of Religion,  
Central Asian Studies

École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section des sciences historiques et  
philologiques, mention Histoire, textes et documents de l'Ecole doctorale

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor philosophiae (Dr. phil.)  
and

National degree of docteur de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études in Histoire,  
textes, documents

Supervisors

Prof. Dr. Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina, Institute for the Study of Religion,  
Universität Bern;

Prof. Dr. Ramble, Charles, Directeur d'études, Section des sciences historiques et  
philologiques, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris.

January 2020

*Any life, however long and complicated it may be, actually consists of a single moment — the moment when a man knows forever more who he is.<sup>1</sup>*

Jorge Luis Borges

---

<sup>1</sup> Jorge L. Borges, *Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 113.

## DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing, which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not been previously submitted, in part or whole, to any university of institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

Signed: Mara Lisa Arizaga

Date: 11 June 2019

Geneva

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would not have been possible to complete this dissertation without the help and support of many individuals. It is simply not possible to name them all, so I will only choose some. My greatest debt of gratitude is to my teachers, who supported me throughout writing this thesis and in my life in general. I am forever thankful to Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung and Tenzin Phuntsok for being such an inspiration to me and many others. I am also thankful to Khenpo Gelek Jinpa for his always joyful and wise advice.

I am indebted to my supervisors, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz and Charles Ramble, under whose expert guidance I have been able to complete my thesis. Throughout the writing of this thesis they were always attentive, communicative and extremely helpful. Nina's guidance in allowing me to reflect repeatedly on my own biases was crucial for helping me to see the forest for the trees. Charles, whose knowledge of Bon in the West and of Shenten's history is unparalleled, has helped me navigate how to discuss sensitive issues and patiently answered the many questions I had. Their complementary talents and expertise resulted in constructive criticism and extremely valuable suggestions. I could not have imagined having better supervisors and mentors for this research.

I would also like to mention some individuals who made this work possible, but this list is by no means exhaustive. My sincere thanks to Samten Karmay for sharing with me the story of his journey from Tibet to the West. To Tenzin Wangyal, for his sharp, honest and generous observations in sharing his own perspectives and experiences with me over a cup of coffee in Paris. To John Reynolds, who is an open encyclopedia for the theme of my research and to so many others, for their support and help during these years.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my friends. I learned a lot from the many discussions I had on Bon with Maya Alvisa Barroso, Baldrun Zeren, Debora Altit Millan and Sabina Lauber over the years. The stimulating conversations I had with Marcin Janowski have been illuminating. I thank him for his continued support and encouragement. Finally, I would particularly like to thank Paul Faller for the many quests we undertook together.

My sincere gratitude goes to the participants, who gave their time, shared their stories and the ups and downs of their spiritual journeys. I have learned a lot from you!

The completion of my dissertation would not have been possible without the support and nurturing of my family, my parents Elena and Luis and my sister Noelia. They deserve special thanks, as without their support, I doubt that I would be in this place today.

I owe my deepest gratitude to Theo, my son, who has given me the strength to get things done. This thesis is dedicated to him.

## NOTE ON TIBETAN LANGUAGE TERMS

In this dissertation, I avoid strict transliteration of Tibetan terms and names in favor of phonetic transcription, based mainly on how they appear in Bon pages in the Internet, such as Shenten Dargye Ling's website. By doing so, I hope to make reading this work an easier task for those not familiar with the Tibetan language. For the first time a Tibetan term appears in the text, I provide a Wylie transliteration in a footnote, except for titles (Yongdzin, Rinpoche, Khenpo), names of people or places, and terms that are already well known to an English-speaking readership with a particular spelling ("karma," "lama," "Lhasa," etc.). Throughout the text, Tibetan terms are italicised except in the case of better-known words such as "lama".



# CONTENTS

<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....	19
1.2 SCOPE OF THE STUDY.....	22
1.3 NOTE ON MY OWN INVOLVEMENT IN BON .....	26
<b>2 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1 WHY USE GROUNDED THEORY? .....	32
2.2 ETHICS .....	34
2.3 CODING.....	37
<b>3 THE CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION .....	44
3.1.1 <i>The intersection between religion and globalization</i> .....	45
3.1.2 <i>Between universalizing and particularizing tendencies</i> .....	50
3.2 THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIONS? .....	53
3.3 LIVED RELIGION .....	55
3.4 TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN THE WEST .....	60
3.5 UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM IN THE WEST .....	62
3.5.1 <i>Buddhist modernism</i> .....	69
3.5.1.1 Controversies: When the iron bird crashes .....	72
3.6 OVERVIEW OF THE BON RELIGION .....	78
<b>4 THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL BON.....</b>	<b>98</b>
4.1 BON CENTERS IN THE WEST.....	102
4.2 SHENTEN DARGYE LING.....	103

4.2.1	<i>The place for spreading the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab</i> .....	105
4.2.2	<i>The precedents</i> .....	107
4.2.3	<i>Looking for a place</i> .....	110
4.2.4	<i>This is the place</i> .....	116
4.2.5	<i>Structure and objectives of Shenten Center</i> .....	117
4.2.6	<i>The Congregation and the Association</i> .....	121
4.3	RETREATS.....	125
4.3.1	<i>Gomdra (Meditation School)</i> .....	125
4.3.2	<i>Dark Retreat</i> .....	130
4.4	A WESTERN BON STUPA .....	135
4.5	NEWSLETTERS AND OTHER MEANS OF DISSEMINATING NEWS.....	142
4.6	OTHER CENTERS ASSOCIATED WITH SHENTEN DARGYE LING .....	144
4.7	LIGMINCHA INTERNATIONAL.....	148
4.7.1	<i>Modernist Bon</i> .....	153
4.8	THE THREE DOORS ACADEMY .....	154
4.8.1	<i>A modern Bodhisattva training</i> .....	155
4.8.2	<i>A “Western way to enlightenment”</i> .....	156
4.8.3	<i>A “rare chance for a radical transformation”</i> .....	158
4.8.4	<i>Do you have to have a Tibetan teacher...to be introduced to the Nature of Mind?</i> .....	163
4.9	THE TRANSMISSION OF BON IN THE WEST: KEY FIGURES .....	167
4.10	BON STUDIES IN THE WEST.....	181
4.11	SCHOLARSHIP AND SPIRITUAL ENTANGLEMENTS: BON AS THE “OTHER” .....	187
5	<b>BEING A BONPO IN THE WEST: WHERE DID WE COME FROM?</b> .....	193

5.1 NARRATING THE PAST .....198

    5.1.1 *We are not Tibetans* ..... 200

    5.1.2 *No religious background, but...* ..... 201

    5.1.3 *When I entered a church, I was terrified.....*202

    5.1.4 *It sounded a little bit stupid* .....205

    5.1.5 *Officially renounced the church* ..... 208

    5.1.6 *My strange dad having a hobby* ..... 209

5.2 BECOMING A BONPO ..... 211

    5.2.1 *Hearing about Bon for the first time.....* 222

    5.2.2 *It was like the sword of Yeshe Walmo to the heart.....*224

    5.2.3 *Something magical happened to me.....* 227

    5.2.4 *I reached home* .....231

    5.2.5 *Since then this is my place* .....234

    5.2.6 *So that’s how I found Bon and my lama.....*234

    5.2.7 *A strong connection* ..... 237

    5.2.8 *Then I got grabbed* .....239

    5.2.9 *This is the Master, this is the path, this is the place* .....242

5.3 WHAT IS BON FOR PARTICIPANTS?.....245

    5.3.1 *I feel like it is a kind of science* ..... 246

    5.3.2 *I dislike the decorations, but what lies inside is what I’m interested in..*247

    5.3.3 *Bon is one spiritual tradition coming from Zhang Zhung*..... 248

    5.3.4 *Bon and Dzogchen* ..... 249

    5.3.5 *Bon is not a religion.....*256

    5.3.6 *Dzogchen is totally mislabeled if you call it a religion.....* 260

5.3.7 <i>Dzogchen is like nothing, nothing at all</i> .....	262
<b>6 BEING A BONPO IN THE WEST: WHERE ARE WE GOING?</b> .....	<b>267</b>
6.1 BON IN PRACTICE.....	272
6.1.1 <i>Chod practice</i> .....	274
6.1.2 <i>Tsalung</i> .....	281
6.1.3 <i>I have a very informal way of doing my formal practice</i> .....	282
6.1.4 <i>Impact on Life</i> .....	283
6.1.5 <i>If you really want to practice, forget about having children</i> .....	292
6.1.6 <i>Instead of practicing Dzogchen, they do skydiving</i> .....	298
6.1.7 <i>I am not trying to make anybody become bonpo</i> .....	299
6.2 MODERN VS. TRADITIONAL APPROACHES.....	301
6.2.1 <i>Master–student relationship</i> .....	308
6.2.2 <i>The purest</i> .....	310
6.2.3 <i>Nobody will give you food in the cave</i> .....	316
6.2.4 <i>The need for practitioners to have money</i> .....	319
6.2.5 <i>Ngondro: Preparing the mind to become a suitable vessel</i> .....	323
6.2.6 <i>A lot of Tibetans despise Westerners</i> .....	326
6.2.7 <i>Most monks—they hate rituals</i> .....	328
6.2.8 <i>It’s like Bon applied to a real Western way of life</i> .....	330
6.2.9 <i>Differences</i> .....	331
6.2.10 <i>Group sitting is something Tibetans never do</i> .....	333
6.3 THE FUTURE.....	337
6.3.1 <i>Preserving traditional teaching vs. adapting to modern cultures</i> .....	341
6.3.2 <i>I do not want it to become “a factory of enlightenment”</i> .....	346

6.3.3 <i>We can talk about Western Bon only when we... have Buddhas from [the] West</i> .....	349
6.3.4 <i>Influence of technology</i> .....	352
<b>7 CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>356</b>
7.1 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY: .....	357
<b>APPENDIX A</b> .....	<b>401</b>
<b>APPENDIX B</b> .....	<b>402</b>
<b>APPENDIX C</b> .....	<b>406</b>
<b>APPENDIX D</b> .....	<b>411</b>
<b>APPENDIX E</b> .....	<b>412</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1 Stages in the development of grounded theory in this research project</i>	39
<i>Figure 2 Nvivo “nodes” compared by number of coding references</i>	41
<i>Figure 3 Nvivo coding from participants' transcripts</i>	42
<i>Figure 4 Image of Shenten Dargye Ling</i>	104
<i>Figure 5 H.H. Menri Tridzin visits Shenten</i>	124
<i>Figure 6 Westerners doing meditation practices at Shenten Dargye Ling</i>	129
<i>Figure 7 Shenten Dargye Ling Stupa, 2017</i>	139
<i>Figure 8 Bon in the West – Key historical events</i>	144
<i>Figure 9 Tenzin Wangyal</i>	149
<i>Figure 10 Yongdzin Rinpoche at a ritual ceremony in Kathmandu, Nepal</i>	168
<i>Figure 11 The cave at Juru Tso Lake in northern Tibet</i>	169
<i>Figure 12 Thangka painted by a Western student of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak</i>	171
<i>Figure 13 Before departing to the West for the first time</i>	175
<i>Figure 14 In Rome</i>	176
<i>Figure 15 Image of Tapihritsa in meditation posture</i>	324

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

- Dakini** in Sanskrit, or *khandro* (Wylie: *mkha' 'gro*) in Tibetan, is referred to in Bon as a type of enlightened or spiritually advanced female being that are often represented as consorts of enlightened male beings.
- Dharma** in Sanskrit, or *Chos* (Wylie: *chos*) in Tibetan, refers to Bon and Buddhist religious teachings about the underlying nature of the universe.
- Dzogchen** (Wylie: *rdzogs chen*) is a tradition of teachings that are considered to be the highest and the fastest of the nine vehicles to enlightenment in Bon. The four main cycles of Bon Dzogchen are: *Atri*, *Dzogchen*, *Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud*, and *Yetri Thasel*.
- Geshe** (Wylie: *dge bshes*) is a Bon (and Buddhist) academic title given in monasteries to monks and nuns after several years of study.
- Gomdra** (Wylie: *sgom grwa*) designates meditation centers or schools held at Bon and Buddhist monasteries.
- Kangyur** (Wylie: *bka'-gyur*) is the section of the Bon canon that refers to the words of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, considered to be the founder of the Bon religion. It contains texts related to monastic discipline, ethics, and the like, as well as sutras.
- Katen** (Wylie: *bKa'brten*) the part of the Bon canon that is presented as containing commentaries that rely on the Buddha's words from various succeeding masters throughout history.
- Kusum Rangshar** (Wylie: *sku gsum rang shar*) is a Dzogchen text written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen (Wylie: *shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan*) (1859-1933), who is considered by his followers to have been an extraordinary Bon Dzogchen master, known for his nonsectarian approach and for having realized the rainbow body.
- Lopon** (Wylie: *Slob-dpon*) is a title that literally means "the teacher" and usually designates the head instructor of a group of students at a monastery.
- Lung** (Wylie: *lung*) To fully receive a teaching, a person is required to receive the Bon text through oral transmission or oral authorization called *lung*, from a qualified teacher or lama.
- Olmolungring** (Wylie: *'ol-mo lung-rings*) is considered by bonpos as a sacred place where Buddha Tonpa Shenrab incarnated as a prince. It is believed that this land is part of a region called Tazig (Wylie: *stag-gzig*), which some scholars identify with Central Asia.
- Sangha** in Sanskrit or Gendun (Wylie: *dge-'dun*) in Tibetan, refers, in the context of this research, to a Buddhist or bonpo "community." For instance, participants refer to the "Shenten sangha," meaning the entire group of lay

and monastic Bon followers who attend or are part of the Shenten community.

**Samsara:** The Sanskrit word *samsara*, like its equivalent *khorma* (Wylie: *'khor ba*) in Tibetan, refers to the beginning-less cycle of birth, mundane existence, and dying, to be born again. In one of the six realms of existence (heaven, demigod, human, animal, ghosts, hell), *samsara* ends when a person attains enlightenment.

**Shedra** (Wylie: *bshad grwa*) designates the educational program followed both in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon monasteries and nunneries.

**Sherab Chamma** (Wylie: *Shes rab byams ma*) is a Bon deity considered to be a fully enlightened being.

**Stupa** in Sanskrit (Wylie: *mchod rten*) in Tibetan refers to a type of religious structure containing sacred relics, indicating a Buddhist or Bon shrine, typically the tomb of a master or a monument to the Buddha.

**Sutra** is a Sanskrit word (in Tibetan Wylie: *mdo*) that, in a Bon context, refers to, teachings that came directly from Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. The teachings of *sutra* are based on the path of renunciation and form the base of monastic life.

**Tantra** (Wylie: *rGyud*) or the Tantric tradition refers to the esoteric traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bon that originated in India around the middle of the first millennium CE. Its main features of Tantrism are the prominent place of rituals, especially the worshiping of deities; the significance of mantras; the essence of practices on visualization and identification with a deity; the requirement of initiations, esotericism and secrecy; and the pivotal role of the master or teacher.

**Terton** (Wylie: *gter ston*) refers to a person who is a “discoverer” of texts that were hidden in the hope of being “rediscovered” in the future.

**Thogal** (Wylie: *thod rgal*) refers to specific practices that the practitioners do to enter and abide in the Natural State, which result in the development of so-called “thogal visions.”

**Tonpa Shenrab** (Wylie: *ston pa gshen rab*) literally means Teacher Shenrab. He is considered by bonpos to be the Buddha who founded the Bon religion.

**Trekcho** (Wylie: *khregs chod*) refers to the practice of the Natural State of the Mind.

**Trulku** (Wylie: *sprul sku*) is a person who is believed to be the reincarnation of a highly advanced master.

**Tsalung** (Wylie: *rtsa rlung*) are yogic exercises dealing with the “subtle channels and winds” that in Bon are designated as “ancillary practices,” aiming to support practitioners to achieve their main meditational Dzogchen practice.



**Tummo** (Wylie: *gtum mo*) refers to a specific meditation cycle aimed at achieving a certain “yogic heat,” which in Bon is designated as “ancillary practices” and is intended to support practitioners as they try to achieve their main meditational Dzogchen practice.

**Wang** (Wylie: *dbang*) is a tantric ritual ceremony, often translated as “initiation” or “empowerment” in which disciples are introduced to specific tantric deity practices by a qualified teacher or lama.

**Yeshe Walmo** (Wylie: *Ye shes dbal mo*) is a Bon deity, believed by bonpos to be the protector of Bon teachings.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the so-called “West” during the twentieth century coincided with unprecedented globalization processes, including what scholars have identified as a radical shrinking of linguistic, cultural, economic, and geographical frontiers.<sup>2</sup> At the same time and partly in response to the fluidity of boundaries triggered by globalization, other boundaries, including religious divisions, have sharpened.<sup>3</sup>

Globalization has led to new religious landscapes, including novel forms of interactions between the secular and the religious. Although there is much literature focusing on the diffusion of Buddhism into Western cultures, research examining this process for the Tibetan tradition known as Yungdrung Bon<sup>4</sup> (hereinafter referred to as Bon) remains limited. The wealth of research that focuses on Bon as a religion does not specifically look at its expansion to countries considered to be part of the West. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to trace the expansion of Bon into the “West,” looking at how and by whom it is being received and adopted, bearing in mind the historical context and the dynamics of globalization processes in which this expansion takes place. In this

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, vol. 16 (London: Sage, 1992), 179–80; Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 45–46; Jan Aart Scholte, *What Is “Global” about Globalization?* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 45–56.

<sup>3</sup> Margit Warburg, “Globalization, Migration and the Two Types of Religious Boundary: A European Perspective,” in *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 97–98.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the only study that focuses on Bon in the West is the following master thesis: Ieva Rute, “Yungdrung Bön Spread in the West” (Master Thesis, Vilnius University, Centre of Oriental Studies, 2010); See also: Ieva Rute, “Yungdrung Bön in the West: Reception and Transformations,” 2007, [http://www.budcon.com/bn/index.php/Yungdrung\\_B%C3%B6n\\_in\\_the\\_West:\\_reception\\_and\\_transformations\\_by\\_Ieva\\_Rute](http://www.budcon.com/bn/index.php/Yungdrung_B%C3%B6n_in_the_West:_reception_and_transformations_by_Ieva_Rute) I am grateful to Ieva Rute for sending to me her Master dissertation.

study, I follow Baumann's interpretation of the expression "Buddhism in the West." By this, he does not mean the West as "the sum of geographic regions outside of Asia collectively" but, rather, "non-Asian industrialized nation states where Buddhist teachings, practices, people, and ideas have become established."<sup>5</sup> The same notion applies to mentions of "Westerners." In this study, a "Westerner" refers to a person who lives in the so-called West and who is not a Tibetan.

The initial open-ended research questions I asked, in line with the research method of grounded theory, were these: What are the dynamics that are taking place in the arrival of Bon in the West? Who is transmitting Bon in the West and how? Who in the West is receiving it and how?

To address these questions, this thesis will look at some consequences of the interactions between expanding religions—in particular, the Tibetan Yungdrung Bon tradition—and people in a globalized world. I will consider how the availability of the Bon religion in the West affects followers and, conversely, how Western people affect the Bon tradition. This dissertation will attempt to contextualize these interactions through a concrete example of lived religious experience, considering Bon in the context of globalization and the transnational movement of peoples and looking at the history of the arrival of Bon in West, its organization and expansion, and its reception by Western students. I will then assess the developments taking place within Bon as it is practiced in the West, including the negotiation and production of identities—individual and collective—and the formation of a "glocal Bon" religion in a global society, using key entry points that emerged from the participants' narratives and the literature

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 5.

reviewed. These entry points represent meaningful areas of a dynamic field, including how Bon is evolving along with deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes; what adaptations and selections are taking place; how “Western bonpos” narrate what it means for them to be bonpos and how they situate themselves vis-à-vis what they received from the lamas and Tibetan teachers; how they negotiate their own identities as “Western bonpos” and what the role is of new technologies in the transmission of Bon teachings in West.

## 1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

By considering both the historical development of Bon in the West and contemporary experiences of “Western followers” of Bon, we can see that the expansion and reception of Bon in the West is a relatively recent development. The globalization of Bon has been precipitated by the convergence of three characteristics: the ability of some Bon religious leaders to adapt to a particular culture and setting; the interest of Westerners in exploring so-called “Eastern” teachings; and the high speed and global reach of information in the digital age. The first of these three characteristics is closely related to the path that was first paved by the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. The way in which Western scholars and earlier propagators of Buddhism in the West narrated “what Buddhism is” heavily influenced the particular context where Tibetan Buddhism and Bon was established and started growing, as we will see in Chapter 3.4. It should be noted that our understanding of Bon in the West is still developing, alongside the translation of its language, philosophy, and practical applications in a new cultural and social environment.

When analyzing Bon in the context of globalization, it becomes apparent that religion plays a key role and constitutes a driving force in globalizing processes. These processes are marked by an increased opening of political borders, exchanges of ideas, and flows of transcultural and transnational faiths, where

both universalizing and particularizing tendencies coexist and where “deterritorialized”<sup>6</sup> cultural resources are embraced, reinterpreted, and utilized accordingly by different social groups. These appropriation processes often include the reterritorialization of cultural resources and their reinsertion into new geographical spaces and sometimes a resignificance of their symbolic meaning.

We can also see that Bon is still evolving today—and will inevitably continue to evolve, as it has always been—both through the “Westernization of teachings” and through Westerners themselves becoming teachers, particularly in the case of Ligmincha International, a network of Bon centers across North and South America and Europe. Moreover, lamas frequently travel from so-called “East” to “West,” and more and more Westerners from a nonreligious background are starting to explore a “spiritual lifestyle” and become involved in Bon.

Indeed, globalization has erased the political and geographic boundaries of Bon, leading this tradition to become deterritorialized from its borders, no longer embedded within one social system. In this context, a “social system” refers to what Parsons defines as “a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors... whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The term “deterritorialization” was first coined by two French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, see: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L’anti-oedipe*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1972) The term nowadays is widely used in the context of studies on cultural globalization, often in relation to the concept of “disembeddment,” which I will discuss below.

<sup>7</sup> Talcott Parsons, “The Social System,” *The Free Press* 101 (1951): 5.

There exists a clear intersection between Bon and globalization, given that Bon has been integrated into different cultures and societies, and the way in which it is transmitted has been adapted and translated to new audiences. Its new followers have also reinterpreted Bon, marking an expansion that is both fluid and dynamic at its core. In this process, which occurred in parallel to the development of the so-called “global Tibetan Buddhism,” global Bon has a dual characteristic whereby it “takes both the modern form of a global flow and transnational network, and the traditional form of territorialized cultic practices, within the boundaries of communities.”<sup>8</sup> A central aspect in this dichotomy is the “territory,” both in the physical/cultural dimensions and in the “imaginary topography of Tibet as “mystical”—a major factor for the reception of Buddhism in the West.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, there is no doubt that both globalization and religions are affected by modern technology, above all the Internet, which provides rapid and widespread communication. Bon practitioners around the world can access the teaching schedules of the lamas online and make plans to visit in person, and can enter online forums to discuss Bon or a center’s publications. Moreover, sacred ceremonies, practices, and teachings that a few years ago were considered secret or appropriate for transmitting only to students who had passed certain preparatory practices are nowadays available on YouTube or broadcast live, demonstrating that the Internet is “clearly changing the face of religions in the world today.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Obadia, “Localised Deterritorialisation? The Case of the Glocalisation of Tibetan Buddhism in France and Worldwide,” *International Social Science Journal* 63, no. 209 (2012): 189.

<sup>9</sup> Obadia, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Veidlinger, “Introduction,” in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

My thesis will further elucidate how followers are interpreting and integrating this religion into their own lives. To do this, I will approach the participants' accounts from a holistic framework in order to uncover the meanings behind often used terms, such as "practice," "practitioner," and "religion," as well as central ones, such as "Bon" itself. I will explore what Western bonpos (Bon followers) are doing and what they believe in as they follow their lived religion and day-to-day activities.

The three primary goals of this thesis are as follows:

1. to explore the modern history of the Yungdrung Bon religion, particularly after 1959 as it was received in the West.
2. to provide a new perspective on the expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the West and;
3. to contribute to the understanding of religious expansion and reception and the dynamics underlying it.

Throughout this dissertation, I will follow Martin<sup>11</sup> in using the word "bonpo" for followers of Bon, and "Bon" as a noun for the religion or as an adjective for describing it when required in English.

## 1.2 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This thesis focuses mainly on the experiences of Westerners attending the European Yungdrung Bon center in Blou, France, called Shenten Dargye Ling (hereinafter referred to as "Shenten"). I chose Shenten for a number of reasons:

---

<sup>11</sup> Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001) Footnote 7.

1. It is the major Yungdrung Bon center in Europe affiliated with the main Bon monastery in exile from Tibet: Triten Norbutse in Kathmandu, Nepal.
2. It receives students from all over the world (in contrast, for instance, to Ligmincha in the United States, which mostly receives Americans, or Ligmincha Poland, which mostly receives Poles).
3. It has both monastic and lay institutional structures, in the form of the Shenten Congregation and the Shenten Association, respectively.
4. Some of the students come from Ligmincha, while others come from schools taught by different Tibetan teachers, such as Sogyal Rinpoche, the founder of the Rigpa community<sup>12</sup> and Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, the founder of the Dzogchen Community.<sup>13</sup>
5. Its founder, Yongdzin<sup>14</sup> Rinpoche, is the main teacher of all other Bon lamas teaching in the West, including Tenzin Wangyal, founder of Ligmincha International
6. I have personally been involved in the organization of the center, having been part of the Shenten Association's board from 2011 to 2015.

I interviewed a total of forty-three people, thirty-six of whom are Bon practitioners and seven of whom are Bon teachers and scholars. To complement the information I gathered from Shenten and to compare and have a broader view of Bon in the West, I also conducted some interviews in Argentina (where Bon has recently arrived), in India to Western students visiting the Bon Menri Monastery located in Dolanji, and elsewhere.

This dissertation is organized as follows. The first three chapters lay the foundation with introductory, methodological, and theoretical discussions.

---

<sup>12</sup> For further information, see: <https://www.rigpa.org/>. See also references to Dapsance's ethnography on Ripga (Chapter 3.5.1.1).

<sup>13</sup> For further information, see: <https://www.dzogchen.it/>.

<sup>14</sup> Yongdzin is an honorific title given to highly accomplished Buddhist teachers.



Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) provides a brief background to the research, discusses the significance of the study and its scope, and recounts my own positioning as a researcher. Chapter 2 (“Methodology”) describes the theory I use (grounded theory), why I chose it, the ethics involved in research involving human subjects, and the language-coding process I followed. Grounded theory allows respondents to describe their lived experiences in their own terms. Chapter 3 (“The Context”) examines the relationship between religion and globalization, how these two are intertwined, and how they affect each other. I aim to show that the relationship between religion and globalization is best understood by analysing them as an interconnected phenomenon and looking at the new possibilities, as well as the emerging and multidimensional challenges arising from this interaction. It also looks at the process of Tibetan Buddhism’s expansion into the West and the unique characteristics of this process, some of which are relevant to the parallel expansion of Bon. This chapter finally contextualizes Bon, providing an overview of some its major aspects and key concepts, as seen by scholars and Bon religious representatives.

The next three chapters discuss the specifics of Bon in the West and present my research findings. Chapter 4 (“The Emergence of a ‘Global Bon’”) provides a brief overview of the history of Bon and its spread to Europe and the Americas. I explore the personal journeys of the main figures who brought Bon into the West, as well as the key scholars who contributed to the academic understanding of Bon in Western countries. This chapter looks closely at the history, organization, and activities of Shenten Dargye Ling, the Yungdrung Bon center in France. It also looks at how other Western centers associated with Shenten Dargye Ling are influencing Bon in the West. In particular, it analyzes a network of centers called Ligmincha International and its significance for the history of Bon in the West.

Chapter 5 (“Being a Bonpo in the West: Where Did We Come from?”) and 6 (“Being a Bonpo in the West: Where Are We Going?”) are two lengthy sections that contain the bulk of my interview data. In these chapters, I present the themes that emerged from the interviews with Bon practitioners, teachers, and scholars. Questions asked were open-ended at the beginning and included queries about the interviewees’ religious background, how they encountered Bon, what Bon means to them, whether they would describe themselves as “bonpos,” which practices they use, and whether or not they actively sought out specific practices. I further asked how they see Bon evolving in the future. These last two chapters are organized according to the six main themes that emerged from these interviews: narrations of the past through which practitioners in Western Bon centers describe their religious histories, most of whom come from a Catholic background; the process of becoming a bonpo; the lived experiences of a Western Bon practitioner, teacher, or scholar; how Westerners receive the teachings of Bon; the two different approaches to Bon—the modern approach and the traditional; and how bonpos envision the future of the Bon tradition in the West.

The final section of this dissertation, Chapter 7 (“Conclusions and Implications”), summarizes the findings and conclusions of this research project, and outlines major implications of this research for the study of religion and globalization, Tibetan and Bon studies, and other fields such as religion and psychology, including leads for future research. This section concludes that we can speak of a global (or glocal) Bon that is expanding and adapting in a global environment in a highly dynamic manner, revealing complementary tendencies toward changes in the tradition as well as forces pushing for its preservation. The fact that Bon became global has several implications at both the transnational level and the more individual level. These include how Tibetan bonpos are negotiating their place in the broader Tibetan community in exile and how Bon is presented in the West through two main trends, a traditionalist approach and modernist one. The latter trend attempts to fuse Bon practices with elements borrowed from schools of Western psychology, which in turn is leading to a secularization of Bon. It is clear that in order to have a deeper view of what Bon is (or any religion, for that matter), we should study it holistically, analyzing both the religions’ own

historical and doctrinal perspectives and also bringing in the voices of the followers and their individual and collective narratives.

Since Bon has caused drastic changes in some of its Westerner followers' families, circles of friends, and professional careers, we see that at the very same time, these Westerners are selecting and adapting Bon practices to fit their lives, thereby influencing Bon. The extend of such influences opens up wider implications for the field of the Bon studies as well as for scientific and psychological research on the impact of meditation practices on mental health and well-being.

### 1.3 NOTE ON MY OWN INVOLVEMENT IN BON

*"It is well known that 'Buddhist' and 'scholar of Buddhism' are not always exclusive categories."*<sup>15</sup>

My decision to pursue research into the development of Bon in the West arose out of my own experience as a practitioner over several years. My first encounter with Bon occurred while I was living in China in 2004. I was interested in Buddhism and met a few lamas belonging to a Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa School.<sup>16</sup> I traveled to Amdo a few times, visiting several Tibetan monasteries representing different Buddhist schools. One day, a friend gave me a copy of the book *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya*.<sup>17</sup> I was deeply impressed and wrote a postal letter to the address indicated on the back of the book, which was that of Triten

---

<sup>15</sup> Martin Baumann and Cristina Rocha, "Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008): 81.

<sup>16</sup> Wylie: *dge lugs pa*, in reference to the newest of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>17</sup> Tenzin Namdak, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*, trans. Richard Dixey (Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2002).

Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal. A year later, the Abbot of the monastery, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung<sup>18</sup> wrote back to me, advising me to visit a monastery in Amdo, and gave me the name of a teacher there. I heeded his advice. My encounter with this teacher resulted in a formidable relationship that had a great impact in my life. I visited him several times. After I moved back to Europe, I went to Shenten Center and met Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche<sup>19</sup> and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, who ran the center. I have participated in several meditation retreats, undergone many practices, and have a personal involvement in the tradition. I would thus be considered, in Christopher Queen's distinction among religious researchers, an adherent.<sup>20</sup>

The first time I heard Bon teachings, I felt a resonance with them. They made sense to me. I was listening and thinking, "Yes, that's how it is," similar to some of the experiences recounted by participants throughout this research. When I decided to work on the topic of Bon for my doctorate, I understood that this journey would entail a fundamental re-evaluation of myself in relation to the tradition. I believe that being an insider is one of many valid ways of conducting research and scholarship, since it opens up questions of depth and breadth. There are advantages and disadvantages in being either a so-called "insider"

---

<sup>18</sup> For a short biographical introduction of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, see: "Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche," accessed January 27, 2019, [http://www.shenten.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=119&lang=en](http://www.shenten.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=119&lang=en).

<sup>19</sup> Yongdzin (Lopon) Tenzin Namdak (1926–) is considered by Bon followers to be a highly accomplished Dzogchen master and one of the most learned contemporary Bon scholars outside of Tibet. He has published many landmark works on Bon history and Dzogchen teachings. Namdak is respected for his encyclopedic knowledge of bonpo culture and his lifetime experience of teaching monks in Tibet and India. He currently resides in his monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, and spends many months of the year teaching his Western followers, particularly in the Bon center Shenten Dargye Ling. For details about his life, see Chapter 4.9.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Queen, "Professing Buddhism: The Harvard Conference on Buddhism in America," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18 (1998): 217–20.

versus a so-called “outsider.”<sup>21</sup> While less objectivity can certainly be a potential drawback in insider research, it is also true that being an outsider does not mean that there is no influence of personal perspective or that an outsider is more objective. A key for me to remain as objective as possible was keeping detailed reflections on the subjective research process, maintaining a close awareness of my own personal biases and perspectives, since there can be no interpreting without some degree of “othering.” I do not consider that being an insider means being merely subjective. To a certain extent, my own affiliation offered me in-depth insights into issues and provided me with greater empathy toward and knowledge of the tradition and its followers. Therefore, from the start, I took the challenge of assuming both my role as a researcher and my own experience as a member of the Shenten community and to use it as a way of bringing depth to my own understanding of this particular religion in the process. I was open to allowing a constant process of self-reflection, making sure that, for example, interviews were shaped by the participants’ points of view and not clouded by my own personal experience as a member of the group. On the practical side, being an insider brought an advantage to conducting interviews, getting access to information and data, and the like. Furthermore, the participants’ attitudes toward me and my interest in Bon in the West were highly positive, so they welcomed the research project itself and expressed encouraging support.

---

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive analysis on the “insider/outsider” and “emic/etic” debates in the scientific study of religions, see: Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, “A Matter of Perspective?: Disentangling the Emic–Etic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion\,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 317–36; Till Mostowlansky, “‘The Very Act of Cutting’: Ethnomethodology, Interaction and the Emic–Etic Debate,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 400–420; Jeppe Sinding Jensen, “Closing the Gaps—Some Notes on the Making of Perspectives,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 465–77.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Data collection, analysis, and development of theory for this study have been guided by the method known as grounded theory. I used this approach to collect data gathered through a pilot study of in-depth interviews (ranging from 45 minutes to two hours) with four people, and then a much more extended period of observation and focused, in-depth interviews with another 32 individuals (for a total of 43 individuals, 36 who are “practitioners” and seven who are Bon teachers). After both stages of collecting data I did content analysis.

Grounded theory originated in the 1960s in the United States in the fields of health care and nursing. It was first developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss with the publication of their influential book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967.<sup>22</sup> The methodology was further developed in a second prominent book by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *The Basics of Qualitative Research*,<sup>23</sup> which went beyond the fields of health care and nursing. Grounded theory methodology advocates sought to create new theories consisting of interrelated concepts rather than to test existing theories. Its main concern is the generation of theory that is “grounded in the collected data.” Key issues and concepts should “emerge” from the data, rather than being the result of the researcher forcing the data into “preconceived categories.”<sup>24</sup> This is different from

---

<sup>22</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Theory* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1967).

<sup>23</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage, 2006), 516.

traditional research design, which “requires the investigator to structure each phase of the research process to verify or to refute... theories.”<sup>25</sup>

After Glaser and Strauss developed their initial approach to grounded theory, they and other researchers began developing variants of the method. All variants share the following basic strategies:

1. Data collection and analysis are done in parallel, and the data are analyzed early in the process using comparative methods throughout the inquiry.
2. Tentative inductive abstract categories that explain the processes are constructed and expanded by using sampling.
3. Sampling is also used to check these tentative categories and make them robust.
4. At the end of the process, the robust categories are integrated into a theoretical framework that shows relationships between categories and “explicates the conditions under which the categories develop, their properties and their consequences as well as those of the studied process(es) of which these categories are a part.”<sup>26</sup>

Grounded theory methodology is usually classified according to three different approaches: constructivist, objectivist, and postpositivist.<sup>27</sup> Kathy Charmaz is one

---

<sup>25</sup> Kathy Charmaz, “Between Positivism and Postmodernism: Implications for Methods,” in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, vol. 17 (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2008), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Kathy Charmaz and Linda Liska Belgrave, “Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis,” in *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium et al. (London: Sage, 2012), 347–65.

<sup>27</sup> Grounded theory has been considered from different angles, including as a positivist paradigm. See for example: Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2007). It has also been seen as a post-positivist paradigm—particularly in relation to so-called “classical” grounded theory,” see for example: Marilyn Annells, “Grounded Theory Method, Part I: Within the Five Moments of Qualitative Research,” *Nursing Inquiry* 4, no. 2 (1997): 120–29; Lillemor RM Hallberg, “The ‘Core Category’ of Grounded Theory: Making Constant Comparisons,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 1, no. 3 (2006): 141–48; and Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2014). It is

of the main advocates of constructivist grounded theory. Like other proponents of this approach, she argues that the usefulness of theory lies in practice and that there is no such a thing as a “discovery” of an external reality. She advises us, when collecting data, to pay careful attention to language—our own language and that of our participants. This entails being alert to the implicit meanings and to how language structures actions and frames for action. Constructivist grounded theory requires that the researcher pay attention to how people construct their view of their world, with the understanding that researchers doing grounded theory “view data analysis as constructions that not only locate our data in time, place, culture and context, but also reflects our social, epistemological, and research locations. Thus, our standpoints, starting points and end points influence our data analysis.”<sup>28</sup> Before collecting data, Charmaz advises that:

- We need to know something about the people we are interested in talking with.
- We have to remain as open as possible.
- We must not narrow our topic.
- We must start with very broad concepts at the beginning of the inquiry and lay out a general frame of inquiry.

Constructivist grounded theory assumes that data are co-constructed through the interactions between interviewer and respondents. This is markedly different from the objectivist view, where grounded theory consists of deriving an

---

worth mentioning that Corbin positioned himself by explicitly indicating that he follows a constructivist approach to grounded theory; see: Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*.

<sup>28</sup> Charmaz and Belgrave, “Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis,” 349.



objective explanation or theory of things, considering data as real, without considering the processes that lead to their production.<sup>29</sup>

At what point in this research process should a literature review be conducted? Grounded theory scholars have different opinions about the most suitable time for this. I followed the advice of Charmaz and carried out an initial review of the literature before the first data collection (in the pilot study) took place. The reason for this early review was, on the one hand, to learn what relevant research had already been conducted in this area and become familiar with questions still needing investigating.

## 2.1 WHY USE GROUNDED THEORY?

After reading the most influential writers in grounded theory,<sup>30</sup> I decided to follow Charmaz's approach. I have thus used this variant of grounded theory to learn about individuals' perceptions and experiences regarding a particular subject area—in this case, their journeys, experiences and perceptions of being Western bonpos—based on empirical data obtained mainly from semi-structured in-depth interviews. For such purposes, this grounded theory method offered me an adequate methodological framework to learn about individuals' perceptions.

---

<sup>29</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, 131.

<sup>30</sup> See, in particular: Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Grounded Theory in Practice* (London: Sage, 1997); Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2009); Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*; Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Grounded Theory in Practice* (London: Sage, 1997).

The main characteristics of grounded theory that are shared with other qualitative methods in the social sciences include focusing on everyday life experiences, valuing the participants' perspectives, and employing an interactive process between researcher and respondents. The data collection and analysis for this present study followed a cyclical process, typical for grounded theory, by using early findings to shape the ongoing data collection.

My collection of data involved a total of 43 participants (including four from the pilot study) and a three-stage sampling process, which is consistent with grounded theory. Six people were interviewed more than once. The interview stages with Western bonpos consisted of:

- a pilot study of four people (four interviews);
- a second round of 14 people (16 interviews; two people were interviewed twice); and
- a third round of 18 people (22 interviews; four people were interviewed twice).

The first two rounds of participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) the number of years they had been involved with Bon, focusing mostly on people with at least five years of experience (the first round included one newcomer, and the second round included three people from Argentina, where Bon is fairly new, and a few newcomers at Shenten); (2) their country of origin, including as many countries as possible; (3) their ages, covering a variety of age groups; and (4) their commitment and assiduity in attending retreats in Shenten, focusing on those who were "more committed" but also including a few people who were "less committed," based on how interviewees described themselves and on my own field observations. The third round of participants were selected based on criteria defined by the emerging analysis of the collected data and

included some Westerners who had taken novice vows (a monk and a nun) as well as some board members of the Shenten Association.

Most interviews were conducted at the Bon center of Shenten Dargye Ling in Blou, France. Other interviews took place in Paris, Geneva, Buenos Aires, Kathmandu (at Triten Norbutse Monastery), and Dolanji, India (at Menri Monastery). Other sources of data include existing research literature, textual data (Shenten's brochures, Bon centers' websites, etc.) and data collected through participant observation.

This study has followed the guidelines provided by the grounded theory method for data collection and for data analysis, consisting of coding, comparisons between data, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. (More information about coding and memo writing is provided below.)

## 2.2 ETHICS

There are a number of ethical issues involved in conducting research with human participants:

1. A key component of ethical research is to collect informed consent from every participant. Everyone assisting me in my research received a clear statement of what the research was about, what it involved, and what their part in it would be. If they were willing to take part, they confirmed this in recorded form.
2. Everyone involved in an interview was offered the option of remaining anonymous. All issues of anonymity were resolved in consultation with informants.

3. I remembered at all times that my role was neither to agree nor disagree with what those involved in the interview were saying but, rather, to facilitate the expression of their views.
4. Anyone involved in an interview could leave at any time, without asking permission or having to offer any kind of explanation.
5. If anyone asked to see a the part of a transcript (transcribed by myself) of what they said that would appear in anything I wrote (thesis, articles, etc.) before it would be read by others, I complied with their request. I also removed all references to them (even anonymous ones) from the item in question if they requested this. I indicated to them that only anonymous excerpts of transcripts will appear in the final thesis and will not be attributed to participants in a way that they could be identified.<sup>31</sup>
6. All of them were ensured of data security and anonymity. Most of them, however, indicated that they did not have any issue with being identified in the research.

In addition to the 36 participants or Western bonpos I mentioned above, I also interviewed four key Tibetan teachers who currently transmit Bon teachings in the West. They are:

1. Yongdzin (Lopon) Tenzin Namdak, considered the foremost living master and scholar of the Bon tradition (see the short biography below in Chapter 4.9). His experience represents the transition from a traditional Tibetan world to the Western world. At age 92, he is part of the last generation of Tibetan teachers who were educated in the strict, traditional way in a Tibet that is now long lost.

---

<sup>31</sup> For examples of interview transcripts, see Appendix E.

2. The late Thirty-Third Menri Trizin, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima (1929–2017), the previous abbot of Menri Monastery.
3. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the current abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, founder of Shenten Dargye Ling, and a key transmitter in the West of the more traditional form of Bon.
4. Geshe<sup>32</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, a well-known teacher, founder of Ligmincha Institute in Virginia, United States, and the key transmitter in the West of the more modern form of Bon.

These actors are living witnesses of how Bon came to the West. They are the ones who actually allowed this process to happen. Their experiences are therefore invaluable; they shared with me priceless information, providing first-hand accounts of this dynamic and ongoing process.

I also interviewed a number of scholars, including Bon experts Samten Karmay, a geshe (scholar), former monk, and key thinker in the scholarly understanding of Bon in the West (see more details about his background in Chapter 4.9), John Vincent Bellezza, archaeologist and expert in the pre-Buddhist heritage of Tibet and the Western Himalaya, John Myrdhin Reynolds, a scholar and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, and Raphael Liogier, University Professor at the Institut d'études politiques d'Aix-en-Provence.

---

<sup>32</sup> The Tibetan word geshe (Wylie: *dge bshes*) is a Bon (and Buddhist) academic title given in monasteries to monks and nuns after several years of study.

## 2.3 CODING

In grounded theory methodology, the stage of coding interviewees' responses shapes the analytic frame and provides the skeleton for analysis. Charmaz sees coding as an essential link between collecting data and developing theory as well as a connection between empirical reality and the researcher's view of it.<sup>33</sup> Coding highlights problems, issues, concerns, and matters of relevance to those being studied. Strauss and Corbin refer to categories as having "analytic power" due to their potential to explain and predict theories. "Constant comparisons" between collected data, codes, categories, and initial findings help to crystallize ideas that become part of the emerging theory.

My early analysis of data (the first four interviews) indicated issues that needed further exploration. These included the meanings that participants attached to certain words, such as "practice," "religion," and "Bon," as well as how a Bon center in the West accommodates different type of "practitioners." I also explored ways in which participants incorporated the teachings into their daily life and how they presented themselves to others. For the pilot study, my interview questions provided as little guidance as possible in order to allow the interviewees to discuss what was of significance to them regarding a given context.

Within the grounded theory framework, it is not always necessary to transcribe all interviews. Glaser, for instance, goes as far as to say that no recording is needed and argues that it is enough to take keyword notes during interviews.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

<sup>34</sup> Barney G. Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions* (Sociology Press, 1998).

Others believe that the interviews should be recorded and notes taken during the interviews if feasible and that these notes should be checked against the recordings and afterward converted to themes.<sup>35</sup> I followed a middle-ground approach by recording all interviews, transcribing the first eighteen interviews and coding them line by line (see Appendix E). I believe that recording all interviews is necessary for coding and finding themes. Moreover, while transcriptions are time-consuming, they are essential in order to revisit the interviews at later stages by both listening and reading the transcripts several times. For the last ten interviews, when the interview themes were more focused, I took notes during the interviews and again while listening carefully to the recorded interview four or five times, only transcribing specific, relevant quotes. The interview protocols that I used were designed in accordance with the findings of the first four interviews, with a view to generating narrative data. These original findings influenced my own understanding of Bon and its adaptation in the West, Buddhism and its adaptation in the West, and issues related to religion and globalization, and formed the list of “sensitizing concepts” of this research and the initial ideas and topics of inquiry.<sup>36</sup>

I used several coding techniques to examine interviewees’ accounts at different levels. For the first stage, I used an open-coding technique. An initial coding was done line by line, as mentioned above, which provided a good starting point to identify initial phenomena and produce a list of themes considered significant by the interviewees. Pilot-study interviews were coded with pen and paper and then transcribed into a Word document (see Appendix E). Usually line-by-line coding is highly descriptive, and the main challenge is to take these codes and start breaking them up. For this I used “in-vivo codes,” which are codes that contain

---

<sup>35</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. See also: Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*; Norman K. Denzin, “What Can Grounded Theorists and Action Researchers Learn from Each Other?,” in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 46–48.

the exact words of participants. I started looking at the meanings of what was being said, their underlying assumptions, and what the words meant in practice. I started unpacking dimensions of what seemed to be simple descriptions. I then attached conceptual labels to almost every line in the transcripts to capture what was said.<sup>37</sup> The following figure illustrates the different stages of conducting grounded theory described above:

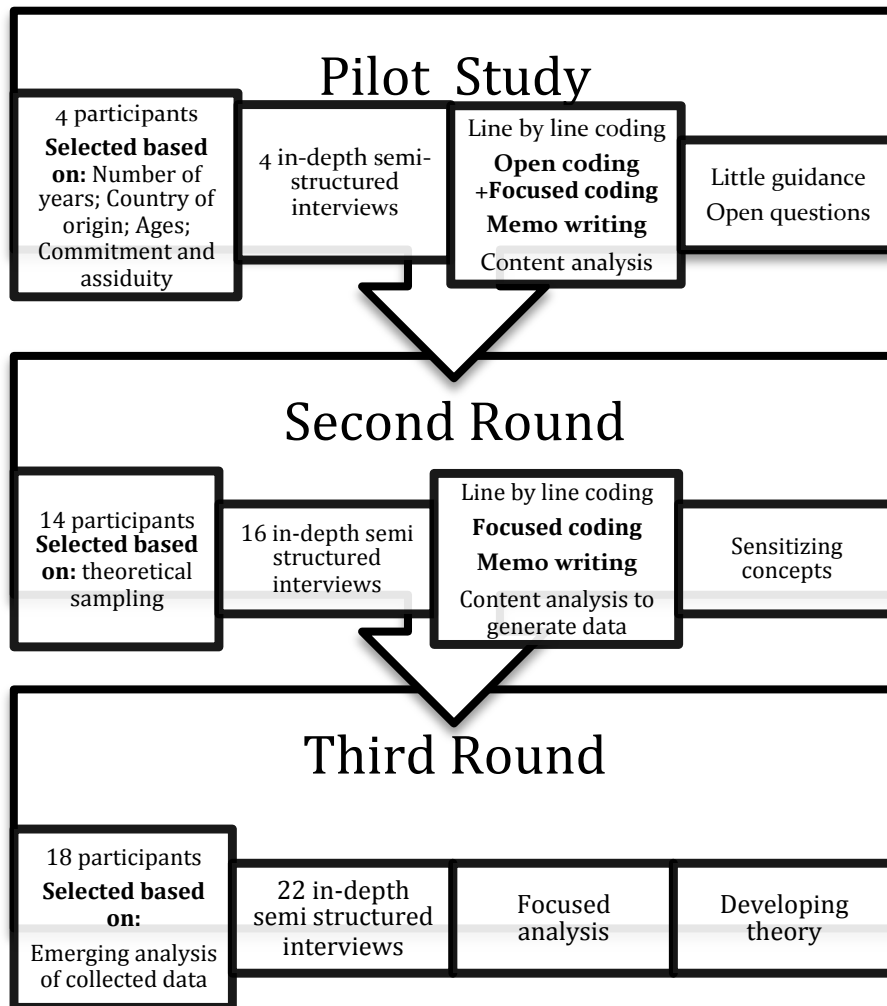


Figure 1 Stages in the development of grounded theory in this research project

<sup>37</sup> For examples of interviews' transcripts, line by line coding and Nvivo Software extracts per Nvivo "nodes," see Appendix E.



Asking analytical questions of the data in the codes is what moves grounded theory forward.<sup>38</sup> The next coding phase was more abstract than the first. Known as “focused coding” or “selective coding,” this stage applies codes to several lines or paragraphs in the transcripts. After doing this, I then chose the most telling codes to represent the interviewees’ voices.

Throughout both stages, I continuously kept notes on my reflections and thoughts. Writing these notes, referred to as “memos,” supports the process of coding and developing categories. After I wrote my memos, I then triangulated them with the data using my notes and personal observations. Memos support the researcher by providing a record of thoughts and ideas. They enable the researcher to reflect on the interviews and the given codes to enter into a sort of inner dialogue about the collected data. Initial thoughts are highly relevant, since they often spark significant ideas. Hence, it is crucial for researchers to write memos during or immediately after reading and coding the interview. At later stages in the research process, I revisited and reflected upon these memos and my initial thoughts and considered them within the overall analysis. The memos I looked at concerned:

1. codes and categories;
2. links between codes and categories;
3. gaps in the existing data set, highlighting issues and themes I did not yet know;
4. my thoughts about the usefulness of the category.

For the second round of interviews—14 in-depth interviews—participants were recruited through the process of theoretical sampling. In this method, the developing concepts that emerged from the data collected and analyzed so far

---

<sup>38</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

guided where, how, and from whom further data would be collected to eventually develop a theory.<sup>39</sup> I asked myself, what larger story are these codes telling me? Using open codes as a starting point, the process of focused coding helped me to verify the adequacy of the initial concepts developed up to that point. I used focused coding for the next two interview phases (a second round with 14 participants and a third one with 18 participants), which used the initial codes as a basis.

During the first round of interviews, I started using Nvivo software. I uploaded my existing interview audios and some transcripts into a Nvivo project and then further transcribed the remaining audios directly in the project. In Nvivo, codes are referred to as “nodes,” as can be seen in the figure below, but I will continue calling them “codes” here in accordance with grounded theory terminology.

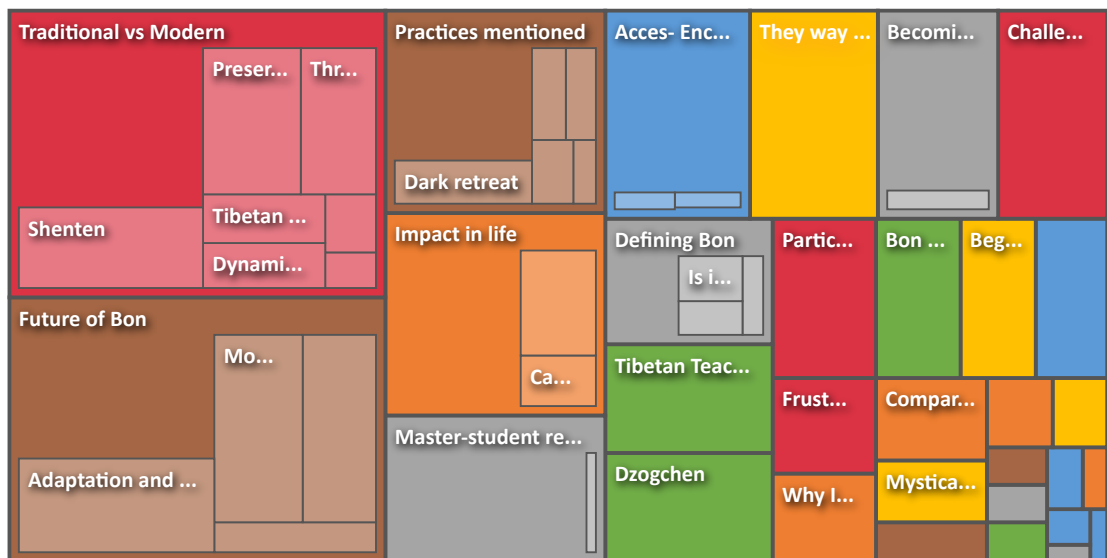


Figure 2 Nvivo “nodes” compared by number of coding references

---

<sup>39</sup> Charmaz; Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*; Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*.

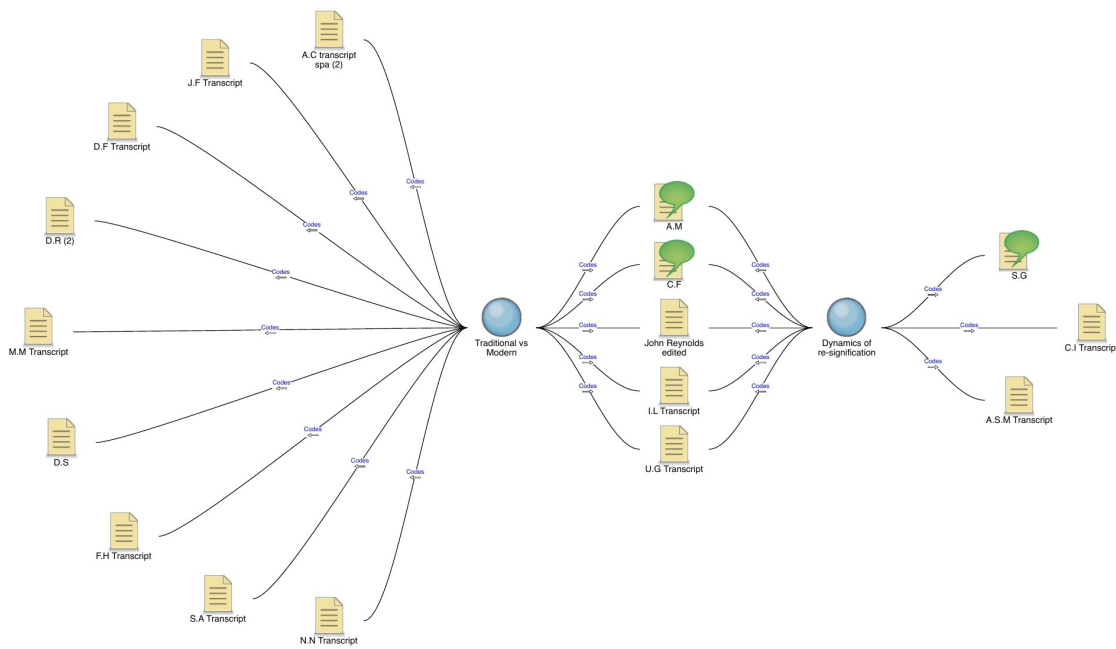


Figure 3 Nvivo coding from participants' transcripts

To determine if I had conducted enough rounds of interviews, I considered the “saturation level” of concepts. Reaching data saturation has been described as “a mysterious, subjective, non-linear, gradual, and unfixed process in grounded theory method.”<sup>40</sup> Charmaz differentiates between the saturation of data and the saturation of theoretical concepts. If an interviewer asks people the same questions, after a while he or she will hear the same stories. But when the researcher who is doing grounded theory continuously asks analytical questions of the data, the interviews themselves will evolve; therefore, the data that is being collected will evolve and, as a result, the researcher will obtain different accounts from interviewees. Saturation is very different when the researcher tries to find the properties of a concept as well as the range of variations.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a key aspect of grounded theory method is being alert in order to seize the right

---

<sup>40</sup> Khaldoun M. Aldiabat and Le Navenec, “Data Saturation: The Mysterious Step in Grounded Theory Method,” *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 1 (2018): 258.

<sup>41</sup> See more at: Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*.

moment to write up a substantive theory as it emerges, not after the research is done. The aim is not to discover innumerable core categories, but to build a substantive middle-level theory as discovered within the boundaries of the planned original research.<sup>42</sup>

A weak point of theoretical saturation lies in the risk that researchers may claim saturation after looking at only a few cases. If constant comparison shows that there are no new properties emerging, then it is acceptable to stop. But grounded theory is a process, so at a different point in time, the properties may change because circumstances might change, public opinion might change, and so on. Researchers have to feel they have exhausted different dimensions of the properties identified.<sup>43</sup>

In this chapter, I have described why and how I used grounded theory for the present research, and its relevance for allowing the interpretations of the experiences of participants to emerge in their own terms. The following chapter aims to contextualize the transmission and reception of Bon in a global context and as a lived experience. It will highlight similitudes in relation to the characteristics of the transmission and reception of Buddhism in the West, noting some characteristics that are unique to Bon.

---

<sup>42</sup> See: Barney G. Glaser, *Stop, Write: B Writing Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Khaldoun M. Aldiabat and Le Navenec, "Data Saturation: The Mysterious Step in Grounded Theory Method," *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 1 (2018): 258.

## 3 THE CONTEXT

### 3.1 RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION

Globalization and religion are both contentious terms, and both have been the subjects of crucial debates.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the term “globalization” itself is not easy to define. Some scholars maintain that globalization is a myth,<sup>45</sup> so they often describe it in paradoxical terms, such as “globalization is everything and its opposite.”<sup>46</sup> The literature on globalization has tended to describe globalization primarily in financial and political terms<sup>47</sup> in relation to an increasing economic integration across the entire globe.<sup>48</sup> Other perspectives focus on globalization as a process of time–space compression;<sup>49</sup> as synonymous with Westernization;<sup>50</sup> or in terms of distinguishing it from the process of Westernization and acknowledging the contribution of other regions of the world.

---

<sup>44</sup> V. Altglas Véronique, ed., *Religion and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>45</sup> D. Held, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 5–7.

<sup>46</sup> T. L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 406. See also: Pelt Campbell Van, “Religion and Phases of Globalization,” in *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 281.

<sup>47</sup> The Hedgehog Review, “An Annotated Bibliography on Religion and Globalization,” *IASC: The Hedgehog Review - Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2002) - Religion and Globalization 4*, no. No. 2 (n.d.): 116.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Beyer, “Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions,” in *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman (London: Brill, 2007), 167.

<sup>49</sup> A. C. Harvey, *The Econometric Analysis of Time Series* (P. Allen, 1990).

<sup>50</sup> Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White, *Globalization: Specialized Applications and Resistance to Globalization*, vol. 6 (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 15–19.

### 3.1.1 THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION

The above-mentioned perspectives have either ignored the role of religions in globalization processes or subordinated them to something else.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, other scholars have argued that, while religion and globalization might appear to be distantly linked, the role of religion cannot be relegated to the sidelines in the study of globalization.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in light of recent studies,<sup>53</sup> scholars now believe that religion has played a much more relevant role in globalization than previously thought; therefore, the limited attention given to religion's role in globalization in the literature has been subject to considerable discussion and debate. For example, Herrington maintains that "the economic-centric approach to globalization fails, in part, because a force more primal, more enduring, and more important has been fuelling this process for millennia—and that force is religion."<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, since religion has arguably been undergoing globalization through time and across cultures, it is something that should be accounted for. However, no fixed, universal model of religious globalization has been developed; rather, multifaceted and ever-changing models are discussed.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it is now clear that religions must be discussed in light of the overall globalization process to

---

<sup>51</sup> William A. Stahl, "Religious Opposition to Globalization," in *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, ed. Peter Beyer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 338.

<sup>52</sup> Steven L. Jones, "Religious Landscapes of Globalization: A Review," *IASC: The Hedgehog Review—Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2002)—Religion and Globalization 4*, no. No. 2 (n.d.): 115.

<sup>53</sup> See for example: Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar, *Religion on the Move!: New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Adogame and Shankar; Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (Boston: Routledge, 2013); Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman, eds., *Religion, Globalization and Culture* (London: Brill, 2007); Jose Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization," in *Religion and Globalization*, ed. Altglas Véronique, vol. Volume I: Religion and Space in Global Context (New York: Routledge, n.d.); Roland Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?," *The Journal of International Communication* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 1994): 33–52; Luke M. Herrington, "Globalization and Religion in Historical Perspective: A Paradoxical Relationship," *Religions* 4, no. 1 (March 12, 2013): 145–65.

<sup>54</sup> Herrington, "Globalization and Religion in Historical Perspective," 146.

<sup>55</sup> Beyer, "Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions," 183–84.

understand them fully. Similarly, as religion has been described as “a driving force in the process of globalization,”<sup>56</sup> globalization must also be discussed in light of the expansion of religions.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, it is critical to understand how religions—such as Bon in our case—become integrated into a new societies and the way in which a religion’s teachings are selected and adapted by those who transmit or follow it. For the purposes of this analysis, I follow Beyer’s understanding of what he calls “systemic religions,” that is, “institutionalized, organized, specialized forms of religion that have religious professionals associated with them.”<sup>58</sup>

Particularly relevant for our understanding of the interaction between religion and globalization in the case of Bon are the following concepts, terms, and ideas that will be developed further below:

1. “Glocalization” is a term that denotes the importance of the local in globalization—which, along with related processes of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization,” can and often occurs simultaneously;
2. Responses to globalization by religious and other actors are varied and include seeing it as an opportunity (or opportunities) and—often at the same time—causing resistances.
3. New forms of communications and new technologies have a great impact in these processes. The Internet, for instance, has been pointed out as the cause for altering the “traditional” teacher–student relationship, and it has been predicted that as a result, the practice of passing down from teachers

---

<sup>56</sup> Beyer, *Religions in Global Society*, 225.

<sup>57</sup> Beyer, 225.

<sup>58</sup> Beyer, 225.

to students practical skills and knowledge, including memorizing specific religious passages, may eventually disappear.<sup>59</sup>

4. In these interactions, the encounters with “others” imply a reflective process where different actors reassess their religious identities, religious narratives, and other aspects of their traditions.<sup>60</sup>

It could be argued that some religions, including Bon, inherently have a tendency toward globality if their worldview is deeply concerned with the idea of “wholeness”; or if attempting to grasp ultimate truths; or if they provide a totalizing explanation of the universe and its origins, the beginning and end of time, the essence of nature and humankind, or the meaning of life. Given this appraisal, we could surmise that “world religions”—noting the contested nature of this concept, which refers mostly to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism<sup>61</sup>—have always been global in the sense that they have never been isolated from each other.<sup>62</sup> Casanova points out that for world religions, “globalization offers to all the opportunity to become for the first time truly world religions, that is, global. But it also threatens them with de-territorialization”<sup>63</sup> being particularly an opportunity, he asserts, for religious like

---

<sup>59</sup> Hiroko Kawanami, “Buddhism,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, ed. Helmut K. Anheier and Mark Juergensmeyer (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 143.

<sup>60</sup> Altglas Véronique, *Religion and Globalization*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> According to Masuzawa, the concept of “world religions,” particularly since the nineteenth century, “enabled Europeans to imagine anew their own identity in relation to the new world order.” It is in this context that, Masuzawa argues, Buddhism and Islam received special attention: Buddhism was associated with being an Aryan religion, and Islam a Semitic religion, in opposition to Christianity, portrayed as the “universal religion.” The term is also contested because it suggests that there is a common structure shared by all religion, or a model that accommodates all cultures of the world in how they experience “religion.” See: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); See also: Peter Beyer, “Religion Out of Place? The Globalization of Fundamentalism,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Robert J. Holton (London: Routledge, 2015), 256.

<sup>62</sup> Altglas Véronique, *Religion and Globalization*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Casanova, “Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization,” n.d., 94.



Buddhism that have always been “transnational.” In the case of Bon, globalization does indeed represent an opportunity to expand its reach, as we will see below, but it can also be perceived as a threat to what is considered by adepts as its identity and values, as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, scholars of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and recently, of Bon have demonstrated that religions have contributed significantly throughout many centuries to international cultural and commercial exchanges across civilizations.<sup>65</sup>

There can be no doubt that the process began long before the term “globalization” was even coined. As Altglas puts it, “Globalization is a process that has worked silently for millennia without having been given a name.”<sup>66</sup> But although the transmission of ideas, including religious ones, the sharing of meanings and values, and the exchanges of cultural, political and economic values across borders are by no means a unique characteristic of our contemporary era, contemporary globalization is marked, above all, by what Casanova refers to as a condition in which we are aware that we are all living at this very moment in one single, global humanity in the same time and space. This awareness—which actually does not depend on whether we want to be aware—is a key aspect that differentiates contemporary globalization from the cultural diffusion and other type of exchanges that occurred, for example, along the Silk Route. The shrinking of distances and the accelerated speed in which this shrinking takes place results in an intensification of the process. This means that

---

<sup>64</sup> On globalization as an opportunity and a threat, see: Véronique Altglas, ed., “Introduction,” in *Religion and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 11.

<sup>65</sup> On the spread of Bon influence beyond the Tibetan Plateau, see Samten G. Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle*, 2009th ed. (Katmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998); John Vincent Bellezza, *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); See also: Dmitry Ermakov, *Bø and Bön: Ancient Shamanic Traditions of Siberia and Tibet in Their Relation to the Teachings of a Central Asian Buddha* (Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), xi. Chanda, xi.

there is more interaction and a global awareness of that global way of being and interacting. What makes globalization different is not its novelty, but the awareness of the fact that we live in a global world coexisting with a plurality of, for example, religions, most of which claim to be universal. In this context, the movements of ideas, information, values, and people, who of course carry ideas and information with them, including religious ideas, occurs on a larger scale and at a faster speed than ever before, in part due to the Internet, which plays an essential role in these processes.

As mentioned earlier, religious studies scholars across different disciplines have shown that the process of globalization is indeed connected with religion in different ways. As religions become less rooted in a particular place and are deterritorialized due to diasporas and transnational ties, globalization triggers diverse responses, reactions, and interpretations as well as resistance from the representatives and followers of religions. At the same time, often, a process of reterritorialization also takes place, for example, in the case of Bon, as exemplified in this study by the Bon center of Shenten Dargye Ling. This reterritorialization refers not only to real or physical places but also to imagined territories and symbolic landscapes. In this sense, “the location of religious Otherness is still installed in a topographic model (the West versus the East) and the transnationalisation of Eastern wisdoms does not disconnect them from their national origins.”<sup>67</sup> Commenting on this issue, Raphael Liogier refers to what he calls a “virtual Tibet” which, he argues, was shaped mostly due to the influence of the Dalai Lama. This is

a Tibet that is deterritorialized and that is everywhere except in Tibet, in the physical Tibet, it is everywhere. It is as if every Buddhist in the world, not only Tibetan Buddhists, were in fact some kind of virtual

---

<sup>67</sup> Obadia, “Localised Deterritorialisation? The Case of the Glocalisation of Tibetan Buddhism in France and Worldwide,” 188.

citizen of this non-territorialised Tibet... With the image of the monasteries, the mountains, and everything that is pure, where the cities are pure, it is peaceful, etcetera... So Tibet became in itself not only a cause but also a symbol of something that is everywhere except in Tibet.<sup>68</sup>

Together, these studies support the notion that religions have contributed significantly throughout many centuries to international cultural and commercial exchange across civilizations,<sup>69</sup> that is to say, to globalization processes, even if they were not referred to as such.

### 3.1.2 BETWEEN UNIVERSALIZING AND PARTICULARIZING TENDENCIES

Globalization, as mentioned above, is not a homogeneous process; it encompasses the development and maintenance of cultures as well as changes within them. Furthermore, as Stahl notes, all religions are being radically transformed by globalization, and these transformations are varied rather than unidirectional.<sup>70</sup> As religion has, in Beyer words, become globalized, it is also dynamic and ever changing, and it is not necessarily grounded in a particular formulation.<sup>71</sup>

Borrowing from the work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, Beyer contends that religion and the formation of religions must be perceived in the context of their social systems. Luhmann argues that social systems have evolved through the use

---

<sup>68</sup> Raphael Liogier, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, April 15, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> See Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*, vol. 1 (Brill, 2001), 14.

<sup>70</sup> Stahl, "Religious Opposition to Globalization," 2.

<sup>71</sup> Beyer, "Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions," 183–84.

of a matrix of communication. However, such communication is limited by social constraints and the broader context in which they exist. One of the central characteristics of religion in the globalized world, as one functional system among others, is its particular binary code, which Beyer identifies as the opposition between “blessed and cursed”<sup>72</sup> which accounts for all other binary codes that are associated with other systems, such as true/false for science, or legal/illegal for the field of law. He further argues that, as a consequence of globalization, religion is affected by modern technology, particularly in the field of communications. Global communication breaks down geographic barriers and facilitates communication between social groups, even dissimilar social ones.<sup>73</sup> “The Other is encountered more often, more closely and by more people than ever before.”<sup>74</sup> Importantly, these communication processes go in all directions and are clearly not limited to the so-called “West to East” or even “East to West”<sup>75</sup> but includes what we may call “East-East,” “South-North,” etc., impacting “old identities” and generating not only “sameness” but also differences.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, that “Other” is less the so-called “East” and more “an “Other that is desired, fantasized and represented as such.”<sup>77</sup>

As indicated above, one of the most notable effects of globalization is what has been referred to as deterritorialization.<sup>78</sup> This refers to the disembeddedness of

---

<sup>72</sup> Beyer, *Religions in Global Society*.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, vol. 27 (London: Sage, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Psychology Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>75</sup> For more on Africa’s religious dynamisms and globalization, see: Afe Adogame and Shibana Shankar, *Religion on the Move, New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> Beyer, “Religion Out of Place? The Globalization of Fundamentalism,” 268.

<sup>77</sup> Véronique Altglas, “The Global Diffusion and Westernization of Neo-Hindu Movements: Siddha Yoga and Sivananda Centres,” in *Religion and Globalization*, ed. Altglas Véronique, vol. Volume II: Westernization of Religion and its Counter-Trends (New York: Routledge, 2010), 263.

<sup>78</sup> L. Basch, N. G. Schiller, and C. S. Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

cultural phenomena from their “natural” territories. Scholars such as Casanova who argue this perspective hold that, throughout history, cultural systems have been territorially embedded in specific physical environments.<sup>79</sup> This is of particular importance to the Bon religion, which was heavily influenced by the original Tibetan context in which it developed. A parallel process involving the “reterritorialization” of religious identities has also often occurred with the rooting of religions into new spaces, for instance with the establishment of religious centers or a temples. “Territory,” in this context, also refers to “imagined spaces and mental mappings,”<sup>80</sup> because “if Buddhism is indeed a globalised religion, and one of the fastest spreading, and therefore a religion on the move, it is in many ways linked to territorial issues, be they material or symbolic.”<sup>81</sup>

It is also important to understand the effect of the globalization of religions in terms of the cultural identities of adherents to a particular religion. This raises a number of critical questions. How and by what means is a culturally particular sacred space reconfigured or “remade” in a different cultural environment? How is a religion adapted, selected, and even transformed by its new followers? In the case of Bon, for instance, do the same rituals and practices occur regardless of location, or are they recreated and reinterpreted in new spaces? Additionally, do some aspects of Bon religious practices travel better than others?<sup>82</sup> Religious messages in the context of the Bon tradition in Tibet were conveyed mostly by and within a monastic context. As these messages enter the global environment, will they need to be simplified? Or have they already been simplified? Finally, how do representatives of a religion perceive new ways of transmitting their

---

<sup>79</sup> Casanova, “Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization,” n.d.84

<sup>80</sup> Casanova, 84.

<sup>81</sup> Obadia, “Localised Deterritorialisation? The Case of the Glocalisation of Tibetan Buddhism in France and Worldwide,” 186.

<sup>82</sup> Kim Knott, “Geography, Space and the Sacred,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 574.

messages? Issues such as these will be explored in the interview data presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

### 3.2 THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIONS?

A relevant issue emerging from the effect of globalization on the cultural assumptions of religions is the impact of different communities interacting with each other. While considering that culture is not a monolithic entity and that there are manifold interactions and entanglements that make up societies, these interactions may lead to a borrowing of the cultures or a re-examination of their premises. This intercultural relationship may even lead to the development of newfound practices and communities.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, the boundaries between religious identities can be individually redefined due to local access to religions that are operating at a global scale and also due to the expansion of “spiritual worldviews” through technological access. In this sense, my examination of the literature has identified a potential gap in our understanding. For example, it is not clear how religions in a globalized world are embedded in daily life through adaptation and practice at home and the workplace. This takes the analysis from the external dimension of globalization and casts a spotlight on the actual people it affects. This in turn permits us to revisit the question of how a religion fits into globalization processes and how such processes affect religion. It is through collective personal experiences that the introduction of a religion into a globalized world transforms that religion.

---

<sup>83</sup> Dietrich Christi M, “Encyclopedia of Global Religion,” ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (London: Sage, 2011), 539.

For instance, when we look at the case of Tibetan schools of Buddhism and Bon and Tibetans in exile, or as Baumann calls them, “deterritorialized Tibetans,”<sup>84</sup> we can see that a distinctive process is taking place. While the experience of exile has posed questions of continuity and even survival for Tibetans, it has also created an environment for new and different presentations of Buddhist teachings. In addition to reaching new audiences in the West, Tibetan lamas now also cater to Tibetans who receive a modern education and may even work in modern economies in the People’s Republic of China, India, or elsewhere.<sup>85</sup> The predicted destruction of Tibetan Buddhism did not occur; rather Tibetan Buddhism has flourished in Tibet itself as well as in India, Bhutan, Nepal, and in the West.<sup>86</sup>

Based on participant interviews and a preliminary literature research, this study attributes the following general characteristics to globalization and its correlation to religion:

1. Globalization *facilitates* the creation of new religious landscapes and new forms of interactions between the secular and the religious, transcending borders and history.
2. Globalization *deterritorializes* cultural phenomena and religious systems, causing them to become *disembedded* from their “original” territories and at the same time, countervailing processes of reterritorialization also take place, with both processes being two sides of what Robertson called religious “glocalization.”<sup>87</sup> This occurs while individuals are aware of the fact that they are living in a global world where different religions claiming

---

<sup>84</sup> Martin Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no. 3 (1997): 378.

<sup>85</sup> Linda Woodhead, Jiroko Kawamani, and Christopher Partridge, *Religions in the Modern World, Traditions and Transformations*, Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), 68.

<sup>86</sup> Peter Oldmeadow, “Tibetan Buddhism and Globalisation,” in *The End of Religions?: Religion in an Age of Globalisation*, ed. Peter Oldmeadow and Carole M. Cusack, n.d., 267.

<sup>87</sup> See: Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*.

to be universal coexist, and where the movements of religious ideas happen on a larger scale and at a faster speed than ever before.<sup>88</sup>

3. The intersection of globalization and religion involves processes of *selection, interpretation, and adaptation* to local settings. This happens in a multidirectional flow; where encountering “Others” makes different actors rethink their own religious identity, the nature of their religion, and similar issues.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the study of one specific religion can shed light on this intersection in general.
4. In the current world, the transmission and transformation of religious ideas have been accelerated in large measure due to the impact of contemporary communication technology.
5. Globalization is an ongoing process in a complex field open to diverse interpretations.

### 3.3 LIVED RELIGION

The emerging data from the interviewees also led me to look at the conceptualization of religion as lived experience, that is, to give due weight to participants’ experiences and perspectives, drawing on the concept of lived religion as developed particularly by Meredith McGuire.

Religious studies scholars, including Robert Orsi and David Hall, popularized the concept of lived religion in the late twentieth century. The study of lived religion has attracted interest in a wide range of subject areas as an increasing number of

---

<sup>88</sup> While deterritorialization started for Buddhism and other religions long before the twentieth century, the influence of new information technologies, particularly the Internet, as well as the possibilities of travelling faster and farther have accelerated these processes, at least since the mid-nineteenth century Casanova, “Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization,” 84.

<sup>89</sup> See: Altglas, “Introduction,” 4.



scholars are exploring and emphasizing what a religious person does and believes. Orsi, a professor of religious studies at Northwestern University, defines lived religion as including “the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Orsi argues that, in order to study and understand lived religions, the researcher has to pay attention to how religious adherents act and how they interpret religious institutions, texts, rituals, practices, and so on.<sup>91</sup>

Ammerman’s most recent book<sup>92</sup> documents the way religion and spirituality operate across the many domains of daily lived experience, the way religious adherents perceive and experience what they narrate as “encountering the sacred,” both within and beyond the boundaries of official religious institutions and practices.<sup>93</sup> McGuire, in her book *Lived Religion*, encourages researchers to focus first on individuals rather than on their affiliation or organizational participation. The focus should be on those experiences that individuals consider most important as well as the practices that they actually engage in and that comprise their personal religious experiences.<sup>94</sup>

From the outset, one of my main focuses of inquiry related to why “Westerners” are engaging with Bon. What role does Bon play in their lives? What is the significance of Bon in their (constructed) identities? How are they receiving and adopting Bon practices? The concept of lived religion appears to be useful to

---

<sup>90</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>91</sup> Orsi, 37.

<sup>92</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>93</sup> See also: Nancy Ammerman, “Introduction: Observing Religious Modern Lives,” *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 2007, 3-18.

<sup>94</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

explain some of the multiple ways in which Bon religious teachings and Bon practices are applied in participants' lives. McGuire's approach in particular allowed me to look at religion "at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often even contradictory amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those [that] religious institutions consider important."<sup>95</sup>

McGuire echoes anthropologist Talal Asad in affirming that religion does not have a "transhistorical essence" and asserts that not only do religions change over time but so does what people understand "religion" to be. Thus, she proposes a frame to look at "individuals' religions as practiced, in all their complexity and dynamism.... [At] the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary or even coherent."<sup>96</sup>

This research looks at how Bon is lived by Westerners in a particular time and cultural setting, acknowledging that "people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that inter-subjective reality."<sup>97</sup> It was clear from the first pilot study that participants shared similar or common meanings and experiences, learned practices, and a borrowed imaginary that drew from the Bon teachings, materials, and generalizations they had access to. A subsidiary question this study also analyzed was what Bon proponents in the West promote as "religious." My goal is to understand individual religion through the case study of Bon and how it is experienced and narrated by Westerners, particularly in Shenten Center.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> McGuire, 4.

<sup>96</sup> McGuire, 12.

<sup>97</sup> McGuire, 12.

<sup>98</sup> McGuire, 16.

Participants spoke of how they appropriated certain elements and rejected others and how they selected aspects of the Bon religion that better suited their personal lives. They also spoke of the differences between how they practice Bon in the context of a formal retreat at the center, Shenten Dargye Ling, and how they practice at home, noticing “precisely those defined-out elements that have become invisible to researchers.”<sup>99</sup> Religious belief is, for McGuire, as much about an individual’s experience of religion as it is about attending church.<sup>100</sup> I looked at the influence of Bon experts and official ideologies, including the people who transmitted Bon to the West, as well as how religious experiences are interlinked with the everyday lives of individuals, not just their experiences within religious environments.<sup>101</sup> For instance, some participants said that at Shenten, they prostrate to the lamas and perform rituals—such as the Refuge practice and the Bodhicitta practice<sup>102</sup>—and recite dedication prayers before and after each practice. However, when at home, they do not recite prayers, and they perform certain practices by choosing some elements and omitting others.

For instance, C. F.,<sup>103</sup> a participant at Shenten stated, “When I am here, I do the rituals; but when I am at home, I don’t do any rituals. Except that sometimes a mantra comes naturally in my head, so I recite mantras, for example. And I don’t know why, but then I recite the mantra in my head, like spontaneously. I feel I should do more at home.” Another participant, N. N., said,

---

<sup>99</sup> McGuire, 45.

<sup>100</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*.

<sup>101</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>102</sup> See Chapter 4.3.1.

<sup>103</sup> For the sake of preserving the anonymity of participants and the confidentiality of their statements, I denote individual participants by two (randomly chosen) letters throughout this dissertation.

I think also there's people who don't even practice that much throughout the year because the connection isn't there, because you forget. You know? It's like you come here and you're full of inspiration, and you're hearing Rinpoche<sup>104</sup> telling you to practice, and you practice, everyone's practicing. And then throughout the year it's like slowly—it's like writing in your diary, at first you write every day and then once a week, and then once a month and then, it's like I haven't written in a year.

All participants interviewed either claimed that they maintained continuity in their meditation and practices beyond the time they went on retreats or else claimed they at least attempted to maintain some practices, with varying success. For instance, most participants mentioned that they meditated daily or from a few to several times a week, usually for at least half an hour. M. N. explained the difficulties of doing so:

I don't actually incorporate enough practice in my daily life. In fact, I think, I think a lot, it is there, in a way, not all the time, but I'm too busy with my things. So it's difficult to practice enough and all, and I think if you repeat, it doesn't matter, start, anyway. It's the truth, so I don't care. I may start, finally I may, but I'm not really sure, because I've not done it right. I've done bits and pieces.

These examples are in line with what McGuire describes as the malleability of lived religion, with people drawing from a number of different religious traditions for practices and teachings. Malleability also refers to the possibilities of modifying religious traditions, institutions, and personal practices, including

---

<sup>104</sup> The word "Rinpoche" is an honorific term meaning "the precious one." In the context of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, it refers to a teacher, an individual, a place, etc. to denote respect.

changing the way teachings are presented in order to enhance the religious engagement of participants and the financial survival of the religious institution.<sup>105</sup>

Turning now to the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, the next section describes some characteristics of this spread that are relevant for our study of Bon in the West.

### 3.4 TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

Cozort argues that early on, as Buddhism spread to Europe, a number of “practitioners” wanted the religion to become a normalized part of their religiously diverse cultures. “Buddhists hope, however, that being a Buddhist in Europe is less regarded as a trendy affair, an expression of romantic exoticism, or a clinging to Asian roots. Rather, Buddhism, in whatever shape, should become a nonsensational, normal, and accepted part of Europe’s landscape of religions.”<sup>106</sup>

There are many accounts of the history and spread of Buddhism, and, in particular, of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Without intending to write a detailed account, for the sake of contextualization I will provide a brief overview of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, highlighting some aspects that are particularly relevant for this research.

---

<sup>105</sup> See: McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*.

<sup>106</sup> Daniel Cozort, “The Making of the Western Lama,” in *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003), 222.

Recent studies have researched so-called “Western Buddhism,” which now forms the focus of a subdiscipline of Buddhist Studies.<sup>107</sup> Several of these studies highlight the point that most Western Buddhists do not realize how different their religion—even the most traditional and allegedly “authentic” forms of it found in the West—are from the so-called “traditional Asian Buddhism.” A dominant feature of how Tibetan Buddhism has been—and is being—portrayed is the attachment of certain notions and the emergence of groups that, even though they draw on traditional Buddhism, attempt to create new styles of Buddhist practice.<sup>108</sup> For instance, Chogyam Trungpa, the founder of the Shambhala meditation movement and a key figure in the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, noted that he intentionally wanted to strip away specific Tibetan attributes from traditional Buddhist methods of working with the mind in order to transmit the essence of those teachings to his Western students.<sup>109</sup> Another term used to refer to the phenomenon of Buddhist expansion is “world Buddhism,” which is sometimes equated with “modern Buddhism.”

