10 Bon in Practice

This chapter looks at Bon as a lived experience, beginning with a discussion of how participants say Bon teachings and practices affect them. While the themes themselves across this and the previous chapter have blurred boundaries, this section delves into the specific practices Bonpos engage in at retreats and at home on their own. 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.

The second part of the chapter, "Modern versus Traditional Approaches," addresses the two contrasting approaches to Bon that Western practitioners and Tibetan teachers tend to take, which they themselves 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, a few words should be said about an essential aspect in Dzogchen transmission – the relationship between a teacher and a disciple. The master–student 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.[552] 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.[553] Indian Tantric Hindu and Buddhist traditions have been influential in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. By the end of the eighth century, as Jacob 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.[554]

552 See: Tribe 2000.
553 Tribe 2000: 193.
554 Dalton 2004: 2.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110758870-010

Dalton further points out that the Dzogchen Tantras, known as the Great Perfection, constitute an exception to these observations, having emerged for the most part in the eleventh century.[555]

While scholars' opinions differ in what the main features of Tantrism are or even that it is possible to enumerate any, Anthony 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 worship of deities; the significance of mantras and visualization practices, including the identification of the practitioner with a deity; the requirements of initiations, esotericism and secrecy; and the pivotal role of a master, teacher or guru.[556] The teacher is both the one who grants permission to the students to undergo certain practices by conferring the initiations and the one who transmits the Tantric teachings. This is why a disciple, who views their guru as an aspect of the deity or even as the deity itself, should never speak ill of them. The path leads the Tantric adept to become the deity either by merging with it, by realizing their nature as identical to that of the deity or by becoming a separate deity but equal in essence to the deity.[557]

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 from a "lineage of masters" through the practice called "Guru Yoga," which is explained by Tenzin 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.[558]

The teacher, particularly the Root Lama, is regarded as the embodiment of the entire lineage of masters, and it is "through them" that the student is introduced to the Natural State of their Mind.

Participants shared their views with me on how this master–student relationship is articulated 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 chapter ends with a description

555 Dalton 2004: 2.
556 Williams/Wynne 2012. V .
557 Tribe 2000: 198–200.
558 Namdak 2006c: 55–56.

where practitioners see Western Bon heading and their concerns regarding how it will evolve.

10.1 Teachings and Practices

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 specific teachings; the others received whatever was made available. It seems that, as Bon started to be introduced in the West, teachings were presented without any particular order, but that appears 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 home. Western Bonpos tend to pick and choose practices to engage in and adapt those practices to their needs and lifestyles. Their statements reveal that from the range of available teachings they selected what they believed to be valuable and useful while disregarding those that they didn't have the time or discipline to practice. They mostly referred to Dzogchen practices, including *trekchö* and *thögal*, as well as some "advanced" practices like the Dark Retreat, but they also mentioned more ordinary daily practices, such as mantra recitations and other specific meditation practices. This distinction is significant for understanding how Bon in the West is shaped by the practitioners' own selectivity and also by what is being offered. Other reasons mentioned by participants their selection of what they practice at home include not having the 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 Zhangzhung Nyengyud Dzogchen cycle over a number of years. This request was fulfilled, and this cycle of teachings was completely transmitted over the course of nearly ten years, from 1991 to 2000. He remembers that in his first encounter with Yongdzin Rinpoche, Rinpoche told him, "'Oh yeah, this is what you need,' and he started giving me the 'Twenty-One Nails transmission,'[559] *lung* transmission. So it was clear to me I wanted to

559 F.H. is referring to the transmission of the text known as The Twenty-One Little Nails, concerning the twenty-one essential points of Dzogchen practice, contained in the Zhangzhung Nyengyud.

follow that." Later, F. H. became 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."

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 which are 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 *Chöd* and *tsalung*, which I discuss below.

M. M. says that in the Bon tradition, he 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* [drum] and sing in Tibetan beautifully."

He adds that at one point, he realized that 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."

