

Yungdrung-bon; the Religion of Eternal Truth in the Land of Snow

by Tsewang Gyalpo Arya*

Abstract: *Tibet is an ancient nation with rich history and culture. Bon is the native religion of Tibet, it is still being practiced in Tibetan community as Yungdrung-bon. Bon has involved over the period of time and shares many values with Buddhism. Yundrung-bon is different from the early Bon and the Bon used as generic term for religious practices. This paper attempts to explore the background of this native religion and its position in the religious cultural history of the Tibet. The paper also aims to clarify the general misunderstanding about the religion with a view to promote harmony and unity in the community.*

Keywords: Bon, Yundrung, Buddhism, Tonpa Shenrab

Bon is generally considered as the indigenous religion of Tibet, which has survived to this day, and Bonpo as the follower of this religion. But this is a general assumption which is true to some extent at conventional level only. Before the advent of Buddhism in 8th century AD, the religion was widespread in the land and has been one of the important primal forces which nourished the culture, language and identity of the region. Tibetan civilization owed greatly to this indigenous faith or religion of their ancestors, which gave them a unique identity and cohesive force to survive and evolve as a nation. Early Tibetan Empire is said to be conducted and sustained through Drung, Deu and Bon¹. Just as Buddhism became popular in Tibet and the neighboring regions around 8th century AD, Bon too was popular in the Himalaya and the neighboring regions at one time in the past². We must remember that before the Tibetan nation emerged under the Yarlung dynasty, there existed a land known by Zhangzhung and ruled by Zhangzhung kings. The land covers major part of Tibet and the surrounding areas³.

Historians and scholars have attempted to unravel the origin and the meaning of the word Bon. According to Prof. Namkhai Norbu, Bon is an ancient Tibetan term having the same meaning as that of the word bZla⁴, meaning to recite. Bon-pa is an archaic verb meaning: to recite.⁵ It is sometime substituted by word Gyer, which also means recite or invoke⁶. Gyer is believed to be a Zhangzhung word for Bon, and Zhangzhung is the country from where the Yungdrung-bon religion came to Tibet. In ancient text, we can see the use of Bon as a verb as well as a noun to mean teach, recite, say, religion etc.⁷ Bon is also said to be source of term "bod" for Tibet in Tibetan, and that the land took over the name of the religion "chos ming yul la tshur brtag-pa"⁸. Just as chos, a term

¹ (1) Nyang-rel nyi-ma 'od-zer, p-158. (2) Orgyen Lingpa, p- 151-152. (3) Namkhai Norbu, Drung, deu & bon, p-xv-xx

(4) Sherig Lekhung, Tibetan Reader VI Part, p-11

² (1) mDo-'dus, p-323. (2) Sharza Tashi Gyaltzen, p-150. (3) Gopa Tenzin Drugdak, p-24

³ (1) Tenzin Namdhak, p-33-34. (2) Triten Norbutse, p-12

⁴ Namkhai Norbu, Necklace of dZi, p-16

⁵ Bod-rgya tsign-mzod chen-mo, p-1853

⁶ ibid, p-385

⁷ Bon-sGo 24: Gopa Yungdrung Yonten, p- 135 footnote28

⁸ Gedhun Chopel, deb-ther dkar-po, p- 8-9.

used for Dharma or Buddhism initially, has different meaning apart from religion, Bon too has different meaning⁹.

The term "Bon" is as ancient as the early history of Tibet, which we will deal later. The concept of Bon, its teaching and the culture associated with it are purely of Tibetan origin. Unfortunately, this unique strength and original wisdom of Tibetan civilization has not been well understood and appreciated. Even today, with open knowledge, free access to information, and religious tolerance, Bon doctrine and its spiritual and culture contribution has not found the rightful place and acceptance it deserve from the progeny of the civilization it nurtured for so long. Although limited in knowledge, inspired by old books and true seekers, I make this small sincere attempt to share my thoughts and throw some light on the matter. I hope this will help us look at the subject from a new perspective and relieve ourselves from the long spell of concocted prejudiced bigotry and conventional hearsay on the religion.