In an early article written by Victor White in 1951, he (inaccurately) predicted that “Westerners who profess and call themselves Buddhist are, and will probably remain, few in number.”<sup>110</sup> To the contrary, the West has seen an unparalleled interest in everything Buddhist, as well as increasing attention from the media and high-profile personalities about Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>111</sup> When analyzing the situation of the Tibetan tradition in the West in 1976, Springer has noted that “certainly, there was a religion and cultural tradition in Tibet prior to the

---

<sup>107</sup> Prebish and Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*.

<sup>108</sup> Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>109</sup> See for example: Chögyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation* (Shambhala Publications, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> Victor White, “Buddhism Comes West,” *New Blackfriars* 32, no. 381 (1951): 587.

<sup>111</sup> Prebish and Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, 1.

development of Buddhism. The Bon tradition... also provided a framework, which was adapted and transmuted into a Buddhist foundation.”<sup>112</sup> When referring to Tibetan Buddhism in the West, he cautions that, in his view, certain “Tibetan dimensions” of these teachings are often not seen as applicable to the lives of Westerners. He notes the necessity of applying these teachings “in terms of one’s own inspiration and one’s own cultural background.”<sup>113</sup> Through this approach, interpreting Buddhist teachings in the West represents a “psychological portrait of ourselves.”<sup>114</sup> Springer focuses on Tibetan Buddhism as a “living tradition” through which knowledge is primarily transmitted through personal experience, asserting that it is not only a matter of intellectually studying Buddhism but also a question of practicing the teachings, which ensures that “the tradition is always up to date.”<sup>115</sup> He also notes that, since Westerners cannot “become” Tibetan, it is unnecessary for them to accept or glorify the exterior aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>116</sup> The apparent tension between the “Tibetan” aspects of Bon teachings versus their “universal” aspects that transcend Tibetan features—including the fact that the Bon texts used for transmitting these teachings are in the Tibetan language—is a point that the participants of this study emphasized again and again (see Chapters 5 and 6).

### 3.5 UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

---

<sup>112</sup> Karl Springer, “Tibetan Buddhism in the West,” *The Tibet Journal* 1, no. 3/4 (1976): 75.

<sup>113</sup> Springer, 77.

<sup>114</sup> Springer, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Springer, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Springer, 79.

A few years later, in 1993, Polichetti also noted the increasing interest in so-called “Asian religions” in the “Western world,” highlighting a transition from an interest confined only to select and small groups of scholars and practitioners to a growing audience interested in “spirituality” more generally.<sup>117</sup> Translations of Tibetan canonical texts started to become available, and Polichetti predicted that Vajrayana Buddhism<sup>118</sup> “will continue to expand in the West for the foreseeable future, along the lines already established during the past twenty-five years.”<sup>119</sup> He pointed out the influence of the charismatic lamas, whom he called “Tibetan tantric adepts, with their gentle lucidity and thought and powerful compassion,”<sup>120</sup> as a key element behind Westerners’ attraction to Tibetan Buddhism. The term “adept,” in this context, refers to practitioners who are highly trained or considered advanced in their practices. Another key element that Polichetti highlights is Westerners’ disenchantment with what he referred to as “their materialistic society”—clear evidence of an Orientalistic approach<sup>121</sup> where the West is considered materialistic and the East spiritual. My research shows that, while this is certainly one reason given by Westerners for their interest in Bon, it is not the only reason why they claim to seek Tibetan Bon or Buddhism. Polichetti also mentions that Westerners often approach Tibetan

---

<sup>117</sup> Massimiliano A. Polichetti, “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West,” *The Tibet Journal* 18, no. 3 (1993): 65.

<sup>118</sup> When speaking of Vajrayana, Polichetti is referring to what is called “Tantric Buddhism,” or the Tantric tradition of Buddhism. Translated often as the “Diamond Vehicle,” Vajrayana includes practices that make use of mantras, mandalas, and the visualization of various deities and enlightened beings. It also refers to one of the three vehicles to enlightenment, the other two being *Hinayana*, a Sanskrit word usually translated as the “inferior” or “smaller” vehicle, and *Mahayana*, the “Great” or “Higher” vehicle. See Chapter 6.

<sup>119</sup> Polichetti, “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West,” 1993, 66.

<sup>120</sup> Massimiliano A. Polichetti, “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West,” *The Tibet Journal* 18, no. 3 (1993): 67.

<sup>121</sup> On Orientalism and Tibet, see Chapter 3.4, 3.5.



Buddhism with many fantasies and a “childish request for the exotic and the miraculous.”<sup>122</sup>

Several years after, Lenoir pointed out that one of the major characteristics of Buddhism in the West is the culturally distorting prism through which it is reinterpreted. He points to the evolution of Western interest in Buddhism in general, which I found to closely parallel interest in Yungdrung Bon, in which the purely “scholastic” point of view started to give way to a “spiritual” perspective from the 1960s onward. It was then that Westerners started to seek out Tibetan masters to receive initiations and to undertake a spiritual path, mainly through the practice of meditation.<sup>123</sup>

Let me underscore the fact that even the scholastic point of view of the era was tainted by Orientalistic notions of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and Bon, as we will discuss below and in Chapter 3. While the collaboration between academia and religious representatives from Tibetan schools of Buddhism and Bon after 1959 had a considerable impact on the way these were portrayed, it did not free the field from deeply rooted Orientalist and romanticized visions, which—in line with Said’s definition of Orientalism—reflect more the West’s ideas of the “Other” than the other itself.<sup>124</sup> However, a more complex dynamic of “Othering” happened in Bon, involving a process that started earlier on Tibet itself and is still being developed up to the present, as we will further see in Chapter 4.11.

Lopez, in the first in-depth study looking specifically at the Orientalization and idealization of Tibet in the West and the West’s fascination for Tibet, pointed out

---

<sup>122</sup> Polichetti, “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West,” 1993, 67.

<sup>123</sup> Frédéric Lenoir and Juliet Vale, “The Adaptation of Buddhism to the West,” *Diogenes* 47, no. 187 (1999): 100–101.

<sup>124</sup> See: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1978 (London: Penguin, 1995); and Edward W. Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Race & Class* 27, no. 2 (1985): 1–15.

that Tibetan Buddhism in the West involves a lot of conceptions, processes, and myths from the West rather than reflecting the reality of Tibet. Even the word “Tibet” has connotations that include images of simplicity and a heroic place of “unpolluted original sources of spirituality.”<sup>125</sup> As we will see, while most of the participants echoed this romantic view of Tibet, a few others noted that Buddhism (and Bon) in the West reflects the institutional, political, and social struggles of Tibetans who have been transplanted to the West.<sup>126</sup>

It is also significant that the Othering of Tibet continues to be widely done in Tibetan Buddhist studies, a field that “still continues along the lines of an Orientalist descriptive mode, with no trace of the new line of enquiry that has developed in Western theory.”<sup>127</sup>

In a further exploration of the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, Prebish and Baumann state that “the practice-based features of meditation and liturgy seem to have enabled Buddhism’s rapidly increasing diffusion since the 1960s.”<sup>128</sup> In contrast, Buddhism in Asia reached “the masses” particularly through the rituals, performances, and the folk religious and shamanic aspects of Buddhism. These characteristics are lacking in the diffusion of Buddhism and Bon in the West, where the emphasis is on individual experience and on aspects of Buddhism and Bon that some participants consider to be “rational” or “scientific.” The analysis of my interviews’ data provides ample evidence of this.

---

<sup>125</sup> Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora,” 377.

<sup>126</sup> See: Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*; See also: Tsering Shakya, *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies* (Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>127</sup> Tsering Shakya, “Who Are the Prisoners?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2001): 183.

<sup>128</sup> Prebish and Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, 1.

These Orientalistic attributions to the “East” indeed continue to have a place in today’s perspectives on Bon, as we will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.

Another characteristic of Buddhism’s arrival in the West is a diminished role for Buddhist monastics. In my case study, this mostly applied to the so-called “modern trend” in Bon, particularly in the Ligmincha International network, discussed in detail in Chapter 4.7. Another common characteristic is “an increasing emphasis on the psychological, as opposed to the purely religious, nature of practice.”<sup>129</sup> Notably, Bon (like Buddhism) has a long tradition of nonmonastic sages, masters, and contemplatives, a fact that inspired many Western lay followers of Tibetan Buddhism “to believe that they may achieve states of spiritual realization comparable to those of such great lay contemplatives.”<sup>130</sup>

While Tibetan Buddhism retains certain features from Tibet when it migrates to different Western locations, it also takes on specific characteristics according to each country where it was introduced. Authors write about British Buddhism, European Buddhism,<sup>131</sup> American Buddhism, and secular vs. traditional

---

<sup>129</sup> B. Alan Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>130</sup> Wallace, 44.

<sup>131</sup> Baumann has dealt extensively with the expansion of Buddhism in Europe; Buddhism and modernity, as well as global Buddhism. See for example: Martin Baumann, “Creating a European Path to Nirvana: Historical and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10, no. 1 (1995): 55–77; Martin Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no. 3 (1997): 377–404; Martin Baumann, “Buddhism in Switzerland,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000): 154–59; Martin Baumann and Cristina Rocha, “Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008); Martin Baumann, “The Transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: Processive Modes and Strategies of Adaptation,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1994): 35–61; Martin Baumann, “The Dharma Has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997); Martin Baumann, “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 1–43; Martin

Buddhism. In Canada, for instance, the main source of the spread of Buddhism was the Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa, who founded the Nalanda Foundation and the Shambhala training centers, with branches in various locations throughout the country. Even when Westerners have run the foundation and centers, they claimed to be “spiritually” associated with the Kagyupa and Nyingmapa lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>132</sup> Many other Tibetan groups associated with Tibetan masters are found throughout Canada; for the most part, these groups are aimed at non-Tibetans.<sup>133</sup> In Australia and New Zealand, Tibetan Buddhism started, as in most Western countries, as an attractive tradition due to its “Otherness,” but it is being adapted in a way that is becoming “more and more acceptable to the mainstream.”<sup>134</sup> The same process happened in Ireland, where, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new way of looking at Tibetan Buddhism emerged; Tibetan lamas were brought to Ireland and centers were established, such as Kagyu Samye Dzong, the oldest organization in the country, founded in 1977.<sup>135</sup> In places like Switzerland, in contrast to what occurred in the United States, Buddhism has not become

---

Baumann, “Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe,” in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. McMahan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 115–35.

<sup>132</sup> See: “Chögyam Trungpa—Shambhala,” accessed January 23, 2019, <https://shambhala.org/teachers/chogyam-trungpa/>.

<sup>133</sup> Matthews Bruce, “Buddhism in Europe,” in *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 126–27.

<sup>134</sup> Michelle Spuler, “Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand,” in *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 149.

<sup>135</sup> For an overview of recent research focusing on Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in specific countries, see for example: Christopher Queen and Duncan Ryuken Williams, *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2013); Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: Meditation and the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Joan Marques, “Buddhism in the United States: Implications for Managers of Buddhist Values in the Workplace,” *International Journal of Management* 28, no. 2 (2011): 564; Spuler, “Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand”; Jørn Borup, “Buddhism in Denmark,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008): 27–37; Joseph Loss, “Buddha-Dhamma in Israel: Explicit Non-Religious and Implicit Non-Secular Localization of Religion,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 4 (2010): 84–105; Laurence Cox and Maria Griffin, “Border Country Dharma: Buddhism, Ireland and Peripherality,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 93–125; Lionel Obadia, “Tibetan Buddhism in France: A Missionary Religion?,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 92–109.

mainstream, and it has not been considered to be a remarkable object of interest for scholars or the media. There are, however, Swiss Buddhists who have been involved in the establishment of Buddhist monasteries and institutions, which carry a significance that goes beyond Switzerland *per se*.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, my research on Bon in various countries shows that, in each one, its teachings and practices were adapted and modified in a distinctive way, influenced by the existing cultural context. For instance, participants and teachers noted that in Mexico, there is a tendency to have a significant interest in Bon rituals and a positive attitude toward the “religious” and “devotional aspects” of Bon. In the United States, to the contrary, participants expressed a rejection of religious elements in Bon and a tendency to favor a more “modern” approach to Bon, best exemplified by Ligmincha International (discussed below in Chapter 4.7).

Some participants I interviewed also believed that reliance on Tibetan teachers alone would impede the development of Tibetan Bon and Buddhism in the West. To support this view, they first suggested that Tibetan teachers have their own financial, personal, and cultural issues to deal with in the West. This includes the fact that they are faced with the starkly different behavior of Westerners, many of whom are women, who have complex lives that are not easy for Tibetans to understand or to interact with.<sup>137</sup> I should note here, however, that this idea of a “complex” Westerner and a “simple” Tibetan is also tainted by an Orientalist notion. In relation to the financial and cultural issues mentioned above, participants noted that many Tibetan Buddhists and Bon monasteries in Asia are supported by the funds raised in the West, which goes mostly to support

---

<sup>136</sup> Baumann, “Buddhism in Switzerland,” 159.

<sup>137</sup> Daniel Cozort, “The Making of the Western Lama,” in *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003), 222.

monasteries where the great majority are monks and where women have a secondary role to play, if any.<sup>138</sup>

### 3.5.1 BUDDHIST MODERNISM

These unique characteristics of Buddhism in the West point to what McMahan refers to as “modern Buddhism.” He suggests we talk about “Buddhist modernism” rather than “Western Buddhism” because of its key issues, such as scientific intellectualism and romanticism. Buddhist modernism refers to “forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity.”<sup>139</sup> It refers to a global Buddhist phenomenon mentioned above that focuses on meditation while de-emphasizing ritual, mythology, and hierarchy.<sup>140</sup>

One feature of this Buddhist modernism is that the participant does not have to follow strict rules to be a Buddhist or believe in any religious tenet in particular (in this context, meditation is not considered as a “religious practice”). McMahan, focusing mostly on Buddhism in North America, identifies three characteristics that separate traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism: detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization. Detraditionalization denotes the elimination of traditional aspects of a religion; demythologization refers to separating elements related to the cosmological and

---

<sup>138</sup> On issues related to woman’s role in Tibetan Buddhism, see: Janet Gyatso, “Female Ordination in Buddhism: Looking into a Crystal Ball, Making a Future,” *Mohr, T. & J. Tsedroen. Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns. Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2010*; Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen, *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns* (Simon and Schuster, 2010).

<sup>139</sup> David L. McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>140</sup> See: McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism*, 2008.

historical accounts of the religion from the philosophical, canonical and ethical aspects of it. Psychologization refers to selecting certain aspects of a religion, and transforming them in line with Western psychological approaches. This all points to the emergence of a “new Buddhism,” a hybrid Buddhism whose success relates, he argues, to a widespread loss of faith in Christianity, potentially leading to the “disenchantment of the world”<sup>141</sup> and a sense of meaninglessness. The participants I interviewed for this research report extensively on these issues (see Chapters 5 and 6). It is worth asking whether disenchantment and meaninglessness are still the problems they seemed to be thirty to forty years ago. I think they still are, to some extent, since some participants whom I interviewed emphasized these aspects of disenchantment and seeking spiritual therapy as a cause for looking for spiritual guidance and finding Bon. But the data also show that there are some Western followers in Bon whose motivations are not simply to seek a therapeutic or spiritual path to “self-fulfillment” but who have made a significant commitment to study Bon teachings and to practice over a sustained period, even a period of several years. “Western bonpos” are not a single entity with an identical motivation or method of making meaning. They make sense of the Bon teachings and practices in an array of ways, individually and collectively interpreting and negotiating their own understanding and application. It is true that some participants came to Bon after becoming disenchanted with their own traditions. But others participants did not; they were not naively “enchanted” with an Eastern tradition, nor were they using Buddhist meditation practices as “spiritual therapy” techniques. This shows how rich and diverse the approaches and experiences are. Some people could be defined as sympathizers or “night-stand bonpos,” a term coined by Tweed (mimicking the phrase “night-stand Buddhist”). He is referring to Westerners who “sympathize” with Buddhism in different ways—they meditate or they decorate their house with statues of

---

<sup>141</sup> The phrase “disenchantment of the world” was borrowed from Friedrich Schiller by Max Weber, see: Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 270.

Buddha or they read popular Buddhist books—but they never formally convert to Buddhism nor do they describe or identify themselves as Buddhists.<sup>142</sup>

Other issues that Tweed touches upon include the belief among Westerners that meditation is a main Buddhist practice, ignoring the fact that, in traditional Asia, Buddhist practice is mostly aimed at either accumulating merit and/or is a part of a variety of rituals. Referring to Asian Buddhism, Cozort writes, “Meditation is always said to be important, but there is little time for it in the monastery.”<sup>143</sup> As Lopez remarks, this emphasis on meditation signified a drastic change of modern Buddhism in relation to how Buddhism is practiced, particularly, in Asian countries, where meditation was one practice among other and not necessarily massive, even in monastic institutions.<sup>144</sup>

Finally, a trend that is common in Buddhism and Bon in the West, as pointed out by the participants of this research, is that “Westerners clearly want to try what they have heard is the ‘highest’ teaching, and at least at this point, Tibetan lamas do not seem concerned about the problems that might ensue.”<sup>145</sup> While most research on meditation practices focuses on the benefits of meditation on different aspects such as health, well-being, and so on, negative impacts related to meditation practices have received much less attention. A recent study<sup>146</sup> conducted at Brown University and the University of California in the United States that has been widely reported in the media highlights challenging or

---

<sup>142</sup> See: Thomas A. Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>143</sup> Cozort, “The Making of the Western Lama,” 238.

<sup>144</sup> See: David S. Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings From East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

<sup>145</sup> Cozort, “The Making of the Western Lama,” 238.

<sup>146</sup> Jared R. Lindahl et al., “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Challenges in Western Buddhists,” *PLoS One* 12, no. 5 (2017): e0176239.



difficult experiences associated with Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices in Western countries. However, this study, as it was published in the media, focused only on people who said that they had negative experiences through meditation rather than on all people who meditate.<sup>147</sup>

A final point worth mentioning is that, in line with what Baumann describes as a characteristic aspect of most modern Buddhist interpretations, bonpos in the West emphasize a “return the essentials,” i.e, Dzogchen, catalogued as the timeless, pure, and original teachings of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. And as Baumann points out, referencing Troeltsh, “a determination of the essentials is actually the construction of an ideal.”<sup>148</sup>

### 3.5.1.1 CONTROVERSIES: WHEN THE IRON BIRD CRASHES<sup>149</sup>

The time of romantic ideas and enchantment with Tibet seems to be, at least in some spheres, coming to an end, as several scandals in recent years involving high-profile Tibetan lamas have negatively affected the image of Tibetan Buddhist orders around the world.<sup>150</sup> These scandals have a bigger impact today

---

<sup>147</sup> Ausiàs Josep Cebolla i Martí et al., “Unwanted Effects: Is There a Negative Side of Meditation? A Multicentre Survey,” *Plos One*, 2017, Vol. 12, Num. 9, 2017; “Does Meditation Carry a Risk of Harmful Side Effects?,” nhs.uk, May 26, 2017, <https://www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/does-meditation-carry-a-risk-of-harmful-side-effects/>; “The Dangers of Meditation,” Mail Online, May 24, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~/article-4538240/index.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Baumann, “Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe,” 130.

<sup>149</sup> This phrase is taken from the website: Shaun Bartone, “When the Iron Bird Crashes: Tibetan Buddhism in the West and ‘Idiot Devotion,’” *Engage!* (blog), March 1, 2015, <https://engagedharma.net/2015/03/01/when-the-iron-bird-crashes-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west-and-idiot-devotion/> and refers to Buddhism and meditation being “promoted [in the West] as a non-religious ‘science of mind,’” but then Buddhist organizations ask Western practitioners to “accept uncritically” the teachings of Buddhist teachers and the experience of the master-disciple relationship, which exposes the practitioner to abuses of power.

<sup>150</sup> See for example: American Buddhist Perspectives, “A Storm Is Coming: Tibetan Buddhism in the West,” *American Buddhist Perspectives* (blog), November 15, 2017,

than they would have had some forty or fifty years ago, due to the Internet and the ability of information to travel fast and far. Two of the most high-profile scandals that have shaken the image of Tibetan Buddhism in the West are the cases of Sogyal Rinpoche (discussed further below) and Kalu Rinpoche. In 2011, Kalu openly said in a YouTube video that he was sexually abused at the age of twelve by older monks from the monastery where he lived.<sup>151</sup>

One of the latest scandals involves accusations of sexual misconduct and abuse against the former spiritual leader of Shambhala International, Sakyong Mipham. As a consequence of the accusations by his students, he recently resigned as the head of the organization, as did the nine members of the organization's governing body, the Kalapa Council. Andrea Winn's "Project Sunshine Report," an exhaustively researched report, details allegations of abuse and cover-up by members of the organization.<sup>152</sup>

By the beginning of the 1990s, several scandals had already occurred among Buddhist groups in the West, including with Shambhala's founder, Chogyam Trungpa, who has been described as "a well-known womanizer and alcoholic,"<sup>153</sup>

---

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2017/11/a-storm-is-coming-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west.html>; Anna Sawerthal, "Abuse and Buddhism: Behind the Smiling Façade," accessed August 10, 2018, [https://info-buddhism.com/Abuse\\_and\\_Buddhism-Behind\\_the\\_Smiling\\_Facade-Anna\\_Sawerthal.html](https://info-buddhism.com/Abuse_and_Buddhism-Behind_the_Smiling_Facade-Anna_Sawerthal.html); Sarah Marsh, "Buddhist Group Admits Sexual Abuse by Teachers," *The Guardian*, March 5, 2018, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/05/buddhist-group-admits-sexual-abuse-by-teachers>; Mary Finnigan, "The Lamas Who Give Tibetan Buddhism a Bad Name | Mary Finnigan," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2012, sec. Opinion, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/oct/08/tibetan-lamas-buddhism>.

<sup>151</sup> The video with the disclosure is available at: Kalu Rinpoche, *Confessions of Kalu Rinpoche*, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ka3bENirs>.

<sup>152</sup> See: Andrea Winn, "Buddhist Project Sunshine," *Http://Andreamwinn.Com/Offerings* (blog), February 26, 2017, [http://andreamwinn.com/offerings/project\\_sunshine/](http://andreamwinn.com/offerings/project_sunshine/).

<sup>153</sup> Tenpel, "Links Relevant To The Current Crisis In Shambhala International Regarding Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche's Conduct With Women," *Tibetan Buddhism—Struggling With Diffi-Cult Issues*

and later with his American disciple, Thomas Rich, appointed in 1976 as his successor. Rich was given the Tibetan name Ösel Tendzin and was the heir of Trungpa's "spiritual and administrative authority." A scandal occurred in 1988 when members of the board of directors revealed that Ösel Tendzin was HIV-positive. Moreover, he had known of his condition for at least four years, but, according to Bell, he "had continued to practice unprotected sex with male, and some female, members of the Sangha."<sup>154</sup> One of the young men with whom Ösel Tendzin had unprotected sex later contracted AIDS and died, after passing the infection on to a girlfriend. It also came to light that members of the board had known about the regent's condition for some time, though they had taken no action."<sup>155</sup> In 1990, Ösel Tendzin went into retreat and died a few months later.<sup>156</sup>

Trungpa is the founder of Naropa University, a "practitioner-friendly"<sup>157</sup> institute where "Trungpa realized his vision of creating a university that would combine contemplative studies with traditional Western scholastic and artistic disciplines."<sup>158</sup> In this context, it is noteworthy that many Tibetologists are themselves followers of a particular Tibetan school of Buddhism, something that also influences their perspectives.

---

(blog), June 30, 2018, <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2018/06/30/links-relevant-to-the-current-crisis-in-shambhala-international-regarding-sakyong-mipham-rinpoches-conduct-with-women/>.

<sup>154</sup> The Sanskrit word *sangha* (or *samgha*) refers, in the context of this research, to a Buddhist or bonpo "community." For instance, participants refer to the "Shenten sangha," meaning the entire group of lay and monastic Bon followers that attend or are part of the Shenten community.

<sup>155</sup> Sandra Bell, "Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 234.

<sup>156</sup> Bell, 234–35.

<sup>157</sup> See more at: Robert E. Goss, "Buddhist Studies at Naropa: Sectarian or Academic?," *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, 1999, 215–37.

<sup>158</sup> See: "Naropa University," Naropa University, accessed October 23, 2018, [https://www.naropa.edu/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIwrD73t2c3gIVl4XVChoH3gEXEAAYASAAEgIQufD\\_BwE](https://www.naropa.edu/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIwrD73t2c3gIVl4XVChoH3gEXEAAYASAAEgIQufD_BwE).

As mentioned, several “scandals” recently came to light, including one involving the famous Sogyal Rinpoche, founder of the Rigpa network of centers and groups, who was called by Bell a “criminal tantric lama.”<sup>159</sup> Marion Dapsance’s critical work regarding Sogyal Rinpoche’s Rigpa center and the publication of her PhD thesis (and later on, a book<sup>160</sup>) opened a heated debate. Critics of Dapsance’s work seemed determined to treat her book as an attack on Buddhism itself and the seriousness of her research was questioned openly.<sup>161</sup> In fact, her book and the responses to it are an example of how Buddhist institutions in the West are perceived by their supporters and critics, where support and condemnations are far more than intellectual issues, belonging to the sphere of personal subjective beliefs. Dapsance’s research was criticized by some<sup>162</sup> but also welcomed by others who claimed it was time to openly discuss these claims of abusive behaviors. Dapsance explained that Rigpa, Sogyal’s center, was not what Westerners think of Buddhism. She says:

The Asian masters propose rituals that are very complex and in the Tibetan language. They summon deities and demand absolute devotion to the master. I realized that I was being confronted with a culture shock that could give rise to misunderstandings and disillusionment. I continued to attend the Buddhist lessons, but [only] in order to investigate.... The whole organization is dedicated to the master’s personal well-being. I had access to the guidelines containing the procedures to be followed to satisfy Sogyal Rinpoche. Among other

---

<sup>159</sup> Bell, 123–35.

<sup>160</sup> Marion Dapsance, *Les dévots du bouddhisme* (Paris: Éditions Max Milo, 2016).

<sup>161</sup> See for example: Philippe Cornu, “Quand le bouddhisme est attaqué,” *Le monde des religions*, accessed November 23, 2018, [http://www.lemondedesreligions.fr/une/philippe-cornu-quand-le-bouddhisme-est-attaque-02-11-2016-5921\\_115.php](http://www.lemondedesreligions.fr/une/philippe-cornu-quand-le-bouddhisme-est-attaque-02-11-2016-5921_115.php).

<sup>162</sup> Claire Lesegretain, “Polémique autour d’un livre hostile au bouddhisme tibétain,” *La Croix*, January 30, 2017, sec. Religion, /Religion/France/Polemique-autour-livre-hostile-bouddhisme-tibetain-2017-01-30-1200821119.

recommendations, he needs to have a heated pool nearby, a double bed, and a special brand of tea, beef-based meals, and a chauffeured Mercedes. He also needs access to CNN wherever he goes, and has a cook and masseuse on call 24 hours a day. Rather surprising for a spirituality that rejects materialism.<sup>163</sup>

In her thesis, Dapsance notes that Sogyal was involved in a legal dispute in 1994 in the United States. A young woman had filed a suit alleging sexual abuse and violence at a Rigpa center and denouncing the Dalai Lama for “closing his eyes” to the abuse. The U.S. justice system allows out-of-court settlements, and it is assumed that the master put up a large sum of money for the former dakini<sup>164</sup> to drop the allegations. The scandal caused Sogyal Rinpoche, founder of Rigpa International, to resign from his position as spiritual leader of the sangha. Furthermore, eight of his students wrote a twelve-page letter in which they detailed his alleged abuses. They discussed four kinds of abuse: physical abuse resulting in injury; sexual abuse and exploitation; psychological abuse; and financial abuse involving appropriation of donations for his own benefit.<sup>165</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Marion Dapsance, “Submission, Devotion and Sexual Abuse: My Investigation of Buddhism in France,” *Tibetan Buddhism—Struggling With Diffi-Cult Issues* (blog), December 1, 2016, <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2016/12/01/submission-devotion-and-sexual-abuse-my-investigation-of-buddhism-in-france/>.

<sup>164</sup> *Dakini* in Sanskrit, or *khandro* in Tibetan, is a term that refers to a type of being that is often represented as consorts of enlightened male beings. In the Yungdrung Bon tradition, there are many accounts of accomplished Khandros, who were sometimes consorts of enlightened beings. Sidpa Gyälmo, the Queen of the Universe, is considered as the chief wrathful protector deity of Yungdrung Bon, and she is believed to manifest in different forms, including as Sherab Chamma taking a wrathful form. There were Khandros considered as tertons or treasures discoverers, such as Dechen Wangmo. For more on a bonpo perspective on Khandros, see: Alejandro Chaoul, *Chod Practice in the Bon Tradition* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2009); Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Heart Essence of the Khandro: Experiential Instructions on Bonpo Dzogchen - Thirty Signs and Meanings from Women Lineage-Holders*, ed. Ermakov Dmitry, Carol Ermakovi, and Gelek Jinpa (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers; First edition, 2012).

<sup>165</sup> Tenpel, “Abuse: Letter To Sogyal Rinpoche From Long Term Rigpa Students,” *Tibetan Buddhism—Struggling With Diffi-Cult Issues* (blog), July 22, 2017, <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2017/07/22/abuse-letter-to-sogyal-rinpoche-from-long-term-rigpa-students/>.

Dapsance further notices how meditation, presented to Europeans as the essence of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, is actually unknown in most Asian religious Buddhist settings.<sup>166</sup> Several debates on the web followed the scandals mentioned above, including by defending or attacking, as well as analyzing from a more critical perspective the situations described and the impact that these scandals might have over the image of Tibetan Buddhism in general.<sup>167</sup> In all of the scandals and allegations of abuse, the main point emphasized by victims and others is the master–student relationship, which is central in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon organizations. Sandra Bell notes that these relationships involve complete devotion to the teacher, which can cause emotional attachment “with feelings that parallel those associated in Western culture with romantic love and its stress on self-abandonment and glorification of the other.”<sup>168</sup> Therefore, “without careful management there is always a danger of manipulation of the

---

<sup>166</sup> Anne Both, “Les bouddhistes français loin du nirvana,” *Le Monde.fr*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/11/09/les-bouddhistes-francais-loin-du-nirvana\\_5028370\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/11/09/les-bouddhistes-francais-loin-du-nirvana_5028370_3260.html).

<sup>167</sup> See for example: Sawerthal, “Abuse and Buddhism”; The Editors, “New Allegations of Sexual Abuse Raise Old Questions,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, July 25, 2017, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/new-allegations-sexual-abuse-raise-old-questions/>; Lobsang Rapgay, “Opinion: How Rigpa Can Redeem Itself in the Wake of Sogyal Rinpoche’s Resignation,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, September 20, 2017, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/opinion-how-rigpa-can-redeem-itself-in-the-wake-of-sogyal-rinpoches-resignation/>; Geneviève Delrue, “Le bouddhisme sans concession, de Marion Dapsance,” February 18, 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20180218-religion-bouddhisme-dapsance-islam-bajrafil-linguiste-theologien-imam>; Mick Brown, “Sexual Assaults and Violent Rages... Inside the Dark World of Buddhist Teacher Sogyal Rinpoche,” *The Telegraph* (blog), accessed August 10, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/sexual-assaults-violent-rages-inside-dark-world-buddhist-teacher/>; Rod Meade Sperry, “Sogyal Rinpoche to Enter ‘Period of Retreat and Reflection’ Following Allegations of Abuse -...,” *Lion’s Roar* (blog), July 21, 2017, <https://www.lionsroar.com/rigpa-press-release-responds-to-allegations-of-abuses-by-sogyal-rinpoche/>; Justin Whitaker, “The Merit of Pointing out Abuse in Buddhism: Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche,” accessed August 10, 2018, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2017/08/the-merit-of-pointing-out-abuse-in-buddhism-dzongsar-khyentse-rinpoche.html>; Bartone, “When the Iron Bird Crashes,” March 1, 2015; See for example: Shaun Bartone, “When the Iron Bird Crashes: Tibetan Buddhism in the West and ‘Idiot Devotion’ Pt. 2,” *Engage!* (blog), February 26, 2015, <https://engagedharma.net/2015/02/26/when-the-iron-bird-crash-lands-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west-and-idiot-devotion/>.

<sup>168</sup> Bell, “Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism,” 239.

student by the teacher, or that the teacher will succumb to sexually flirtatious students.”<sup>169</sup>

In a book dedicated to discernment on the spiritual path, Caplan discusses what discernment means and the dangers associated with being in a relationship with a spiritual teacher in the modern West.<sup>170</sup> The term “Spiritual bypassing,” a concept that comes from psychotherapy, refers in this context to the use of spiritual practices to avoid pain, and it is considered a potentially harmful behavior that can result in “extreme detachments, numbing of our emotions, the inability to allow for negative feelings, especially anger, lack of boundaries, and an overdeveloped rational way of seeing the world.”<sup>171</sup> American clinical psychologist John Welwood writes, “When people use spiritual practice to try and compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice.”<sup>172</sup>

### 3.6 OVERVIEW OF THE BON RELIGION

In order to analyze how Bon is being transmitted and by whom, as well as who Western bonpos are, we first need to look at what Bon is. However, this has been subject to considerable debate.

---

<sup>169</sup> Bell, 239.

<sup>170</sup> See more at: M. Caplan, *Eyes Wide Open: Cultivating Discernment on the Spiritual Path* (Sounds True, 2009).

<sup>171</sup> Robert A. Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 194.

<sup>172</sup> John Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 206.

The following section provides an overview of some aspects and key concepts of the Bon religion (to be expanded in Chapters 5 and 6) with a focus on certain aspects that are usually in the spotlight in the field of Bon studies, echoing what Bon religious representatives often highlight about their religion and, consequently, what Bon followers in the West also emphasize when defining Bon. These are:

1. Bon is presented as the original religion of Tibet.
2. In Bon history, the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zhung is viewed as the land of origin from where the teachings were later propagated to Tibet, in contrast to Buddhists who regard India as the land of origin of Buddhism.<sup>173</sup>
3. The central Buddha of Bon is considered to be Tonpa Shenrab,<sup>174</sup> who, according to Bon doctrine, predates Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.
4. Dzogchen<sup>175</sup> is the core of Bon teachings, and the ultimate path toward liberation, and Bon adherents consider it to be “the most revered system

---

<sup>173</sup> For more on the dominant point of view among researchers on the idea of Zhang Zhung, see: Per Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” in *Tibetan Subjectivities on the Global Stage: Negotiating Dispossession*, ed. Shelly Bhoil and Enrique Galvan-Alvarez (Rowman & Littlefield, n.d.), 3–22; See also: John V. Bellezza, “Zhang Zhung, Foundations of Civilisation in Tibet,” *Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften*, 2008; John Vincent Bellezza, “Zhang Zhung,” *Foundation of Civilization in Tibet. Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* 368 (2008); John Vincent Bellezza, *Antiquities of Northern Tibet: Pre-Buddhist Archaeological Discoveries on the High Plateau: Findings of the Changthang Circuit Expedition, 1999* (Adroit Publishers, 2001); Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, *The Light of Kailash: A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet. Vol. 1. The Early Period* (Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2009); Namkhai Norbu, *Drung, Deu, and Bön: Narrations, Symbolic Languages, and the Bön Traditions in Ancient Tibet* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1995); Mark Aldenderfer and Holley Moyes, “In the Valley of the Eagle,” *Expedition—University of Pennsylvania, Museum of Archaeology* 47 (2005): 28–34; Mark Aldenderfer, “Defining Zhang Zhung Ethnicity: An Archaeological Perspective from Far Western Tibet,” *Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas*, 2007, 1–21; Tsering Thar, “The Ancient Zhang Zhung Civilization,” *Bod-Ljongs Zhib-'jug* 1 (1989): 90–104.

<sup>174</sup> Wylie: *ston pa gshen rab*, which literally means Teacher Shenrab.

<sup>175</sup> Wylie: *rdzogs chen*.



of thought and practice among the ancient Buddhist and Bon traditions of Tibet.”<sup>176</sup>

The majority of modern Western Tibetologists distinguish two types of Bon: the ancient form of Bon, active prior to and during the seventh and eighth centuries, when it was suppressed in order to be replaced by Buddhism in Tibet; and a form of Bon that, according to these Tibetologists, is a mere reworking of Buddhism and is similar to the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Achard, however, indicates that Bon representatives, including Namdak, reject these categories.<sup>177</sup> According to Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, Bon can be divided into three main categories:

1. Primitive Bon: the religion that existed in Tibet before the entrance of the Yungdrung Bon religion. This early form of Bon was not written down and was not supported by any formal philosophical system.
2. Yungdrung Bon: the religion that was introduced into Tibet from Zhang Zhung and constituted the official religion of the kingdom of Tibet until the seventh or eighth century. It is the religion contained in the Bon *Tengyur* and *Katen* (see below).
3. New Bon: the tradition that started as a consequence of the persecution of Bon by Buddhists in the eighth century. According to

---

<sup>176</sup> Anne C. Klein and Tenzin Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>177</sup> See: Jean-Luc Achard, “L’Essence Perlée du Secret-Recherches philologiques et historiques sur l’origine de la Grande Perfection dans la tradition mying-ma-pa,” *Annales de l’École pratique des hautes études* 110, no. 106 (1997): 215–39; See also: Samten G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 220–23.

Namdak, it later became an eclectic tradition, combining elements of Bon and Buddhist teachings.<sup>178</sup>

Snellgrove further says that Bon is “a heterodox form of Tibetan Buddhism, being more ancient in its origins than the more orthodox forms of Tibetan Buddhism,”<sup>179</sup> the early literature of which was translated from a language of Zhang Zhung.<sup>180</sup>

In broader terms, Bon can be defined as “Tibet’s non-Buddhist religious system, which traces its own origins to western Tibet and beyond to lands called Olmo Lung Ring<sup>181</sup> and Zhang Zhung in the centuries before Buddhism arrived.”<sup>182</sup>

Jean-Luc Achard expresses the notion that “the Bon religion is generally considered to be the oldest spiritual tradition of Tibet, but what should be properly understood as Bon differs quite widely according to individuals.”<sup>183</sup> In part, this is because there was an intentional approach promoted by Buddhist masters who helped create a specific image of what the Bon religion is, associating it primarily with sanguinary rituals and human sacrifices, based mainly on “poorly documented polemical works filled with partisan opinions.”<sup>184</sup>

---

<sup>178</sup> Yongdzin Rinpoche Lopon Tenzin Namdak, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, a compilation of teachings in France (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>179</sup> David L. Snellgrove, *Bon: The Magic Word*, ed. Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007), 11.

<sup>180</sup> Snellgrove, 11.

<sup>181</sup> Wylie: ‘ol-mo lung-rings.

<sup>182</sup> Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>183</sup> Jean-Luc Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), ix.

<sup>184</sup> Cft: Achard, ix; See also: Per Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition* (Shambhala Publications, 1996), 10.

Indeed, in the earlier travel books on Tibet, Bon was described as “a fusion of animism and shamanistic beliefs.”<sup>185</sup> Categorizing Bon as shamanism was mostly done in pejorative terms, equating Bon to “strange and sinister... the sinister other that is indigenous to Tibet.”<sup>186</sup> Yongdzin Rinpoche says that from the religious perspective, before Tibet was founded as a kingdom, Bon existed in some way: “This way is what we currently refer to as shamanism [but] this has nothing to do with Yungdrung Bon.”<sup>187</sup>

Furthermore, the word “Bon” can mean different things, according to where and how it is used. Uray noted that there are only the following meanings that can be attributed with certitude to “Bon”: to ask; to give, offer, and possibly also to murmur, recite prayers and charms; as well as to invoke, summon and call.<sup>188</sup>

Stein emphasizes that the word “bon,” which refers to ancient “*bon pos*” as mentioned in Dunhuang texts, is not equivalent to the word Bon designating the institutionalized religion as it came to be in the eleventh century<sup>189</sup> and that

---

<sup>185</sup> Andrew N. Woznicki, *Transcendent Mystery in Man: A Global Approach to Ecumenism* (Academica Press, LLC, 2007), 58.

<sup>186</sup> Zeff Bjerken, “Exorcising the Illusion of Bon ‘Shamans’: A Critical Genealogy of Shamanism in Tibetan Religions,” *Revue d’études Tibétaines*, 2004, 30; On Bon and Shamanism, see also: Per Kværne, “Bon and Shamanism,” *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 19–24.

<sup>187</sup> Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, quoted in Andrew N. Woznicki, *Transcendent Mystery in Man: A Global Approach to Ecumenism* (Academica Press, LLC, 2007), 58.

<sup>188</sup> Uray Geza, “The Old Tibetan Verb Bon.,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 3, no. 17 (1964): 334; See also: Stanimir Kaloyanov, “Irano-Tibetica: Some Observations on the Tibetan Bon,” *The Tibet Journal* 15, no. 1 (1990): 77–78.

<sup>189</sup> Rolf Alfred Stein, “Tibetica Antiqua V: La Religion Indigène et Les Bon-Po Dans Les Manuscrits de Touen-Houang,” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, no. 77 (1988): 27–56. The article can be accessed in English language at: Rolf Alfred Stein, “Tibetica Antiqua V. The Indigenous Religion And The Bon Po In Dunhuang Manuscripts,” in *Tibetica Antiqua* (London: Brill, 2010), 231–72. For an analysis of the word Bon and Chos in the Tibetan imperial period, including an overview of the references to these words found among the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave, see: Sam Van Schaik, “The Naming of Tibetan Religion: Bon and Chos in the Tibetan Imperial Period,” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1 (2013): 227–57.

claims “to continue the tradition of the ancient priests.”<sup>190</sup> Bellezza notes that indeed, “the term Bon/bon has proven a loaded term, one engendering quite a bit of scholarly controversy in the last half century.”<sup>191</sup> As Kvaerne notes, in Western scholarship, Bon can refer to the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, as mentioned above, which, among other characteristics, focused on the person of the king. Our knowledge about this early form of Bon is rather fragmented; the only thing we can say for sure is that its religious system differed from today’s Yungdrung Bon or Tibetan Buddhism. Bon can also refer to the institutionalized religion that appeared in the tenth and eleventh centuries in Tibet, following “the rediscovery and recreation of texts supposedly hidden during a wave of persecution in the late 8th century CE.”<sup>192</sup> This religion, referred to as Yungdrung Bon, has much in common with Tibetan Buddhism, sharing ethical, doctrinal, and philosophical aspects related to mysticism.<sup>193</sup> Karmay further adds that “there was no such teaching in Tibet as ‘pure’ as some Tibetan Buddhists might like to claim. In other words, Bon and Tibetan Buddhism are like two sides of the same coin—on viewing, one must also turn it over to see what is on the other side.”<sup>194</sup> Finally, Bon can also refer to what Stein called “the nameless religion,” namely, a formless corpus of popular beliefs, including on divination, the cult of local deities as well as conceptions of the soul.<sup>195</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 6.

<sup>191</sup> See: John Vincent Bellezza, “A Better Definition of Bon in 508 Words,” *Tibet Archaeology* (blog), accessed October 26, 2018, <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/october-2015/> See also: Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 4.

<sup>192</sup> Bellezza, “A Better Definition of Bon in 508 Words.”

<sup>193</sup> Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 9.

<sup>194</sup> Karmay, “A Historical Overview of the Bon Religion,” 55.

<sup>195</sup> Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 10.

Bon can also refer to localized religious traditions that are practiced in the Hindu Kush, Pamirs, Siberia, Mongolia, and China, and that may or may not be related to the ancient bon of Tibet.<sup>196</sup>

Yungdrung, the Tibetan term for the ancient figure of a swastika, evokes what bonpos called the “eternal and indestructible nature” of the Bon religion.

A common classification of Bon doctrine is system known as the “The Nine Ways of Bon.”<sup>197</sup> Within these Nine Ways, the first four “Lower Ways” contain Bon teachings related to day-to-day life, including astrology, rituals, medicine, and so on, distinguished from the “Higher” five ways, which focus on “enlightenment” and “liberation”). Bellezza notes that these first four vehicles of Bon have many characteristics in their customs, rituals, and historical views that predate the eleventh century CE and that “in their earlier forms these non-Buddhist traditions do not appear to have constituted a fully institutionalized or systematized religion.”<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>196</sup> Bellezza, “A Better Definition of Bon in 508 Words.”

<sup>197</sup> The Nine Ways are as follows: 1. The Way of the Shen of Prediction (phywa gshen theg pa), concerned with divination, astrology, diagnosis and healing techniques; 2. The Way of the Shen of the Visual World (snang gshen theg pa) concerned with protection rituals and exorcism; 3. The Way of the Shen of Illusion, (‘phrul gShen theg pa) concerned with rituals and techniques to overcome negative forces; 4. The Way of the Shen of Existence (srid gShen theg pa), which contains explanations on funerary rituals; 5. The Way of the Virtuous Adherers (dge snyen theg pa) containing rules for lay followers; 6. The Way of the Great Ascetics (drang srong theg pa), concerned with rules for monastic discipline; 7. The Way of Pure Sound (A dkar theg pa), with tantric practices; 8. The Way of the Primeval Shen (Ye gShen theg pa) including higher tantric practices based on the Generation and Perfection stages; 9. The Supreme Way (bla med theg pa, i.e. Dzogchen). See: David L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); Donatella Rossi, *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion* (Snow Lion Publications, 2000), 20–1, n. 19. For a comparative description of the Nine Ways in the Bon tradition and in the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingmapa tradition, see: Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion* (Routledge, 2017), table 6.1.

<sup>198</sup> Bellezza, “A Better Definition of Bon in 508 Words.”

The Bon scriptures or “Bon canon” is traditionally divided into the Kangyur,<sup>199</sup> which refers to the words of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of the Bon religion, and the Katen,<sup>200</sup> or “what relied on the Word,”<sup>201</sup> sometimes the so-called “Tibetan Bonpo Tenjur.”<sup>202</sup> The Katen is presented in bonpo websites as containing “commentaries of all kinds that rely on the Buddha’s Words”<sup>203</sup> from various succeeding masters throughout history.<sup>204</sup>

The Kangyur contains texts related to monastic discipline, ethics, and the like, as well as sutras. Sutra is a Sanskrit word (in Tibetan Wylie: *mdo*) often translated as “discourse,” or as “threads,” that it is used to label texts that are believed to contain the words of the Buddha. In Buddhism, a sutra is a part of the canonical literature, divided into what is called “the three baskets,”<sup>205</sup> a well-known division consisting of the discourses or sutra, the discipline or vinaya,<sup>206</sup> and tantra.<sup>207</sup> In Bon, the texts regulating the monastic life (which correspond to what in Buddhism is called vinaya) are part of the sutra section, and although it presents

---

<sup>199</sup> Wylie: *bka’-gyur*.

<sup>200</sup> Wylie: *bKa’brten*.

<sup>201</sup> See: Yasuhiko Nagano, “Preface,” in *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, ed. Martin Dan and Per Kvaerne, vol. 24, Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies 4, 5 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003).

<sup>202</sup> See Karmay’s forward at: Yasuhiko Nagano and Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, eds., *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*, Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies 25 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), Foreward.

<sup>203</sup> See: “The Scriptures,” accessed April 8, 2019, [http://www.triten.org/TR/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=63](http://www.triten.org/TR/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=63) The version of the Bon Katen hosted in the Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, belongs to the version of the Katen that was published in 1998 in Lhasa, which contains over 300 volumes.

<sup>204</sup> For a critical assessment of a history of the “Bon Canon” and for an overview of its content, see: Nagano and Karmay, *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*; Martin Dan, Per Kvaerne, and Yasuhiko Nagano, eds., *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, vol. 24, Senri Ethnological Reports 4, 5 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003).

<sup>205</sup> Tibetan Wylie: *sde snod gsum*.

<sup>206</sup> Tibetan Wylie: *’dul ba*.

<sup>207</sup> Tibetan Wylie: *rGyud*.

similarities to the Buddhist monastic rules, it also has unique characteristics peculiar to bonpos.<sup>208</sup> In the Bon canon, moreover, some confessional and consecrational texts are included in the sutra section as well,<sup>209</sup> and some texts that are considered tantric are classified as sutra. In fact, all the sutras of the Bon canon contain tantric elements.<sup>210</sup> In a Bon context, Ligmincha International refers to sutra as “teachings that came directly from the historical Buddha. The teachings of sutra are based on the path of renunciation and form the base of monastic life.”<sup>211</sup>

Sutra, as presented in Bon texts, is one of the three main methods to attain liberation from samsara; the methods and descriptions corresponding to the sutra way are explained in the Fifth and Sixth Ways of Bon. The sutra path is considered the slowest of the three methods, in contrast to tantra and Dzogchen, which are the fastest “due to the lack of division into development stages of the practice; a direct attempt is made to recognise the nature of the mind.”<sup>212</sup>

The Kangyur also contains the three versions of the biography of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. In the longer version of these three, as explained above, the teachings of

---

<sup>208</sup> See: Ulrike Roesler, “The Vinaya of the Bon Tradition,” in *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, ed. Hanna Havnevik and Charles Ramble (Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2015), 432–48.

<sup>209</sup> Martin Dan, “Introduction,” in *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, ed. Per Kvaerne and Yasuhiko Nagano, vol. 24, *Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies* 4, 5 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, n.d.).

<sup>210</sup> Dan Martin, “The Emergence of Bon and the Tibetan Polemical Tradition” (Indiana University, 1991), 107. For instance, what we may call the “bonpo version of the Kālacakra” tantra is classified in the Bon canon as a sutra, see: Charles Ramble, “The Assimilation of Astrology in the Tibetan Bon Religion,” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes*, 2013, 210.

<sup>211</sup> “Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International,” accessed January 17, 2019, <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/boen-buddhism/resources/glossary-of-bon-terms.html>.

<sup>212</sup> Jacek Trzebuniak, “Magic in The Nine Ways of Bon,” *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2014): 219.

Yundgrung Bon are explained within the context of nine different ways, or vehicles. The first four are classified as The Causal Ways, or the Bon of Causes. These include teachings referring to ethics, astrology, medicine, and so on. The following four are known as the Ways of the Result, or the Bon of the Fruit. The Ninth Way contains the teachings of Dzogchen, considered the highest philosophical, doctrinal, and meditational practices of Bon.<sup>213</sup>

According to Dzogchen teachings, all sentient beings exist in a state of awareness that is primordial pure. The primordial purity of the mind is believed to be empty and free of defilements. All sentient beings are intrinsically living in that state of purity and emptiness but are not aware of it due to emotions and thoughts. A classical example given in Dzogchen teachings is that of a mirror, which reflects whatever is in front of it, but its essence is never modified by any of it.

The translation of the term “Dzogchen,” usually rendered as “the Great Perfection,” has different variants. Scholars such as Anne Klein and Dan Martin choose to translate this term as “Great Perfectedness” rather than “Great Perfection” or “Great Completion.” The latter two would imply “a process that would lead toward utter perfection,”<sup>214</sup> while Great Perfectedness refers to something that is already perfected.<sup>215</sup>

---

<sup>213</sup> Karmay delineates a history of the emergence and development of Dzogchen, where he links it with the history of Buddhist tantrism in Tibet. He points out that it is not clear whether Dzogchen as a philosophical branch existed before the eighth century, but he asserts that it was around that time that Dzogchen, originally coming from the tantras was putted as the highest or ninth “atiyoga” of the nine categories of Buddhist doctrines, elaborated in that period. It was only at the tenth century, he argues, that Dzogchen became mainstreamed as a philosophical doctrine, in parallel to tantric Buddhism in that same period. See: Samten G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 10–13. See also: Rossi, *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*, 21–22.

<sup>214</sup> Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*, 1:14.

<sup>215</sup> Martin, 1:14.



In Dzogchen teachings, our ultimate nature is said to be pure primordial awareness, which has no form of its own but is capable of perceiving, experiencing, reflecting, or expressing all forms. Dzogchen also designates a meditation practice and body of teachings aimed at helping an individual to recognize the “Natural State of the Mind,” which is “the original, primordial abiding mode of the Mind... endowed with primordially pure Essence, a spontaneously accomplished Nature, and an all-embracing Compassion.”<sup>216</sup> In this state, which is beyond thoughts, everything is perfect and complete “just as it is”; nothing has to be transformed into something else, nothing has to be perfected. The Natural State of the Mind, bonpos explain, means perfection, clarity, purity, and the already perfected qualities of nature. In Dzogchen practice, the adept obtains self-liberation by recognizing his or her own primordial Natural State and remaining in that state of awareness in which all phenomena are experienced without adding anything to it, without attachment or conceptual labeling.<sup>217</sup> In summary, the Dzogchen practice consists of recognizing that all manifestations are the projection of one’s own mind and the emanation of one’s energy.<sup>218</sup> Dzogchen refers to the self-perfected nature of each individual, which a student has to first discover and become familiarized with, “until all dualistic limitations are overcome.”<sup>219</sup>

According to bonpo narratives, Shenrab Miwo,<sup>220</sup> or Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, regarded as the founder of the institutionalized form of the Bon religion as we

---

<sup>216</sup> Jean-Luc Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 187.

<sup>217</sup> Namdak, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*, 47–49, 93, 99.

<sup>218</sup> Adriano Clemente, *Visionary Encounters: The Dzogchen Teachings of Bönpo Treasure-Revealer Shense Lhaje* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2016), 5.

<sup>219</sup> Clemente, 1.

<sup>220</sup> Wylie: *gshen rab mi bo*.

know it today, and “the ultimate source of all their doctrine,”<sup>221</sup> was born a prince in the royal family of Zhang Zhung, a kingdom in western Tibet.<sup>222</sup> He is believed by bonpos to have lived some eighteen thousand years ago.<sup>223</sup> With the support of the royal family, Yungdrung Bon is believed to have developed in Zhang Zhung for centuries and was finally introduced into Tibet during the reign of Nyatri Tsenpo,<sup>224</sup> considered by Tibetan sources to be the first king of Tibet. From the reign of Nyatri Tsenpo to that of Songtsan Gampo,<sup>225</sup> the thirty-fourth king of Tibet in the seventh century, Bon was the only religion in Tibet, according to bonpos. Kings and their private doctors, they claim, had several Bon spiritual tutors. Most of the spiritual tutors were invited from the neighboring country of Zhang Zhung, and they became supporters of the kings and spread Bon religion in Tibet.<sup>226</sup>

In the historical narratives that bonpos present, the eighth century was marked by tragedy. Under the reigns of King King Trisong Detsen,<sup>227</sup> bonpos were persecuted, repressed, and forced to change their religion to Buddhism or leave the country. As Kvaerne explains, “according to its own historical perspective, Bon was introduced to Tibet many centuries before Buddhism.... It is claimed

---

<sup>221</sup> Charles Ramble, “Gshen Rab Mi Bo,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Jonathan A. Silk (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>222</sup> It is relevant to reference here Kvaerne, who emphasizes that on Zhang Zhung, from an academic point of view, “We know nothing – and it bears repeating: nothing – about what its condition was in cultural or religious terms.” See: Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 8.

<sup>223</sup> For an analysis of Bon texts and the different interpretations made by bonpos on Tonpa Shenrab’s birth date and life span, see: Kalsang Norbu Gurung, “The Emergence of a Myth: In Search of the Origins of the Life Story of Shenrab Miwo, the Founder of Bon” (Leiden University, 2011), 19–25.

<sup>224</sup> Wylie: *gnya’ khri btsan po*.

<sup>225</sup> Wylie: *srong btsan sgam po*.

<sup>226</sup> Tsering Thar, *Nangshig: A Tibetan Bonpo Monastery and Its Family in Amdo* (Vajra Books, 2016), 10–12.

<sup>227</sup> Wylie: *khri srong lde btsan*.

that before reaching Tibet, Bon prospered in a land known as Zhang Zhung.... Zhang Zhung was subsequently converted to Buddhism and assimilated into Tibetan culture, losing not only its independence but also its language and its bonpo religious heritage in the process.”<sup>228</sup> Zhang Zhung, bonpos claim, was totally absorbed by Tibetan culture “to the extent that only its name remain[s] in written sources.”<sup>229</sup> Nevertheless, Zhang Zhung is believed by bonpos to have contributed vastly to the development of Tibetan culture in the early period.<sup>230</sup> It should be noted that the belief that Zhang Zhung was a historical place that made a significant contribution to Tibetan civilization has not been supported by scientific evidence, according to Kvaerne, who regards it as “a new narrative within the Bön religion.”<sup>231</sup> This narrative, he argues, possibly began during the Tibetan exile some fifty years ago, in a context where bonpos “needed to assert their identity in a situation of cultural pressure and rapid and radical social change.”<sup>232</sup>

Bonpos, however, describe Zhang Zhung as a sacred place and consider that most Bon scriptures are translations that were originally written in the Zhang Zhung language; indeed, some of their scriptures begin with words they believe are in Zhang Zhung, a language that “although no one really knows it yet, there is hope, justifiable hope, that we will come to know Zhang-zhung better.”<sup>233</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 187.

<sup>229</sup> Samten G. Karmay, *The Little Luminous Boy: The Oral Tradition from the Land of Zhangzhung Depicted on Two Tibetan Paintings* (Orchid Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>230</sup> Namkhai Norbu, “Preface,” *The Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. Inaugural issue (2013): 7–10.

<sup>231</sup> Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 9.

<sup>232</sup> Kvaerne, 9.

<sup>233</sup> Dan Martin, “Knowing Zhang-Zhung: The Very Idea,” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*, no. 1 (2013): 189. In this article, Martin presents a comprehensive account of existing knowledge on Zhang Zhung language. Bonpos, including Tenzin Namdak and John M.

One of the consequences of the eighth century's tragedy mentioned above was that, in order to save the sacred texts for future generations, many bonpo texts are said to have been concealed as *terma*, "hidden treasures," in different places, including in religious monuments, in the ground, in rocks, and so on. During the Bon revival in the tenth century, the texts are believed to have been re-discovered by *tertons*<sup>234</sup> or "discoverers of treasures" and translated from Zhang Zhung into the Tibetan language over several centuries by scholars and translators.<sup>235</sup>

With the appearance of *terma* texts, a new development started in Tibet, known by Bon historians as "the second flourishing of Bon."<sup>236</sup> Geoffrey Samuel describes this period as the reconstruction of the Bon religion as we know it today, "a process which took place during several centuries and under strong Buddhist influence. This phase was characterized... by the discovery of [a] large number of *terma* texts which provided a mechanism for the gradual transformation and reshaping of the Bon religion."<sup>237</sup> Particularly important for the Bon religion were

---

Reynolds, maintain that Bon texts were translated from the Zhang Zhung language into Tibetan. Blezer claims that linguistically, it is not possible to confirm these claims. See: Henk Blezer, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, and Saraju Rath, "Where to Look for the Origins of Zhang Zhung-Related Scripts?," *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*, no. 1 (2013): 105. See also: Yu-Shan Liu, "Rethinking the Recently 'Discovered' Bon/Zhangzhung Traditions: The Case of Yungdrung Shon Dance (g.Yung Drung Shon Rtsed) | Yushan Liu - Academia.Edu," accessed February 18, 2015, [http://www.academia.edu/8158621/Rethinking\\_the\\_Recently\\_Discovered\\_Bon\\_Zhangzhung\\_Traditions\\_the\\_Case\\_of\\_Yungdrung\\_Shon\\_Dance\\_g.yung\\_drung\\_shon\\_rtsed\\_](http://www.academia.edu/8158621/Rethinking_the_Recently_Discovered_Bon_Zhangzhung_Traditions_the_Case_of_Yungdrung_Shon_Dance_g.yung_drung_shon_rtsed_); Guillaume Jacques, "Zhang-Zhung and Qiangic Languages," in *Linguistic Substrata in Tibet*, vol. 75 (National Museum of Ethnology, 2008), 121–51; Helmut Eimer, *A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms. (Bon Studies. 11). (76)*, vol. 11, *Bon Studies 76* (Osaka: Senri Ethnological Reports, 2010); Karmay, *The Little Luminous Boy: The Oral Tradition from the Land of Zhangzhung Depicted on Two Tibetan Paintings*, 12; Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 13–14.

<sup>234</sup> The Tibetan word *terton* refers to a person who is a "discoverer" of texts that were hidden.

<sup>235</sup> See: Henk Blezer, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, and Saraju Rath, "Where to Look for the Origins of Zhang Zhung-Related Scripts?," *New Horizons in Bon Studies* 3, 2013, 105.

<sup>236</sup> Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*, 2017.

<sup>237</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion* (London: Routledge, 2017), 132.

the discoveries of numerous texts by the *terton* Shenchen Luga<sup>238</sup> (996–1035) in 1017.<sup>239</sup> His discoveries are considered to be the beginning of the later flourishing of the Bon religion.

The introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the seventh century began a long conflict between Bon and Buddhism. The thirty-eighth king of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, organized a famous debate dealing with a controversy between bonpos and Buddhists in Lhasa in the eighth century.<sup>240</sup> According to some sources, bonpos lost the debate. Since that time, Trisong Detsen persecuted bonpos and encouraged the spread of Buddhism. Bonpos were forced to convert to Buddhism or escape and seek refuge in remote places such as Ngari, Khams, and Amdo. The origin of many master lineages and teaching traditions in Amdo can be traced to refugees fleeing central Tibet under persecution.<sup>241</sup> According to Karmay, the official abolition of the Bon religion took place in 785 CE. After this persecution, there was a period of decline<sup>242</sup> in Bon history for more than two centuries.<sup>243</sup>

In contrast with Buddhism, which traces the origin of its doctrine to the Buddha Shakyamuni, bonpos assert that the ultimate origin and source of the Yungdrung Bon teachings and doctrine goes back to a sacred land, Tagzig Olmo Lung Ring

---

<sup>238</sup> Wylie: *gshen chen klu dga'*

<sup>239</sup> Per Kvaerne, "The Literature of Bon," *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Edited by José Cabezón and Roger Jackson (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 138–46.

<sup>240</sup> Dondrup Lhagyal, "Bonpo Family Lineages in Central Tibet," in *New Horizons in Bon: Studies*, ed. Yasuhiko Nagano and Samten G. Karmay, vol. 2, *Senri Ethnological Reports* 15, 2000, 435.

<sup>241</sup> Tsering Thar, "Bonpo Tantrics in Kokonor Area," (2008), 538.

<sup>242</sup> This period of decline very much resembles the Buddhist period of decline between the "earlier" and the "later" spread. See: Alex McKay, ed., *The History of Tibet, The Medieval Period: C.850-1895, the Development of Buddhist Paramountcy*, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2003). For a comprehensive study on the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet, see: Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a critical overview of the periodization of Tibetan history, see: Bryan J. Cuevas, "Some Reflections on the Periodization of Tibetan History," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 10, no. 2 (2006): 44–55.

<sup>243</sup> Samten G. Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon* (London, 1972), 24.

(hereinafter Olmo Lung Ring).<sup>244</sup> It is in this land where a prehistoric Buddha, source of the Bon revelation, came from. The Buddha Tonpa Shenrab was “a Nirmanakaya (i.e., the physical appearance of a Buddha) manifestation of Buddhahood, appearing in time and history.”<sup>245</sup> Bon followers see the historical figure of Shakyamuni Buddha as “one Buddha among many.”<sup>246</sup> Buddha, in this context, refers to an “enlightened” being. Bon and Buddhist followers consider that there existed millions of Buddhas, that is, beings who attained liberation throughout history.

The source of Bon teachings and the first Buddha to propagate the teachings in our era is Tonpa Shenrab,<sup>247</sup> an earlier Buddha than Shakyamuni.<sup>248</sup> According to

---

<sup>244</sup> The translation of the word *Olmolungring* has been proposed as follows: “‘Ol’ symbolizes the unborn, ‘mo’ the undiminishing; ‘Lung’ denotes the prophetic word of Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon, and ‘ring,’ his everlasting compassion”; see: Per Kvaerne, “Bon,” ed. Eliade Mircea, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987). Martin translates it as follows: “Ol because it is unproduced. Mo because it fulfils desires. Lung because the oral transmission of the Word was taught there. Ring because of the long reach of compassion”; see: Dan Martin, “Olmo Lungring, A Holy Place Here and Beyond,” in *Bon: The Magic Word*, ed. Samten Gyaltsen Karmay and Jeff Watt (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007), 104. Martin notes that “no attempt is made to interpret any part of the name as if it were in Shangshung language.” He references a source, the *Zhang-zhung-Tibetan-English Contextual Dictionary*, published in Bonn by Dagkar Namgyal Nyima in 2003. This source says that *Olmo Lungring* is what the people of Shangshung call it (Martin op. cit., 104, 121 footnote v.).

<sup>245</sup> Tenzin Namdak and John Myrdhin Reynolds, *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings* (Vajra Publications, 2006), 4 The Nirmanakaya manifestation of a Buddha represents its physical appearance so that beings can establish direct contact with them. The other aspects of a Buddha are the Sambhogakaya and the Dharmakaya form. The Trikaya doctrine (Sanskrit, literally “Three bodies or personalities”) implies that a Buddha has three bodies: the Nirmanakaya or created body which manifests in time and space; the Sambhogakaya or body of mutual enjoyment which is a body of bliss or clear light manifestation; and the Dharmakaya or Truth body which embodies the very principle of enlightenment and knows no limits or boundaries. In the bonpo context, the Nirmanakaya, which means to a physical body of a Buddha, was Tonpa Shenrab. The Sambhogakaya aspect of the Buddhahood is known as Shenla Okar and the Dharmakaya aspect as Kungtu Zangpo.

<sup>246</sup> Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 83–97.

<sup>247</sup> As there are inconsistencies in the spelling of his full name, the meaning of his name has been interpreted in differently ways. For Yungdrung Bon adherents, Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche means “the great important man, the excellent priest who is the teacher.” The word tonpa designates the teacher. Shen designate a class of early Tibetan priests, which functions are yet not clear. Rab can mean “family,” “social class” or “the best,” “the excellent.” His name can also mean, depending on

bonpos' interpretations of the biographical accounts of his life, they considered that Buddha Tonpa Shenrab appeared some eighteen thousand years ago in Olmo Lung Ring, located north of Tibet at the center of the world. Bonpos believe that "many millennia before the historical Buddha Shakyamuni lived, the tantras<sup>249</sup> were taught by the Buddhas of past eras to both human and nonhuman beings."<sup>250</sup> Religious legitimation of the bonpos has its source in this very land.

There are several texts describing Tonpa Shenrab's life story.<sup>251</sup> The three main classical texts dealing with his life are called the *Dodu*,<sup>252</sup> or concise sutra, which is the oldest and shortest of the three versions<sup>253</sup> and consists of one volume. It can be dated to the eleventh century or even earlier and is said to have been translated by a Bon master called Lishu Taring<sup>254</sup> from Tagzig in the eighth

---

the spelling, "the great important man who is a member of the Shen clan." As such, some scholars argue that his name referred to a class of hereditary priests rather than to a specific individual. See: Per Kvaerne, "Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion," in *Bon: The Magic Word*, ed. Samten Gyaltzen Karmay and Jeff Watt (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007), 83; Namdak translates the title of Shenrab Miwoche as "the great human being who is the supreme Shen practitioner." See: Namdak and Reynolds, *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*, 4; Ramble, "Gshen Rab Mi Bo."

<sup>248</sup> For a comparative analysis between the hagiographies of Shakyamuni and Tonpa Shenrab, see: Gurung, "The Emergence of a Myth: In Search of the Origins of the Life Story of Shenrab Miwo, the Founder of Bon." Gurung argues that Shenrab Miwo's life account has been heavily influenced by the life accounts of Shakyamuni Buddha, and asserts that the composition of Shenrab Miwo legend was done by borrowing stories from various sources, concluding that the place of origin of Bon philosophy and religious system is to be found in Indian Buddhist ideology.

<sup>249</sup> Tantra, a Sanskrit word (Tibetan Wylie: *rgyud*) that refers to what is often referred to, in the international Bon milieu, as the teachings of the Buddhas from the path of transformation, see: "Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International" For an expanded discussion on "tantra" see Chapter 6.1.

<sup>250</sup> Namkhai Norbu and Michael Katz, *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light* (Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, NY, 1992), 11.

<sup>251</sup> For a summary of Tonpa Shenrab's hagiography, see also: Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*, xv–xvii.

<sup>252</sup> Wylie: *mdo 'dus*, or in its long form: *dus-gsum sangs-rgyas byung-khungs-kyi mdo*.

<sup>253</sup> For an index of the two longest versions, see: Odzel Tenzin Wangyal, "An Introduction to the Index of GZi-Brjid and GZer-Mig," *The Tibet Journal*, 1986, 29–35.

<sup>254</sup> Wylie: *li-shu stag-ring*.

century, who hid it at a religious monument at Samye monastery.<sup>255</sup> It was, bonpos narrate, rediscovered later by two custodians of the Samye Monastery temple<sup>256</sup> named Rinchen Drakpa<sup>257</sup> and Drekya Radza.<sup>258</sup> The second version is called the Zermig,<sup>259</sup> in two volumes and eighteen chapters. The first seven chapters of this version were published and translated by Hermann Francke.<sup>260</sup> The longest version of Shenrab's biography is known as the *Zijid*.<sup>261</sup> It consists of twelve volumes with sixty-one chapters, which were passed orally to a master known as Loden Nyingpo.<sup>262, 263</sup>

Similar to the life of Shakyamuni,<sup>264</sup> Tonpa Shenrab Miwo was born a prince in the royal family of Zhang Zhung, a kingdom in western Tibet. The similarities with Shakyamuni's life, according to bonpos, "are due to Buddhism having borrowed the relevant texts from Bön, and not, as the Buddhists insist, the other

---

<sup>255</sup> He is believed to have hidden the text inside "the red Stupa (a religious structure, further discuss below in Chapter 4.4) of Samye Monastery," in Wylie: *bsam-yas mchod-rten dmar-po*.

<sup>256</sup> See: Samten G. Karmay, *Feast of the Morning Light: The Eighteenth Century Wood-Engravings of Shenrab's Life-Stories and the Bon Canon from Gyalrong*, vol. 57 (National Museum of Ethnology, 2005), 4, 160–62.

<sup>257</sup> Wylie: *rin-chen grags-pa*.

<sup>258</sup> Wylie: *dre'u-rgya ra-dza*.

<sup>259</sup> Wylie: *gzer-mig*, or in its long form: *dus-pa rin-po-che'I rgyud*.

<sup>260</sup> August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 1 (Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1924); August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 3 (Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1926); August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 4 (Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1927); August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 5 (Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1928); August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 6 (Leipzig: Asia Major, 1930); August Hermann Francke, *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*, vol. 7 (London: Asia Major, 1949).

<sup>261</sup> Wylie: *gzi-brjid*, or in its long form: *dus-pa rin-po-che dri-ma med-pa gzi-brjid rab-tu 'bar-ba'I mdo*.

<sup>262</sup> Wylie: *blo-ldan snying-po*.

<sup>263</sup> See: Karmay 2005, pp. 4, footnote 1.

<sup>264</sup> For a comparative research of the hagiography of Shenrab Miwo and the Legend of Buddha, see: Gurung: 2008.



way around.”<sup>265</sup> Tonpa Shenrab then became a monk and retired to practice austerity. He is thought to have brought the higher teachings of Bon to the land of Zhang Zhung, which is centered on the sacred mountain of Mount Kailash in western Tibet.<sup>266</sup> As Martin argues, his life is “an illusory event, of course, as he is from the start an immortal and omniscient being. His apparent passing beyond the suffering of birth and death, therefore, has a purely pedagogical purpose, i.e., to prevent the mistaken belief from arising that there is anything eternal and indestructible in this world of phenomena.”<sup>267</sup>

There is no historical evidence to date proving he lived; there only exist references to his name in ninth-century manuscripts found in Dunghuang.<sup>268</sup> This lack of historical evidence,<sup>269</sup> however, does not represent a problem for bonpos, since they are more “concerned with providing the means to overcome the limitations inherent in existence conditioned by the round of birth and death, and it is therefore on the basis of its efficacy in this respect that it must, in the view of its adherents, be judged.”<sup>270</sup>

Important elements to highlight from the above discussion include:

1. Bonpos claim to have a historical and geographical origin distinct from Buddhists.
2. Their main Buddha is not Shakyamuni but Tonpa Shenrab.
3. They consider themselves, and are regarded by most Tibetans, to be following the oldest tradition from Tibet.

---

<sup>265</sup> Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 7.

<sup>266</sup> Kvaerne, “Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion.”

<sup>267</sup> Martin, “Olmo Lunging, A Holy Place Here and Beyond,” 89.

<sup>268</sup> Kvaerne, “Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion,” 83.

<sup>269</sup> See: Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 7.

<sup>270</sup> Kvaerne, “Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion,” 84.

4. They claim to have a historical connection with the kingdom of Zhang Zhung and believe that their religion originated there.
5. They have had past conflicts, persecutions, and confrontations with Buddhists, particularly with the newest of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa sect.
6. Bonpos consider Dzogchen to be the highest of the Bon teachings.

## 4 THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL BON

The spread of Bon into the West by Tibetan lamas can be directly related to the loss of their country, after the Chinese People's Liberation Army's invaded Tibet in 1950.<sup>271</sup> The following year, the signing of the "Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," generally known as the "Seventeen-Point Agreement,"<sup>272</sup> marked the de facto control of China over Tibet.<sup>273</sup> In the agreement, representatives of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama<sup>274</sup> and representatives of the recently established People's Republic of China affirmed Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and provided for a so-called autonomous administration led by the Dalai Lama.

In 1959, amidst escalating tensions and fearing for his life, the Dalai Lama escaped to Dharamshala,<sup>275</sup> India. The newly established Central Tibetan Administration in exile declared the above-mentioned signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement as unlawful, alleging that Tibetan representatives signed it under coercion. A few years later, the Tibet Autonomous Region within China

---

<sup>271</sup> For a comprehensive modern history of Tibet, see: Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and; Sam Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>272</sup> On the Seventeen Point Agreement, see: Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, 89–91.

<sup>273</sup> For an historical overview of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, see: Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History*, 207–37; and Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, 33–211.

<sup>274</sup> The current Dalai Lama's complete name is Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso. He was born as Lhamo Thondup.

<sup>275</sup> For a detailed account of the escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet to India, see: Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, 200–211; For a first hand account of the escape, see: Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (London: Cardinal, 1990).

was officially established in 1965. The Tibetan government in exile also declared that there exist five religious traditions of Tibet, which include four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug)<sup>276</sup> and a fifth Tibetan religious tradition, Bon.

The Dalai Lama's flight to India was followed by an exodus of Tibetans, among them high-ranking lamas and heads of monasteries, including Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, one of the key figures central to the present research. Although this was a traumatic process, it also enabled the opening up of previously enclosed religions such as Bon. The vast extent of their spread can also be directly related to the globalization process and the resultant globalized world in which this expansion occurred.

The connection between globalization and the spread of Bon can be seen clearly in the following story told to me by Yongdzin Rinpoche about Lophon<sup>277</sup> Sangye Tenzin, his teacher. Lophon Sangye Tenzin received a prophecy warning that, if not taught openly; Dzogchen Bon teachings were at risk of disappearing. Yongdzin Rinpoche explains:

During the time of my teacher, the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud<sup>278</sup> teachings started to be openly transmitted. Before, the name "Zhang Zhung Nyen

---

<sup>276</sup> The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelug tradition.

<sup>277</sup> The Tibetan word Ponlob is a title meaning "Teacher."

<sup>278</sup> The teachings known as the Oral Transmission of Zhang Zhung, or Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud is a set of Dzogchen teachings that contains oral transmissions and instructions which, according to the tradition, can also be received by "qualified" students or practitioners by a "qualified" teacher, who should be a lineage holder of this teachings. This collection of teachings is believed by bonpos to have been originated in the country of Zhang Zhung. It has several parts, including a core or root text and complementary texts, divided according to a classification of outer, inner, secret and innermost secret cycles or divisions. For a comprehensive introduction to the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud cycle and a translation into English of its main root text, called "the Six

Gyud” was popular, but very few people actually received these teachings. Even one [of] my main teachers, for example, I think he received something but not the complete teachings. My teacher Sangye Tenzin, during his time, he told me that [for these] essential teachings [on] Dzogchen [it was] better not to keep them secret.<sup>279</sup>

Sangye Tenzin emphasized that these teachings were, until then, considered to be secret and were only transmitted to a select number of students, but with the Chinese already occupying the region after Chamdo, Sangye Tenzin advised Yongdzin Rinpoche to study and teach them as much as he could. “Better not to lose it. So he started to make block printings. First he made a beautiful calligraphy book, after he made blocks for printing. From there it started, he didn’t have much time, he was busy. He left me to transmit these teachings, as Menri’s Ponlob.”<sup>280</sup>

Sangye Tenzin therefore decided that Bon teachings, and Dzogchen in particular, should not be considered secret any longer but should be taught as much as possible so as not to be lost.

---

Lamps”, see: Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*. See also: Rossi, *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*, 29–30. For an “insider” perspective, see also: Tenzin Namdak, *Masters of the Zhang Zhung Nyengyud: Pith Instructions from the Experiential Transmission of Bonpo Dzogchen*, ed. Dmitry Ermakov and Carol Ermakova (Heritage Publishers, 2010). For more on the lineage and the history of ideas of the cycle, particularly a bibliographical tool with references to published versions of the texts, see: Henk Blezer, “A Brief Bibliographical Key to Zhang Zhung Snyan Rgyud Editions with Special Attention for Sources on the Early Lineage,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 20 (2011): 125–203.

<sup>279</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

<sup>280</sup> Namdak.

In relation to the transmission of this set of teachings in the West, Achard noted that a new development had taken place whereby the oral transmissions of the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud precepts are transcribed by Western students. He points out that, according to bonpos themselves, it is forbidden to write commentaries to the root texts of this cycle. As such, Achard notes that the transcripts available to students for instance at Shenten’s shop “constitute a transgression of the rule.”<sup>281</sup> He further elaborates that teachings are being adapted to the level of the Western audience, which, he argues, “is rarely, if ever, at the level of understanding properly the actual teaching.”<sup>282</sup> This, he goes on, does not mean that students in the West are incapable of understanding these teachings but, rather, that the way the teachings are transmitted to them is rather “light” and adapted by the transmitters, a situation that, in his view, will eventually result in the actual disappearance of the original teachings.<sup>283</sup> This observation should be kept in mind when reading Chapters 5 and 6 below.

When three Bon lamas—*Geshe* Samten Karmay, *Geshe* Sangye Tenzin (who later adopted the title His Holiness Tenpai Menri Trizin), and Lopon Tenzin Namdak (nowadays addressed as Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche)—first traveled to the West in 1961 and visited England (see Chapter 4.9), they initiated an expansion that would take Bon to distant parts of the globe, including Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina.<sup>284</sup> At that time, not only were there no Bon followers in the West, but also few people, even those

---

<sup>281</sup> Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*, 153.

<sup>282</sup> Achard, 153–54.

<sup>283</sup> Achard, 154, footnote 184.

<sup>284</sup> The newsletter of Shenten Dargye Ling comments on this expansion of Bon: “Due to the Buddha’s compassion and the karmic sources of sentient beings, the precious doctrine of Yungdrung Bon began to be introduced in Western countries, starting in 1961.” Tenpa Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight,” Shenten Dargye Ling’s Newsletter, 2016.

who were educated or well traveled, knew of their existence. This was the start of the true globalization of Bon through a direct route of transmission. In the following section, the main centers where Bon is taking roots in the West will be discussed, including their organizational structures, activities and so on.

## 4.1 BON CENTERS IN THE WEST

The precarious new settlement in Dolanji, India, established by the late Abbot Lungog Tenpai Nyima and Yongdzin Rinpoche after returning from London is currently not what it used to be. There, young monks and *geshes* speak English and travel to the West and to Tibet; some have moved permanently to the West<sup>285</sup> and cater to a Western clientele.<sup>286</sup> In a recent collection of Bon studies in honor of Per Kvaerne, Hanna Havnevik indicates that “in these centers monks often show an eclectic attitude, incorporating elements from New Age, New Shamanism and healing in their teachings. Bonpo monasteries in India and Nepal likewise tend to attract Westerners seeking fulfillment of their spiritual needs, and through this interaction the bonpos have been influenced by global trends.”<sup>287</sup>

This chapter will start with a comprehensive description of Shenten, the Bon center in Blou, France. This section includes a historic overview of the establishment of Shenten, as well as its main characteristics, its administrative

---

<sup>285</sup> There are resident lamas in most centers in the West, including in France, Mexico and Austria.

<sup>286</sup> Hanna Havnevik and Charles Ramble, eds., *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne* (Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2015), 14.

<sup>287</sup> Havnevik and Ramble, 14.

organization, and the different types of retreats offered at the center. The second and third topics involve descriptions of types of Bon retreats and teachings that are presented to the participants. In the following two chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), I will turn my attention to how participants narrate their experiences of these retreats and teachings. Fourth, I look at the use of newsletters as a means for diffusing the Bon religion into the West. Fifth, in order to contextualize Shenten, I examine how other Western centers associated with Shenten Dargye Ling also help to spread the Bon religion. Sixth, I specifically look at one network of Bon centers, called Ligmincha International, a network of centers closely linked to the history of Bon in the West. Finally, I look closely at the Three Doors Academy, a recent development by Ligmincha International, which offers a three-year training program for Westerners.

## 4.2 SHENTEN DARGYE LING

Shenten's website presents Bon as "the native religion of Tibet...one of the world's most ancient spiritual traditions. It has a unique and very rich heritage. Its knowledge helps sentient beings to cope with the demands of daily life and ultimately leads them all the way up to full enlightenment."<sup>288</sup>

This opening statement has two interesting characteristics: it aims to reach people who are looking for solutions to their "daily life challenges," usually called "worldly" issues in contrast to "spiritual" issues, as well as to reach those who are looking for "enlightenment." As we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, this opening

---

<sup>288</sup> "Shenten Dargye Ling," Shenten Dargye Ling, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://shenten.org/index.php>.



statement resonates both with the participants who are attracted by a “modern” Bon approach and those who feel attracted by a “traditionalist” one.



Figure 4 Image of Shenten Dargye Ling. © Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung

This Bon center, Shenten, is key to my research because it serves as the best example of the monastic Bon tradition in the West. Although monastic, it is attended by an overwhelming number of lay people. Thus, it combines a monastic structure, where Tibetan Bon monks residing in the center live a monastic life, together with Western Bon monks and nuns who do not reside in the center, and lay practitioners from different countries who regularly travel there to attend teachings, undergo retreats, and meet their teachers. Its importance also lies in the fact that it is the center established by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, recognized by all other Bon lamas and teachers in the West as either their main teacher or as a remarkable Bon teacher. Furthermore, Shenten is nowadays the largest monastic Yungdrung Bon center in Europe.

The name “Shenten Dargye Ling” means “the place for spreading the Teaching of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab.” Understanding the process of how the center came to

be helps us contextualize how Bon was introduced in the West and how the religion itself is being adapted, if so, to local settings, as well as how it is reaching new audiences. It also helps us to historically contextualize the experiences of Western Bon practitioners that I will explore in Chapters 5 and 6.

#### 4.2.1 THE PLACE FOR SPREADING THE TEACHING OF LORD TONPA SHENRAB

Shenten Dargye Ling was founded in 2005 with the aim of “preserving the Bon tradition and transmitting it to Western students in a completely *authentic* way, in its entirety and at the highest quality” (emphasis added).<sup>289</sup> In 2006, the French Ministry of the Interior recognized Shenten Dargye Ling as a “Religious Congregation.” In Shenten Dargye Ling’s second newsletter, “Speech of Delight,” Abbot Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung indicated that “receiving the status of congregation from the French government is a very special opportunity for us. This will surely also be very important for all bonpos, both inside and outside Tibet. Wherever bonpos are, they will know about this positive development and feel supported.”<sup>290</sup> He elaborated on what this opportunity represented, indicating that Yungdrung Bon is now recognized as an “authentic” religion in Europe, at a critical time for bonpos and for Tibetan culture and religion in general. This is why, he emphasizes, “the establishment in Blou will be very significant for the future of our religion.” He further delineates his wishes for Shenten, which he envisages as a place where the Bon religion and culture will not only be preserved but also expanded into the West. Shenten, he adds, will become an educational center that will offer, apart from religious activities, “practical aspects of our religion... [including] medicine, art, language, and so

---

<sup>289</sup> From the “About Us” page in the Shenten website, accessed on October 10, 2016: “Shenten Dargye Ling Website,” accessed April 6, 2019, <http://shenten.org/index.php/en/about/about-us>.