Chöd Practice

The Tibetan word *Chöd* can be translated as meaning "to cut" or "to sever" and 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."[560]

Chöd is a practice whose origins have been identified by scholars as being Central Asian, Indian and Tibetan. Chöd has also been presented ahistorically in line with shamanic practices.[561] In Tibetan Buddhism, a key figure in the Chöd lineage transmissions is that of Machig Labdrön, a female mystic and practitioner considered to be the originator of a number of Tibetan lineages of the practice of Chöd.[562] In his book on the biography of Machig Labdrön, Jérôme Edou presents an overview of some historical and doctrinal aspects related to the Chöd practice and argues its origins in Indian Buddhism, including how it was thereafter transmitted into Tibet. Chöd teachers emphasize that the practice originated or was connected to the figure of Padampa Sangye, a male Indian meditator who is believed to have visited Tibet several times during Machig Labdrön's life and who is acknowledged in some lineages of Chöd. Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz suggests that the emphasis in Chöd teachings on transmission was intended to legitimate Chöd 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 Chöd in particular originated in Tibet.[563]

Within Tibetan Buddhism, Michelle Sorensen argues that Chöd developed in the context of Buddhist ideas transmitted during the later spread of Buddhism in

560 Sorensen 2013: 2.
561 Sorensen 2013: 12–16.
562 Kollmar-Paulenz 1998: 11.
563 Kollmar-Paulenz 1998: 23.

Tibet. She notes that Chöd has been recently "interpreted through the lenses of Bön and/or 'shamanism'," [564] focusing on what she calls the "exoticization" of Bon practices (i.e., the focus on visualizations related to offering the body). Instead, Chöd 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.[565] Namkhai Norbu has pointed out that Machig Labdrön's family members were Bonpos, which is why, in his view, her Chöd practices have a Dzogchen perspective.[566] However, this view is contested by Edou and others.[567]

Chöd practice, in Buddhism and in Bon, is traditionally performed in frightening places, such as 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 Chöd in the Bon tradition, Chaoul explains that, despite controversies regarding its origins, Chöd is a Tibetan practice that has certain common features across all Tibetan traditions. Among these are the following series of steps:

1. Once the practitioner is sufficiently trained, they go to a desolate place, usually at night, and blow 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,[568] the practitioner starts by entering a calm and meditative state of mind.
3. In this state, the practitioner visualizes expelling their 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 into 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,

564 Sorensen 2013: 7.
565 Sorensen 2013: 7–18.
566 Norbu 1986.
567 For more on historical and doctrinal accounts of Chöd, see: Edou 2017: 6–8; Gyatso 1985; Kollmar-Paulenz 2005; Orofino 1987; Sorensen 2013.
568 This is a small, two-headed drum. Traditionally, Bon *damarus* were made from human skulls.

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 with 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 Chöd practice.

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 anymore, seeing the benefit of developing the enlightened mind.[569]

Chaoul explains that Chöd 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.[570] 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."[571]

Namdak further explains that this practice is a tool to help practitioners develop their meditation: "Chöd 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 Chöd is 'cutting,' but which things can be cut? What is cutting? What is the purpose?"[572] He explains that what is being cut are the Five Poison Consciousnesses that bind human beings: "Chöd means the real realization of Nature and Empty Nature . . . that

569 Sorenson notes that a problematic tendency in recent works devoted to Chöd 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 Chöd is not successful in attempting to historicize Bön Chöd as preceding Buddhist Chöd, largely because he uses mostly Buddhist Chöd materials for his discussion. See: Sorensen 2013: 16.

570 See: Chaoul 2009.

571 Van Schaik 2004: 5.

572 Namdak 2006b: 6.

can cut off the Five Poison Consciousnesses and Ignorance in particular."[573] According to Dzogchen teachings, all reality is created by the mind; thus, with regard to objects, there is no reality.[574]

The Chöd tradition taught at Shenten 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."[575]

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 (explained above by Chaoul), which include visualizations while the practitioner sings and plays the *damaru* and other instruments.[576] During retreats at Shenten, Chöd practice is performed every evening at the main temple, with a lama guiding and participants either sitting or performing the practice with their own *damaru* and singing in Tibetan.

I. L. explained how she introduced Chöd practice to her partner, telling him that first an "oral transmission" is needed. "He insisted that he wanted to do Chöd. 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 that these problems, which had been "really impossible to solve, just disappeared." Her partner decided to accompany her to the Shenten center the following summer. I. L added that "these teachings helped him to survive a very serious period in his life." Chöd was a practice that they believed helped them to overcome "worldly obstacles."