Just like any ancient civilizations, Tibetans ancestors too lived with the nature. Calm and bountiful nature gave peace, prosperity and development. Flood, thunder storms, earthquake, diseases and other natural calamities brought fear and insecurity. In order to live in harmony with the nature and tame the destructive natural forces, our ancestors too were intelligent and ingenious enough to come up with ideas to communicate with these forces to pacify or to control them. This communication took in the form of rituals involving propitiation, offerings, expelling, incantation, fumigation etc. As the civilization developed, the rituals also became more widespread and sophisticated. This took the form of belief and foundation of religion. These early practices and different forms of worship were called Bon. It has no doctrinal foundation, and was comparable with shamanism to some extent. R.S. Stein used the term "Nameless Religion"¹⁰ to mean all the ritual practices widespread in Tibet and the neighboring regions in early times. With the advent of civilization, these indigenous practices also evolved and various form of Bon practices emerged in Tibet and the neighboring regions.

Some of the early forms of Bon prevalent in the land were: gDon-bon, bDud-bon, b'Tsen-bon, Dur-bon etc.¹¹ There were kLu-bon, gNyen-bon, 'Dre-bon, Ngod sBying-bon, Ma-Sangs-kyi-bon etc.¹². Like any primitive religion, some of these Bons among other things involved sacrifice of flesh and blood [*dmar-mchod*] as propitiation rituals. It can be deduced from these fact that the term "Bon" was used broadly for all "ritual, healing and religious practice" in early period. It was not a specific but a generic term to mean various forms of rituals and religious practices or faith in the land. The Bon religion that we are talking in Tibetan society is Yungdrung-bon taught by Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. This Yungdrung-bon, which has sustained the Tibetan civilization since the early Zhangzhung and Yarlung Empire, and which later came to be known by Bon only, should not be confused with the generic Bon, a term used to mean various rituals, beliefs and faiths in the early period.

⁹ (1) Bon-sGo 6: sMen-ri Ponlop Thinley Nyima, p-20, 1993. (2) Bon-sGo: 5 'go-pa bsTen-'Zin 'Brug-drags, p 31. (3) Bon-sGo 24, Lhakpa Tsering, p-23

¹⁰ R.S. Stien, Tibetan Civilization, p- 191 ff

¹¹ (1) Namkhai Norbu, p-45. (2) Bon-sGo 5, 'go-pa bsTen-'Zin 'Brug-drags, Bon gyi skor cun zhig gLen-ba, P-37.

¹² dGe-gShes Phunstok Nyima, p- xxiv

Tonpa Shenrab Miwo was the founder of Yungdrung-bon religion of Tibet. He reformed and reorganized the existing Bon rituals and expounded the doctrine of Eternal Bon. Tonpa Shenrab was believed to be born in Wolmolungring¹³, a mystical land in Tagzig¹⁴, identified as Persia or modern day Iran. But given the direction, its proximity and the sound, any phonetician would link it to Tajik-sathan [the land Tajik people], which broke away from Soviet Union in 1991. Some scholars ascribe it to Zhangzhung, present day Ngari region of Western Tibet¹⁵. The description of Wolmolungring described in Tonpa Shenrab's biography bears a striking resemblance to the area around the Mount Tise and the Lake Mansarovar in Western Tibet¹⁶.

In mDo gZer-mig, the medium version of Tonpa Shenrab's life, existence of some forms of Bon practices is clear from the text, when it talks about what the Master taught on his first visit to Tibet. "Bod kyi bonpo la bon-du lha-gSol-wa, 'dre bkar-wa, yug phud-pa", meaning "For the Bonpos in Tibet, the religion of propitiating gods, interrogating demons, purification rites were introduced."¹⁷ Here the term "Bonpo" is used for the practitioners and "Bon" for religion or ritual. It is also to be noted that in mDo-mDus, the shortest 8th century biography of Tonpa Shenrab, the title name of his father was Lha-bon Mi-bon rGyal-bon, meaning bon of god, bon of human, bon of king. These early scriptures very succinctly prove that there were practices known by Bon in Tibet and beyond the border of Tibet before the coming of Master Tonpa Shenrab.