<sup>290</sup> Tenpa Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight N°2,” *Shenten Dargye Ling’s Newsletter*, November 1, 2006.

on.”<sup>291</sup> Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung further believes that the establishment of Shenten opened “a new chapter in our history as, although Bon was the indigenous state religion of Tibet for many centuries in ancient times, it has since come under several waves of persecution due to political changes.”<sup>292</sup> The congregation statutes, he underscores, facilitate carrying out religious activities for preserving the Bon tradition and for educating “young monks and lay people to ensure Yungdrung Bon continues to benefit future generations.” Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung also envisioned Shenten as “an important center for Bon studies both in terms of spiritual practice and academic research... We consider this work to be of prime importance for the future of our tradition.”<sup>293</sup>

The acquisition of Shenten was financially supported by Loel Guinness, founder of the Kalpa Group.<sup>294</sup> The Kalpa Group, the successor of the Loel Guinness Foundation, aims to support research by individual scholars and professionals on a wide array of issues, including Bon. Notably, Guinness has recently published a book entitled *Rainbow Body*,<sup>295</sup> in which he narrates his encounter with Bon and his ensuing practice under the guidance of Bon teachers. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak writes,

Loel Guinness’s support has been a great help to us. He supports the preservation of our religion and culture in many ways and although we have long been hoping to establish a center like Shenten Dargye Ling, it

---

<sup>291</sup> H.E. Yongdzin Rinpoche, see at: “Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou,” accessed August 12, 2018, [http://www.kalpagroup.com/bon\\_shenten.html](http://www.kalpagroup.com/bon_shenten.html).

<sup>292</sup> “Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou.”

<sup>293</sup> “Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou.”

<sup>294</sup> See: “The Kalpa Group,” accessed December 29, 2018, <http://www.kalpagroup.com/>.

<sup>295</sup> See: Loel Guinness, *Rainbow Body* (New Delhi: Serindia, 2018).

was only thanks to his generous donation that this project was able to get off the ground.<sup>296</sup>

Guinness's role in the establishment of Shenten should be kept in mind when we discuss the significant contribution of some Westerners in facilitating the spread of Bon in the West.

#### 4.2.2 THE PRECEDENTS

As we will see below in Chapter 4.9, as early as 1960, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, then called "the Lupon,"<sup>297</sup> came to Europe, working as a scholar with the renowned Tibetologist David Snellgrove in London and Helmut Hoffman in Munich. He first began to teach Yungdrung Bon in Europe in 1989 to a small group of students, some of whom had met him in Nepal. As he visited other European countries, the work, teachings, and commitments of Bon teachers in the West increased considerably, particularly since the establishment of Shenten, where he has spent a few months every year over the past thirteen years. As a consequence, a number of organizational structures have evolved around his students.

The precursor of Shenten Dargye Ling was the Yungdrung Bon Association, which came to life as a result of the peregrinations to Nepal by a Western student of Bon named Bilal Hondo. The board of the Yungdrung Bon Association, with a legal address located in Paris, was established in 1996. The first president was Jean-Luc Achard, a Tibetologist and researcher at the Centre National de la

---

<sup>296</sup> "Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou."

<sup>297</sup> Lupon is a title that literally means "Teacher," as indicated before, and it usually designates the head instructor of a group of students at a monastery. Tenzin Namdak was called "Lupon" for many years, his current title being "Yongdzin," which, according to Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, means "the one who holds all the lineages."

Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France. He is also the editor and publisher of the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, an online academic journal of Tibetan Studies. The treasurer and secretary were two Western students of Yongdzin Rinpoche.

Hondo, one of the early Westerners to be involved in Bon practice, studied bonpo teachings in the Triten Norbutse Monastery under the guidance of Lopon Tenzin Namdak, and he was the first to translate the book *Heartdrops of Dharmakaya*, about bonpo Dzogchen practice, into a Western language (specifically French).<sup>298</sup> The original purpose of the association was to bring Bon masters to Europe to teach Dzogchen theory and practice to their disciples. Masters included the Lopon Tenzin Namdak, who resided in Kathmandu, and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who was already based in the United States. In 2001, the association started to facilitate Dzogchen practice throughout the year in several French cities (Paris, Nice, Montpellier) with the help of *geshes* sent by Lopon Tenzin Namdak to liaise with other European and American organizations to help promote the teachings.<sup>299</sup>

The first website of the Yungdrung Bon Association highlighted that the Tibetan Bon tradition

does not originate from India and the Buddhism of Shakyamuni, but from Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, coming from the Kingdom of Tagzig, and born in the region of Olmo Lung Ring. According to his three hagiographies, Tonpa Shenrab is supposed to have come to Tibet once, and to have converted then an important number of local priests called bonpos.<sup>300</sup>

---

<sup>298</sup> Namdak, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*.

<sup>299</sup> Information flier, under the following copyright “©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000.”

<sup>300</sup> From Shenten Dargye Ling’s archives, snapshot of the former Yungdrung Bon Association from 2005, courtesy of Christophe Moulin.

In these early days, the teachings events by the Dalai Lama in Europe were announced on the website, and Tenzin Wangyal was portrayed as one of the guest masters (see Appendix B).

A few years later, a new association, called Shenten Dargye Ling, was founded (see Appendix B). Contrary to the Yungdrung Bon Association, it was able to receive funds and donations from any source (private, corporate, or public) and any country, according to French and European laws. Its main objective was to become financially able to buy real estate so members could build a Dzogchen Practice Center according to Lupon's wishes for Europe. The center was to be devoted to the Gyalwa Menriwa<sup>301</sup> lineage, aiming to organize the trips and stays of the bonpo masters involved in the teachings, either during retreats or throughout the year.<sup>302</sup> The public launch and first General Assembly of the Shenten Dargye Ling Association took place in October 2000 in Paris.

In 2000, a third association linked to Shenten was also created. Triten Norbutse Association was founded by active members of Shenten Dargye Ling.<sup>303</sup> Until

---

<sup>301</sup> Gyalwa Menriwa refers to the lineage of teachings as transmitted by the abbot of Menri Monastery, and spiritual head of the Bon religion. There are two Menri monasteries, the original Menri located in Tibet and the Menri Monastery in the exile, located at Dolanji. The head of the Bon religion resides in Menri Monastery in Dolanji. The former "Menri Tridzin," an honorific title to refer to the abbot of Menri, the Thirty-Third Gyalwa Menri Trizin Rinpoche, passed away on 14 September 2017. His successor, the Thirty-Fourth Menri Trizin Rinpoche, was announced on 1 January 2017. He is Geshe Dawa Dargyal and was selected from among sixty-four candidates, following a process that included prayers and rituals to Bon deities and protectors. See more at: "Lineage of Bon - 34th Menri Trizin," Ligmincha International, accessed May 7, 2019, <https://ligmincha.org/bon-buddhism/>.

<sup>302</sup> Informative flyer, under the following copyright "©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000."

<sup>303</sup> Yungdrung Bon Association and Triten Norbutse Association are French associations established according to "Loi 1901" or the French law of associations from 1901, while Shenten

2013, it functioned as a charitable organization, in line with French and European law. Its main objective was to support the Asian communities “which are linked to the Yungdrung Bon spiritual and religious Tradition, in order to help maintain a continuous presence of this perennial (but recently endangered) Tradition, in countries close to its original birthplace.”<sup>304</sup> Asian communities refer mostly to Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal, as well as to other villages in Nepal and India where bonpos live. To meet this objective, the association’s aim was to help build schools, community clinics, and monasteries; to promote medical follow-up visits in such places; to provide and send medicines; to send funds to present and future institutions when needed; and to promote the sponsoring of individuals (e.g., young monks or orphans) or groups of such individuals and all possible communication means to inform the public at large in Western countries. The funds of this new association, apart from its members’ subscription fees, were going to be constituted by donations from individuals, institutions, or other associations.<sup>305</sup>

#### 4.2.3 LOOKING FOR A PLACE

When Shenten Dargye Ling was inaugurated in 2005, it was the first center for the Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon to be established in continental Europe. In 2000, the European students of the Lopon received a message sent by the Yungdrung Bon Association, explaining the basis upon which Shenten would be established. In this message, they were told that Yongdzin Rinpoche had the “deep feeling” that it was time and the ground was fertile to establish such a

---

Dargye Ling is a French association established under “Loi 1905” or the French law on associations from 1905.

<sup>304</sup> See: “Association Triten Norbutse,” accessed May 17, 2019, <http://www.association-triten-norbutse.org/>.

<sup>305</sup> Information flier, under the following copyright “©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000.”

center “for the benefit of all sentient beings and especially for his current and future students.” He further indicated that it was best to concentrate efforts toward first establishing a single center in the heart of Europe. Already a year ago, in the summer of 1999,

as a sign of the great importance he places on this initiative Rinpoche has given the name Shenten Dargye Ling to this center: “The place for spreading the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab.” At this moment of violent communist uprising and political instability in Nepal the transmission and continuity of the ancient Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon is threatened with extinction; therefore it is even more important to open our hearts and raise our good intention in practical matters in order to establish a safe ground for the survival, the study and practice of Lopon’s teachings.<sup>306</sup>

This message also outlined the primary objectives for establishing Shenten: to play an important role in “maintaining the precious teachings for benefiting future generations” and to be the place where the Yungdrung Bon tradition teaching would grow its roots in Europe and play a role in “sustaining and safeguarding the tradition for future generations.”<sup>307</sup>

According to Lopon Tenzin Namdak, some of the criteria that a location for Shenten Dargye Ling should meet included:

---

<sup>306</sup> Sebastien Doerler, Gerd Manusch, and Florens Van Canstein, “Establishing a Bon Centre,” 2005.

<sup>307</sup> Doerler, Manusch, and Van Canstein.



- A central location: The majority of the Lupon's students live in France, Germany, Austria, and Holland. The center should be located within one day's travel from these countries and two hours' travel from an airport.
- Easy to reach: It should be accessible by public transport (air, rail, coach, or car).
- Ready to use and easily maintainable: Rinpoche was then seventy-nine years old.
- Scalable in size: Ideally, the center should be on a piece of land with several buildings, in an area that could accommodate growth in activities and in the number of students.
- Surrounding area: The center should be located in a pleasant natural environment with a supportive attitude of neighbors and villagers and available housing for those who wished to stay or live nearby.

These characteristics provide evidence that from the outset, Shenten was envisaged as a place that would have three major purposes: 1) safeguarding the Bon religion for future generations; 2) establishing Bon in France, centrally located in Europe; and 3) from this center, expanding Bon in Europe and in the West in its "authentic form." These three objectives demonstrate the process where, in the spread of Bon, the global and the local interact and where adaptations are made according to the environment, while at the same time allowing a stronger Bon religious identity to be reasserted and a process of reterritorialization to take place, influenced both by Tibetan bonpos and Westerners who were followers of Bon.

At first, a location in the Vosges near Colmar in eastern France was identified by Yongdzin Rinpoche as a site that met all the criteria. Compared to other possibilities in Germany and France, this location was considered the most suitable. However, the acquisition of this location fell through, and a new option was considered when Loel Guinness offered to donate part of his land in the

Normandy region of France. Finally, the current location in Blou was later identified and successfully acquired through a donation from Guinness (discussed further below).

An initial legal framework, which afterwards evolved into what today are the Shenten Association and Congregation (explained further below) was set up to provide for transparent governance in accordance with the ideas of Lopon Tenzin Namdak and with Western legal and financial standards. Shenten Dargye Ling was first administered by a non-profit organization established and maintained in conformity to the laws of France. The foundation served as the legal conduit for the activities of the center. The main objective of the foundation, as laid down in its articles, were: “To spread and maintain the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab according to the ancient Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon as transmitted by Lopon Tenzin Namdak or his spiritual heirs.”<sup>308</sup>

Lopon Tenzin Namdak and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung were the founders and spiritual guides of Shenten Dargye Ling and initially had final authority in all governance matters. Shenten Dargye Ling was and continues to be spiritually associated with Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal, the main seat of Lopon Tenzin Namdak. A board of directors, consisting of five members—a president, two vice-presidents, a treasurer, and a secretary—initially governed this first Shenten foundation. It had final responsibility in a legal sense. The first board of directors included some of the participants interviewed for this research, including a lawyer, bank manager, architect, filmmaker, sales agent, and art and graphic designer. This foundation later became Shenten’s association, and it was further divided into two entities, Shenten Association and Shenten Congregation (explained further below).

---

<sup>308</sup> Statutes, Foundation Shenten Dargye Ling, 2001.

The spread of Bon into the West was facilitated not only by the charisma of Tibetan lamas and teachers, as indicated in Chapter 3, but also by the efforts made by certain Western individuals to give it institutional structure. For instance, after the first efforts made by Hondo to bring Bon to France (see above), Jean-Louis Massoubre, a disciple of Lopon Tenzin Namdak, played an essential role, along with Loel Guinness, in the establishment of Shenten. When the first board of directors was set up, Massoubre was appointed directly by Rinpoche as the responsible advisor, “channeling all information and advice from different members and other sources of the Buddhist and Western world—traditional religious as well as from the cultural background of France and the whole of Europe.” He later served as the treasurer of the association. Massoubre was a former member of the French National Assembly and, in parallel with his political career, he “found his path in Buddhism.”<sup>309</sup> He is considered to have had a great impact in the coming of Tibetan Buddhism to France, notably through his contributions to the institutionalization of Buddhism and Bon in the country. He was instrumental in setting up various Buddhist centers and a congregation belonging to one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Karma Kagyu School. It has to be noted that Trinley Thaye Dorje, considered by his followers as the Seventeenth Karmapa, head the Tibetan School supported by Massoubre. However, since the passing away of the Sixteenth Karmapa in 1981, two candidates were presented for his succession, one of whom was Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the other Trinley Thaye Dorje. In a controversial move, both candidates were “enthroned” as being the Seventeenth Karmapa. But it was Ogyen Trinley Dorje who was recognized by the Dalai Lama and most Tibetans to be the successor of the Sixteenth Karmapa.

---

<sup>309</sup> “In Memoriam: Jean-Louis Massoubre,” The 17th Karmapa: Official website of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, April 26, 2016, accessed October 13, 2018, <https://www.karmapa.org/>.

Massoubre was an assiduous visitor at Shenten Dargye Ling until his death in 2016. Upon Massoubre's passing, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung expressed his condolences and deep appreciation, describing him as "a meritorious practitioner and supporter of Tibetan Bon and Buddhist spirituality."<sup>310</sup>

It is remarkable that one of Massoubre's sons, Karma Trinlay Rinpoche<sup>311</sup> (born Ananda Massoubre, 1975), was the first Westerner recognized as a *trulku*<sup>312</sup> (reincarnation of a Buddhist saint) by the late Sixteenth Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage.<sup>313</sup> He was raised at a monastic center, trained in both traditional Buddhist and Western academic studies, and currently teaches Buddhism around the world. This reference is relevant to the view expressed by some interviewees in Chapter 6, who consider that for Bon to be firmly established in the West, there is a need for Westerners who achieve enlightenment and thereby become "Western Buddhas."

A memorial posted at Thaye Dorje's website, considered by his followers to be the legitimate Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, maintains that Massoubre "devoted the last years of his life to practicing the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) as much as possible."<sup>314</sup> It is significant that there is no mention in this memorial of the strong and fluid links Massoubre had with the Bon religion, perhaps evidencing the political divides among Buddhist schools, and between Buddhism and Bon in

---

<sup>310</sup> Yungdrung, "Speech of Delight."

<sup>311</sup> See more at: "Karma Trinlay Rinpoche."

<sup>312</sup> Wylie: *sprul sku*.

<sup>313</sup> For more information on the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage and the Karma Kagyu Buddhist school, see: "The 17th Karmapa Thaye Dorje: Official Website of His Holiness Karmapa," The 17th Karmapa: Official website of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://www.karmapa.org/>.

<sup>314</sup> "Karma Trinlay Rinpoche," accessed January 6, 2019, <http://www.bodhipath.org/trinlay/>.

Tibet, which seem to be carried forward in the West. As discussed in Chapter 4.10 (“Bon Studies in the West”), it also shows that some elements of the way Buddhists (and Bon) institutions and structures interplayed with each other in Tibet continue to be significant in the diaspora.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, Casanova points out that globalization “facilitates the return of the old civilizations and world religions not only as units of analysis but as significant cultural systems and as imagined communities,”<sup>36</sup> representing both an opportunity as well as a threat.

The Board of Directors of the Shenten Foundation reported annually on its activities and financial affairs and was requested to present a plan of objectives for each coming year, together with a financial plan, to all interested members, parties, and donors. No board members received financial compensation.

#### 4.2.4 THIS IS THE PLACE

By 2005, it was clear that the establishment and functioning of the center Shenten Dargye Ling could only be realized with the support of the international community of students of Lopon Tenzin Namdak.<sup>37</sup>

After the unsuccessful attempt to acquire a site in the Vosges near Colmar, in 2005, another site was acquired in the commune of Blou (Maine-et-Loire department) in western France, and “the heart-felt wish of Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche to establish a center for the ancient Tibetan tradition of

---

<sup>35</sup> See: Ana Cristina O. Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 240.

<sup>36</sup> Jose Casanova, “Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization,” *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 4 (2001): 430.

<sup>37</sup> Doerler, Manusch, and Van Canstein, “Establishing a Bon Centre,” 2005.

Yungdrung Bon in Europe has become a reality.”<sup>318</sup> The property, previously known as the Chateau de la Modetais, was previously used as a pedagogical medical institute and as an educational center.<sup>319</sup> It consists of approximately seven hectares. It was owned by L’Association Regionale Les Chesnaies, which sold the property to the Association pour la Congregation Shenten Dargye Ling on March 14, 2005.

When it was bought, the buildings needed extensive repairs. Under the supervision of Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the building was renovated and adapted by a group of bonpo monks and local supporters, mostly volunteers who contributed their time and work, doing what is referred to as “karma yoga.”<sup>320</sup>

#### 4.2.5 STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES OF SHENTEN CENTER

Apart from the aim of spreading the Bon teachings in the West, Shenten was also established to preserve the Bon tradition, as “this is a very critical time for the Tibetan religion and culture as regards its future safety, so the new establishment of Shenten Dargye Ling in Blou, a nice French country village with its friendly and courteous people, will be extremely significant for the future of our tradition.”<sup>321</sup>

---

<sup>318</sup> Doerler, Manusch, and Van Canstein.

<sup>319</sup> See: Karine Le Meitour, “BLOU (49) - histoire, patrimoine et activités de la commune,” Office de tourisme Saumur Val de Loire, accessed April 12, 2019, [https://www.ot-saumur.fr/BLOU\\_a13093.html](https://www.ot-saumur.fr/BLOU_a13093.html).

<sup>320</sup> Literally “the yoga of action,” in this context karma yoga consisted of individuals doing certain tasks, contributing to the activities of Shenten, and providing services in exchange for discounted fees for retreats or free accommodation or meals. The aims of karma yoga are said to be accumulating merits and purifying obstacles.

<sup>321</sup> Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight N°2.”

In 2006, a year after its foundation, a document entitled “Aims for a Transparent Financing of Shenten Dargye Ling” established that:

The board of directors will be required to act prudently in all matters relating to the foundation and will always bear in mind the interests of the foundation. They will not let personal views or prejudices affect their conduct as board of directors. The board of directors acknowledges the need to exercise the same degree of care in dealing with the administration of the foundation as a prudent business man or woman or those of someone else for whom he/she was responsible.<sup>322</sup>

Also in 2006, a document entitled “Note for Shenten Dargye Ling’s management”<sup>323</sup> indicated that many jobs would have to be filled all year long in order to develop the Center’s activities and keep them operating smoothly for the lamas who live there and for participants engaging in personal retreats, practicing of Bon and karma yoga, students taking weekly courses, and visitors. The first official team was composed of three members and sporadic volunteers. The need for regular team members, including reliable volunteers, included a housekeeper;<sup>324</sup> a “chaplain” to support the lamas and perform the rituals and ceremonies; a treasurer; and a gardener.<sup>325</sup> Finally, it was determined that a secretary-manager was needed to assure the application of the administrative

---

<sup>322</sup> Internal document, courtesy of Shenten Dargye Ling Board.

<sup>323</sup> Internal document, courtesy of Shenten Dargye Ling Board.

<sup>324</sup> An “official” job posting for the caretaker job was published. The housekeeper’s job description included: to cope with the Center’s upkeep, to watch out regarding to the buildings and to call up professionals (plumber, firemen, electrician, and the like) if necessary, and to supervise the volunteers.

<sup>325</sup> Internal document, courtesy of Shenten Dargye Ling Board.

board's decisions; to represent the Congregation to the French government; to report activities and proposals; and to perform related tasks. In addition, people were needed to handle the audio and video recordings of teachings and the post-production tasks of translation, transcription, and maintaining the library's collection. Some Western founding members contributed financially to the purchase of the property; others became sustaining members; and many others helped by painting, gardening, fixing the plumbing, and doing other maintenance tasks.

At the time, a local newspaper described Shenten as “a thriving religious center,” reporting that it was “developing courses on the Tibetan language, traditional Tibetan medicine and *thangka* painting (traditional scroll painting) and initiating projects to transcribe teachings and translate Tibetan texts.”<sup>326</sup> Shenten was also described in the local media as a Buddhist research center in an article entitled “Two Tibetan monks this week at the castle de la Modetais in Blou.”<sup>327</sup> The article mentioned that the Dalai Lama considers Yongdzin Rinpoche to be the living memory of the Bon tradition.<sup>328</sup> This way of presenting Bon in the media suggests that, at least at the time, it was easier to present Bon as a form of Buddhism rather than as a separate tradition. This portrayal, however, changed over time. In the same local media, the center was presented as a place for researchers from all over the world to come and study “the ancestral knowledge” of Bon, including religion, philosophy, astrology, and medicine. For an overview of how local newspapers described Shenten, see Appendix C.

---

<sup>326</sup> “Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou.”

<sup>327</sup> D.R, “Deux Moines Tibétains Cette Semaine Au Château de La Modtais a Blou,” *Le Courrier de l'Ouest*, June 1, 2005.

<sup>328</sup> “Shenten Dargye Ling,” accessed October 13, 2018, <http://shenten.org/index.php>.



As discussed above, in its early days, Shenten board members set up the center to serve both as a place for the practice of Bon in the West and as a place for a complete set of the bonpo scriptures (*Kangyur and Katen*) and other collected works to be kept safe in Europe.<sup>329</sup> This was considered essential in view of the political instability of the time in Nepal, where Triten Norbutse Monastery is located, highlighting the significant link of Shenten with the Nepalese monastery.

During the first decade of existence of Shenten, several significant milestones were met, including setting up the main assembly hall, with a statue of Buddha, a wooden carved traditional altar, and a stupa (a religious monument discussed below) placed in it. Moreover, a digital archive was created that contained the teachings given by Yongdzin Rinpoche in Europe and the United States since the 1990s, as well as teachings given by other Bon lamas in the West. A group of volunteers regularly transcribe these teachings. Some Tibetan texts have been translated into English and French, and starting in 2010, into German and Spanish as well. Many of these can be purchased in the Shenten small shop in the form of CD-ROMs.

As I will discuss in detail below, a traditional stupa was inaugurated and consecrated at the end of 2009 and a second one was consecrated in 2017. Since its establishment, teaching and practice programs have been organized all year long.

With the aim of promoting research on Bon, the first academic conference on Bon was held in Shenten on June 22–27, 2008.<sup>330</sup> The journal *East and West*

---

<sup>329</sup> Besides including a complete set of Bon canonical scriptures, the collection of Tibetan texts in the library continues to grow; for example, during 2010, the collected works of Nyamme Sherab Gyaltzen, the founder of the original Menri Monastery in Tibet, arrived from Nepal.

<sup>330</sup> More precisely, this is the second conference of its kind; the first one occurred in 1999 in Tokyo, called *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, held August 23–27 under the auspices of the National

published the proceedings in a special issue.<sup>331</sup> Presentations included topics on philosophy, history, philology, myth, ritual, meditation, medicine, religious music and dance, anthropology, architecture, art history, and Zhang Zhung linguistics. Eight years later, a second conference, “International Conference on Bon—Ancient and Modern,” was again hosted by the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation; it was held from June 29 to July 1, 2016. These conferences were attended by leading Bon scholars, including Samten Karmay and Charles Ramble (co-organizers of the conferences), Marc des Jardins, John Vincent Bellezza, Mark Aldenderfer, Collin Millard, Matthew Kapstein, Philippe Cornu, Heather Stoddard, and Katia Buffetrille, as well as several Tibetan students and *geshes*. These two conferences, which are representative of the adaptations of Bon in the West, introduced an innovation specific to Bon in the West, where members of academia and Bon religious leaders met and shared their views on different aspects of Bon from their own perspectives.

#### 4.2.6 THE CONGREGATION AND THE ASSOCIATION

The “community” of Shenten is comprised of lay practitioners, who represent the great majority of practitioners, some of whom are long-standing members and others who are temporary participants, as well as ordained monks and nuns, who are mostly Tibetans. The ordained community is organized under the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation, headed by Abbot Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, who also serves as the abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal. In 2013, *Geshe* Gelek Jinpa was named Khenpo, or Abbot, of Shenten Dargye Ling.

---

Museum of Ethnology of Japan. The proceedings were published under the same name, edited by Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano.

<sup>331</sup> See: Samten G. Karmay and Donatella Rossi, eds., *Bon: The Everlasting Religion of Tibet. Tibetan Studies in Honour of Professor David L. Snellgrove*, 1/4, vol. 59 (East and West, n.d.).

The lay community is organized under the Shenten Dargye Ling Association. Since 2006, the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation became the main administrative entity of the center, the owner of the site, and the holder of spiritual and moral authority. In addition, the responsibility of managing the production, translation, reproduction, and dissemination of teachings and texts belongs to the Congregation. Nevertheless, another entity was created: the Shenten Dargye Ling Association, which is in charge of hosting retreats and managing public hospitality. The community of lay practitioners is organized under the Association. In sum, Chateau de la Modetais (the physical space) is owned by and operates under the responsibility of the Congregation, and the Association rents the place.<sup>332</sup> This division of Shenten into a congregation and an association exemplifies how Bon institutions have had to adapt to the French legal structure and, more broadly, to Western law. This adaptation required the active involvement of Westerners versed in French (and European) legal systems. Massoubre was one of them, playing a significant role in supporting the setting up of the legal frame of Shenten, with the guidance of Loel Guinness and his lawyer, once again evidencing the high relevance of a number of Western individuals in the spreading of Bon in the West.

As a result, we can see the spread of Bon in the diversity of the teaching calendars of those who reside at Shenten Dargye Ling. *Geshe* Gelek Jinpa, for example, teaches across Europe, including Italy, Finland, and Austria. Lama Sangye Monlam resides and teaches at the Shenten Dargye Ling, while he is also now the main resident lama at Yeshe Sal Ling Bon center in Austria (see below), and teaches in Paris, Austria, and Poland as well.

---

<sup>332</sup> More specifically, the Congregation has responsibility for the lamas themselves, the teaching, rituals, and the premises. The Association is in charge of publishing retreat information, running the restaurant, publishing, and distributing the practice books, among other responsibilities.

One of the characteristics discussed in Chapter 3 that precipitated the expansion and reception of Bon in the West is the ability of some Bon religious leaders to adapt to a particular culture and setting. This ability can be exemplified in Shenten by how the center's administrative and legal structure evolved over time and how it was changed as the center's organization became more complex. The religious leaders had the indispensable support of a group of Western individuals who played a significant role in moving these processes forward. During the 2010 annual meeting of the Shenten Association, for instance, a call was made for organizational change, so later that year, some Western students formed a group to prepare a five-year plan for the maintenance and upgrade of Château de la Modetais. The year 2010 was particularly significant in Shenten for other reasons as well. One was that the Shenten yearly teaching program started in the spring with a one-week retreat led by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung. This retreat was replicated the following years up to 2018. A "traditional" three-week summer retreat also took place for the first time in 2010 and has been held every year since then. Over the course of several years, Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung transmit different Dzogchen cycles of teachings.<sup>333</sup> At the end of summer 2010, the late abbot of Menri Monastery in India, considered by the bonpos to be the spiritual leader of their tradition, visited Shenten. "He blessed our place.... This is a unique occasion that many bonpos in Tibet, India, Nepal and the rest of the world followed with intense interest. They would have loved to participate."<sup>334</sup>

---

<sup>333</sup> Speech delivered by Shenten Dargye Ling's President, August 2011, Shenten Blou, France.

<sup>334</sup> See: Tenpa Yungdrung, "How the Stupa of Yungdrung Koeleg Is Constructed in Shenten Dargye Ling," Shenten Dargye Ling's Newsletter, 2010.



Figure 5 H.H. Menri Tridzin visits Shenten. *From left to right: Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung; the late Abbot Menri Tridzin and Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak. Shenten July 2010. ©Mara Arizaga*

Moreover, from September until November 2010, the “Gomdra<sup>335</sup>” or Meditation School (see below) continued into its second year, guided by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung. Nineteen participants continued to receive the teachings on the Atri Dzogchen cycle (discussed below in Chapter 4.3) while they engaged in several sessions of meditation practice. Other retreats in 2010 included the winter retreat led by *Geshe Gelek Jinpa*, modeled on the practice of Sherab Chamma,<sup>336</sup> a Bon female enlightened deity. In addition to the program at Shenten, Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, *Geshe Gelek*, *Geshe Tendzin Yeshe*, and Lama Sangye Monlam taught in many countries, including Germany, Italy, Austria, Poland, England, and the Netherlands, and various cities in France. Members of Shenten and other communities organized these teachings, facilitating the spread of Bon in several places in Europe and the Americas.

---

<sup>335</sup> Wylie: *sgom grwa*.

<sup>336</sup> Wylie: *Shes rab byams ma*.

The significance of the year 2010 was noted in the following year's General Assembly meeting, when the president of the Shenten Association indicated that "five years after establishing and inaugurating Shenten Dargye Ling at Chateau de la Modetais, Shenten's annual program has fully developed into a consistent whole. The program allows people with different levels of interest, development and knowledge to partake in the teachings."<sup>337</sup>

## 4.3 RETREATS

Already in the year 2006, over the four weeks of the summer retreat that year, a total of 203 people traveled to Shenten. Although the majority were from Europe, participants came from all over the world. About a third were visiting Shenten for the first time, and thirty-six people were meeting the teachers for the first time. It is telling that, while the center has grown, the number of retreat participants did not increase significantly. The average number of participants in Shenten's summer retreats continues to be around two to three hundred per year, in contrast, for instance, to Ligmincha International (discussed below), where the numbers of participants in summer retreats outnumber those of Shenten.

### 4.3.1 GOMDRA (MEDITATION SCHOOL)

The Shenten Dargye Ling Dzogchen Meditation Training (Shenten's Gomdra) is presented as an opportunity for intensive study and practice and follows the curriculum of the meditation school established by Yongdzin Lopon Tendzin Namdak in Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal. However, the curriculum was also adapted to meet the needs of Westerners, such as by shortening the duration

---

<sup>337</sup> Speech delivered by Shenten Dargye Ling's President, August 2011, Shenten Blou, France.

of some practices (see below). In traditional Bon monasteries in Tibet, Nepal, and India, schools have a four-year program, each year involving the transmission and practice of one of the four main cycles of Dzogchen: Atri, Dzogchen, Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, and Yetri Thasel. In Shenten, however, one cycle only is transmitted over the course of four years, in retreats lasting seventy days. During each year, students study the texts and engage in the preliminary and main practices of the relevant cycle. These consist of Guru Yoga, Reflection on Impermanence, Bodhicitta, Refuge, Purification, and Mandala Offering.<sup>338</sup> The last weeks are dedicated to the “main practice” of the cycle, which is Dzogchen practice, following a practice manual written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen.<sup>339</sup> For the first year of the first Gomdra retreat, which lasted one hundred days (and was shortened to seventy days the following years), Charles Ramble and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung compiled a booklet of the biographies of the Atri lineage

---

<sup>338</sup> Here, the Bodhicitta refers to the “Enlightened Mind,” that is, the mind that aims toward awakening, with a sense of compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. As a specific practice, it involves visualizations intended to generate the Enlightened Mind as part of the ngöndro or preliminaries. Refuge refers to the act of “taking refuge” in the “Three Jewels” of Buddha Dharma and the sangha (community of practitioners). It refers to the formal rite of entry into the religion by “taking refuge” in front of a teacher, with a specific ritual and visualizations. It also refers to a specific practice that a person does, visualizing what is called the Refuge Tree, when the person takes refuge in the Three Jewels by means of complex visualizations. This is one of the practices done as part of the ngondro or preliminaries. The Mandala Offering refers to a specific practice that involves certain visualizations as one of the practices in the ngondro or preliminaries. All these practices have different levels of understanding according to the level of the practitioner. See: Namdak and Reynolds, *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*.

<sup>339</sup> Shardza Gyaltzen, also known as Shardza Rinpoche (1859–1933) was, according to bonpos, an accomplished Bon Dzogchen master who had disciples from all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. He is considered as the most significant Bon teacher in the ris med or nonpartisan movement. The ris med movement began in eastern Tibet during the late eighteenth century, and took an “unbiased” approach to all religious schools, considering each school valuable in its own right, a position contrasting with the prevailing sectarianism at that time. He is widely known for his works on Dzogchen and Bon history, his non-sectarian attitude, and for his attainment, at the end of his life, of the “rainbow body” or “body of light” (Tib. ‘ja’ lus). The ‘ja’ lus is the highest attainment for a dzogchen practitioner, and it implies that when the adept culminates the dying process, there is “the intentional dissolution of the physical body into its subtle ‘elements,’ yielding uncanny appearances of multi-colored lights as well as the absence of an ordinary corpse.” See: Jean-Luc Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltzen* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); See also: William M. Gorvine, *The Life of a bonpo Luminary: Sainthood, Partisanship and Literary Representation in a 20th Century Tibetan Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

masters. During the course of a full four-year Gomdra cycle, each student is meant to practice a specific hundred-day *tsalung*<sup>340</sup> retreat called *tummo*.<sup>341</sup> A description of Bon *tummo* practices is to be found in the Dzogchen text called Kusum Rangshar,<sup>342</sup> where the practices of the heat (*tummo*) are described in detail.<sup>343</sup> Traditionally, practitioners enter into this *tsalung*—sometimes translated as the “Yoga of Channels and Winds”<sup>344</sup>—*tummo* retreat for one hundred days during winter, combining special breath-retention techniques with physical movements and complex visualizations of the “channels and winds,”<sup>345</sup> in the third year of the *Gomdra*, and, in the fourth year, the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat (explained below in Chapter 4.3.2). However, the *tummo tsalung* practice was adapted in Shenten to last only seventy days instead of the traditional hundred days. This change in the duration of the retreats was made due to “practical reasons,” which included the fact that some participants coming from abroad could only receive a ninety-day visa to stay in France. It was also meant to accommodate Westerners who, because of their professional commitments, were not able to leave their jobs for that many days, showing yet again a specific confluence of the global and the local, where globalized structures like the Bon religion operate simultaneously at both levels.

At its inception in 2009, the school transmitted the *Atri* cycle over the course of four years. In the first year, the cycle lasted a hundred days; in the following three years, it lasted seventy days, for the same reasons discussed above. In the first

---

<sup>340</sup> Wylie: *rtsa rlung*. *Tsa* means channel, and *lung* means vital wind.

<sup>341</sup> Wylie: *gtum mo*.

<sup>342</sup> Wylie: *sku gsum rang shar*.

<sup>343</sup> Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*, 266.

<sup>344</sup> Achard, 41.

<sup>345</sup> Anne C. Klein and Tenzin Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16.



year, the students practiced the *ngondro* or preliminary practices, performing in addition a daily set of Bon rituals. Yongdzin Rinpoche, following the traditional practice, gave the participants the full *Atri lung* (an oral transmission from a master to students, where the master reads directly from the canonical text in Tibetan). Students started their retreat by performing a ritual meant to “secure the boundaries.” The daily program consisted of four sessions of meditation, along with the performance of the set of rituals mentioned above. Yongdzin Tendzin Namdak Rinpoche stayed at Shenten during the retreat, teaching occasionally. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung led the first hundred-day retreat and gave teachings during the following years. See Appendix A for a daily program of the students during the retreat.

The guidelines for the retreat required students to commit to follow the entire program of the Atri Dzogchen cycle over four years in seventy-day retreats each year. During the Gomdra, participants stayed within the physical “retreat boundaries,” defined as Shenten Dargye Ling’s premises. Correspondence with the outside world (by telephone, Internet, or email) was allowed only one day per week. Some participants studied Tibetan language under Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung and Charles Ramble’s tutelage.

In the Triten Norbutse and Menri monasteries in Nepal and India, respectively, monks and nuns follow both or only one of these two paths called *the Shedra*<sup>346</sup> and the *Gomdra*. The first consists of a monastic college for the scholastic study of Bon, and the second, as seen above, involves a meditation school for the practice of the Bon teachings, particularly Dzogchen. Since those who follow the Gomdra need to be free of distractions and dedicate themselves fully to the

---

<sup>346</sup> Wylie: *bshad grwa*. This word designates the educational program followed both in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon monasteries and nunneries

practice, they spend most of the time during the retreat in silence, avoiding contact with the “outer world.”



Figure 6 Westerners doing meditation practices at Shenten Dargye Ling. ©Mara Arizaga

Yongdzin Rinpoche argues that implementing a Shedra in Shenten is an impossible task, because Westerners do not have the cultural context or the required Tibetan language skills.<sup>347</sup> Despite this remark, an adapted Shedra will start in 2019 at Shenten, which will last five years and be delivered over a yearly span of a three-week teaching retreat. The course is presented as being based on the curriculum of the traditional Dialectical School at Menri and Triten Norbutse monasteries.<sup>348</sup>

The Shenten Gomdra also aims to replicate the program as organized in Triten and Menri but as adapted to the Western reality. While certain aspects remained

---

<sup>347</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

<sup>348</sup> See: “Start of a Five Year Course on Bonpo Philosophy,” accessed April 12, 2019, <http://www.shenten.org/index.php/en/component/content/article/73-shenten/419-start-of-a-five-year-course-on-bonpo-philosophy..>

identical, such as cutting off contact with the “outer world” and including the same number of meditation sessions as in the monasteries, other aspects, such as the duration of the program, were adapted to meet the local needs. Other obvious adaptations are the translations of the teachings, while keeping the recitations during the performance of rituals, the *lung* transmissions, and certain practices strictly in Tibetan.

#### 4.3.2 DARK RETREAT

The practices most often mentioned by participants interviewed for this research (discussed in depth in Chapters 5 and 6) include the so-called “Dark Retreat.” In Bon, this is considered one of the most powerful and suitable environments for working with the teachings of Dzogchen and the practice of the Nature of the Mind, often referred to as the direct path of liberation. This path, Wangyal affirms, allows practitioners to recognize experiences exactly as they are, without treating them “as having power of [their] own or requiring any response.”<sup>349</sup>

The Dark Retreat consists of retreating to a space that is completely absent of light. Traditionally in Tibet and in Bon monasteries in Nepal and India, and now in Bon centers in the West like Shenten, practitioners dedicate seven weeks to complete the Dark Retreat cycle. According to Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, this practice is useful for people at two distinct stages: 1) those who are beginning to embark upon Dzogchen meditation; and 2) more advanced practitioners. In the first case, the Dark Retreat is a matter of clarifying and stabilizing the participant’s experience of the mind. In the second case, the purpose is to

---

<sup>349</sup> Martin Lowenthal and Tenzin Wangyal, *Dawning of Clear Light: A Western Approach to Tibetan Dark Retreat Meditation* (Newburyport: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2003), vxi.

develop a certain kind of vision associated with the practice of Dzogchen<sup>350</sup> and to deepen the practitioner's experience of them. During the Dark Retreat, "the visions and thoughts in the dark tell us what life is like in the unnoticed regions of our being. And the darkness is both intimate and boundless simultaneously."<sup>351</sup>

In the Bon context, Dzogchen practice is intended to help practitioners recognize the "Natural States of their Minds," thereby "stabilizing the experience of the natural state and contemplating its dynamic manifestation in ever increasing visions."<sup>352</sup> There are two methods used to allow practitioners to experience it, called *thogal* and *trekchö*<sup>353</sup> (further explained in Chapter 5.3.4). Succinctly, *trekcho* refers to the practice of the Natural State, and *Thogal* refers to specific practices that the practitioners do while remaining in the Natural State, which results in the development of so-called "*thogal* visions,"<sup>354</sup> (a type of vision discussed below in Chapter 5.3.4).

According to the bonpo texts, there are three main methods to use to develop *thogal* visions. These methods consist of practice in a Dark Retreat hut, contemplation with space, and contemplation with sunlight. The first method is to be applied by the practitioner who, after being stable in the experience of the

---

<sup>350</sup> These visions are called *thogal* visions; discussed in Chapter 4.3.2.

<sup>351</sup> Lowenthal and Wangyal, *Dawning of Clear Light: A Western Approach to Tibetan Dark Retreat Meditation*, vxi; See more at: John Myrdhin Reynolds, *The Precepts of the Dharmakaya: Advanced Instructions on the Practice of bonpo Dzogchen According to the Zhang-Zhung Tradition of Tibet* (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2014).

<sup>352</sup> Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*, 14.

<sup>353</sup> Tenzin Namdak, *Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud, Dringpo Sorzhag: Chapters VI – VII, 24th August – 2nd September*, ed. Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2010), 50.

<sup>354</sup> For academic references examining the meaning of the words "trekcho" and "thogal," see for example: David Seyfort Ruegg, *The Life of Bu Ston Rin Po Che, with the Tibetan Text of the Bu Ston RNam Thar*, vol. 34 (Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966), 76; J. May, "Chugan (Madhyamika)," *Hobogirin* 5 (1979): 470–93; David L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 139; G. Karmay Samten, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon* (London, 1972), 53; Per Kvaerne, "bonpo Studies: The A Krhid System of Meditaion," *Kailash* Pp. 19–50; Vol. I, No. 4, Pl. 247-332. 1, no. 1 (1973): 44.

Natural State of Mind is looking to develop *thogal* visions. While the word *thogal* does not appear in the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyu text,<sup>355</sup> its practice is explained in practice manuals, such as the Gyalwa Chaktri. There is a specific cycle of forty-nine days called “The Seven Cycles of Clear Light,”<sup>356</sup> appended to the Gyalwa Chaktri, containing seven sessions of practice, each involving breathing, visualization, body postures, and so on, which are practiced in succession for one week each.<sup>357</sup>

Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains that in the Bon tradition, the Dark Retreat is considered as one of the essential methods in Dzogchen practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that such a retreat can present certain difficulties. That is why, he adds, any practitioner who decides to undergo the Dark Retreat needs proper guidance and has to be prepared. The basic requirements are that the practitioner needs to “have a solid base of practice but one also needs to be in good shape both physically and mentally.”<sup>358</sup> The texts, he emphasizes, outline the conditions that the dark cabin must meet in order to be suitable for the practice, such as proper ventilation and enough space.<sup>359</sup>

In the context of Gomdra retreats in monasteries in Tibet, India, and Nepal, monks and nuns, as part of their Dzogchen practice, perform the forty-nine days of the Dark Retreat right after they have completed the series of practices called *tsalung tummo* mentioned above, where they apply visualizations exercises and breathing practices, as well as the combination of breath retention techniques

---

<sup>355</sup> The term *thogal* does appear in the text but with a different meaning than the one mentioned here, see: Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*, 14.

<sup>356</sup> Achard, 14–15; See also: Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*, 24.

<sup>357</sup> See: Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight N°2”; See also: Achard, *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*, 19–20.

<sup>358</sup> Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight N°2,” 2.

<sup>359</sup> Yungdrung, 2.

with physical movements and visualizations of the “channels and winds.”<sup>360</sup> These channels and winds of the so-called “subtle body” consist of “energy channels” (*tsa*) through which subtle energies or winds (*lung*) circulate.<sup>361</sup> Although a detailed description of these practices needs extensive explanations and is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to understand that “training for the most esteemed monastic scholars—who typically spend ten or more hours a day studying for nine to fifteen years and longer without any holiday except at New Year’s—does not revolve around texts alone.”<sup>362</sup>

The practice of the “retreat into the darkness” is related to a practice called “the practice of the clear light,” which involves performing difficult physical postures while watching the sunlight. The theory of the “Rainbow Body” or *Jalu*<sup>363</sup> is linked to the theory of the natural luminosity of the mind.<sup>364</sup> Dzogchen teachings refer to the mind as luminous, and light plays an essential role in it as the creator of all phenomenal existence. Karmay eloquently explains this concept by saying that, from a Dzogchen perspective, “Enlightenment is nothing other than the mind itself when it is approached through spiritual means of realization.”<sup>365</sup> The

---

<sup>360</sup> Klein and Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual*, 2006, 16.

<sup>361</sup> For more on the winds and their role in the development of the human body, see: Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet*, 249, 301–3. Achard mentions that a detailed explanation of the techniques related to *tsalung* can be found in the Dzogchen text called *Kusum Rangshar*, see: Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*, 159. For an introduction to *tsalung* and *tummo* practices in Bon, see: Tenzin Wangyal, *Awakening the Sacred Body* (Carlsbad: Hay House, Inc, 2011); and The 3 Doors Academy, *Background and Benefits of the Tsa Lung Practice*, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MWOkatdjpU>.

<sup>362</sup> Klein and Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual*, 2006, 15.

<sup>363</sup> Wylie: *’ja’ lus*.

<sup>364</sup> Karmay, *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, 2007, 187, 190–94.

<sup>365</sup> Karmay, *The Little Luminous Boy: The Oral Tradition from the Land of Zhangzhung Depicted on Two Tibetan Paintings*, 11.

luminous mind is in fact “the creator of the world, the world being nothing but is only illusory projections.”<sup>366</sup>

Wangyal recounts his own experience in the Dark Retreat,<sup>367</sup> when every day his master, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, would come and talk to him, reminding him to do the visualizations: “My Dark Retreat was very successful and brought about a great change in my personality. During the first few days, it was not easy for me as a young boy with a lot of dynamic energy to stay confined and still in such a small, dark room.”<sup>368</sup>

In order to allow Westerners to undergo the practice of the Dark Retreat, a special retreat house mainly for this practice was inaugurated in Shenten Dargye Ling in 2010. The first Dark Retreats by Westerners began in September of that year, after the late Abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche and Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak performed specific rituals to “bless” the retreat house. Normally, when an individual undergoes a Dark Retreat in there, the resident lamas in Shenten perform a blessing ritual at the beginning and end of the retreat. Because of the reasons outlined above by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, including the fact that this type of retreat requires practitioners to be prepared and to receive proper guidance, he advises practitioners in the West to start by taking retreats for short periods, up to seven consecutive days, and slowly increasing their duration. This approach takes into account the reality of some Western students who want to undergo Dark Retreats before following the traditional process outlined above. It thus represents yet another adaptation of Bon practices in the West.

---

<sup>366</sup> Karmay, *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, 2007, 203.

<sup>367</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2000), 24–33.

<sup>368</sup> Wangyal, 33.

Currently there are three rooms in the Dark Retreat house. They have windows but these are completely covered in black. Each room has a private bathroom and shower. The participants get their meals through a serving hatch, which preserves full obscurity. Geraldine Dubreuil, a French former assistant who served those doing Dark Retreats in Shenten by preparing their meals and other practical matters, refers to this practice as “a very deep purification on many levels. We are here for practitioners to give them all kinds of support and advice depending on their mind and specific circumstances.”<sup>369</sup>

In 2012, twenty-seven people underwent Dark Retreats, staying for an average of seven days.<sup>370</sup> By 2017, some had completed the forty-nine-day cycle, including some of the participants interviewed for this research.

Both the Gomdra and the physical facilities at Shenten Center, such as the Dark Retreat house, are evidence of how Shenten accommodates students who are willing to dedicate extensive periods of time to Bon practice. In parallel, the existence of shorter retreats during the year also allows students with less time to also participate in retreats.

#### 4.4 A WESTERN BON STUPA

Stupa is a Sanskrit word that refers to a type of religious structure containing sacred relics. The corresponding Tibetan term is *chorten*,<sup>371</sup> which indicates a

---

<sup>369</sup> Geraldine Dubreuil, “Go for Your Dark Retreat in Thogal House,” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, January 22, 2012, 22.

<sup>370</sup> See: Dubreuil, “Go for Your Dark Retreat in Thogal House.”



Buddhist or Bon shrine, typically the tomb of a master or a monument to the Buddha. The history and the significance of stupas in Buddhism are extensively documented.<sup>372</sup> In contrast, Bon stupas have received far less attention.<sup>373</sup> The origins of stupas are possibly pre-Buddhist,<sup>374</sup> and they developed afterwards in India as commemorative monument containing sacred relics of the Buddha.

It is clear that the symbolism of the stupa changed over time according to the spread of Buddhism. “Buddhist speculations and metaphysics evolved differently at different times and in different countries so that it is likely that the symbolism of the stupa did not remain the same through the ages.”<sup>375</sup> The symbolism, functions, origins, and ritual meanings<sup>376</sup> of Tibetan Buddhist stupas are described in detailed in manuals that prescribe the different aspects of building a stupa. As monumental reliquaries, stupas are erected in special places and can

---

<sup>371</sup> Wylie: *mchod rten*.

<sup>372</sup> See for example: Giuseppe Tucci and Lokesh Chandra, *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism*, vol. 1 (South Asia Books, 1988); Adrian Snodgrass, “The Symbolism of the Stupa. 1985,” *Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass*, 1992; Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse. A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century* (London: Serindia, 1993); Peter Harvey, “The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1984, 67–94; Pema Dorjee, *Stūpa and Its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective* (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1996); Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*, vol. 11 (Brill, 1996). For studies on a specific Buddhist stupa, various works have been written on the stupa of Gyantse (located at Shekar Gyantse monastery, in Gyantse, Shigatse Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, China. It was firstly documented by Giuseppe Tucci in 1937 and consequently studied by Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue in 1993. See: Ricca and Lo Bue, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse. A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century*.

<sup>373</sup> Philip Denwood article on Bon stupas was one of the first to deal with the matter, see: Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Denwood Philip, eds., “Stupas of the Tibetan bonpos,” in *The Stupa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, vol. 28 (Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1980).

<sup>374</sup> Gérard Fussman, “Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1986, 67.

<sup>375</sup> Fussman, 38.

<sup>376</sup> For a comprehensive study on tantric practices of consecration for stupas in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, see: Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*.

have an array of different structures,<sup>377</sup> with the structural components and their proportions being precisely described in these manuals.<sup>378</sup>

A common element in the construction of Tibetan Buddhist (and Bon) stupas is the requirement of specific rituals that should be performed. A person possessing certain qualities should guide the rituals for the stupa construction, which, in broad terms, is divided into three phases, the rituals done before, during, and after the construction.<sup>379</sup> These rituals include recitations, examining the place where the stupa will be built and the directions of the site, looking at the earth and whether it is appropriate, taking possession of the site, and purifying any adversities that the site may have.<sup>380</sup>

Relics contained in stupas can be of different types, such as physical relics of Buddha himself, or of masters, and they are believed to preserve the “spiritual force and purity of the person they once formed part of.”<sup>381</sup>

Apart from being reliquaries, stupas have “a system of overlapping symbols.”<sup>382</sup> In the case of Bon, it is important to note that rituals related to the construction of stupas (and other types of buildings) are meant to maintain the “good relations

---

<sup>377</sup> Dorjee, *Stūpa and Its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective*, 3.

<sup>378</sup> Dorjee, 9.

<sup>379</sup> Dorjee, 24.

<sup>380</sup> Dorjee, 25–27.

<sup>381</sup> Samten G. Karmay, “A New Discovery of Ancient Bon Manuscripts from a Buddhist” Stūpa” in *Southern Tibet*,” *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 69.

<sup>382</sup> Harvey, “The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa,” 67.

between the human and preternatural realms.”<sup>383</sup> This is the rationale behind the many rituals that are performed before any building activity. Furthermore, while bonpos consider that there are 360 types of stupas, “one-third of the 360 *stūpas* named in bonpo sources are made of light, and one-third have no physical or visible form whatsoever.”<sup>384</sup> That is to say, stupas can be physical but they can also be of an immaterial nature, belonging to the visionary or imaginary realms.

The first stupa built at Shenten<sup>385</sup> was inaugurated in 2011. The process of choosing the place, constructing the stupa, and following the different phases of the rites and ceremonies had a far-reaching symbolic meaning, which A. M, one of the Shenten participants, described as “a Western Bon stupa to radiate Bon energy in France and in Europe.” M. P. also referred to it as a “symbol of Shenten as the center of Bon in the West,” while F. H. said the process of constructing it was a “way to bring us closer to the *sangha* [community of monastic and lay practitioners] and to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.”

---

<sup>383</sup> Charles Ramble, “Ritual Architecture and Architectural Rituals in Tibet: Bon and Buddhism” (n.d.).

<sup>384</sup> Ramble.

<sup>385</sup> Apart from France, Bon stupas have also been built so far in the West in Mexico, Madrid and England. There are plans for building a Bon stupa in Austria in the near future.



Figure 7 Shenten Dargye Ling Stupa, 2017. © Mara Arizaga

The stupa was built in the traditional Tibetan style. Shenten’s newsletter states that this stupa is “the first of its kind in a Western country, built in such a precise way, under the guidance of Yongdzin Rinpoche and with the performance of the full extensive rituals. Thus, its construction constitutes a unique and special event for Shenten Dargye Ling and its community, and for the continent in general.”<sup>386</sup>

In 2008, “on an auspicious date,” Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung selected the site for the construction of the stupa in Shenten,

---

<sup>386</sup> Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight.” In the same article, it is also noted that to be more precise, the first Bon stupa built in a Western country was constructed during Yongdzin Rinpoche’s first visit to England, in David Snellgrove’s private garden in Berkhamstead.

performing the “rituals for the earth purification.” Subsequently, the builders laid the basic foundation. However, due to a lack of qualified stupa builders in France, the construction was postponed until 2009. Finally, just after the end of the autumn retreat, the first Shenten stupa was built by Paljor Norbu, a Tibetan who came from Nepal for this purpose, together with two Western students who learned how to build stupas from Norbu, Yongdzin Rinpoche, and other *geshes* and lamas who taught them the techniques.

In an extensive article detailing the different stages of the construction of the stupa, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains that traditionally, “devoted practitioners engage in the construction of these supports of Buddha’s Body, Speech, and Mind, in different sizes, qualities, etc. according to the individual circumstances.”<sup>387</sup> The construction followed elaborate rituals and several phases, which included the consecration of written mantras prepared in the prescribed way. A sacred “pill,” containing 108 “holy substances,” was placed on top of the main axial “Tree of Life” at the center of the stupa, representing Buddha’s relic. Written mantras were inserted, along with a solid pure crystal marked with a [left-facing] swastika,<sup>388</sup> which represents the “eternal” nature of Bon, and two “precious treasure vessels” that had been prepared and consecrated for the occasion. Different types of grains and medicinal herbs were inserted as well. Extensive offerings were performed and several volumes of sacred texts were inserted in the stupa afterwards, with ceremonies led by Yongdzin Rinpoche. The final consecration was performed by Yongdzin Rinpoche and the monks, with the participation of Shenten’s *sangha* members.

---

<sup>387</sup> See: Yungdrung, “How the Stupa of Yungdrung Koeleg Is Constructed in Shenten Dargye Ling.”

<sup>388</sup> The swastika, as a Tibetan symbol, has no relation whatsoever with the Nazi swastika. The figure was widespread in Buddhist, Hindu, and other East Asian religions for thousands of years. The Bon swastika is a left-facing one.

Traditionally, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains, the construction of stupas is considered as part of the Guru Yoga practice (see Chapter 6.1), where “the stupa is the support of Buddha’s Mind. Therefore, whatever activities one performs with the aim of building and paying reverence by doing prostrations, circumambulations, presenting offerings, or even just by thinking of this, one can obtain inexhaustible merits.”<sup>389</sup> Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung also indicates that practitioners, in order to connect with the body aspect of Buddha, should “support the building of statues, pay devotion to them and consequently receive blessings.” In order to connect with the speech aspect of Buddhas, they should “receive Buddha’s teachings, and study them devotedly.” Finally, he explains, a major practice for connecting with the Minds of the Buddhas is to “engage in the construction of the Kudung or stupas. Revering them by remembering Buddha’s knowledge, one should pay respect, do prostrations with the three doors (of Body, Speech, and Mind); ask for blessings to pacify the obstacles and to strengthen one’s practice.”<sup>390</sup>

Shenten’s first stupa was constructed according to the traditional Tibetan practices by Western builders and financed by a Western student. It was described by S. G. as a step forward that “implanted Bon in France and beyond.” The rituals performed around the construction of the stupa were also done following most of the traditional rules and steps as described in Bon texts. Westerners, who in most cases did not understand the meaning of the different rituals, actively participated in the different stages of the process.

Shenten, indeed, is not only a deterritorialized space but also a reterritorialized Tibetan/Western place, where Bon is being implanted in a new geographical, social, and cultural milieu through a process of transplantation that results in

---

<sup>389</sup> Yungdrung, “Speech of Delight.”

<sup>390</sup> Yungdrung, “How the Stupa of Yungdrung Koeleg Is Constructed in Shenten Dargye Ling.”

adaptations and transformations, as we will see below. The Shenten Bon stupa serves as a concrete material object that represents Bon in the West, symbolically linking the “West” to Tibet. The stupa, called by a participant the “vision of Yongdzin Rinpoche,” might even eventually become a pilgrimage site for bonpos around the world. The practice of stupa circumvallation, which one can witness in Shenten regularly, is an example of how modern Bon, despite the general assumptions of the “scientific” and “nonritualistic” forms it can take, is able to accommodate devotional practitioners, who do not necessarily disregard magical, ritualistic, and devotional practices and aspects as cultural baggage. The meanings of religious symbols and places themselves are not rigid but fluid and multifaceted. While globalization, in the case of Bon, erases the geographical boundaries, new scenarios are created, which are both deterritorialized and reterritorialized spaces where Tibetan religious representatives and Westerners seemed to have shared symbols, exemplified by the Shenten stupa.<sup>391</sup>

## 4.5 NEWSLETTERS AND OTHER MEANS OF DISSEMINATING NEWS

In 2006, Shenten began publishing a newsletter in French and English and mailing issues by post to all subscribed members of the Shenten Association. Initially its purpose was to communicate the “non-teaching” activities at Shenten, such as possibilities for the practice of “karma yoga.” Each issue was no more than three pages, including a foreword by Khenpo or Rinpoche; an extract of teachings given at Shenten or short texts translated from Tibetan into English and French; a calendar of the teachings, practices, and other activities; and contact information for people who wanted to visit the center. In addition, their newsletters included short reports written by the people responsible for specific

---

<sup>391</sup> See: Parsons, “The Social System,” 5.

tasks at the center, such as one by the treasurer and another prepared by people in charge of translations and transcriptions about their ongoing activities. Contact information was provided for each person in charge of certain activities. There were also articles about Shenten and about the Yungdrung Bon Association in an effort to make its functioning transparent, as well as news about Triten Monastery, events regarding the Yungdrung Bon tradition worldwide, and the activities of local groups. For an example of the first and second newsletters, see Appendix B

The newsletter has evolved and changed since 2006, focusing today mostly on the calendar of activities of *geshes* and lamas in the West. It is a periodic newsletter sent to members now by email to all those who are registered in the Shenten database. Typically the newsletter begins with a letter from the president of the Shenten Association, followed by news regarding the center and the calendar of activities, retreats, and teachings related to Shenten's *geshes* and lamas. Volunteers administer the newsletter, and its leadership has changed several times over the past few years. The goal is to publish four issues per year, but this does not always happen due to delays in writing the articles or translating them into French or English. Thus, its periodicity depends more on the available time volunteers have than on a fixed publication schedule. Often, academic articles on Bon studies are also included, particularly from scholars who are also Bon practitioners or who attend Shenten retreats.

An overview of the main events that occurred since the beginning of Bon arrival in the West can be seen in the timeline below:



**Bon arrival in the West**  
**Timeline of important historical events**

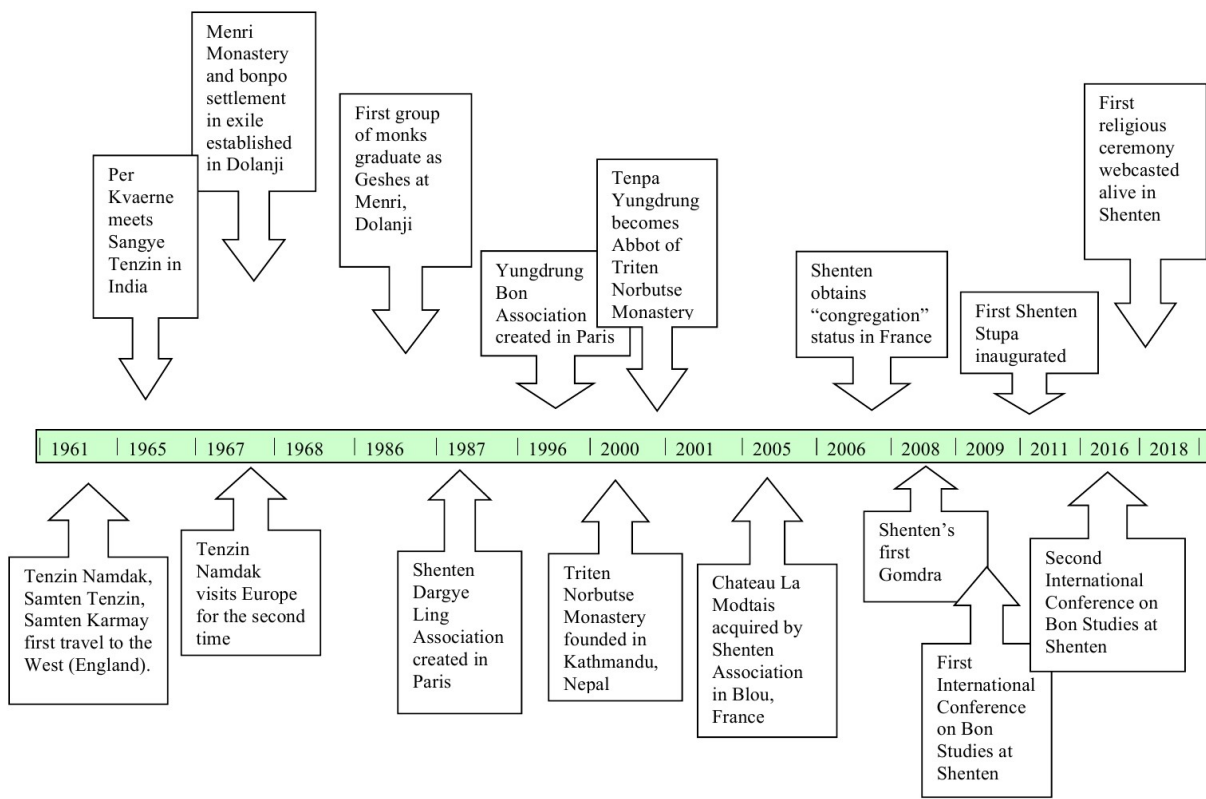


Figure 8 Bon in the West – Key historical events

## 4.6 OTHER CENTERS ASSOCIATED WITH SHENTEN DARGYE LING

Several centers, groups of practitioners, and communities related to Shenten Dargye Ling have emerged in Europe and abroad. For example, in 2012, the “Asociación Religiosa Yungdrung Bön, la tradición nativa de Tíbet” (“Yungdrung Bon Religious Association, the native tradition of Tibet”) was founded in Buenos Aires with the goal of spreading the Yungdrung Bon teachings in Argentina. Since 2011, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung has traveled annually to Buenos Aires to deliver teachings to a group of some sixty participants. A small group of ten participants among them meets twice a month in a rented space to practice together.

Similarly, groups and centers have been established in Austria, Holland, Romania, and elsewhere.<sup>392</sup> In Austria, Yongdzin Tendzin Namdak Rinpoche inaugurated the Yeshe Sal Ling Bön Center in July of 2015, with Lama Sangye Monlam as its resident lama. The center is set up as a non-profit organization and its objectives are similar to those of Shenten, including the promotion of the teachings and the preservation of the Yungdrung Bon tradition. It offers several retreats throughout the year and facilities for the practice of the Dark Retreat.<sup>393</sup> An Austrian student of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Lama Sangye Monlam, who was a regular attendant at Shenten retreats, donated the funds for acquiring the building that was converted into the Bon center.

The Yungdrung Bön Association in Hungary organizes teachings by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and by *Geshe Gelek Jinpa*.<sup>394</sup> Hungarians who had attended several retreats at Shenten Dargye Ling founded this association in 2016.

The Yungdrung Bön Cultural Association in Oradea, Romania, often receives Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche as a leading teacher.<sup>395</sup> Students of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, who attended retreats at Shenten Dargye Ling, founded this association in 2011. The Tapihritsa organization in the Netherlands organizes teachings by Triten Norbutse Ponlop

---

<sup>392</sup> “Yeshe Sal Ling – Yungdrung Bön Center in Austria,” Yeshe Sal Ling, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://yungdrung-bon.com/yeshe-sal-ling/>; “Stichting Tapiritsa | tibetaanse meditatie in de yungdrung-bön traditie in Nederland,” Stichting Tapiritsa, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.tapiritsa.nl/>. See also, for example, the following websites: “Asociația Culturală – Bön – Kulturális Egyesület,” Asociația Culturală Bön, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.acbon.org/>. See also: <https://www.facebook.com/BonArgentina>.

<sup>393</sup> See: “Yeshe Sal Ling – Yungdrung Bön Center in Austria.”

<sup>394</sup> See: “Jungdrung Ten Gye Dü De – Örökkévaló Tan Összegyűjtésének és Szétárasztásának Közössége,” Jungdrung Ten Gye Dü De, accessed October 13, 2018, <http://jungdrungbon.hu/>.

<sup>395</sup> See: “Asociația Culturală – Bön - Kulturális Egyesület.”

Tsangpa Tendzin Rinpoche and *Geshe* Kalsang Gyatso.<sup>396</sup> It was founded in 2016 by Dutch students of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak who attended retreats at Shenten. There is also a small group of approximately twenty persons in Lithuania who practice Bon together and attend retreats in Shenten every summer. For the logos of the above mention Bon centers in Europe, see Appendix D.

One common element of Bon centers in the West listed above is the emphasis they place on Dzogchen practice and teachings. The essential features of Dzogchen are presented to Western students in the following terms: Dzogchen practice aims to reveal, within a person's immediate experience, the state of *rigpa*,<sup>397</sup> the "Primordial State" of the individual, which is beyond all time and conditioning and conceptual limitations. The ultimate goal is enlightenment, which reveals the true "Nature of the Mind." According to Bon Dzogchen texts, this nature neither improves on enlightenment nor becomes flawed in conditioned existence. It is said to be present in all living beings as the abiding condition of every mind. Enlightenment is simply the full manifestation and experience of this all-abiding condition. This Natural State is spoken of in terms of its intrinsic primordial purity and its spontaneous perfection in manifestation. The realization of the Natural State of Mind depends on the capacity of the individual to "realize"<sup>398</sup> the Dzogchen teachings.

The Bon teachings, as conveyed at Shenten and the other Bon centers in the West described above, regard Dzogchen meditation as extremely powerful; it is described as being like the sun shining in the sky, which can easily purify deep

---

<sup>396</sup> See: "Stichting Tapiritsa | tibetaanse meditatie in de yungdrung-bön traditie in Nederland."

<sup>397</sup> Wylie: *rig pa*.

<sup>398</sup> The words "realization" and "to realize" in this context refer to achieving a high level of experience in a given practice. A "highly realized" master, person or practitioner refers to someone who has achieved a high level of accomplishment in a given practice, or in the path toward "enlightenment."

darkness. Yongdzin Rinpoche equates Dzogchen to Yungdrung Bon by noting that “when we say Dharma or Yungdrung Bön, or whatever term we use, the real Dharma is this: one’s Natural State of Mind, because this is the direct antidote of negative emotions.”<sup>399</sup>

Another common element of Bon centers is an emphasis on the “purity,” “authenticity,” and “originality” of Yungdrung Bon teachings, as well as its alleged unique origins in Zhang Zhung. A third common characteristic is the linkage with Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and with Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal. All these centers were founded by students in their own countries, who first either visited Nepal and/or India or a Bon center in the West, often Shenten. They later invited the lamas to visit their countries and then created a formal framework, usually in the form of a religious or a cultural association or foundation.

In this section, we have seen how Bon is spreading in the West, starting from the first teachings of Bon lamas, mostly from Tibetan Bon monastic institutions in Nepal and India, who first came to Europe, without yet having a center, at the invitation of Westerners who served as a bridge between Bon in Nepal and India, and the West. These first *geshes*, teachers, and lamas who traveled to the West learned English and were able to adapt their way of teaching in the monasteries to new and varied Western audiences, most of which, with notable exceptions, did not have the time to engage in extensive retreats or the inclination to join a religious institution. The main interest of Westerners in Bon was the practice of Dzogchen.

---

<sup>399</sup> Namdak, Lopon Tenzin, *The Seven Mirrors of Dzogchen from the Cycle of Namkha Truldzö, Teachings by Rinpoche given on the inauguration of Shenten Dargye Ling, June 2-4, 2005* (Shenten Dargye Ling Publications, 2005), 8.

The active role played in this process by certain Westerners in ensuring a physical installation and a legal framework for Bon in France, as a major international Bon center in the West, was essential for this first establishment and also for the consequent expansion into other European countries and beyond.

In the next section, I will explore another development of Bon in the West, called Ligmincha International, which was also started by the joint efforts of Westerners who were interested in Bon in conjunction with a Tibetan Bon *geshe*, a student of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche and former monk. While Ligmincha is closely linked to the process of how Shenten was set up, it also has unique characteristics in terms of how it is changing and adapting Bon teachings into a new form of practice, particularly through its Three Doors Academy.

## 4.7 LIGMINCHA INTERNATIONAL

Another noteworthy development of Bon in the West is the funding and development of Ligmincha International, a network of centers across North and South America and Europe, which is led by *Geshe* Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, a former Bon monk who was the first to extend Bon teachings to the United States. The Ligmincha International website lists centers in almost twenty countries, illustrating the geographical spread of the Bon religion. The network is also active in releasing publications and information for followers and those interested in the religion and its teachings.<sup>400</sup>

---

<sup>400</sup> See Ligmincha's website at: "Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche | Ligmincha International," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/tenzin-wangyal-rinpoche.html>.



Figure 9 Tenzin Wangyal. ©Ligmincha International: [www.ligmincha.org](http://www.ligmincha.org) (retrieved on 06.06.2019)

Regarding his own personal journey, Tenzin Wangyal recounts how he first came to the West in 1987 at the invitation of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche:

I knew Rinpoche for a long time, of course, and he invited me, I came just as a visitor. I came for three weeks. After three weeks I applied for a little work to ISMEO,<sup>401</sup> in Rome. I just stayed continuously and I began to teach, Norbu Rinpoche asked me to teach sometimes. So I taught a little bit. Not so much, I don't think there was so much. It wasn't because they planned [for] me to teach; but as I was there, they asked me to teach here and there.<sup>402</sup>

Tenzin Wangyal then went to Oslo University, where he received a scholarship to work with Professor Per Kvaerne (discussed in Chapter 4.7). He spent a few months in Oslo and also visited Namkhai Norbu's center in Italy. He says that seeing Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, the founder of the Dzogchen Community, and the way he started to build his center in the Tuscany region of Italy inspired him.

---

<sup>401</sup> ISMEO is the International Association of Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, see: <http://www.ismeo.eu/>

<sup>402</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

Rinpoche definitely inspired me. I saw what he was doing [and] how he was doing. I don't take anything light, I try to perceive and hear everything and have some positive influences. So, then I felt that I was at a personal level, I was 33 years old or something like that and interested in the world, exploring. I left my home, my teacher, my family, I left everybody. For a few years, I didn't get in touch with anybody. Even I could not; I remember I could not know when the Tibetan *losar* [Tibetan New Year] was, so totally disconnected. Probably not intentionally, not intentionally I did that, but I think maybe unintentionally there was something there.<sup>403</sup>

He slowly began to feel that “maybe there is a purpose here” when he realized that by 1987, there were several Tibetan Buddhist centers in the West but not a single Bon center.<sup>404</sup> This motivated him to look at new possibilities other than simply teaching at the Buddhist center already established by Norbu. In 1990, he traveled to the United States and met Professor Anne Klein at Rice University. She invited him to return, and he visited the university during the following summer for a few weeks. Then she encouraged him to apply to a Rockefeller Fellowship, which he did with success. He went back to the United States for one year, and felt that

U.S.A. is the place to be, because in Italy everything was complicated. Life was good, it was fun, but everything is bureaucracy, is complicated. U.S.A. was incredible for me. When I got to Rice University they gave me scholarship, they gave me a home. Even professors that I never met they had boxes for me, a black and white TV which didn't work, but still

---

<sup>403</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>404</sup> Wangyal.

somebody thought of me. A new professor is coming, help him, you know. I went to the library, you can borrow books, and you can print as many pages as you want. An amazing place.<sup>405</sup>

He decided to stay in the United States and started to teach a group of Westerners in Virginia, as yet without a center, until 1992, when a few students decided that they wanted to start a Bon center: “It was the first Ligmincha. I began to teach, but people wanted me to stay there. But I am not the kind of person to stay in one place; I like to travel. Because in my life, until I became a *geshe*, I never traveled anywhere. Once I began to travel, I liked it.” Furthermore, he highlights a revealing aspect of why he likes to travel “so not only I began to like it, also if you stay also with a few people you never know, I met lots of people, resources.”<sup>406</sup>

Tenzin Wangyal recounted how these first students were students he had met before during his first trip to the Dzogchen Community in Virginia: “They were very young people; we were all very young. Nobody knew exactly what we were doing. So but these people had a house, so we said, okay, let’s start.” With Wangyal’s own financial resources and that of some of the students, they hired a lawyer and set up a non-profit organization in 1992. This was the beginning of Ligmincha International.

Tenzin Wangyal recalls that during the first ten years of Ligmincha’s existence, Yongdzin Rinpoche, who was then known as “the Lopon,” and His Holiness Menri Trizin were invited to Ligmincha Center in Virginia every year for imparting teachings over three consecutive weeks.<sup>407</sup> In 1995 or 1996, Wangyal

---

<sup>405</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>406</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>407</sup> Wangyal.



and his students were able to acquire land and to raise funds to establish a first center:

We were looking for a center, but we had no money. We had no idea where money would come from. Funny story is to some of my students I asked them to look for that. They said they went to look for land, and the real estate agent asked, “What is the budget?” And they answered, “Money—don’t worry for that.” The real estate agent said, “Wow! We want these people.” I told them how come you said no problem from money? Where is the money going to come from? I don’t know. I said this is a good omen, you know.<sup>408</sup>

When I asked him how he decided which teachings to transmit to his students, he noted,

Many of them only had a connection [to Dzogchen]. Some were already received teachings, some of my students they had access to teachings already through Norbu Rinpoche, so they were more interested in Dzogchen teachings. Specifically, all the time we taught Dzogchen, we also taught little bit different pieces from Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud cycle.<sup>409</sup>

Wangyal exemplifies in this statement that the spread of Bon in the West was influenced both by the promulgators of Bon and by the receivers, or the Western students, who, as Wangyal indicates, also influenced how Bon is presented by a teacher. It also sheds light on the transnational religious relationships at multiple

---

<sup>408</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>409</sup> Wangyal.

levels that take place among Bon and Buddhist centers that use the practice of Dzogchen as a common and core element, such as Namkhai Norbu's Dzogchen Community.

#### 4.7.1 MODERNIST BON

The creation of Ligmincha International was a cornerstone in the process of adapting Bon to a Western audience, particularly in the United States. It was successful in attracting Westerners and led to even greater innovations, including mixing Bon teachings with Western psychotherapy. Wangyal asserts that “any teaching taught in the West by a Tibetan teacher will undergo change by the very fact of being taught in a new and different cultural and linguistic context, and the more successful a teacher is in communicating with the “Western mind,” the more he will have to modify the teachings.” (emphasis added).<sup>410</sup>

These adaptations are characteristic of recent developments in the way Bon is being articulated in the West. However, the way Tenzin Wangyal uses the concept of “a Western mind” perpetuates the assumption that societies can be divided into a fundamental dualism between East and West—an assumption that I believe to be a discursively constructed duality. East and West, indeed, are not fixed concepts but relative ones. Moreover, if there were such a thing as a “Western mind,” it would not account for some Bon followers in Shenten Dargye Ling who are, for instance, Africans or Asians.<sup>411</sup> In the same vein, stereotypes

---

<sup>410</sup> Wangyal, *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet*, 36.

<sup>411</sup> To the reference of a “Western mind,” we can add the images of exoticism, spirituality and purity often associated with Tibet, in a symmetrical comparison with the “Orientalism” once

related to Tibet are many and varied, idealizing Tibet's complexities and reinforcing the myth of Tibet as "an idyllic society devoted to the practice of Buddhism."<sup>412</sup>

## 4.8 THE THREE DOORS ACADEMY

In association with Ligmincha International, a recent development is the creation of the Three Doors Academy, an institution founded by Tenzin Wangyal that "teaches meditation methods with practical applications for everyday life."<sup>413</sup>

In the first issue of Ligmincha Magazine Europe, the Three Doors Academy was presented as "an educational organization developed in response to Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's desire to open Bon-Buddhist practices to a worldwide audience."<sup>414</sup> With headquarters in the United States, a group of Western students of Tenzin Wangyal runs the organization. The Academy offers a "special three-year training program to those *sangha* members in the United States, Europe and Mexico who are interested in working deeply with these practices," exemplifying yet another adaptation of Bon in the West. Students who complete the training, the article indicates, "will be authorized to then share these practices with others."<sup>415</sup>

---

described by Edward Said. See more at: Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1978; and Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered."

<sup>412</sup> Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 9.

<sup>413</sup> See: "The 3 Doors," The 3 Doors (blog), accessed May 17, 2019, <https://the3doors.org/>.

<sup>414</sup> Kallon Basquin, "The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind," Ligmincha Europe Magazine, n.d., 10.

<sup>415</sup> Basquin, 10.

#### 4.8.1 A MODERN BODHISATTVA TRAINING

Presented as “profound teachings for today’s world,” the first Director of Operations of the Three Doors Academy, Kallon Basquin, explained that it was Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche who, about fifteen years ago (around 1997), started “thinking outside the box of the traditional training he received.”<sup>416</sup> Realizing that “planting the Dharma” in the West was going to require a unique approach, Wangyal is believed to have had a series of dreams in which he saw the first signs of what is now called the Three Doors program. According to this narrative, Tenzin Wangyal often discussed matters with His Holiness and Lopon, “seeking their support and encouragement in developing his vision of opening the teachings to today’s world.”<sup>417</sup> Yongdzin Rinpoche, as we saw earlier, is the teacher of most Bon master teaching in the West, and being associated with him is seen as a source of legitimacy.

Four years before the opening of the Academy, Wangyal selected a group of senior students who began practicing privately with him to explore what they conceived as a new way of doing certain practices. Many aspects of what is now the Three Doors training evolved out of their discussions. Tenzin Wangyal’s vision for the Academy, says Basquin,

was instantaneously apparent to me... As details of the structure, focus, and curriculum of the programs emerged for me, I began taking notes. Then I would meet with Rinpoche to get his corrections and clarification.

---

<sup>416</sup> Kallon Basquin, “The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind,” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d., 11.

<sup>417</sup> Basquin, “The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind,” n.d., 11.

Finally, he encouraged me to write up all the notes as proposals. These became the basis for the Three Doors Public Programs.<sup>418</sup>

The Three Doors International, Basquin adds, is considered the vehicle through which Tenzin Wangyal's vision is presented to the world.<sup>419</sup>

#### 4.8.2 A "WESTERN WAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT"

When the first Three Doors Academy training started in August 2011, a three-year program, presented as a meditation and training program, was announced as being created "with the blessings of Yongdzin Rinpoche and His Holiness Lungtok Tenpai Nyima."<sup>420</sup> At the beginning, the "legitimization" of the religious leaders was still emphasized. Wangyal stated that the Three Doors Academy empowers trainees to become "tradition carriers" of his "Heart Drop," utilizing a metaphor often quote in Bon texts. "You learn not only how to transform your own life using the Three Doors Practices, but also how to present these practices to others."<sup>421</sup> After obtaining the certificates to be official teachers, graduates

may then choose to take these teachings into the world in their individual ways and settings. While maintaining the *authenticity* of what they have been taught, they can provide teachings in public programs, hospitals, educational organizations, or business environments. It will be

---

<sup>418</sup> Basquin, "The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind," n.d., 10.

<sup>419</sup> Basquin, 10.

<sup>420</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, "Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's Heart Drop: The Three Doors - Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe," *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, 2011.

<sup>421</sup> "Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's Heart Drop: The Three Doors - Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe."

up to the participants to determine where to take the fruits of their Academy training [emphasis added].<sup>422</sup>

John Jackson, one of the first to complete the three years of training, categorized it as “the richest training and practice experience of my life. These practices reached the source of issues that I had never been able to fully resolve through psychotherapy or other meditation methods.”<sup>423</sup>

Another student, who also completed the training, described his being part of the Three Doors training over the last three years as a phenomenal experience, that was also linked to Bon practices:

I thought I had understood the practices, but the Three Doors program took me deeper in a very direct and intimate way. I connected to a subtler level of my pain body, speech, and mind, and dissolved patterns that had eluded me. I also realized that the Three Doors is Rinpoche’s precious gift from his heart essence, and am grateful for his vision in bringing these teachings to all of us in this very accessible way.<sup>424</sup>

The developments described above reveal that, borrowing from McMahan’s expression of “Modernist Buddhism,” we can speak about a “Modernist Bon,” which hybridizes Bon practices and traditions with Western ideologies, particularly psychology and psychotherapy. Other elements highlighted by

---

<sup>422</sup> Wangyal, 12.

<sup>423</sup> Wangyal, 12.

<sup>424</sup> “Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche’s Heart Drop: The Three Doors – Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe,” 12.

McMahan are also relevant for our findings, including an emphasis on aspects of Bon that seem to resonate well for Western audiences and, at the same time, the suppression of aspects of Bon that appear to be in contradiction with what makes sense to Westerners.

Some of the Western characteristics that seemed to have also influenced Wangyal's reformulation of Bon teachings are the rejection by Westerners of whatever they perceive as being "religious," as I will discuss in detail in Chapters 5 and 6. In this regards, A. M., one of the first participants to complete the Three Doors training, explains:

the Three Doors is a lay program. It uses the Bon teachings but, for example, we don't refer to Tenzin Wangyal as "Rinpoche," we call him only by his name. We don't pray, we read what we call "the poems of inner refuge" developed by Tenzin Wangyal. And it is clear for me that these are techniques that came from Bon, but it is not religious. There are no images.

#### 4.8.3 A "RARE CHANCE FOR A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION"

A student of Wangyal who interviewed one of the participants of the Three Doors Academy wrote about her impressions of the program as follows: "Talking with Rose about the training made a strong impression on me. Before our conversation, I already felt the program was very useful and important. But now I see why the training is such a rare chance for a radical transformation."<sup>425</sup>

---

<sup>425</sup> Wangyal, "Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's Heart Drop: The Three Doors - Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe."

Later in 2018, the Three Doors Academy was presented in a secular way, as “a program that helps you unleash your full potential and truly transform your being. As you transform, you can see the impact on others – your family, coworkers, friends, relatives, and society.”<sup>426</sup>

In October of 2018, the fifth North American academy was started at the Serenity Ridge Retreat Center in Virginia, opening with a two-and-a-half-year program built around six in-person group retreats, along with interactive online support. The Academy website reports that after graduation, participants “support each other in maintaining an ongoing commitment to their meditation practice and serving the well-being of others.”<sup>427</sup>

The Academy also evolved to having online practices, for example, an online meditation program that “explores the body as a powerful doorway into open awareness and the vibrancy of direct experience,”<sup>428</sup> which is presented as an opportunity to connect with stillness and increase “inner stability.”<sup>429</sup> This online course is also available in a Spanish version.<sup>430</sup>

The title of a section of the Ligmincha magazine asks the readers: “A Traditional Path or The 3 Doors?,”<sup>431</sup> explicitly positioning these two as opposite paths. The Three Doors Academy appears specifically “Western” in its activities, its way of

---

<sup>426</sup> “The 3 Doors Program News,” Ligmincha Europe Magazine, n.d., 16.