Tsalung

Another practice mentioned by participants is *tsalung*, which refers to yoga practices and exercises related to "manipulation" that causes "channels" and "winds"[577] 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 in the Bonpo medical text called *Bumzhi* among others.[578] In the Bon international environment, including Ligmincha websites and other

573 Namdak 2006b: 7.
574 Namdak 2006b: 8.
575 Namdak 2006b: 8.
576 For a detailed overview of the practice and its different phases and visualizations, see: Namdak 2006b.
577 Gorvine 2018: 78–79; Samuel 1993: 236.
578 Millard 2002: 139.

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."[579]

Namdak explains that in the subtle channels, or *tsa*, move "the essences, the essential spheres or *thigle*[580] 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 energy of the mind and its consciousnesses or governed by the Pure Awareness-*Thigle*."[581]

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, changing their circle of friends and even deciding not to have children to avoid attachments. Two participants said the repetition of practices has the effect of being "brainwashed" and indicated that this carried a positive connotation, meaning the brain's structure and habits have changed for the better. Looking at which aspects of practice are selected as teachings and which practices are continued at home allows us to have a better understanding of how participants categorize the Bon framework they receive and how they maintain meaning for themselves. Participants reported that 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 Bon practitioners engage in at home on their own. Often their practices at home are different and less intense than those they engage in during retreats. Yet the interviewees also indicated that the effects or results of their retreat practice and of their "everyday" practices are not different. They said that from a Dzogchen perspective, their practice does not end when they complete the formal practice per se, but

579 See: Dakpa 2006. See also: Ligmincha International 2019a.
580 Wylie: *thig le*, referring to "spheres of light."
581 Namdak 2001: 14.

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 that they maintain continuity of meditation and personal practice at home or that they at least attempt to continue doing certain practices, with variable results. Most mention that they meditate daily or 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 retreats. Moreover, many participants explicitly mention that they have an ideal vision of how they would like to practice at home, but for various 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, it is neccessary to understand what is implied when participants use specific terms, such as "practice," "practitioner," "religion" and "Bon." In this way it is possible to look at the participants' narratives as individual experiences and ways of framing and constructing meaning, identities and religious experiences.

As we have seen, the term "Bon" is not easy to define; Westerners conceptualize Bon and Bon practice, taking into account a broad understanding of "practice," which embodies traditional religious practices, such as rituals and 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 of 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 had a significant impact on the personal life of most participants, including those of other family members who join them and embrace Bon.

Almost all participants indicated that they had undergone personal changes as a result of their Bon practice. In all cases, this resulted in a decision to commit to Bon, to Dzogchen, and in most cases, to a particular teacher. 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.

J. F. explained that for her listening to Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings had a very strong impact in her life:

> 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 without 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 to India for the second time and to Menri. He waited a few weeks "for a good astrological day" and was then ordained with three other monks and stayed in Menri. He recalls that he was alone most of the time. He felt frustrated because he did not receive any teachings after becoming a monk, and he felt there was no effort to accommodate him in the monastery. He asked a couple of times for teachings and to study Tibetan, but then he became frustrated and stopped asking:

> 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.

In his narrative D. F.'s talks about a schism 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"[582] not only in the West but also in Tibetan communities in exile. D.F's response reflects how this divide was experienced as highly frustrating, and also how the way of narrating this frustration revealed religious notions of Bon, such as pride that needs to be overcome.

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,

582 Shakya 2001b: 185.

he said that initially he was clueless about what Bon was or what Bon practices meant. "I had not much idea of the Bon practices. I didn't know anything about Bon really, 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 this to her family, including her sister with whom she had lived for many years:

> My brothers know me very well. [But] 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, in contrast, that practice can in fact adversely affect individuals who engage in "spiritual bypassing" (see Chapter 4), which occurs when practice is used to neglect or avoid pain.[583]

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, in early 1993 they "took refuge" in Bon through Yongdzin Rinpoche, 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 he became a solitary person as a result of his practice, because he thinks it is too challenging to find common values and common themes of interest in his interactions with "nonpractitioners":

583 Masters 2010: 194.

> 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 [think], like, music comes 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 first saying, "No, it's not my thing." One weekend, she came to Shenten during an initiation at the end of the teaching retreat, and M. N. 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['s] 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 [Yongdzin Rinpoche] 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 to things like yoga and stuff, and it makes it easier."