People are apt to say that followers of Bon religion are called Bonpo. But this was not so in the early period. Before Buddhism, Yungdrung-bon religion flourished in Tibet. There was no need to identify the general populace as Bonpos; they were Zhangzhungpas and Tibetans only. The term "Bonpo" has been used synonymous to "priest" or "healer". It was a specific term used for a person or a priest or to the one who is conducting any religious ritual irrespective of what kind of Bon he was practicing. In mDo-gZer-mig, the medium version of Tonpa Shenrab's biography, the Master talks about different Bonpos, who tried to cure the ailing prince¹⁸. General populace who believed in these rituals were not referred as Bon or Bonpo. Some scholars say that the term was originally used for a class of priest-magicians, and not to the religion itself¹⁹. This reference of Bonpo to all the practitioners and believers in Bon religion started only after the coming of Buddhism in Tibet to differentiate it from the Buddhist - Ban-de.

So, this distinction of general Bon and Yungdrung-bon, and the term Bonpo in early and modern time should be properly understood to have a clear perspective of what Bon and Bonpo we are talking about. The term "Chos", Tibetan equivalent to Dharma was coined with the coming of Buddhism in Tibet in 8th century. Initially, Chos was used to mean Buddha dharma, later it also came to be used to mean "religion" in general: Yeshu-chos for Christian, Kache-chos for Islam,

¹³ mDo-gZermig, Chapter three, p-23.

¹⁴ Samten Karmay, Arrow & the Spindle, p- 104, 109

¹⁵ (1) Namkhai Norbu, The Necklace of dZi, p-16. (2) Samten Karmey, The Arrow & the Spindle, p-107

¹⁶ mDo-'Dus, p- 307

¹⁷ (1) Shar-rDza bKra-Shis rGyal-tsen, p-47, 161 (2) Samten Karmay, Treasury of Good Sayings, p-30.

¹⁸ mDo-gZer-mig, Chapter nine, p-161-162. "Bon-po tham-ced kyi gto byes kyang ma phen". [Rituals of all the Bonpos brought no effect.] And the text talked about a Bon-po, who was against *dmarmchod*, animal sacrifice.

¹⁹ Priyadarsi Mukherji, p-37

Hindu-chos for Hindu etc. A parallel could be drawn to the fact that all yellow-haired [go-ser] foreigners were "Inji" [English] for Tibetans. Only after coming to India in 1959, Tibetans realized that all yellow-haired people are not "Inji".

Just as all chospas are not Buddhist and all go-sers not Inji, all bonpos are not Yundrung-bon follower. Chos in generic term is different from Buddhism; likewise, Bon in generic term is different from Yungdrung-bon. This distinction should be very clear. What was Bon for religion earlier became Chos later. As early Bon practices were reformed and abolished, Yungdrung-bon religion came to be known only by Bon in the later period. Yungdrung-bon means religion of Yundrung, "Yung" means not distracted from the eternal truth or meaning, "Drung" means everlasting²⁰, so "Yungdrung-Bon" means "Religion of everlasting or eternal truth". And this religion should not be misunderstood with the other early practices which may have survived in and around Tibet in the name of Bon.

Yungdrung-Bon doctrine taught by Tonpa Shenrab, which has come from Zhangzhung and practiced since the early days of Nyatri Tsenpo²¹, the first king of Tibet, does not involve any form of human or animal sacrifices. In mDo-gZer-mig, the medium version of Tonpa Shenrab's biography, one of the Bonpo priests has said, "I don't understand the Bon of killing one to revive other; it is not proper and should be avoided."²² Tonpa Shenrab reformed and abolished all forms of animal sacrifice and blood offerings and replaced it with substitutions using dough, effigies etc. for *glud* and *dmar-chos*²³ rituals. These teachings are well recorded in the four Bon of cause; where he taught divination, astrology, sortilege, healing, exorcism, ransom, funeral rites etc. In fact, if we look at Tibetan culture, it is these four Bon of cause [rGyu-bon bzhi] which has made the Tibetan culture unique and rich, and these practices are still very much alive in Tibetan society in different forms and well adapted into religious and secular life.