<sup>427</sup> “The 3 Doors Program News,” 16.

<sup>428</sup> “The 3 Doors Program News,” 16.

<sup>429</sup> “The 3 Doors Program News,” 16.

<sup>430</sup> “The 3 Doors Program News,” 16.

<sup>431</sup> See: John Jackson, “The Path: Traditional Bon Teachings or the 3 Doors Academy?,” Ligmincha Europe Magazine, n.d.



functioning, and its scope. Although deemphasizing the elements of Bon religion on its website, Wangyal explains that as part of the training, students have to do what the Academy calls “sixty-three transformations.” He explained in an interview that these transformations mean that students actually apply the Bon teachings, but “not just accumulating mantras but changing the conduct.”<sup>432</sup> For example, he explains, “if somebody has a bad relation with the food, so they change their relation with the food, or they change the relation with their partner; with their profession, with money.”<sup>433</sup>

The Three Doors, he explains, practices with people who are interested in awareness “but who are not Buddhists.” The syllabus was created by a first group of students who were also doing Bon practices, including Basquin (mentioned above). Tenzin Wangyal actively participated in this process. A relevant singularity is that most of these first students who laid the basis of the program were therapists. Recounting the experiences of the first group of students while developing the curriculum of the Academy, Najia, one of the participants, says:

Out of that sharing, our mutual support began to grow. Our main learning experience was selecting and writing about the sixty-three transformations we were all committed to making in our lives, using the practices. This took three years and some of us are still working on them. Some people completed all sixty-three transformations two or three times. We did what Rinpoche teaches to all his students to do—we selected issues, problems, and limitations in our lives and then used the practices to transform them.

---

<sup>432</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>433</sup> Wangyal.

She explains that one of the main reasons for giving her support to this initiative was that Tenzin Wangyal visited the group while they were doing the training. She added that she “could see it was a radical step on his part to take this risk, to go against the centuries of monastic tradition and open these teachings to the public. I think all of us in the training group could feel his commitment, so I felt a great desire to support him in that.”<sup>434</sup>

While there is no reference to Bon in the Three Doors Academy’s website, Tenzin Wangyal has specified that the first and second generations of students in the Three Doors Academy are people who were also following Bon practices and that he had a personal relation with, but not the third generation, which is composed of participants who do not come from a Bon background or have had direct contact with Bon teachings. He further notes that “we are not intending that [i.e., the Three Doors Academy] to be preserving Bon culture, we don’t. I look at it more as a social thing, and whatever the spiritual impact it will have, and that’s all. I see impact.”<sup>435</sup> Looking back over his experience in the West over the last twenty years, he says that he witnessed many people benefit in their personal, relational, and professional lives from “Bon’s legacy of wisdom and compassion.” Over those two decades, he adds, he continually worked on how best to present the teachings “coherently and effectively in a cultural context so different from my own. Almost without exception, the teachings and practices for healing Body, Speech, and Mind [The “Nine Purification Breathings” of *Tsalung*, the “Five Warriors Syllables,” and the “Practices with the Five Elements”]<sup>436</sup> have been the most useful and transformative.”<sup>437</sup>

---

<sup>434</sup> Rose Najia, “A Chance for Radical Transformation,” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d., 14.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>436</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, *Tibetan Yogas of Body, Speech, and Mind* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2011); Tenzin Wangyal, *Healing with Form, Energy, and Light* (Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2002); Tenzin Wangyal, *Awakening the Luminous Mind: Tibetan Meditation for Inner Peace and*

The Three Doors Academy has Western coordinators in North and South America and Europe, indicative of its reach across much of the globe. According to Wangyal, it has designed its retreats and teachings with the modern Westerner in mind while attempting to remain true to the fundamentals of Bon teachings but in a non-religious form.<sup>438</sup> Wangyal further says that he sees the Three Doors Academy as an opportunity to help Westerners according to their own circumstances. But he also emphasizes that the approach taken at the Academy has also been effective for long-standing students of his who previously followed a more traditional Bon path:

People who are more traditional form of practitioner, it really touches them and I see people who change their behavior, they change physical attitudes. I see changes, which means basically that it supports keeping their spiritual practice. Other people, it also depends on how to define spiritual practice. My definition of spirituality is that these people they have an introduction to their Nature of Mind.<sup>439</sup>

This statement denotes a particular definition of spirituality, one that is connected to a specific aspect of Bon, which is considered by bonpos as the essence of Dzogchen practice, the introduction to the Natural State of Mind. Wangyal notes that, according to his experience, the “main power to change” an individual does not come from analysis and reflection but from “who they are in the Nature of their Mind.” He further differentiates this approach, where the

---

Joy (Carlsbad: Hay House, Inc, 2012); Wangyal, *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet*.

<sup>437</sup> Wangyal, “Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche’s Heart Drop: The Three Doors - Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe.”

<sup>438</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>439</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

“source of power” from which change comes is very different from, for example, therapy. Because of that, the practices at the Three Doors Academy can actually deepen a person’s spiritual practice, he claims.

#### 4.8.4 DO YOU HAVE TO HAVE A TIBETAN TEACHER...TO BE INTRODUCED TO THE NATURE OF MIND?

Wangyal further poses a question that was echoed by some participants interviewed for this research: “Do you have to have a Tibetan teacher, or is there a specific form to be introduced to the Nature of Mind, or can somebody awaken by circumstances in their life, awaken by enough mentoring, or just by reading texts?”<sup>440</sup> He goes further by asking whether the Nature of Mind can be seen as belonging to a specific tradition or if it is universal, therefore questioning whether it is relevant if we call it a “Bon practice” in contrast to calling it, for example, a “Nyigmapa practice.” Wangyal says he discussed this matter with Yongdzin Rinpoche, asking him, “Does it matter if you call it Bon? If Buddha is Buddha, does it matter if you call it Buddha? He said, ‘Of course, it matters.’ For him it matters for Bon, it matters at the level of preserving transmissions, lineages, and things, which we anyway do in Ligmincha,” touching on issues of authenticity discussed before.

Wangyal compares the impact of the Academy to a health program connected to the hospital<sup>441</sup> where one of his oldest students, Alejandro Chaoul, works. Alejandro is an Argentine based in the United States and one of the trainers of the Academy. Wangyal says,

---

<sup>440</sup> Wangyal.

<sup>441</sup> For more on this program see: Alejandro Chaoul and Lorenzo Cohen, “Rethinking Yoga and the Application of Yoga in Modern Medicine,” *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 2 (2010): 144–67.

I really believe in Dzogchen teachings and I really believe that, for example, pain, physical pain, we have done some research and I have my own very experiences that in physical pain you can change...The reason pain goes away, as we all know, our conceptual mind, our pain identity is the one that created it. But when you are able to separate it, as we call in Dzogchen, separate the mind with the Nature of Mind, pain changes so much. So I use very different language. But still for me is pure Dzogchen. But I make it understandable in different ways.

Wangyal underscores that he believes in social change through the principle of Dzogchen, an issue about which he is considering writing a book. Every month, he teaches a course called “enlightened leadership,”<sup>442</sup> which is transmitted via webcast.

Basically, it is all about how to become a good leader with principles based in these teachings. I feel it could be very good for people in the business world. Again, if you question about how much spiritual practice they will reach, it is difficult to say; but at least it will give them some spiritual perspective.<sup>443</sup>

He explains that in addition to Ligmincha and the Three Doors Academy, he also founded Lishu Institute<sup>444</sup> in India, where Western students receive a traditional approach to studying Bon: “They [the teachers] go traditionally line by line,

---

<sup>442</sup> See the videos at: Tenzin Wangyal, “Videos Enlightened Leadership EN | Ligmincha International,” accessed November 25, 2018, <http://www.ligmincha.org/index.php/en/programs/prison-project/2-uncategorised/306-videos-enlightened-leadership-en.html>.

<sup>443</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>444</sup> “Home of Study of Bön Buddhism – Lishu Institute Wwww.Lishu.Org,” accessed January 5, 2019, <http://www.lishu.org/>.

teaching the Nine Ways of Bon.” He notes that he has invested “more money and energy in India than anywhere else in the West. Sometimes I doubt if it was a good thing to add. There is a small group of people but very dedicated, three years, so I believe in it, so I am [also working in ] preserving [the tradition]. We have five, ten people, if I would not believe in it, I would not put so much energy.”

At the same time, he adds, Ligmincha holds a retreat every winter focusing on the explanations of the *Gyalwa Chaktri*, the manual of practice of the *Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen* cycle. Participants include students who have undergone the full preliminary (*ngöndro*) practices and who have been following Bon for as many as thirty years. Some of them have completed the seven-week Dark Retreat (see Chapter 4.3.2). However, the objective of the Three Doors Academy, he explains, is “to help society, and it may bring some people in Ligmincha, and into the Bon. Or it might not.” A point that Wangyal made clear is that his expectations do not include making “these people to become bonpos.” Yet, he sees the Three Doors Academy as a way of supporting the spread of Bon, because, he argues, the practices at the Academy were initially inspired by Bon.<sup>445</sup> Many lamas, he recounts, tell him that, wherever they go, people who have heard something about Bon usually did so through one of his books, which are now also being published in China. He adds

I just try to see whatever and whenever I can help. Of course, deep inside there is a wish, it would be nice to be able to do exactly what you want, but this is not the world. When it doesn't support you, you don't want to close yourself up and don't do at all. So you help whatever you can help.<sup>446</sup>

---

<sup>445</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>446</sup> Wangyal.

Wangyal further believes he is lucky to attract “capable people, resourceful people. They initiate things.” This aspect—the involvement of Westerners who are willing to invest time, financial resources, and their own professional expertise—has proven to be essential in the establishment of Bon in the West, including for Ligmincha International.

In his analysis of what he refers to as “global Buddhism,” Baumann points to two predominant groups of Buddhists in Europe, which he identifies as traditionalists and modernists. “Modernist Buddhists” are characterized by having demythologized and rationalized traditionalist Buddhism. Baumann argues that, in a similar way, some postmodernist Buddhists have secularized Modernist Buddhism. In this regard, however, Modernist Buddhism is described as “an important part is constituted by approaches and understandings that no longer refer to them as Buddhist.”<sup>447</sup> While the curriculum and the structure of the Three Doors Academy is based on the Bon teachings, in a similar manner, it is presented as a secular institution, free of any devotional or ritualistic element, and with a heavy emphasis on psychological dimensions that were surely influenced by the fact that the curriculum of the program was mostly developed by therapists. This “psychologization” of Bon, which shares certain characteristics with Buddhism in the West as it has also gone through a similar process, implies presenting -and transforming- certain Bon ideas and practices, such as Dzogchen under new labels and names, in order to reach wider audiences. Future developments will show to what extent the program will still be described as “based on Bon.”

---

<sup>447</sup> Martin Baumann, “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001), <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/128/>. Martin Baumann, “Buddhism in the West: Phases, Orders and the Creation of an Integrative Buddhism,” *Internationales Asienforum* 27, no. 3-4 (1996).

Another characteristic of the Three Doors Academy, as discussed above, is that it makes extensive use of the Internet, digital media, and digitized structures. This in turn shapes the way the practices are experienced by imprinting a largely “individual” approach rather than a community approach. In relation to Buddhism, Wagner and Accardo note that “as Buddhist practice increasingly takes place online, the space of meditation itself is recontextualized into the blur and motion of contemporary urban life, such that practice often becomes something that people do while they are doing something else.”<sup>448</sup>

Apart from Shenten and Ligmincha, the existence of various centers across Europe and America highlights the breadth and diversity of the Bon religion across the Western world, accessible to all and ever growing. It also demonstrates the capacity of the promulgators of Bon in the West to adapt and integrate their religion into Western modern societies through a process in which Westerners, conversely, also have a significant influence in shaping how this religion is transformed and adapted in this new context.

#### 4.9 THE TRANSMISSION OF BON IN THE WEST: KEY FIGURES

Key figures in Bon teaching, scholarship, and transmission include Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, *Geshe* Samten Karmay, and *Geshe* Sangye Tenzin, the late “His Holiness” (abbreviated as H. H.) Menri Trizin.

His Eminence (abbreviated as H. E.) Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, born in 1926 in Khyungpo Karru in the Khyunpo district of Kham province, eastern Tibet, has been indispensable in the advance of Bon in the West. Considered to be the most senior teacher of the Bon tradition and widely regarded as the world’s

---

<sup>448</sup> Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo, “Buddhist Apps: Skillful Means or Dharma Dilution?,” in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, ed. Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2014), 134.



foremost expert on Bon, he belongs to the last generation of Tibetan masters to have been fully educated in Tibet. His life depicts the turbulence, changes, and dramatic socioeconomic transformations experienced in Tibet over the last few decades. From living as a monk in a cave to founding a Tibetan settlement for bonpo refugees in India and then traveling to England, he has been instrumental in bringing Bon to the West.<sup>449</sup> He is widely considered by co-religionists to be the driving force through which “Yungdrung Bon is experiencing a revival both within Tibet and beyond.”<sup>450</sup>



Figure 10 Yongdzin Rinpoche at a ritual ceremony in Kathmandu, Nepal, December 2012. © Mara Arizaga

---

<sup>449</sup> An English translation a biography of Yongdzin Rinpoche (currently available in Tibetan) by Charles Ramble and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung is under preparation. A documentary on the life of Yongdzin Rinpoche is to be released soon.

<sup>450</sup> Nagru Geshe Jinpa Gelek, *Bon in Nepal, Traces of the Great Zhang Zhung Ancestors in the Himalayas*, ed. Ermakova Carol and Ermakov Dmitry (Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 2013), 22.



Figure 11 The cave at Juru Tso Lake in northern Tibet where Yongdzin Rinpoche spend many years in retreat. © Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung

Yongdzin Rinpoche's religious life started at the age of seven, when he entered Tengchen Monastery, where his uncle served as chant leader. He took his vows as a monk when he was fourteen. When he was fifteen, he traveled with his uncle to Yungdrung Ling, a Bon monastery in central Tibet. There he helped by executing wall paintings, given that he was already viewed as an accomplished artist and painter. In 1943, he began his studies in philosophy. For several years, he studied with his tutor and master Gangru Tsultrim Gyaltzan Rinpoche, who had retired from eighteen years of service as Lopen (i.e., principal teacher) of Yungdrung Ling. He spent "long periods in seclusion, in a remote cave at Juru Tso Lake in northern Tibet. There, he learned from his teacher grammar, poetics, monastic discipline, cosmology and the stages of the path to enlightenment according to Sutra, Tantra<sup>451</sup> and Dzogchen."<sup>452</sup>

---

<sup>451</sup> Sutra is a Sanskrit word (in Tibetan Wylie: *mdo*) that refers to "teachings that came directly from the historical Buddha. The teachings of sutra are based on the path of renunciation and form the base of monastic life." Tantra, a sanskrit word (in Tibetan Wylie: *rgyud*) refers to "teachings of the Buddhas. They are based on the path of transformation and include practices

In 1948, Yongdzin Rinpoche moved to Menri Monastery, located in Tsang Province, central Tibet, which is considered the main Bon monastery in the country. After fifteen years of studies, he obtained his *geshe* degree at age twenty-seven under the tutelage of his main teacher at Menri, Lopon Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, eventually succeeding his teacher and becoming the Lopon of Menri. After the Thirty-First abbot of Menri died, Yongdzin Rinpoche decided to support the newly appointed abbot, who was inexperienced. He went north to teach among the Dangra nomads, and he sent whatever donations he received to Menri. While he was in a monastery called Sezbig, located on the Dangra Lake in northern Tibet Sezbig, near Dangra, conflicts escalated in Tibet due to the invasion of Chinese Communists, so he stayed in Shezig in retreat until 1960. The violence and chaos escalated and many Tibetans left their homeland, including the Dalai Lama. Carrying only a few texts and relics, Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche tried to escape on foot, accompanied by lamas and monks of Menri Monastery, among them the Thirty-Second Abbot of Menri. Chinese soldiers impeded Namdak's escape by shooting him in the leg. But, "thinking him dead, the Chinese left the great master lying in the dirt."<sup>453</sup> Thanks to the help of local people, he recovered from the injuries caused by the Chinese shooting. They then made a second attempt to escape, walking for nearly a month at nighttime, and managed to arrive safely to Nepal.<sup>454</sup>

---

such as working with the energy of the body, the transference of consciousness, dream and sleep yogas, and so on." See: Ligmincha International, "Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International," accessed January 17, 2019, <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/boen-buddhism/resources/glossary-of-bon-terms.html>.

<sup>452</sup> See more at the Bon Website: Ligmincha Germany, "S.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche," Ligmincha Deutschland, accessed December 16, 2018, [http://new.ligmincha.de/?page\\_id=1106](http://new.ligmincha.de/?page_id=1106).

<sup>453</sup> Ligmincha Germany.

<sup>454</sup> See: Ligmincha Germany.



Figure 12 Thangka painted by a Western student of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak describing his life as follows (*from right to left*): Menri Monastery in Tibet; crossing the Himalayas and establishing Menri monastery in India and Triten Norbutse monastery in Nepal; arriving into the West and establishing Shenten Dargye Ling. At the center, Namdak's teacher, Lopon Sangye Tenzin. ©Shenten Dargye Ling. Courtesy of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung.

Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche first traveled to the West in 1961 after he met the renowned English Tibetologist David Snellgrove of the University of London, who invited him, along with *Geshe Sangye Tenzin* and *Geshe Samten Karmay*, to London. During his three years in England (1961–1964) and in collaboration with Snellgrove, Yongdzin Rinpoche worked on the preparation of the book *The Nine Ways of Bon*, which was published in 1967. It was the first major scholarly study

of the Bon tradition in the English language, establishing the foundation of Tibetan Bon studies in the West.<sup>455</sup>

Yongdzin Rinpoche's life story helps introduce a number of illuminating elements of the growth of Bon in the West, including the emergence and development of Bon studies and Bon followers.<sup>456</sup> Snellgrove recounts how Bon first arrived in Europe when the Rockefeller Foundation made grants available for research on Tibet, funding the travel of Tibetans who had recently escaped from China and were now living in Nepal and India.<sup>457</sup> Since then, a great deal has happened, as demonstrated, for example, in a recent celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Bon studies in the West, which was held during a conference marking sixty years of Tibetan studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and the founding of the London Shangshung Institute for Tibetan Studies.<sup>458</sup> Indeed, starting with the work of Snellgrove in the 1960s, SOAS became the first institution of higher education in the United Kingdom to host a permanent academic position in Tibetan studies.

In May 1960, Snellgrove went to northern India and Nepal to do research, meet "educated Tibetans,"<sup>459</sup> and invite them to London for the Rockefeller-funded project. He believed it would be valuable to invite bonpo monks rather than "regular Buddhist ones." The next winter, while visiting Dolpo, Snellgrove heard

---

<sup>455</sup> Nagru Geshe Jinpa Gelek, *Bon in Nepal, Traces of the Great Zhang Zhung Ancestors in the Himalayas*, 21.

<sup>456</sup> Cf: Geoffrey Samuel, "Shamanism Bon and Tibetan Religion," in *The History of Tibet, Vol 3, The Modern Period: 1895-1959, The Encounter with Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 465.

<sup>457</sup> David L. Snellgrove, "How Samten Gyaltsen Came to Europe," *Revue d'Etudes Tibetaines, Indologica*, no. 14 (October 2008): 1.

<sup>458</sup> The conference took place on 9 September 2011.

<sup>459</sup> Snellgrove, "How Samten Gyaltsen Came to Europe," 2.

that the Abbot of Yungdrung Ling Monastery (in central Tibet) was staying nearby on his return journey from the Bon Monastery of Samling, located in Dolpo. Like other Tibetans who had recently fled from Chinese-occupied Tibet, he was looking for block prints and manuscripts in small monasteries in these regions of Tibetan culture, which remained outside of political Tibet, to be able to reproduce them in Delhi as a means of reestablishing a monastic system in exile.

The abbot was accompanied by Sangye Tenzin, a young monk. After borrowing a large number of Bon texts during their travels, they were on their way to Delhi to reprint them. “This was my first contact with a Grand Lama of an important bonpo establishment in Tibet itself,” Snellgrove added.<sup>460</sup> When he returned to Kathmandu Valley, Snellgrove went to a monastery where he was supposed to meet with Sangye Tenzin. There he met Lopen Tenzin Namdak for the first time; he recalls that Tenzin Namdak “also impressed me by his learning, his cordiality and his cheerful good humour.”<sup>461</sup> For his part, Tenzin Namdak recalls this moment when he met Snellgrove:

He came suddenly. He tested me. He has been to Dolpo, to some monasteries, he asked me some questions. I was very pleased. I had no hopes absolutely for any of this to survive. So seeing him and his interest was very exciting. Very much. Then he asked about our living, eating, food, we said nothing, no much money. He took me to the Red Cross to eat. So great. He took us down to Kathmandu to eat there. There was a

---

<sup>460</sup> Snellgrove, 2.

<sup>461</sup> Snellgrove, 2.

Swiss man in charge, to organize in Patan where the Tibetan refugee camp started to be organized there.<sup>462</sup>

Later in Delhi, Snellgrove tried to track down Sangye Tenzin at the address given by Tenzin Namdak, an address for a printing business in Old Delhi. Sangye Tenzin was not there, having gone on pilgrimage, “but we found his younger companion Samten Gyaltzen [Karmay], who impressed us very much indeed,” writes Snellgrove.<sup>463</sup> Samten remembers how he met Snellgrove:

When Snellgrove arrived in Delhi, he came quite early in the morning, came to the printing place. He came early at 5 o'clock. Then, he knocked. I was sleeping under the table. As Tibetan, I could sleep everywhere. I see this European man for the first time in my life. He said something I couldn't understand. He spoke some sort of Dolpo dialect. In the end we managed to understand each other. He said he would come back midday. He came back with his Sherpa assistant. Snellgrove was furious fighting with a driver, and he was telling nothing to do with you. I offered Tibetan tea. The weather was very, very hot. That was the first time I met a European man. A few days later, he proposed to go to London.<sup>464</sup>

After this encounter, Snellgrove formally invited *Geshe* Samten, Sangye Tenzin, and Tenzin Namdak to London, a trip they finally managed to make in 1961. As part of the formalities they underwent before traveling, the three Tibetans met

---

<sup>462</sup> Tenzin Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 5, 2014.

<sup>463</sup> Snellgrove, “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe,” 2.

<sup>464</sup> Samten G. Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

with the Dalai Lama and explained their travel plans to him.<sup>465</sup> Snellgrove says that the three “were willing to accompany me into a different world, entirely unknown to them personally.”<sup>466</sup> In addition to these three, a young aristocrat from Lhasa (named Sonam Panden Trangjun) and a Tibetan monk (named Lhakpa, from Sera Monastery in Lhasa) also joined them on the trip to England.<sup>467</sup>



Figure 13 Before departing to the West for the first time. *From left to right:* Geshe Samten Karmay, the late Abbot Sangye Tenzin, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and a Tibetan who also travelled to London with the group. © Prof. David Snellgrove. Photo taken in Delhi in 1961<sup>468</sup>

Before starting the journey to the West, Snellgrove taught them basic English and gave them lessons in world geography. He also bought European-style clothes for

---

<sup>465</sup> Snellgrove, “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe,” 3.

<sup>466</sup> Snellgrove, 3.

<sup>467</sup> Snellgrove, 3.

<sup>468</sup> I am grateful to Samten Karmay for explaining this photo to me and for allowing me to use it in this thesis.



them, which they wore for the first time. On their journey to England, they made a stopover in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to visit Buddhist historical sites, and then another in Rome, Italy, where they met Snellgrove's mentor, the famous Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci. It was also their first encounter with "the important Lama of the Old Tibetan Religious Order, namely Namkhai Norbu, whom Tucci had just then invited under the same Rockefeller scheme."<sup>469</sup>



Figure 14 In Rome. *From left to right:* Geshe Samten Karmay, the late Abbot Sangye Tenzin. ©Heather Stoddard<sup>470</sup>

After they arrived in London, "the three monks rapidly accustomed themselves to this entirely new life of study, but during the first year little of academic value

---

<sup>469</sup> Snellgrove, "How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe," 4.

<sup>470</sup> I am grateful to Samten Karmay for explaining this photo to me and for allowing me to use it in this thesis.

was accomplished, and I had problems with our aristocratic layman Sonam Panden, who did not fit in at all with the others,” writes Snellgrove.<sup>471</sup>

Yongdzin Rinpoche says that he “was purely Tibetan” when he arrived in London.<sup>472</sup> Samten Karmay describes their situation vividly: “If I think from where we came, if I think of that period, we were like yak, like sheep. From the eighteenth century in Tibet it was closed, so we never had connection with other people. You can’t use the word ‘pure’ but we were more or less pure in that sense.”<sup>473</sup> Yongdzin Rinpoche further adds, “Now it is not possible to be ‘pure’ Tibetan.”<sup>474</sup> He is once again echoed by Karmay, who adds: “We were purely Tibetan, no language. We were completely Tibetan. We started with A, B, C, D. During lunch we went to the garden. He gave us book notes, pencils and started A, B, C, D. Those were the first English lessons for us.”<sup>475</sup>

Yongdzin Rinpoche observes that he could not imagine then that he would eventually have his own Bon center in Europe. There were no Europeans, he notes, interested in Bon as a religion: “At that time I had no hope, no expecting to teaching or nothing.” In these early days, he also noted that, to the Tibetans, the outward appearance of Westerners “look very good, very luxury, [but] inside [the] individual person [they were] very stressed. [During the] three years [I was there], very rare to meet a content person. I traveled to some places, seeing people, connected with the outer world.”<sup>476</sup>

---

<sup>471</sup> Snellgrove, “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe,” 4.

<sup>472</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

<sup>473</sup> Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

<sup>474</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

<sup>475</sup> Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

<sup>476</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

Yongdzin Rinpoche further recalls how they were sometimes invited to the Tibet Society and Buddhist Society in London (both of which had the same president), a place where there was a monk trained in Burma: “He used a bowl and we had to sing three, four times, then silence.” Only ten to fifteen people attended, most of whom were interested in learning about Tibetan culture. He made a few presentations there of the work he was doing with Snellgrove in translating the Nine Ways of Bon. Yongdzin Rinpoche also studied English in Cambridge, where he spent three full months. Highlighting that being a Tibetan in the West in those early times was unusual, he says: “Sometimes, on the weekends I met with the Dalai Lama’s nephew, he was there studying. There were many foreigners, I was the only Tibetan.”<sup>477</sup> Regarding whether there was any interest in Bon from a practicing point of view, Yongdzin Rinpoche said, “In Western culture at that time, [there was] no talk about religion, only scholarly interest.”<sup>478</sup>

Snellgrove described the journeys of the three monks in the West as an “extraordinary success.” At the end of the three-year grant, in 1964, Samten was invited to Paris to work with Professor Rolf Stein. It was at that time that he started to teach in the university on religious topics: “I thought the Nine Ways of Bon was useful and I did work on the historical side of Bon. I started giving lectures. I chose Olmo Lung Ring, the birthplace of Tonpa Shenrab, who Tonpa Shenrab is, as the topics of my lectures.”<sup>479</sup>

Snellgrove concludes that Sangye Tenzin and Tenzin Namdak “both wanted to return to India, Tenzin Namdak was interested in building up an ever-larger collection of bonpo literature, now that so much appeared to have been lost in

---

<sup>477</sup> Namdak.

<sup>478</sup> Namdak.

<sup>479</sup> Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

Chinese-occupied Tibet, while Sangye Tenzin had hopes of founding a bonpo center for laymen and monks in some suitable place in the Himalayas.”<sup>480</sup>

Samten Karmay mentions that when he arrived in England, Snellgrove was giving lectures, not necessarily on Bon religion. He started working individually with Tenzin Namdak, they worked on the *Ziji* [i.e., Buddha Tonpa Shenrab’s hagiography, discussed in Chapter 3.6] and I worked for him on *the Four Lamas of Dolpo*.<sup>481</sup> These were not necessarily Bon studies, except the *Ziji* with Tenzin Namdak, that later became *The Nine Ways of Bon*. I can say that Snellgrove was the only person interested in my knowledge on the Bon religion as such at the time.<sup>482</sup>

Snellgrove compares the experiences of these three Tibetan to those of other Buddhist Tibetan teachers, such as Namkhai Norbu and Chogyam Trungpa, who, after arriving in the West, founded Buddhist centers (see Chapter 3): “Famous and not so famous Tibetan lamas who arrive in the Western world usually become the center of a group of Western Buddhists.” He notes that, after spending time in the West, it was rare for these Tibetan teachers to return to their communities. Indeed, “Very few, perhaps only these two, have returned to India or Nepal, to further the cause of their own people, and only one simple Tibetan monk has become an outstanding worldwide scholar in a Western world.”<sup>483</sup>

---

<sup>480</sup> Snellgrove, “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe,” 5.

<sup>481</sup> He refers to the following book: David L. Snellgrove, *Four Lamas of Dolpo (Tibetan Biographies)* (Delhi: Himalayan Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>482</sup> Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

<sup>483</sup> Snellgrove, “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe,” 6.

In 1965, Per Kvaerne, a Norwegian scholar from Oslo University, went to India and met Sangye Tenzin (who later became the abbot of Menri Monastery at Dolanji in 1969, receiving the name of Lungtok Tenpai Nyima). The two began a lifelong friendship that would also later connect Kvaerne with Samten Karmay. This encounter, like that between Snellgrove and the three Tibetans he brought to Europe, was one of the key impetuses for Bon studies in the West.<sup>484</sup>

After his return to India, Yongdzin Rinpoche's main focus was to revive and keep bonpos and the Bon tradition alive in exile.<sup>485</sup> In 1967, with financial support from the Catholic Relief Services, Namdak acquired land at Dolanji, near Solan in Himachal Pradesh in northwest India. There he started a Tibetan Bon settlement, including setting up a small school and Menri Monastery, which nowadays is one of the two largest Bon monasteries in exile. At that time, Abbot Sherab Tenpa Gyaltzen, of Yungdrung Ling monastery in central Tibet, became temporary spiritual leader of the bonpo community in exile. His successor, Sangye Tenzin Jongdong (H. H. Lungtok Tenpai Nyima) was selected in the traditional way as Menri Trizin, or Abbot of the Menri Monastery, in March 1968. The two of them, Yongdzin Rinpoche and H. H. Menri Trizin, slowly built the monastic community in Dolanji, at the time the only bonpo monastery in India.<sup>486</sup>

The second visit of Yongdzin Rinpoche to Europe took place in mid-1968, when he served as visiting scholar at the University of Munich. The following year, he went back to Dolanji where, up until 1978, he focused his time on writing, publishing, transmitting initiations, and teaching. His teacher Lopon Sangye

---

<sup>484</sup> Havnevik and Ramble, *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, 10–11.

<sup>485</sup> Ligmincha Germany, "S.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche."

<sup>486</sup> See: Ligmincha Germany; and Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

Tenzin, passed away in 1977, and he was given full responsibility for teaching the younger generation of monks. The Menri Dialectic School was established in 1978, and the first *geshes* obtained their degrees upon graduation in 1986. That year, Yongdzin Rinpoche traveled to Tibet. On his return via Kathmandu, Nepal, he acquired a small piece of land, where he later built Triten Norbutse Monastery. Formally founded in 1987, it “has since become one of the two main Bon monasteries outside Tibet, providing an extensive and rigorous comprehensive study of the broad spectrum of Bon teachings and traditions.”<sup>487</sup>

At its beginnings, the monastery was very small; there were no beds, only three rooms, one toilet, and a kitchen. In 1988, Yongdzin Rinpoche moved there with two *geshes*. By 1989 the monastic quarters were built, and refugees coming from Tibet slowly joined the monastery. The construction of the monastery continued; in three years, the basic structure was in place. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung was elected in 1996 to be the senior teacher at Triten Norbutse. In 2001, he was appointed to be the abbot of the monastery.<sup>488</sup>

#### 4.10 BON STUDIES IN THE WEST

While Buddhist Studies, as an academic discipline, started in Europe “as an offshoot of philology, in which scholars of Sanskrit also read Buddhist texts,”<sup>489</sup> Bon Studies came into existence as a subsidiary branch of Tibetan Buddhist

---

<sup>487</sup> Ligmincha Germany, “S.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.”

<sup>488</sup> For an overview of the history of Triten Norbutse Monastery, see: Tenpa Yungdrung, ed., Triten Norbutse Monastery, 25th Anniversary Celebration (Kathmandu: Vajra Books in association with Triten Norbutse Institution, 2012).

<sup>489</sup> Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 158.

Studies. If a majority of scholars of Tibetan Buddhism “shy away from certain genres of Tibetan literature...and gravitate to others...texts that demonstrate unequivocally that the chief religion of Tibet is a direct and legitimate descendant of Indian Buddhism,”<sup>490</sup> some of the leading scholars of Bon have laid the foundations for a distinct branch that we can call Bon Studies.

In parallel with the efforts of Bon savants, an understanding of the Bon religion in the West became more meticulous in the 1950s and particularly after the mid-1960s, thanks to the efforts of Snellgrove. A landmark publication in this process was Helmut Hoffmann’s 1950 monograph on Bon,<sup>491</sup> which, along with his next book *The Religions of Tibet*, contributed to making Bon Studies a field of scholarly interest in Europe. His publications also contributed to the idea of Bon as an animist tradition, a vision that started to change in the 1960s. This decade marked the beginning of Tibetan Buddhist Studies in the West, which emerged in cooperation with Tibetan informants (monks and lamas).<sup>492</sup> This beginning was closely linked to the Rockefeller Foundation grants and support as well as to the arrival of the Sakya scholar Deshung Rinpoche to the University of

---

<sup>490</sup> Lopez, Jr., 179.

<sup>491</sup> See: Helmut Hoffmann, *Die Religionen Tibets: Bon Und Lamaismus in Ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (K. Alber, 1956); See also: Helmut Hoffmann, “Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion,” *Abhandlungen der Geistes-und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Jahrg n. 4*, 1950, 130–443; Helmut HR Hoffmann, “An Account of the Bon Religion in Gilgit,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 13, no. 2 (1969): 137–45; Helmut Hoffmann, “Zur Literatur Der Bon-Po,” *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 94, no. 2 (1940): 169–88.

<sup>492</sup> In Russia, however, the cooperative work of Buddhist lamas and Russian scholars was established in the middle of the nineteenthth century. The Russian study of Tibetan Buddhism was very much informed by these “native” informers, some of whom in the late nineteenthth century turned to scholars, having got a formal university education at Russian universities. The first such “native” scholar was the Buryat Dorji Banzarov, who defended his Ph.D.thesis at Kazan university in 1846. For an “insider” perspective and an overview of Russian contacts with Tibetans, see: “An Overview of the Tibetan and Russian Contacts,” accessed April 13, 2019, <https://tibetpolicy.net/comments-briefs/an-overview-of-the-tibetan-and-russian-contacts/>.

Washington.<sup>493</sup> However, compared to studies of Tibetan Buddhism, the field of Bon Studies took longer to take off.

Gradually, Bon began to be recognized as possessing a religious identity of its own, even though it was closely related to the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The scholar Per Kvaerne helped to found the International Association for Tibetan Studies at this time.<sup>494</sup> He and Samten Karmay contributed greatly to the field of Bon Studies and to the differentiation between Buddhism and Bon. They provided a different perspective on the Bon tradition from what was prevalent at that time, when Bon was often described dismissively as a shamanist and animist religion.<sup>495</sup>

Particularly relevant is Karmay's translation of a nineteenth-century Bon historical work that was published as *A Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, which started a new direction in Tibetan Studies by presenting an indigenous view of its historical development. The works published by Karmay and Kvaerne established the basis for understanding the vast collection of Bon texts.<sup>496</sup> Kvaerne's publication of the translation of a "chronological table" of Bon<sup>497</sup> and his analysis of the content of a catalogue of the canonical scriptures of Bon were particularly influential. Kvaerne further contributed to the

---

<sup>493</sup> Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 159.

<sup>494</sup> Havnevik and Ramble, *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, 11.

<sup>495</sup> See particularly: Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*; Kvaerne, "Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion"; Per Kvaerne, *Tibet Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of The Tibetan Bonpos* (Leiden: Brill, 1985); and Karmay, *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, 2007; Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle*; Karmay, "A Historical Overview of the Bon Religion."

<sup>496</sup> As discussed in: Havnevik and Ramble, *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, 12–13.

<sup>497</sup> Per Kvaerne, "A New Chronological Table of the Bon Religion: The Bstan-Rcis of Hor-Bcun BsTan-'jin-Blo-Gros (1888–1975).," *Studia Tibetica, Tibetan Studies*, no. 2 (1985): 241–244.



establishment of Bon Studies in the West by bringing together a team of Western and Tibetan scholars for one year at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo for the “simple but formidable” aim of provide a detailed catalogue of the Bon Kanjur.<sup>498</sup> The aim “seems to have been successfully achieved”<sup>499</sup> and the project led to the publication of a catalogue on the Bon Kangyur.<sup>500</sup> One team member was the former Director of Tibetan Studies at the Minzu University of China, Tsering Thar, who became a leading scholar on Bon in China.<sup>501</sup>

Along with Karmay and Kvaerne, Anne-Marie Blondeau, a French Tibetologist, also had a formative influence on the field of Bon Studies, particularly on pre-Buddhist history in Tibet.<sup>502</sup> Thanks to them, there is a growing recognition that, in order to fully appreciate the scope of Bon traditions, one must understand (and critically pay attention to) how bonpos themselves narrate their own historical developments. Snellgrove has eloquently summed this up: “In giving an account of any religion we cannot ignore what the practitioners have to say about themselves.”<sup>503</sup> From this perspective, accepting and understanding the bonpos as they see themselves goes hand in hand with tracing the historical trajectory of their religion.

---

<sup>498</sup> Nagano, “Preface.”

<sup>499</sup> Nagano.

<sup>500</sup> Dan Martin, Yasuhiko Nagano, and Per Kvaerne, *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, vol. 24, *Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies*, 4,5 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003).

<sup>501</sup> Apart from Minzu University of China (former Chinese Central University for Nationalities) in Beijing, the most important centers for Tibetan studies in Chinese institutions correspond to the China Tibetology Research Center in Beijing and Lhasa, the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, the Northwest University for Nationalities in Langzhou, the Qinghai Nationalities University in Xining and the branches of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, principally in Lhasa, Xining, Chengdu, Langzhou and Kunming.

<sup>502</sup> See for example: Anne-Marie Blondeau and Anne Chayet, *L'épopée Tibétaine de Gesar: Manuscript Bon-po fonds A. David-Néel du Musée Guimet: Présentation et traduction* (Editions Findakly Paris, 2014); Anne-Marie Blondeau, *La Controverse Soulevée Par l'inclusion de Rituels Bon-Po Dans Le Rin-Čhen Gter-Mjod: Note Préliminaire* (Kommission für Zentralasiatische Studien, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988); Anne-Marie Blondeau, *Le "Découvreur" du Mañi bka'-bum était-il bon-po?*, 1984.

<sup>503</sup> Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, 2.

The works of Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche on early Tibetan narratives, symbolic languages, and Dzogchen teachings<sup>504</sup> are also relevant to this discussion about how the nature of Bon is portrayed. Norbu's publications on the role of Bon in the origins of the Tibetan civilization had influenced the way Bon was perceived by a considerable number of Tibetans in Tibet and in exile. His works, published in Tibetan in China,<sup>505</sup> were very influential in situating the Bon tradition as an equal and independent Tibetan religious tradition in the contemporary religious debate, an almost unparalleled development in Tibetan sectarian relations. His influence on this matter was significant also because Norbu, besides being a highly respected "master," was himself not bonpo but Buddhist. Apart from his scholarly works, he was one of the first Tibetans to teach Dzogchen to a Western following in Italy after establishing a center called the Dzogchen Community in 1967.<sup>506</sup> In this context, it is relevant to note, as Lopez points out, that "many of the elements that were previously associated with the old institutions of Tibetan Buddhism continue to play a central part in the diaspora, but in the current context they acquire new configurations."<sup>507</sup>

Other key authors include Charles Ramble, who contributed to the understanding of religions in the Himalayas and their relation to Bon as a

---

<sup>504</sup> See for example: Norbu, *Drung, Deu, and Bön: Narrations, Symbolic Languages, and the Bön Traditions in Ancient Tibet*; Norbu, *The Light of Kailash: A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet. Vol. 1. The Early Period*; Choegyal Namkhai Norbu, Adriano Clemente, and Barrie Simmons, *The Necklace of Zi: On The History and Culture of Tibet* (Shang Shung Edizioni, 2004).

<sup>505</sup> An outline of research on Tibetan issues and the development of Tibetan studies in China both by Tibetans and Chinese after 1945 can be seen in: Eugen Wehrli, "Tibet Research in China by Tibetans and Chinese after 1949," *Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya*, 1993, 425–32; To compare with the development of the study of Bon in China, see: Mara Arizaga, "An Introduction to the Study of Bon in Modern China," *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 327–35.

<sup>506</sup> See: <http://www.dzogchencommunity.org/intro.html> (retrieved on 13.09.2016).

<sup>507</sup> Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*, 240.

religion, including making texts available and documenting rituals of the Bon tradition.<sup>508</sup>

In parallel to what happened with Tibetan Buddhism (discussed in Chapter 3.4) since the 1960s, there has also been a development through which academics who are also Bon practitioners are writing and doing research on Bon. The work of John Myrdhin Reynolds is notable, especially in relation to his close collaboration with Yongdzin Rinpoche.<sup>509</sup> The appearance of Dzogchen meditation manuals in English—such as Kværne’s *The A Khrid System of Meditation*, published in 1973; the commentary by Lopon Tenzin Namdak on the Bon text *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya*, written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (1859–1933 or 1935),<sup>510</sup> one of the first such publications in a Western language; and *The Stages of the A Khrid Meditation*<sup>511</sup>—has made the doctrinal perspective of Bon more accessible. Several other Dzogchen meditation manuals appeared later. These include the Gyalwa Chaktri of Druchen Yungdrung, the Bon Dzogchen practice manual for the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, called “The Sevenfold Cycle of the Clear Light,” and the Dark Retreat practice manual from the same tradition, translated with commentaries and notes by John Myrdhin Reynolds.<sup>512</sup>

---

<sup>508</sup> See for example: Charles Ramble, “Playing Dice with the Devil: Two Bonpo Soul-Retrieval Texts and Their Interpretation in Mustang, Nepal,” *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 205–32; Charles Ramble, “A Nineteenth-Century Bonpo Pilgrim in Western Tibet and Nepal: Episodes from the Life of DKar Ru Grub Dbang BsTan’dzin Rin Chen,” 2008; Charles Ramble, “The Secular Surroundings of a Bonpo Ceremony: Games, Popular Rituals and Economic Structures in the MDos-Rgyab of Klu-Brag Monastery (Nepal),” in *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, ed. Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000).

<sup>509</sup> His publication *The Oral Tradition from Zhang Zhung* includes biographies of the principal early masters in the lineages of transmission of the Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud. He has also published important works on Dzogchen teachings: *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*, for example, is a compilation of teachings given by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, which Reynolds transcribed, edited, and annotated, and then wrote the introduction to the book.

<sup>510</sup> Namdak, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*.

<sup>511</sup> Yungdrung Gyalba and Per Kvaerne, *The Stages of A-Khrid Meditation: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1996).

<sup>512</sup> See: John Myrdhin Reynolds, *The Practice of Dzogchen in the Zhang-Zhung Tradition of Tibet* (Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2013).

It is instructive to note how modern scholarship and spiritual engagement worked together and contributed to the spread of Bon. This seems to be a main characteristic of the process that led to the globalization of Bon practices. As a consequence, in current times, Bon is gaining a place as an independent tradition, being described as “not only a fascinating religious phenomenon, but also, if not more importantly, [as] one of the most precious assets of the Tibetan cultural heritage.”<sup>513</sup> However, Kvaerne himself has asserted in recent years that, while he does not challenge the way bonpo followers represent themselves, this way cannot be exported into the West as an historical reality, admitting that “it is mandatory to read the texts critically, which he admits he did not do sufficiently in the past.”<sup>514</sup>

#### 4.11 SCHOLARSHIP AND SPIRITUAL ENTAGLEMENTS: BON AS THE “OTHER”

As described by Yongdzin Rinpoche above (Chapter 4.9), when he first arrived to Europe, the interests of people at that time were “only scholarly interest.”<sup>515</sup> Similar remarks were made by Karmay, who did not find any Westerners interested in Bon from the religious point of view when he first came to England.<sup>516</sup> It was only when that scholarly interest met with spiritual engagement that Bon took off and became “global.” Of particular relevance in this process of “popularizing” Bon were the books of Namkhai Norbu<sup>517</sup> but also

---

<sup>513</sup> Rossi, *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*, 20.

<sup>514</sup> Havnevik and Ramble, *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, 15.

<sup>515</sup> Namdak, Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.

<sup>516</sup> Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.

<sup>517</sup> Particularly: Norbu, *Drung, Deu, and Bön: Narrations, Symbolic Languages, and the Bön Traditions in Ancient Tibet*; Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra, and*

the translation of Dzogchen practice texts<sup>518</sup> and, particularly, Tenzin Wangyal's books.<sup>519</sup> At the same time, the parallel process of growing academic studies on Bon and the beginning of Bon religious groups in the West, which started informally by Westerners inviting Tibetan lamas to teach in their countries, resulted in an expansion of Bon that continues to the present day.

The entanglements of academic studies and religious affiliations in the field of Buddhist Studies, particularly in North America, are well documented.<sup>520</sup> For Bon, as seen above, the process shared some similar characteristics, but it had and continues to have its own peculiar elements that will be briefly enumerated below.

While some long-enduring Orientalist notions are still pervading the study of Tibetan Buddhism, these have also changed over time. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism, once portrayed in the academic spheres in the West as the "polluted" Other in contrast with Indian Buddhism, was gradually converted into the pure, holy, and pristine doctrine from "Shangri-La."<sup>521</sup> At the same time, Lopez indicates how neighboring countries have always perceived Tibet as "peripheral."

---

*Dzogchen* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1986); Norbu, Clemente, and Simmons, *The Necklace of Zi: On The History and Culture of Tibet*.

<sup>518</sup> For instance: Gyalba and Kvaerne, *The Stages of A-Khrid Meditation: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*.

<sup>519</sup> See: Tenzin Wangyal, *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1998); Wangyal, *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet*; Wangyal, *Healing with Form, Energy, and Light*.

<sup>520</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1998); Tenzin Wangyal, *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2000); See: Tenzin Wangyal, *Healing with Form, Energy, and Light: The Five Elements in Tibetan Shamanism, Tantra, and Dzogchen* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2002).

<sup>521</sup> See: Donald Sewell Lopez Jr, "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Journal* 3 (1994): 36-43.

Bonpos (and Buddhists as well) contributed to this notion with their historical narratives in which Tibet was represented as an uncivilized land until “culture” was introduced from Zhang Zhung, in the case of bonpos, and from India, in the case of Buddhists.<sup>522</sup> Moreover, as discussed above, bonpos were often described in Tibet and in the West as “animists” and “shamans,” and as belonging to the exotic “original” tradition from Tibet. Indeed, Bon Studies (and practice) were situated as the Other in relation to Buddhist Studies and practice, and “all such descriptions of the ‘other’ are framed in the ideological structure of the objectifier, with the native being a passive object in the objectifier's gaze.”<sup>523</sup>

But the originally pejorative way of referring to bonpos also came to represent an opportunity vis-à-vis Westerners who were attracted to “new age spirituality,” where Bon was deemed appealing due to its reputation as the ancient and authentic religious tradition, related to shamanism. For instance, as Tenzin Wangyal’s notes, “Contributing to the richness and depth of the Bon heritage are its shamanistic practices, such as healing and soul retrieval, which carry with them a deep respect for nature and the spirits that abide there, and which continue to play an important role in Tibetan culture.”<sup>524</sup>

In addition, Pommaret notes how labeling any Buddhism as “pure” in contrast to other “adulterated” forms of Buddhism is also part of a nineteenth century Western invention, as “Buddhism as it is practised—we are not talking here

---

<sup>522</sup> Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, 156–80.

<sup>523</sup> Tsering Shakya, “Review:Who Are the Prisoners?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2001): 184.

<sup>524</sup> “Discovering the Sacred: An Interview with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche,” *Shambhala*, March 6, 2017, [https://www.shambhala.com/snowlion\\_articles/discovering-the-sacred/](https://www.shambhala.com/snowlion_articles/discovering-the-sacred/).

about dogma—is essentially a polymorphous religion that evolves according to the specific cultural context that it encounters.”<sup>525</sup>

In this interplay, bonpos are still finding their own place, which is being shaped by the joint efforts of scholars and practitioners, a distinction that in many cases cannot be made. Wangyal’s books, for instance, contributed to the “popularization” of Bon, since it became accessible to a neophyte audience, particularly through his books published after the founding of Ligmincha Institute.

As with Buddhist Studies, the grants of the Rockefeller Foundation were instrumental in facilitating Bon Studies in the West, despite the fact that, in contrast with Buddhism, no graduate programs focusing on Bon were set up at Western academic institutions. This is not that surprising, since the number of Tibetan Buddhist teachers who came to the West greatly outnumbered that of bonpo teachers. Besides, as described in Chapter 4.9, one of the key figures in the spreading of Bon in the West, Yongdzin Rinpoche, returned to Asia after the Rockefeller grant instead of staying in the West, with the aim of rebuilding the bonpo communities in exile. However, Dan Martin’s expression of hope seems to have come about, when he wished “for a future Tibetan studies that will finally come to fully include Bon studies.”<sup>526</sup>

To a certain extent up to today, we can affirm that the study of Bon occurs at the margins of Buddhist studies. As discussed above and similar to the field of Buddhist Studies, Bon Studies, in cooperation with bonpo informants from Tibet, began systematically in the West after the 1959 diaspora; some of the more influential works on Bon were produced as a result of such cooperation. Karmay,

---

<sup>525</sup> Françoise Pommet, “The Masters Go West: A Story of Buddhism’s Adaptation to ‘New Fields,’” in *Buddhism Without Borders: Proceedings of the International Conference on Globalized Buddhism* (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012), 89.

<sup>526</sup> Dan, “Introduction,” 19.

in fact, was himself a Bon *geshe*, and his works, as mentioned above, constitute essential readings for the modern understanding of Bon. He was a sort of bridge between two universes. However, in contrast with Buddhism, there are no examples of Westerners taking Bon vows, studying at Bon monasteries and obtaining titles such as *geshe* or others, and returning later to the West to occupy academic positions in Western universities. In fact, very few Westerners have, to date, become Bon monks (or nuns) and none of them, at least to my knowledge, is fluent in Tibetan language. Despite this, as mentioned above, the production of books on Bon by scholar practitioners and Bon teachers, particularly Wangyal, were key in “popularizing” Bon. Furthermore, due to the persistent influence of the vision of Tibet as the “pure land,” the Bon genres that were mostly the focus of the majority of Western scholarship were related not to rituals or the like but mostly to works on Dzogchen, meditation, and philosophy. At Bon centers, including Lingmincha and Shenten Dargye Ling, alongside transcripts of teachings by Bon masters, academic books on Bon are sold to devotees, who read them with interest.

Moreover, the study of Bon in the West is in many ways permeated by the notion of the “need to survive,” due to the political struggles of bonpos both in Tibet and in exile, due to the Chinese invasion as well as to Buddhist persecutions of bonpos in Tibet. Because of this desire for Bon to survive, there is a perceived need to preserve the knowledge of the tradition, which might be otherwise lost. The notion of needing to survive is also articulated in most Bon websites. The avowed objective of Shenten, for instance, is above all “to preserve this ancient tradition and to transmit it to Western students.”<sup>527</sup>

---

<sup>527</sup> “Shenten Dargye Ling Website.”



To sum up the dynamics described above, we can paraphrase Edward Said<sup>528</sup> in indicating that Bon, as the Other, has been and continues to “bonponized” in a multidirectional flow, including an “East/East” and “West/East” dynamic but also a “Buddhism/Bon” and even “Bon/Bon ” interplay. This occurs in parallel with what Per Kvaerne sees as the emergence in Bon of what could be called a *new historical fundamentalism* by means of which bonpos strive to give their religion the same kind of factual, historical basis, and prestigious status that the Buddhists claim for their own tradition... an identity in which the role of India is downplayed and that of an imaginary Zhangzhung civilization takes center stage.”<sup>529</sup>

---

<sup>528</sup> See: Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1978.

<sup>529</sup> Kvaerne, “Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative,” 9.

## 5 BEING A BONPO IN THE WEST: WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

In Chapter 3 above, I considered recent debates about religion within a global context, as well as the interplay between globalization and religion and the often conflicting (but intrinsically related) nature of this interaction. The literature shows that globalization has affected the diffusion of religion and has advanced the spread of traditionally non-Western forms of religion into Western cultures. Bon is a useful case study to explore this phenomenon, as there is to date extremely limited literature available for understanding the impact of globalization on the spread and understanding of this religion.

The arrival of Bon in the West indeed raises questions about the dynamics of religious transmission and reception that are taking place in the tradition. Some of these questions were delineated above. For instance: Are new forms of Westernized Bon emerging? Does the expansion of the religion pose a threat, an opportunity, or perhaps even both, in relation to the continuity of the tradition?<sup>530</sup> The literature on these issues shows no apparent agreement on whether Tibetan Buddhist (and Bon) traditions are under threat through contact with the modern and postmodern world.<sup>531</sup> Baumann notes the often-tense relationship between traditionalist and modernist forms of Buddhism.<sup>532</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I will follow him in using the term “global Bon.” This highlights two main characteristics that are present in the current processes

---

<sup>530</sup> Oldmeadow, “Tibetan Buddhism and Globalisation,” 269–70.

<sup>531</sup> Oldmeadow, 275.

<sup>532</sup> Martin Baumann, “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001), <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/128/>.

of transmission and diffusion of Bon in the West. According to Baumann, “global” encompasses both the transnational and transcontinental flow of Buddhist ideas and practices, as well as the international travel of Buddhist teachers and students. He views it as the most recent of four processes he identifies in the history of Buddhism: canonical Buddhism, traditionalist Buddhism, modernist Buddhism, and what he calls “post-modernist” or “global” Buddhism, marking its geographical spread outside of Asia along with its modern adaptations.<sup>533</sup> He also notes that neither the form nor the periods of Buddhism are static or fixed. “Rather, an ongoing change is observable, and the cumulative tradition of Buddhism constantly engenders new interpretations of Buddhist practices and teachings.”<sup>534</sup> The same, one might add, applies to Bon. The following analysis shows that the global is always permeated by the local dimensions of the individuals’ experiences, which allow a global Bon to “take roots” in the West.

The context in which Bon has become global can be further explained as a transnational religious field<sup>535</sup> where, without a doubt, the Internet has played a key role in the spread of Buddhist religious concepts. We will see below that many Bon Tibetan lamas, centers, and followers make extensive use of the Internet. At the center of this transnational religious field, the primary actors are the lamas or the teachers (in many cases, former lamas) who are transmitting the teachings to the West.<sup>536</sup> Their success—at least for those who decide to follow them and become their students—is based, among other factors, on their position as representatives and “holders” of a tradition, on their charisma (as mentioned by Karmay above and by some participants), and also, in the view of

---

<sup>533</sup> Baumann.

<sup>534</sup> Martin Baumann, “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 31, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/128/>.

<sup>535</sup> Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*, 85.

<sup>536</sup> Lopes, 87.

other participants, on their capacity or efforts to transmit religious concepts in a secular language, in many cases, using examples that are relevant for the new audiences.

Based on the above, we have seen that we can speak about a “global Bon” with specific characteristics, which is in a process of change and adaptation. In the following chapter, I will analyze the main findings from interviews of Bon followers in the West to see further how this process is marked by conceptual fluidity and flexibility, highlighting the various ways in which different people appropriate, negotiate, and adapt Bon practices to their personal lives and circumstances.

By focusing in this chapter and the next on the experiences narrated by individuals, I delineate the “personal” religious experiences of Bon as they are actually lived.<sup>537</sup> I listen for patterns that emerge from their narrations, including how certain elements are appropriated and how others are rejected, creating a constant dialogue between the “formal” and the “real” practice in everyday life. Other patterns that emerged from participants’ voices include how certain aspects of Bon are being emphasized in the West, particularly the rational and scientific parts of Bon and Dzogchen practice. Showing characteristics similar to what Lopez describes in relation to “modern Buddhism,” some participants describe Bon as not dogmatic and as a path that emphasizes individual practice rather than institutional belonging.<sup>538</sup>

---

<sup>537</sup> See: McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*.

<sup>538</sup> See: Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings From East and West*.

These two chapters explore in depth the six major themes that my research uncovered, which are reviewed and analyzed by providing extended data from interviews.

The first section of this chapter, “Narrating the Past,” highlights one of the salient themes shown in the data: participants represent a variety of geographical backgrounds but far less diversity of religious backgrounds. They were mostly Christian, although they also included Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and self-professed agnostics and atheists; some of whom had already converted from Christianity to other religions. This religious diversity has led to a wide range of perspectives and opinions. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of participants share a Catholic upbringing. More than 22 interviewees (out of a total of 36 practitioners) specifically mentioned “Catholicism” as part of their background. It appeared that participants from European countries, as well as from Argentina, were similarly predominantly Catholic. They indicated that they were brought up in a Catholic environment, and their narrations of the past often include highlighting how their positioning vis-à-vis “the Church” was crucial in their becoming bonpos. Furthermore, from the outset, participants identified themselves as being part of a group that is distinct from what they refer to as “the original” Tibetan Bon followers.

Within this theme, subthemes that emerged include the participant’s relationship with the Catholic church, their rejection of the religion of their families, the need to renounce their past religion, and a strong emphasis on not wanting to be a “mindless follower” of a religion, thinking religion was just for “stupid people.”

The second major section, “Becoming a bonpo,” is a long section that describes the process of people first hearing about Bon and then attending a teaching or a retreat. Participants describe their first experiences in moving terms: “It was like

[a] sword... to the heart”; “Something magical happened to me”; “I reached home”; and so on. This section addresses the process of transitioning from a Western religion, in the majority of cases Catholicism (or no religion, or an Asian religion in the case of a Hindu participant) to Bon, the participant’s interpretation of this process, and what it means for them to be a bonpo. These narratives often include a specific moment in the participant’s life where they had a need for “finding sense” and started seeking for something “meaningful.” This turning point was at times the result of a personal crisis, but there is no uniformity in this; some participants were prompted by practical reasons, such as the need to reduce stress levels at work, not necessarily involving a crisis. Many participants mentioned a feeling of “homecoming” when they encountered Bon for the first time, and others mentioned their encounter with a particular lama or teacher that was the key turning point for them to decide to follow Bon practices.

The third section, “What is Bon for participants?” looks at how participants define Bon. They sometimes had difficulty putting into words their understanding of it. Some described Bon as “a kind of science,” which is in line with one of the characteristics highlighted above in Chapter 3.5, “Unique Characteristics of Buddhism in the West,” where the emphasis of Bon is on both the individual experiences and on its “rational and scientific aspects.” Another common characteristic with Buddhism coming to the West is the influence of the psychological nature of practice,<sup>539</sup> something that was particularly emphasized by Tenzin Wangyal’s students. In this subsection, we will see that Bon is also described as a “spiritual path”; I noticed reluctance by many participants to label Bon as a “religion.” Many participants specifically focused on Dzogchen, describing it as “the essence of Bon,” the “only important aspect of Bon,” and the “center; all other practices are just decorations.” Dzogchen has proven to be one

---

<sup>539</sup> B. Alan Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 35.

of the main attractions for Westerners following Bon, something that, in his interview, Reynolds called “one of Bon’s success stories.”

## 5.1 NARRATING THE PAST

One of the major themes of my research is the way into which participants selectively narrate their past before encountering Bon. This reconstruction of their autobiographies is in line with characteristic ways of communicating the past noted by scholars of religious conversion, as I will further analyze below.

From the onset, it is noteworthy that despite a multiplicity of geographical backgrounds represented by practitioners in centers in the West, most participants share a common Catholic upbringing. Even some participants who said they were raised without religion mentioned the church and Catholicism in their narratives of their past.

This theme (geographical diversity vs. their relation to the religion of their upbringing) is divided into four subthemes, which include participants’ views of who they are and where they come from in relation to their encounter with Bon. These subthemes are grounded in specific quotes from the interviewees, as follows:

1. Some interviewees specifically differentiated themselves from Tibetan Bon practitioners, positioning themselves as individuals who “take” only specific aspects of the Bon tradition that are not “culturally Tibetan.”
2. Many interviewees noted they were not raised with religion but now consider themselves to be a religious participant. For those who were raised in a religious context, there is a common narrative of a separation between the participants’ attitudes toward “religion” or “spirituality” and their parents’ religious understanding.

3. In connection to the above, many participants felt that in order for them to practice Bon properly, they needed to renounce (not necessarily formally) their previous religion. While only one participant formally renounced to his Catholicism, others expressed what Rambo would classify as an “apostasy” stage, where they abandoned their religion and joined a new religion, belief, or spiritual movement.
4. Most participants expressed disenchantment with the idea of “religion” and “organized religion,” pointing out that religion had been “imposed on them.” This led to ambivalence about whether Bon, in their view, is—or is not—a “religion.”

In reconstructing their past, thirteen participants mentioned a key experience that took place during their childhood, which made them question their religion, mostly Catholicism. These experiences were emphasized in the participants’ narratives, selectively recalled, and presented as a turning point for their rejection of their childhood and family’s religions. Almost all participants indicated in some way that they rejected, at least at some point in their lives, or did not embrace their family religion. What is relevant for my research is not the specific incidents themselves but the meaning participants attribute to these incidents for rejecting or leaving their family’s religions. For the purpose of my research, the question of whether or not the events, selectively narrated by participants, are true is not significant, and I made no attempt to dig into this. I focus on how participants narrated the journey that brought them to the point of deciding to follow Bon.

This is further explored under the third theme, “What is Bon for participants?” where I look at how participants describe themselves—as either bonpos or members of other denominations, which also reveals how their religious identity changes over time—keeping in mind that a religious identity is always negotiated and constructed.



### 5.1.1 WE ARE NOT TIBETANS

Three interviewees made a point of differentiating themselves from Tibetans. N. N. asserts plainly, “We are not Tibetans.” C. F. mentions, “I was never fascinated by [the] Tibetan world or the Tibetan aspects of the tradition.” These participants underlined that Bon is not attached to a specifically Tibetan culture but, rather, that is “universal” and as such, cultural specificities are not relevant. These assumptions also differ with the often-encountered notion held by Westerners in Buddhist and Bon centers that frames Tibetans as Others who are simple and pure, wise and calm, and sees Tibet as a pristine ecological paradise.<sup>540</sup> Perhaps their opinions were influenced by the recent scandals in the world of Tibetan Buddhism described in Chapter 3.5.1.1. It might also be related to Westerners spending longer periods in face-to-face contact with the lamas and consequently deconstructing ideas of Tibetans as “vegetarians,” for example, after seeing them eat meat.

Moreover, the social and cultural backgrounds of interviewees influenced a range of meanings that they attributed to their becoming bonpos, due to their prior conditions that represent, in Rambo’s conversion theory, the stage called “the context,” which “has shaped a distinct transpersonal psychology of Buddhist converts, especially in non-Asian cultural environments.”<sup>541</sup> Bon is defined according to how it is presented, how it is received and heavily influenced by standardized discourses replicated in the Bon websites, as well as by the participants’ cultural, social, and psychological contexts.

---

<sup>540</sup> See: Lopez Jr, “New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet.”

<sup>541</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 475.

### 5.1.2 NO RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND, BUT...

Some participants mentioned that they had “no religious background,” but they noted that at critical moments in their life, religion had a role to play. D. F. was born into a family of schoolteachers, and he explained that in his country, “There is no religion in school, it’s forbidden. Religion is for outside school and outside university. All my parents, my grandparents are teachers. There is no spiritual background at all in my family.” He was baptized because he was born prematurely at seven months: “I was baptized out of urgency because they thought I would die, so they baptized me [in the Catholic clinic] so I would be saved.” He recounts, “The only person in my family who somehow had some words of wisdom is my grandfather on my father’s side. He was a musician, and many times he was asking people what makes you happy. He had some—he enjoyed talking about philosophy. This is the only person in my family who had some reflection on life.”

F. H. claims that he had no religious background but noted that his father, in the last period of his life, opened up and revealed that he was a Christian and that he went to church and believed in God. F. H. thinks that his father’s beliefs were “childish, I mean, [I know] ‘childish’ is a negative word, but I mean ‘fresh.’ And he died with that ... which was very good, but I was really brought up without religion. I wasn’t baptized.”

C. I. asserts that his family did not practice any institutionalized faith. He was brought up with no religion, “apart from just the everyday Christianity that is in the background in [his country], which is not so much, really.” He mentions that once, when he was fourteen, he voluntarily went to a church service because he was bored. He did not find it interesting, so he never went again. Later when he was seventeen, he became intrigued with all different forms of “mystical philosophy,” and so, for years, he explored different forms of such philosophies,

including Celtic religion and occultism. He asserts that “a lot of people, for example, they bring their Christian religious preconceptions to Tibetan religion. Obviously, they will do that so when they have confession, they’ll obviously... think about it, even if they don’t consciously think about that. There’s going to be some unconscious thing.”

Similarly, C. F. mentions that his parents were not religious at all, but, he adds, “Mysteriously, I was interested by that when I was a child. I had the best notes of my class about religion, and so I think I was interested by spirituality. After, when I become a painter, when I was fourteen, I begin to paint some surrealistic painting about spiritual, God, about something like that, and it was very strange for my mother and my father because they don’t understand what’s happened.”

The statement above illustrates a link made by several participants between what they refer to as “religious” and its connection to “spirituality.”

### 5.1.3 WHEN I ENTERED A CHURCH, I WAS TERRIFIED

Other participants grew up with a religious background but reported that it was not a positive experience for them. Eight interviewees described a moment in their lives when they started doubting the beliefs of traditional religions, particularly Catholicism, and the authority of the church. They described their disappointment in the inability of the church to provide answers to their questions or the unsatisfactory answers they received from family members or priests. This frustration with not receiving answers caused them to move away from or even reject the church and look elsewhere for explanations and meaning.

E. S. was brought up in a strict Catholic household. She feels that the problem with Catholicism is that it imposes rigid rules on people. But she maintains that

there is one aspect of Catholicism that is useful for practicing Bon, and that is devotion: “When you enter here, devotion comes easily.” It is significant to note that most Westerners find it difficult to digest the notion of “devotion,” which is the reason, two participants note, that lamas use the word “trust” instead.

A. M. mentions that during her childhood, people “wanted to influence my religious part, but I did not allow it.” Her relatives questioned how it was possible for her and her sisters to grow up without religion, but her parents did not want a strict religion for their children. “They talked about it and agreed that, during our childhood, they would have an inclination toward Catholicism,” says A. M. “The truth is that when I entered a church, I was terrified. I rebelled; I did not want [to] kneel. Blood, open hearts, tears—all of that disturbed me. I could not find where to look. The drama of Catholicism bothered me so much. I never understood anything and neither made any move to understand anything.”

A. M. explains that one day, when she was twelve years old, her aunt told her that she should have her first communion, just as all her cousins had done. And so A. M. did take her first communion. She says further:

When I see Catholicism and all the tragedy that has resulted in the world and so much suffering it has caused and confusion, judgments, prejudices, hurts me pretty bad, I see a lot of human population [interested in finding] something, a significance, and it really hurts that the priests have a captive audience that could be helping a lot, and you hear them and it's like complete darkness.

Although Tibetan Buddhism was once portrayed as the “polluted” Other in contrast with Indian Buddhism as well as in relation to Catholicism, and the

sanguinary images found in Tibetan monasteries were once described as proofs of its evil nature, the statements above exemplify the changing nature of the “othering” of Tibet analyzed in Chapter 4.11. It is still viewed as the Other but now of a positive kind, one that is now seen as the pure, non-religious tradition<sup>542</sup> in contrast to the negative judgments made of the Catholic church and its darkness.

Another participant, D. E., mentions she is Jewish by background “because my father was Jewish and my mother converted to Judaism. We were not [overt] practitioners, and also my father, when I was sixteen years, stopped really practicing at home.” D. E. adds,

Other than that, as a child when I was five years old, I actually doubted the existence of God. I mean, those concerns came to me when I was very little, and I used to ask my parents, and the responses they gave me they were not helpful, and then I thought that no, there was no God, and the responses in my surroundings about what religion was did not convince me and I wasn’t a believer.

M. N.’s family was Catholic, but M. N. did not have a positive experience in the church. Her father was against religion “in the sense of the general opium of the people and that sort of thing. So he didn’t want me to be baptized, [but] my mother [did]. So finally I got baptized after my mother divorced and married someone else. But I followed this thing, how do you say, catechism?” She remembers the first two years of catechism as a “nice experience” but notes that in the last year, it was, as she puts it,

---

<sup>542</sup> See: Lopez Jr, “New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet.”

a disaster. I started to see that the priest, he believes only what he sees. Because once I didn't bring my [workbook], and I said I forgot it and he says, "No, you didn't do it. I believe only what I see."... I hated that I had a small pink book and you had to stamp [it] every time you go to the Mass so you can prove you've been there. It was ridiculous. So this put me [off] from all that for long, and I didn't like to be a, how do you say, a sheep that follows everything.

S. G. is the only participant from Africa. He was raised in a strong Catholic tradition. At the age of thirteen, he left Catholicism and became interested in many "spiritual avenues." He states:

As I was looking for more explanations and I couldn't get more in this tradition. I only became interested in religion again many years later when I came to France.... I was eighteen when I came here. In Africa I was already practicing martial arts, and I had interest in Zen and Asian traditions. When I came here, I was deeply interested in different ways, like hypnosis, magic, alchemy, occultism and so on.

#### 5.1.4 IT SOUNDED A LITTLE BIT STUPID

Some participants said that religions sound stupid and unintellectual. M. M. was brought up as a "fervent Catholic," but when he became a teenager and started asking questions, he thought the answers "sounded a little bit stupid," although he underscores the fact that perhaps he "didn't ask the right person." M. M. continues by saying that the biggest problem for Christian theology is the existence of evil. Noting that Buddhism has its own difficult questions, she highlights how Christianity says that "evil exists because God loves humans so

much that he leaves them free will. It just sounded so stupid to me.” Due to this, she started searching to find answers to her questions. “I went from New Age stuff to more occult Kabbalah stuff. But I was always feeling that it was not the real thing. Finally I was anti-Buddhism. First of all because I really didn’t like the trendy, it was so modern now. Hollywood people like celebrities, etc. I really hated the kind of show-off that came with.”

In the case of S. A., encountering Bon was the result, as she narrated it, of a “disenchantment with samsara.”<sup>543</sup> She emphasizes that from the beginning of her life, she always had “what Khenpo calls disenchantment with some samsara.” She thought people were following totally meaningless pursuits and believed that “this can’t be all.” At the same time, she felt that she was

on a certain path and I have to find people who know about this path, because I myself cannot reconstruct everything just from my own. I need to find the experts for this very path. It is very strange. Even as a child, I remember thinking, because if I don’t find the people who know this path, it would be much too hard to reconstruct everything, including the rituals. Somehow I find this very strange for a child to think, “I have to reconstruct rituals.”

She remembers that she tried to keep conscious when she fell asleep, believing that “great things will be revealed. I tried, and tried, and tried, and didn’t

---

<sup>543</sup> The Sanskrit word *samsara*, like its equivalent *khorma* in Tibetan, refers to the beginning-less cycle of birth, mundane existence, and dying, to be born again. In one of the six realms of existence (heaven, demigod, human, animal, ghosts, hell), *samsara* ends when a person attains enlightenment.

succeed. But anyway, I tried.” At the same time, she recognizes that she grew up completely nonreligious: “I did not associate this path with religion at all. It was just this sort of nameless thing I couldn’t talk to anybody about.” After she read a book by an Austrian writer who made allusions to meditation, she thought this might be the path she was looking for:

[Where I grew up] it was mainly Christianity, and even if I had heard of other religions, they all involved believing in God, or at least believing in something, and I thought that was a stupid idea. Because believing means you have some preconceived notion about something about which you don’t know anything, and it’s much more honest, in every way better if—well, about all those things that we don’t know anything about, to just be aware that we don’t know anything and to keep an open mind.

S. A. mentions that all human beings have “emotional holes” and these are often filled by beliefs, blocking “the door for any opportunity that we might have to learn something later about the things we don’t know anything about.” This was her reason for being against believing something, “and all religions involve beliefs. So I thought religions are just for stupid people.” This thought prevented her from finding Bon, because, she argues, it is usually wrongly labeled as a religion, “and I just did not look for my path anywhere labeled religion.”

Another subtheme, related to the previous one, is being suspicious of the rules of religions. This presents an obvious contrast with the fact that Bon centers, like Bon monasteries, follow strict rules and guidelines that participants and ordained persons have to follow as well. The narratives below shed light on how participants see their experiences in the Bon tradition as ones that are not fundamentally religious, even when they do follow rules, perform rituals, and are actively involved in a center that has a monastic structure. One of the main



reasons alluded to by participants is that they found answers in Bon to their quest for meaning from a practical or rational perspective. In this perspective, they referred to meditation as a practice that is not aligned with dogma, religion, gender, or nationality.

#### 5.1.5 OFFICIALLY RENOUNCED THE CHURCH

Some participants, as we have seen, specifically linked their experience of becoming bonpos to their rejection of Christianity. They also referred to particular aspects that they perceived as being part of the Christianity they rejected, including its “religious” content, its “lack of explanations,” and the idea that religion needs to be followed blindly. Some participants felt a need to renounce their past religion before moving on. This rejection of their previous religion is indeed a salient element of Buddhist conversion in today’s world.<sup>544</sup>

U. G. was raised in a Catholic family. When he was very young, he had the feeling that the Catholic church was not for him. “I had a feeling that the ‘institution’ and the actual ‘messages’ from the New Testament were actually very different,” he asserts. He slowly started to move away from the church. In his youth, he became interested in different religions, “esoteric sources,” and Buddhism. What awoke his interest was reading the biography of the Dalai Lama. He explains that in [name], every person categorized as Catholic usually has to pay a church tax. When he was twenty-two, he “said goodbye to church. I officially renounced the church, and from then on I was very interested in Buddhism.”

---

<sup>544</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World,” 467.

These findings closely resonate with those of Marion Dapsance, who, in her thesis on Rigpa entitled *Ceci n'est pas une religion: L'apprentissage du dharma selon Rigpa*,<sup>545</sup> highlights the palpable contradictions between the behaviors and statements of Western Buddhists. They claim that the Buddhism they follow is not a religion while at the same time they follow strict hierarchies, participate in rituals, and practice devotional activities. She notes how individuals who criticize Catholicism for its religious nature are also willing to surrender to their Tibetan masters; while proclaiming their total trust in the rational Buddhism, they perform rituals to invoke divinities, prostrate before their teachers, make offerings, and pursue many other activities that are nonrational.<sup>546</sup>

#### 5.1.6 MY STRANGE DAD HAVING A HOBBY

In relation to the experiences described above, a pertinent question is whether a person's childhood context matters regarding a person's attraction to the Bon tradition. If so, to what extent does it play a role in attracting them? What difference does it make to grow up in a bonpo family—having an altar in the home, seeing lamas since childhood, and having the cultural aspects of the Bon religion integrated into everyday life—in contrast to a person who grows up in another religion and whose daily life does not have the codes, language, or symbols related to Tibetan Bon? This is a question relevant to the issues explored in this research project, one that does not seem to have a single answer.

A particular case is that of I. H. Her father was already a bonpo when she was little, while her mother was Catholic. She described the situation in these terms:

---

<sup>545</sup> Marion Dapsance, "Ceci n'est pas une religion»: l'apprentissage du dharma selon Rigpa (France)" (Thèse de doctorat en Religions et systèmes de pensée, École doctorale de l'École pratique des hautes études, 2013).

<sup>546</sup> Marion Dapsance, "Sur le déni de la religiosité du bouddhisme," *Le Débat*, no. 2 (2015): 179–86.

I was going to church with my grandparents. I went to church. My father was always into Bon from [a] very young age, interested and looking for spiritual things. But he never imposed [this] on us. It was like my strange dad having a hobby, but it wasn't a family thing. It was never like "You have to be part of this." It was something from a distance. I remember a Ganapuja one time among practitioners. They were offering food. I was looking at the food, I couldn't eat it, and it was an offering. It wasn't grabbing me, I wasn't interested in Dharma at that age.

The father of John Reynolds (a Westerner who is a Bon scholar and translator) was Protestant, and his mother was Irish Catholic. They married outside the church and did not raise their children with religion. "But I was very interested," says John. "What got me initially interested was reading Greek mythology when I was a child, and then, when I was twelve years old, I came across a book in my father's library [on philosophies and religions of India]."

D. R. refers to what he perceives as a tendency of Westerners to have blind faith, something that, according to him, is derived from Judeo-Christianity: "Some people counterbalance their personal stories with following a religion. People come with ideas, you know, we came to Dharma center, it has to be a kind of refuge. Unfortunately, you know how many left? There are almost no Lithuanians here. It is because hypocrisy, that's the word. That's what it is. It is hypocrisy; it is not an honest situation." This evidences a certain tension pulling Bon centers in two different directions, similarly described in Tibetan Buddhist centers in North

America,<sup>547</sup> reflecting the need to preserve the loyalty of long-standing devotees, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to open up the tradition to new (and more) participants.

This section has discussed how participants themselves vis-à-vis Tibetan bonpos and in relation to their families' religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds. It has explored participants' perspectives on Christianity, institutionalized religion, and spirituality, contextualizing their narratives in the framework of their personal histories. The following section will go one step further, looking at how participants narrate their encounter with the Bon tradition and with Bon masters.

## 5.2 BECOMING A BONPO

Another of the major themes that emerged from my research is the process of becoming a bonpo. This is the focus of the following long section, dealing with questions such as: What does it mean to become a bonpo? When and how does this happen? Do practitioners self-identify as bonpos?

For the purpose of this research, a bonpo is someone who follows a Bon teacher and explicitly attempts to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. This person will meditate (or attempt to meditate) using meditation techniques considered to be “bonpo,” will be familiar with some of the Bon teachings, and will apply some practices in their “normal” lives (i.e., outside of retreats in Shenten or other Bon centers). It was not possible—and not necessarily

---

<sup>547</sup> Lynn P. Eldershaw, “Collective Identity and the Postcharismatic Fate of Shambhala International,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, no. 4 (2007): 92.

relevant—for me to determine if the participants were actually meditating every day or how significant Bon practices were in their lives.

In Buddhism and Bon, a formal rite of passage from non-Buddhist or non-bonpo to Buddhist or bonpo is called “taking refuge.” In Bon, this essential rite of passage means that the person takes refuge, through a ritual ceremony, in the Three (or Four) Refuges: in the “Enlightened Ones,” in Bon, in the *Shenrab Yungdrung Sempas* (Bodhisattvas), and in the lama or teacher. However, as we will see below, taking refuge was not considered by most participants as the most important or even relevant milestone in their becoming bonpos. To reconcile this disjunction, I therefore adopt a midway definition of a bonpo in order to understand what it means to be a bonpo in the West. While taking into account the gradual processes and the different ways in which participants describe their levels of commitment, I consider the turning point to be the first time someone began meditating according to Bon meditation techniques or the first time they called themselves a bonpo. When relevant, I also define a bonpo as someone who has (also) gone through the Three or Four Refuges.

When looking at participants’ personal narratives and their individual experiences, we can see issues of self-representation that emerge from experience and in the ways they live out their religion in real life. Participants interpret and analyze their own points of view on what it means to be a bonpo in the West. At this point, it should be clear that the distinction between who is and who is not a “practitioner<sup>548</sup>” is artificial. Several stages occur on the path toward becoming a bonpo practitioner, not always in a linear sequence.

---

<sup>548</sup> The word Buddhist or Bon (or even Dzogchen) “practitioner” has become part of the international Buddhist lexicon and is commonly used in Buddhist and Bon books, websites, etc. It is also used sometimes to describe meditators (monastic and lay) and ritual specialists in Asian context by some scholars. See for example: Colin Millard, “Bon Religion in Reb Kong,” in *Monastic*

Certain words, such as “practitioner,” seem to have a specific meaning for participants in the Bon context. A “Bon practitioner” in this context refers to a person who is doing “Bon practices”; to do so, this person has to have listened to at least some “Bon teachings” (teachings that are translations of texts contained in the Bon Kangyur and Katen), and to have engaged in basic practices, such as refuge—referring here to a refuge practice that is not the formal rite of passage mentioned above—and Bodhicitta, or mantra recitations or practices considered to be “more advanced” ones, such as sitting for meditation, including Dzogchen meditation. “Bon teachings” can also mean practices that are transmitted by a Bon teacher, even if they do not exactly involve translations of Bon texts but, rather, interpretations of these texts. It should be emphasized that a practitioner is someone who actually claims to do these practices. Notably, the issue of who is or who is not a practitioner is mostly based on self-identification. Nevertheless, sometimes “practice” and “meditation” are used as synonyms, sometimes as traditional religious activities, and in almost all cases, Dzogchen practice is mentioned as the center of spiritual practice, the core upon which all other practices are related.

In their narratives of their paths toward becoming Bon practitioners, almost all participants, in one way or another, described a certain moment when they felt they needed to find meaning in their life. They mentioned a point in their life when they started seeking something (truth, meaning, a sense to life), sometimes motivated by what they described as a personal crisis or trauma, sometimes by “karma”<sup>549</sup> or by friends. There was a great variety of motivations that led people

---

*and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet* (BRILL, 2013), 141–62; Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*; Bellezza, *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*, 2014.

<sup>549</sup> The Sanskrit word *karma* literally means action. In this context, it refers to the “principle of cause and effect.”

in their search for meaning. Some participants, for instance, mentioned a very practical reason for arriving at Bon, such as dealing with stress at work.

Of the 36 participants, half of them talked in some way about “arriving home,” using a variety of expressions for a similar experience. These narratives bring the theoretical frame of religion conversion into our discussion. The field of religious conversion studies presents various theories on what actually constitutes “conversion.” Systematically analyzing the data obtained from the participants of this study under the light of a religious conversion theoretical frame could possibly be the focus of a whole new dissertation. The way in which some participants narrate their encounters with Bon, as well as the different stages or turning points in these processes, could indeed to be looked at from such perspectives. However, I have chosen not to focus my whole analysis from this standpoint because I deemed other perspectives to be more relevant for my thesis. However, even if a detailed analysis of them is beyond the scope of this study, I will summarize general aspects of my own findings in relation to existing conversion theories, particularly that of the conversion theorist Lewis Rambo. Moreover, wherever appropriate and relevant, I will indicate where and why the participants’ narrations are significant from a conversion angle throughout the chapters below.

As mentioned earlier, the manner in which some participants narrate their encounter and embrace of Bon does accords with narratives of conversion delineated in theories of religious conversion. Conversion narratives have been defined as a particular way of communicating religious experiences of conversion,

through which individuals “reconstruct their own biographies” by way of adapting them to their new religious universe of discourse.<sup>550</sup>

In the field of the psychology of religion, the work of the conversion theorist Lewis Rambo is of particular relevance. Rambo’s proposed model of religious conversion<sup>551</sup> is broken down into seven stages, which are not necessarily sequential:

1. The **context**, that is, the cultural, social, and psychological context of the individual, including religious and other institutions that set up the scenario where he or she is located;
2. A **crisis**, which activates the participant’s search or quest;
3. The **quest**, where there is an “active” searching for a meaning explicit in most narratives of conversion, despite some exceptions that Rambo notes of narrations of “passive” experiences;
4. The **encounter**, where the searching individual meets the religion in question;
5. An **interaction** stage, characterized by the relationship between the individual and the religion, when the roles, the rituals, the relationships and the rhetoric of that religion absorb him or her;
6. A **commitment** stage when the individual identifies him- or herself with the wider religious community. It might also include a membership ritual of some sort, for instance, the act of taking refuge, in the Bon case;

---

<sup>550</sup> See: Peter Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

<sup>551</sup> See: Lewis R. Rambo, “Anthropology and the Study of Conversion,” *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, 2003, 211–22; Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Lewis R. Rambo, “Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change,” *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 259–71.