In the case of 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.”

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 is understood to mean that to become successful, a practitioner has to have a strong commitment to practice, which entails giving up other parts of life. There are many stories of past practitioners who renounced 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 also 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 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.

It is significant that there are no provisions for childcare at Shenten or Ligmincha during meditation retreats, and practitioners with [young] children receive no”receives no formal institutional support in the centers during these periods, possibly keeping a certain segment of the community from participating in the retreats. In some participants’ views, children are often regarded as a cause of distraction. However, it was also noted that in recent years participants have started to make informal childcare arrangements in the centers, as several members of Shenten, for instance, became parents and started bringing their children.

N. N. remarked further that she had already been a mother in several lifetimes as part of 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 [for example, 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 be 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 been in 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 routine, 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 Nyingma 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 that 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.

Because of this wish, he thought that the Gomdra at Shenten was a good choice for him. Yet other participants spoke of experiencing very different effects of retreats. C. F. recalls that after he first attended a retreat, he separated from his wife:

> When I came 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 decided to move to Paris.

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 years."

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, because she found that "the path was short but super intense. Suddenly I dove into something and [was] 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 she used to feel very motivated to practice after participating in retreats at Shenten, that she did so in the beginning 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."

I. R. reports that becoming a Bonpo did not change her 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 other side, becoming a Bonpo for E. S. 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 for the past ten years but still feels as if 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 practice into 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 [and the] 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 home country, felt a sense of responsibility in bringing the teachings there. 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 the 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?"

Instead of Practicing Dzogchen, They Go 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 accustomed 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."[584] He said that his realization of these differences absolutely changed the way he teaches:

584 Wangyal 2016b.

> 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.[585]

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, [a] member of their centers." Wangyal further believes that this is a mistake, 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,

> for some spiritual connection, whatever that means to them, but [it] 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 noticed 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 *ngöndro* and other Bon practices in Tibet, mostly to nomads. I've never seen them, but the way they respect, it is so sweet. On my bad days, I listen to them and [that] makes my days good." He mentions that, while they don't have the same educational level as Westerners, "their devotion is incredible. In the West [it] 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 never had access 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.

585 Wangyal 2006b.

Through the voices of participants as expressed during my interviews it is evident that Western Bon practitioners 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 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 in which 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.

10.2 Modern versus 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, in Yongdzin Rinpoche's words, "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."[586] In Shenten and in traditional Bon settings, it is emphasized that those who undergo the training should first "check" whether 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 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."[587] However, only a few interviewees followed these preliminary practices, once

586 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." Namdak/Reynolds 2006: 107–108.
587 Namdak 2006d: 11.

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.

Other participants 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, the world being conceived as being both pure and impure, and the pure world as associated with the Buddhas.[588] Adaptations shifting the focus from rituals to meditation 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.

Some Bonpo lamas travel regularly, especially across Europe but also to other continents such as the Americas and Asia, including Singapore and Hong Kong. This often surprised the interviewees, who saw this as a very "modern" aspect of the religion. A further new and visible development is the increase in the number of Western teachers (i.e., Westerners who are now teaching at the centers), especially at Ligmincha.[589] This development contrasts with the more "traditionalist centers" like Shenten Dargye Ling, where all of the teachers are Tibetan monks. This divergence exemplifies a process whereby 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 2, globalization has facilitated the establishment of various religious traditions in new places, which in some locations has caused processes of "detraditionalization" to take place, in which 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 the tradition include the ritual instruments, clothing, decorations and furniture. Some of them believe these are not relevant for the Western cultural context.

588 For an analysis of how purity is conceived in Buddhism, see: Rosch 2012.

589 Chapter 7 provides a more detailed discussion of 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 to a completely lay manner.