In order to properly understand the teaching of Yungdrung-bon, commonly known as Bon, study of the biography of the Teacher Tonpa Shenrab, which is in three versions is indispensable. mDo 'dus: It is one of the earliest and shortest written sources in one volume with 21 chapters under gTerma [discovered text] on the life of Tonpa Shenrab²⁴. The text is believed to be translated from Zhangzhung to Tibetan by sNya-chen Lishu stag-ring and he concealed it in 8th century. Two other biographies: gZer-mig and gZi-brJid are the medium and longer versions of the Teacher's life and teachings containing 2 volumes with 18 chapters, and 12 volumes with 61 chapters respectively. Doctrine and philosophical teachings of the Yungdrung-bon is classified into two as sgo-zhi mzod-nga; four doors and one treasury. It is also classified as theg-pa rim-pa dgu; nine stages of vehicle. The later is popularly known as "Nine ways of bon", after David Snellgrove's translation.²⁵ The Nine

²⁰ ibdi, Bon-sGo 10, 'go-pa sTen-'zin 'brug-drags, p- 21

²¹ Tenzin Namdak, p-41-42

²² (1) mDo-gZer-mig, Chapter nine, p-162. "gcig bsd gcig gso bya ba'i bon ni bdag gis mi shes-so. De-ni log-par gol-wa'i bya mi rung-ngo. " (2) Gopa Tenzin Drukdak, Theg-chen., p-28

²³ *glud* means expelling or banishing someone away with a request or order to take the disease or bad luck along it. *dMar-chos* means propitiation through the offering of blood and life.

²⁴ Samten Karmay, The Arrow & the Spindle, p-109

²⁵ David L. Snellgrove, The Nine Ways of Bon,

ways of Bon are further classified as rGyu-bon bzhi; four bon of cause, 'bres-bon bzhi; four bon of result, and the rZod-pa chen-po; the great perfection. Until and unless one has gone through these hagiographies and the vehicles, it may not be prudent to slander the teachings of this great Master of Tibet²⁶, Tonpa Shenrab.

It is true that Buddhism greatly enriched and enlightened the Tibetan civilization, but discarding and belittling one's own root and culture is not a commendable approach to adopt by the heir apparent of this rich civilization. If a strong national foundation is desired, we need to seek the root. Buddhist missionaries extolled India as the land of Gods, people were made to believe that anything coming from India as sacred and pure. So much so that the propagators tried and were in fact successful in rewriting the Tibetan ancient history by ascribing origin of the Tibetan race²⁷, king²⁸, and language²⁹ to India. Scholars like Namkhai Norbu have refuted these claims as overdoing of the Buddhist masters to show their loyalty to the land of Dharma³⁰ and to disparage the native civilization.

"In both China and Japan, the Dharma flourished and greatly influenced the development and enrichment of the cultures of respective nations. But nowhere have these nations sacrificed the uniqueness of their own culture and history for the sake of Dharma. There would be nothing wrong if the Tibetans would view the relation between Buddhist religion and their cultural history in such a perspective."³¹

In one of the Guru Rinpoche's prayers "bar chad lam-sel" it is written "gdon-gzugs bon-gyi bsten-pa bsnubs"³², and many interpret this as "Guru Rinpoche abolished the Bon religion of Tibet". This is not true, and it is blasphemous to interpret in this way. gdon means demonic spirit, and gzugs means form. So what the scripture is saying is: Guru Rinpoche abolished the Bon teaching that was in the form of "gdon-worship", i.e. demonic spirit-worship or propitiation. Tonpa Shenrab too disapproved of this practice much earlier, when he introduced Yungdrung-bon. Just as propitiation of gdon [spirit] is discouraged in Buddhism, it is same in Yungdrung-bon also.