7. The **consequences**, the final stage in Rambo's model, which refers to the possible repercussions of the conversion.

As said above, when looking at the accounts of participants of this study, some aspects of Rambo's model are relevant, noting that, as he himself emphasized, it should not be taken as a step-by-step model. As we will see, some of the stages do not follow a sequential logic, and they do not occur in the order delineated above. In the case of Buddhism, moreover, "homecoming" can be viewed instead as a process that individuals go through on their way to "awaken" their Buddha nature.<sup>552</sup>

It is worth noting that academic literature covering religious conversion in the context of Tibetan Buddhism is not abundant. Nonetheless, of particular relevance is Parker's doctoral dissertation on the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism.<sup>553</sup> Out of the twenty participants included in her research, five were members of a Tibetan Buddhist school. Her analysis follows the seven stages of conversion delineated by Rambo. Her interviews were designed to account for these seven stages. She concluded that these stages are not adequate for analyzing Westerners Buddhist conversions, particularly because of the fact that the theory proposes "stages," which do not account for the narratives of the participants she interviewed, but also because, in her view, Rambo's model is a better fit for monotheistic religious than for a religion like Buddhism. She proposed another set of stages for conversion that would be appropriate to the case of Buddhists, which is as follows: context, exposure, interest invoked, practical application, commitment, and consequences.

---

<sup>552</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, "Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World," 467.

<sup>553</sup> Glynis Parker, "The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Africa, 2007).

From the conversion perspective, we can see in the accounts below that several participants mentioned a “crisis moment,” which included a professional change, a relationship ending, disorientation in general, and dissatisfaction with life. These crisis accounts would fit into what Rambo and other scholars of religious conversion consider as the crisis preceding conversion.<sup>554</sup> Moreover, participants noted that it was due to these crises that they found Bon. The narrated crises were linked to a search for meaning, a quest, which some participants, such as D. S. below, described as a quest they initiated in their past but that became accelerated due to a crisis. However, Parker found that the “crisis” stage of Rambo’s theory does not seem to apply to the groups of people she studied (South Africans who convert to Buddhism), which does not accord with the findings in my case study. I would also disagree with Parker’s findings in relation to the fourth stage of Rambo’s conversion theory, which she asserts, in the case of Buddhist conversions, “poses some problems in terms of how Rambo defines encounter.” She elaborates by saying that Rambo includes the contact between the potential convert and the religious advocate in a specific setting, which was not relevant to her research, since, she claims, “Buddhism in general is not a proselytizing religion and especially in South Africa there is no major effort by temples, centers or Buddhist groups to advertise or even acknowledge their existence.”<sup>555</sup> She argues that the “advocate,” in the case of Buddhism, can refer not only to a spiritual leader but also to a friend, family member, books, or the Internet. In my view, one role does not exclude the other, since “advocates” often are the ones making books, developing Internet websites, and so on. Moreover, advocates are not necessarily religious leaders, teachers, priests, or the like. They can also be Westerners converted into Buddhism or Bon. As Yu Smyer notes, “although tremendously indebted to their Asian masters, non-Asian Buddhist elite converts nevertheless deserve much credit for spreading Buddhism in their

---

<sup>554</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 165.

<sup>555</sup> Parker, “The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism,” 94–95.

home countries.”<sup>556</sup> Parker also questions the specific setting of the encounter delineated by Rambo, because in the case of Buddhism, she argues, the fourth stage might take place not necessarily in a religious structure, such as a temple or church, but can happen in an individual’s home or sitting room. The key problem with this explanation is that it does not take into account the global character of Buddhism (or, for our case, Bon) in the West; this global character, I contend, explains these differences rather than contradicting Rambo’s proposed model.

With regards to the stage called “interaction,” I found, in contrast to Parker, that some (but not all) participants experienced a great degree of interaction. Parker stated that the “encapsulation” process that is characteristic of this stage, involving an intensification of the interaction with the religious group and its worldview, was relevant only for interviewees who were ordained. Moreover, she linked this to the “secular nature of Buddhism” and the fact that “Buddhism does not require that people make drastic changes in their lifestyle, perhaps the only change that most of the interviewees made was to become vegetarians in sympathy of all sentient beings.”<sup>557</sup> Such an approach, however, fails to address the fact that the alleged “secularism” of Buddhism is not intrinsic to this religion, being a feature restricted to “modernist Buddhism” (see Chapter 4.7.1.). The participants I interviewed did, in fact, describe the changes in their lives as being drastic, which we could say was the result of encapsulation. Furthermore, the participants whose experiences were more “encapsulated” were not necessarily the ordained ones. For instance, the two participants who were studying and had some degree of knowledge of Tibetan language were laypersons. Parker also observed that there were no significant changes in the lifestyle of Buddhist converts, which is contrary to my findings. Most participants I interviewed actively participated, in one way or another, in religious rituals,

---

<sup>556</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World,” 473.

<sup>557</sup> Parker, “The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism,” 113.

prostrated before their teachers, and noted the significant effects of these practices on their lives, even when they mentioned that before being bonpos, they rejected any form of “religiosity.”

In relation to the sixth stage, commitment, which corresponds, in Rambo’s theory, to the process of deciding and finally converting, is a process marked by a confrontation with the self: in this case study, there were a variety of experiences presented in different forms of narratives. Some participants recounted the moment they took refuge as an important part of their conversion narrative (D.S, E.S, A.M, F.H) but others considered themselves to be bonpos but did not focus on whether this had anything to do with “taking refuge.” Finally, most participants underlined the positive effects or consequences of their “conversion,” and all of them indicated that they planned to continue being bonpos. Some indicated their wish to dedicate more time to their meditation practices, while others also noted negative effects stemming mainly from difficulties in balancing their religious life with their professional or “worldly” life.

Parker argues that, instead than speaking of “conversion” in a Buddhist context, it is more appropriate to refer to a “development toward becoming a Buddhist.” This is because, she claims, participants in her study referred to being Buddhist “before they even heard about Buddhism, or that when they heard the teaching of the Buddha it felt as if they were coming home and that this was something that they always knew.”<sup>558</sup> She called this characteristic as a “type of proto-Buddhist tendency within the interviewees.”<sup>559</sup> I consider this to be a weak argument since it attributes reality to a narrative that is “constructed as a reality” in the narratives of participants. Claims of being Buddhist or bonpo before encountering

---

<sup>558</sup> Parker, 154.

<sup>559</sup> Parker, 154.

Buddhism or Bon would be related, from a conversion theory, to the reconstruction of individual biographies, as mentioned earlier, and to the incorporation of symbols and discourses of the new shared religious universe.<sup>560</sup> In my research, participants narrated their life prior to encountering Bon by taking into account their new religious worldview, utilizing words such as “previous lives,” “karma,” “awareness,” and “compassion,” which are part of the lexicon of their new Bon symbolic universe.

Closer to my findings are Yu Smyer’s remarks on Buddhist conversion in the context of global Buddhism, which occurs, he notes, “in a concurrent rather than linear, fashion”<sup>561</sup> and includes a complex interaction between Buddhist (and Bon, we might add) traditions and local values. By situating the conversion of Westerners to Buddhism in the global context, he highlights how in the West, in contrast with Asia, Buddhism is transmitted in a mostly lay context. He points out that “an increasing number of non-Asians are converting to Buddhism, and, on the other side, the new converts also transform the religion that they have embraced.”<sup>562</sup> He rightly points out that the process of conversion to Buddhism in the West “is not a simple, unidirectional move from a nonreligious background; it involves a complex interplay, rejection, and negotiation between Buddhism as the new faith and pre-existing religious beliefs and practices.”<sup>563</sup> This, perhaps, is what was missing in Parker’s analysis, along with the global dimension of Buddhism that Smyer addresses. He argues that “modern Buddhist conversion travels a two-way path: Asian masters have bred non-Asian Dharma teachers, and, in turn, these modern Buddhist teachers and their cultural constituencies

---

<sup>560</sup> See: Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

<sup>561</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World,” 167.

<sup>562</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, 476.

<sup>563</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, 476.

have taken the initiative to transform traditional versions of Buddhism to meet their own social and political needs.”<sup>564</sup>

In her study on Western Buddhists in two Western Buddhist centers in Australia, Glenys Eddy notes that commitment to Buddhism is often presented as a decision point that occurs after a period of immersion in the Buddhist religious centers, when participants contrast the Buddhist worldview with their own emerging from their individual, social, and cultural backgrounds. Commitment is part of a process that includes the stages of exploration, apprehension, and comprehension before reaching commitment.<sup>565</sup> In the Bon case, all of the stages presented by Eddy were relevant, even though participants described experiences in the process in various ways. Therefore, Eddy’s classification will complement the analysis below that of Rambo’s seven stages conversion theory.

The theme of “becoming a bonpo” therefore includes how participants narrated hearing about Bon for the first time, describing the moment they either met a Bon lama, read a Bon book, listened to a teaching, or got in touch with Bon. Most accounts are grandiloquent, with participants describing this moment as a sort of magical moment, for example, as “the sword of Yeshe Walmo<sup>566</sup> to the heart.” Several participants spoke of the moment they met a particular teacher or the teachings in general as a pivotal moment or turning point in their lives. They expressed clearly how Bon or Shenten “is my place.” Most participants said their lives were completely changed after encountering Bon teachings. Participants described their encounter with Bon as something extraordinary, magical, and a

---

<sup>564</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World,” 481.

<sup>565</sup> See: Glenys Eddy, *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2012).

<sup>566</sup> Yeshe Walmo is a Bon deity.

special connection. While homecoming was a central theme for many participants, it was not the case for all. In particular, some participants spoke of the impact of finding “my lama.” In the Bon context, the “root lama” is considered to be the lama who introduces the student to the “Natural State of Mind.” In this regard, an emergent theme was that following Bon was, in many cases, related to feeling a connection with one particular teacher (Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Tenzin Wangyal, etc.).

Upon deciding to follow Bon teachings, most of the participants also decided to stop following other teachers or paths and to focus their attention only on Bon in general and on a particular teacher. Participants also showed different levels of commitment; one participant mentioned that, in order to become a real practitioner, a person must “forget about having children.” This accounts for the seventh stage of Rambo’s conversion theory, where the consequences of conversion are considered.

### 5.2.1 HEARING ABOUT BON FOR THE FIRST TIME

Some participants first heard about Bon through a friend who was already either Buddhist or bonpo or was going to a Buddhist or Bon center or retreat. In other cases, the person was introduced to Bon by a family member who was either Buddhist or had an interest in Buddhism. Yoga, Zen Buddhism, and non-Buddhist meditation were other paths that led participants to Bon. Another path to Bon was through traveling; some people had taken trips to India, Nepal, or Tibet and discovered Bon or Buddhism there. Some participants also mentioned a “crisis” that led them to look for a spiritual path. For other people, their introduction came through books or the Internet.

After renouncing his church, U. G. became fascinated in Buddhism; he read some stories about Tibetan masters when he was in his twenties. Then he started

working and was “really into the material world a lot. I mean, still I was interested in spirituality, but I didn’t have really time to find the appropriate way.” This mention of “the material world” is often found in the voices of participants, where Shenten is the place for Dharma/enlightenment and the “outside” is the place for the “worldly affairs” and “samsaric activities,” often described in opposition and as contradicting each other. It is also evidence of Orientalist notions of the West as a materialistic society versus the East as a spiritual society.

When U. G. turned thirty-eight in 2008, a friend took him to meet another friend, who was the founder of the Yungdrung Bon Foundation in his country. U. G. listened to a teaching about Dzogchen and the Bon tradition. Then another friend who was a bonpo took him to a retreat, and he saw Yongdzin Rinpoche for the first time:

It was the first lama I actually saw. In this retreat I directly took refuge in Lopon. So I entered Bon tradition and Dzogchen teachings. Then like every year I went to Bon teachings. He has a small group there, and three or four times a year I went to his teachings, and I went to Shenten for first time in 2010, I think. Then also to the teachings of Lopon and then of Khenpo, then more and more I followed the teachings and started practicing the Bon tradition.

When asked if he identifies as a bonpo, U. G. adopted a non-sectarian approach and answered,

I follow the *Buddhist* tradition of Bon. Because also the values and the ideas are the same, and even Lopon says it is Buddhism.



So for me it is not important if it is from which route the ideas came. The ideas of the Buddha, of compassion, bodhisattva, is the same basis, and even with the Nyigmapas, we have the same Dzogchen. It is not a different thing. It might have other rules. Even Dzogchen might have come to Indian Buddhism, but in the end this is—I cannot really follow the history. [emphasis added]

When C. I. was asked if he identifies as a bonpo, he responded, “Most of my religious, or Yoga, or spiritual practices are from the Bon religion. My main practices come from that.” But he also said that if he is asked whether *he* follows some kind of “religion,” his answer “depends on the context and who is asking me.”

## 5.2.2 IT WAS LIKE THE SWORD OF YESHE WALMO TO THE HEART

Narratives related to encountering Bon focused on themes of reaching home as well as on “signs” that showed the way. For instance, F. F. referred to how one day she read a book about Tenzin Wangyal

and felt that was a call to myself. I then did my first retreat with Tenzin Wangyal in the U.S.A. I found it, it is intense. When I went out of the teachings, there were three birds turning around my head, and I saw this in a dream. I then went to an Atri retreat.<sup>567</sup> And I got the introduction to the Natural State. I knew I had to follow this path.

---

<sup>567</sup> For an explanation of the Atri retreat, see Chapter 4.3.1.

A. M. once had a friend who followed Namkhai Norbu and “all the important lamas.” She describes this friend as “one of those that collects teachings and books and everything, but does not practice anything.” He showed her a documentary about Vedanta and Dzogchen. The teachings of Namkhai Norbu made an impression on her, so she went to an esoteric bookstore and bought his book *Dream Yoga*.

I read it and I loved it. One day I went for the second book of Namkhai Norbu and saw a poster that said Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche would teach *Dream Yoga*, and I told myself that I had to go. So I went to hear that *Yoga Dream* weekend and said, I know he is not [my teacher], but this teaching is [what I am looking for]. And here I am following it. That was in 1997. But two years later, Yongdzin Rinpoche came to [name], and that was like the sword of Yeshe Walmo to the heart, [I] had an open heart.

When A. M. met Yongdzin Rinpoche in 1999, she asked him for permission and told him that she was following a Vedanta master but wanted to follow Bon. “He told me laughing clearly that I had to follow the Bon and come to Tritten Norbutse. I took it as a fact, and in 2000 I went there,” she adds. Later she took novice vows.

In narrating her process from encounter to “conversion,” she recounts a dream where she was in a lake called *Dangra Yumtsho*,<sup>568</sup> considered sacred by the bonpos, “a dream with footprints and all.” Then she bought a book by John

---

<sup>568</sup> Wylie: *dwangs rwa g.yu mtsho*.

Vincent Bellezza called *The Dawn of Tibet*.<sup>569</sup> She said to herself, “I’m going to *Dangra Yumtsho*. I want to go because it’s Zhang Zhung territory. I need to sleep and place my head over there.” She went with what she described as the intention of finding clarity about whether nunhood was right for her and if she would be “a good nun.” She went to Tibet and then “had the certainty that I was going to be good at it, and when I came back to [my country], I spoke with His Holiness [i.e., the late H. H. Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, the Thirty-Third Menri Trizin] and asked for it.”

The first work that C. F. read on spiritual research was the book by Arnould De Jardin, which made him become very interested in “spiritual things.” He then read Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*.<sup>570</sup> He describes the impact of this book as follows:

It was a big shock when I read that. I was with a friend of mine and we begin to search together. We were far from everything in a little town, and we began to read a book and to discuss about it. But at that time there were not so many books about Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Not many Buddhist events. And when we went to Paris, we began to go; we went, one time, to see Sogyal Rinpoche. At the time he was not so popular in the area, only about 20 to 25 people listened to him. He proposed to make a retreat in Scotland. So I sold my entire music instruments collection to go to this retreat and it was big change in my life.

---

<sup>569</sup> John Vincent Bellezza, *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>570</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2002).

In 1997, a friend of C. F.'s suggested they go see the Lopon, so he agreed. He recalls, "In two hours I learned more about Dzogchen than for all the year we studied with Sogyal Rinpoche. So it was very—a shock for me." Then he decided to follow both Lopon and Sogyal Rinpoche. Until 2003 he followed Sogyal Rinpoche, his previous teacher, and Yongdzin Rinpoche. With his friend, he was very involved in the organization of retreats with Lopon. In 2000, they organized a retreat, and in 2001, he began organizing retreats alone. He did so over the following years until 2003, when Sogyal Rinpoche asked his students to choose, if they had two masters, between him and the other. So C. F. went to see Sogyal Rinpoche and told him, "I'm sorry but I'm leaving your teachings and I will follow the teachings of Lopon." [Sogyal Rinpoche] said, 'It's good that you tell me.' He was very, very nice."

The previous statement shows that sectarian approaches are still prevalent and in some cases, teachers do not openly agree to allow their students to participate or to follow several schools.

### 5.2.3 SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENED TO ME

Many participants recounted a "magical moment" when they felt a "connection" upon encountering Bon. Words commonly used were "energy," "connection," and "practice."

A. M.1 recounts that one day, without knowing anything about Buddhism or Bon, she read a pamphlet announcing a seminar by Tenzin Wangyal in her city. He was her first contact with Tibetan Bon. Following the instructions in the pamphlet, she arrived at the given address where Wangyal was going to teach, and they asked her, "Are you coming because of the monk?" She says, "I had no idea. It was like boom. I listened for the first time [the] Guru Yoga [prayer]. I saw the rituals; it was as if I was remembering something that I've lived already. I

don't know how, but I knew that I knew it. It was just before Tenzin Wangyal was leading a seminar in [name of a city].”

She continues narrating how that moment represented a turning point in her life, after which she embarked in a journey that would bring her to different countries, following Bon teachers. At the time, she felt that Wangyal was almost unreachable, due to the hierarchical organization in Ligmincha, among other factors.

Something magical happened to me with Tenzin Wangyal. I was behind as [one of] the newcomers. Here in Shenten is different, but in [my country], the front seats are reserved for old students. In a break, I observed that a person went closer to him, and I mentally thought, ‘I wish to be one day that close to him.’ He looked at me; I felt I was listened to. He told me mentally, ‘You will be.’ It was super magical. Since then I always go to all his retreats. I feel it was like a call.

Later, A. M.1 visited Shenten: “Every time I saw pictures of Yongdzin Rinpoche, I felt something. As soon as I saw Yongdzin Rinpoche, I couldn't stop crying, and I said: ‘It is my master.’ Obviously, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, I adore him, but it is a different type of energy.”

A.M.1 is representative of a number of participants who emphasized devotional aspects of Bon, again signaling that Bon in the West is not a monolithic tradition but one with a variety of interlinked aspects, some of which are selected or rejected according to the needs of participants.

C. I.'s first connection to Bon was through his travels through India. He knew he was interested in shamanism and had heard that "Bon was the shamanistic aspect of Tibetan culture." As seen in Chapter 4,<sup>11</sup> this entanglement between Bon and shamanism was sometimes perceived as pejorative but also triggered the interest of Westerners such as C. I. His first experience of a Tibetan religion was in a Tibetan center in his own country. But his "big connection with Tibet" started when he pursued his academic studies in a field related to Tibetan studies. His travels finally brought him to Dharamsala, where he hoped to work in the Tibetan medical center. Despite considering it a great place in many ways, he did not feel there was an appropriate opening for him there. After that, he went to Tibet, but the political situation made it difficult to conduct research. He heard about bonpos in connection with "shamanism and things like that." He visited Katmandu in 1994 and wanted to visit Triten Norbutse, but "there was nobody there. I can hardly remember about it, but I remember there was supposed to be a monastery there." In 1996, during the first year of his doctoral studies, he went again and met Tenzin Namdak. By that time, he said,

I was a little bit more knowledgeable about what Bon was. I knew there was this thing called Dzogchen. I didn't really know very much about what it was, and I knew about Tenzin Namdak, who was a very respected, scholarly, and accomplished lama, and so I thought I would like to meet him and ask him about Tibetan medicine.

During his first interview, Tenzin Namdak told C. I. to "go and work in Dhorpatan, because we have a medical tradition and a medical text called the *bum zhi*<sup>571</sup>." C. I. set off to Dhorpatan.

---

<sup>571</sup> Wylie: *bum bzhi*.

It was anthropologically fascinating, because you had a thousand Nepalese there from seven different ethnic groups. Then you had the Tibetans, who also internally divided between the Buddhists and the bonpos. But the only people doing religion there were the bonpos. So you had all that going on. The cultural complexity and all focused on this clinic, because the temple was next to the clinic.

At the same time, C. I. told Tenzin Namdak that he was interested in learning about Dzogchen. Tenzin Namdak advised him to “go step by step. First you have to learn the *nongdro* practices and then go from there.” Tenzin Namdak appointed the monastery teacher, who was at the time Tenpa Yungdrung, to teach him the Dzogchen cycle of Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud: “My Tibetan was not so good, and his English was not so good. So we sat there for two weeks and we went through the whole thing.”

M. N. mentions social network influences in her journey, as it was a friend who invited her to Katmandu. She first listened to Rinpoche’s teachings in 2005, when she attended one of the teachings in English at the monastery, which were given “in a very informal way.” She did not originally plan to continue attending teachings, but after that first teaching, she decided to follow this path. She explains,

So I might be the one who knows Rinpoche the longest but the one who came later. [It took me] twenty-five years. I went to one teaching of Rinpoche, the only teaching I went [to] before [was] some Dalai Lama teaching in Manali.... The only thing I remember is Rinpoche saying, ‘Yes, this [experience of the Natural State] is empty, but it is a very special kind of emptiness.’ Those words had stayed with me since then. And that was it. It had to click—and it clicked and that’s it.

#### 5.2.4 I REACHED HOME

Some participants, as shown in some of the narratives above, described their encounter to Bon as one of arriving home, reaching their place, or finding their place. D. F. described this experience as a chain of events that were linked in a process leading to a personal crisis, facing an unexpected situation (breaking up with his girlfriend and losing his job), and meeting a teacher who had a great impact on him. “Never before [had] I thought I would be a monk. Never before [had] I wished to be a monk,” D. F. said. He spoke of his travels in India with his girlfriend at the time. Although their relationship ended during the trip, he visited Menri monastery for the first time in 1997 and stayed for about seven days. During this time, he felt he “reached the goal.” This is clarified in his statement: “No need to travel more, my wishes to do tourism just vanished. I had only one [goal]... I had only one wish... to stay there. I did not feel like going to India to travel anymore. I felt like a boat in the sea, a rough sea, and storms, and then when you reach the harbor, this was my feeling. I reached home.”

In narrating his life, D. F. revealed,

I was attracted by a young woman. I realized afterwards I was attracted to her because she was Buddhist. Somehow it was important that she was Buddhist to engage in a relationship with her. At that time, I read the book by Sogyal Rinpoche on the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying.<sup>572</sup> I got interested. Eventually, a friend took me to a Buddhist monastery, it was a Kagyu school. Somehow, those are two connections I had with Tibetan Buddhism. Then I went to teachings by His Holiness the

---

<sup>572</sup> See: Rinpoche Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (New York: Random House, 2008).



Dalai Lama. First, it was in Paris.... That evening, he gave teachings on the mind and then the workings of the mind. At that time, he said something that made me realize that we are not the slaves of the thoughts. This was great teachings from His Holiness.

He went to listen to the Dalai Lama again in 1998. At that time, the Dalai Lama had asked many high lamas, spiritual priests, or teachers from different traditions to participate. Among them was a Bon teacher, Lopon Trinley Nyima, from Menri. That was his first encounter with Bon. He went back to the monastery at Menri, where, he narrates,

At that time, His Holiness advised me to become a monk. This is—I thought about it. After he advised me, and I decided to take his advice, I became a monk.... I think I realized now that I—somehow, because I had the taste of many pleasures and satisfactions, and I realized that there was no end seeking new pleasures. It was in vain. It was endless, seeking satisfaction of pleasures all the time, or desires. There was no end... .[W]hen you're hungry you eat, and then you stop because you have enough. I think I had enough of this life, this worldly life.

D. F. noted that when he was advised by His Holiness to become a monk, he felt fear, but nevertheless “followed his advice.... I waited a few weeks for a good astrological day, and then I was ordained with three other monks, young men, and we became monks at the same time. I stayed in Menri.”

D. S, like D. F., also had a personal crisis when she was thirty-three years old, when a relationship ended abruptly. She started to rethink what she was doing with her life and “was also very anxious.” She felt that she was not following her real interests. She started reading texts on Buddhism and meditating because suddenly she wanted to explore a new path on issues of “spirituality” that she used to reject completely. This also coincided with her return to her country after living many years abroad. She “started to absorb like a sponge all that was offered.” This crisis left her “very open.” Then she visited a Zen center. She tried different things and started doing guided meditations at home. A friend recommended she visit Shenten, which she did. When I asked about her first impressions at Shenten, she answered,

I do not know, I don't even remember what were the lessons about or if I learned anything from them, so the truth is I don't know, do not know why that struck me so much. It was kind of rejection and yet, for some reason, in summer I went back for another week and then decided to do a longer retreat in fall, that was a seventy-days retreat. I reached the conclusion that I was going back, because I felt a special connection with one of the masters who was there, that I didn't feel on the first visit. It was when I seemed to realize that was my thing.

After attending the Gomdra retreat (see Chapter 4.3.1) for seventy days, D. S. made the decision to take formal refuge in Bon, but waited two more years to do so. During this period, she closely followed the tradition. She explained,

I was very committed and I had dedicated many months; nearly all my vacations were dedicated to do retreats. But there was something in me that seemed to me that taking refuge was not right, even though many people come into contact with

Buddhism or Bon and immediately after a week they take refuge and they love it, but I did not want to do it. I believed it was a very serious thing and I'm glad I waited. The truth is that when I took refuge, it excited me a lot, and I think it would have not been the same if I had done it at the beginning.

#### 5.2.5 SINCE THEN THIS IS MY PLACE

Some participants, when speaking of discovering a home, referred to one place in particular: Shenten. S. G. was a follower of the Kagyupa and Sakyapa Buddhist schools. He had a friend who was close to Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: "I met him in [name], I asked if the path was open, especially for me as I was Kagyupa and Sakyapa. He said, 'No problem, I see very clearly that you have a path, so go; it is very good for you.' Anyway I was already decided. When I came here, I met Rinpoche in [name], first. When we had this place, I was there already. Since then this is my place."

He also said that his Kagyupa lama told him to wait and he would "see something." He followed Namkhai Norbu practices "until I came here [Shenten]. I arrived to Rinpoche in 2001, before I was practicing Namkhai Norbu's teachings for four years, and before that I was receiving Tantric initiations."

#### 5.2.6 SO THAT'S HOW I FOUND BON AND MY LAMA

Reaching home also referred to the moment of meeting a particular teacher; in most cases, they identified this teacher as Yongdzin Rinpoche but also Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Tenzin Wangyal, and others. "I arrived to Bon due to my interest in Dzogchen" mentions M. S., who had a teacher who told him, "there is a great living Dzogchen master, you should see him." M. S. also studied with the Tibetan Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu (introduced in Chapter 4.10), but

“decided to stay with the bonpos, not because of the religion but because of the Dzogchen aspect: they are the more generous one. They give you all the knowledge they have, they guide you. They help you, in real.”

R. S. recounts that before coming to Shenten for the first time, “I just looked at the photo of Lupon and felt like an immense compassion. I came, and immediately connected, dreamed, etc. Shenten wasn’t very welcoming, and also a bit religious so that was a bit overwhelming. I first continued following other masters, until I decided to only follow this path, you have to choose.”

V. S. refers to meeting with Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung: “When I met Tenpa, he said only three or four words and it was exactly what I needed to hear. So simple and straightforward.”

S. A., when asked how she encountered Bon, mentions that, as a teenager, she experienced “spontaneous appearances of my Natural State and so on.” That is, she narrates her encounter with Bon as prior to the real encounter, by retrospectively reading Bon characteristics into her experiences in her teen years. Later on, after experiencing trauma, she again encountered Bon:

I had a great shock because the love of my life died. When my boyfriend died, I was twenty-eight. Then I was so completely shocked, I went like in a state [of] hibernation for something like twelve years or so. I was completely paralyzed. I felt just like a dead body... . I would say I was traumatized. Descriptions of what people who are survivors of concentration camps tell, about what they felt when they came out pretty much described how I felt—like completely emptied of all emotion... internally completely dead, and this was for maybe twelve years or so.

S. A. says that when she was around forty years old, she felt as if she awoke from this state and started searching for sense in her life once again, “this time already a more mature idea where to search.” She thought her path had something to do with meditation but still did not want any religion. “So I searched for where is meditation taught without any religious indoctrination, and I found some people teaching traditional Indian Yoga connected with meditation and that was all fine.” After a period of in-depth immersion into this practice, she concluded that while it was a valid path, she did not feel it was what she was looking for. Then she attended a seminar of Tenzin Wangyal, and there again she did not quite have the feeling “this is it” but felt that it was closer. “It is getting warmer. Then he talked about Yongdzin Rinpoche. Then I Googled Yongdzin Rinpoche... and then I found Shenten and I went to Shenten.”

S. A. went to Shenten in 2007. She recalls entering the main compound, where Geshe Gelek and Lama Sangye were performing a ritual: “It must have been *tsalung* in the morning. This was such an experience. Even though on the surface everything was so completely exotic. I mean I had never heard or seen anything like this before. It felt like this total homecoming.” She describes how from that moment, she found her place; she says she had the same feeling with Lama Sangye Monlam, one of the resident lamas at Shenten.

I immediately [knew] this is my lama. Even though Lama Sangye at the time didn’t speak one word of any Western language, and Geshe Gelek did speak a little English, I kept asking the translator to interpret for me with Lama Sangye because I wanted to ask questions; not just of any lama, but of Lama Sangye. I immediately knew this was my lama, even though we

could just sort of look at each other, and he told me the same: he immediately felt that I was his student.

She goes further in saying that, at one point, by looking at her lama, she entered into the Natural State: “Unfortunately, just like one of those mistakes of meditation that Khenpo was talking about today, the sort of labeling the state of perfection, I made the mistake of thinking, ‘Ah, wow, absolute perfection,’ and the moment that I conceptualized this, I was out of the state again.” But S.A. deemed this experience to be foundational, as she felt she had proof that the Natural State of the Mind exists, “because a lot of people listen to the teachings, and they keep wondering if this is just some story that they tell you.... I at least have the experience this state exists, even if I am not capable of entering it at will.” That encounter was sufficient for her to know that Lama Sangye “is really without a doubt my lama, because I think in most traditions this is sort of the gold standard of recognizing your lama or guru. If you immediately enter this state that the particular tradition is about when you look at him, then that’s it. So that’s how I found Bon and my lama.”

#### 5.2.7 A STRONG CONNECTION

Another way of expressing the feeling of reaching home or finding their place was that of having a “connection.” This word was used repeatedly by participants in relation to Bon, to teachers, to practices, and to places.

N. F. believes that making a commitment to Bon is a matter of “having a connection.” As he puts it,

I think also there’s people who don’t even practice that much throughout the year because the connection isn’t there, because

you forget. You know? It's like you come here and you're full out and you're hearing Rinpoche telling you to practice and you practice, everyone's practicing and then throughout the year it's like slowly—it's like writing in your diary, at first you write every day and then once a week, and then once a month and then, it's like, I haven't written in a year.

E. S. mentions that her first arrival at Shenten and to Bon was “very strong,” because there was a retreat going on at the time where the *Gyalwa Chaktri* Teachings were being transmitted. The combination of the “power of the teachings and the power of the teachers was what made me stay. It was very strong.”

V. S. also refers to her meeting with Tenzin Namdak as a pivotal change in her life: “I received answers to all the questions I had all my life. He is the kindest person I ever met.... I had a strong connection since the beginning, I always dreamed about him, sometimes I dreamed about doing practice with him.”

More than thirty years ago, F. H. lived for nine months in a Gelugpa center until he felt attracted to Dzogchen. He first met Yongdzin Rinpoche in 1991 on his second visit to Europe. He heard about an upcoming visit from John Reynolds and felt an urge to invite Yongdzin Rinpoche to his country. So the next day, he called Nepal, and Yongdzin Rinpoche answered the phone:

It was quite funny. I had prepared a whole note to be precise with the lamas on what I really wanted. A whole speech of what I wanted to say, and halfway [through] Rinpoche interrupted [and said], ‘Yeah, of course, I’ll come.’ So he came. Since then I have been following him and the Yungdrung Bon teaching because it

was clear to me from the beginning that it's true teaching that's going to bring you to enlightenment fully. I had a strong connection to Yongdzin Rinpoche and Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud. That was very clear immediately.

A. M.1 asserts that, "The great majority are students of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and only a few of us 'also connect' with Yongdzin Rinpoche."

#### 5.2.8 THEN I GOT GRABBED

Having a "connection" was also expressed using metaphors such as "being grabbed" by Bon when encountering it. I. H. remembers that, when she was a child, Lupon came to her house before the Shenten Center existed. Her father had invited Lupon to his country, and he always stayed at their home. She narrates that she was

afraid Lupon was clairvoyant. Somebody told me he was, so I was afraid he would read my mind. I remember me and my sister were very little. He gave us *khatas* [i.e., a traditional ceremonial scarf that symbolizes purity and are presented at many ceremonial occasions as a symbol of respect] and he said we were the first bonpos baptized in the West. I felt something special. I was ten. I felt this was special but I was too little still.

When I. H. was nineteen, she went to Shenten, which had recently been established. She describes the experience in this way:



That was the first time I felt ready. I came with a friend. But this friend didn't like it, she didn't have a connection. There was nothing personal, she was very spiritual but didn't have a connection with this. I remember that time I was really grab[bed]. I thought, this is important and this is very rare. I should keep it and do something with it. At the beginning it was also boring sometimes, you know, your mind is not ready. I remember Lupon [sitting] with other people, and he said to my friend, "Maybe this is not for you." And then he said to me, "But you, you will come back every year." Then I got grabbed.

The relationships with the lamas and teachers are varied and some participants expressed expectations of having a degree of closeness to the teachers that were not fulfilled. A. M. explains, "That's why I'm saying that I'm attached emotionally to Khenpo Rinpoche, that's the word." She explains that she experiences her "connection" to Khenpo as "a negative thing," because it implies her having high expectations that cannot be fulfilled. She expresses a sense of "longing" due to the fact that she does not receive the attention from Khenpo she had hoped for. Although she understands the reasons, such as Khenpo's busy schedule, she also mentions that it saddens her.

C. I. also speaks of his connection to Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung but in positive terms:

I thought this person is brilliant. I just connected with him totally. I liked the way he explained things. I liked to work together with knowledge and things like that. It was really an exciting experience for me to be working with him, and almost privileged as well, and nobody knew him then, really. Very few Western people knew him, and I thought at the time that when

people start to know him he is going to be famous because he is brilliant, and sure, I still think it's going to happen. It's been a little bit slower than I expected.

C. I. believes that most people in Shenten do not really see the greatness of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, "because he is all a bit in the shadow of Tenzin Namdak's resplendent light." He further regards Yongdzin Rinpoche as

a great master and I consider him to be my teacher and things like that. But my primary contact has been always Tenpa, because, I don't know, we are kind of like friends, I suppose. I like that relationship. I very much respect him, but most of the time we've most been like friends. But it's partly because I was out in Dhorpatan where he was brought up. So I know his family. I know all the places around there. You know, the people. We know a lot of common people.

A. M. refers to her attraction to the traditional way of teaching at Shenten and her "connection" to Khenpo: "I feel attracted for that, I am bonpo and I am not interested in any other lineage, in contrast with many others who follow different teachers. I can respect a master, but I only follow Bon, my connection is here. This time my connection with Khenpo Rinpoche was deepened, I cry only to see them."

"Recognizing, experiencing and abiding in the Natural State is the main aim of Dzogchen practice," says E. S., adding that for her, arriving at Shenten was the result of years of searching and years of practicing with Namkhai Norbu in particular. So when she arrived, "I already knew the State, because I practiced alone in my place for a year. I also did preliminary practices, which for me were

easier than the Natural State. I started many years ago. I even brought my family into this.”

#### 5.2.9 THIS IS THE MASTER, THIS IS THE PATH, THIS IS THE PLACE

The degree of commitment to the tradition expressed by participants varied among them. However, most, if not all, participants presented themselves as followers with a level of commitment that would qualify them as much more than mere “sympathizers” or people who “have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully... those who might place a how-to book on Buddhist meditation on the nightstand.”<sup>573</sup>

C. F. believes that the Bon religion “is very rich. I think everything is there.” He considers himself to be nonsectarian, affirming that all the other Tibetan lineages have great qualities in them as well. However, he expressed a special affinity with Bon:

It’s not like the Bon is better or something like that, but I feel happy working in the Bon. You know, and I think it is better to focus on one thing. So... everything that I need is in the Bon religion. I don’t need anything else. I sometimes go to other teachings and things like that and that’s good. But my main thing is the practice that I get from the Bon religion. That is actually my main practice and so it is better to concentrate just on that.

---

<sup>573</sup> Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” 75.

I. L. remembers that, after arriving at Shenten for the first time in 2008 and meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche, “all the questions—everything—doubts disappeared. I saw [that] this is the master, this is the path, and this is the place. And since then I understood that I’m going to be coming here year and year and year like until Rinpoche will be teaching. Well, we will see the possibilities, but still... I had this feeling and I took refuge the same year.”

Similarly, R. S. explains that when she came to Shenten, her expectations were met: “I found what I was looking for. This is it. I now know this is not that tangible. This is my body, and it is not. The world as such doesn’t work anymore.”

J. F. spent fifteen years as a student following another Buddhist tradition. Then a friend told her that a great Dzogchen master was coming to [name]. For a few years, she received teachings from Yongdzin Rinpoche. She explains,

He articulates everything, to understand from the beginning to the end, the way the path was very clear, very panoramic. But at the beginning, I was still following my other master of that time. And one year, it was in ‘91 in Blou, I went there for a retreat, but I was not supposed to come. I was in my house in the countryside, and I decide to make a personal retreat and during this personal retreat the first week I dream three times of Rinpoche coming in my dream. [The] first day [I thought], “Oh”; second day, “Oh-oh”; third day, “Let’s go.”

She went to attend a retreat where Yongdzin Rinpoche was teaching and she had what she called an “experiential state.” She narrates that in this state, she suddenly had “all the experience of the teaching you know, I was experimenting all the teaching of the Zhang Zhung [Nyeng Gyud Cycle]. So afterward... [I

realized that] I can do nothing else [but follow this teachings], even it was difficult for me to go back to another master again.”

The experiences presented in this section demonstrate that the encounter with Bon was narrated in compelling ways and that most participants expressed a feeling of finding their place, their teachers, their homes, often using terms implying a connection or a “predestined” link to either Bon, Shenten, or a teacher. Similar to what Parker noted in the case of South African converts to Buddhism, some people I interviewed indicated that they were somehow bonpos before meeting Bon.<sup>574</sup> In the following section, the issue of what it is that participants understand by the term “Bon” will be explored, including their understandings of notions such as “religion,” “Dzogchen,” and their own positioning in relation to them.

In addition, interviewees had various approaches to classifying Bon as a “religion.” C. I. maintains, “if somebody asked me if I followed some kind of religion, it depends on the context and who is asking me. But I would be likely to say that most of my religious, or Yoga, or spiritual practices are from the Bon religion.” Similarly, E. S. defines herself as Buddhist or as a bonpo depending on her interlocutors, “because if I say ‘bonpo,’ people don’t understand. But if I am with Buddhist people, who know about Bon, I say I practice with the bonpos.”

The question of whether Bon is a religion, a spiritual path, a tradition, or something else was discussed by most participants (see Chapter 5.3 below). These assertions exemplify the style of the Western Bon follower who feels free to mix Bon with the insights and approaches of other Tibetan or Buddhist traditions as

---

<sup>574</sup> Parker, “The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism,” 154.

well as Yoga, Reiki, and Western psychology in a clearly nonsectarian approach. But for some, even a general identification as a Bon follower needs to be transcended: “I am not bonpo. I follow Bon teachings.” This theme is further expanded in the next section.

### 5.3 WHAT IS BON FOR PARTICIPANTS?

The notion of what exactly constitutes Bon varies from participant to participant. Some said they wanted to understand what Bon was in order to “transform themselves,” but this meant they first had to understand what is meant in the Bon context by the Natural State of the Mind. Since there were several approaches to defining Bon among participants, this theme can be divided into the following subthemes:

- “I feel like it is a kind of science”: some participants thought that Bon was a science of the mind; others, however, believed that such an approach was part of a “marketing” plan to present Westerners with only the meditation aspects of Bon (see Chapter 3.5.1 on modernist Buddhism).
- “I dislike the decorations, but what lies inside is what I’m interested in”: some participants felt reluctant to embrace all the cultural aspects of Bon but were eager to explore what they defined as Bon’s essence.
- Bon as Tibet’s original tradition coming from Zhang Zhung was also emphasized.
- Dzogchen—considered the pinnacle of Bon teachings and described as a practice where there is “nothing to grasp”—was also emphasized.

### 5.3.1 I FEEL LIKE IT IS A KIND OF SCIENCE

C. I. challenges Bon's categorization as a religion, arguing that, according to his own studies and from an anthropological point of view,

What we know as religion—this is my point of view and it's not the kind of current perspective on things—I think that there was a Western concept, academic concept, of religion created in the nineteenth century. Then you used that concept of religion, which was mostly based on Western Judeo-Christian notions of religion to try and find these things, assuming that these exist everywhere. So then we get things like Egyptian religion. Of course ancient Egyptians also didn't have a word for religion. Greek also didn't have a word for Greek religion. Then these cultures themselves, in the modern times, they start thinking of themselves as religions.

C. I. concludes that Bon is “like a science. It's like a science of the mind. It is a technology of the mind if you look at it, and you could argue that many religions are that. But particularly Buddhism is a science.”

M. M. casts a wider net, revealing the different perspectives among participants on what is Bon, defining it as a religion, a science, a tradition, and a philosophy: “It's all of it.”

### 5.3.2 I DISLIKE THE DECORATIONS, BUT WHAT LIES INSIDE IS WHAT I'M INTERESTED IN

Some participants define Bon only in relation to Dzogchen; they argue that Dzogchen is the essence of Bon and the rest are just “decorations.” They also highlight Bon’s origins, emphasizing their views of Zhang Zhung and Bon as the “original” tradition of Tibet.

“The essence of Bon, to me, is Dzogchen,” says N. N., while D. S. defines Bon as “a path in which I trust, if it is a path that has much wisdom and has much truth, and I don’t know, I feel that it is like a present with decorations, that I dislike the decorations but what lies inside is what I’m interested in.” This is elaborated by I. L., who, when referring to Dzogchen teachings presented in Western languages, says that “words are like ornaments on an outer box but they cannot influence the inner capacity.”

U. G. asserts, “If they asked me what is Bon, I think I would say: it is a religion, the oldest religion of Tibet, the religion that was in Tibet before Buddhism arrived. Tibetan Buddhism has actually taken many things, many things, and many teachings from Bon and actually Tibetan Buddhism has more relation with Bon than with Theravada Buddhism. And I would also say that rituals play an important part and that there is also an aspect associated with shamanism inside the Bon, although they are different things.”

S. G. describes himself as a “Dzogchengpa,” or Dzogchen practitioner, saying that before encountering Bon, he was

very greedy about knowledge. So I read hundreds of books and knew all the stories of all the masters. It was again some ego trip.



I didn't do that at all. Sometime I kind of feel shameful. Because I don't know as well the Bon tradition as I do about the Nyingma [i.e., Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism]. But it is just that I try to really focus more on, to me, what is essential is the meaning of the teaching and how it can transform me.

### 5.3.3 BON IS ONE SPIRITUAL TRADITION COMING FROM ZHANG ZHUNG

As seen in Chapter 3.6, certain aspects of Bon seem to be highlighted when it is transmitted into the West. This includes presenting Bon as the original, oldest, indigenous religion of Tibet and locating the kingdom of Zhang Zhung as the source of its history. Other aspects that are repeated by participants include the assertion that Yungdrung Bon is a continuation of the religion that preceded the arrival of Buddhism into Tibet, and that Bon's origins go back 18,000 years. In this context, I. L. thinks that it is not possible to define Bon:

I never try to put it into our words, because I don't think that this is important. I had a very strange feeling when I started translating Rinpoche's teachings; I understood that I have to translate simultaneously because I cannot lose anything. And then when I started speaking, inside of me I was speaking. I was translating. I was telling with Rinpoche's speaking. But I had a strange feeling that these words don't matter at all. That it's not the words that matter.... I was translating. I was speaking but I had such a strange feeling, so I don't see a name to this. I don't think should we call it religion or not religion because all these names are not settled. You can also find in modern times that there are a lot of things called in different ways. Maybe we can call it a spiritual tradition. Like one spiritual tradition that is coming from Zhang Zhung, from Tibet, from Zhang Zhung.

A few other participants echoed the themes raised by I. L. There was also a sense among them that their experiences in listening, understanding, and translating Bon teachings were marked by the influence of a particular Bon teacher and that these transcended the actual content of the teachings in ways they were not able to put into words. In their views of what is Bon, they do not see it as a religion but feel comfortable in calling it a “spiritual” tradition, which they prefer not to define too narrowly. I.L elaborates that “there’s a feeling that this tradition is so ancient that it predates countries and predates the nations and nationalities. So there’s something really very, very deep.”

I. L.’s remarks denote a notion of a Bon that was always global in terms of what she describes as its intrinsic universality.

#### 5.3.4 BON AND DZOGCHEN

The interviewees commonly seem to have an allegiance to Dzogchen that is greater than their allegiance to Bon or to the Shenten center. Five participants, for instance, do not describe themselves as bonpos but, rather, as Dzogchenpas, which places the emphasis on the practice over the religion. One participant (S. A.) stated that she came to Bon from Dzogchen, a practice that, in her view, does not show any resemblance to religion. For her, Dzogchen is merely a vehicle to Bon.

The first Westerners who traveled to India to receive Bon teachings were attracted mostly by Dzogchen, or the “Great Perfection,” believed by its followers to be “the most revered system of thought and practice among the ancient

Buddhist and Bon traditions of Tibet.”<sup>575</sup> The Tibetologist Charles Ramble, for instance, spoke of his time in Nepal in 1980 when he went to visit Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Tenzin in Dolanji. He notes that some individuals at the time were receiving teachings directly from Menri Tenzin—one was practicing *tummo* (one of the *tsalung* practices; see Chapter 4.3.1) and another was receiving more general instruction—but he did not observe a systematic teaching.

In fact, out of 36 people interviewed, 32 stated that their main reason for following Bon was due to the transmission of and access to Dzogchen teachings. As R. F. explains, it is “the peak of the teachings, so somehow it is very satisfying for the ego just to go to the highest teachings.” On this point, R. F. elaborates that Westerners following Dzogchen “are people that think they are smarter than the other one, basically.” He observes that one feature of people following Dzogchen,

not specifically in Shenten but in general, is that they—but I mean it is according to the doctrine also—that they need to pretend that they are not what you think they are.... So you can see that right away they want to show that they are not making a show. So they make a show to show they don’t make a show. You know? It’s just kind of complex.

The reference to the “highest teachings” is derived from the doctrine of the Bon religion usually being classified into the “The Nine Ways of Bon.”<sup>576</sup> Within these Nine Ways, the Fifth and Sixth Ways contain the sutra teachings; the Seventh and Eighth Ways, the Tantric teachings; and the Ninth Way, the highest one, the Dzogchen teachings. These five higher vehicles are also known as the “Ways of the Fruit.” The first four “Lower Ways,” or “Ways of the Cause,” do not directly

---

<sup>575</sup> Anne C. Klein and T. W. Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>576</sup> See: David L. Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon* (Oxford University Press, 1967).

focus on methods believed to lead to liberation from cyclical existence; rather, they are supposed to support practitioners in their worldly life.

According to Dzogchen teachings, all sentient beings, in essence, exist in a state of awareness that is primordially pure. The primordial purity of the mind is believed to be empty and free of obscurations or defilements. All sentient beings are intrinsically in that state of purity and emptiness but are not aware of it due to emotions and thoughts. A classic example given in Dzogchen teachings is that of a mirror, which reflects whatever is in front of it, but its essence is never modified by any of it.

Dzogchen practice aims at showing practitioners a roadmap so that they can “recognize” the Natural State of their minds. When this happens, it is believed that all phenomenal existence, all appearances are seen as what they are, that is, as reflections in the mirror, mere manifestations of the mind.

Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak often says that, in order to abide in the Natural State of the Mind, one needs to just “leave it as it is.” That is, when in a state of awareness, the actual practice consists in being mindful of all manifestations, including thoughts and emotions, and letting them be, without any intervention or manipulation. It entails simply being present in that state.

In Dzogchen, a practitioner first needs to receive a direct introduction to one’s Natural State from a teacher who has directly experienced it himself. This is why the “Guru Yoga” practice is essential, as it is by this first recognition of the Natural State that the practitioner can know the difference between one’s Natural State and the mind that is obscured by thoughts and emotions. The most common method used to reach this state is to look back to a specific thought. By observing it one will

discover that the thought does not stay, it soon disappears. After it disappears, the adept has to just remain there. There are different techniques to help the adept not to confuse the Natural State with other mental states, for example, a state of non-thought, which does not mean the Natural State, as even a hawk is always like this, watching when it is sleeping, but it is a state of no thoughts, nothing, no realization.<sup>577</sup>

In sum, Dzogchen practices and methods are presented as aiming to help students first to recognize the Natural State of the Mind. After this has been achieved, the student learns to extend this awareness for longer periods. This entails recognizing what is often explained using the following metaphor: thoughts are like waves in the ocean, they come and go and cease to exist. By staying in that state, without following the thoughts or identifying with them, just “leaving them as they are,” the practitioner experiences the mind in the nakedness of its own natural condition, which in turn leads toward enlightenment. The continuous practice of the Natural State of the Mind implies that, at an advanced level, the practitioner “becomes more stable and clear, then the pure perfect Nature will become clearer and more powerful and the temporary perfection will become weaker and weaker and finally it will disappear.... The two methods used in Dzogchen to lead the practitioner to experience the Natural State of the Mind are called *thögal* and *trekchö*.”<sup>578</sup>

*Trekcho* refers to the practice of the Natural State and it is usually done by “going along and practicing the Natural State without adding or changing anything, just the State itself as it is.”<sup>579</sup> The practice of *trekcho* is done using three “supports”:

---

<sup>577</sup> Tenzin Namdak and Richard Dixey, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition* (Snow Lion Publications, 2002), 47–49, 93, 99.

<sup>578</sup> Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud, Dringpo Sorzhag: Chapters VI–VII, 24th August–2nd September*, ed. Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2010), 50.

<sup>579</sup> Namdak, 50.

space (meditation in a clear sky), darkness (particularly by undergoing “Dark Retreats”), and sunlight. These three supports are meant to facilitate the development of the *thogal* visions:

When the student is ready to practice Thögal, there are methods to use—the dark room, gazing in sunlight, and the sky. These are three supports. According to the teachings, in the dark room more visions develop and with sunlight they are clearer but fewer. If your Trekchö is stable enough, it doesn’t matter which you use first.... It is important to be stable with Trekchö and Dzogchen—with Trekchö and Thögal together—and from the beginning you must practice with the preliminaries properly.<sup>580</sup>

*Thogal* refers to practices related to the development of a certain kind of vision. These *thogal* visions appear to the practitioner through any of the three supports mentioned above (space, darkness, or sunlight). Bonpos say a sign that the practice is going well is when these visions appear but do not disturb the practice of the Natural State.<sup>581</sup> “Whoever practices both *Trekchö* and *thögal*—i.e., Dzogchen yogis—even if they practice without integrating with *Thögal*, only *Trekchö*, will have the result that all their normal living conditions disappear and become invisible, and this can even include their body.” Any being, according to these teachings, already has this nature and these visions. Thus, the aim of the Dzogchen practice is to recognize these experientially. An analogy often used is that of a lamp:

---

<sup>580</sup> Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen – Kusum Rangshar, Oral Teachings by Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Paris, April 1999*, ed. Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), 1–6.

<sup>581</sup> Namdak, *Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud, Dringpo Sorzhag: Chapters VI – VII, 24th August – 2nd September*, 57–58.

If you light up a lamp inside a vessel or *bumpa*,<sup>582</sup> when the vessel breaks you can see the light. This means that the Natural State is integrated with us but while we are alive we can't see it clearly. When our body and mind are disconnected (at death), at that time the vessel is broken and the light shines out. But that is only an example—there is no need to wait until death! When a practitioner practices Thögal and all the visions appear clearly, that is the same thing, the same source, and those visions all appear to the practitioner during his lifetime.<sup>583</sup>

According to these teachings, the practice of *trekcho* and *thogal* together leads to the disappearance of all visions into empty space, including the dissolution of the physical body.

It is important to note that the word *thogal*, however, is not mentioned in the corpus of the du Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud (with the exception of one mention but with a different meaning than the presented above) or in the oldest Bon Dzogchen texts.<sup>584</sup>

Many interviewees argued that the difference between Bon as a “religion” and Bon as “spirituality” is the commitment to the practice of Dzogchen. F. H., for

---

<sup>582</sup> A *bumpa* is a ritual vase with a spout that is used in the celebration of various Buddhist and Bon rituals.

<sup>583</sup> Tenzin Namdak, *Drenpa Namkha, Yetri Thasel: Dgos 'Dod Gsal Byed Bshad Gzhai'i Mchongs, Commentary Chapters Regarding the Base of the Teachings That Elucidate One's Wishes (and Needs). Teachings by Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Pfauenhof, Germany, 8-14 September, 2007*, ed. Carol Ermakova and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2007), 9.

<sup>584</sup> Jean-Luc Achard, “Edition critique des instructions de Bru rGyal ba g. yung drung sur la pratique de la Claire-Lumière ('od gsal) selon le cycle du Phyang khrid du Zhang zhung snyan rgyud.,” *Revue d'études tibétaines* 23 (2011): 206.

instance, mentions that it was “the purity” of Dzogchen, combined with the spiritual realization of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche that attracted him to Bon. Dzogchen was also explained as a powerful tool of self-discovery. John Reynolds indicates that Dzogchen can be labeled as one of “bonpo’s success stories.”<sup>585</sup> Dzogchen, for many interviewees, is such an integral part of Bon that it cannot be separated from how they define Bon as a religion. Moreover, twenty-five participants described it as the essence of the Bon tradition.

The statements above denote a characteristic of how Westerners perceive and experience Bon, and also imply how those transmitting Bon in the West are presenting what Bon is. Only one participant mentioned that he asked for specific practices. All the others mentioned that they “received what was given.” Three participants noted that perhaps there is “a different mindset of Westerners” that makes Dzogchen even more attractive to them. John Reynolds noted that Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche feels that Westerners are very good at Dzogchen but that perhaps they would not be so good at *Tantra*. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal and the main teacher at Shenten Dargye Ling, also expressed this sentiment. He gives mostly Dzogchen teachings when he travels because he believes this teaching and practice are more relevant to the Western lifestyle.<sup>586</sup>

M. M. remembers that when Yongdzin Rinpoche was first teaching Dzogchen in the West, “it was quite nonritual in that it did not address cultural Tibetan rituals, such as prayer flags.” The Western version is therefore tailored to conform to what participants consider “a pure Dzogchen teaching,” devoid of the

---

<sup>585</sup> John Myrdhin Reynolds, Personal communication, Shenten, Blou, July 18, 2015.

<sup>586</sup> Tenpa Yungdrung, Personal communication, Geneva, Switzerland, April 10, 2014.



Tibetan cultural background. Moreover, it was offered in small groups of individuals who were able to ask questions and seek personal guidance.

C. F. compares the Dzogchen teachings to a leap of faith:

When you stay near a cliff: Dzogchen teachings mean to jump into the empty space—you understand? Dzogchen says: you can believe, you know. You can at least know, you can make a step if you want, see? And all the people who want to practice Dzogchen, they are near to the cliff, near the act of jumping. But they say, “I’m not prepared enough to do that.” So they speak together, they make some reunions, make some business and make some exercise and make some—but at the end, the only thing to do, you know, to do by yourself, is to take that step into the emptiness. You have to do that alone.

### 5.3.5 BON IS NOT A RELIGION

It is telling that almost all respondents referred to “spirituality,” “spiritual path,” or similar terms rather than to “religion” when speaking of Bon. Participants also defined Bon as “a path of wisdom.” A few participants described Bon in contrast with what it is not, asserting that it is not a religion. S. A. says that Bon is usually “labeled” as a religion:

I think that Bon is mislabeled if you call it a religion, because still in the usual sense of the word “religion,” some sort of belief is involved. I mean people use belief and religion more or less synonymously. I mean for instance, there is a book by Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, which is about Islam. So belief and religion

is used more or less interchangeably and I don't believe anything, but I am aware there is a lot of things I don't know anything about, and I keep an open mind. So I am still not for belief and I don't think Bon should be called a religion. I mean there are, of course, all the practical aspects, that in many countries religions have special privileges, whatever, tax privileges, blah, blah, and it would be, of course, for practical purposes an advantage to be labeled—to be recognized as a religion. But still I think it is kind of hypocritical to call yourself something, which you feel you are not, just for tax purposes.

M. M. thinks that Bon is intentionally marketed as something that is not a religion: “I really dislike people who say Buddhism or Bon is not a religion just to make it attractive to the masses, because it *is* a religion. There is a religious side to it. But it is just that I try to really focus more on, to me, what is essential, [which] is the meaning of the teaching and how it can transform me.” M. P. says “in a recent teaching given in Holland, the lama completely washed out the teachings of any religious connotations.”

R. S. thinks that “Bon is religion. But I would never tell to people I follow a religion. Maybe I say this because Rinpoche always says this is a religion. Here I rediscover what is religion; we had a wrong interpretation. I discovered I am very religious. I never really stopped believing in God. My Catholic background is deep.”

When asked to consider the Tibetan translation of the word “religion,” C. I. states that there is no Tibetan translation of the word. He thinks that the word *cho*

might be close, but that “this is also possibly a word of bonpo origin.” *Cho* and *Bon*, he argues, “are the two words that could be used to describe religion, yet *cho* is now translated as Buddhism, and *Bon* is left untranslated.”<sup>587</sup> C. I.’s argument implies that the definition of religion is a matter of translation or semantics and that ultimately, the question cannot be answered using the available words. As mentioned earlier, C. I. says that what we know as “religion” is a Western concept or an academic notion created in the nineteenth century and that Buddhism, in particular, could be considered a science—a technology of the mind.

These statements are representative of what is usually called “modern Buddhism” (see Chapter 3.5.1), which views Buddhist traditions at a particular angle that de-emphasizes rituals, monasticism, clerical hierarchy, and other aspects considered religious.<sup>588</sup>

Issues related to how to translate certain Tibetan words into Western languages were also raised by C. I. For instance, he points out that certain words, such as “karma,” need to be explained in longer sentences, as there are no Western words that can capture their original meaning. In this regards, Pommaret notes “nowadays, most of the Western languages use the word Karma as it had become a common and understood word.”<sup>589</sup>

---

<sup>587</sup> The Tibetan word *Chos* or *Dharma* in Sanskrit is a “multivalent term referring to Buddhist religious teachings, underlying nature of the universe (as revealed by these teachings), and to a constituent element of the universe in early Buddhist philosophy.” See: Geoffrey Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*, 2011, Glossary.

<sup>588</sup> See more at: David L. McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>589</sup> See: Pommaret, “The Masters Go West: A Story of Buddhism’s Adaptation to ‘New Fields,’” 89–96.

I. L., like C. I., argues that the term “religion” is problematic because it is not settled, and for this reason, she would prefer to call Bon “a spiritual tradition.” S. A. also argues that Dzogchen<sup>590</sup> in particular is not a religion. Despite these concerns, D. S. does believe that Bon is a religion, in fact, “the oldest religion in Tibet,” preceding Buddhism.

M. N. also defines herself in ambiguous terms:

I won't say I'm a bonpo, but I say I follow the Bon teaching. And that's it. And, this master, I feel a connection and I think it's good. For me, I think it's good not to follow too many masters. Some other people think, oh, it's good, because then you hear the same thing from different angles. But I'm not sure. I'd rather read from others, but I don't really need to go.

U. G.'s understanding of “what it is called God” was that of “an entity with pure love, without any judgment and at the same time, everything is coming out of it and everything going back into it, and everything is part of it without any separation. This was my imagination or my understanding of the numinous, of the spiritual path.” So when he heard the Bon explanations about the Nature of the Mind, it made sense to him, “because the Nature of the Mind it's actually *Kungtu Zangpo*, which is all good, all loving, and all present father, but in the end, it's your own mind. You are not separated. So there is no distinction between outside Buddha and inside nature, but it's all in the same, nature and the same kind of space, and this is a spacious Nature of the Mind.”

---

<sup>590</sup> On Dzogchen, see Chapter 5.3.4.

### 5.3.6 DZOGCHEN IS TOTALLY MISLABELED IF YOU CALL IT A RELIGION

Bon, according to the participants, is not a fixed thing but, rather, a multifaceted and fluid phenomenon. They also described Bon as a science of the mind, parallel to how Tibetan Buddhism, and Buddhism in general, is perceived in the West (see Chapter 3). They referred to Dzogchen as the essence and the main practice of Bon, and said that rituals, religious characteristics, and other aspects of Bon are merely “decorations.”

A key element highlighted in participants’ statements (and also in descriptions of Bon presented by centers, websites, pamphlets, and other means of communication) is that Bon is historically different from Buddhism, both in its geographical origins, Zhang Zhung, and as being the “original” religion from Tibet.

S. A. explains that she entered into Bon from the Dzogchen side:

Of course there are religious aspects in sutra, but this is something I am not so connected with. But with Dzogchen I just do not see any resemblance to any religion. I really think Dzogchen is totally mislabeled if you call it a religion. But you know Dzogchen sometimes—since there are all those vehicles in Bon, the Dzogchen practitioners, they sometimes have to sort of hide behind a more naïve façade to be able to practice together with people who really believe in spirits, gods, whatever. And then you can do the same rituals but do them from a Dzogchen stance, but the people outside will not see any difference.

C. F. recounts a story told by Sogyal Rinpoche: when the first Tibetan masters begin to teach in Europe and they saw that Westerners apparently understood

Dzogchen easily, they thought, “Wow, it’s very good. They will be enlightened people, Very quickly.” But later they noticed that these same Westerners would forget everything a few days after and go to search at another center or another tradition. “They say that this is our problem. Because in Tibet, you say something to [a] Tibetan, but he has a really hard head, no? So you teach and you teach again, you teach again, you teach again, you teach again, and after ten years, okay. You say, ‘Ah, yes.’ Yeah, but after? It’s okay. You can let him alone.” C. F. indicates that Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche has a different technique:

He says, Dzogchen, Dzogchen, and Dzogchen. Understand who can understand or begin to understand, who can begin to understand, but he gives. But after, he says, I hope that people that are interested will go by preliminary practices, at least to do at least—not complicate many but okay to think about all the preliminary practices. So, this is a different technique between the Bon tradition and the Nyingmapa tradition.

N. N. recalls that Sogyal Rinpoche has some Western disciples “who practiced a lot. I met one, he gives out so much light you can see it. He practiced a lot of compassion type of thing. And he told us a story about a Western disciple who did the Rainbow Body, so it’s possible.”

On Dzogchen and the different way it is transmitted in Rigpa, C. F. mentions that Nyingmapas choose to prepare the student for many years:

Prepare, prepare, prepare. I was with Sogyal Rinpoche, you know, you never speak about Dzogchen. Never. And sometimes when you just say the word *trekcho*,<sup>591</sup> this is like *trekcho*, when you just say that, you know, everybody was more like it? “Ahh.” Like that, you know, and if you speak about that much later, it’s more like that, so prepare, prepare, prepare students, you know. The students remain and continue to follow because they want to hear, but they are courageous to remain because year after year after year, I spend hours and hours doing long practices and waiting for the Dzogchen. And if we received once a sentence related to Dzogchen teachings, it was like very, very precious.

Bon, as seen in the narratives of participants in this section, is a term that is not easy to define. Moreover, Bon is experienced, understood, and explained using different (sometimes contradictory) notions, including Bon as a science; as a spiritual tradition; as contrasted to “religion”; and as being equivalent to Dzogchen.

### 5.3.7 DZOGCHEN IS LIKE NOTHING, NOTHING AT ALL.

Dzogchen is also described in ways that are abstract and more related to what could be considered religious experiences than to logical understanding. C. F. says,

When we listen all to the last teaching of the older masters of the Zhang Zhung, they often say that they had complete confidence

---

<sup>591</sup> Wylie: *khregs chod*.

in the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud teachings. It is difficult to have complete confidence, because Dzogchen is like nothing, nothing at all. No mantras, no nothing. We have nothing to grasp, yeah? So it's difficult to really trust in it.

C. F. told me about a conversation he had one day with Yongdzin Rinpoche about Dzogchen. "He asked me, 'Do you think they understand?' We were alone. 'Do you think they understand?' 'I'm not sure,' I say. And it was difficult for me to answer him because I was not sure if I understand myself."

C. F. elaborates that many people think they understand Dzogchen teachings, but really they don't understand. "And if you don't understand, you miss the point, I think." He refers to the fact that certain metaphors and teachings are repeated often in Shenten by Yongdzin Rinpoche

with few words, few stories, but if you know the teaching of Rinpoche, you know a few stories, we know by heart. And we still love when he says the story. Because it's so simple to explain, explain, explain but until people [do] not really, really understand the point, it's not—what do I say? It's not useful at all.

In his view, when a person practices Dzogchen, it is practicing "something so far from your level of your existence now that you don't see the effect at first. You practice something related to the roots, so you don't see the effect. Maybe you can see some effect but the real effect, you don't see it." It is only after years, C.F. adds, when you can see the effects of Dzogchen practice. But he explains that such effects are difficult to put into words:



It's like the example about the glass, when you put some water in a glass. You change the water, it's not a matter of changing the glass, you don't change the color, and you don't change the form of the glass. So, still you're the glass. It's difficult for you to see that the water changed. You don't realize that it's you who changed. It's like—try to remember how you see the life when you were maybe twelve years old, for example. It's not so easy to remember because, now you are you, you are not any more a twelve-year-old. Actually it is something like that. Sometimes it changes you deeply without changing your manner so you can still be egoistic, or something. But still, Dzogchen increases, it goes in you.

E. S. summarizes the perception that Dzogchen changes individuals by saying, “this practice fundamentally changes you. Sometimes you don't see it immediately. But if you look your life before and after: less fear, I now say to myself: ‘Don't believe this world.’ This path means that you are somehow in a continuous crisis, but it gives the possibility of having a distance to observe things, it gives you calm.”

D. R. notes that rituals have their function, “but Rinpoche primarily teaches Dzogchen. He told us, ‘I came to the West and I was thinking, how can I help people? Everybody is so busy here. We have to teach the essence, because you may not realize Rainbow Body or become great Dzogchen practitioner, that's very difficult, but at least you will have some sort of inner peace stability regardless of what circumstances are around you.’”

D. F. thinks that the main reason for Westerners' attraction to Yungdrung Bon is Dzogchen because it has become popular and involves the highest teachings, and “because they realize that these teachings are not very—they were not given

openly in Tibet, and now coming in the West. Also, maybe they've realized it's the fastest way to enlightenment. That's attractive." However, F. H. feels that there has been an overemphasis on Dzogchen at Shenten Center.

John Reynolds asserts that only a minority of Westerners who come to Bon are scholastically motivated. Most of them, he says, are interested in practice, "particularly meditation practice and particularly Dzogchen, which is what the Lupon emphasizes. He feels that Westerners are very good at Dzogchen. He has his doubts about how good they would be at doing Tantra." Reynolds believes that those from Protestant or Reformed Jewish backgrounds have difficulty going through all the ritual practices but that it is less difficult for Catholics, who "tend to have almost an intuitive understanding of how ritual works and energy flows through things." He believes that with the bonpo, "Dzogchen has been one of their big success stories." He points to the interconnectivity with other Buddhist centers: "A lot of people came in originally from Namkhai Norbu's group, which also emphasized Dzogchen, have become involved also with the Lupon." V. S. says that "most people in the beginnings of Bon being taught in the West were with Tenzin Wangyal, coming from Namkhai Norbu. It was my case. I then realized that every teacher that was a bonpo I met, I immediately connected."

As Reynolds pointed out, at the center of the apparent relatedness between different Buddhist and Bon teachers and centers where Dzogchen is taught is the transmission and the practice of Dzogchen teachings. Dzogchen meditation, in particular, is perceived as somehow free of cultural or religious connotations and often referred to as a "pure" teaching. M. M. explains, for example, that he, like many Westerners, was attracted to Dzogchen first, and then, after meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche, became devoted to him as a Dzogchen teacher. M. M. refers to the mental state achieved through the practice of Dzogchen as something that does not need "cultural Tibetan things, rituals, prayer flags, color. I don't have anything against that. But I think it's absolutely, 100 percent convinced that it is

totally unnecessary. Because this is talking about reality, not Tibetan rule, about our nature, human nature, sentient beings' nature. So the idea [is] to really get a kind of a pure Dzogchen teaching.”

N. N. paraphrases Yongdzin Rinpoche in saying that

What it is that really matters in the teaching in the end is the Natural State; that is the only thing that matters. And the Natural State is nothing cultural, it's nothing.... Namkhai Norbu said if you stay in the Natural State, the time it takes for an ant to travel from here to your nose, it's like millions of lifetimes of purifications. That's how powerful it is, and it also how much we have to purify. But it's very powerful.

In looking at where participants come from in terms of their religious background, their encounter with Bon and their experiences and understandings of key notions, this chapter has laid the foundations for the following chapter, which focuses on what participants believe is the road ahead for Bon and for themselves as bonpos. In particular, it will explore how participants incorporate Bon into their daily lives, how they perceive and narrate the adaptations that are taking place in the diffusion of Bon in the West, and how they foresee the future of Bon in the West.

## 6 BEING A BONPO IN THE WEST: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The following chapter looks at Bon as a lived experience, starting with a section entitled “Bon in Practice,” which focuses on how participants say Bon teachings affect them. While most themes overlap rather than being entirely distinguishable across this and the previous chapter, this section takes a close look at the specific practices bonpos engage in at retreats and at home on their own. Often their home practices are different and less intense than the practices pursued during personal retreats and other types of short and extended retreats. Here, participants describe how they perceive, live, and interpret their actual experiences. I try to uncover the meaning behind terms such as “practice,” “practitioner,” “devotion,” and “spiritual experience.” I also look at how participants explain their adaptations of the practices and teachings they have received, and whether they actively requested these practices or if they simply accepted what was available. In this section, I further delineate some of the main Bon practices that are transmitted in the West, including those considered “advanced practices,” and who is practicing them and how.

The following section, “Modern vs. Traditional Approaches,” addresses the two contrasting approaches to Bon that Western practitioners and Tibetan teachers tend to take, which they designate as “traditional” and “modern.” The latter is described as an approach that diverges from the former by being deliberately adapted to the lives and needs of Westerners. Participants spoke of these two main trends, often labeling the approach to Bon transmitted at Shenten as “traditional,” in contrast to the approach transmitted at Ligmincha by Tenzin Wangyal as “modern,” representing the two poles of the phenomenon.

Before going further, let me introduce an essential aspect in Dzogchen transmission—the relationship between a teacher and a disciple. The disciple-master relationship is a fundamental feature of esoteric Buddhism and Bon, having its origins in the Indian texts called the Tantras. “Tantrism,” or the Tantric tradition refers to the esoteric traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bon that originated in India around the middle of the first millennium CE.<sup>592</sup> Tantrism is not easy to define: its complexity includes a dominant ritualistic aspect that was, for a long time, mostly neglected in the academic study of Buddhism.<sup>593</sup> Indian Tantric Hindu and Buddhist traditions have been influential in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. By the end of the eighth century, as Dalton notes, “Buddhist authors at the time described what was unfolding as an internalization of ritual performance; in contrast to the earlier ‘external’ methods of worship, they termed the new techniques the ‘internal yogas’... The significance this shift had for Buddhist ritual discourse is attested by the fact that the Tantras composed between the late eighth and early tenth centuries form the canonical core of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to this day.”<sup>594</sup> Dalton further points out that the Tantras of Dzogchen, known as the Great Perfection, constitute an exception to these observations, having emerged for the most part in the eleventh century.<sup>595</sup>

While scholars differ in what the main features of Tantrism are or even that it is possible to enumerate any, Tribe acknowledges the limitations of his approach and enumerates a number of defining characteristics. These include the prominent place of rituals, especially the evocation and the worshiping of deities; the significance of mantras and visualization practices, as well as the

---

<sup>592</sup> See: Anthony Tribe, “Mantranaya/Vajrayāna–Tantric Buddhism in India,” in *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 192–222.

<sup>593</sup> Tribe, 193.

<sup>594</sup> Jacob Dalton, “The Development of Perfection: The Interiorization of Buddhist Ritual in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2004): 2.

<sup>595</sup> Dalton, 2.

identification of the “practitioner” with a deity; the requirements of initiations, esotericism, and secrecy; and the pivotal role of a master, teacher, or guru.<sup>596</sup> The teacher is the one who grants permission to the students to undergo certain practices through conferring the initiations, and the one who transmits the Tantric teachings. This is why, a disciple, who views the guru as an aspect of the deity or even as the deity itself, should never speak ill of him. The path leads to the Tantric adept to become the deity either by merging with it, realizing its nature as identical of that of the deity or by becoming a separate deity but equal in essence to the deity.<sup>597</sup>

In this context, the traditional relationship between a guru and student is perhaps considered to be the quintessential element in the Bon Dzogchen practice. The “blessings” that allow the student to have the different experiences described in the Dzogchen texts are received through a “lineage of masters” through the practice called “Guru Yoga,” which is explained by Namdak as follows:

Guru Yoga means that the lineage masters give you blessing. Knowledge has to come in this way; otherwise it cannot come from texts, Teachings tapes or CD-ROMs. They have no knowledge.... There is a reason why I am saying this: if you listen to a tape or watch the CD-ROM or television, whatever you do, you have to use senses or consciousness, but this teaching never comes through consciousness.<sup>598</sup>

---

<sup>596</sup> Paul Williams and Alexander Wynne, eds., *Buddhist Thought* (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>597</sup> Tribe, “Mantranaya/Vajrayāna–Tantric Buddhism in India,” 198–200.

<sup>598</sup> Tenzin Namdak, *Experiential Transmission of Zhang Zhung. Dringpo Sorzhag, Vimoutiers, 25 August – 14 Septembre 2003*, ed. Ermakov Dmitry and Carol Ermakova (Blou, France: Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), 55–56.

The teacher, particularly the “Root Lama,”<sup>599</sup> is regarded as the embodiment of the entire lineage of masters, and it is “through him” that the student is introduced to the Natural State of his/her Mind.

Participants shared their views with me on how this teacher–student relationship is being carried out in the West, including the adaptations that are taking place, the different ways of understanding the role of the teacher, and how cultural differences affect this relationship.

The contrasts between “modern” and “traditional” approaches are highlighted through another characteristic of Bon transmission in the West, which relates to the way that the different traditions and steps are followed. One interviewee said that according to the “traditional” way of training at the monasteries, students of Dzogchen must first “do the preliminary practices and then go to a master who introduces us to the Natural State, after which we go on to practice retreat in isolation in the wilderness for years until we attain some realization.”<sup>600</sup> Participants contrasted this with what they described as the “modern” approach, which reflects the “psychologization” of Bon teachings, as seen above in Chapter 3. They noted that for many people, participating in religious rituals and being part of a tradition with religious characteristics and cultural references are not options they would consider, as we have also seen in the previous categories. As explained by Wangyal, mixing Yungdrung Bon teachings and practices with Western psychotherapy is an innovation that has two purposes: addressing the

---

<sup>599</sup> On the “Root Lama,” see below in the theme “Becoming a bonpo.”

<sup>600</sup> Not all monks approach Dzogchen in the same manner. Another way of undergoing the monastic path is described as follows: “At Menri Monastery in Tibet, we had an educational system whereby students studied Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen. However, this also meant that there was little time for practice. It was mostly a matter of intellectual study, and at the end of their course of studies, having passed the oral examinations, students received a Geshe degree.” Tenzin Namdak and John Myrdhin Reynolds, *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings* (Vajra Publications, 2006), 107–8.

demands of Westerners, and reaching a wider audience. Wangyal states that he implements this “modernization” while maintaining “the essence” of Bon teachings, particularly Dzogchen. In contrast, several participants referred to the traditional approach as the one transmitting what they consider to be the “pure” and “authentic” teachings. These processes are closely linked to certain characteristics of globalization that have facilitated the establishment of various religious traditions in new places; this in turn has led to processes of “detraditionalization,” whereby religious systems are separated from their traditional or original context.

The final section, “The future,” describes where practitioners see Western Bon heading and their concerns regarding how it will evolve.

Participants believe that Bon will continue to expand in the West but that some adjustments will be unavoidable. They think that Westerners will eventually evolve to the point of becoming teachers; they attribute this to the commitment to practice demonstrated by some students, to Westerners’ need to find sense in their lives, and, above all, to the “inherent truth” they attribute to Bon and the value they accord its ancient origin in Zhang Zhung. This theme also highlights the impact of the West on Bon as a monastic institution. Some participants noted that a monastic institution has no place to flourish in the West and indicated that they see a contradiction in having a place like Shenten, which has a monastic structure but almost all the students are lay people. This section also describes participants’ thoughts on how technology influences the transmission and reception of Bon teachings. As we will see, some felt that the impact of technology was to “water down” the teachings, while others believed it allowed the spread of the teachings to reach a wider audience.



## 6.1 BON IN PRACTICE

Most participants were clear about receiving Bon teachings and adapting them to their needs. However, only two of the participants indicated that they had deliberately asked for these teachings. The others received what was made available. It seems that, as Bon started to be introduced in the West, teachings were presented without any particular order, but that seems to be changing. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung mentioned that there is a plan to systematize the teachings in the West, to keep track of what was transmitted and by whom.

Another trend is the emergence of a clear distinction between what participants learn at Shenten and what they apply in their practice at their homes. Their statements reveal that from the range of available teachings they selected what they believed to be valuable and useful. This distinction is significant for understanding how Bon in the West is shaped by the practitioners' selectivity, but it is also shaped by what is offered. Other reasons mentioned by participants for selecting what they practice at home include not having time, and/or lacking the discipline to practice.

F. H. is one of the two participants who explicitly told me that they had asked directly for practices. He specifically asked Yongdzin Rinpoche to transmit the complete Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud Dzogchen cycle over a number of years. This request was fulfilled, and this cycle of teachings was completely transmitted over the course of almost ten years, from 1991 until 2000. He remembers that in his first encounter with Yongdzin Rinpoche, he told him, "Oh yeah, this is what you need," and he started giving me the "Twenty-One Nails transmission,"<sup>601</sup> *lung*

---

<sup>601</sup> I.e. the transmission of the text known as "The Twenty-One Little Nails," in reference to twenty-one essential points of Dzogchen practice, contained in the *Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud*.

transmission. So it was clear to me I wanted to follow that.” Later, F. H. got interested in other Bon Dzogchen cycles and Bon history. He attributes his continuous exploration of Bon to the “Dzogchen practice and the clarity of explanation and the purity... that really attracted me, and then Rinpoche’s realization, that combination.”

From their accounts, it became clear that, in several cases, participants did not request specific practices due to their lack of knowledge about Bon. As F. H. mentioned, some students started asking for practices as they learned more about the teachings, cycles, and practices.

S. A., for example, followed what was available: “In the beginning I was relatively confused because, of course, I could only go to teachings whenever I could get free from my work, and so on.” She first followed disconnected chapters from different cycles, “in totally unrelated practices in random order, and I was somewhat confused.” But her perseverance helped her to “assemble itself to a whole.” Her experience changed dramatically when she learned the Tibetan language and was able to communicate better with her lama. “From the beginning, I asked him to teach me first Tibetan so that I could actually communicate with him, and then meditation, and so he taught me first 90 percent Tibetan and 10 percent meditation, and then right now it is maybe fifty/fifty.” Once they could understand each other, she asked him for “sort of a prescribed course of practice.” Following his advice, she practiced Guru Yoga, contemplation, and “just trying to be in the Natural State for so many sessions.” Later, she did some of the advanced practices, like *tummo tsalung* and the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat. “The moment I could ask Lama Sangye for a course of practices, I felt on track.”

---

Western bonpos tend to pick and choose practices to engage in and adapt those practices to their needs and lifestyles. When participants mentioned different practices they are doing, it was clear they selected certain aspects and practices and disregarded others. They mostly referred to Dzogchen practices, including *trekcho* and *thogal*, as well as some “advanced” practices such as the Dark Retreat, but they also mentioned more ordinary, daily practices, such as mantra recitations and other specific meditation practices.

E. S. reports that her daily practice consists of Guru Yoga and the Natural State: “When I cannot practice Natural State, I perform other practices, like singing mantras. Guru Yoga practice with Tapihritsa, which we do here, is my principal practice.”

Another element that influences which Bon practices participants receive is determined by what is offered. Retreats at Shenten expose participants to a specific range of these practices. The focus is mostly on Dzogchen, including the so-called “ancillary practices,” which aim at helping practitioners to recognize, abide in, and maintain the Natural State of the Mind through practices such as *chod* and *tsalung*, which I discuss next.

### 6.1.1 *Chod practice*

The meaning of the Tibetan word “Chod” can be translated as “to cut” or “to sever,” and it refers to meditative practices aiming at “cutting” the attachment to an ego as techniques for liberation from *samsara*, and “should be practiced in

accordance with the ideal standpoint of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva, the ultimate aim being the liberation of all sentient beings from the realm of suffering.”<sup>602</sup>

Chod is a practice whose origins have been identified by scholars as being Central Asian, Indian and Tibetan. Chod has also been presented “ahistorically” in line with shamanic practices.<sup>603</sup> In Tibetan Buddhism, a key figure in the Chod lineage transmissions is that of Machig Labdrön, a mystic and practitioner who lived “in a Buddhist, patriarchally structured society... and who is considered to be the originator of a number of Tibetan lineages of the practice of Chöd.”<sup>604</sup> In his book on the biography of Machig Labdrön, Jérôme Edou presents an overview of some historical and doctrinal aspects related to the Chod practice and argues about its origins in Indian Buddhism, including how it was thereafter transmitted into Tibet. Chod teachers emphasize that the practice originated or was connected to the male Indian figure of Padampa Sangyé, an Indian meditator who is believed to have visited Tibet several times at the time of Machig Labdrö’s life, and who is acknowledged in some lineages of Chod. Kollmar-Paulenz suggests that the emphasis on Chod teachings on transmission was intended to legitimate Chod teachings as being “Indian” and “Buddhist,” as a manner to justify the existence of an originally non-Buddhist Tibetan teaching into the teaching system of Tibetan Buddhism. However, Kollmar-Paulenz argues that Bon in particular originated in Tibet.<sup>605</sup>

---

<sup>602</sup> Michelle Janet Sorensen, “Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition” (unpublished, Columbia University, 2013), 2.

<sup>603</sup> Sorensen, 12–16.

<sup>604</sup> Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Ma Gcig Lab Sgron Ma—The Life of a Tibetan Woman Mystic between Adaptation and Rebellion,” *The Tibet Journal* 23, no. 2 (1998): 11.

<sup>605</sup> Kollmar-Paulenz, 23.

In a Tibetan Buddhist context, Sorenson argues that Chod developed in the context of Buddhist ideas during the later spread of Buddhism in Tibet. She notes that Chod has been recently “interpreted through the lenses of Bön and/or ‘shamanism’”<sup>606</sup> focusing on what she calls the “exoticization” of Bon practices (i.e., the focus on visualizations related to offering the body). Instead, Chod is better understood, she maintains, as a practice based on key Buddhist concepts related to the practices of generosity, the problem of ego-clinging, and the doctrine of emptiness.<sup>607</sup> Namkhai Norbu has pointed out that Machig Labdrön’s family members were bonpo, and this is why, in his view, her Chod practices have a Dzogchen perspective.<sup>608</sup> This view, however, is contested by Edou and others.

609

Chod practice, in Buddhism, as well as in Bon, is traditionally performed in frightening places such as cemeteries and charnel grounds, involving visualizations along with singing, dancing, and playing special bone instruments. The visualizations associated with this practice include offering one’s own body (in a complex visualization) as a “banquet” to an assembly of demons, spirits, enlightened beings, and other sentient beings. In his book about Chod in the Bon tradition, Chaoul explains that, despite controversies regarding its origins, Chod

---

<sup>606</sup> Sorensen, “Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition,” 7.

<sup>607</sup> Sorensen, 7–18.

<sup>608</sup> Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra, and Dzogchen*.

<sup>609</sup> For more on Chod historical and doctrinal accounts, see: Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod* (Shambhala Publications, 2017), 6–8; Janet Gyatso, “The Development of the Gcod Tradition,” *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, 1985, 320–41; Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Khros Ma Nag Mo, The ‘Wrathful Black One’ and the Deities Summoned to the Ritual Feast in the Gcod-Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. A Preliminary Survey of the Gcod Demonology,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 34 (2005): 209–30; Giacomella Orofino, “Contributo Allo Studio Dell’insegnamento Di Ma Gcig Lab Sgron,” 1987 (in Italian); Sorensen, “Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition.”

is a Tibetan practice that has certain common features in all Tibetan traditions. These include the following series of steps:

1. Once the practitioner is sufficiently trained, he or she goes to a desolate place, usually at night, and blows a trumpet made from a human thighbone, calling all the spirits to invite them to the banquet.
2. Playing a bell and a *damaru* drum,<sup>610</sup> the practitioner starts by entering into a calm and meditative state of mind.
3. In this state, the practitioner visualizes the expelling of his consciousness from the body, through the crown of the head. The consciousness then becomes a female deity, and the body becomes a corpse upon which the guests invited to the banquet will feast.
4. The visualization that follows involves the deity cutting the cranium and chopping the corpse in pieces and placing the flesh, blood, and bones inside the cranium, which serves as a receptacle. The contents are cooked over a fire, becoming a nectar that satisfies all the desires of the guests, including the enlightened and unenlightened, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, demons and spirits, wrathful protectors and sentient beings.
5. After this “white feast” (called “white” because this color is associated to notions of “purity”), a second offering starts. This is called a “red feast,” comprised of raw flesh, blood, and bones that are offered to the more carnivorous guests.
6. In concluding the offering, the practitioner senses that all the desires of the guests have been satisfied. This aspect of generosity in offering one’s body is crucial in the *Chod* practice.

---

<sup>610</sup> This is a small, two-headed drum. Traditionally, Bon *damarus* were made from human skulls.

The body of the practitioner becomes the tool to play the instruments and to dance and chant vigorously; at the same time, it is the object of offering. This is known as a “gift of Dharma,” when the practitioner’s intention is for the guests to feel so satisfied by the banquets that they do not harm anyone any more, seeing the benefit of developing the enlightened mind.<sup>611</sup>

Chaoul explains that Chod has different levels of understanding, and one way of approaching the meaning of the practice is to look at what different practitioners understand is being “cut.” From a Dzogchen perspective, Chaoul asserts, this means cutting through the root of the thought process, in other words, cutting off the “demon” of self-grasping and remaining in a non-dual state of self-liberation.<sup>612</sup> This perspective is consistent with Tantric logic, and, as in the case of Buddhism, “the Great Perfection was used as an interpretive structure for the practice of the Tantras... practices are contextualized within the higher perspective of nonconceptuality and nonduality.”<sup>613</sup>

Namdak further explains that this practice is a tool to help practitioners develop their meditation: “Chod is a little part to help your meditation to develop and to purify disturbances and send them away, but it doesn’t give you real realization; it helps you develop. The worldly meaning of Chod is ‘cutting,’ but which things

---

<sup>611</sup> Sorenson notes that a problematic tendency in recent works devoted to Chod is “the insistence on the indigenous Tibetan roots of Chöd and the neglect of its fundamental Buddhist grounds.” In particular, Sorenson notes that Chaoul’s study on Bon Chod is not successful in attempting to historicize Bön Chöd as preceding Buddhist Chöd, mostly because he uses mostly Buddhist Chöd materials for his discussion. See: Sorenson, “Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition,” 16.

<sup>612</sup> See: Chaoul, *Chod Practice in the Bon Tradition*.

<sup>613</sup> Sam Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of Dzogchen Practice in the Longchen Nyingtig* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 5.

can be cut? What is cutting? What is the purpose?”<sup>614</sup> He explains that what is being cut are the Five Poison Consciousnesses that bind human beings: “Chod means the real realization of Nature and Empty Nature... that can cut off the Five Poison Consciousnesses and Ignorance in particular.”<sup>615</sup>

According to Dzogchen teachings, all reality is created by the mind; thus, with regard to objects, there is no reality:

If you look back to the consciousness, you can't find anything; consciousness itself disappears if you try to look back to it; if you try to look back to a thought, nothing exists any more, so there is no reality, no other object nor subject. Yet still everything looks concrete, but that is only thinking. So if you realize that this is the situation, then that is real Chod and there is no longer any need to fight or show anger, desire, no need for sufferings or miseries any more.<sup>616</sup>

The Chod tradition taught at Shenten, he says, is “very popular and sangha members can sing it. It is very short but it has a great meaning. It is for normal practicing and it has a good melody, so then it can be nice to sing or chant it.”<sup>617</sup>

---

<sup>614</sup> Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Chod: Commentary on Yang Zab Nam Mkha' Mdzod Chen Las Lus Sbyin Mkha' 'gro Gad Rgyan of Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen*. Given in Paris, Salle Saint Martin, 16–17 October, 2004, ed. Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), 6.

<sup>615</sup> Namdak, 7.

<sup>616</sup> Namdak, 8.

<sup>617</sup> Namdak, *Chod: Commentary on Yang Zab Nam Mkha' Mdzod Chen Las Lus Sbyin Mkha' 'gro Gad Rgyan of Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen*. Given in Paris, Salle Saint Martin, 16–17 October, 2004, 8.



The name given to the version of this practice developed by Shardza Rinpoche is called “Laughter of the Dakinis.” The practice, as transmitted at Shenten, has different phases, as explained above by Chaoul, which include visualizations while the practitioner sings and plays the damaru and other instruments.<sup>618</sup>

During retreats at Shenten, Chod practice is performed every evening at the main temple, with a lama guiding and participants either sitting or performing the practice with their own *damarus* and singing in Tibetan. For instance, I. L. explained how she introduced Chod practice to her partner, telling him that first an “oral transmission” is needed. “He insisted that he wanted to do Chod. So... he started doing the practice without any transmission.” She narrates how, at that time in his life, he had significant financial problems and debts to pay off. To her surprise, she says,

It was really a very complicated situation. The first time we did this *Chod*, the second day a friend of him calls and said: “You owe to me such amount of money. I don’t need it anymore, forget it.” Then we started doing it again another time. Things were happening in a way that all these problems, which were very complicated, somehow really impossible to solve, just disappeared. Wow!

Her partner decided to accompany her to Shenten Center the following summer. I. L. added that “these teachings helped him to survive a very serious period in his life.” Chod was a practice that they believed helped them to overcome “worldly obstacles.”

---

<sup>618</sup> For a detailed overview of the practice and its different phases and visualizations, see: Namdak, *Chod: Commentary on Yang Zab Nam Mkha’ Mdzod Chen Las Lus Sbyin Mkha’ ‘gro Gad Rgyan of Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen. Given in Paris, Salle Saint Martin, 16–17 October, 2004.*

### 6.1.2 TSALUNG

Another practice mentioned by participants is the *tsalung*,<sup>619</sup> which refers to Yoga practices and exercises related to the “manipulation” done to cause “channels” and “winds”<sup>620</sup> to move, which practitioners perform to gain spiritual insight and to aid their main dzogchen practice. The various subtle “channels” existing in the body are described, among other texts, in the medical bonpo text called *bumzhi*.<sup>621</sup> In the Bon international environment, including Ligmincha websites and other Bon resources, *tsalung* is explained as follows: “In Tibetan, *tsa* means channel and *lung* means vital breath or wind.” By doing *tsalung* exercises, the practitioners “bring together the focus of the mind, breath and physical movements.” This opens particular chakras, which are energetic centers in the body, and clears obstacles “that disturb and obscure you from recognizing the pure and open space of being. This pure and open space is the source of all positive qualities.”<sup>622</sup>

Namdak explains that in the subtle channels or *tsa* move “the essences, the essential spheres or *thigle*”<sup>623</sup> with the vital winds or *lung*, like a rider on a horse following its track or pathway. The *thigles* are either influenced by the impure

---

<sup>619</sup> Wylie: *rtsa rlung*

<sup>620</sup> Gorvine, *The Life of a Bonpo Luminary: Sainthood, Partisanship and Literary Representation in a 20th Century Tibetan Biography.*, 78–79; Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press., 1993), 236.

<sup>621</sup> Millard, Collin, “Colin Millard Ph.D. Thesis 2002 Thesis Abstract The Focus of This Research Is Learning Processes in a Tibetan Medical School” (University of Edinburgh, 2002), 139.

<sup>622</sup> See: Nyima Dakpa, *Opening the Door to Bon* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2006); See also: “Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International.”

<sup>623</sup> Wylie: *thig le*, referring to “spheres light.”

energy of the mind and its consciousnesses or governed by the Pure Awareness-*Thigle*.”<sup>624</sup>

### 6.1.3 I HAVE A VERY INFORMAL WAY OF DOING MY FORMAL PRACTICE

M. M. says that in the Bon tradition, she mostly practices Dzogchen. As he puts it,

I have a very informal way of doing my formal practice. Like a long time ago, I would know pages and pages of old protectors and to me it really looked like a delusion. Like going into something exotic, running away from myself. Creating a kind of persona so that I don't have to work on myself. You know, "I'm this holy being, I know how to enter my *damaru* and sing in Tibetan beautifully."

He adds that at one point, he realized he was not really practicing; therefore he decided to concentrate on Dzogchen. "If I told about my practice, it's basically Bodhicitta, renunciation, devotion, and Dzogchen as much as I can in a very informal way." He mentioned that he decided to practice Guru Yoga of Taphiritsa, "because I feel that it's still important to keep a connection of the lineage. How can I say that? To maintain the practice as it has been done. It's been done that way. So, I do it that way. See what I mean? That's somehow my most formal practice." He underscores that "the only thing that happened spontaneously is Dzogchen teaching."

---

<sup>624</sup> Tenzin Namdak, "The Essence of the Elements in the Continuity of the Mother (Ma Rgyud 'byung Ba'i Thig Le), Oral Commentary by Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, 2001, January, 8th to 17th, at Triten Norbutse Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal" (n.d.), 14.

#### 6.1.4 IMPACT ON LIFE

The teachings affected participants in a variety of ways. For some, it meant a radical change in their life, including moving to a new country. For others, it meant changing their circle of friends and even deciding not to have children, since doing so would create attachments. Two participants said the repetition of practices has the effect of being “brainwashed,” indicating that to them, this carried a positive connotation in this respect, meaning the brain’s structure and habits have changed for the better. They also mentioned that teachings are now more accessible than they used to be.

When looking at participants’ patterns of practice, we can see which aspects of formal practice they do at home and also which ones they select from the range of practices taught at Shenten or other centers. Moreover, we can see participants’ ideas on which practices are considered important and relevant, the meaning of commonly used terms, their views on teachings, and the meanings of teachings. Looking at these elements allows us to have a better understanding of how participants categorize the Bon framework they receive and how they maintain meaning for themselves.

According to participants, they underwent a period of experimental immersion in the practices, during and after which they actively appropriated some elements of what was presented to them.

This section takes a close look at the specific practices bonpos engage in at home on their own. Often their practices at home are different and less intense than those they engage in during retreats. Participants’ everyday activities showed how they applied the formal meditation, ritual, or other forms of practices and techniques to their everyday life.

Practitioners distinguish between retreats and their practice at home, but they also indicate that the effects or results of their retreat practice and of their “everyday” practices are not different. They also highlight that, particularly from a Dzogchen perspective, their practice does not end when they complete the formal practice per se, but its influence permeates their lives, how they look at reality, and so on. They call this the “integration” of the Dzogchen practice into normal life.

All interviewees either claim they maintain continuity of meditation and personal practice at home or that they at least attempt to keep on doing certain practices, with variable results. Most mention that they meditate daily or from a few to several times a week, usually for at least thirty minutes. They all try to establish a daily practice. Some set time aside for it, while others find it difficult to do so. Some participants do not meditate at all except during retreat times. Moreover, many participants explicitly mention that they have an ideal vision of how they would like to practice at home, but for different reasons, including lack of time, they are not able to follow this ideal in practical terms.

In order to understand the dynamics that are taking place in the reception of Bon, we have to look at what is implied when participants use specific terms, such as “practice,” “practitioner,” “religion” and “Bon.” This way we can look at the participants’ narratives as individual experiences and ways of framing and constructing meaning, identities, and religious experiences.

All participants consider undergoing retreats to be an essential aspect to learn practices that they will subsequently use at home in their personal lives. The following responses are representative of the range of individual patterns of practice.

As we have seen, the term “Bon” is not easy to define. We saw how Westerners conceptualize Bon and Bon practice, taking into account a broad understanding of “practice,” which embodies traditional religious practices, such as rituals, mantra recitations, as well as Dzogchen practice or meditation.

Practitioners emphasize their interest in experiential practice rather than a merely intellectual understanding of Bon. They feel that it is only through a realization of the teachings that the full understanding of Bon can be achieved. Furthermore, they perceive Bon as a path that includes practical techniques to realize the Natural State of the Mind as well as other types of intellectual, spiritual, and even mystical realizations. These techniques, participants underscore, are practical tools that can be applied to their daily lives. Participants stated that their lives have changed as a direct result of these practices. Encountering Bon has had a significant impact on the personal life of most participants, including other members of the family who join them and embrace Bon.

It is significant that there are no provisions for childcare at Shenten or Ligmincha during meditation retreats, and it receives no formal institutional support in the centers during these periods. Children, in some participants’ views, are often regarded as a cause of distraction. This possibly keeps out a certain segment of the population to participate in meditation retreats. However, it was also noted that participants have started, in recent years, to informally organize childcare arrangements in the centers, as several members of Shenten for instance became parents and started bringing their children to the center.

As a result of their encounter with Bon, some participants have re-evaluated their career choices and their relationships. Some have changed jobs, and some have noticed that they spend less emotional energy or time with their family members and friends. Instead, they spend more of their time and financial resources

attending Bon retreats. A number of participants implied that they feel guilty that Bon has not had more of an impact on their lives, particularly regarding the amount of time they engage in Bon practices.

Almost all participants indicated that they had undergone personal changes as a result of their Bon practice. In all the cases, this resulted in a decision to commit to Bon, to Dzogchen, and in most cases, to a particular teacher.

J. F. explained that the impact in her life from listening to Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings was for her very strong:

During one year, I couldn't even sit on a cushion to meditate, because everything seemed to be fabricated for me, you know. So when I heard, "Leave it as it is," for me it was kind of a revolution, but very deep, you know. After, during, one year I was a little, like lost. And it's very strange because I was not a new practitioner. So I felt like, "Oh, come on," you know?

On the impact of his decision to become a monk in relation to his family, D. F. explained that in the Bon tradition, you could not become a monk if you did not have permission from your parents and siblings. Therefore, he asked his mother, father, and sister for their permission. He was forty-one at the time, and he recalls his family members saying to him: "At your age, we cannot refuse your request," so they gave him their permission. "It's very wonderful to do like this. Every practice I'm doing, all my life as a monk, it is because they gave me permission. I have a lot of gratefulness. I'm very grateful to them. All my practice somehow is because they gave me permission, so they get the fruit of my practice. They benefit from my practice. It's a very good way to do it."

With his family's permission, D. F. left his work and went back to India for the second time and to Menri. He waited a few weeks "for a good astrological day," and then he was ordained with three other monks and stayed in Menri. He recalls that he was alone most of the time. He felt frustrated because, after becoming a monk, he did not receive any teachings, and he felt there was no effort to accommodate him in the monastery. He asked for teachings and to study Tibetan a couple of times, after which he got frustrated and stopped asking:

I could see the rise of emotions, and at times there was a lot of frustration because I couldn't. I didn't want to beg all the time because I was very proud. Also, I didn't keep asking. At one point, I thought I would not live at Menri anymore. I would come to France, and I would come here for teachings. I would live on my own, or with my mother, but I would not be in a monastery. Then I realized that it's my mistake. Out of pride I don't ask and ask. I changed my approach, and I ask, and I ask, and I got teachings. Although it takes years, it takes years. If I want to learn some practice, it would take three or four years for me to obtain it. Still, I can't get it.

D. F.'s narrative talks about a *sysme* or a distance between Tibetans and Westerners, which was something also mentioned by other participants. These two groups, it seems, "continue to exist in separate domains"<sup>625</sup> not only in the West but also in Tibetan communities in exile. It also reflects how this divide was experienced as highly frustrating, and also how they way of narrating this frustration revealed religious notions of Bon, such as pride that needs to be overcome.

---

<sup>625</sup> Shakya, "Review:Who Are the Prisoners?," 185.



D. F. later received some instructions on Bon practices by the late His Holiness Menri Tridzin, but despite residing in a Bon monastery and being a monk, at the beginning he said he was clueless about what Bon was or what Bon practices meant. “I had no much idea of the Bon practices. I didn’t know anything about Bon really, much very little. I studied while I was there, but a few books I read in English, not many books. So really I learned from experience.”

When A. M. decided to become a nun, she didn’t find it hard to communicate it with her family, including her sister with whom she lived together many years:

My brothers know me very well. One of my brothers still refuses to see that I’m bold and have habits; he believes that is something that won’t last, like an episode in my life. And then my dad was really happy, he wasn’t sad or anything, in general terms it was all good. Socially it was better, I broke free of an enormous amount of confusion, and I took off a weight.

Several participants noted that their engagement with Bon marked a divide between them and “nonpractitioners,” but they also described their experiences as entailing a certain incompatibility between their religious life and social or “worldly affairs.”

F. H. recounted that when he “became a practitioner,” he had less time for both his family life and his social life. But he emphasized, “the impact was positive because practice makes you more relaxed. It’s supposed to make you a more relaxed person, more happy with yourself, so easier in the relationship with others as well.” This sentiment was not shared by others, who argued by contrast, that practice, in fact, can adversely affect individuals who engage in “spiritual bypassing” (see Chapter 3), which occurs when practice is used to neglect or

avoid pain, resulting in various negative conditions, such as extreme detachments and the lack of capacity to deal with negative feelings.<sup>626</sup>

One of F. H.'s daughters, he recounts, followed his example and became interested in Bon practice, while his other daughter "is also engaged but not yet deeply engaged." In fact, they "took refuge" in Bon through Yongdzin Rinpoche in early 1993, who told them that they were the first "pure bonpos" in the West. F. H. explained, "Most people, like myself, came from another tradition initially because Bon was the last to come to the stage of the Tibetan traditions. So the family got involved and it's positively affected family life like that."

M. M. says that it is difficult to measure the impact of Bon on his life because his whole identity was built around his encounter with the teachings. All his friends are "Dharma friends." He points out that, as a result of his practice, he became a solitary person because, in his interactions with "nonpractitioners," he thinks it is too challenging to find common values and common themes of interest.

I don't have anything against them. It's just that I don't. How could I say that? But all the relationships I have with my Dharma friends are so much deeper. I feel nourished and touched. When I interact with other people, I feel like we stay so much on the surface that it's just not worth it.

This is why, he emphasizes, Bon practice is now the main priority of his life. "I have my own obstacles and my karma, which sometimes makes me like music

---

<sup>626</sup> Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters.*, 194.

come first often or women come first.” He adds that for him, Bon practice is not compatible with “mundane activities.” In his view, this change in the way he interacts with people who are not bonpos is caused by his own efforts and as a result of his practice.

The encounter with Bon also had a big impact in M. N.’s family: “For me that’s amazing, I mean I never thought, I never thought even my husband would get interested in something like that, something very religious.” Her daughter came into the teachings later on:

At the time, she had this thing, she wanted to be different, you know, it’s normal. So when I used to tell her that she was not happy. Anyway, one day she came to Shenten. She was already here before, but the first time she came, she just slept away. And she said, “No, it’s not my thing.” And when she saw everybody, she felt this is like a sect.

Later on, she came to Shenten at the end of the teaching retreat. There was an initiation going on at the time at Shenten, and M. M. was working on a book on Bon masters. N. N. helped her mother with the English part of the book.

Finally, that weekend changed her life. She came again for the following year summer retreat for a week. And then the next summer she decided to come for three weeks, and that was really a new thing. So it’s good also that she was really coming by her own initiative. And then she met him and that was it.

M. N.'s daughter later decided to dedicate her life full-time to practice and meditation, reasoning that she had the opportunity to practice now and that this opportunity might not come in "many lifetimes." "I have to do it now," she said.

I have amazing conditions. This is the time to realize, to reach realization, because if I don't, I don't know where I'll be next. That's what I'm thinking. So now my parents worry and I'm like, yeah, but I'm more worried about impermanence. Maybe in three years' time, I may not be dead, but I may not have the same circumstances. I may have to work because there'll be no other way to live. But at least I'll have spent three years in retreat.

The Bon tradition impacted I. H.'s social life by making him feel rather lonely and left out. He felt that he was very young when he encountered Bon, when people of his age were "partying, studying a little, having fun, and when they asked me what I was doing, I would say, 'Going to a retreat.' And they thought that was weird. I felt lonely sometimes, little people to share with." At Shenten, he did not meet many people of his age. Over time, things changed: "Nowadays it is okay, I see that some people get more interested in spirituality, there is more openness in things like Yoga and stuff, and it makes it easier."

In terms of the impact in her family and social context, S. A. says she was

always kind of a loner and then never had many social contacts to speak of. I mean only very, very few close friends, and well, unfortunately, the closest friend died when we were both young, and other friends I still have contacts with. Then, of course, now some of my closest friends are actually bonpos, but I was always a person who had only, I don't know, two or three friends and that hasn't changed much.

For U. G., his family already had to accept that he officially left the Catholic Church when he was twenty-two, and he described himself as a very independent person. “I am not talking too much about it in my family. My social life, maybe a little bit, because when you are many times away from home, you lose a little bit of the contact. But anyway, I am a person who goes his own ways.”

#### 6.1.5 IF YOU REALLY WANT TO PRACTICE, FORGET ABOUT HAVING CHILDREN

In relation to the statements above, one aspect narrated by a few participants relates to the “renunciation” that is emphasized in some of the teachings. This means that to become a successful, a practitioner has to have a strong commitment to practice, which entails giving up other parts of life. There are many stories of practitioners in the past who renounced to their “worldly” or “mundane” life, including their spouses and children, to dedicate their lives to practice.

N. N. says that, if a person “really wants to practice, forget about having children.” She notes that having children implies that the person cannot stop working, since they have to pay for the many expenses required to raise children. Furthermore, she says that children represent “a worry for the rest of your life. You will worry where they are, what are they doing, whether they are in trouble, are they okay? It’s so much responsibility, and you can’t practice.... So it’s not good for the child or for the practitioner.” But, she adds, it depends on each individual case: there are some Westerners for whom Bon practice becomes the center of their lives. There are others, she points out, who only want to practice other activities and interests. The challenge she sees is that

People want to practice and get the good sides of practice but then they also want to keep the good sides of Samsara. And at one point, if you want to liberate you have to renounce, and I think not having children is

an essential thing to renounce, because it's a huge attachment. It's like we're trying to get rid of attachment and you're creating the biggest attachment of all, having a child.

This view, echoed by other participants discussed above, presents Bon as a path that, to be followed, requires a “renunciation” of “mundane activities,” which for some participants includes having a family and pursuing a professional career.

N. N. also claimed that she had already being a mother in several lifetimes. This reflects the Buddhist and Bon doctrine of rebirth, which asserts that every sentient being goes through rebirth in an endless cycle of repeated births, mundane existences, and deaths. This cycle is called Samsara.

I've probably been pregnant so many times—and had so many children. I've done that, but I've never been liberated, though.... And the thing is that when you are seriously practicing, first of all, the practice gives you, nourishes you with the love, you don't need anything from outside to give you that. And secondly, you're trying to be liberated from all this. You're not supposed to be scared. None of those fears [of dying without descendants] make sense anymore. It can create so many problems. And you have no more time.

For S. G., his encounter with Bon did not spread to his family:

My family for the moment are not interested in Buddhism. Only one sister who is very Catholic and a believer, she is open to discuss with me. For the others, they are quite materialistic. For them what is relevant is to have a good life, work, good domestic life, etc. They only see

spirituality in the nebula of Christian tendencies. So for me it has been very solitary.

S. G.'s partner, however, shares his interest in Bon, and they often attend retreats together at Shenten. He said that sharing the same beliefs in Bon influenced them to stay together: "We have the same goal. We decided to stay together also to give strength to our practice. Another reason is also to start bonpo families. That's very important to me." He notes that in Asia, "people have bonpo families since many centuries, and they are practicing inside the families. There are advantages but also problems because maybe sometimes it is kind of routines, you know." This is why, he stresses, it is time "to start in the West, because when we die, who will continue?" The way to ensure continuation, he adds, is by making a family and bringing "all the knowledge to the family members; this will make their access to spiritual Buddhism easier than it was for me."

U. G.'s journey started when he suddenly decided to quit his job after working assiduously for twelve years: "I really had the feeling, I wanted to continue my spiritual path in an intense way, and I was looking for possibilities." He was considering doing a three-year retreat in the Buddhist Nyigma tradition and had identified a place in Bhutan where he could do so. But he decided not to follow through because "it's too—for me it was too big of a jump out of the normal life." After he started looking for a retreat, possibly in the Bon tradition.

My wish was always to have a guided retreat. You know, with a master, and we have somebody to go to and not to be totally on my own, because I have the feeling it is harder to be on your own, to have the discipline, and sometimes you also need to speak to somebody.

This is why he thought that the Gomdra at Shenten was a good choice for him.

C. F. recalls that after he first went to a retreat, he separated from his wife:

When I come back after a while, it was really difficult to import that in my life because my life was not ready for that. So the retreat, we went to the retreat, in the winter retreat, and we begin to practice. And this time I practiced quite a lot because I decide to live alone in a little house far from everything and practice every day. So I have some experience at this time. I afterwards decide to move to Paris, to leave my—not to leave my wife, but we have some argument with my wife, she goes with another man.

C. F. said that Dzogchen practice has had a deep impact on his life, but in a slow and subtle way that he did not notice at the time. He says he only notices this change in himself whenever a drastic event takes place in his life. For example, he recounts how his father recently passed away, and he did not feel anything. Then, he said, “I just learned that my mother has a very, grave illness, yeah? She will die, she will die in one year or one and half year.”

Participants shared experiences of altered states of mind, what they described as deep spiritual practices, and insights. D. S. explained that a lot has changed in her life, since she found “the path was short but super intense. Suddenly I dived into something and on a quest to which I devoted myself completely for at least two years. Has my life changed? Maybe saying 100 percent is too much to say but at least 80 percent.” She explains that she changed careers, her circle of friends, and the way she interacted with them. Moreover, she changed the way she related to her family, noting that her interactions with other family members used to be more confrontational, “and even now it still is from time to time, but I also have like these moments of plenitude and of being capable of helping others, and that’s something I like a lot. When I find myself in those moments, I feel like I’m a channel to help other people.” The Bon path, she affirms, helped her to develop



“an inner confidence, a connection with my instincts, which was one of the things that made me go through all of this, feeling that my head was pointing one way and that my conscience was pointing the other way and I did not hear it.” Now, she concludes, she feels “more aligned and that is thanks to the practices and meditation.” In terms of how regularly she practices, she said that in the beginning, she used to feel very motivated to practice after participating in retreats at Shenten, with

a lot of motivation, eager to do practice, but with time I lost that. And now suddenly, since last summer, I’ve seen that there’s something already inside of me that pulls me to do the practices in a regular basis. I don’t know if it is like an internal peace or something, but definitely something inside me asks for it. Just like there [are] people that feel the need to go to the gym.

I. L. says that her life changed more when she found a boyfriend than when she entered the Bon tradition. But soon after, her boyfriend also started following the tradition. As she explained, “I was trying to build my life on these Buddhist values before, so the idea of confession, the idea of permanence, the idea of sharing was never new for me.” It is notable that I. L. was the only participant who said that it was specifically the Bon community that led to the most significant change in her life. “I’m happy because I found a community. I found Dharma friends.” At the same time, she said that on this spiritual path, “you are always doing it alone. It’s your own fight. It’s your own way, your own path. We are born alone and we die alone. We can have Dharma brothers and Dharma sisters, but nobody will do practice for you. You have to do it yourself.”

Becoming a bonpo didn’t change I. R.’s circle of friends much because she has different circles of friends for different aspects of her life, and sometimes they intermix. She thinks this is because her job, her studies, and everything in her life

were all linked: “All things which I was doing—they were directed in one way.” On the contrary, for E. S., becoming a bonpo meant completely changing her circle of friends, her work, and other aspects of her life: “I started realizing about the energy of different persons. I don’t want to work for example eight hours a day. Many times in these years I had to break many structures.”

A common feeling among participants is that they are “not doing enough practice.” For instance, M. M. has been coming to Shenten over the last ten years but still feels like he has not applied the practices completely: “Since I became a Dzogchen practitioner, all my money and holidays have been spent to come here, to Shenten. But I cannot say I have progressed enough, and I don’t practice enough. I think there is genuine motivation, but yeah, not enough application.”

When I asked M. N. how much she incorporates in her daily life, she said, “Not enough. Not enough.... It is there, in a way, not all the time, but more but I’m too busy with my thing, so it’s difficult to practice enough.... I may start, finally I may, but I’m not really sure, because I’ve not done it right. I’ve done bits and pieces.” Similarly, E. S. mentions that Bon is “a way of life. I know I have many obstacles, I don’t have the capacity but this is the most important thing in my life.” And R. S. says that “studying Bon history, philosophical aspects background of Bon is important. We don’t do it as much as we should.”

I. L., who after years of visiting Shenten started to organize Bon retreats in her country, felt a sense of responsibility in bringing the teachings to her country. She reflects that “if I found this is a master and there are people who are ‘in need of the teaching’ in my country, I have to do this. So I have to organize myself, and I have to translate the teacher.” She also expresses that, at the same time, she is “very much afraid. I don’t want to become a guru. I don’t, because in my country I see a lot of things.” She elaborates that she has witnessed people who are not “properly trained” pretending to be Bon masters. “So I really have this feeling that

I don't want to become too much involved.... I've been trying to let other people do sometimes some things and for months, because I'm traveling, and I'm not in the place. But from the other side, also because I don't want to become the main—the main thing. I am, but I don't want to be the only one.”

M. N. said that repetition of practices is important because the structure of the mind needs to be changed: “What matters and why should you do that, it is basically because it's a brainwash, you need to be brainwashed. And by doing more and more it gets into you, even if it looks stupid.” She explains that spiritual practice works in this same way. “It's like many things, you know, for example, if you are very angry, but you force yourself to be happy, you force yourself to love someone, then first you force it, but the brainwash finally becomes true. So first it's false, but then it becomes true. So this is the same way, this is how spiritual practices work.”

M. F. sees the utility and value of these teachings in the West as follows: “I think there's a lot of use in everything that brings another dimension to life and to the meaning of life and everything. I think that brings also a lot of peace, it brings a lot of things, a lot of understanding which may not be logical, but you know, openness, that brings everything, I think. Yes. Otherwise very dry, no?”

#### 6.1.6 INSTEAD OF PRACTICING DZOGCHEN, THEY DO SKYDIVING

Tenzin Wangyal, the founder of Ligmincha, refers to cultural differences between the way Tibetans and Westerners receive Bon teachings: “We are used to Tibetan culture. We are very loyal; once we are connected with somebody, we stay for a lifetime.” He used to expect that from others, including Westerners, but was surprised and disappointed by his experiences. “You meet somebody who will say, ‘You are the best thing [that] ever happened to me.’” But after a year or two, “instead of practicing Dzogchen, they do skydiving or something like that, and

they say, ‘Oh, I am so interested, and I found someone who teaches skydiving!’” He has become used to this experience and chooses not to criticize Westerners. “I think deep inside they are all good. They were brought up in different ways, they have different realities, they see the world differently, they relate with the world differently.”<sup>627</sup> He said that his realization of these differences absolutely changed the way he teaches:

I began to have much more empathy and compassion [for] them. At the beginning... I thought, if they are serious, they should do what I did. They should be loyal to me, they should be dedicated to me, they should learn what I would teach, they should be interested in what I think is important.... And I didn’t realize they were disconnecting completely. It was not making sense for them.<sup>628</sup>

#### 6.1.7 I AM NOT TRYING TO MAKE ANYBODY BECOME BONPO

Tenzin Wangyal believes that Buddhist teachers coming to the West, generally speaking, are trying to convert followers into their religion: “They are trying to make them a Nyingma or Bon or Gelug; they are trying to make them particular to their center, member of their centers.” Wangyal further believes that this is a mistake, that it is a “totally wrong approach,” because some of the people arriving are interested in dealing with their family issues, life problems, and the like. They are coming for very different reasons, he argues,

---

<sup>627</sup> Tenzin Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>628</sup> Wangyal.

for some spiritual connection, whatever that means to them, but is not about Buddhism or Bon. But we try to convert them into Bon or Buddhism or something immediately that is in the mind or this should become a bonpo. I notice that myself and I notice that and I totally changed that.... [Since then], I am not trying to make anybody become bonpo, but if they do become bonpos, I am glad for it.

He further explains how he is currently teaching more than five hundred Tibetans in Tibet via the Internet. “We have a five-hundred-people group and I am teaching to 150 people *ngondro* and other Bon practices in Tibet, mostly to nomads. I’ve never seen them, but the way they respect, it is so sweet. In my bad days, I listen to them and make my days good.” He mentions that, while they don’t have the same educational level as Westerners, “their devotion is incredible. In the West is not like that especially, I don’t complain. People didn’t grow up in that way, and they are interested, and in contrary they are really much more than the Tibetans.” He also notes that Tibetan people living in the West

are not interested in that way, they have [a] sense of devotion, maybe some faith, but they are not interested, very few. Americans they had never accessed to teachings, something came out and then suddenly they are dedicating their life, spending money, traveling, taking time off their jobs, amazing. And sometimes they don’t understand anything, but they still believe that there is something to be understood. They don’t know when that will happen, but they are waiting for that moment to happen, patiently.

Through the voices of participants as expressed in this section, it is evident that Western bonpos are receiving and adapting the teachings to different degrees. While some select only one practice that suits them best, others undergo intensive retreats, learn the Tibetan language, undergo “advanced practices”

including the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat and *tsalung*, and spend months every year at the Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu in order to be closer to what is considered a more traditional way of Bon. This wide spectrum of commitment levels shows the diversity of ways that Bon is applied to participants' lives. In the following section, we will see how these experiences are related to the two predominant trends identified by participants, a modern approach and a traditional approach to Bon.

## 6.2 MODERN VS. TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

The contrasts between “modern” and “traditional” approaches are highlighted through another characteristic of Bon transmission in the West, which relates to the way that the different rites and steps are followed. According to the “traditional way” of training at the monasteries, students of Dzogchen must first “do the preliminary practices and then go to a master who introduces us to the Natural State, after which we go on to practice retreat in isolation in the wilderness for years until we attain some realization.”<sup>629</sup> In Shenten, as well as in the traditional Bon settings, it is emphasized that those who undergo the training should first “check” if their practice is correct according to the Bon texts and to the oral teachings received from Bon masters. They have to practice to become “more and more familiar and integrated with it. That is the preparation for receiving the Dzogchen teachings. If you do that, you will be a qualified student and will be allowed to receive the Dzogchen.” However, failing to follow these preliminary steps and lacking devotion to the teachings means that the individual

---

<sup>629</sup> A second traditional way of approaching Dzogchen is described as follows: “At Menri Monastery in Tibet, we had an educational system whereby students studied Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen. However, this also meant that there was little time for practice. It was mostly a matter of intellectual study, and at the end of their course of studies, having passed the oral examinations, students received a Geshe degree.” *bonpo Dzogchen teachings: According to Lopon Tenzin Namdak*, 2007, John Myrdhin Reynolds (Editor), Vajra Bookshop, Kathmandu, 107–108

will “not be ready to be a qualified student and will receive a kind of punishment from the Dakinis and Guardians. You will find it difficult to read the texts and you won’t be able to receive the Dzogchen teachings.”<sup>630</sup>

However, only a few interviewees followed these preliminary practices, once again indicative of how Western followers select and adapt elements from Bon to suit their lives and interests. It is also indicative of the way teachings are presented by lamas in the West.

Bellezza notes that some Bon teachers who have a translator are teaching the same way that they would if the audience were Tibetans. On the other end of the spectrum, he notes, are those who are fluent in English, travel to the West, and then completely tailor their teachings to the needs and expectation of Westerners. And then there is everything in between.<sup>631</sup>

Others also commented on the differences between the approaches followed at Shenten and at Ligmincha, speaking of Shenten’s traditional approach as “pure” and even “the purest way,” using adjectives that imply that these are the original and authentic teachings. For example, F. F. refers to Shenten as the place following the “true pure path”: “Here in Shenten the focus is on meditation, which is the path, which is the true path.” Purity as a concept, it should be noted, is central to Buddhist doctrine and practice, where the world is conceived as

---

<sup>630</sup> Tenzin Namdak, *The Seven Mirrors of Dzogchen from the Cycle of Namkha Truldzö*, ed. Ermakov Dmitry and Carol Ermakova (Blou, France: Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), 11.

<sup>631</sup> John Vincent Bellezza, Personal communication, Shenten, Blou, June 30, 2016.

being both pure and impure, and where the pure world is associated to the Buddhas.<sup>632</sup>

This adaptation was also mentioned by others, who noted that the most difficult aspects of the practice of Bon related to specific Tibetan aspects or to rituals that were hard to comprehend and to follow.

Lamas travel regularly, especially across Europe but also to other continents such as the Americas and Asia, including to Singapore and Hong Kong. Often this surprised the interviewees, who saw this as a very “modern” aspect of the religion. Furthermore, a new development that was apparent was the increase in the number of Western teachers (i.e., Westerners who are now teaching in the centers), especially at Ligmincha.<sup>633</sup> This trend contrasts with the more “traditionalist centers” like Shenten Dargye Ling, where all the teachers are Tibetans monks. This contrast exemplifies a process where new meanings are assigned to different aspects of Bon depending on the particular location of a center in a global context.

As discussed in Chapter 3, globalization has facilitated the establishment of different religious traditions in new places, which in some places caused processes of “detraditionalization,” where religious systems are dissociated from their traditional sociocultural contexts. These processes can be observed when participants speak about leaving aside all Tibetan cultural references and being only interested in the “essence of the tradition,” usually referring to Dzogchen practice and teachings. Items that participants consider to be cultural elements of

---

<sup>632</sup> For an analysis of how purity is conceived in Buddhism, see: Petra Rosch, “The Purifying Power of the Buddhas,” in *How Purity Is Made*, ed. Petra Rosch and Udo Simon (Wiesbaden: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2012), 217–44.

<sup>633</sup> In Chapter 4.7, I provide a more detailed discussion on Wangyal’s teaching style and adaptations, highlighting how he incorporates elements from psychology and how his presentations of the teachings have evolved over time, from a more religious manner to a completely lay manner.



the tradition include the ritual instruments, clothing, decorations, and furniture. Some of them believe these are not relevant for the Western cultural context.

Participants and teachers also stressed that adaptations are necessary, but they are related to the “form and not the essence,” indicating that what is being taught and received at Shenten is “the essence of Bon.”

S. A. refers to two “fundamentally different ways of practicing Bon in the West.” The first way is where Westerners learn Tibetan in order to read texts in the original language and, in the ideal case, to receive teachings in Tibetan, such as listening to the Yongdzin Rinpoche’s teachings on tape and reading the original texts of authors like Shardza Rinpoche or Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung. The other way is to translate all the practices into the practitioner’s native language, except for recitations of Guru Yoga or Refuge Bodhicitta in Tibetan, which they only understand phonetically. S. A. says that many Westerners “when they are alone they maybe even just recite in their own language without even going through the motions of reciting in Tibetan.” She observed how some Buddhist centers in Europe have no resident lamas, never invite any to visit, and only see one every five years. They only practice among themselves, she complains, and in this way they are cutting themselves off from the possibility of practicing with a lama, most or all of whom are Tibetans. She remarks that

If we want to practice together with the lama and have him help us with his energy if I practice some ritual together, recite it together with Lama Sangye, I learn a lot from just his influence, from reciting together, and if you want this kind of togetherness with the lamas, of course, you have to recite everything in Tibetan.

She further believes that people who are trying to translate everything, “they are cutting themselves off from this community with the lamas, and they will end up in sort of sterile circles where they just encourage each other in whatever mistakes they are habitually making.”

Another key aspect of the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West noted by Samten Karmay is that it is heavily dependent on the teachers. For instance, he notes, Shenten uses a very traditional approach, but this is not new. Tibetan lamas exercise a certain kind of charismatic attraction, as we can see, for example, in Geluggas or Karma Kagyu lineages in the West.

They know what to do, what to say in front of people, and there are people willing to listen.... There are people who are willing to accept, so it has something to do with the teachings and the emphasis of Tibetan lamas on a sentiment of conversion, it also has something to do with the Tibetan teachers’ strong character. They are very capable of laughing and making audiences laugh with them.<sup>634</sup>

Indeed, the lamas play an essential role in transmission of the Bon; they are the lineage holders who pass on the teachings in accordance with the Bon and Buddhist traditions. To fully receive a teaching, a person is required to receive the Bon text through oral transmission from a qualified lama in the oral lineage, called *lung*,<sup>635</sup> or oral authorization. Furthermore, in certain ceremonies, called *wang*,<sup>636</sup> empowerments, or initiations, the teachings are transmitted through the

---

<sup>634</sup> Samten G. Karmay, Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, May 2, 2014.

<sup>635</sup> Wylie: *lung*.

<sup>636</sup> Wylie: *dbang*.

teacher to the student following a lineage. At Shenten, the way the lineage is structured relies on Tibetan lamas. In Ligmincha, a different trend is seen, where Western “instructors” transmit teachings directly to fellow Westerners.<sup>637</sup>

In this context, Wangyal asserts that there is a need to adapt the delivery of the teachings to make them relevant to people in various contexts by using a language that is relevant to diverse audiences and their contexts, particularly in the United States.<sup>638</sup> However, in Rute’s opinion, the transformations of the Yungdrung Bon teachings that Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche is introducing “are not at all welcomed by his teachers, who belong to the older and more traditional generation of Yungdrung Bon, to those masters who have been working all their lives to protect and expand the Yungdrung Bon tradition after their original monasteries in Tibet have been destroyed.” Moreover, even if Tibetan masters never directly say anything negative about other Tibetan masters, even if they are in disagreement with the way the Yungdrung Bon teachings are being transformed, interviewees who received teachings at Shenten Dargye Ling (and probably at other traditional Bon centers) said they could feel the tension over these issues.<sup>639</sup>

A. C., on the contrary, thinks that both the traditional approach at Shenten and the more modern approach of Tenzin Wangyal are valid, but that “the more difficult [option] may be to follow the traditional path.” In this regard, some participants believe that Bon has been adapted in the West in a new form because, as I. L. puts it, Westerners “are not happy with the traditional forms.”

---

<sup>637</sup> See also: Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*, 87.

<sup>638</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>639</sup> See: Rute, “Yungdrung Bön Spread in the West”; See also: Rute, “Yungdrung Bön in the West: Reception and Transformations.”

They note that Western teachings omit a large part of the teachings. One participant noted that she has only met one Westerner who fully follows the traditional path, someone who is very committed and who has recognized that “the Tibetan context offers a fuller picture.” Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche states that in Tibet, in contrast to the West, the majority of Tibetans attend Buddhist and Bon *wang* initiations with the intention of receiving blessings. But if a person wants to do formal training and practice, then this person must start from preliminary practices, as “you cannot directly kind of jump. Because if you do this, it will be more difficult for you to understand and to really ripen the practice properly.”

However, from the interviews conducted for this project, it was clear that not all participants followed all the steps, perhaps a reflection of the different levels of commitment that individuals had but also due to the flexible approach evidenced in the centers in the West. As M. N. noted,

I don't practice all the practices and I didn't do the preliminaries. I'm not doing preliminaries and all those things or I'm doing them but the way I find suitable. I just do my own visualizations of things that help me feel compassion, help me feel devotion but not necessarily what they tell you to, you know?

These statements demonstrate that Western students are adapting and selecting the parts of the Bon teachings that are most suited to them. It also indicates that the transmitters of the Bon religion in the West are adapting both their way of transmitting their teachings and the content of such transmissions, including the emphasis on Dzogchen meditation.

Most participants highlighted the stark differences between modern Western culture and what they referred to as the cultural foundations of Bon. U. G., denoting a rather idealized and Orientalist image of the past, says, “The cultural context is completely different. Before, Bon practitioners lived in caves, and they spent their lives in retreat.” They acknowledged that, although cultural differences exist, they were still prepared to commit to the teachings and to develop their own personal way of following Bon. Nonetheless, some individuals did not find it easy to forge strong bonds with either the teachers or the culture of the Bon religion. N. N. said, “The teachers here don’t have that kind of intimacy, or I don’t have that kind of intimacy with any of the teachers.” This was due to various reasons they mentioned, including the short periods of time that students can meet the teachers who are on the road. If we recall what D. F. said above when narrating his experiences living in a Bon monastery in India, the distance may also be related to the divide among Tibetans and Westerners indicated before, a divide that result in the two groups existing in separate domains.<sup>640</sup>

### 6.2.1 MASTER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

An essential element in Tibetan Buddhist culture in general and in the transmission of Dzogchen in particular is the role of the teacher (lama, guru). According to Yongdzin Rinpoche, Guru Yoga is considered to be the single most important preliminary practice in the Dzogchen tradition, where the “luminous figure of the Guru as the archetypal wise child or eternal youth in the space above and in front of oneself in the sky is imagined to embody and encompass within his radiant form the essences of all the masters of the Dzogchen teachings.”<sup>641</sup>

---

<sup>640</sup> Shakya, “Review:Who Are the Prisoners?,” 185.

<sup>641</sup> Namdak and Reynolds, *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*, 219.

Some participants felt that there is a difference in the way this relationship is lived in the West compared to Nepal, India, or Tibet. Others said that in the West, it is easier to have access to great teachers, even more so than in Asian contexts. Whatever the case is, the relationship between the lamas and their students presents another aspect of adaptation. For instance, in the West, teachers do not live in monasteries but travel to different places throughout the year. In contrast to Bon monasteries in Nepal and India, in the West parents do not send their children to study to Bon centers at a very young age. As Tenzin Wangyal comments from his first years in the West: “I didn’t like this lack of continuous contact between master and student: here it seemed that going to hear the teachings was just like attending an ordinary talk in a hall, so that sometimes it felt impersonal, and I felt almost like I was speaking on the radio.”<sup>642</sup>

Wangyal adds that the goal of teachers is to make people understand the Bon teachings, and this is often achieved by “making the teachings relevant.” When there is a cultural difference and the teacher is not familiar with Western culture, specifically that of Western audiences, there are several challenges. “Language and culture, therefore, limit teachers from a deeper understanding of the student’s cultural and educational background, which may be needed to adequately present the teachings.”<sup>643</sup>

N. N. thinks that “the distance of the master makes it really difficult for people. You can be blocked for months and months with a doubt because you can’t go speak to your master. That is definitely something that I think is lost with the fact that in the West they need to teach everyone.”

---

<sup>642</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>643</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

A. C. remembers that when she met Yongdzin Rinpoche, she “was too embarrassed to see Rinpoche... so I feel the importance of the external master, he is more important [than texts or previous teachers], because he’s the one who will introduce you the other masters.”

E. S. describes her encounter with her “root teacher” as an experience of love: “When I went back to my city and thought of Lopen, I was crying. I felt love, for the first time in my whole life, I felt pure love.” Similarly, J. F. asserts that Yongdzin Rinpoche’s teachings are the most important thing in her life: “It’s very, very, very deep, and I know perfectly [that my relationship with Yongdzin Rinpoche] is the main thing in my life, you know?” She had difficulties in explaining her experiences the first time she met with Yongdzin Rinpoche and how she felt when she was in a state where she was able to “understand the meanings [of the teachings] naturally. So when I listen the teaching, I say, ‘Ah! This is, you know, it’s good for me. Because, oh yeah, I recognize, I have this gift.” Even though she noted that she had been introduced to the Natural State of Mind before this, she said that when she encountered Bon and Yongdzin Rinpoche, she felt she suddenly incorporated this experience into her ordinary life: “It was completely different.”

N. N. refers to Yongdzin Rinpoche as a teacher who “is in another dimension.” She says that when she started and had no experience in meditation, “I thought we were in the same dimension and he saw things like me. And then I started practicing more and starting to have experiences, and I’m like, ‘Oh my God, you’re in another world. How could I even think that we understood each other?’”

### 6.2.2 THE PUREST

A. M. felt that, in contrast with the “modernization” of Bon teachings in other centers like Ligmincha, the teachings made available at Shenten are “the purest gift with the greatest freedom and the greatest compassion without any restriction. I mean, nobody asked us if we had a history or any records.”

C. F. believes that Dzogchen practice is the solution for any problem. But he emphasized that to practice at length is difficult for Westerners. As a result, he said, teachers are required “to adapt the teachings in one way.” He believes that, on the one hand, “teachings shouldn’t mix with the modern world; but on the other hand, I think mixing a little bit is necessary. Like what happens with Tenzin Wangyal.”

D. R. maintains that the tension between the traditional approach and Tenzin Wangyal’s teachings has been “going on for a long time. The problem is cultural clash and huge religious misunderstandings. Many geshees are copying Tenzin Wangyal because he is successful, and that’s in Tibetan society: ‘Let’s mix it with psychology and that will be good for the West.’”

N. N. refers to other Dzogchen masters teaching in the West, particularly Sogyal Rinpoche and Namkhai Norbu, who are not monks. With regard to their relationship to their Western students, she believes that “they’re just like philosophers. They’re not here to deal with emotions or be like therapists. There are certain emotions they cannot relate to.”

C. F. explains that he is not interested in the Tibetan aspects of Bon. She was never fascinated by the Tibetan world,

so sometimes when I say to a friend or to some people, “Okay Come to Shenten to see,” I first explained to them, “Okay, don’t worry about that, don’t worry about that. Don’t look at that. It’s not a cult.” And



sometimes, even if they listen to some teaching with many Tibetan aspects, they say, “Wow, he’s very wonderful.” For me, that was always a mystery because—all Tibetan aspects were never wonderful for me.... We never know which karmic hook they can be connected to.

D. E. explains that in the beginning, she felt resistance toward practices like Mandala Offering and other rituals. “After a while, I think for me it was not so much about overcoming the resistance, but it was more like assuming the resistance.” At one point, she adds, she noticed that her own resistance was slowing her down in her practice:

It caused doubts to arise, so I got to the conclusion that there were certain things that I could not understand by myself. I decided to keep practicing even if I don’t understand it. Maybe in the future I’ll see it differently, but I will not allow these doubts about this practice give me questions about everything, absolutely everything, because then it does not make sense to me.

S. G. mentions that he incorporates some practices into his daily life “but in a very free way. Dzogchen is a wonderful occasion to practice free of many formalities. I mean, the rituals I like very much, the language, etc. But what is always coming back to me is that life itself is a teaching. Dzogchen teaching, I mean.” He affirms that, in order to apply what Yongdzin Rinpoche teaches,

no rituals are needed for that. I don’t like rituals any more. For me it’s like “closing little boxes of rituals around the experience.” I prefer to be open completely. Sometimes I am very busy and I am not thinking about rituals or cultural specificities or Tibetan aspects, but I am focusing on the meaning of Rinpoche’s words all the time and trying to understand its meanings of the time.

Despite having reservations such as these, participants stand every time a lama enters the main temple, and after the lama sits down, they do prostrations and recite prayers. These are intended to enhance their motivation before receiving the teachings. At the end of the session, they recite a prayer dedicating “the merits they have obtained” from the practice to the benefit of all sentient beings. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explained that the act of prostration is a way to pay respect to the three jewels, the Buddhas, and the enlightened mind.

In J. F.’s view, there is a “karmic link” that connects people to the Bon traditions. She says that

this tradition is very pure, you know. We have a great, great master, a great master, and great masters. You know, for when we have a tradition very pure, it’s in one way easy for the ones who have a connection; it’s very deep and very easy. And, in another way, it’s not easy, because people we know these times are a little, we can say, degenerate.

She elaborates that some people are looking for “easier ways to enlightenment,” but she believes that “until we will have this kind of tradition, the world will be safe somewhere, you know? But it’s difficult I think, not so easy... I cannot say it’s easy, you know. It’s very difficult to find the easiness. It’s very sacred, you know this is a secret, is to find this, which word, I don’t know, jewel.”

A. C. describes the way Tenzin Wangyal adapted the teachings in these terms: “That’s what I find tremendously intelligent, because there’s a lot of people that don’t want the religious part, not the ritual part, to me personally, I’m not very interested in the ritual.”

A. M.<sup>1</sup> says that she finds Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche incredible for the following reasons:

he keeps the essence of the teaching and he takes it to very practical situations. So people who don't want to depend so much or are not able to understand, etc., I think it is very valuable, not everybody wants to come three weeks to sit in Europe. People would tell me that I am crazy, how can you go three weeks to seat? But people want 'something'—what Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche gives is valuable, is accessible.

She notes that Wangyal's way of teaching is easily understood by younger people because "he makes use of new technologies. He is no monastic. It is very rare for him to read a text. Here, as you know, it is deeper, the texts are followed." She correlates Tenzin Wangyal's teachings with being "easier" and teachings at Shenten with being "more difficult to follow." She elaborates:

Here it is deeper, the texts are followed. I feel attracted for that, I am Bonpa,<sup>644</sup> and I am not interested in any other lineage, in difference with many others who follow different teachers. I can respect other masters but I only follow Bon, my connection is here. This time my connection with Khenpo Rinpoche was deepened. I cry only to see them.

Expanding on this notion, J. C. describes Tenzin Wangyal's way of teaching as based on what she calls "essentialized Bon practice," which means that he maintains the essence of Bon. She emphasizes that she can recognize the Bon imprint in his approach because she is aware of what Bon is,

---

<sup>644</sup> A "bonpa" is a Spanish term that refers to a female Bon practitioner.

because I have this background of all these teachings, so I can see that what he says is true, I mean authentic. But if I didn't have all this background, I would not probably recognize his teachings as true teachings, and it would look as New Age, any kind of New Age practices, because it has the same dynamics, the same words that are often used in New Age circles.

J. F. elaborates by saying that both Tenzin Wangyal's and Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings are important,

but I think the more difficult maybe is to follow Rinpoche, you know, but is very important, we have a really, a responsibility, because, or, so if people follow Rinpoche, traditional way, Rinpoche, it's working. This is very important because we have the responsibility, we are the one, we will make this teaching stay alive in this world, you know.

She adds that Tenzin Wangyal's approach aims at helping people who "don't have exactly the connection... but it is very important because it helps people." She further says that in her view, Yongdzin Rinpoche's traditional teaching is "under our responsibility of some people, you know... because this is so pure." However, the key practice that, according to participants, does not need to be reinterpreted because it is ahistorical, free of any cultural background, and related to the mind in every country, religion, or language is Dzogchen.

A. M.1 mentions that

I personally prefer this, Shenten. When Yongdzin Rinpoche went to Mexico for the consecrating the stupa, for me it was so clear, as I knew the way of teaching of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo and Tenzin Wangyal, as I've visited Shenten before. It was *Hearts Drops of Dharmakaya*.... [I]f you want to deepen your practice, it is here, in Shenten.

### 6.2.3 NOBODY WILL GIVE YOU FOOD IN THE CAVE

I. L. reflects further on the differences in how she perceived that Westerners receive the teachings in comparison with how Tibetans do so in Tibet, India, and Nepal:

First of all, we don't have this devoted relationship with the lamas as Tibetans do. That's one thing. But from the other side—and that's also one thing that, you know, sometimes it's difficult to—well, as Rinpoche is also telling, we are in a different situation now. Nobody will give you food in the cave. So that's another thing. So also we have to understand this.

This again reveals the imaginary ideal cherished by many participants that, in Tibet, all students have a close relationship with their masters. This is contradicted by participants who actually spent time in monasteries, as we saw above. Nevertheless, there are some specific cases where students live near their teachers, but these are mostly exceptions (such as D. F.).

In this context, N. N. refers to what she labeled as the “traditional” way of receiving teachings:

Before, a master would choose a disciple and live with him and would give him all the answers. But here, at Shenten, the teaching he's giving is the higher teaching of all. That's the contradiction. The teaching he's giving is the teaching that the master would give to the disciple that was ready. And this disciple the master chose. Here, the master is not choosing the disciple any more. So you have people who can actually go crazy. People who may not have good circumstances and still decide to just follow the teaching blindly and that's dangerous... since it's open to... anyone [who] can hear it.

On this issue, C. I. says that in a Tibetan cultural context, “even to be near a lama, you know, a lama like Yongdzin Rinpoche, his presence is a powerful blessing, never mind teachings.” That's why, he highlights, whenever there is any ritual where Yongdzin Rinpoche or any other highly regarded teacher participates, Tibetans “would just want to be in the vicinity of the ritual.... It's not often been the opportunity for the average person to get access to these teachings because they have a different institutional framework.” By contrast, he adds, “now we have easy access to lamas and teaching, which is unusual from a Tibetan point of view for people to get access to such—just the average person to get access to these kinds of teachings. It didn't happen before.”

So, I. L. asks herself. what are Westerners looking for in Bon? And she concludes that they are looking for some practice, “because some people they just take parts of it and they just do whatever they do. Nothing to do with the Bon tradition. Or they really want to follow the path to enlightenment and that's another thing, which is a really, really important one.” She believes some Westerners come to the Bon tradition

with a wrong attitude and if they have a good connection, then they can develop a really strong devotion and the practice can help them. But if

sometimes it can just worsen the situation, and because sometimes you can just see that people are using Bon as a trademark.

She further refers to people using the label “Bon” to do “totally crazy things. So, here it’s—this point of view I always feel a little bit—it’s not like afraid. Maybe I feel sorry.”

She raises a few issues to consider: first, she implies that doing only some parts of the practice does not mean that the person is practicing Bon. Only those who want to do the full path to enlightenment are true bonpos. She also refers to the common notion that there has to be a “karmic connection,” a “hook,” a “good connection” for a person to be interested and follow the Bon teachings. Third, she mentions that she finds it difficult to cope with people making adaptations to what she called “the pure tradition.”

Against this background, it is worth posing the question of whether the context matters or not. When speaking about the cultural context and whether knowing the Tibetan background is necessary for practicing Bon, M. M. is “absolutely, 100 percent convinced that it is totally unnecessary. Because we are talking about reality, not about a Tibetan reality, but about our nature, human nature, sentient beings’ nature. So the idea here is to really get a kind of a pure Dzogchen teaching.” N. N. further mentions that “lots of people, I think, feel estranged by the culture and feel like maybe they can’t. Like, I’ve heard questions, like, that from disciples here who ask, but can we really—if we’re not a Tibetan or we’re not a monk, will we have the same realization? And I think for me that’s also an easier point, because I grew up in this culture, it’s not—how do you say it—there’s no culture shock.”

N. N. goes on to elaborate that sometimes she wants to bring friends to Shenten,

because the message and teaching are very interesting and could help them. But then I always feel like if I bring them here, it's so "Tibetan culture." Like when you go to the Gompa [the main temple] and everything, I feel like they'll be so much culture shock that it will put a blind on what is being said.

The problem, she thinks, is that at Shenten, on the one hand, there is "a very Tibetan culture that can be shocking, and on the other hand, you have a place where the majority, the feeling, at least, is that the majority of people here, they're very sick and depressed." When she visited Shenten for the first time, she felt that "this is weird, this place really weird.... I'm sorry, it looks so much like a cult. The first time I saw it, I was just like, and, okay, this is very cultish. I don't go actually. I think, "These are all like practices you can do on your own."

#### 6.2.4 THE NEED FOR PRACTITIONERS TO HAVE MONEY

Some individuals commented on the differences between their modern lives and the practices at the centers, noting the challenges they perceived as inherent in living in a modern society, including the need to make money. U. G. says, "I think it is also not easy to follow a daily path in your life in Western society, where you have to earn money and deal with all the things there, and follow the spiritual path at the same time." Another participant mentioned, "I think it's these days even more difficult to follow a high spiritual tradition like this, because we have so many influences from outside, and a lot of times it interferes with your practice or with what you really want to do."

These statements indicate that a number of participants have the idea that it is easier to follow these teachings in Tibet. They seem to overlook the fact that, for example, it may be easier for a modern person to have leisure time than, say, a Tibetan herder. This points to a persistent imagery of an idealized East, as



described in Chapter 3. Participants noted that attending retreats can be expensive in the West. They further added that in Tibet, to the contrary, traditionally no fees are required to attend teachings. This once again points to their notions of an idealized Tibet, where in fact, attending teachings even in Tibet is not always free of charge.

D. R. believes that Dzogchen teachings can be practiced fully in the West, but he also notes that there are challenges, such as the need for practitioners to have money. This is also related to statements quoted earlier in which participants expressed their views that in the modern world, it is difficult to “balance” having a family, or a professional career while devoting “enough time” to practice. Indeed, a few participants referred to the fact that in the West, it is difficult to balance work and practice, which sometimes results in them neglecting their work. S. A. said that, due to her commitments to her Bon practice, she certainly slighted her work:

I certainly do some work, but, you know, in [my field] you are more or less expected to do 200 percent. You are expected to do research day and night and to put all your energy into this, and I cannot do this because I put a lot of energy in the practice.... I am fortunate to have a job, so the only thing that happens to me is that, well, it is sort of frowned upon if you do not put 200 percent of usual job requirements into this research.... But I have to live with that.

At the same time, she feels she is “not practicing as much as I could if could practice full time. So I am sort of neglecting both sides.”

Similarly, D. R. said,

If you practice now, you have to support yourself, you have to deal with lots of mental activity trying to basically keep going financially. You need to work and integrate to society to a certain degree. You can't come out. If you come out, you may be seen as a weirdo and you will have problems.

He pointed to a related difference between lay communities in the West and those in Tibet, India, and Nepal:

Also a problem is this misbalance with the Tibetan community because we don't have here in the West a clear status. In Tibet, normally the situation in the monastery, there is a monastery, monks are practitioners and then lay people come, like in the Christian church, for blessings. So people here, not everybody but real practitioners, they came to receive teachings to get realization. So they are not like lay Tibetans, they are far superiorly educated and able to think independently.

This characterization of Tibetans as the ones who attend ceremonies to receive blessings and have an easier approach to devotion, in contrast to rational Westerners who have a more critical approach toward religion is sometimes seen as a positive aspect and others as a negative one.

Along related lines, highlighting another aspect of the relation between Tibetans and Westerners, I. L. says,

We do not have that much respect for lamas as Tibetans do and we usually doubt more than Tibetans do. We always raise the questions. We always want to check, to check, and to check. And we are always looking

for shortcuts. That's also one thing that Westerners always are looking for shortcuts. That's why they don't want to do *ngondro* and so on and so on and so on.

This refers to a point raised by D. R., among others, emphasizing that in the Tibetan centers in the West,

there is no structure and system to accommodate this people, there is not. Especially at Shenten now, there is a very strange situation because there is a 99.9 percent lay sangha and completely monastic structure and leadership. Summing up, there is the sense that if you practice seriously, you have problems with money in the society, automatically.

D. R. defines Bon as “an upper-middle-class religion now; you have to have a lot of money and they keep watering down the teachings for seminars and courses, where you have to go here and there, always pay, you know.” It has been documented how Tibetan Buddhism in America appeals mostly to white, middle- to upper-middle-class individuals who are often middle-aged, well educated, and financially sufficient.<sup>645</sup> In the case of Bon, participants noted that indeed, having sufficient money is a prerequisite for following teachers and undergoing retreats. They also noted that Shenten's retreat fees, in comparison to other centers like Rigpa and Dzogchen Community, are considerably low in price.<sup>646</sup> Participants in

---

<sup>645</sup> See for example: Eve Mullen, *The American Occupation of Tibetan Buddhism* (Waxmann Verlag, 2001), 48; Barry Kosmin, *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (Three Rivers Press, 2011); Eldershaw, “Collective Identity and the Postcharismatic Fate of Shambhala International,” 89.

<sup>646</sup> At Ligmincha, a private room with shared bathroom costs \$ 55 per night. The meals are included in the retreat price, which for January 2019 was of \$705 or \$775 per week, depending on early registration. See: “Summer Retreat: June 23–July 7, 2019 | Serenity Ridge Retreat Center,” accessed April 24, 2019, <https://serenityridge.ligmincha.org/retreats-and-programs/432-summer-retreat-june-23-july-7-2019.html>; At the Rigpa center in France, Lerab Ling, the fees for a personal retreat include a daily fee of €26, plus for an individual room with shared facilities costs €45, and three meals costs €21. Discounts are offered for students. See: “La Source Prices,” Lerab Ling,

this study were mostly middle- or upper-class people (only one was unemployed); most were able to cover the cost of their retreats with ease, but some also mentioned the difficulties they had and the need to choose carefully to which retreats to attend due to financial constraints.

Other challenges discussed by participants include issues related to gender biases they perceived in Tibetan Bon in general, as well as what R. S. described as “rigidity” in its norms:

Some aspects that are challenging for me, is that if you are a woman, you are second-class. Also the rigidity. After you discover the depth of the path, things are not so rigid anymore. Rigidity meaning norms. There are many norms in the center, the protocol, how we treat the lamas.

#### 6.2.5 *NGONDRO*: PREPARING THE MIND TO BECOME A SUITABLE VESSEL

The student who wishes to become a qualified recipient should undergo the *ngondro*, the preliminary practices before receiving Dzogchen teachings. According to the teachings given at Shenten, the first step includes meeting a “qualified master and have devotion to him.”<sup>647</sup> Second, the aspiring student

---

accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.lerabling.org/lang-en/la-source-prices>; At Shenten, the fees for a personal retreat for an individual room with shared facilities costs €30m and the 3 meals per day €20. There is a daily fee for teachings of €35 per day of teachings. Discounts are offered depending on the income of the individual. See: “Retreat Tariffs,” accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.shenten.org/index.php/en/retreats/retreat-tariffs>.

<sup>647</sup> Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Bönchöd Gurim, Ngöndro Teachings from Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, 27th August–1st September, 2006*, ed. Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry (Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006), 6.

offers a *ganapuja*<sup>648</sup> to the teacher and asks him to teach, to “give the initiation,” and then to “give the transmission,” so that the practice is “protected from disturbances.”<sup>649</sup> The actual Guru Yoga practice requires sitting in the “Five-Pointed Body Posture.”<sup>650</sup> The practitioner should then visualize Taphritsa (the twenty-fifth master of the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen cycle of transmission) in front of him or her but should not think that Taphritsa is “just a picture or an image [or] that he is something material. He is in fact completely luminous light, transparent and all knowledge and wisdom are ready and complete [in him]. Otherwise, if you think he is just like a picture, that won’t work at all, you see.”<sup>651</sup>

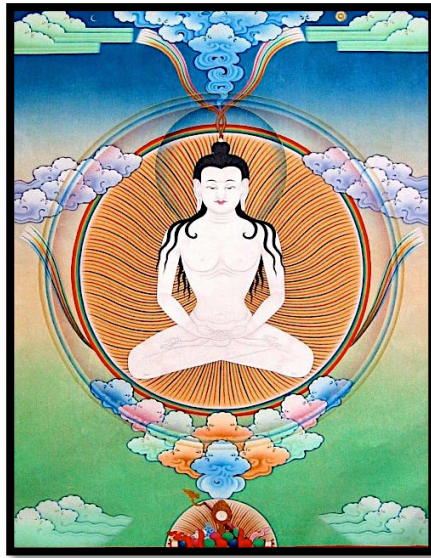


Figure 15 Image of Taphritsa in meditation posture. ©Shenten Sargye Ling.

---

<sup>648</sup> The Sanskrit word *Ganapuja* or the Tibetan *tsog* refer to various forms of offerings or feasts involving specific rituals, considered to be methods for accumulating merit and wisdom and purifying obstacles that impede the ability to achieve Buddhahood.

<sup>649</sup> Namdak, *Bönchyod Gurim, Ngöndro Teachings from Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, 27th August–1st September, 2006*, 6.

<sup>650</sup> The position adopted in the Five-Pointed Posture is to sit cross-legged, with the spine straight, the neck a little bent, eyes gazing at nose level, and the mouth a little open.

<sup>651</sup> Namdak, *Bönchyod Gurim, Ngöndro Teachings from Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, 27TH August – 1st September, 2006*, 7.

As explained in the teachings at Shenten, Taphritsa lived in the eighth century; Namdak describes him as “a normal person, a man born in Zhang Zhung” who, at one point in his life, met with a Dzogchen master named Dawa Gyaltsen, considered to be the Twenty-Fourth Master of the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen cycle. After this encounter, Taphritsa received the instructions of the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen cycle and decided to practice continuously for nine years. During this time, he completely cut off any connections with “worldly activities and living conditions,” kept himself in solitude, and practiced until, after nine years, he achieved a “Rainbow Body.” His master, Dawa Gyaltsen, the Twenty-Fourth Master, is also believed to have achieved the Rainbow Body.<sup>652</sup>

There are two reasons why bonpos maintain that Taphritsa is so significant and why he serves as the main visualization in the Guru Yoga practice. The first is because he is said to have been “kind” by allowing the Bon teachings to be written down. According to the tradition, before him, Dzogchen teachings only existed as oral transmissions, and no one was allowed to write them down or keep any notes. Dzogchen teachings, as the tradition goes, had to be kept very secret; even the master was only allowed to transmit these teachings to one person. “They had to check with the divinities whether it was possible to teach someone, and they also had to check whether the student was qualified, whether they had devotion and determination.” The tradition holds that it was only after Taphritsa that Dzogchen teachings started to be taught openly due to the dangers posed by conflicts at the time. Because of them,

Taphritsa allowed the teachings to be written down rather than continue being kept as the oral transmission of a single lineage. His pupil Nangzher Lödpö wrote down his teachings on paper. The second reason

---

<sup>652</sup> Namdak, 7–8.

why Tapihritsa is visualized during Guru Yoga is because he is considered to represent all the lineage masters of this tradition, a tradition that, according to these teachings, has never been interrupted from Dharmakaya right up to now.<sup>653</sup>

The actual practice involves visualizations, but “you need to have devotion to it and think: ‘It represents all the Buddhas, I have to have devotion and trust it.’ These two go together.”<sup>654</sup> Visualizing Tapihritsa and not a living master is the advice students receive often at Shenten. This is because, as Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains, a teacher is an individual who could eventually make mistakes and deceive the student, but, he argues, Tapihritsa, as the archetype of Buddhahood, can never be deceptive.

#### 6.2.6 A LOT OF TIBETANS DESPISE WESTERNERS

In contrast to the many participants who sometimes described their impressions of lamas, Tibetans, and Bon in general in an idealized manner (also discussed in relation to Buddhism in Chapter 3), those who discussed the challenges of being a bonpo in the West revealed a different perspective. The dissenting voices referred to issues such as the need to have money in order to practice, the difficult situation that ordained Westerners in relation to the Tibetan ordained community, the cultural gap between Tibetan lamas who are not willing to get acquainted with the culture of the place where they teach, and lamas who do not see Westerners as equals in comparison to their Tibetan students. M. M., for instance, speaks about this cultural gap:

---

<sup>653</sup> Namdak, 7–9.

<sup>654</sup> Namdak, 10.

There is something that I personally realize, is that you can feel that lots of Tibetans despise Westerners. Some like—I can understand that there are a lot of strange people, borderline psychotic. But, you know, you feel that—not necessarily saying that for my own teachers. But yeah, basically, since I was saying that they don't take Westerners seriously.

D. R. refers to the fact that, traditionally,

in Tibet there were always people, you read stories of yogis or monks in monasteries who faced lots of problems only by living in monasteries. Drenpa Namkha said don't stay in the monastery of disputing times. This is not a new problem. The problem is that we already had this in a different religion [meaning Christianity in the West] and everybody is so conditioned by being abused in the society, unfairness, etc.

When N. N. referred to how she selects her practices, she directly says that she decides not to practice the preliminaries but instead does her own visualizations “of things that help me feel compassion, help me feel devotion but not necessarily what they tell you to, you know?” She argues that a practitioner should only do whatever is helpful for his/her practice, not necessarily what the teachers say they should do. “I'm not doing all these mantras. I'm doing them when I feel I need to do them, when my practice isn't working, to help me find the Natural State again.” She does not explain how a practitioner can distinguish what is helpful and what is not; she simply indicates that, in her case, she notes immediately when she loses the “clarity” in her meditation. Other students who attend retreats at Shenten had a totally different approach, indicating that only teachers can know what students need. In comparing herself with them, N. N. notes that when she goes to Shenten, “everyone knows the mantras by heart and everyone is such a good student, and then I feel bad, and I'm not doing this and I'm not doing that.”



She further reflects that practices such as mantra recitations are meant to help students to enter and abide in the Natural State, and therefore they are not necessary if the student is already in that State. “You know, sometimes I’m in a Natural State, and I’m like, shit, I’m not doing Guru Yoga. And I stop practicing and I start doing Guru Yoga, which doesn’t make any sense, it’s supposed to be the other way around. [I do this, because] I just feel like [otherwise] I’m not being a good student.”

N. N. refers to the group practices held at Shenten, including the four generosity rituals: “But when I stand there, in the Natural State, it doesn’t feel like I have to stop my practice, come here and be hot in the sun, sing things that don’t really mean anything and it doesn’t bring anything.... And so I’ve started getting over the guilt of not going and just doing what is best and in the end, I think that’s very important.” These remarks by practitioners indicating that they select some practices, adapt others, and adjust the path to their own needs is often mixed with mentions of how sometimes they lack the time, or the discipline to actually do the practices they wished to do, denoting two different and even opposite attitudes that are mixed together in their narratives.

#### 6.2.7 MOST MONKS—THEY HATE RITUALS

Tenzin Wangyal pointed out another theme over which there are dissonant opinions. He referred to the inherent cultural gap between a Tibetan teacher and a Westerner. His approach is not to pretend it does not exist or to try to force a situation where one adapts to the other. Rather, he maintains an “openness” where the limits between the two are acknowledged but communication is still allowed to happen, without interrupting it by trying to convert the Westerners to something they might not even want in the first place. He says:

Generally, the way I look at it, if we are talking three people, I know you are Argentinian, I know she is Tibetan, and I know if I am trying to convince you of something, I know how far I can go. At some point, you are Argentinian, no matter what you pretend to be. She, no matter how much she speaks French, she is a Tibetan girl. So I have to understand that somehow you will hit the limit, and when you hit the limit, either want to communicate with this individual more, or I want to stop.

He further explains that the Three Doors Academy (see Chapter 4.8) functions under the logic that many people have no interest and are not looking for a religion, rituals, or religious ceremonies. Following this logic, the Three Doors Academy offers them what they are able and ready to receive. Wangyal asserts that it is not only Westerners who do not like rituals: “Even the lamas, they don’t do rituals. They are born with rituals and they don’t do rituals. In everyday business life, I don’t do rituals. And I know many of my dear religion lamas, they don’t do rituals. If you tell them whether it is important, they will say it is important. If you see if they are doing in their life, they don’t do in their life.”

He believes it is essential to see these people “as they are, there is one way you can help them.” He adds that when Buddha Tonpa Shenrab and Buddha Shakyamuni taught, they adapted the teachings according to “the state of peoples’ minds,” taking into account that every person has different capacities. “They didn’t feel bad because some people were not listening Dzogchen,” This is why he takes “liberty that way and I get critiqued for that, and I am completely receptive, open, and I don’t critic back and I was not interested. I see where they are coming from, and sometimes they don’t see where I am coming from, because they have no clue of many things that I know.” He elaborates that he can see how he himself changed over time. While acknowledging that for some people, “it may look at the way I changed very badly, some people will say that’s what it is, some people may look at it as good. So for me the context in many of these traditions, rituals, it has a context, and I value them in their context but that is

not for me. It has never been for me, since I was in the monastery.” Furthermore, he explains,

most monks, they hate rituals: “Why we have to do that way?” And I really, what I believe, like even the monasteries, and I know maybe Yongdzin Rinpoche, my own root guru, will not be very happy about this, I know that, and in Menri Monastery there are so many rituals, I really believe too many rituals. Shenten is very minimum, but in the monasteries. But still in Shenten is a lot for Westerners. So the question is, is it really important to continue in that same form? Or it can evolve?<sup>655</sup>

The topics raised by Wangyal are a clear example of how globalization might affect the cultural identities of the follower of a particular religion (see Chapter 3). He is pointing to how a religion can be adapted, selected, and even transformed not only by its new followers but also by the “transmitters” of the religion. His reflections also shed light on how some aspects of Bon seem to “travel better than others”<sup>656</sup> and how these messages are, in the words of some participants, “simplified” in order to reach wider audiences in a global environment.

#### 6.2.8 IT’S LIKE BON APPLIED TO A REAL WESTERN WAY OF LIFE

In relation to changes that Tenzin Wangyal noted in himself, A. M.1 remembers that when she first started to follow Bon, Wangyal was more focused on Tantric

---

<sup>655</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

<sup>656</sup> Knott, “Geography, Space and the Sacred,” 574.

or monastic practices. “For a reason, he decided to put aside that and he stop giving teachings on *tummo*, etc., and said that he would focus, over the next few years, on inner refuge and Dzogchen. You have to understand that he lives in the USA, and the mentality of Americans is super different than Mexican mentality. We Mexicans love rituals, we love them. But he has a more American mentality, mixed with a lot of psychology. It’s like Bon applied to a real Western way of life.” The opinions expressed by A.M.1 resonate with one of the characteristics of Buddhism coming to the West discussed in Chapter 3, which is the diminished role for Buddhist monastics and an emphasis on the psychological nature of meditation and practice.<sup>657</sup> Moreover, Wangyal’s own reflections and the accounts of his students make it clear that his way of teaching in the West evolved over time and is now much less religious. But as history shows, changes often cause tensions and negotiations, some of which I will explore in the following sections.

#### *6.2.9 Differences*

The issue of hierarchies at the Ligmincha Center also refers to the fact that, unlike the practice at Shenten, Wangyal designates certain Western Bon practitioners to become instructors.

A. M.1 speaks of the differences in relation to the hierarchical structure of members of Ligmincha, where “seats during teachings are assigned very strictly, first the directors, the instructors, and then, etc. That’s difficult to me here in Shenten. I think that’s correct because lots of people work many hours and they deserve to be in the front. Here is more open, they listen more, people are not stressed as in the Mexican community.” She believes this contrast is due to the

---

<sup>657</sup> Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” 35.

fact that Tenzin Wangyal designates “instructors” as well as “guides of practice,” who are Western students who are allowed to explain Bon practices in the various communities across the country. This designation of “titles,” she adds, causes conflicts because “of course, the egos of people enter into play. I left Leon *sangha* because of that, because of conflictive situations. It is a big challenge.”

Another difference noted by participants is the cultural gap between the lamas and the Westerners, which was already mentioned above. D. R. said,

The problem is that geshees don't understand so many things about the West and how life is here, they get wrong ideas, and in Tibet they have to be automatically respected whatever they say, so they are not used to somebody telling them, you know, look, excuse me, but this is completely wrong.

He emphasized that part of the problem is that Tibetan centers were set up in the West with the objective of “saving Tibetan culture”:

They are not changing. I understand why, because they are trying to preserve their culture and religious identity; I understand all the reasons. But if you talk from a Western point of view, this is a big problem. There is a big gap. If you try to talk to them, they will look at you thinking, “Ohhh, they have gone bad.” Just say yes, just beat your head on the floor, positions, and no questions. I am not interested. Not interested.

The previous remarks highlights that, the “saving of the Tibetan culture” slogan has served both to mobilize and attract Westerners, but it is also seen as a cause of tension due to the lamas' alleged lack of interest in trying to understand the Western cultures where they teach. It also shows that the dynamics in the religious transmission of Bon to Westerners are multidimensional, including

dissident voices that question what they perceive as a cultural gap impeding real communication and devotional expressions of surrender by those on the other side of the spectrum.

#### 6.2.10 GROUP SITTING IS SOMETHING TIBETANS NEVER DO

Reynolds believes that in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, there have generally been two strategies for bringing Dharma teachers to the West. One is the traditional approach, which he associates with Shenten Center and the teachings of Lopon, Khenpo, and other related lamas. Then there is another approach, where the teachers mix Western philosophical and/or psychological concepts with traditional Tibetan Buddhism. This, he says, is the case of Chogyam Trungpa (discussed in Chapter 3). When Trungpa first came to England, Reynolds adds, he immediately noticed that the two things that Westerners were very interested in were psychotherapy and art. Based on this impression, his first teachings were an attempt to “approach the Western mind” by utilizing elements from psychotherapy and other Western traditions. However, Trungpa was also an artist, Reynolds recounts, and when he came to the States, he met the Japanese Zen master Suzuki Roshi, who made a great impression on him. This encounter had a key effect in Trungpa’s way of teaching, and thereafter he “made the fundamental practice in his group to be group sitting, which is something Tibetans never do, because Tibetan practice of meditation, you get the instruction and then you go out and do it individually. You don’t sit in large groups.” The congregational practice in Tibetan Buddhism, according to Reynolds, is the Puja (special devotional and offering ceremonies). “So that was an innovation, which Chogyam Trungpa found to be very successful.”

Reynolds further adds that “many Americans come to spirituality through psychotherapy. They have emotional problems and think this is going to fix—anyway, so that’s the other approach.”

He indicates that this other approach tends to pull in even more people: “That’s why Tenzin Wangyal, who followed that route, has attracted a lot more people, whereas, say, the Lopon has stayed a relatively small group. The Lopon also has no intention—no interest—in becoming a pop guru, you know, and attracting hundreds or even thousands of people.” Reynolds argues that this is the reason why Yongdzin Rinpoche refused to focus on overseas Chinese, “where the money is,” indicating that only time will tell how these two approaches will evolve in the future.

Reynolds remembers that when he first got involved with Tibetan Buddhism, there were very few books available. There were four books by Evans Wentz, as well as Lama Govinda’s book, *The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, but others, such as those by Alexandra David-Neel, were out of print. But he points out that now so much has been translated, particularly into English, as well as French, German, and other European languages. “We can’t keep up with everything that’s happening now, all the books that are out there. Of course, so far, there hasn’t—there isn’t as much material on Bon, but slowly this is also happening. Scholars are taking interest now in Bon, whereas years ago it was all Buddhism. Bon was considered to be shamanism or something primitive that was there before Buddhism came.”

Reynolds notes that only recently have Western scholars begun debating the significance of Zhang Zhung. In the past, some Western scholars argued that the existence of a so-called “Zhang Zhung Kingdom” was mostly fantasy. This view was challenged by other scholars, such as John Vincent Bellezza, who, during his numerous field trips, documented the existence of ruins, tombs, and

archeological sites from Zhang Zhung in northwest Tibet. Reynolds also highlights the role of Japanese scholars who have been studying the Zhang Zhung language for decades, and he mentions particularly the project on Bon studies at the Ethnographic Museum at Osaka, led by Professor Yasuhiko Nagano. This project was significant because, apart from funding research and publishing several books, it supported a specific project to make a catalogue of the *kanjur* and the *tenjur*. The *tenjur* was catalogued in Oslo by a team headed by Professor Per Kvaerne (discussed above in Chapter 4). The typing, however “was done at Menri Monastery in India, because they taught the monks how to use Tibetan programs on the computer and they did it. Great job. So this is all in the process of developing, and we see how many people are attracted to Bon as a way of life for people who are not Tibetan.”

Reynolds believes that, despite these changes, nowadays only a minority of Westerners who are interested in Bon are scholastically motivated. Instead, “they’re very interested in practice, particularly meditation practice and particularly Dzogchen, which is what the Lupon emphasizes.” He feels that “Westerners are very good at Dzogchen. But so it’s also a question in general with Tibetan Buddhism whether young people, Western young people, would become interested. I mean my generation, which came out of the ’60s did a lot of experiments with various drugs and so on. We’re very interested in consciousness and so on. And flowed very easily into all this Tibetan milieu.” But, he adds, that was a couple of generations ago. He observes that in many Dharma centers, there are now few young participants and that there is a worrisome tendency to “water down [the teachings], just mixing it in with psychotherapy and nothing else, because psychotherapy may be an entranceway, but that doesn’t supply all the answers to life and so I think there’s room for both approaches.” In his view, the approach followed by Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung is meant to “keep this higher level going. We have it here at Shenten and at the retreats they do, maybe doesn’t bring in hundreds of people.” Because of these reasons, Reynolds affirms, “the Tibetans are the new Jews or the Aquarian Age.