²⁶ As provenance of Wolmolungring and sTag-gZig could not be identified, some scholars believe that this Wolmolungring is none other than Zhangzhung, which was once western region of Tibet, therefore, Tonpa shenrab was a Tibetan master

²⁷ (1) Nyang-rel Nyima 'Od-zer, p-139-140. (2) Tsepon Shakabpa Tsepon, page 1. [Based on the text Lha les phul-byung gi stod-'grel by Indian master Sherab Goched. Following their defeat against Pandavas in Mahabharata war of Indian epic, prince Rupati along with his platoons fled to Tibet in the guise of women. They were said to be the first inhabitants in Tibet.]

²⁸ 1) Khes-pa lDe'u, p -150. [It was written that after the Mahabharata war, Rupa-skyes, the 99th son of Dhrtarastra fled to Tibet. When the native asked from whence he come, not knowing the language, he pointed to the sky. People believed he came from the sky and was made their king. (2) Nyang-rel Nyima 'od-zer, page-156-157. [Here the King of Badsala tribe had a prince with many strange features, bird like eye lid, webbed fingers etc. He was cast in a river, when he grew up and came to know the reality, he fled to Tibet. There the people made him king because they believed him to be divine when he pointed his finger in sky about his origin.]

²⁹ (1) Nyang-rel Nyima 'od-zer, p-170. (2) Tsepon Shakabpa, p-12 and 25.

³⁰ (1) Namkhai Norbu, The Necklace of dZi, p-3-4, and 7. (2) Namkhai Norbu, DDB, p-43. [A boy of Shen clan having donkey's ear was depicted as the origin of the so called rdol-bon. Namkahi Norbu has refuted this.]

³¹ ibid Namkhe Norbu, p- 8.

³² Nyer mkho'i shel 'don kun-phen nyi-ma, p-283.

As for Guru Rinpoche's view on the Bon teaching, here is an extract from Kathang, "gyung-drung bon kyang bden-par nges. Sid-pai dgu-lha dus su mchod. gnod-byed nyes-pa' si-mgo non. Long-spyod phyawa dang gyang du 'gug. Bod rnam bde-legs 'byung bar mzed³³." This can be roughly translated in laymen's language as: "Yungdrung-bon is also a confirmed truth. Deities of the land should be propitiated in time. Heads of the harmful demons should be suppressed. Prosperity should be summoned through phyawa and yang [luck and essence]. Tibetans are blessed with health and prosperity." Therefore, Guru Rinpoche did not suppress or abolished Yungdrung-bon teaching.

Buddhism too was misinterpreted in early 10th during the dark period of Tibetan history, where tantra practices were greatly misused. This led Lha Lama Yeshe-Od to invite Atisha Dipamkarashrijana to clarify and revive the real teaching of the Buddha³⁴. But this does not mean that Buddhism before Atisha was bad and Buddhism after Atisha was good. Buddhism as a religion is pure and good, but there could be bad practitioners. Just because there are bad practitioners, we cannot say that the religion is bad. So it is same with Bon teaching, not all early forms of Bon are bad, there could be bad as well as good Bon, but the mDo, sNgags and Sems teaching of Yungdrung-bon taught by Tonpa Shenrab is what is being practiced by the Tibetan Bonpos. And it is this Bon we have to take into the context while talking about Bon religion of Tibet and its follower Bonpo. Buddhist scholar Ngawang Zangpo says in his book, Guru Rinpoche: His Life and Times, "His Holiness the Dalai Lama regularly invites representative of the Bon faith in his Kalachakra empowerment and Kalu Rinpoche himself gave Bon empowerments, explaining that their faith was different only in form and language, not in essence, from the Buddhist path."³⁵

Tibetans should be proud that like any other major civilizations of the world, they too had an ancient religious culture, which evolved over the period of time, coexisted with Buddhism, and gave the land a unique religious and culture identity. Bon and Buddhism are two inalienable paths analogous to method and wisdom aspect of Vajrayana teaching to understand the depth and essence of Tibetan mind and civilization. Bon is the foundation of Tibetan socio-cultural identity, and we should learn to appreciate our origin and heritage, and be grateful to the primal everlasting the wisdom of our forefathers.

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³⁴ Shakabpa Tsepon, p-56-60

³⁵ Ngawang Zangpo, Guru Rinpoche, His life and Times, p-186

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