They've been kicked out of their country, but they're preserving their culture as it is."

In relation to the "watering down" of the teachings expressed by Reynolds, Tenzin Wangyal affirms that whenever he has taught Westerners who had an inclination to follow a more "traditional" path in Bon, he advised them to go to Shenten and continue their studies and practice there. He underscores that many of the practitioners who attend Shenten had been his students first. "This is my contribution [to traditional Bon]. I open door for many people, then they find what they want and what they can, so I think it is a beautiful thing. But is not that one is right and one is wrong." He refers to the fact that at Shenten, some people say he is inauthentic. "But my skin is very thin.... It doesn't [make] me feel bad, but what makes me feel bad is that many people, when I send them to Shenten, I say my teacher is the most important person in my life. They go to Shenten, these people, beautiful people, heart open, they go to the dining room, meet, listen to critics, and they get totally confused." He laments that sometimes these people lose their "pure devotion."

In this section, we saw that, in relation to the existing tendencies categorized by participants as traditional and modern approaches, participants speak of Shenten's approach and the traditional ways as "a pure way, in fact, the purest way." They use adjectives that refer to original and authentic teachings. They also note the challenges inherent in living in a modern society, including the need to have money, particularly to afford to go on retreats. Some equate adapting Bon to modern life with Tenzin Wangyal's teachings, while others consider that to be diluting the essence of the teachings.

With reference to the "essence of the teachings," Belleza believes that

from the lamas' points of view, some of these traditions go back really far in time, for example, the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, who might be older than 12,000 years. Yungdrung Bon is not a fossilized tradition, the teachings have changed and adapted over the centuries. They would agree but will say there is the essential. I guess that's true in some cases, even when the languages and context changed, but you might say that in essence is the same transmission.<sup>658</sup>

In this section, the contrasts between what is defined by participants as “modern” and “traditional” approaches to Bon have been presented through concrete examples, including the different ways of following the teachings and how these are presented to different audiences, as well as how the context influences Bon and vice versa. Dzogchen, participants argue, is the central element of Bon, which, despite variations depending on when and by whom it is received (and transmitted, one could add), does not depend on external, historical, or cultural circumstances. In the following section, I will look at how the future of Bon is seen by Western bonpos and where they believe the changes in Bon practices will lead.

### 6.3 THE FUTURE

Finally, I asked interviewees about the future of Bon and the direction the religion might take. They acknowledged that if some Westerners continued “to practice and follow the Bon path in depth,” more such individuals would become teachers and lamas. Indeed, this is already happening in the relatively more modern centers. Participants believe that Bon will continue to grow in the West

---

<sup>658</sup> Bellezza, Personal communication, Shenten, Blou.

because, as F. H. put it, in “the past twenty years, there is increased recognition among Tibetans and scientists of the authenticity and the purity of Zhang Zhung Bon spiritual tradition and Zhang Zhung Bon as the source of Tibetan civilization.”<sup>659</sup>

References to Bon as the “authentic” tradition and to its teachings as the “authentic” and “pure” teachings are abundant. While it is not possible to define what is considered authentic, as this will depend on the context, we can say that “it is not an inherent quality but, rather, the product of orchestration, performance and intersubjective negotiation.”<sup>660</sup>

Authenticity relates to a longing for connecting a past to the present, something clearly seen in this study. It is easy to see glimpses of nostalgia and the search for the “original” in these narratives, which are always constructed and negotiated according to the social, cultural, and in this case, religious context.<sup>661</sup>

As mentioned, issues of authenticity are a significant aspect of participants’ engagement and way of perceiving Bon. They do not feel that the religion they are exposed to is any different than how it was in Tibet (or even in Zhang Zhung). Authenticity in this context can be defined as a “proximity to a past material

---

<sup>659</sup> On Zhang Zhung, see the works of John Vincent Bellezza, particularly at: <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com>.

<sup>660</sup> Patrick Finney, ed., *Authenticity. Reading, Remembering, Performing* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3.

<sup>661</sup> See: Anne Braedder et al., “Doing Pasts: Authenticity from the Reenactors’ Perspective,” in *Authenticity. Reading, Remembering, Performing*, ed. Patrick Finney, vol. 21, 2017, 42.

reality” and it also relevant for a “subjective experience or rediscovery of lost premodern values.”<sup>662</sup>

My interlocutors also attributed the increasing expansion of Bon to the qualities of the lamas in the tradition, and, in particular, to the “growing need for spiritual life in the world.” However, E. H. noted, “We have something to offer that’s real and true. So it will develop, but it will not be a huge development, because being the real thing, it requires a commitment and commitment in the practice and commitment in the study.” E. H. indicated that this growth will imply changes in the way Bon is presented in the West. D. F. gave an example of this: “While there is a monastic life in Shenten, it’s much smaller, and lay is in the majority; whereas in traditional Tibetan society, it’s opposite.” Furthermore, some participants note that the process of modernization is going to change the monastic institutions, first in the Tibetan context. They also note that in the West, monastic institutions were established for a specific purpose, as a medium to preserve and perpetuate the teachings. C. I. thinks that the greatest advantage of the Bon tradition is that it is “still very much a continuation of the old institutional structure. Many of the current teachers were born in Tibet, which demonstrates that the tradition is continuing vibrantly.” However, these participants also argued that monastic settings are not sustainable in the West; therefore, for the tradition to continue in the West, further changes will have to happen. Specifically, U. G. states, “In Shenten, retreats are of three months’ duration, as opposed to several years, because Westerners have jobs.”

Bon practitioners also talk about how the teachings are now more accessible than they used to be. The use of new technologies has a great deal to do with this. They mentioned a certain tension existing between the tendencies to use new

---

<sup>662</sup> Braedder et al., 55.

technologies, on the one hand, and, on the other, the traditional practice of reserving the teachings only for those who are ready. In this regards, they mentioned how the more modern centers like Ligmincha are making use of new technologies, while other centers like Shenten are slower and more cautious.

Teachings and rituals are being modified to be more relevant to Western audiences, “which is an inevitable process, but also one that will promote the survival of the Bon tradition in the West” (C. F). As C. I. noted, “By the very fact of translation, teachings are adapted in some form.” Indeed, languages carry different meanings; moreover, beyond linguistic meanings, the words are interpreted through a cultural filter. “When teachings are interpreted, they are adulterated to some extent, but that does not necessarily mean they have lost their essence.” Therefore, “despite efforts to ensure authenticity of teachings, they could never be purely traditional. A pure translation is impossible, despite a naïve view that the transmission is completely pure, because obviously it is culturally influenced.” In relation to this, Bellezza notes that Westerners are not receiving the same teachings as do students in Triten Norbuste:

That’s utterly impossible, because you have a transmission and a receiver. The receiver is very different, they are not Tibetans, it is filtered through their own experiences, cultures, history, and traditions, and so the reception cannot be the same. Even if the transmission is very similar, but it is also transmitted in a different language, and that’s a major change. This is another world. It has its own social conditions, economic components, and environment. The world is different here, and this also affects the reception.<sup>663</sup>

---

<sup>663</sup> Bellezza, Personal communication, Shenten, Blou.

Interviews like these on the theme of “the future” revealed the following subthemes:

- Bon will continue to change because individuals interpret the teachings according to their cultural and historical backgrounds. Participants noted both the need to “preserve” Bon and the natural “adaptations” that will continue to happen.
- For Bon to really grow in the West, a Westerner has to attain enlightenment or become a Buddha. The stories of Buddhas from the past may inspire followers, but they are not sufficiently close to Westerners’ reality to have a deep or widespread impact.
- Technology will continue to influence the way Bon is spread, received, and interpreted.

### 6.3.1 PRESERVING TRADITIONAL TEACHING VS. ADAPTING TO MODERN CULTURES

Even individuals from similar backgrounds listening to a similar teaching might take different meanings from it. As Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung relayed, “When a new religion or new tradition comes to a new place, people are trying to follow the tradition or religion, and then at the same time, they adapt it to their own local lifestyle and local settings and local tradition.” This is, of course, happening as Bon develops in the West. As a result, even those trying to follow the traditional route must adapt it to their lives. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung does not see this as a problem so long as the teachings are not misinterpreted or do not lose their essence. Tenzin Wangyal elaborates that Bon will evolve, because

There is no time in history when things didn’t change. Things always change. Tonpa Shenrab until now, increasable changes, monasteries have changed. If you look at Menri Monastery, lots of things have changed.

Shenten, Triten Norbutse, lot has changed, and it keeps on changing; it is the nature of history, it changes. It speeds up in the West more because culturally very different.

He mentioned that in different places, for instance, he is teaching “more or less same thing every time. For me it is the first thing, no matter where I go, how different I phrase, I teach the essence of Dzogchen. If you look at Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud teachings, there are minimum of rituals, minimum of images, and more essential type of teachings.” He remembers the words of Yongdzin Rinpoche, who often says that “finding the Nature of Mind, this is it, and everything else is not important. He always said that, always. I take all his words literally in my heart. And not only take it, but I do it that way. I am not trying to convince anybody who doesn’t want to do it.” Even when his wife is very interested in rituals, he adds, “I respect her for that.” In Ligmincha, he notes that for years he invited geshe to join a number of students

who really love these [traditional] teachings, and bring them all together, bring the teachings, put my wife there, put our resources and the students who were interested. Some of them are not interested in what I teach. Great! And I am glad you found what you like. Go for it, I encourage you. I support that. It is not that I close that. But somebody who is not interested, I don’t want to. Why? Why is my job to try to convince somebody who doesn’t?<sup>664</sup>

He notes that not all Western societies are the same, indicating that, for instance, Mexicans “are much stronger in rituals, and they have lots of opportunities to

---

<sup>664</sup> Wangyal, Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.

learn. We teach them, the lamas come to teach them, but I personally don't teach. I don't do it and I don't teach. I don't want to teach something I don't do. So I value it, I especially I have a wife who is so much into it." He thinks that one of the most important discoveries for him was how much of an influence Dzogchen teachings had on Westerners

when you communicate with somebody as it is. They get it, people get that. People are moved, people cry, people change. It is incredible, incredible. So I think, when you can touch people like that, then trying to do more complicated way doesn't make sense to me.<sup>665</sup> Yongdzin Rinpoche, for example, he would make comments to people, like sometimes Westerners sometimes very surprising, is like almost you have to leave your family to be really strong practitioner, something like that. So usually Westerners expect teachers to say: love your family, be with your family, help them rather than saying get rid of them [laughs].

Another aspect revealing hopes for the "preservation of the teachings" in the future was raised by E. H., who believes that the "original" Bon texts are the key to ensure this continuation of Bon. But he also adds that these have to be translated into Western languages, for "those of us who have full trust in the tradition and who think this is a meaningful life... In the future there can be changes, or teaching can be mixed, but the base has to be always based on the *original* [emphasis added] tradition."

I. L. thinks interest in Bon will continue to grow in the West. She notices that, when she organized teachings of one lama in her country, "people and he was very happy with the retreat, because really everybody was doing meditation, and

---

<sup>665</sup> Wangyal.



they were asking the questions, and they were willing to do. And people are willing to continue.”

C. I. believes that Bon’s “continuation of the old institutional structure” is an advantage for it, in contrast to other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, in which “some lamas have come to the West and set up their own thing, a little bit disconnected from the old traditional structures.” Then when they pass away, they somehow need to establish a mechanism for the succession of their teachings in the new context of the West. C. I. also points out that Bon in the West is “still in the early days. There are still some teachers who were born in Tibet, who were educated in Tibet.” He believes other centers, such as Rigpa run by Sogyal Rinpoche or the Dzogchen Community of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, are also adapting the way they present Dzogchen teachings. These centers, he notes, are considerably larger in the number of participants they have in comparison to Shenten. But a common characteristic between them is that they “kind of have a new way of doing things,” in contrast to the Shenten approach that “is just an extension of the institutional structures that have existed for centuries.” Nevertheless, due to the fact that Shenten has “great teachers around that can, you know, who can continue things,” he thinks that “the whole thing is continuing vibrantly.”

In relation to Namkhai Norbu, N. N. refers to what she thinks is a retaliation from conservative forces within Buddhism that are “really angry against Namkhai Norbu in Tibet and Bhutan, because he has extracted the essence of Dzogchen teachings and has created a way of teaching to Westerners.” She argues that the opponents to this trend believe that in doing so, “he sort of twisted the tradition in a way, in their eyes. He extracts the essence and teaches, but it’s better for Westerners.” She further reflects on whether these changes and adaptations are suitable for Westerners who are only beginning to embark on the Buddhist or Bon path, or if in contrast, they can actually have a negative effect in people’s lives.

D. F. believes “the tradition will be kept the way it is now by conserving the texts.” He thinks audiences who can “fit into that [traditional] way of teaching” will be naturally attracted. Like A. M.1, he believes that being “traditional” equals being “profound,” and that, conversely, “the people who like something less profound, they will go to some other place.”

Several participants noted that the traditional Bon approach is a deeper approach. They refer to modern ways of presenting Bon as less profound, washed out, and more light-weight.

Furthermore, D.F. thinks that Bon taught in a traditional way is more difficult to follow because there are fewer students at Shenten compared to Tibetan Buddhist centers that have “modernized.” For him, the value of how teachings are given in Shenten is based on the fact that these are translated directly from Bon texts. He also expressed his wish that one day, “Shenten will develop, and maybe one day when—maybe some rich benefactor may come and help Shenten, and then maybe at that time they would be able to help individual monks... and then there would be, it could be a real monastery in the future.” His mention of a “rich benefactor” resonates with the tradition in Tibet of monasteries being financially supported by “benefactors.” This provides further evidence for how Tibetan customs and structures are continued in the exile, in a new context like Shenten, not only by Tibetan religious representatives but also by Westerners who replicate these narratives in their own voices.

A number of participants said that Western people find it difficult to become monks or nuns because Shenten cannot accommodate them, due to financial, legal, and cultural constraints. For instance, they mentioned how Shenten does not offer medical insurance for ordained Westerners, or how it could not

financially support them if they were to move there. Other challenges raised by participants in this regard include the cultural differences that sometimes cause “tensions because we have a monastic setting, in France, where this religious congregation composed of Tibetan monks has to adapt to the realities of France,” says D. R.

### 6.3.2 I DO NOT WANT IT TO BECOME “A FACTORY OF ENLIGHTENMENT”

Five participants noted that they appreciate Shenten’s small size and low number of retreatants, particularly in comparison to other centers where Dzogchen is imparted, such as Rigpa or Namkhai Norbu’s centers. They worried that in the future this could change “if a more commercial approach is taken.”

S. G. thinks that the evolution of Shenten is directly linked to “the devotion that practitioners have for Rinpoche; even when Rinpoche will not be here, it will last, it is too deep. The legacy is too deep, too complete. That’s what Rinpoche wanted.... I think this Shenten will come, as a deployment of the vision of Rinpoche.... I love the littleness of Shenten. I will not like it to become a factory of enlightenment; it would have another flavor.”

D. R. is one of the witnesses of the very beginnings of Yongdzin Rinpoche’s teachings in the West. He met Rinpoche in 1995. “Retreats at that time were completely different, completely informal. Maybe there were about forty people. No water offering, no prostration, nothing. He was teaching two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon without translations. We received Zhang Zhung Ngyed Gyud in Holland, Austria, Germany.”

D. R. believes that the way teachings in Shenten are given has evolved over time, from a more informal way to a more “religious” way, where certain protocols, such as prostrating in front of the lama, are now firmly in place.

C. F. wonders what will happen to the center once Rinpoche dies. Noting that he is not afraid to speak about the latter's death, he thinks that when that happens, he is not sure whether "the activity of Shenten will go down at this time or not.... Khenpo gives very really, really clear teaching, very clear, pure, authentic and very, very right. I think more and more young people will come."

Referring to lamas traveling to different places and giving teachings, J. C. thinks that there is a need to systematize the teachings and the order in which these are taught in the West. Otherwise, he points out, "many lamas are coming and going and they're giving one talk, another talk, and that's it. And there's nothing left, you know? And here [in Shenten] you have all what we need.... I want to do more practice retreats because Gelek is very nice. He's giving very nice talks and very nice things, but I think we lack of practice."

F. H. believes Bon is going to change, and that the only way for Bon to be successful in the West is if it adapts to its new cultural context, something that he believes is slowly starting to happen now. "The kind of teachings that are happening now it's a new thing. We are all sitting there, we are lay people, and we are receiving very powerful teachings and the way they are doing the retreats here. It's a redefinition, doing these *gomdras*. Well, there has been *gomdras* before. Gomdra is a Tibetan word, but they are adapting it. You know, we do three months because we know Western people, they've got jobs." He believes these adaptations will continue to happen "inevitably... and that process is beginning now."

C. I. highlights that one difference that has an impact on the form Bon takes in the West is that here, Bon represents only one aspect of people's lives, whereas in Tibet, it permeates society:

In Tibetan culture, from my experience is, it is the whole of Tibetan culture. It's all pervasive. It permeates everything, and here that is not the case. You know, it's just some practice that people have adopted. It is not fully integrated into their lives. Whereas in Tibetan culture, it's fully integrated into people's lives. I am not saying everybody, but generally speaking, if you go to a Tibetan village, even now, even after decades of communism imposed upon him or her, it's still there, integrated everywhere. They have such a deep, deep faith and conviction.

C. I. said that we have to think about what circumstances will be like in one or two hundred years' time. What shape will Bon teachings take then? He thinks there is something of great value in the Bon teachings that should be perpetuated and continued into the future.

We need to think about the right kind of institutions that will be relevant. I think that there are things of therapeutic value in the Bon religion that can be used outside of a religious context. Some of the philosophy is very practical and useful. But anyway, even the old, traditional classification of the Nine Ways of Bon was dividing into things that were practical for everyday life, and things that were focused on enlightenment.

He further says that he listened once to a teaching by Tenzin Wangyal, who "framed it in such a way that people in a Western audience could relate to in their lives, without it being any connection with any religion, and it was very effective and helpful. So I think that is a good thing."

### 6.3.3 WE CAN TALK ABOUT WESTERN BON ONLY WHEN WE... HAVE BUDDHAS FROM [THE] WEST

The issue of whether cultural context matters was raised several times in the interviews. Related to this issue is another element pointed out by several participants: the examples of great yogis of the past are inspirational, but they have specific connotations linked to Zhang Zhung or Tibet that are either too distant in the past or too different symbolically and culturally from today for modern Westerners to grasp.

I. L. wondered whether, for Western people to fully understand the meanings or the teachings of Bon, should they learn Tibetan first? Is it a prerequisite? She poses the question of whether Western languages have words that can be faithful to the original meaning in Tibetan language.

I think that we can talk about Western Bon only when we will have Buddhas from West. I would say, when we will have fully realized practitioners who would be teaching in Western languages. That, for me, it was always a question. Can we say prayers in our own languages? Well, prayers were created by enlightened beings. Are we enlightened to put them in our language?

Bellezza further adds that “the Western mind is different, there are many things that Tibetan know for granted; it might take years for Westerners to catch things that Tibetans know inherently from birth.”<sup>666</sup>

---

<sup>666</sup> Bellezza, Personal communication, Shenten, Blou.

Concerning the development of Bon, D. R. emphasizes that Lopon is a Dzogchen master, and as such, he teaches

regardless of religion, nationality, race and all this kind of things. The guys who come now, geshe, they are politicians and businessmen to a large extent. I am not saying completely and everybody, but many. Culture is like that; you have education in monastic system in Tibet, that's only way to get education. Once you get this education, you can have positions on society and it doesn't change here.

Because they cannot go back to Tibet, he believes, "they came here, they have their own schemes going on, money-making schemes, supporting some populations in the East, which I think is good idea but it should be done." D. R. words reveal a long-cherished Orientalist notion about Tibet deeply steeped in religion. But, private schools as well as government schools in Tibet did exist where it was possible to get a layman's education in secular knowledge. As far back as the eighteenth century, private schools for lay people were established in monasteries. Moreover, whenever the existence of private education is mentioned, it usually refers only to education of a small and privileged group of Tibetans from high society. This is, after all, also part of the "imagined Tibet." In fact, as Alicia Travers notes, prior to 1959, there existed in Tibet a social group that could be classified under what we may today call "middle-class," which included government secretaries, aristocratic families, merchants, large landholding farmers and military officers who were heavily influenced by education received at private schools, which were, of course, outside of the monastic sphere. The subjects taught at these schools went from calligraphy to grammar and mathematics, but a variety of additional subjects were also introduced according to the needs of the students. For example, foreign

languages were taught in some of them, which also received the indirect support of the Tibetan government.<sup>667</sup>

D. R. also raises themes that were not mentioned by other participants, pointing out to what he calls “a dangerous tendency toward business and politics.” For example, he refers to the third annual meeting of Tibetan bonpos outside of Tibet, a meeting that reunites bonpos teaching in the West to share experiences and challenges, noting that in that meeting “everything is Tibetan, in Tibetan, no Westerners’ presence at all, as if they don’t exist at all. And everything is broadcast to Tibet, to Tibetan audiences.” Other issues that he reflects on, which are connected to Bon becoming global, are what he considers to be the excessive use of technological devices, such as “iPhones” or related objects. This point is linked to a wish to maintain a particular “image,” which D. R. attributes to the fact that bonpos “came late, they came already when Tibetan Buddhism has been here, so they are establishing now, so they are growing some sort of dissent from other Buddhist groups but 99.9 percent monastic. I don’t see a bright future.” D. R. thinks that Yongdzin Rinpoche sees this trend and that he

perfectly understands what’s happening, what’s the situation.... But he is eighty-eight years old.... He’s done so much and because of him the tradition is alive. And it will be alive for Tibetans, I have no doubt there are good practitioners and very learned geshe and lamas. Having said all that, they haven’t figured out what to do in the West and a lot of it has to do with money.

---

<sup>667</sup> See: Alice Travers, “Between Private and Public Initiatives? Private Schools in Pre-1951 Tibet,” *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 35, no. 2 (2016): 30; For an analysis of how educated lay Tibetans in early modern Tibet struggled to find a balance between the religious and the secular areas of knowledge when thinkers found their way to deal with their ideal of integrating Buddhism and the so-called “worldly life” or the union between religion and politics, see: Dominique Townsend, “Buddhism’s Worldly Other: Secular Subjects of Tibetan Learning,” *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 36, no. 1 (2016): 15.



I. L. said that she posed this question about the future of Bon teachings to the late Abbot of Menri, and whether what Tenzin Wangyal teachings can be considered Bon. She recounts his answer as follows: “His Holiness said: if I would say that this is not Bon, he would be really very upset.” This again points to the notion of authenticity. She further indicates that Bon, as an institution and at the doctrinal level,

has been conservative for more than two thousand years, and I don’t think that it has to change. The original text, original teaching, these things do not have to change because they should be as pure as it was, because our Nature of Mind is the same and nothing has changed. I think that the way we communicate, the way it moves, it is changing.

#### 6.3.4 INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY

Access to Bon teachings and to teachers of Bon also varied across the group. Even within the small sample, some individuals stated that they had already stayed at Buddhist schools for many years and had only recently found Bon teachings. So, even though it has been argued that globalization and technology have allowed many more people to have access to Bon, this might not necessarily be true for all. Some of the participants said they learned about Bon centers through friends and publications, an indication of the various ways in which people can be reached.

Similar to the debate on modern versus traditional teachings of Bon was the perception of how modern technology would influence the religion. For some, the Internet was regarded as an essential element that provides access to resources and teachings from any location, a means to communicate with other

followers, and a source of information about teaching schedules. However, some individuals felt that there could also be negative consequences. For example, this was most obvious in the discussion of having webcasts of the teachings. “Would this reduce the efficacy of the teachings?” some asked.

Technology has enabled the increased accessibility of teachings. A certain tension exists between the tendency to use new technologies, sharing teachings more widely, and the tendency to remain more traditional, making the teachings available only to those who are considered ready. Participants mentioned how the more modern centers, like Ligmincha, are making use of the Internet, while other centers, like Shenten, are slower and more cautious about doing so.

Clearly, the Internet has only become more prominent and will increasingly serve as a source of information on Bon, Shenten, Ligmincha and the many practices and teachings that come from them. One participant found Shenten by a Google search in 2007, and another stated that the Internet is useful in finding teachers, as his first connection to Rinpoche was through email.

It is impossible to know precisely how modern technology will affect the religion, its spread, and its teachings in the future. This will lead us into an innovative time, not seen before in history. The rate of change and need for adaptation is likely to be great. But there is no doubt that both globalization and religions are affected by modern technology, above all the Internet, which provides rapid and widespread communication.

As seen in Chapter 3, Beyer further argues that as a consequence of globalization, religion is affected by modern technology, particularly communication. Global communication allows for geographical barriers to be broken down, and it

facilitates communication between dissimilar social groups.<sup>668</sup> “The other is encountered more often, more closely and by more people than ever before.”<sup>669</sup>

Some participants noted that although technologies such as the Internet and smart phones will make teachings more accessible in the West, they will not replace the central role of teachers. As F. H. comments, “Practitioners will still need to seek guidance from teachers on important issues.” Other interviewees who discussed the difficulties of practicing without a teacher also echo this sentiment.

It is noteworthy that the first ever live broadcast of a religious ceremony at Shenten only occurred very recently, on the occasion of the Grand Du Tri Su Ceremony that took place on October 20, 2018. More than 300 people came from different countries to attend the ritual, and many of them also participated in a seven-day retreat aimed at accumulating a specific number of recitations of mantras and preparing for the ceremony. Monks from Tritten Norbutse traveled from Nepal to participate in the event. Additionally, a recorded video of the live broadcast of the event is available on YouTube.<sup>670</sup> During the retreat before the ceremony, daily live webcasts were available in the mornings and afternoons.

The YouTube broadcasting of the Shenten Du Tri Su Ceremony by a Bon center as “traditional” as Shenten might well presage the breaking down of further boundaries in the future. It is certainly indicative of how the ongoing process of expansion and adaptation of Bon in the West is driven by Western followers, as much as it is by Tibetan Bon teachers. As the voices of the participants of this study revealed, this dynamic transplantation, compelled by several forces, is

---

<sup>668</sup> P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (SAGE Publications, 1994).

<sup>669</sup> Hinnells, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2.

<sup>670</sup> See: Shenten Dargye Ling, *DU TRI SU Ceremony*, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzLftYTUEIc>.

resulting in Bon taking roots in the West in various forms. Whether we look at Bon in the West as a hybrid mix of the “original” Bon and the European and American cultures in which it is set, or as a new form of Bon, completely different from the “original” tradition and with no traces (or only as a faint reminiscence) of its Tibetan cultural aspects, or as both, it is certain that its unique characteristics are the consequence of the reciprocal influence of Bon in its global dimension as well as in its localized forms, meanings, and interpretations.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation set out to answer the question: What are the dynamics that are taking place in the transmission and reception of Yungdrung Bon in the West? Grounded in the experiences of participants (Bon followers in the West), this study provides a new viewpoint on the expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the West. It also provides us with a comprehensive picture of the modern history of the Yungdrung Bon religion, deepening our understanding and broadening our knowledge of Bon as a lived religion.

By situating the transmission of Bon in the West in the context of the recent expansion of Tibetan religious traditions, this study also contributes to scholarly discourse concerning the intersection between religion and globalization. The findings of this research project include the existence of new forms of interactions between the secular and religious facilitated by globalization, through which cultural phenomena are deterritorialized and disembedded from their original territories, followed by processes of selection, interpretation, adaptation, and reterritorialization into new contexts.

Considering both the historical development of Bon in the West and the contemporary experiences of Western followers of Bon, the findings of this study are broadly consistent with the postulations described in Chapter 3. Furthermore, I have shown that globalization has impacted the diffusion of the Bon religion in the West and accelerated its spread, and furthermore, that the globalization of Bon, including the relatively recent expansion and reception of Bon in the West, has been precipitated by different factors. These include:

1. the ability of the propagators of the religion to adapt it to new cultural settings in a particular context where Tibetan Buddhism had already

- found its way, gaining renown for emblematic figures such as the Dalai Lama, who has been perceived as a symbol of peace and harmony;
2. the various ways the receivers adapt Bon to their own lives and circumstances;
  3. the interest of Westerners in exploring Eastern teachings and Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, as well as the central role played by some lamas and teachers and also some Westerners; and
  4. the characteristics of the information age, through which the transmission of religious ideas is accelerated by the use of contemporary communication technology, particularly the Internet; however, while digital technologies are making teachings more accessible in the West, it is doubtful, some participants argued, that they will replace the importance of teachers.

While our understanding of Bon in the West is still developing as its proponents and scholars continue to translate the language, philosophy, and research on the practical application of the teachings to new environments, my results provide evidence for how these teachings are already being actively reshaped by both teachers and students in multiple settings. The findings emerging from the participant's perspectives on Bon also shed light on how global Bon is embedded in their daily lives, switching from an external level of analysis to looking at the practical impact Bon has on their individual lives and their "collective personal experiences."

## **7.1 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY:**

Significant conclusions, as well as conceptual and practical implications of Bon as a global religion drawn upon the relevant literature and the data I have presented include the following key elements.

Religion plays a key role and constitutes a driving force in globalization processes, and Bon is no exception. These processes are marked by an increased opening of borders, flows of ideas, and transcultural and transnational faiths, in which universalizing and particularizing tendencies coexist and where cultural resources are embraced, appropriated, reinterpreted, reterritorialized, and utilized accordingly by different social groups.

Globalization has lifted the boundaries of Bon, which has clearly left its original Tibetan borders and reached new places in Europe and the Americas. The intersection between Bon and globalization is evident in the fact that it has been integrated into new cultures and societies; it has been adapted and interpreted by its followers, demonstrating both fluidity and dynamism, in line with what McGuire describes as the malleability of lived religion.<sup>671</sup> Malleability also refers to the possibilities of modifying religious traditions, institutions, and personal practices, including changing the way teachings are presented in order to enhance the religious engagement of participants and the financial sustainability of the religious institution, which has also been the case for Bon in the West, as narrated by participants.

This case study has shown that Bon, like other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, is in fact operating within a global context, one in which coexisting forces are creating changes in the tradition while other forces are enabling the preservation of the tradition despite these changes. Indeed, Bon has become global and its expansion is ongoing, widening our understanding of previous research in the field of the study of religion and globalization. The results of the current study further support the notion that religions in a global world are marked by the confluence of universalizing and particularizing tendencies. Religions travel and

---

<sup>671</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 186–87.

also take root in specific locales. Some aspects of religions, depending on the social, historical, and cultural contexts, travel better than others. But clearly, appropriation processes, including those that result from the reterritorialization of cultural resources, can and most times do result in religious emblems, myths, and practices acquiring new symbolic meanings. Globalization, as Robertson pointed out, is characterized by a global consciousness, which refers to individuals being directly or indirectly aware of this global status.<sup>672</sup> Moreover, particularly due to the impact of modern technology, religious actors and followers are aware of the global situation of the religions they belong to, but they are equally aware of the many other religions that exist and are also global. In other words, they are aware of being part of a global (and local) religion while also being conscious that this is one of many other religions coexisting in a parallel global interconnectedness. At the individual level, the consequences of these interactions between expanding religions and people in a globalized world thus result in individuals knowing that they belong to “one of many existing religions,” and that there are Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and many other religious teachers, schools, centers, and retreats they could access in the West simply by doing a Google search, booking a place, and paying the corresponding fee. Is being a bonpo the same as knowing that Bon is one among many religions and that by being a bonpo, he or she belongs to a relatively small community in comparison to other religious communities? Is this different than being a bonpo in a rather isolated region of Tibet and thinking that Tibetan Buddhism is all there is outside of Bon? Or in other words: does context matter?

It is clear that the role of the teachers and their individual personalities and, in some cases, their charisma are central to the way Bon is being assimilated as it spreads globally. The master–student relationship, an essential element of

---

<sup>672</sup> Roland Robertson, “The New Global History: A Sociological Assessment,” *Sao Paulo: Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Sao Paulo*, 1996, 13.



esoteric Buddhism and Bon and an aspect deemed essential in transmitting Bon, is perceived by some participants as having changed in the West, no longer being the same as the traditional master–disciple relationship in Tibet, India, and Nepal. They believe this change is mainly due to the different cultural contexts and to the fact that the transmission of Bon takes place mostly in nonmonastic environments. Nevertheless, most Bon followers in the West claim to mainly follow one teacher or to have a strong “connection” with one teacher in particular. Teachers’ personalities have a powerful imprint on the way teachings are transmitted, particularly for the more “modern” trend of Bon led by Tenzin Wangyal. According to participants, teachers are at the center of the process of adapting Bon in the West. And, as the history of Bon in the West shows, a small number of Westerners who came into contact with Bon practitioners between the ’60s and the ’80s, particularly in India and Nepal, also played a leading role in facilitating this process.

In the field of Tibetan studies, and more particular Tibetan Buddhism—and even more Tibetan Buddhism in the West—significant evidence from this study leads me to assert that we can speak of a field called *Bon Studies*. We will see if this will also result in the formal institutionalization of Bon Studies by academic centers that create programs and institutions dedicated to the field, since it is already happening in seminars and conferences, where dedicated panels on Bon studies are held.

This expansion of Bon in the West shows at least two major trends: the first trend can be described as a “modernist approach,” mostly led by Tenzin Wangyal. This trend was described by some participants as being a “simplistic” form of Bon, to the point of not necessarily being Bon any longer. However, it was also described by Wangyal and his students as a new way of presenting Bon and, in particular, Dzogchen practice, in a manner relevant to wider audiences who do not necessarily wish to be “converted” to Bon or to embrace a new religion. The second trend refers to a more traditionalist approach that is associated by participants with a monastic setting and with Shenten Dargye Ling.

A significant task that I aimed to achieve in this thesis was tracing the expansion of Bon into the “West,” looking at how and by whom it is being received and adopted, bearing in mind the historical context and the dynamics of globalization processes in which this expansion is taking place. My contribution in this field is particularly valuable since some of the key actors of the modern history of Bon are of advanced age. Having access to their stories and being able to interview them provided me with precious first-hand information, some of which may be lost in the near future if not documented now.

It is noteworthy that limitations in researching Bon in the West have included the lack of prior research studies on the topic, which led me to use grounded theory as a methodology in the first place. This helped me to identify new gaps in the literature and to describe the need for further research and, in the research phase, to identify salient themes that emerged from interviewee statements.

Furthermore, the findings of this study provide with implications for future research on Bon in the West and in comparison to the history of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Indeed, in the field of Tibetan Studies, the modern history of Bon since the beginning of the Tibetan diaspora in exile is very recent. The main events that led to Bon becoming global only started happening less than sixty years ago. While Tibetan bonpos followed a process similar to that of their compatriot Buddhists, they soon differentiated themselves and are now finding their own way of presenting and narrating what they identify as being their singular identity and their role as “the others” in relation to Tibetan Buddhists. This is leading to the

emergence of new characteristics proper only to bonpos in the West, which occupy a central place in how Bon is presented and perceived in the West.<sup>673</sup>

Historically situating the transmission of Bon in the West, we saw that the first Bon Tibetan teachers who came to Europe and North America were invited by other early influential Tibetan Buddhist teachers who already had Buddhist centers in the West. That was the case, for instance, of Tenzin Wangyal, who was invited by Namkhai Norbu. We also saw that the first Bon websites included references to the Dalai Lama, specifically his teaching calendars in the West. However, along the way, Bonpos reassessed who they are, their place in the Tibetan community in exile, and their place vis-à-vis other Tibetan Buddhist schools. Nowadays, Bon websites rarely mention the Dalai Lama, if ever, and emphasize other aspects, historical accounts, and figures. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche is currently portrayed in the majority of Bon websites as a central, unifying figure, highlighting his role, together with the late Abbot of Menri, in preserving and reviving Bon after the Chinese invasion in China. For instance, elements like Dzogchen, Zhang Zhung, Olmo Lung Ring, and Tonpa Shenrab are being strongly emphasized as Bonpos find a way to define “who they are” in a process marked by a search for an identity and for a positioning in the West. What is certain is that this repositioning of bonpos vis-à-vis the wider Tibetan community and the audiences in the West is, in general, accompanied by a sense of “pride” for being what is widely perceived to be “the indigenous/authentic/original” tradition of Tibet, a tradition that preceded the arrival of Buddhism into Tibet. Such pride can even amount to what Kvaerne mentioned as an incipient though growing “fundamentalism,” indicating again that the confluence of globalization and religion often causes both fluidity of

---

<sup>673</sup> See: Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*, 240.

boundaries and the sharpening of religious divisions.<sup>674</sup> I myself noticed during a fieldtrip to Tibet in October 2016 how bonpos emphasised their “Zhangzhungness.” Renowned Tibetan bonpo scholars told me that there were plans of setting up a museum on Zhang Zhung in Lhasa. The causes for this are also to be found in how Tibetan Buddhist schools and bonpos in particular perceived or created opportunities arising from their exile, to redefine who is who in relation to others, as well as other hierarchical assumptions. As indicated in Chapter 3, it was once predicted that Tibetan Buddhism would be destroyed, yet to the contrary, Tibetan Buddhism and Bon continue to thrive in Tibet itself, including via the many Chinese now following Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, as well as in India, Bhutan, Nepal, and, of course, in the West. It is certain that bonpos in Tibet are also being influenced by this trend that started in the bonpo communities in exile. It is to be seen how this will influence the configuration of power and politics among Tibetan traditions in general and Bon both in the West and in Tibet. Bonpos are defining their position in a larger scheme of Tibetan communities in exile. This process started in the West, but it is most likely influencing Tibetans in Tibet.

A related significant discovery to emerge from this research is that certain elements that were relevant in the old institutions of Tibetan Buddhism still play a significant role in the Tibetan diaspora. This includes the divide between Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, and the issues related to hierarchical structures among designated Bon representatives and Bon followers. What I found telling in my research is that some of these elements, such as sectarian views, references to Bon in pejorative terms, or issues related to hierarchies and power ploys, are also being reproduced by Western followers at the very same time that they are carrying with themsevers idealized images of Bon or Tibet in general.

---

<sup>674</sup> Warburg, “Globalization, Migration and the Two Types of Religious Boundary: A European Perspective,” 97-98.

Moreover, as it happens in the case of Tibetan Buddhist schools, “narratives about Buddhism (Bon in our case) are found on websites, Facebook comments, or message forums, they are being shaped, told, and retold among a network of Internet users and producers.”<sup>675</sup> It is also seen in the special position accorded to anything related to Zhang Zhung in all narratives of Bon in the West. The “West”—“East” flow is worth further research, to corroborate whether these identity narratives are also followed in Tibetan communities in Tibet and to which extent.

A well-thought-out analysis of the narratives on Bon found on the Internet is a promising theme for further research. Another line of future research is whether the Bonpos’ search for a sense of identity has also happened or is happening in the Tibetan regions in China, as it is in the case in their exile in India and Nepal..

In parallel, further research on the political connotations of the reconfiguration of Tibetans belonging to the different Buddhist and Bon schools in exile, and in relation to how does the government of China perceives this repositioning in the Tibetan autonomous region, is certainly worth for further research. This, however, would need to take into account the limitations that exist for the study of politically sensitive issues inside of China.

Furthermore, in considering how Westerners’s adoption of Bon and interaction with the teachers and the tradition affect Bon, including looking at how Bon is evolving along with deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes, a

---

<sup>675</sup> Laura Osburn, “Between Networks and Story: Analyzing Hyperlinks and Narratives on Websites about Tibet,” in *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, ed. Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger (New York: Routledge, 2014), 54.

pertinent question is whether certain significant symbols of Bon, such as the imaginary topography of Zhang Zhung and Tibet as the place where the great masters of the past lived and thrived, will continue to have the same status and place in how Bon is presented and received in the West in the future. Will the new geographical expansion of Bon play a role into the “sacred geography” of Bon? Will Westerners incorporate new myths and stories related to physical places in France, for instance? Will Tibetans in Tibet see France as a special place because their revered teacher Yongdzin Rinpoche established a center there? My interviewees predicted that in this globalization process, monastic institutions will eventually diminish or even disappear, firstly in the Tibetan context and also in the West. The open question is whether an adapted form of Bon, transmitted in a European Western language by a Western teacher who has never been in a Bon setting in Asia (i.e., Tibet, India, or Nepal) can still be called Bon.

Indeed, as noted by participants, a key element that will show to what extent Bon is established in the West is the emergence—or the lack of—Western lamas, Western teachers, or “Western Buddhas.” In this sense, additional future research can further explore the development of Bon within specific Western cultures, for example, Argentina, and how followers are interpreting and integrating the religion into their own lives in their particular Argentinean context.

As a dynamic and not a fixed or static phenomenon, Bon is still evolving in the present day, including through the “Westernization” of teachings and the constant interaction between universalizing and particularizing tendencies mentioned above. Some notable ways this is happening, as my research found, include how Bon is presented in the West with characteristics borrowed from schools of Western psychology; by Westerners becoming teachers, particularly in the case of Ligmincha International; by “secularizing” Bon and by defining it as something different than “a religion”; and through the translation of Bon texts, particularly into English, Spanish, French, German, and Russian. Bon is further

evolving as Tibetan Bon lamas frequently travel from East to West, and by Westerners from nonreligious backgrounds starting to explore a “spiritual lifestyle” and become involved in Bon.

Although most respondents seemed aware of the changes and evolution of Bon and particularly of certain practices as they are experienced in the West, most did not seem concerned by this or express that it has lost any “authenticity.” Furthermore, the adaptation of Bon beliefs, understandings, and practices to new cultural environments and societies has resulted in transformations ranging, as mentioned above, from the translation of teachings into English and other European languages, to changes in the step-by-step process traditionally required to follow the Bon religion. None of these changes were perceived as altering the “nature of Bon.” As our case study corroborates, as religions travel, religious messages are transformed by the transmitters and also by the receivers, according to the historical and cultural contexts. But those in the receiving end, in our case study, find it more difficult to acknowledge (or to self-reflect over) the transformations that they themselves are causing to the religion. Significantly, participants did not perceive that they are agents of change. They did not see themselves as affecting the religion, even when they indicated that they are selective when choosing what parts of Bon they have chosen to follow. This did not represent for them something that could eventually impact the way Bon is perceived and presented.

Another significant implication of this study, in line with what Snellgrove noted when he published the very influential book *The Nine Way of Bon*, is that when looking at any religion and in order to understand it holistically, researchers should take into account the religion’s own historical and doctrinal

perspective,<sup>676</sup> which involves bringing in the voices of the followers and their own points of view. A religion should not only be studied by paying attention to the texts but, at least as importantly, the lived aspect of the religion, including what the followers have to say about these aspects is key in having a broader understanding of any religion, which will always be—by its own nature—a dynamic phenomenon. From a scholarly point of view, this has to be done by looking at bonpos' own self-representations, recognizing that this does not necessarily represent a historical reality, but it does represent a religious reality for the followers. Accompanying such research with the critical study of texts and other sources is key to understand the many layers of religious meanings beyond the written sources.<sup>677</sup> Without one or the other, the study of any religion would unavoidably be incomplete.

Bon means different things to different participants. The wide spectrum of perceptions, assimilations, and definitions show that Western participants select, adapt, and interpret their understanding of Bon in relation to other approaches they are already familiar with. However, their approaches are not uniform. When describing their encounter with Bon and the different ways in which this event changed their lives, many participants linked this moment to their early lives, describing it as something of crucial significance and narrating the encounter as a “homecoming,” “magical,” “special,” and marked by a sudden sense of “connection.” Some participants referred to their “belonging” to Bon in a rather sectarian manner, while others indicated that they do not want to follow a sectarian approach. Bon was explained by some participants with characteristics that are aligned to what we understand as “Modernist Buddhism,” including as a rational, scientific, and methodical path. This “modernist Bon,” which combines elements of Bon with psychology and psychotherapy and emphasizes meditation

---

<sup>676</sup> Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, 2.

<sup>677</sup> Havnevik and Ramble, *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kværne*, 15.



as its core practice, resonates more acutely with the expectations of these participants, particularly those who reject anything they perceive as being “religious.” Religions, for some participants, are “unintellectual” and most of them narrate their experiences of Bon as not having a religious nature. While most Western followers are less interested in the ritualistic aspects of the religion and more interested in meditation practices, particularly Dzogchen, other participants emphasize the devotional and ritualistic aspects of Bon as essential or mention them as being practiced in their daily lives. These differing accounts suggest that there is no simple way of describing what Bon is and how it is lived by Western participants. Their interpretations, nevertheless, seem focused on how Bon impacted them rather than how they as Westerners have impacted Bon. This may be because they see themselves as only one element of the broader change. Notably, participants, in contrast to the beginnings of Bon in the West, are more recently starting to request specific practices as they learn more or have access to information about different Bon teachings, cycles, and practices.

In this context, in line with McMahan’s theory of Modernist Buddhism, in today’s global Bon, we can see demythologization and detraditionalization at work, which are also followed by the psychologization<sup>678</sup> of Bon. As McMahan notes, the detraditionalization of Buddhism in the West tends to value reason and experience over tradition and promotes individuals to select, reject, adopt, or reinterpret traditional practices accordingly.<sup>679</sup> In my findings, I noted that this shift from tradition to experience is mostly influenced by a group of Westerners who follow the more modernist approach to Bon. However, most participants who actually follow a more traditional approach to Bon also strongly rejected any identification of Bon as a “religion.” Similar to the findings of Marion Dapsance in

---

<sup>678</sup> McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism*, 2008, 52.

<sup>679</sup> David L. McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54.

her study of a Tibetan Buddhist center in France, we have seen that there is a clear reluctance to name Bon as a religion even by the same participants that perform the four generosity rituals, involving burning incense and visualizing water as pure realms. This may lead us to question what actually do we mean, in this context, when we refer to “religion”? That is to say, if what we normally understand as a “religious” practice is considered by participants as being “nonreligious,” then perhaps the concept itself should be questioned.

Furthermore, the levels of commitment expressed by participants varied, but there was a tendency for a high level of dedication among participants who were actively engaged in Shenten. Some of them had undergone practices considered to be “advanced,” such as the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat and other *tsalung* practices. Some dedicated long periods of time during the year to practice, either by doing extended retreats at Shenten of more than one month each time or by reducing their formal work commitments in order to have more time to practice. A few of them claim to have radically changed their lives after encountering Bon, including by causing changes in their families, their circles of friends, and their professional careers. This suggests a type of bonpo who does not fit into what Tweed defined as “sympathizers” or “nightstand” Buddhists, described in Chapter 3.<sup>680</sup> These participants who engage in long meditation periods, sometimes even studying Tibetan language, usually follow the more traditionalist approach and tend to perceive the approach to Bon that is transmitted in Shenten as the “authentic” form of Bon.

On the other side of the spectrum, for those who are less “traditional,” we have seen that Bon practices such as meditation have been adapted to suit Westerners’ modern lifestyle. Specifically, these Westerners are less likely to engage in

---

<sup>680</sup> See: Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures.”

extended periods of meditation. Instead, they prefer practicing it in shorter time periods to achieve a sense of “well-being.” The influence of the psychological approach to practice<sup>681</sup> is something that was particularly emphasized by Tenzin Wangyal’s students, as mentioned above. They follow instructions via Internet webcasts, they do not necessarily have a relationship with a particular teacher, and their focus seems to be on applying what they learn to have a better life, or, as one participant put it, “to have a nicer Samsara.” This contrasts with the claim made by the more “traditionalist” followers, who frame their practice in terms of the goal of attaining liberation from Samsara.

In this context, meditation, and Dzogchen meditation in particular, is a key element. Dzogchen is what mostly attracts Westerners to Bon and what most participants highlighted as the core of Bon and the reason for their adherence to Bon. Again and again, they mentioned Dzogchen’s nuances of being “secret” and “the highest” of all teachings. With the increased interest in Bon Dzogchen meditation by Westerners (even those who have no particular allegiance to a religion), we have seen that it has become an accepted practice to jump into Dzogchen practice without necessarily undergoing the preliminary practices, demonstrating another aspect of how Bon has been adapted in the West. Furthermore, some participants believe that the primacy of Dzogchen increases the alleged compatibility between the teachings given in different centers, e.g.,

---

<sup>681</sup> Extensive research is available on the application of mindfulness meditation and techniques to different types of modern therapies, such as psychotherapy and cognitive-based therapy. To cite just a few, see: Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: Meditation and the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Paul Salmon et al., “Mindfulness Meditation in Clinical Practice,” *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 11, no. 4 (2004): 434-46; D. Morgan, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse* (Taylor & Francis, 2003); John J. Miller, Ken Fletcher, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Three-Year Follow-up and Clinical Implications of a Mindfulness Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Intervention in the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders,” *General Hospital Psychiatry* 17, no. 3 (1995): 192-200; Ilan Kutz, Joan Z. Borysenko, and Herbert Benson, “Meditation and Psychotherapy: A Rationale for the Integration of Dynamic Psychotherapy, the Relaxation Response, and Mindfulness Meditation,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1985.

the “Buddhist forms” of Dzogchen taught by Namkhai Norbu and Sogyal Rinpoche, in relation to that taught in Shenten or other Bon centers.

A more practical implication of my thesis is related to one of the questions I set out to answer at the very start: Who in the West is receiving Bon and how? Despite heterogeneities, there are certain common characteristics shared by all participants: they are often middle-upper class, with a certain level of education and with possibilities for financing their spiritual practice. In those cases where participants were not financially solvent, they were mostly dedicated to the practice of Bon either full time or most of their time. Except for cases where people were already wealthy, this created financial difficulties for them to pursue Bon. A possible question is whether the Tibetan traditional system of “sponsorship” of richer Tibetans to others will be replicated but, in this case, from Westerners to Westerners, rather than going only from West to India, Nepal or Tibet. A system where Bon centers create scholarships to broaden the diversity of people who can participate in center activities or in advanced practices would impact the relative lack of socioeconomic diversity of participants, something that researchers as well as centers should consider when studying Bon in the West.

How the personal lives of participants are affected by their encounter with Bon also varies, but there is a general tendency to narrate this impact as being significant and prominent in their lives. It was also interesting to see that some individuals, as they stayed longer in Shenten, had an experience that they presented as of self-realization—a sense that they are not actually the person they thought they were. They began to explore their own identity and relationship with themselves and with others, such as friends, relatives, and intimates, indicating that the meditative practices of Bon were instrumental in these processes of self-discovery. Some participants described their relation to other members of the Bon sangha as having a central place in their lives.

However, others also noted that the Bon path is a rather solitary one, especially as they tend to refer mostly to Dzogchen meditational practices.

These findings are relevant and valuable for those looking at the impact of meditation practices on mental health and well-being. I particularly emphasize the intriguing and barely studied impact of practices such as the Dark Retreat, which involves Westerners spending forty-nine days in complete darkness doing specific breathing and visualization practices. At least eight of the participants of this study underwent Dark Retreats, and five of them completed the full seven weeks retreat. Indeed, little efforts, if any, have been made so far into investigating which “advanced” practices are Westerners undergoing and what impact these are having in them. It is worth asking, as a theme for future research, how advanced practices like the Dark Retreat impacted the lives of those who underwent them and the implications of these practices from a psychological point of view. Conversely, another theme for future research is which elements from Bon are being incorporated into Western psychotherapy as alternative methods of treatment, as is the case, for example, with so-called “mindfulness” techniques. It is also worth asking whether in the future there will be stricter or more relaxed conditions for embarking on these practices, which used to be allowed only to advanced practitioners.

Again in the domain of the psychology of religion and spirituality at the individual level, encountering Bon had a significant impact in participants’ thoughts about their relationships, family life, and their future plans. From the perspective of psychotherapy, a significant implication is that it is key for therapists to be aware of affiliations that their patients have to Bon or, indeed, to any religion or belief system. This is a major discovery since knowing which practices patients engage in or have followed would provide significant information for the therapist that can eventually influence the entire therapeutic relationship. Conversely, it would also be relevant for a patient selecting a

therapist to know whether he or she is involved in Bon practices, particularly considering that this would certainly impact the manner in which therapists interpret their patients' experiences, as evidenced in some of the views shared by participants in this research who happened to be therapists. In other words, the Bon religious framework of patients (and that of therapists) should be taken into account in therapy, both to assess its beneficial as well as its restrictive effects, something that has been neglected in most studies in the field, in contrast to the many existing studies on mindfulness and mental health, as seen in Chapter 3. The particular nature of Bon practices, particularly advanced practices, call for focused research.

It also became clear in the course of my research that Bon, as it is lived on a daily basis, differs from what is practiced during formal retreats. Indeed, as a consequence of and in relation to globalization, Bon is undergoing a process of expansion in which certain elements, like Dzogchen meditation, are being selected while other elements, like traditional teaching methods and institutional structures, are often being adapted and reinterpreted in the new contexts by Bon followers in the West. Some elements of Bon are more likely to be retained than others, particularly Dzogchen meditation. Other practices that do not require a formal time for "sitting in meditation," such as mantra recitation, were mentioned by participants as something they normally do in their everyday lives. This is proving significant in still unfolding ways to the lives of contemporary Western men and women. Thus, the case of Bon exemplifies how globalization can influence religions and vice versa. Many of the respondents were only partially practicing (most expressed that they could have a higher level of commitment), but they rarely acknowledged this as something, if widespread (as it seems to be), that is actually changing the practice of Bon. In other words, I did not perceive that they believe their individual practices have an impact on the evolution of the tradition in the West; however, some participants noted that the way Bon practices are applied by Westerners in general is indeed cumulatively changing Bon.

Much like the interviews carried out for this research, it would now be timely to pursue case studies on the lives of the new Western Bon teachers and instructors. As I focused mostly on one center, Shenten, the experiences reflected in my research include mostly behaviors and practices at that site, which might not reflect similar tendencies in other centers that either teach Dzogchen or are labeled as Bon centers. Additional research would be needed to verify what the actual similarities or differences are. While I was lucky to have extensive access to Shenten, a potential limitation to such research might be a lack of access to information, key persons, and documents in other centers. Another aspect worthy of further research and analysis is the role of global Bon in the context of the Tibetan diaspora, particularly in the process of the formation of a “modern Tibetan identity.” This would entail looking at the historical roots of Bon, as well as how bonpos narrate their history, and at the importance they place in the early history of Zhang Zhung, and how Bon, as the indigenous religion “of the Tibetan people”<sup>682</sup> is situated in this process.

Global Bon, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, can be looked at from various perspectives. It can be viewed as a historical process that is going through a continuous dynamic development in which global and local tendencies coexist, sometimes in tension and other times in apparent coherence. But it can also mean looking at the individuals who either transmit Bon or receive and follow Bon, and how transmitting or receiving Bon in a new geographical and cultural setting affects what is transmitted and what is received, as well as the reciprocal influences among the two. The manner in which the participants expressed their experiences of these cross-cutting elements were discussed as facets of their lived religious or spiritual reality, allowing us to unpack the human dimensions in the interplay between religions and globalization. This made it possible in this dissertation to move between a theoretical approach and the discovery of the

---

<sup>682</sup> Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, 107.

lived experiences of a specific group of bonpos in the West. The various ways in which they receive and apply Bon practices—and their perceptions of them—reveal that Tibetan Bon, far from being a monolithic whole, is a complex religion that creatively takes on specific characteristics according to diverse cultural settings and that reflects the rich diversity of voices within it.



## REFERENCES

- Achard, Jean-Luc. "Edition critique des instructions de Bru rGyal ba g. yung drung sur la pratique de la Claire-Lumière ('od gsal) selon le cycle du Phyang khrid du Zhang zhung snyan rgyud." *Revue d'études tibétaines* 23 (2011): 203–33.
- . *Enlightened Rainbows: The Life and Works of Shardza Tashi Gyeltsen*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- . "L'Essence Perlée du Secret-Recherches philologiques et historiques sur l'origine de la Grande Perfection dans la tradition mying-ma-pa." *Annales de l'École pratique des hautes études* 110, no. 106 (1997): 573–76.
- . *The Six Lamps, Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bon Tradition*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017.
- Adogame, Afe, and Shibana Shankar. *Religion on the Move, New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Adogame, Afe, and Shobana Shankar. *Religion on the Move!: New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Aldenderfer, Mark. "Defining Zhang Zhung Ethnicity: An Archaeological Perspective From Far Western Tibet." *Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas*, 2007, 1–21.
- Aldenderfer, Mark, and Holley Moyes. "In the Valley of the Eagle." *Expedition - University of Pennsylvania, Museum of Archaeology* 47 (2005): 28–34.
- Aldiabat, Khaldoun M., and Le Navenec. "Data Saturation: The Mysterious Step in Grounded Theory Method." *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 1 (2018): 245–61.
- . "Data Saturation: The Mysterious Step in Grounded Theory Method." *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 1 (2018): 245–61.
- Altglas, Véronique, ed. "Introduction." In *Religion and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Altglas Véronique, ed. *Religion and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Altglas, Véronique. "The Global Diffusion and Westernization of Neo-Hindu Movements: Siddha Yoga and Sivananda Centres." In *Religion and Globalization*, edited by Altglas Véronique, Vol. Volume II: Westernization of Religion and its Counter-Trends. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Ammerman, Nancy. "Introduction: Observing Religious Modern Lives." *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 2007, 3–18.
- Ammerman, Nancy T. *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- “An Overview of the Tibetan and Russian Contacts.” Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://tibetpolicy.net/comments-briefs/an-overview-of-the-tibetan-and-russian-contacts/>.
- Annells, Merilyn. “Grounded Theory Method, Part I: Within the Five Moments of Qualitative Research.” *Nursing Inquiry* 4, no. 2 (1997): 120–29.
- Arizaga, Mara. “An Introduction to the Study of Bon in Modern China.” *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 327–35.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Asociația Culturală Bön. “Asociația Culturală - Bön - Kulturális Egyesület.” Accessed October 13, 2018. <http://www.acbon.org/>.
- “Association Triten Norbutse.” Accessed May 17, 2019. <http://www.association-triten-norbutse.org/>.
- Bartone, Shaun. “Sogyal Rinpoche: Criminal Tantric Lama.” *Engage!* (blog), August 18, 2017. <https://engagedharma.net/2017/08/18/sogyal-rinpoche-criminal-tantric-lama/>.
- . “When the Iron Bird Crashes: Tibetan Buddhism in the West and ‘Idiot Devotion.’” *Engage!* (blog), March 1, 2015. <https://engagedharma.net/2015/03/01/when-the-iron-bird-crashes-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west-and-idiot-devotion/>.
- . “When the Iron Bird Crashes: Tibetan Buddhism in the West and ‘Idiot Devotion’ Pt. 2.” *Engage!* (blog), February 26, 2015. <https://engagedharma.net/2015/02/26/when-the-iron-bird-crash-lands-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west-and-idiot-devotion/>.
- Basch, L., N. G. Schiller, and C. S. Blanc. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005.
- Basquin, Kallon. “The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind.” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d.
- . “The Three Doors: Transformative Practices for Body, Speech and Mind.” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d.
- Baumann, Martin. “Buddhism in Europe.” In *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia*, 85–105, 2002.
- . “Buddhism in Switzerland.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000): 154–59.
- . “Buddhism in the West: Phases, Orders and the Creation of an Integrative Buddhism.” *Internationales Asienforum* 27, no. 3–4 (1996).

- . “Creating a European Path to Nirvana: Historical and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10, no. 1 (1995): 55–77.
- . “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 1–43.
- . “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001). <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/128/>.
- . “Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001). <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/128/>.
- . “Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe.” In *Buddhism in the Modern World*, edited by David L. McMahan, 115–35. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- . “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no. 3 (1997): 377–404.
- . “The Dharma Has Come West: A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997).
- . “The Transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: Processive Modes and Strategies of Adaptation.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1994): 35–61.
- Baumann, Martin, and Cristina Rocha. “Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008).
- Bell, Sandra. “Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism.” In *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, edited by Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann. University of California Press, 2002.
- Bellezza, John V. “Zhang Zhung, Foundations of Civilisation in Tibet.” *Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften*, 2008.
- Bellezza, John Vincent. “A Better Definition of Bon in 508 Words.” *Tibet Archaeology* (blog). Accessed October 26, 2018. <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/october-2015/>.
- . *Antiquities of Northern Tibet: Pre-Buddhist Archaeological Discoveries on the High Plateau: Findings of the Changthang Circuit Expedition, 1999*. Adroit Publishers, 2001.
- . Personal communication, Shenten, Blou, June 30, 2016.
- . *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

- . *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- . “Zhang Zhung.” *Foundation of Civilization in Tibet*. *Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* 368 (2008).
- Bentor, Yael. *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*. Vol. 11. Brill, 1996.
- Berger, Peter, and Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books, 1969.
- Beyer, Peter. “Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions.” In *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, edited by Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman. London: Brill, 2007.
- . *Religion and Globalization*. Vol. 27. London: Sage, 1994.
- . “Religion Out of Place? The Globalization of Fundamentalism.” In *The Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies*, edited by Bryan S. Turner and Robert J. Holton. London: Routledge, 2015.
- . *Religions in Global Society*. Boston: Routledge, 2013.
- Beyer, Peter, and Lori Gail Beaman, eds. *Religion, Globalization and Culture*. London: Brill, 2007.
- Bjerken, Zeff. “Exorcising the Illusion of Bon ‘Shamans’: A Critical Genealogy of Shamanism in Tibetan Religions.” *Revue d’études Tibétaines*, 2004, 4–59.
- Blezer, Henk. “A Brief Bibliographical Key to Zhang Zhung Snyan Rgyud Editions with Special Attention for Sources on the Early Lineage.” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 20 (2011): 125–203.
- Blezer, Henk, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, and Saraju Rath. “Where to Look for the Origins of Zhang Zhung-Related Scripts?” *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*, no. 1 (2013): 99–127.
- . “Where to Look for the Origins of Zhang Zhung-Related Scripts?” *New Horizons in Bon Studies* 3, 2013, 99.
- Blondeau, Anne-Marie. *La Controverse Soulevée Par l’inclusion de Rituels Bon-Po Dans Le Rin-Čhen Gter-Mjod: Note Préliminaire*. Kommission für Zentralasiatische Studien, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988.
- . *Le “Découvreur” du Maṅi bka’-’bum était-il bon-po?*, 1984.
- Blondeau, Anne-Marie, and Anne Chayet. *L’épopée Tibétaine de Gesar: Manuscript Bon-po fonds A. David-Néel du Musée Guimet: Présentation et traduction*. Editions Findakly Paris, 2014.
- Borges, Jorge L. *Borges: Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1999.

- Borup, Jørn. "Buddhism in Denmark." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008): 27–37.
- Both, Anne. "Les bouddhistes français loin du nirvana." *Le Monde.fr*, November 9, 2016. [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/11/09/les-bouddhistes-francais-loin-du-nirvana\\_5028370\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/11/09/les-bouddhistes-francais-loin-du-nirvana_5028370_3260.html).
- Braedder, Anne, Kim Esmark, Tove Kruse, Carsten Tage Nielsen, and Anette Warring. "Doing Pasts: Authenticity from the Reenactors' Perspective." In *Authenticity. Reading, Remembering, Performing*, edited by Patrick Finney, 21:171–92, 2017.
- Brown, Mick. "Sexual Assaults and Violent Rages... Inside the Dark World of Buddhist Teacher Sogyal Rinpoche." *The Telegraph* (blog). Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/sexual-assaults-violent-rages-inside-dark-world-buddhist-teacher/>.
- Bruce, Matthews. "Buddhism in Europe." In *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia*, 120–38. University of California Press, 2002.
- Bryant, Antony, and Kathy Charmaz. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage, 2007.
- Caplan, M. *Eyes Wide Open: Cultivating Discernment on the Spiritual Path*. Sounds True, 2009.
- Casanova, Jose. "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 4 (2001): 415–41.
- . "Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization." In *Religion and Globalization*, edited by Altglas Véronique, Vol. Volume I: Religion and Space in Global Context. New York: Routledge, n.d.
- Cebolla i Martí, Ausiàs Josep, Marcelo Demarzo, Patricia Martins, Joaquim Soler, and Javier García Campayo. "Unwanted Effects: Is There a Negative Side of Meditation? A Multicentre Survey." *Plos One*, 2017, Vol. 12, Num. 9, 2017.
- Chanda, Nayan. *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Chaoul, Alejandro. *Chod Practice in the Bon Tradition*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2009.
- Chaoul, Alejandro, and Lorenzo Cohen. "Rethinking Yoga and the Application of Yoga in Modern Medicine." *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 2 (2010): 144–67.
- Charmaz, Kathy. "Between Positivism and Postmodernism: Implications for Methods." In *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, edited by Norman K. Denzin, 17:43–72. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2008.
- . *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage, 2014.
- . *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, 2006.

- Charmaz, Kathy, and Linda Liska Belgrave. "Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis." In *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney, 347–65. London: Sage, 2012.
- "Chögyam Trungpa - Shambhala." Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://shambhala.org/teachers/chogyam-trungpa/>.
- Clemente, Adriano. *Visionary Encounters: The Dzogchen Teachings of Bönpo Treasure-Revealer Shense Lhaje*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2016.
- Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage, 2008.
- Cornu, Philippe. "Quand le bouddhisme est attaqué." *Le monde des religions*. Accessed November 23, 2018. [http://www.lemondedesreligions.fr/une/philippe-cornu-quand-le-bouddhisme-est-attaque-02-11-2016-5921\\_115.php](http://www.lemondedesreligions.fr/une/philippe-cornu-quand-le-bouddhisme-est-attaque-02-11-2016-5921_115.php).
- Cox, Laurence, and Maria Griffin. "Border Country Dharma: Buddhism, Ireland and Peripherality." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 93–125.
- Cozort, Daniel. "The Making of the Western Lama." In *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003.
- Cuevas, Bryan J. "Some Reflections on the Periodization of Tibetan History." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 10, no. 2 (2006): 44–55.
- Dakpa, Nyima. *Opening the Door to Bon*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2006.
- Dallapiccola, Anna Libera, and Denwood Philip, eds. "Stupas of the Tibetan Bonpos." In *The Stupa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, Vol. 28. Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1980.
- Dalton, Jacob. "The Development of Perfection: The Interiorization of Buddhist Ritual in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2004): 1–30.
- Dan, Martin. "Introduction." In *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, edited by Per Kvaerne and Yasuhiko Nagano, Vol. 24. Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies 4, 5. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, n.d.
- Dan, Martin, Per Kvaerne, and Yasuhiko Nagano, eds. *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*. Vol. 24. Senri Ethnological Reports 4, 5. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003.
- Dan Smyer Yü. "Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Dapsance, Marion. "Ceci n'est pas une religion»: l'apprentissage du dharma selon Rigpa (France)." Thèse de doctorat en Religions et systèmes de pensée, École doctorale de l'École pratique des hautes études, 2013.
- . *Les dévots du bouddhisme*. Paris: Éditions Max Milo, 2016.
- . "Submission, Devotion and Sexual Abuse: My Investigation of Buddhism in France." *Tibetan Buddhism – Struggling With Diffi-Cult Issues* (blog), December 1, 2016. <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2016/12/01/submission-devotion-and-sexual-abuse-my-investigation-of-buddhism-in-france/>.
- . "Sur le déni de la religiosité du bouddhisme." *Le Débat*, no. 2 (2015): 179–86.
- Davidson, Ronald M. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'anti-oedipe*. Vol. 1. Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1972.
- Delrue, Geneviève. "Le bouddhisme sans concession, de Marion Dapsance," February 18, 2018. <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20180218-religion-bouddhisme-dapsance-islam-bajrafil-linguiste-theologien-imam>.
- Denzin, Norman K. "What Can Grounded Theorists and Action Researchers Learn from Each Other?" In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage, 2007.
- Dietrich Christi M. "Encyclopedia of Global Religion." edited by Mark Juergensmeyer. London: Sage, 2011.
- Shambhala. "Discovering the Sacred: An Interview with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche," March 6, 2017. [https://www.shambhala.com/snowlion\\_articles/discovering-the-sacred/](https://www.shambhala.com/snowlion_articles/discovering-the-sacred/).
- Doerler, Sebastien, Gerd Manusch, and Florens Van Canstein. "Establishing a Bon Centre," 2005.
- nhs.uk. "Does Meditation Carry a Risk of Harmful Side Effects?," May 26, 2017. <https://www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/does-meditation-carry-a-risk-of-harmful-side-effects/>.
- Dorjee, Pema. *Stūpa and Its Technology: A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1996.
- D.R. "Deux Moines Tibétains Cette Semaine Au Chateau de La Modtais a Blou." *Le Courrier de l'Ouest*. June 1, 2005.
- Dubreuil, Geraldine. "Go for Your Dark Retreat in Thogal House." *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, January 22, 2012.

- Eddy, Glenys. *Becoming Buddhist: Experiences of Socialization and Self-Transformation in Two Australian Buddhist Centres*. London: Continuum International Publishing, 2012.
- Editors, The. "New Allegations of Sexual Abuse Raise Old Questions." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, July 25, 2017. <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/new-allegations-sexual-abuse-raise-old-questions/>.
- Edou, Jérôme. *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod*. Shambhala Publications, 2017.
- Eimer, Helmut. *A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms*. (*Bon Studies*. 11). (. 76). Vol. 11. *Bon Studies* 76. Osaka: Senri Ethnological Reports, 2010.
- Eldershaw, Lynn P. "Collective Identity and the Postcharismatic Fate of Shambhala International." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, no. 4 (2007): 72–102.
- Ermakov, Dmitry. *Bø and Bön: Ancient Shamanic Traditions of Siberia and Tibet in Their Relation to the Teachings of a Central Asian Buddha*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2008.
- Finney, Patrick, ed. *Authenticity. Reading, Remembering, Performing*. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Finnigan, Mary. "The Lamas Who Give Tibetan Buddhism a Bad Name | Mary Finnigan." *The Guardian*, October 8, 2012, sec. Opinion. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/oct/08/tibetan-lamas-buddhism>.
- Francke, August Hermann. *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 1. Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1924.
- . *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 3. Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1926.
- . *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 4. Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1927.
- . *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 5. Verlag der Asia Verlag, 1928.
- . *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 6. Leipzig: Asia Major, 1930.
- . *GZer Myig: A Book of the Tibetan Bonpos*. Vol. 7. London: Asia Major, 1949.
- Friedman, T. L. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.
- Fussman, Gérard. "Symbolism of the Buddhist Stūpa." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1986, 37–53.



- Geza, Uray. "The Old Tibetan Verb Bon." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 3, no. 17 (1964): 323–34.
- Glaser, Barney G. *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Sociology Press, 1998.
- . *Stop, Write: B Writing Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 2012.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Theory*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1967.
- "Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International." Accessed January 17, 2019. <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/boen-buddhism/resources/glossary-of-bon-terms.html>.
- Gorvine, William M. *The Life of a Bonpo Luminary: Sainthood, Partisanship and Literary Representation in a 20th Century Tibetan Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Goss, Robert E. "Buddhist Studies at Naropa: Sectarian or Academic?" *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, 1999, 215–37.
- Guinness, Loel. *Rainbow Body*. New Delhi: Serindia, 2018.
- Gurung, Kalsang Norbu. "The Emergence of a Myth : In Search of the Origins of the Life Story of Shenrab Miwo, the Founder of Bon." Leiden University, 2011.
- Gyalba, Yungdrung, and Per Kvaerne. *The Stages of A-Khrid Meditation: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1996.
- Gyatso, Janet. "Female Ordination in Buddhism: Looking into a Crystal Ball, Making a Future." *Mohr, T. & J. Tsedroen. Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*. Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2010.
- . "The Development of the Gcod Tradition." *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, 1985, 320–41.
- Hallberg, Lillemor RM. "The 'Core Category' of Grounded Theory: Making Constant Comparisons." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 1, no. 3 (2006): 141–48.
- Harvey, A. C. *The Econometric Analysis of Time Series*. P. Allen, 1990.
- Harvey, Peter. "The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1984, 67–94.
- Hatchell, Christopher. *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Havnevik, Hanna, and Charles Ramble, eds. *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kværne*. Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2015.
- Held, D. *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*. Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Herrington, Luke M. "Globalization and Religion in Historical Perspective: A Paradoxical Relationship." *Religions* 4, no. 1 (March 12, 2013): 145–65.
- Hinnells, John R., ed. *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Psychology Press, 2005.
- Hoffmann, Helmut. *Die Religionen Tibets: Bon Und Lamaismus in Ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung*. K. Alber, 1956.
- . "Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion." *Abhandlungen der Geistes-und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Jahrg n. 4, 1950*, 130–443.
- . "Zur Literatur Der Bon-Po." *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 94, no. 2 (1940): 169–88.
- Hoffmann, Helmut HR. "An Account of the Bon Religion in Gilgit." *Central Asiatic Journal* 13, no. 2 (1969): 137–45.
- "Home of Study of Bön Buddhism - Lishu Institute Www.Lishu.Org." Accessed January 5, 2019. <http://www.lishu.org/>.
- The 17th Karmapa: Official website of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. "In Memoriam: Jean-Louis Massoubre," April 26, 2016. <https://www.karmapa.org/>.
- Jackson, John. "The Path: Traditional Bon Teachings or the 3 Doors Academy?" *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d.
- Jacques, Guillaume. "Zhang-Zhung and Qiangic Languages." In *Linguistic Substrata in Tibet*, 75:121–51. National Museum of Ethnology, 2008.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding. "Closing the Gaps—Some Notes on the Making of Perspectives." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 465–77.
- Jones, Steven L. "Religious Landscapes of Globalization: A Review." *IASC: The Hedgehog Review - Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2002) - Religion and Globalization* 4, no. No. 2 (n.d.): 109–15.
- Jungdrung Ten Gye Dü De. "Jungdrung Ten Gye Dü De – Örökkévaló Tan Összegyűjtésének és Szétárasztásának Közössége." Accessed October 13, 2018. <http://jungdrungbon.hu/>.
- Kaloyanov, Stanimir. "Irano-Tibetica: Some Observations on the Tibetan Bon." *The Tibet Journal* 15, no. 1 (1990): 77–82.
- Kalu Rinpoche. *Confessions of Kalu Rinpoche*. Accessed November 23, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ka3bENirs>.

- Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- “Karma Trinlay Rinpoche.” Accessed January 6, 2019. <http://www.bodhipath.org/trinlay/>.
- Karmay, Samten G. “A New Discovery of Ancient Bon Manuscripts from a Buddhist” Stūpa” in Southern Tibet.” *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 55–84.
- . *Feast of the Morning Light: The Eighteenth Century Wood-Engravings of Shenrab’s Life-Stories and the Bon Canon from Gyalrong*. Vol. 57. National Museum of Ethnology, 2005.
- . Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, May 2, 2014.
- . Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, June 30, 2016.
- . *The Arrow and the Spindle*. 2009th ed. Katmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998.
- . *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998.
- . *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- . *The Great Perfection (Rdzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*. Vol. 11. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- . *The Little Luminous Boy: The Oral Tradition from the Land of Zhangzhung Depicted on Two Tibetan Paintings*. Orchid Press, 1998.
- . *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*. London, 1972.
- Karmay, Samten G., and Donatella Rossi, eds. *Bon: The Everlasting Religion of Tibet. Tibetan Studies in Honour of Professor David L. Snellgrove*. 1/4. Vol. 59. East and West, n.d.
- Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen. “A Historical Overview of the Bon Religion.” In *Bon: The Magic Word*, edited by Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007.
- Kawanami, Hiroko. “Buddhism.” In *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, edited by Helmut K. Anheier and Mark Juergensmeyer. London: Sage Publications, 2012.
- “Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche.” Accessed January 27, 2019. [http://www.shenten.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=119&lang=en](http://www.shenten.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=119&lang=en).
- Klein, Anne C., and Tenzin Wangyal. *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

- . *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Knott, Kim. "Geography, Space and the Sacred." In *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. New York: Psychology Press, 2005.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karenina. "Khros Ma Nag Mo, The 'Wrathful Black One' and the Deities Summoned to the Ritual Feast in the GCod-Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. A Preliminary Survey of the GCod Demonology." *Zentralasiatische Studien* 34 (2005): 209–30.
- . "Ma Gcig Lab Sgron Ma—The Life of a Tibetan Woman Mystic between Adaptation and Rebellion." *The Tibet Journal* 23, no. 2 (1998): 11–32.
- Kosmin, Barry. *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*. Three Rivers Press, 2011.
- Kvaerne, Per. "A New Chronological Table of the Bon Religion: The Bstan-Rcis of Hor-Bcun BsTan-'jin-Blo-Gros (1888–1975)." *Studia Tibetica, Tibetan Studies*, no. 2 (1985): 241–244.
- . "Bon." In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Eliade Mircea. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
- Kværne, Per. "Bon and Shamanism." *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 19–24.
- Kvaerne, Per. "Bonpo Studies: The A Krhid System of Meditaion." *Kailash Pp. 19–50; Vol. I, No. 4, Pl'. 247–332*. 1, no. 1 (1973): 19–50.
- . *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*. Shambhala Publications, 1996.
- . "The Literature of Bon." *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre. Edited by José Cabezón and Roger Jackson. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996, 138–46*.
- . *Tibet Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of The Tibetan Bonpos*. Leiden: Brill, 1985.
- . "Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Founder of the Bon Religion." In *Bon: The Magic Word*, edited by Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007.
- . "Zhangzhung, Bön, and China: The Construction of an Alternative Tibetan Historical Narrative." In *Tibetan Subjectivities on the Global Stage: Negotiating Dispossession*, edited by Shelly Bhoil and Enrique Galvan-Alvarez, 3–22. Rowman & Littlefield, n.d.
- Lerab Ling. "La Source Prices." Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.lerabling.org/lang-en/la-source-prices>.
- Lama, Dalai. *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*. London: Cardinal, 1990.

- Lenoir, Frédéric, and Juliet Vale. "The Adaptation of Buddhism to the West." *Diogenes* 47, no. 187 (1999): 100–109.
- Lesegretain, Claire. "Polémique autour d'un livre hostile au bouddhisme tibétain." *La Croix*, January 30, 2017, sec. Religion. /Religion/France/Polemique-autour-livre-hostile-bouddhisme-tibetain-2017-01-30-1200821119.
- Lhagyal, Dondrup. "Bonpo Family Lineages in Central Tibet." In *New Horizons in Bon: Studies*, edited by Yasuhiko Nagano and Samten G. Karmay, 2:429–508. Senri Ethnological Reports 15, 2000.
- Ligmincha Germany. "S.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche." Ligmincha Deutschland. Accessed December 16, 2018. [http://new.ligmincha.de/?page\\_id=1106](http://new.ligmincha.de/?page_id=1106).
- Ligmincha International. "Glossary of Bon Terms | Ligmincha International." Accessed January 17, 2019. <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/boen-buddhism/resources/glossary-of-bon-terms.html>.
- Lindahl, Jared R., Nathan E. Fisher, David J. Cooper, Rochelle K. Rosen, and Willoughby B. Britton. "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Challenges in Western Buddhists." *PloS One* 12, no. 5 (2017): e0176239.
- Ligmincha International. "Lineage of Bon - 34th Menri Trizin." Accessed May 7, 2019. <https://ligmincha.org/bon-buddhism/>.
- Liogier, Raphael. Personal communication, Blou, Shenten Dargye Ling, April 15, 2015.
- Liu, Yu-Shan. "Rethinking the Recently 'Discovered' Bon/Zhangzhung Traditions: The Case of Yungdrung Shon Dance (g.Yung Drung Shon Rtsed) | Yushan Liu - Academia.Edu." Accessed February 18, 2015. [http://www.academia.edu/8158621/Rethinking\\_the\\_Recently\\_Discovered\\_Bon\\_Zhangzhung\\_Traditions\\_the\\_Case\\_of\\_Yungdrung\\_Shon\\_Dance\\_g.yung\\_drung\\_shon\\_rtsed\\_](http://www.academia.edu/8158621/Rethinking_the_Recently_Discovered_Bon_Zhangzhung_Traditions_the_Case_of_Yungdrung_Shon_Dance_g.yung_drung_shon_rtsed_).
- Lopes, Ana Cristina O. *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2014.
- Lopez, David S. *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings From East and West*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Lopez, Jr., Donald S. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Lopez Jr, Donald Sewell. "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Journal* 3 (1994): 36–43.
- Loss, Joseph. "Buddha-Dhamma in Israel: Explicit Non-Religious and Implicit Non-Secular Localization of Religion." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 4 (2010): 84–105.

- Lowenthal, Martin, and Tenzin Wangyal. *Dawning of Clear Light: A Western Approach to Tibetan Dark Retreat Meditation*. Newburyport: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2003.
- Marques, Joan. "Buddhism in the United States: Implications for Managers of Buddhist Values in the Workplace." *International Journal of Management* 28, no. 2 (2011): 564.
- Marsh, Sarah. "Buddhist Group Admits Sexual Abuse by Teachers." *The Guardian*, March 5, 2018, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/05/buddhist-group-admits-sexual-abuse-by-teachers>.
- Martin, Dan. "Knowing Zhang-Zhung: The Very Idea." *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*, no. 1 (2013): 175–97.
- . "Olmo Lungring, A Holy Place Here and Beyond." In *Bon: The Magic Word*, edited by Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007.
- . "The Emergence of Bon and the Tibetan Polemical Tradition." Indiana University, 1991.
- . *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- Martin, Dan, Yasuhiko Nagano, and Per Kværne. *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*. Vol. 24. Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies, 45. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003.
- Masters, Robert A. *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- May, J. "Chugan (Madhyamika)." *Hobogirin* 5 (1979): 470–93.
- McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- McKay, Alex, ed. *The History of Tibet, The Medieval Period: C.850-1895, the Development of Buddhist Paramountcy*. Vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- McMahan, David L. *The Making of Modern Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *The Making of Modern Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Meitour, Karine Le. "BLOU (49) - histoire, patrimoine et activités de la commune." Office de tourisme Saumur Val de Loire. Accessed April 12, 2019. [https://www.ot-saumur.fr/BLOU\\_a13093.html](https://www.ot-saumur.fr/BLOU_a13093.html).

- Millard, Colin. "Bon Religion in Reb Kong." In *Monastic and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet*, 141–62. BRILL, 2013.
- Millard, Collin. "Colin Millard Ph.D. Thesis 2002 Thesis Abstract The Focus of This Research Is Learning Processes in a Tibetan Medical School." University of Edinburgh, 2002.
- Mohr, Thea, and Jampa Tsedroen. *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.
- Mostowlansky, Till. "'The Very Act of Cutting': Ethnomethodology, Interaction and the Emic–Etic Debate." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 400–420.
- Mostowlansky, Till, and Andrea Rota. "A Matter of Perspective?: Disentangling the Emic–Etic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016): 317–36.
- Mullen, Eve. *The American Occupation of Tibetan Buddhism*. Waxmann Verlag, 2001.
- Nagano, Yasuhiko. "Preface." In *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, edited by Martin Dan and Per Kvaerne, Vol. 24. Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies 4, 5. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2003.
- Nagano, Yasuhiko, and Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, eds. *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*. Senri Ethnological Reports, Bon Studies 25. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001.
- Nagru Geshe Jinpa Gelek. *Bon in Nepal, Traces of the Great Zhang Zhung Ancestors in the Himalayas*. Edited by Ermakova Carol and Ermakov Dmitry. Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 2013.
- Najia, Rose. "A Chance for Radical Transformation." *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d.
- Namdak, Tenzin. *Bönchöd Gurim, Ngöndro Teachings from Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud, 27TH August – 1st September, 2006*. Edited by Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006.
- . *Chod: Commentary on Yang Zab Nam Mkha' Mdzod Chen Las Lus Sbyin Mkha' 'gro Gad Rgyan of Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen. Given in Paris, Salle Saint Martin, 16 – 17 October, 2004*. Edited by Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006.
- . *Drenpa Namkha, Yetri Thasel: Dgos 'Dod Gsal Byed Bshad Gzhai'i Mchongs, Commentary Chapters Regarding the Base of the Teachings That Elucidate One's Wishes (and Needs). Teachings by Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Pfauenhof, Germany, 8-14 September, 2007*. Edited by Carol Ermakova and Ermakov Dmitry. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2007.
- . *Experiential Transmission of Zhang Zhung. Dringpo Sorzhag, Vimoutiers, 25 August – 14 Septembre 2003*. Edited by Ermakov Dmitry and Carol Ermakova. Blou, France: Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006.

- . *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya: Dzogchen Practice of the Bon Tradition*. Translated by Richard Dixey. Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2002.
- . *Heart Essence of the Khandro: Experiential Instructions on Bonpo Dzogchen - Thirty Signs and Meanings from Women Lineage-Holders*. Edited by Ermakov Dmitry, Carol Ermakovi, and Gelek Jinpa. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers; First edition, 2012.
- . *Masters of the Zhang Zhung Nyengyud: Pith Instructions from the Experiential Transmission of Bonpo Dzogchen*. Edited by Dmitry Ermakov and Carol Ermakova. Heritage Publishers, 2010.
- . Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 5, 2014.
- . Personal communication, Kathmandu, Triten Norbutse Monastery, February 17, 2015.
- . *Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen - Kusum Rangshar, Oral Teachings by Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Paris, April 1999*. Edited by Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006.
- . “The Essence of the Elements in the Continuity of the Mother (Ma Rgyud ’byung Ba’i Thig Le), Oral Commentary by Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, 2001, January, 8th to 17th, at Triten Norbutse Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal,” n.d.
- . *The Seven Mirrors of Dzogchen from the Cycle of Namkha Truldzö*. Edited by Ermakov Dmitry and Carol Ermakova. Blou, France: Shenten Dargye Ling, 2006.
- . *Zhang Zhung Nyan Gyud, Dringpo Sorzhag: Chapters VI - VII, 24th August - 2nd September*. Edited by Carol Ermakovi and Ermakov Dmitry. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2010.
- Namdak, Tenzin, and John Myrdhin Reynolds. *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*. Vajra Publications, 2006.
- Naropa University. “Naropa University.” Accessed October 23, 2018. [https://www.naropa.edu/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIwrD73t2c3gIVl4XVChoH3gEXEAAAYASAAEgIQufD\\_BwE](https://www.naropa.edu/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIwrD73t2c3gIVl4XVChoH3gEXEAAAYASAAEgIQufD_BwE).
- Norbu, Choegyal Namkhai, Adriano Clemente, and Barrie Simmons. *The Necklace of Zi: On The History and Culture of Tibet*. Shang Shung Edizioni, 2004.
- Norbu, Chögyal Namkhai. *The Light of Kailash: A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet. Vol. 1. The Early Period*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2009.
- Norbu, Namkhai. *Drung, Deu, and Bön: Narrations, Symbolic Languages, and the Bön Traditions in Ancient Tibet*. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1995.



- . “Preface.” *The Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1, no. Inaugural issue (2013): 7–10.
- . *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra, and Dzogchen*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1986.
- Norbu, Namkhai, and Michael Katz. *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light*. Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, NY, 1992.
- Obadia, Lionel. “Localised Deterritorialisation? The Case of the Glocalisation of Tibetan Buddhism in France and Worldwide.” *International Social Science Journal* 63, no. 209 (2012): 185–95.
- . “Tibetan Buddhism in France: A Missionary Religion?” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2 (2001): 92–109.
- Oldmeadow, Peter. “Tibetan Buddhism and Globalisation.” In *The End of Religions?: Religion in an Age of Globalisation*, edited by Peter Oldmeadow and Carole M. Cusack, n.d.
- Orofino, Giacomella. “Contributo Allo Studio Dell’insegnamento Di Ma Gcig Lab Sgron,” 1987.
- Orsi, Robert A. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Osburn, Laura. “Between Networks and Story: Analyzing Hyperlinks and Narratives on Websites about Tibet.” In *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, edited by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger, 40–58. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Parker, Glynis. “The Conversion of South Africans to Buddhism.” Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Africa, 2007.
- Parsons, Talcott. “The Social System.” *The Free Press* 101 (1951): 5–6.
- Perspectives, American Buddhist. “A Storm Is Coming: Tibetan Buddhism in the West.” *American Buddhist Perspectives* (blog), November 15, 2017. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2017/11/a-storm-is-coming-tibetan-buddhism-in-the-west.html>.
- P-L.A. “Les Moines Bouddhistes Peuvent Compter Sur Leurs Amis Europeens.” *Le Courrier de l’Ouest*. June 8, 2005.
- Polichetti, Massimiliano A. “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West.” *The Tibet Journal* 18, no. 3 (1993): 65–67.
- . “The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in The West.” *The Tibet Journal* 18, no. 3 (1993): 65–67.
- Pommaret, Françoise. “The Masters Go West: A Story of Buddhism’s Adaptation to ‘New Fields’.” In *Buddhism Without Borders: Proceedings of the International Conference on Globalized Buddhism*, 89–96. Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012.

- Prebish, Charles S., and Martin Baumann, eds. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*. University of California Press, 2002.
- Queen, Christopher. "Professing Buddhism: The Harvard Conference on Buddhism in America." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18 (1998): 217–20.
- Queen, Christopher, and Duncan Ryuken Williams. *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Ramble, Charles. "A Nineteenth-Century Bonpo Pilgrim in Western Tibet and Nepal: Episodes from the Life of DKar Ru Grub Dbang BsTan'dzin Rin Chen," 2008.
- . "Gshen Rab Mi Bo." In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, edited by Jonathan A. Silk. Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- . "Playing Dice with the Devil: Two Bonpo Soul-Retrieval Texts and Their Interpretation in Mustang, Nepal." *East and West* 59, no. 1/4 (2009): 205–32.
- . "Ritual Architecture and Architectural Rituals in Tibet: Bon and Buddhism," n.d.
- . "The Assimilation of Astrology in the Tibetan Bon Religion." *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes*, 2013, 199–232.
- . "The Secular Surroundings of a Bonpo Ceremony: Games, Popular Rituals and Economic Structures in the MDos-Rgyab of Klu-Brag Monastery (Nepal)." In *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, edited by Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000.
- Rambo, Lewis R. "Anthropology and the Study of Conversion." *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, 2003, 211–22.
- . "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change." *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 259–71.
- . *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Rambo, Lewis R., and Charles E. Farhadian, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Rapgay, Lobsang. "Opinion: How Rigpa Can Redeem Itself in the Wake of Sogyal Rinpoche's Resignation." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, September 20, 2017. <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/opinion-how-rigpa-can-redeem-itself-in-the-wake-of-sogyal-rinpoches-resignation/>.
- "Retreat Tariffs." Accessed April 24, 2019. <http://www.shenten.org/index.php/en/retreats/retreat-tariffs>.
- Reynolds, John Myrdhin. Personal communication, Shenten, Blou, July 18, 2015.

- . *The Practice of Dzogchen in the Zhang-Zhung Tradition of Tibet*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2013.
- . *The Precepts of the Dharmakaya: Advanced Instructions on the Practice of Bonpo Dzogchen According to the Zhang-Zhung Tradition of Tibet*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2014.
- Ricca, Franco, and Erberto Lo Bue. *The Great Stupa of Gyantse. A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century*. London: Serindia, 1993.
- Robertson, Roland. "Globalisation or Glocalisation?" *The Journal of International Communication* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 1994): 33–52.
- . *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. Vol. 16. London: Sage, 1992.
- . "The New Global History: A Sociological Assessment." *Sao Paulo: Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Sao Paulo*, 1996.
- Robertson, Roland, and Kathleen E. White. *Globalization: Specialized Applications and Resistance to Globalization*. Vol. 6. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003.
- Roesler, Ulrike. "The Vinaya of the Bon Tradition." In *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kværne*, edited by Hanna Havnevik and Charles Ramble, 432–48. Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2015.
- Rosch, Petra. "The Purifying Power of the Buddhas." In *How Purity Is Made*, edited by Petra Rosch and Udo Simon, 217–44. Wiesbaden: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2012.
- Rossi, Donatella. *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*. Snow Lion Publications, 2000.
- Ruegg, David Seyfort. *The Life of Bu Ston Rin Po Che, with the Tibetan Text of the Bu Ston RNam Thar*. Vol. 34. Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966.
- Rute, Ieva. "Yungdrung Bön in the West: Reception and Transformations," 2007. [http://www.budcon.com/bn/index.php/Yungdrung\\_B%C3%B6n\\_in\\_the\\_West:\\_reception\\_and\\_transformations\\_by\\_Ieva\\_Rute](http://www.budcon.com/bn/index.php/Yungdrung_B%C3%B6n_in_the_West:_reception_and_transformations_by_Ieva_Rute).
- . "Yungdrung Bön Spread in the West." Master Thesis, Vilnius University, Centre of Oriental Studies, 2010.
- Said, Edward W. "Orientalism Reconsidered." *Race & Class* 27, no. 2 (1985): 1–15.
- . *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1978. London: Penguin, 1995.
- Samten, G. Karmay. *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*. London, 1972.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press., 1993.

- . *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*, 2011.
- . “Shamanism Bon and Tibetan Religion.” In *The History of Tibet, Vol 3, The Modern Period: 1895-1959, The Encounter with Modernity*, 459-472. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- . *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*. Routledge, 2017.
- . *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Sawerthal, Anna. “Abuse and Buddhism: Behind the Smiling Façade.” Accessed August 10, 2018. [https://info-buddhism.com/Abuse\\_and\\_Buddhism-Behind\\_the\\_Smiling\\_Facade-Anna\\_Sawerthal.html](https://info-buddhism.com/Abuse_and_Buddhism-Behind_the_Smiling_Facade-Anna_Sawerthal.html).
- Scholte, Jan Aart. *What Is “Global” about Globalization?*. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Shakya, Tsering. *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*. Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- . “Review:Who Are the Prisoners?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2001): 183-89.
- . *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- . “Who Are the Prisoners?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2001): 183-89.
- Shenten Dargye Ling. *DU TRI SU Ceremony*. Accessed December 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzLftYTUElc>.
- Shenten Dargye Ling. “Shenten Dargye Ling.” Accessed October 13, 2018. <http://shenten.org/index.php>.
- “Shenten Dargyé Ling Monastery, Blou.” Accessed August 12, 2018. [http://www.kalpagroup.com/bon\\_shenten.html](http://www.kalpagroup.com/bon_shenten.html).
- “Shenten Dargye Ling Website.” Accessed April 6, 2019. <http://shenten.org/index.php/en/about/about-us>.
- Snellgrove, David L. *Bon: The Magic Word*. Edited by Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007.
- . *Four Lamas of Dolpo (Tibetan Biographies)*. Delhi: Himalayan Publishing House, 1992.
- . “How Samten Gyaltzen Came to Europe.” *Revue d’Etudes Tibetaines, Indologica*, no. 14 (October 2008): 1-6.
- . *The Nine Ways of Bon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Snodgrass, Adrian. “The Symbolism of the Stupa. 1985.” *Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass*, 1992.

- Sogyal, Rinpoche. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. New York: Random House, 2008.
- Sorensen, Michelle Janet. "Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition." Unpublished, Columbia University, 2013.
- Sperry, Rod Meade. "Sogyal Rinpoche to Enter 'Period of Retreat and Reflection' Following Allegations of Abuse -..." *Lion's Roar* (blog), July 21, 2017. <https://www.lionsroar.com/rigpa-press-release-responds-to-allegations-of-abuses-by-sogyal-rinpoche/>.
- Springer, Karl. "Tibetan Buddhism in the West." *The Tibet Journal* 1, no. 3/4 (1976): 75–80.
- Spuler, Michelle. "Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand." In *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia*, 120–38. University of California Press, 2002.
- Stahl, William A. "Religious Opposition to Globalization." In *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, edited by Peter Beyer. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- "Start of a Five Year Course on Bonpo Philosophy." Accessed April 12, 2019. <http://www.shenten.org/index.php/en/component/content/article/73-shenten/419-start-of-a-five-year-course-on-bonpo-philosophy>.
- Stein, Rolf Alfred. "Tibetica Antiqua V: La Religion Indigène et Les Bon-Po Dans Les Manuscrits de Touen-Houang." *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, no. 77 (1988): 27–56.
- . "Tibetica Antiqua V. The Indigenous Religion And The Bon Po In Dunhuang Manuscripts." In *Tibetica Antiqua*, 231–72. London: Brill, 2010.
- Stichting Tapiritsa. "Stichting Tapiritsa | tibetaanse meditatie in de yungdrung-bön traditie in Nederland." Accessed October 13, 2018. <http://www.tapiritsa.nl/>.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. *Grounded Theory in Practice*. London: Sage, 1997.
- . *Grounded Theory in Practice*. London: Sage, 1997.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Barney Glaser. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2009.
- "Summer Retreat: June 23–July 7, 2019 | Serenity Ridge Retreat Center." Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://serenityridge.ligmincha.org/retreats-and-programs/432-summer-retreat-june-23-july-7-2019.html>.
- Tartarin, Francois. "En Danger a Katmandou a l'abri a La Modtais." *La Nouvelle République*. August 22, 2005.
- Tenpel. "Abuse: Letter To Sogyal Rinpoche From Long Term Rigpa Students." *Tibetan Buddhism – Struggling With Diffi·Cult Issues* (blog), July 22, 2017.

<https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2017/07/22/abuse-letter-to-sogyal-rinpoche-from-long-term-rigpa-students/>.

———. “Links Relevant To The Current Crisis In Shambhala International Regarding Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche’s Conduct With Women.” *Tibetan Buddhism – Struggling With Diffi-Cult Issues* (blog), June 30, 2018. <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2018/06/30/links-relevant-to-the-current-crisis-in-shambhala-international-regarding-sakyong-mipham-rinpoches-conduct-with-women/>.

“Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche | Ligmincha International.” Accessed January 4, 2019. <http://www.ligmincha.org/en/tenzin-wangyal-rinpoche.html>.

Thar, Tsering. “Bonpo Tantrics in Kokonor Area,” 2008.

———. *Nangshig: A Tibetan Bonpo Monastery and Its Family in Amdo*. Vajra Books, 2016.

———. “The Ancient Zhang Zhung Civilization.” *Bod-Ljongs Zhib-’jug* 1 (1989): 90–104.

The 3 Doors. “The 3 Doors.” Accessed May 17, 2019. <https://the3doors.org/>.

The 3 Doors Academy. *Background and Benefits of the Tsa Lung Practice*,. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MWOkatdjpU>.

“The 3 Doors Program News.” *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, n.d.

The 17th Karmapa: Official website of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. “The 17th Karmapa Thaye Dorje: Official Website of His Holiness Karmapa.” Accessed January 6, 2019. <https://www.karmapa.org/>.

Mail Online. “The Dangers of Meditation,” May 24, 2017. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~/article-4538240/index.html>.

The Hedgehog Review. “An Annotated Bibliography on Religion and Globalization.” *IASC: The Hedgehog Review - Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2002) - Religion and Globalization* 4, no. No. 2 (n.d.): 116–23.

“The Kalpa Group.” Accessed December 29, 2018. <http://www.kalpagroup.com/>.

“The Scriptures.” Accessed April 8, 2019. [http://www.triten.org/TR/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=63](http://www.triten.org/TR/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=63).

Townsend, Dominique. “Buddhism’s Worldly Other: Secular Subjects of Tibetan Learning.” *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 36, no. 1 (2016): 15.

Travers, Alice. “Between Private and Public Initiatives? Private Schools in Pre-1951 Tibet.” *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 35, no. 2 (2016): 30.

- Trelat, Fabienne. "Blou Au Coeur de La Tradition Tibetaine." *Le Courrier de l'Ouest*. June 29, 2008.
- Tribe, Anthony. "Mantranaya/Vajrayāna–Tantric Buddhism in India." In *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, 192–222. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Trungpa, Chögyam. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2002.
- . *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation*. Shambhala Publications, 2002.
- Trzebuniak, Jacek. "Magic in The Nine Ways of Bon." *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2014): 209–23.
- Tucci, Giuseppe, and Lokesh Chandra. *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism*. Vol. 1. South Asia Books, 1988.
- Tweed, Thomas A. "Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures." In *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, edited by Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann. University of California Press, 2002.
- Van, Pelt Campbell. "Religion and Phases of Globalization." In *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, edited by Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Van Schaik, Sam. *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of Dzogchen Practice in the Longchen Nyintig*. Simon and Schuster, 2004.
- . "The Naming of Tibetan Religion: Bon and Chos in the Tibetan Imperial Period." *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1 (2013): 227–57.
- . *Tibet: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Veidlinger, Daniel. "Introduction." In *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Voiteau, Yves. "Les Moines Bouddhistes s'installent Au Chateau." *Aujourd'hui En France*. June 23, 2005.
- Wagner, Rachel, and Christopher Accardo. "Buddhist Apps: Skillful Means or Dharma Dilution?" In *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, edited by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Wallace, B. Alan. "The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West." In *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, 34–50. University of California Press, 2002.

- Wangyal, Odzel Tenzin. "An Introduction to the Index of GZi-Brjid and GZer-Mig." *The Tibet Journal*, 1986, 29–35.
- Wangyal, Tenzin. *Awakening the Luminous Mind: Tibetan Meditation for Inner Peace and Joy*. Carlsbad: Hay House, Inc, 2012.
- . *Awakening the Sacred Body*. Carlsbad: Hay House, Inc, 2011.
- . *Healing with Form, Energy, and Light*. Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2002.
- . Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.
- . Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.
- . Personal communication, Paris, April 23, 2016.
- . "Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's Heart Drop: The Three Doors - Introducing the Three Doors Academy and Its Teachers for Europe." *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, 2011.
- . *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1998.
- . *Tibetan Yogas of Body, Speech, and Mind*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2011.
- . "Videos Enlightened Leadership EN | Ligmincha International." Accessed November 25, 2018. <http://www.ligmincha.org/index.php/en/programs/prison-project/2-uncategorised/306-videos-enlightened-leadership-en.html>.
- . *Wonders of the Natural Mind: The Essence of Dzogchen in the Native Bon Tradition of Tibet*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2000.
- Warburg, Margit. "Globalization, Migration and the Two Types of Religious Boundary: A European Perspective." In *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, edited by Peter Beyer and Lori Gail Beaman. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Wehrli, Eugen. "Tibet Research in China by Tibetans and Chinese after 1949." *Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya*, 1993, 425–32.
- Welwood, John. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000.
- Whitaker, Justin. "The Merit of Pointing out Abuse in Buddhism: Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche." Accessed August 10, 2018. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2017/08/the-merit-of-pointing-out-abuse-in-buddhism-dzongsar-khyentse-rinpoche.html>.
- White, Victor. "Buddhism Comes West." *New Blackfriars* 32, no. 381 (1951): 585–91.
- Williams, Paul, and Alexander Wynne, eds. *Buddhist Thought*. Routledge, 2012.



- Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: Meditation and the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Winn, Andrea. "Buddhist Project Sunshine." *Http://Andreamwinn.Com/Offerings* (blog), February 26, 2017. [http://andreamwinn.com/offerings/project\\_sunshine/](http://andreamwinn.com/offerings/project_sunshine/).
- Woodhead, Linda, Jiroko Kawamani, and Christopher Partrudge. *Religions in the Modern World, Traditions and Transformations*. Second edition. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Woznicki, Andrew N. *Transcendent Mystery in Man: A Global Approach to Ecumenism*. Academica Press, LLC, 2007.
- Yeshe Sal Ling. "Yeshe Sal Ling - Yungdrung Bön Center in Austria." Accessed October 13, 2018. <http://yungdrung-bon.com/yeshe-sal-ling/>.
- Yü, Dan Smyer. "Buddhist Conversion in the Contemporary World." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 2014.
- Yungdrung, Tenpa. "How the Stupa of Yungdrung Koeleg Is Constructed in Shenten Dargye Ling." *Shenten Dargye Ling's Newsletter*, 2010.
- . Personal communication, Geneva, Switzerland, April 10, 2014.
- . "Speech of Delight." *Shenten Dargye Ling's Newsletter*, 2016.
- . "Speech of Delight N°2." *Shenten Dargye Ling's Newsletter*, November 1, 2006.
- , ed. *Triten Norbutse Monastery, 25th Anniversary Celebration*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books in association with Triten Norbutse Institution, 2012.

## APPENDIX A

### Example of Participants' Schedule during a Gomdra Retreat at Shenten

#### Daily schedule

One adheres to the following daily schedule for six days. On the seventh day (the 'holiday') the schedule is limited to the early morning and evening practices.

06.00 - 07.30 Sang offering, meditation & prostrations

07.30 - 08.30 Breakfast & break

08.30 - 09.30 Meditation & Water offering

09.30 - 10.30 Teaching

10.30 - 11.00 Break

11.00 - 12.00 Individual accumulation

12.00 - 13.00 Lunch

13.00 - 14.30 Break

14.30 - 15.30 Individual study

15.30 - 16.30 Accumulation

16.30 - 17.00 Break

17.00 - 18.00 Meditation & Sur offering

18.00 - 19.00 Dinner & break

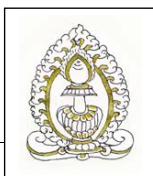
19.00 - 20.30 Meditation & Offering of the Body

21.30 - 22.30 Individual study

22.30 - 06.30 Sleep & dream yoga

# APPENDIX B

## First pages of Shenten Dargye Ling's first and second Newsletters



# Speech of Delight

Introduction by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche

Shenten  
Dargye Ling  
Newsletter  
N°1  
May 2006

« First of all, both the personal and spiritual sides are important in keeping our tradition alive and in running this place over a long period of time. This requires a lot, but there is also great benefit in supporting a peaceful, happy atmosphere in such things. »

At the end of the last summer retreat, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung designated certain people to oversee the various aspects of life at Shenten: Florens Van Constein (general co-ordinator); Jean-Louis Massoubre (advisor); Isabelle Catona (secretary); Aïcha Charmi (treasurer); Philippe Renucci (works overseer); Carol and Dima Ermakovi (caretakers, recently replaced by Guillaume Lassalle) Romain Morin (groundsman); Stéphane Arguillère (texts translator); Martha Daams (contact for the Netherlands); Wolfgang Schmid (contact for Germany); Pierre Combraux (tasked with public relations with the press).

### Staying at Shenten Dargye Ling

If you'd like to stay at Shenten, it is imperative to contact **Isabelle (0616041682)** and **Guillaume (0241594956)** in advance. Please bring your own bedding (eg sheets and a sleeping bag). **Accommodation** is 10€ per night; or 5€ for those on low income. **Meals**: when the centre provides meals, breakfast will be 1€, lunch 3€ and diner 3€. If you provide some of your food yourself, we would still ask for a minimum contribution of 2€ per day **Transport**: from Saumur: 7€; from Longué: 2€.

### Works : balance and projects

Responsible : Philippe Renucci

Many large jobs have already been completed: Rinpoche's apartment (bedroom, bathroom, living room and kitchen), the Gompa, 'Khenpo's house', plus the painting of many rooms and the caretaker's flat. External wooden window frames have been repainted and the airy study room has received a new door.

One of the most costly jobs has been renovating the heating in the château (14000€ approx.), and it has also been necessary to bring the water purifying system back into good working order (7000€); cleaning the rainwater drainage pipes is underway (1800€), as well as the construction of a bathroom for our monks in the West Wing (3000€).

In the near future we hope to repair the roof in the East Wing (12000€) and the installation of a kitchen in line with all legal norms plus a dining hall in the 'Garden Pavillion' are under consideration.

We are also planning to build a dark retreat cabin with two cells. The façade of the West Wing needs to be restored as do the roof supports (80 000€).

### Geshés and Teachings

**Geshé Gelek** and **Geshé Samten** have been resident here in Shenten since the beginning of the year and our first Christmas Retreat was led by Geshe Gelek who gave detailed instructions on Tummo. The last weekend of every month is dedicated to Ngöndro practice and we look forward to more retreats and teaching weekends to be led by our Geshes over the coming months. For up-to-date information, visit our website [www.yungdrung-bon.net](http://www.yungdrung-bon.net).

### Grounds

Responsible : Romain Morin

Various jobs have already been done, a small hedge and other trees have been planted, the courtyard in front of the château has been weeded and some new flower beds created.

Last summer our first vegetable garden was created and this year we have planted up almost the whole of the plot. We've tried to concentrate on 'easy-to-grow' vegetables with a high, on-going yield but have also branched out with herbs to enhance our meals and with varieties to try to ensure an abundant supply during retreat times so we can all enjoy organic vegetables at a low cost. We are experimenting with organic gardening techniques.

Guillaume has set up a system of notebooks for logs, advice and memos to enable Anne and other garden helpers to coordinate our efforts. The initial job of getting the garden underway is virtually finished, now it's just a case of weeding, watering and looking forward to a good harvest! All volunteers welcome.

Contacts: Romain: +33 689122338; Anne: [anne-castagne@wanadoo.fr](mailto:anne-castagne@wanadoo.fr) (+33 621727732); Guillaume: [gflassalle@yahoo.fr](mailto:gflassalle@yahoo.fr).

### Karma Yoga

OUR CENTRE CAN ONLY CONTINUE WITH YOUR ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT! Those coming to work full-time at Shenten (that is, 6 hours a day) will be **housed free of charge** plus part of their meals will be provided by the centre.

Even when Philippe Renucci is not here, volunteers are welcome, particularly for painting and plastering. **Guillaume** can fill you in on the details and all necessary materials will be waiting for you!

### Tools and Furniture

Shenten Dargye Ling gladly accepts donations of chairs, tables, bedside tables, chests of drawers, wardrobes, carpets, hoovers and all kinds of tools... ..

### Shenten Accounts

Responsible : Aïcha Charmi

From March 2005 to March 2006, expenditure on **works** amounted to **24 500€**. Outlay for furniture and tools (mattresses, beds etc.) over the same period was **9 200€**. The annual total for **taxes** is around **4 000€**; **1 800€** was spent on **transport** while **bills** (heating, electricity, telephone, insurance, general maintenance...), came to **22 000€**.

We also spent **1400€**, on **daily expenses and fees**. This brings us to total of around **62 900€**. Current information allows us to estimate that the monthly sum from regular donations is around 1 200€ or 14 400€ per annum. With one-off donations amounting to around **22 000€** per year plus contributions amounting to **30 000€** by the Yungdrung Bon Association from retreat incomes we have been able to balance accounts so far. However, this present system does not easily facilitate the establishment of long-term book-keeping forecasts.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ASSOCIATION YUNGDRUNG BÖN : 5th of AUGUST, 2H30 PM IN SHENTEN.



# Speech of Delight



Shenten Dargye Ling's Newsletter N°2 Nov. 2006



## Good news and a few words regarding Shenten Dargye Ling

Greetings from Blou! I want to share good news and a few words regarding Shenten Dargye Ling with you. The good news is that Shenten Dargye Ling has now been legally recognized as a religious congregation by the government of the Republic of France. This took place on 30th June, 2006 and marks a new and historical development for the Yungdrung Bön tradition.

Receiving the status of congregation from the French government is a very special opportunity for us. This will surely also be very important for all Bönpos, both inside and outside Tibet. Wherever Bönpos are, they will know about this positive development and feel supported.

The congregation was initiated and established by H.E. Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche with the inspiration of furthering the critically needed preservation of Yungdrung Bön, the indigenous religious culture of Tibet and one of the most ancient religions still alive in the world today. The support of Mr. Guinness of the Kalpa Group has been great help to us. He supports the preservation of our tradition in many ways and it was thanks to his generous donation that this project was able to get off the ground. I also appreciate our Sangha members for their participation and tremendous supports.

This is a very critical time for the Tibetan religion and culture as regards its future safety, so the new establishment of Shenten Dargye Ling in Blou, a nice French country village with its friendly and courteous people, will be extremely significant for the future of our tradition. Here we expect to develop a hub which will be a vital presence in preserving our religion and culture, a center of education but also a home where practitioners



ཡང་དྭང་རྒྱུད་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལྟར་གྱི་  
མཉམ་སྲུང་གི་འགྲུབ་ལུ་  
འགྲུབ་ལུ་འགྲུབ་ལུ་  
འགྲུབ་ལུ་འགྲུབ་ལུ་  
འགྲུབ་ལུ་འགྲུབ་ལུ་

*As for the fundamental root of originating all spiritual and temporal well-being for everyone, There is no means other than to perform virtuous actions. Engaging oneself in supporting and contributing to the development and stability of others' welfare - What good fortune this is!*

can enrich their spiritual knowledge and a place where practical aspects of Yungdrung Bön can flourish – medicine, art, and language and so on – alongside major academic and religious activities.

Against this background on behalf of Shenten Dargye Ling, I would like to extend my welcome to all the friends and practitioners of Yungdrung Bön who wish to participate in its endeavors and advancement. At the same time, I also would like to let you know that as a new organization with no financial resources, our Congregation is in need of financial aid to sustain it and to enable us to carry on our programs smoothly.

As for the current program of the Congregation, I would present it in following ways:

1. We have already started a Library consisting of a complete set of the

Bönpo Kajur and Katen together with some other collected works. More printed and rare manuscript texts will be gathered and saved here.

2. The main assembly hall (tib. 'du 'khang) with Buddha's statue has been inaugurated and we hope to install a wooden carved traditional altar and a Stupa next year.

3. To create and maintain a Digital and Book archive of teachings given by H.E. Yongdzin Rinpoche in Europe and the U.S. over the last 17 years and other Bön Lamas.

4. Projects regarding Transcription of teachings and Translation of Tibetan texts have also been initiated.

5. Spring, summer, autumn and winter Teaching and practice programs along with additional and weekend programs have already been started in Shenten. As one of the most important instruments of the preservation, this program is to be developed more efficiently in the near future:

- intensive meditation training program with a view idea to developing a traditional meditation training program
- to set up programs on Tibetan language and literature
- Tibetan arts, medicine and healing programs.

6. To conduct scientific, experimental research on specific fields related to this tradition.

7. To convene Academic conferences on the Bön tradition.

These are our current on-going projects. For more information on the events of Shenten Dargye Ling this newsletter, Speech of Delight, will be issued from time to time and additionally, there will a website of Shenten Dargye Ling in the near future. I conclude this message here with my warmest regards and prayers for all of you.

Les responsables désignés par Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung demeurent : Florens Van Canstein (coordinateur) ; Jean-Louis Massoubre (conseiller) ; Isabelle Catona (secrétaire) ; Aïcha Charni (trésorière) ; Martha Daams (correspondante pour les Pays-Bas) ; Wolfgang Schmid (correspondant pour l'Allemagne) ; Philippe Renucci (responsable des travaux) ; Carol et Dima Ermakovi (transcripts anglais) Guillaume Lassalle (gardien) ; Romain Morin (jardin) ; Stéphane Arguillère (traductions de textes, communications internes) ; Pierre Combroux (relations avec la presse).



# TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHÉ

## Les 21 Sceaux

### ENSEIGNEMENTS À PARIS

Vendredi 10, Samedi 11,  
Dimanche 12 septembre 1999

AU FORUM- VAUGIRARD

#### DATES ET HORAIRES DU SÉMINAIRE :

- Vendredi 10 septembre  
11h à 13h  
pause  
16h à 18h  
pause  
20h à 22,30h
- Samedi 11 septembre  
9h30 à 13h  
pause  
18h30 à 22h30
- Dimanche 12 septembre  
9h30 à 13h  
pause  
15h à 17h30

#### LIEU DU SÉMINAIRE :

Le FORUM  
104 rue de Vaugirard  
(M° St Placide,  
Montparnasse)  
Salle des Glycines



INSCRIPTION OBLIGATOIRE "ASSOCIATION YUNGDRUNG BÖN" TEL : 06 60 90 76 00

## Inscription of the Shenten Dargye Ling Association

Consulter les annonces du JO Association < 29/07/10 23:16

Jeudi 29 Juillet 2010 | Accueil | Nous contacter | Aide | FAQ | Plan du site |

 **journal-officiel.gouv.fr**  
Un site de la Direction de l'information légale et administrative

Accueil > Les annonces publiées au JO Associations > Consulter les annonces

JOURNAL OFFICIEL AUTHENTIFIÉ

Consulter le JO authentifié  
Consulter les Documents administratifs  
Aide  
FAQ

ANNONCES OFFICIELLES

Les annonces de marchés publics sur le site boamp.fr  
Les annonces civiles et commerciales sur le site bodacc.fr  
Les informations financières sur le site info-financiere.fr  
Les annonces publiées au JO Associations  
Consulter les annonces  
Accéder aux formulaires diffuser les comptes annuels  
Les annonces publiées au BALO  
Consulter les annonces  
passer une annonce  
Aide  
Tarifs des insertions

LES PUBLICATIONS

Les bases de données JO  
Abonnements JO et OPOCE  
Catalogue/Actualisation des ouvrages

BO CONVENTION COLLECTIVE

Consulter les textes  
Aide

INFORMATIONS JO

En savoir plus sur la DILA  
Rapport d'activité 2008(PDF)  
Les marchés passés par la DILA

**• Résultat de votre recherche**  
Résultat de la recherche : **1 annonce(s)**  
Rappel de vos critères de recherche :  
Annonce(s) contenant le ou les mots : Shenten Dargye Ling  
Région de l'association : Aquitaine  
Département de l'association : Dordogne  
> [Modifier ma recherche](#)

Page 1 / 1

Association : **ASSOCIATION SHENTEN DARGYE LING.** No d'annonce : **462**  
No de parution : **20010016** Paru le : **21/04/2001**  
Département (Région) : **Dordogne (Aquitaine)**  
Lieu parution : **Déclaration à la sous-préfecture de Sarlat-la-Canéda.**  
Type d'annonce : **ASSOCIATION/CREATION**

Déclaration à la sous-préfecture de Sarlat-la-Canéda. **ASSOCIATION SHENTEN DARGYE LING.** Objet : exercice public du culte Yungdrung Bon, plus particulièrement selon les préceptes de la lignée Gyalwa Menriwa, tels que dispensés par Lopon Tenzin Namdak, ses successeurs et tout enseignant désigné par lui (cette lignée étant actuellement représentée en Europe par Lama Tenpa Yungdrung ; transmission des enseignements Yungdrung Bon ; donner la possibilité d'étudier, de réfléchir et de pratiquer la méditation d'après ces enseignements et instructions. Siège social : La Tourélie, 24620 Tursac. Date de la déclaration : 28 mars 2001.

Page 1 / 1

Affinez votre recherche avec les catégories suivantes :

THÈMES  
Information communication (1)

TYPE D'ANNONCE  
ASSOCIATION (1)

RÉGION/DÉPARTEMENT  
Aquitaine (1)

## Inscription of the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation

Détail d'un texte 14/07/08 20:51

 **Legifrance.gouv.fr**  
LE SERVICE PUBLIC DE LA DIFFUSION DU DROIT

JORF n°152 du 2 juillet 2006 page 9935  
texte n° 7

DECRET  
**Décret du 30 juin 2006 portant reconnaissance légale d'une congrégation**  
NOR: INTA0600140D

Par décret en date du 30 juin 2006, la congrégation Shenten Dargye Ling, dont le siège est La Modethaye, à Blou (Maine-et-Loire), est légalement reconnue.

# APPENDIX C

## Local newspapers' articles on Shenten Dargye Ling



### NEWSPAPER ARTICLE: 1

D.R, “Deux Moines Tibétains Cette Semaine Au Chateau de La Modtais a Blou,”  
*Le Courrier de l’Ouest*, June 1, 2005.

BLOU

# Les moines bouddhistes peuvent compter sur leurs amis européens

**Le château de la Modtais à Blou est en train de se transformer en centre bouddhiste (lire CO de mardi). Les moines de Katmandou qui viennent de s'installer à Blou sont aidés dans leur tâche par de nombreux amis. Rencontre.**

*« Le bouddhisme tibétain fait partie du patrimoine de l'humanité. C'est une culture très ancienne, mais qui est menacée. En Europe, et partout dans le monde, il y a des gens qui veulent à préserver ce précieux héritage » : c'est ce qu'explique Pierre Combroux, un réalisateur qui a découvert cette culture à l'occasion d'un reportage pour Arte. C'est lui qui s'occupe de la communication de l'association Shenten, nouvelle propriétaire du château de la Modtais à Blou. Il fait partie des nombreux amis européens des moines bouddhistes, venus leur appor-*

ter leur savoir-faire afin de les aider dans cette implantation en France.

### Coup de main

C'est aussi le cas de Philippe Renucci, chef décorateur (il a notamment travaillé sur les clips de Kyo et de De Palmas), qui s'occupe des travaux :

*« Nous avons déjà transformé l'ancienne salle de sport en temple. Il va maintenant falloir faire des enduits et de la peinture dans la partie hébergement, et relaire des racades ». Mais la Modtais ayant hébergé jusqu'à l'an dernier un institut d'éducation spécialisée, il n'y a pas vraiment d'énorme chantier à réaliser pour accueillir les groupes.*

Dès ce week-end d'ailleurs, 80 personnes environ sont venues de France et d'autres pays d'Europe pour recevoir l'enseignement des moines. En dehors des cours, les membres de l'association Shenten apporteront un coup de main pour rénover et aménager les bâtiments.

**Retombées économiques**  
Dès cet été, et tout au long de l'année, il y aura donc du mouvement à la Modtais. Le centre culturel bouddhiste se veut ouvert sur l'extérieur. C'est aussi une façon de répondre aux inquiétudes de ceux qui seraient tentés de confondre à tort la religion bouddhiste avec une secte.

Déjà, le week-end dernier, certains commerces, restaurants et hôtels de la région loriguéenne ont eu la visite de membres de l'association Shenten qui profitent patris de l'occasion pour faire du tourisme. L'installation du nouveau centre doit donc avoir localement des retombées économiques.

### Empirisme par les Chinois

Elle permettra aussi aux Saurmouirs que cela intéresse d'en savoir plus sur la culture tibétaine qui, malgré l'invasion chinoise, parvient à résister et à se transmettre à travers le monde grâce à de nombreux relais.

Lopon Tenzin Namdak, le chef



Pierre Combroux, ici à droite face à Lopon Tenzin Namdak, fait partie des membres de l'association Shenten qui sont venus accueillir les trois premiers moines tibétains au château de la Modtais

avant de s'échapper. Aujourd'hui, quand on lui demande s'il pense que le Tibet retrouvera sa liberté et son indépendance, il répond : « On souhaite bien sûr que cela arrive un jour. Mais nous n'en savons rien. Nous ne pouvons qu'attendre et espérer ».

P.-L.A.

Open de Cholet



« L'histoire a commencé, un jour, à table, notre petite dernière avait 9 ans, François m'a dit : Je ferais bien

1962, à l'âge de 13 ans, sur le téléviseur en noir et blanc de ses parents. Sur un terrain vague adossé à l'au-

Saint-Nazaire : « Au départ, ils m'ont pris pour un illuminé, se souvient François Zanella. Puis, lorsqu'ils ont

pour ma naissance cumule a

## PAYS DE LA LOIRE

# Les moines bouddhistes s'installent au château

SAUMUR (MAINE-ET-LOIRE)  
DE NOTRE CORRESPONDANT

QUI AURAIT PU imaginer que les héritiers de la plus ancienne tradition reconnue du bouddhisme s'installeraient un jour au fin fond de la campagne saumuroise ? A Blou, joli petit village d'à peine 900 habitants à mi-chemin entre Angers et Saumur, personne, c'est sûr. Et pourtant. Depuis deux mois, ce sont bien des bönpos, le nom des moines de la tradition Bön, qui arpentent, en tenue traditionnelle, les couloirs et le parc du château de la Modtais, à quelques kilomètres du bourg et à proximité immédiate de plusieurs fermes.

Au début de l'année 2004, ce château construit aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles abritait encore un centre de rééducation spécialisé qui a été fermé depuis pour raisons administratives. Réunis au sein de l'association Shenten, des Français, des Néerlandais, des Anglais, des Allemands ou encore des Polonais, adeptes de l'enseignement de la tradition Bön, l'ont racheté pour faire de la Modtais un centre européen d'enseignement à la méditation et de conservation de la culture spirituelle Bön.

### « C'est une rencontre karmique »

« Au Tibet, c'était un peu leur religion orthodoxe. Une tradition dont les origines remonteraient à près de neuf mille ans » explique Pierre Combroux de l'association Shenten. Réalisateur de documentaires, ce jeune Parisien est lui-même tombé en émoi pour la culture Bön, en retrouvant dans des vallées oubliées de l'Himalaya de petites communautés villageoises qui vivent toujours au rythme ancestral de la spiritualité Bön.

Pourchassés après l'invasion chinoise, les moines Bön, eux, ont été contraints à l'exil au Népal. Ils ne sont plus que 400 à perpétuer la tradition dans deux monastères à Katmandou et à Dolanji, au nord de l'Inde. Régulière-



BLOU (MAINE-ET-LOIRE), LE 9 JUIN. Des adeptes de la tradition bouddhiste Bön ont racheté une propriété en plein pays saumurois pour en faire un centre d'enseignement. (AFP/FRANCK PERRY.)

ment invités à enseigner en Europe, ils n'y disposaient pas jusqu'alors de véritable pied à terre. « Nous n'avons pas choisi la France. C'est parce que des gens ici se sont mobilisés que nous sommes là. C'est une rencontre karmique », sourit le yongzin Tenzin Namdak, l'un des plus hauts chefs spirituels, venu délivrer il y a quelques jours ses premiers enseignements à la Modtais.

Conscients des risques d'incompréhension que pourrait susciter leur présence, Tenzin Namdak et l'association Shenten souhaitent clairement que le château de la Modtais soit un lieu ouvert. « On sait que l'évêque d'Angers est au courant de notre présence. On serait heureux de l'accueillir. »

YVES BOITEAU

JEUDI 23 JUIN 2005

## PACA

### Les déb

(Bo  
DE

EN PLE  
horor  
Marseille  
de riverai  
(Régie de  
d'Autopa  
tombe pa  
campagn  
y a quelq  
ter les M  
ture pour  
plément  
commun  
« Dites a  
gnez 400  
tage », an  
taines d'a  
bus de la

Cen

Tout aboi  
mun peut  
ficatif de  
néficer d'  
l'abonner  
soit 200  
bénéficie  
frais d'ac  
peut ainsi  
préférenti  
avec d'au  
lez passe  
vence ave

Newspaper Article: 3

Yves Voiteau, "Les Moines Bouddhistes s'installent Au Chateau," *Aujourd'hui En France*, June 23, 2005.

**BLOU**

## En danger à Katmandou à l'abri à La Modtais

Les moines tibétains rassemblent au château de La Modtais  
les textes rares de la tradition Bön, désormais en danger à Katmandou.

page 5



Le lama Tempa Yungdrung avec une partie des textes récemment reçus de Katmandou. (Photo NR)

**BAUGÉ**

## Pierre Guibert annonce

Newspaper Article: 4

Francois Tartarin, "En Danger a Katmandou a l'abri a La Modtais," *La Nouvelle République*, August 22, 2005.

## Blou au cœur de la tradition tibétaine

Philippe Cornu et Katia Buffetrille sont deux sommités françaises de la tradition Bön, l'ancienne religion du Tibet. Elle nourrit l'intérêt des chercheurs du monde entier. Un colloque international les a réunis à Blou.

**P**hilippe Cornu est l'auteur du Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme. Paru aux éditions du Seuil en 2001, ce pavé de référence a été réactualisé en 2006 : « ça marche bien ! J'ai juste un problème avec les Anglo-Saxons parce qu'aucun éditeur ne veut prendre en charge la traduction. Il y a deux ans de travail pour un spécialiste ».

### Un véritable événement

Chercheur à l'Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, il apporte un outil précieux aux scientifiques et praticants : « Un village s'est produit, il y a environ 15 ans. On est sorti de l'engournement et des fantasmes sur le Tibet. Si on veut transmettre un savoir, il faut s'établir dans la durée et l'étude. Et donc produire des ouvrages, qui permettent aux gens d'étudier ».

Du 22 au 25 juin, des spécialistes du monde entier ont échangé avec bonheur : « Les tibétologues se rencontrent rarement. Ils sont dispersés partout. Au Japon, on met les moyens. En France, on est incapable de faire ça dans les universités, qui dé-

gingolent à grande vitesse. On a pour la recherche en France, une vision pragmatique à très court terme et on écarte les sujets de fond ».

Le Bön est un des aspects les moins défrichés de la culture tibétaine. Ce colloque international au centre Shenten Dargye Ling de Blou (Ndtr, l'ancien institut spécialisé de la Modétais) est un événement. Philippe Cornu et ses collègues sont ravis : « C'est une première en Europe et dans un centre tibétain. Ici à Blou, c'est officiel. Le centre a le statut de congrégation (Ndtr, accordé par l'État) qui permet d'organiser de telles manifestations ».

### Deux terres de tradition se rencontrent

Le chercheur est également pratiquant : « C'est l'intérêt d'expérimenter à condition de garder du recul ». Philippe Cornu insiste : « Il y a un aspect militant à préserver cette tradition. Elle est une illustration de la richesse de l'humanité alors qu'aujourd'hui tout disparaît dans la globalisation. Que l'Anjou terre de tradition accueille une autre terre de tradition, c'est



Mardi dernier à Blou, Philippe Cornu et Katia Buffetrille, ravis de participer à ce premier colloque international, véritable coup d'envoi officiel du Centre d'études et de recherche Shenten Dargye Ling

la garantie que les choses ne deviennent pas du folklore comme ça se passe au Tibet... »

L'anthropologue Katia Buffetrille est, quant à elle, une spécialiste de la culture populaire « et des pèlerinages autour des montagnes sacrées ». Ingénieur à l'École Pratique des Hautes Etudes, elle est l'éditrice avec Anne-Marie Blondeau d'un ouvrage de référence « Le Tibet est-il chinois ? » en ré-

ponse à un pamphlet chinois intitulé « Le Tibet, cent questions et réponses ».

Sa contribution était la présentation d'une peinture spirituelle rare « de la Terre pure des Bönpos » photographiée dans un monastère du Tibet et comparée avec une autre version. « Dans ce colloque, je viens de découvrir qu'un des chercheurs était du village de ce monastère et que son oncle, était destina-

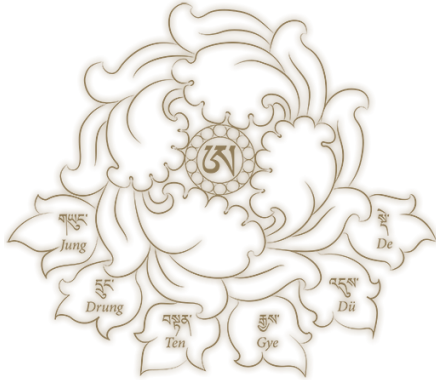
taire de cette copie, réalisée pour sa mort ! » Elle rit : « En règle générale, vous comprenez le Tibétain quand vous savez ce qu'il y a derrière ! ».

Cet été, le très érudit lama Lopön Tenzin Namdak enseignera les étudiants confirmés ou débutants sur des textes sacrés de la tradition Bön, dont certains très précieux ont été rapportés en France.

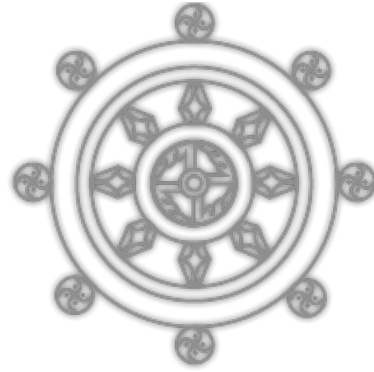
Fabienne TRÉLAT

# APPENDIX D

## Logos of Yungdrung Bon Centers in Europe



JUNGDRUNG TEN GYE DÜ DE  
*Magyarországi Bönpo Közösség*



Romanian Bon Cultural Association  
*Asociația Culturală - Bon - Culturalis Egyesület*

**Logo of the Yungdrung Bon association in Hungary**

**Logo of the Yungdrung Bon cultural association (in Oradea, Romania)**



Logo of the Yungdrung Bon Association in Argentina



Logo of the Yungdrung Bon Association in Holland

## APPENDIX E

### Example 1: interviews transcript (raw data)

Participant I.L

**Interviewer: First, please tell me about your own like religious history: How what was your history before coming to the Bon teachings or to this tradition and how did you encountered Bon?**

Participant: First, I was always running away from Buddhist traditions since when I was a child. Like when I was a teenager, one friend of mine offered me to read a book of Suzuki about Zen and I just said, "No, I'm not interested." But then a few years later I went to a lecture of a Zen Master -- westerner -- Hungarian and I listened. It was a public talk and we got into an argument and then he won this argument and I thought, "Oh, wow. That's interesting. Okay." Then I want to go. Then I went with them to-- I went to a kind of a retreat, a weekend retreat. But, all these things—Before, all these things, I had since I was a child, I had a certain feeling, since teenager, I had a very certain feeling of understanding the world and love, what is that? And when I was teenager I had a feeling that I love all the world. I love everything. I love trees. I love houses. I love – whatever.

I was one having an interview at a radio-- Like a teenager running a program at a radio station invited me and they asked me what is my attitude to love. Suddenly I realized, and it was really big shock to me, that a day will come and I will have to pick out from all the world one person and to give all my love to this person. And it was really-- In my understanding it was something horrible. I really could not bear. It was really depressing for me. Then a few years later when graduating from school, I also had a nice talk with my friend and then I realized that, oh my God, how it can be! Whatever human does it is always egoistic, it is always egoistic and you cannot overcome this. And really this terrible understanding that even by doing good, people want to please themselves because doing good they feel well. So there's no possible really altruistic or non-egoistic behavior. So for me it was also a big shock to understand this. So, but this way like the small things I had in my life and I had like a feeling that maybe I don't want to be in a society or maybe society is not that good because human nature is not able to do things. I had this feeling. And then with the Zen

thing, I went there. Of course, after I got to Zen I was already divorced and I had my relationship crisis. But, also at the same time I also had this strange feeling. I went to talk to him, to have an interview with the teacher and I asked this Zen Master about love because I said, "I want to ask about love." He started talking about boyfriends, girlfriends.

"No, no, no," I say. "It's not this thing." I have a very strange feeling that this feeling of love people are talking about, all those songs, poems, is something very incorrect. Absolutely. Because this love is something fake thing. The real love is much deeper and is much wider. You cannot take one thing out of it. It is absolutely different.

He was looking at me and said, "Okay, you are on path of a Bodhisattva." Then this finish on it, I thought, "Oh well." Zen thing is not so good for me, but I knew that I needed a path. I really needed that.

Then I was in my university studies and I was studying Tibetan but we did not have a very good teacher and there was some people from the Dzogchen community and they offered me to come. They gave me a brochure.

### **Do you mean Namkhai Norbu's Dzogchen Community?**

Yeah, Namkhai Norbu community. But when we had some tea with them, they were having a conversation and I heard, I heard that, "Oh, have you heard, there is a German guy who just attained rainbow body?" "Oh yeah, no, no." Therefore, for me, sitting aside all was sounding very strange as if it was a race for who achieves this first. Who first attains rainbow body? Come on? Where is the Buddhism there?

After this talk with the Zen Master, I have been trying to get more into Buddhist literature and because I was already doing my Asian studies. I was interested in Chinese culture, I was interested in Taoist culture and turned slowly into Buddhist culture and I was attending Buddhist lectures because I had a very good professor on Buddhism and he mainly is a specialist but he is a specialist of all the Buddhist schools. He was giving very good lectures and for me, just without having any Lama I had-- I took some ideas from

Buddhism, which I understood from my point of view. Most important, it was like understanding compassion, non-attachment and impermanence. These were things which I tried to build my life on, because for me it was always strange when people raised a flag on Buddhist and then they say, “Kill Muslims. Kill Muslims.”

Or like they say, “I’m Buddhist,” and they behave totally differently. So I think if you want to be someone, you have to change your world, your values. First, you have to build a base, and this should be the base and only then, you can start practice anything. You cannot lie. So this is the main thing that you have to change, your own point of view. You have to change your worldview and only then you can practice. So I said, “Well, no, I don’t want that. I don’t need this race.” And then Dzogchen. How about this, you know, it is like the fastest way to enlightenment, to Buddha,” like la, la, la. It all sounded to me like a race, you know. It is like ppphhft! It is something wrong there. There is something wrong. I really do not want to go there. Then few years later, I met one person who invited me to go to Johns’ teaching in [name of place] And I went to [name of place] and I had nothing to do with Tibetan Buddhism at all before this time.

While I had nothing to do with Buddhism, when I was in the first day as student at the university in the year 2000 and Dalai Lama came to [name] University and beside my friend, blind friend was standing there. So what I did when Dalai Lama came to him, gave him his hand. Then he turned to me, because of what I did, I hugged him and posed my head on his shoulder for the moment. It was a totally crazy thing, but I did this. Okay, this was my first connection with Tibetan Buddhism. But then I had nothing to do with that. But this inspired me.

And after I went to teachings of John. It was maybe in 2006 in spring, it was the first time. And when I got to [name of place], John was teaching a tantra. Without knowing anything I just get into tantra and okay, I was listening to that. And found many friends there and we were chatting. And then I was going to other John’s teachings and there was one lady who was looking at me so-- “How lucky you are. You just came and you listen this teaching. Exactly.” And I was just, “Okay, okay, okay.” And after some time, there was one lady who was going there and she was attending the Lupon’s teachings here. She was here also, [name]. She was always talking a lot of blah, blah and you will never know what is true and what is not. But she was coming to retreats to Shenten and after she

never came anymore and she didn't show up to Gelek's teachings in [name of place], which I organize. Well she was asking but not showing up. But that's another story. So, I have heard about this. I wanted to come but in 2007, I was busy traveling. My work was cancelled. So, "Okay," I said, "If it is canceled, then I take my chance to go to France." And it was a good chance because my sister had friends in Paris and they needed someone to take care of the cat. So, me with my mother we came for a week into Paris to take care of the cat. And then my mother returned home and I came here to Shenten for eight days. I arrived to Shenten. I met Rinpoche and all the questions -- everything has -- doubts disappeared. I saw this is the Master. All the questions—everything I had—all doubts disappeared. I saw [that] this is the master, this is the path, and this is the place. And since then I understood that I'm going to be coming here year and year and year like until Rinpoche will be teaching. Well, we will see the possibilities but still that was I had this feeling and I took refuge the same year.

So, that's how it started and then I started going on and I have very strong feeling with Rinpoche, and very strong relation and really-- And then it became even more serious because next year when I was planning to come, friends of mine asked me if I could translate. I never was doing translations, never before. I said, "I can try to." I never was doing this. I started doing translations for them and then more people, more people start coming and then I was doing translations and at first I was doing writing down and then I started doing simultaneous translation. So, that's how even translation started. And then year after year we started thinking that we have to invite Lamas to [name of place] and first was in 2010, we invited Menri Ponlop but it was not organized by me. But then we were successful to invite again. Like last year and this year he's continuing and this very, very good and people mostly were new people because those who were coming to Shenten they were from Namkhai Norbu and from different cities and we never gathered together. Well, we also have now a big sponsor-- Well, not a big but we don't have bigger. So, she's kind of a sponsor and a lot of new people showed up and regarding that last year was the first year when Gelek came and gave *ngondro* and this year the second year, then when he came and gave the second part with the "Practices of the Mind" and also we started doing with the concentration or *zhine* practice. He was so excited that people were listening and doing the breakfast together. So maybe next year we can do the "sky gazing." And some people got some of the signs that are supposed to occur as a sign of success in the practice. It's really wonderful, it's really wonderful.



Well, if I am here, if I find this is Master and there are people who are in need of the teaching, I have to do this. So I have to organize and I have to translate because I'm also translating this in [name of place] and so on.

But from the other side, I'm always very much afraid. I do not want to become a guru. I do not, because in [name of place] I see a lot of things. So I really have this feeling that I don't want to become not too much involved.

I am involved and I have been trying to let other people do sometimes some things and for months, because I am traveling, and I'm not in the place. But from the other side, also because I don't want to become the main -- the main thing. I am, but I do not want to be the only one. I want it to be more-- More people to get involved.

So because I'm really afraid of this power games which are happening here and I've seen them a lot, I don't want to get involved into that and I really want it to be a community, not like a single person thing or something.

I hope later others will take the lead. Because really, I am the kind of person who likes to do the entire thing alone. So for me sometimes it's not so easy to share the responsibilities, but I'm learning and this year we had very good opportunity because Gelek had to change his plans suddenly and I had to leave to [name of place] and I had no possibility to be there. So there was a big mess, it was difficult organizing a place where we would do, but finally everything went very, very well.

### **And how do you see it in the future?**

I think he will continue because as far as I understood he was very happy with people and he was very happy with the retreat because really everybody was doing meditation and they were asking the questions and they were willing to do. And people are willing to continue.

### **How many people attend these teachings?**

Not too much, like 20. Twenty something. But those were really into and wanting to. So, of course, it's not without the problems. I also want to start inviting Lamas from [name]. I mean the ones who are teaching in [name], now they started teachings.

They invited the first time and then in June I have been invited another lama to [name of place]. And this guy who did so many retreats was translating and he was with his wife and the main sponsor of them is trying to get a lama living in Europe.

What I really want to do and probably it will be in the end of next summer, we will organize practice retreat with Arta lama in [name].

What I really want to do and what is my intention, what I ask Gelek to teach. I want to take one cycle, like Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud and to teach it from the beginning to the end. Because so many, you know, lamas are coming and going, they are giving one talk, another talk, and that is it. And there's nothing left, you know? We have ngondro and we stress on ngondro. And really I want to do more practice retreats because Gelek is very nice. He is giving very nice talks and very nice things, but I think we lack practice. So I think I really want to do practice retreats with serious practitioners and to do like searching of the mind that people could go to interview, could talk to Lama directly, could share their experiences. I think that's very important.

### **What is Bon, in your words?**

I never try to put it into our words because I do not think that this is important because I-- I had a very strange feeling when I started translating Rinpoche's teachings. I understood that I have to translate simultaneously because I cannot lose anything. Then when I started speaking, inside of me I was speaking. I was translating. I was telling with Rinpoche's speaking. But I had a strange feeling that these words don't matter at all. That it is not the words that matter. Those words are like ornaments on an outer box but they cannot influence the inner capacity. So, I was translating. I was speaking but I had such a strange feeling so within this I also do not think that it is-- I do not see a name to this. I do not think should we call it religion or not religion because all these names are not settled. You can also find it, in modern times, as you know, that there are a lot of things. Maybe we can call it a

spiritual tradition. Like one spiritual tradition which is coming from Zhang Zhung, from Tibet. But from the other side, there's a feeling that this tradition is so ancient that it pre-dates countries and pre-dates the nations and nationalities. So, there's something really very, very deep, which echoes with what we have inside our country, because [name of place] was the last pagan country.

The last country to be Christian and baptized in Europe and our pagan traditions were living long until nineteenth Century when Russians put a ban on our language and language survived only through Catholic bibles and catechisms, books and so on. But this moved us away from paganism and we still have a lot of pagan rituals inside of a Catholic tradition but still, after the Soviet occupation, people are like cut off their roots. So, those who were Catholic, they were Catholic. So they still have this feeling and connection. But a lot of people who don't have. So in this Dharma supermarket though, like with a supermarket we have people from everywhere and really the ones who are the customers looking for what's going on and really searching for things. But, this Bon tradition is something so ancient that at least for me, it's not only ancient, it's basic. So that's why I don't see it as a religion. You can say it is a religion, but from the other side, it is something really much deeper for me.

**And if somebody asks you whether you follow any tradition, how will you identify yourself?**

Yeah, yeah, I do. I do say I am bonpo, and I wrote it when I had the social request in the—when I was filling a paper. They had this place were-- I write the term bonpo.

**What is the impact of you being bonpo in your social/family life?**

Of course my life has changed because-- But I can say that it changed more when I found a boyfriend, you know, but then, you know-- Boyfriend started following my tradition. He came from a different tradition and then he start following my tradition. In his life, a lot of things have changed and really I can see from a side it's much easier to see from a side than to evaluate yourself. But in his life a lot of things have changed and it helped him to survive really hard things which are happening actually now.

So I think that, yes, and yes and no. No, is because I was trying to build my life on these Buddhist values before so the idea of confession, the idea of impermanence, the idea of sharing was never new for me. So I was-- It was just deeper the idea of-- Like now I am happy because I found a community. I found dharma friends, but still anyway, you are always doing it alone. It is your own fight. It is your own way, your own path. We are born alone and we die alone. So we can have dharma brothers and dharma sisters but nobody will do practice for you. You have to do it yourself. So from this point of view, of course, it changed my attitude to other people.

It did not change much my circle of friends. Not that much. Not that much because the circle of friends I had, it was pretty much the same. There are more new friends from the dharma friends but related, but it's not that critical amount. I always had a different amount of friends and I had friends for my photography hobby, friends from my studies, friends from my practice and sometimes they intermix together. But, I did not feel a really strong change because I was doing the same job I was doing. I was doing the same studies that I was doing because if I would put all together, it all was going very directly in a one direction. Like, all the things which I was doing, they were directed in one way.

**Can you recall the Bon practices you did from the beginning since 2008? Did you incorporate any practice in your daily life?**

Yeah, yeah. I'm trying to do-- Since I came first time I've been listening to Dzogchen teachings and also preliminaries or ngondro, and I had received information about ngondro practices. I have a book. I read it but it did not help me to realize how to do it and what to do it. So I was trying to do practices in a way I could understand. And then, when Gelek went to [name of place] and he gave more expanded explanation about these practices, so I was trying to do the ngondro practices and what we are trying to do now is that. I never finished all ngondro. I hope maybe someday I will do this. But because I feel that it's important and I feel that we have to do this and I can say that I was doing little meditation the first years. Now I am doing more and more. I can sit for a longer time. I can see better results and I have got the *magyu* initiation so I was doing *magyu*, reciting and I got other initiation as well, but I'm not doing that that much. But mainly doing ngondro and what we try to do in [name of place] when we gather together. We try to gather together at least once a week on Sundays when those people who are into teachings of Gelek. So we are not many when we gather together. It's like five, six people maximum. But

what we do regularly we do guru yoga in the way Gelek taught us. Then we do the nine purification breathing. Then we recite the essential mantras one hundred times. Then we do a meditation and then we do some mantra recitation and finally we do 100-syllable mantra and we always do the lineage prayer together. That's what we are trying to do. That's what Gelek asks us to do so I think this is important. So but we do not do *thogal* practices and so on. One way because we were never real explained how to do this. That's one, we are not that much into rituals. We have a meditation room at our home. We are very lucky to rent a flat where we have a meditation room. But not so often we go there. Ah! We do mantras. We do *chod* practice. When I went to [name of place] first time and received this *chod* teachings. And I felt very strong connection. I felt a really-- This was wonderful. My boyfriend, when we started a relationship and I explained to him what Bon is, he really, he immediately was very much interested. He said, "I want to do *chod*." He said, "Can I do?" Because first I came here he was at home. He was not here. "I want to do *chod* practice." But I said, "You need a transmission." So when I came from [name of place], he started doing with me without any transmission. The first time we did this, the second day he had lot of problems in his life. I mean with financial problems and there were people who said that they would pay to him debts. He was working for them and they were not paying and lot of such things. So it was really and a very complicated situation. The first time we did this *chod*, the second day friend of him calls and says you owe to me such amount of money. I do not need it anymore, forget it. I give it to him. Okay. Then we started doing it again another time. Things happening in a way that all his problem, which was very complicated, somehow impossible to solve and disappeared. Wow! It was really-- I never pay attention to this kind of thing. I do *chod* but for him it was really very strong thing. And then he came to the teachings of Rinpoche last summer and really he is very much inspired and these teachings help him to survive very serious challenges in his life.

And I'm really very happy that teachings of Gelek are also giving result. That people are coming and doing the practice. It means that we are going in the right way. So, that's what I want to do and I-- Of course, I want to be more devoted. I want to find more time for practice, but—

**You also travel in the Tibet and so you saw monasteries in the region and the cultural differences. If you can tell me a bit of what do you think are the main cultural differences if any?**

First, we do not have this devoted relationship with the lamas as Tibetans do. That is one thing. We do not have that much respect for Lama as Tibetans do and we usually doubt more than Tibetans do. We always raise

the questions. We always want to check, to check, to check and we want-- And we are always looking for shortcuts. That is also one thing that westerners always are looking for shortcuts. That is why they don't want to do ngondro and so on and so on and so on. But from the other side-- And that's also one thing that, you know, sometimes it's difficult to-- Well, as Rinpoche's also telling, we are in a different situation now. Nobody will give you food . So that's another thing. So also we have to understand this. But from the other side, again, what westerners are looking in Bon. That's another question. Are they looking for some practice because some people they just take parts of it and they just do whatever they do. Nothing to do with the Bon tradition. All they really want to follow the path to enlightenment and that's another thing, which is really, really important one.

So I think that westerners -- some westerners -- they have to completely different attitude and even if they--But I think that even though they come to Bon tradition with a wrong attitude and if they have a good connection then they can develop a really strong devotion and the practice can help them. But if sometimes it can just worsen the situation and because sometimes you can just see that people are using Bon as a trademark.

They're doing completely different things and totally crazy things. So, here it's-- This point of view I always feel a little bit-- It's not like afraid. Maybe sorry because even with this first visit of Menri Lupon to [name of place]. I don't understand. Really, there are so many strange-- All around Europe and even here. Getting the strange stories. Everywhere, he's getting such strange stories. I think it's a Karmic issue. In Europe, in France, he's teaching with Luc Achard, Jean-Luc Achard. It's really-- You know-- And he's so wonderful Master. He's wonderful teacher. He's really giving wonderful teachings but sometimes it's really-- I don't know. I really...

I was told by [name] who passed away, that when he first came to [name of place] to teach, he was invited by a group of Bon tantra practitioners. Like eight people who invited him who are rich people who send a private plane to pick him up to do the teaching. And he said, "Where are the other students?" "Oh, we don't need other students. How much money you need we will give. We just want this teaching for ourselves." And then he decided not to go anymore. And then he went for the second time. But again, I did not know-- I do not know clear what happened but it was a misunderstanding again. Something really--

I think Bon will fit into the west. I think it is already fitting because people do need spiritual teachings, spiritual tradition and this is very pure one

and-- But I do not think that it will ever be really a mass thing. I was always surprised about how little people come to teachings of Lopon. It is like our Rinpoche, he is so special. It is like a pure doctrine, you know, directly to your mind.

Still not that many people come here. I think that is because of the teaching. I think that specifically because of the teaching because this teaching is so specific that protectors I think protect the teaching. It's not-- I think that is because of protectors. Because there are people that cannot come. Obstacles come up and so on and so on and I think that those who are here, they're really gifted. And it's different. And people are different and teaching are different. So it means that protectors are working and I think that is why it will never become a mass one. So, that's one thing which is really, really specific. I think that we have good masters. I think that Geshe Gelek is very good Master. Khenpo is also good but in a specific way. I do not have a strong connection with Khenpo somehow. I come to his teachings but I do not have a strong connection. He is very good. He is very intellectual. He is speaking very clear but one thing that his lectures are in the afternoon and everybody is tired, me too. So I better choose not to go because I don't like-- I feel-- I feel discomfort about to sit there and to sleep it's really-- No, no, no. I do not feel good. However, I will get the CDs and then we will listen, than to sit here inside. So I think that we have very good masters and I think that really it's very pure. It's very pure and those who will do they will do. But what I'm not looking forward and I don't want to happen but this probably will happen and I don't know how this will see. I don't want westerners Bonpo Lamas. I don't want.

## Why?

Because very often what happens in West, people start to adding something. They don't-- Are not happy with the traditional-- People like to add. So, okay. Right now, from all the westerners I have seen, there is only one person I could trust, this translator who is going on that training and who did Dark Retreats and who is absolutely pure and absolutely clear to every single word. And he does not like to come here-- He says, "Okay, Lopon is very good. But when he teaches English, he omits a big part of the teaching." So, in Tibetan you get much in a fuller context. But there's another question--There's another thing. Should we-- Do we need the full context? That's another question. Like because it's-- And this very good to question according to your research because Tibetan context is one context. Our context is different context. This question, I asked His Holiness. That was very specific.

## What did he say?

I wanted to ask him about Tenzin Wangyal. And I was trying this way and another way and this way and another. And then I said, "Okay. Please tell me." Can we say what Tenzin Wangyal teaches it is a new kind of Bon, like American Bon? He looked at me and smiled. He said, "Who told you this division?" I said, "Well, it's in the books." La la, la, la, la, la. Well, and-- Then he did not-- Again, he did not answer correct. And I say, "Okay." And then I ask him a different question, a different way. "Is that what Tenzin Wangyal teaches Bon?" And he said-- He laughed, smiled and he said, "If I would say that this is not Bon, he would be really very upset." So in this case I don't see a possibility for a new Bon to happen. It was non-- It was conservative for two thousand years, more than two thousand years and I don't think that it has to change. The original text, original teaching, this thing does not have to change because this should be as pure as it was because our nature of mind is the same and nothing has changed and I don't think that this part has to change. It has been conservative for more than two thousand years, and I don't think that it has to change. The original text, original teaching, these things do not have to change because they should be as pure as it was, because our Nature of Mind is the same and nothing has changed.

I think that the way we communicate, the way it moves, it is changing. I think that we can talk about western Bon only when we will have Buddhas from west. I would say when we will have fully realized practitioners who would be teaching in western languages.

That, for me, it was always a question. I think that we can talk about Western Bon only when we will have Buddhas from West. I would say, when we will have fully realized practitioners who would be teaching in Western languages. That, for me, it was always a question. Can we do prayers in our languages? Well, prayers were created by enlightened beings. Are we enlightened to put them in our language? I contradict myself because I'm doing translations of these teaching, of course. But from the other side, I think that to talk about fully trained western Lama we can only when we will have Buddhas from the west. I think in this way because you see we have 25 Masters who attained rainbow body and so on. I think only after we will get Buddhas for westerners and who are teaching? Who will be?



## Example 2: line by line coding

1.

RESPONDENT: And in the books he doesn't speak, he doesn't speak the way I'm telling you really. Firstly in the books he doesn't do any intellectualization, and that is also fascinating because the intellectual things bother me and I find them annoying. And in the three doors academy he focus on that, not like here where they discuss other topics that I haven't read, and I'm not interested in that.

TW does less intellectualization  
Intellectual is boring  
Intellectual readings are boring  
Not interested in other topics  
Defining three doors academy  
Difference TW / Shenten  
Interests

INTERVIEWER: What is the Three Doors?

Definition Three Doors

RESPONDENT: It's a whole school. It has to do with the Three Doors, it's a way to alleviate the pain because he talks a lot about pain, and his knowledge is amazing, the acknowledgement that you know because we generally don't acknowledge pain, it's hard for us to do it except someone slaps you in the face and it hurts or let's say your mom is dying or you broke your toe. But in the daily aspects, those things that bother you that cause you pain, any type of pain he makes a big emphasis on people acknowledging it and then he has a whole school on it

To alleviate pain  
TW's knowledge / TW is amazing  
Acknowledging the pain  
Generally we acknowledge pain in extreme situations  
Pain in daily life  
Lack of awareness in daily routine  
TW emphasizes acknowledging pain

2.

INTERVIEWER: And the Dark Retreat?

RESPONDENT: Well I did it for a week, I have done two retreats of one week each - What motivated me to do was the fact that it was an essential practice, for me, the reason that made me introduce myself in the Bon somehow it was my fear to death, since I was five years old, is closely related to that practice which is the time of preparation for the time of death, then sooner or later It would have to happen, it was inevitable to cross paths with it, and it had a little bit of dealing with my fears, my fear of the dark that I had since a child, fear to solitude and this feeling that you are preparing yourself because in there you know that you are preparing yourself to death because it will happen and it is a little training, to face those things that...what was the other question?

One week Dark Retreat  
What motivated me  
Dark retreat essential practice  
Enter Bon for fearing death  
Since I was five - childhood  
Connect childhood and Bon  
Preparation for death  
Dealing with fears / fear of dark  
Fear of solitude  
Preparing for death  
Training for death  
Dark retreat as preparation for death  
Death will happen, this is a training

## Examples of Nvivo nodes coding for emerging themes, from Nvivo Software

### **Theme: "Becoming a bonpo"**

Internals\A.M - § 2 references coded [ 7.67% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.71% Coverage

Something magical happened to me with Tenzin Wangyal. I was behind as the newcomers. Here in Shenten is different, but in (place), the front seats are reserved for old students. In a break I observed that a person went closer to him and I mentally thought "I wish to be one day that close to him" - he looked at me, I felt I was listened to. He told me, you will be. It was super magical. Since then I always go to all his retreats. I feel it was like a call.

Reference 2 - 4.96% Coverage

One day without knowing anything I see Geshe Tenzin Yeshe. He was my first contact. I arrived and they asked me: are you coming because of the monk. I had no idea. It was like "boom" I listened for the first time guru yoga, I saw the rituals, it was as if I was remembering something that I've lived already, I don't know how but I knew that I knew it. It was just before Tenzin Wangyal was leading a seminar.

Internals\A.S.M Transcript - § 3 references coded [ 14.28% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 6.07% Coverage

One day I was talking to a friend of mine who follows Namkhai Norbu and all the important Lamas, he is one of those that collects teachings and books and everything but does not practice anything. We were talking about Vedanta and Dzogchen, but I told him that I did not know what that was and he told me to go to his house to watch a documentary and see if that was connected to the Dzogchen teaching, and I agreed to go. The teachings of Namkhai Norbu seemed brighter me, so I went to an esoteric bookstore and bought the book Yoga Dreams. I read it and I loved it. One day I went for the second book of Namkhai Norbu and saw a poster that said Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche would teach dream yoga, and I told myself that I had to go. So I went to hear what yoga dream weekend and said, I know he is not, but this teaching is. And here I am following it. That was in 1997, but two years later Yongdzin Rinpoche came to (place) and that was like the sword of Yeshe Walmo to the heart, I had an open heart. I asked him for permission and told him that I was following a Vedanta Master but wanted to follow the Bon, and he told me laughing clearly that if I had to follow the Bon and come to Triten Norbutse. I took it as a fact, and in 2000 I went there.

Reference 3 - 0.01% Coverage

I know that because Sogyal Rinpoche speaks about the usual life of people, you know, but the problem, about when they speak about ego, it's easy to understand in the Western way of life, so this way you keep the people and slowly you make

it more traditional and more traditional, and more traditional. And, somebody liked the Dalai Lama, and also Yongdzin Rinpoche, they don't do like that. They still stay in their tradition. They say, it works like that, somebody gave me the teachings like that and I will not mix with my confusion so I will teach like that. And after the many years that I spend with Sogyal Rinpoche, for example, I was really, really fed up. I was tired with that. I needed some more pure and authentic teaching. So when I heard the teaching of Rinpoche and how authentic he gives this teaching of his tradition. I was very, very happy. This is like pure, crystal, pure. So I started liked that. But, thanks also to Sogyak Rinpoche who opened me the way.

Internals\\D.S - § 3 references coded [ 10.67% Coverage]

I was very committed and I had dedicated many months, nearly all my vacations were dedicated to do any retreat. But there was something in me that seemed to me that taking refuge was not right even though many people come into contact with Buddhism or any activities and immediately after a week they take refuge and they love it, but I did not want to do it from that place I believed it was a very serious thing and I'm glad I waited. The truth is that when I took refuge it excited me a lot and I think it would have not been the same if I had done it at the beginning.

Internals\\I.L Transcript - § 2 references coded [ 3.75% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.88% Coverage

And then I came here to Shenten for eight days. I arrived to Shenten. I met Rinpochet and all the questions - everything - doubts disappeared. I saw this is the Master. This is the path, this is the place. And since then I understood that I'm going to be coming here year and year and year like until Rinpoche will be teaching. Well, we will see the possibilities but still that was I had this feeling and I took refuge the same year. There were rainbows in the sky and everything. So, that's how it started and then I started going on and I have very strong feeling with Yongdzin Rinpochet and a very strong relation with him.

Internals\\S.A Transcript - § 2 references coded [ 7.81% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 3.96% Coverage

Shenten. When was this? Well 2007 I think. Then I went here, and when I came into the compound it was Geshe Gelek and Lama Sangye doing some ritual. It must have been saluang in the morning. This was such an experience. Even though on the surface everything was so completely exotic. I mean I had never heard or seen anything like this before. It felt like this total homecoming. Like, "Ah, oh." Exactly like this. So you cannot mistake your home when you come home, and this was it.

**Theme: "The Future of Bon"**

Internals\\C.F - § 3 references coded [ 0.01% Coverage].

Reference 2 - 0.01% Coverage

I have no real ideas. I think I'm not so much afraid of death, you know. So I'm not afraid to speak about the death of Rinpoche. So Rinpoche will go, in not so long time. So, what happened after? This is really, really, I don't know. For me, I think I will stay. I will stay. Maybe a little bit less because I will get old too. So I have to make my – have to think about my practice life a little bit. But, I will still be here. Khenpo, it will be a real hard job for him. I don't know if the activity Shenten will go down at this time or not. So, in the next steps, I try to see something like that. After – because Khenpo gives very really, really clear teaching – very clear, pure, authentic and very, very right. I think more and more young people will come. But I'm not so good to see the big thing. So I leave the big thing – the big view to another people because me, I'm not so much the big view. I don't know what will happen to Shenten.

Reference 3 - 0.01% Coverage

I said that teachings don't have to mix with the modern world, but at the end, I think maybe a little bit. Maybe like a step to go and teaching in the Bon tradition. Little bit more in the Western world. Like what happens with Tenzin Wangyal. But for me, it's a mystery because for me, I'm not very, very interesting by Tibetan aspect. I was never fascinated by Tibetan world; all Tibetan aspect was not so wonderful for me. No. So, you understand what I mean?

Internals\\C.I Transcript - § 6 references coded [ 20.09% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5.53% Coverage

Well I think the great advantage that the Bon religion has is it's still very much a continuation of the old institutional structure. So whereas some other Lamas have come to the west and set up their own thing, a little bit disconnected from the old traditional structures. So then they have the problem of when they pass away, putting in place some way, some mechanism for the succession of their teachings in this new context, and it is still early days. There are still some of those teachers who were born in Tibet around. So what is going to happen in the future? And they are all doing it in different ways. I mean Soygal Rinpoche has got his entire monastery complex there. Rigpa, or the Dzogchen community of Namkhai Norbu, we'll see what is going to happen there. But they have kind of got a new kind of thing, I suppose. Whereas in here, it's just an extension of the institutional structures that have existed for centuries.

Internals\\D.F Transcript - § 3 references coded [ 17.48% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 3.56% Coverage

I think the tradition will be kept. It will—it will—it can be kept the way it is now by conserving the texts. It will get the audience that will fit into that way of teaching. The people who like something less profound, they will go to some other place. There are not that many students here, in comparison with other centers, I think last week 140 registered, but there must be about 150. I think this week maybe it will be a little more; it could be a little more, yes. I think Shenten will develop, and maybe one day when—maybe some rich benefactor may come and help Shenten

Internals\\F.H Transcript - § 2 references coded [ 54.04% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 16.98% Coverage

It will definitely grow because since the past twenty years there is increased recognition amongst Tibetans and scientists of the authenticity and the purity of Yungdrung Bon as a spiritual tradition and Yungdrung Bon as the source of Tibetan civilization. Another reason is people recognize that there's very good lamas in the tradition and also some of our younger lamas are fully trained and very well trained, and there is a need for spiritual life in the world. We have something to offer that's real and true. So it will develop, but it will not be a huge development because being the really thing it requires a commitment and commitment in the practice and commitment in the study.

Internals\\I.H - § 2 references coded [ 17.31% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5.52% Coverage

I hope shenten will continue, there will be no problem because there is a good base. Maybe it will become bigger. I hope mostly we can keep the essence. I wish we can keep that. For Shenten it will be easy, like a flow. Maybe we are not so developed as those people from the past. We cannot be more developed than we are spiritually, but I do feel like this idea of something that we are not only here for us but we are also the keepers, we have the possibility to keep these teachings alive.

Internals\\S.G - § 3 references coded [ 24.31% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 7.75% Coverage

Shenten for me is very especial. I call it the pure land of Shenten. Is like arriving in a kind of sphere of devotion, devotion is omnipresent here. Shenten is little but rich. Many communities are big; you have thousands of people like tourists. But here is very concentrated very constant, you see people coming long time, always the same faces. That means there is a kind of fidelity, which is strong, and continuity in the project, because Shenten is not only a place where we came when we want to practice, but also it is also a place to develop.

Internals\\U.G Transcript - § 1 reference coded [ 5.64% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5.64% Coverage

I think very much depends on the next generations of spiritual leaders, in the Bon tradition. How they can manage, because you have a very big field you have to cover. On the one hand you have to cover the rules of the monastic tradition. On the other side you have a very modern world where monks have smart phones and they see the TV is coming more to Nepal, and all the influence of Internet and everything of the modern society is influencing. So I am not really sure that the monastic tradition, as it is today, can be continued in the future. Maybe in one or two generations it will be very different. It will be more like educational maybe, like an educational school.

## RÉSUMÉ

---

Cette thèse a pour but de réaliser un examen approfondi de la religion Yungdrung Bon (ci-après dénommée "Bon") à la lumière de la globalisation. Elle explore les dynamiques en cours dans la transmission et la réception du Bon en Occident, en offrant un nouveau point de vue sur l'expansion des traditions religieuses tibétaines en Occident, ainsi qu'un panorama de l'histoire moderne du Bon. Afin de mieux appréhender la spécificité du Bon contemporain en Occident, il faut d'abord prendre du recul et examiner l'histoire de l'expansion de Bon en l'Occident, ainsi que le contexte dans lequel cette propagation s'est produite. Pour cela, la thèse retracera le processus par lequel Bon s'est globalisé en examinant sa transmission dans les sociétés occidentales, les principaux acteurs qui ont facilité cette transmission, et la manière dont les Occidentaux eux-mêmes le reçoivent et l'adaptent. De nombreuses informations ont été recueillies lors d'entretiens, qui ont ensuite été analysés de manière qualitative par le biais d'une méthode de théorisation ancrée afin d'en tirer les thèmes principaux. La recherche a porté en particulier sur Shenten Dargye Ling, le principal centre Bon en Occident, situé à Blou, en France, où l'on peut régulièrement observer par quelles manières le "Bon moderne" s'adapte à la fois à des adeptes définissant le Bon comme une tradition "scientifique" et "non-spirituelle" et à des dévots ne négligeant pas nécessairement les pratiques magiques, rituelles et dévotionnelles en tant que "bagage culturel", preuves que les significations des symboles, des pratiques et des interprétations religieuses ne sont pas rigides, mais fluides et multiples. Shenten est analysé non seulement comme un espace déterritorialisé, mais aussi comme un lieu tibétain/occidental reterritorialisé, dans lequel le Bon est implanté dans un nouveau milieu géographique, social et culturel, suivant un processus de transplantation qui entraîne des adaptations et des transformations multiples, certains éléments comme la pratique Dzogchen ou la méditation étant mieux retenus que d'autres. Le Bon, dans sa dimension globale, opère dans un contexte où les forces qui créent des changements dans la tradition coexistent avec d'autres forces qui

## MOTS CLÉS

---

Yungdrung Bon, Dzogchen, Bouddhisme Tibétain, Mondialisation, Transmission Religieuse.

## ABSTRACT

---

This thesis aims to provide an in-depth examination of the Yungdrung Bon religion (hereinafter referred to as “Bon”) in light of globalization. It seeks to explore the dynamics taking place in the transmission and reception of Yungdrung Bon in the West, providing a new viewpoint on the expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the West and a comprehensive picture of the modern history of the Yungdrung Bon religion. Addressing the specificity of contemporary Bon in the West requires first taking a step back and looking at the history of Bon’s expansion into the West as well as the context within which this propagation occurred. Thus, the thesis will trace the process by which Bon became global by looking in chronological terms at the transmission of Bon into Western societies, the main characters who facilitated this transmission, and how Westerners themselves are receiving and adapting Bon. Significant data was gathered through interviews, which were then analysed using a qualitative grounded theory methodology to distill main themes. The research focused particularly on Shenten Dargye Ling, the main Yungdrung Bon center in the West located in Blou, France, where one can witness regularly how “modern Bon” accommodates followers who define Bon as a “scientific” and “nonritualistic” tradition as well as devotional practitioners, who do not necessarily disregard magical, ritualistic and devotional practices as “cultural baggage,” indicating that the meanings of religious symbols, practices and interpretations of these are not rigid but fluid and multifaceted. Shenten is analyzed not only as a deterritorialized space, but also a reterritorialized Tibetan/Western place, where Bon is being implanted in a new geographical, social, and cultural milieu, in a transplantation process that results in adaptations and multidirectional transformations, where certain elements—such as Dzogchen practice and meditation—are better retained than others. Bon, in its global dimension, operates in a context where forces that are creating changes in the tradition coexist with other forces that aim at preserving it, sometimes in tension and sometimes in parallel. Therefore, this thesis explores the expansion, adaptation, and integration processes of a particular religion as a consequence of and in relation to globalization.

## KEYWORDS

---

Yungdrung Bon, Dzogchen, Tibetan Buddhism, Globalization, Religious Transmission.