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. referred to two "fundamentally different ways of practicing Bon in the West." In the first way 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 Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings on tape and reading the original texts of authors like Shardza Rinpoche or Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung. The second 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 "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 Tibetan Buddhism in the West pointed out by Samten Karmay is that it is heavily dependent on the teachers. Tibetan lamas exercise a certain kind of charismatic attraction, as can be seen, for example, in Gelugpa 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.[590]

Indeed, the lamas play an essential role in the transmission of Bon; they are the lineage holders who pass on the teachings in accordance with the Bon and

590 Karmay 2014.

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*, or oral authorization. Furthermore, in certain ceremonies, called *wang*,[591] empowerments, or initiations, the teachings are transmitted through the teacher to the student following a lineage. At Shenten, the way the lineage is structured relies on Tibetan lamas. Karmay remarks that this is a very traditional approach, and this is not new. In Ligmincha, a different trend is seen, where Western "instructors" transmit teachings directly to fellow Westerners.[592]

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 suited to diverse audiences and their contexts, particularly in the United States.[593] However, in Ieva 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 when 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 sense the tension concerning these issues.[594]

Another participant, A. C., 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." They note that Western teachings omit a large part of the teachings. One participant remarked 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, unlike in 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 they must start from preliminary practices, as

591 Wylie: *dbang*.
592 See also: Lopes 2014: 87.
593 Wangyal 2006b.
594 See: Rute 2010; also: Rute 2007.

"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 have followed or are following all of the steps, which is perhaps a reflection of the different levels of commitment that individuals had or also due to the flexible approach evidenced in the centers in the West. As M. N. explains,

> 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 those transmitting the Bon religion in the West are adapting both their way of transmitting the 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. Evoking a rather idealized and Orientalist image of the past, U. G.says, "The cultural context is completely different. Before, Bon practitioners lived in caves, and they spent their lives in retreat." Participants 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." They mentioned various reasons for this, including the short periods of time that students can meet the teachers who are on the road. Recalling what D. F. said above when narrating his experiences of living in a Bon monastery in India, the distance may also be related to the divide between Tibetans and Westerners indicated before, a divide that results in the two groups existing in separate domains.[595]

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, the single most important preliminary practice

595 Shakya 2001b: 185.

in the Dzogchen tradition is considered to be Guru Yoga, in which 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."[596]

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 Bon centers to study at a very young age. As Tenzin Wangyal comments reflecting on 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."[597]

The impact of this distance was also noted in the interviews with participants. 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." 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 [to] 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 Lopon, 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 difficulty in explaining her experiences of 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 [to] the teaching, I

596 Namdak/Reynolds 2006: 219.
597 Wangyal 2006b.

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 that 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?'"

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 [or another]." 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 Geshes 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, but "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 [to] 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 at the time."

Despite having reservations such as these, participants stand up every time a lama enters the main temple, and after the lama has sat 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.

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 "[in] 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. M.1 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 sit? 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 [in Shenten], 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,[598] and I am not interested in any other lineage, unlike 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. If she did not have the background of Bon teachings, she believes she would not recognize the teachings as true but as some sort of New Age practice.

J. F. elaborates by saying that both Tenzin Wangyal's and Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings are important, but that Rinpoche's are the traditional way, and so it is a responsibility to keep his teaching alive in the world.

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." However, according to participants, the key practice that does not need to be reinterpreted because it is ahistorical, free of any cultural background and related to the mind in every country, religion, and language is Dzogchen.

A. M.1 mentions that:

> I personally prefer this, Shenten. When Yongdzin Rinpoche went to Mexico for consecrating the stupa, for me it was so clear, as I knew the way of teaching of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo [Tenpa Yungdrung] and Tenzin Wangyal, as I've visited Shenten before. It was *Hearts Drops of Dharmakaya* . . . If you want to deepen your practice, it is here, in Shenten.

598 "Bonpa" is a Spanish term that refers to a female Bon practitioner.

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 [Yongdzin] 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 have actually spent time in monasteries, as we saw above. Nevertheless, there are some specific cases in which students live near their teachers (such as D. F.), but this is generally the exception.

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 highest 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." He adds, in contrast "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."

I. L. asked herself what Westerners are looking for in Bon. She concludes 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 sometimes it can just worsen the situation, and because sometimes you can just see that people are using Bon as a trademark.

This statement raises a few issues to consider: first, I.L. 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 to 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, there is "a very Tibetan culture that can be shocking." When she visited Shenten for the first time, she felt that "this is weird, this place [is] 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."

Ngöndro: Preparing the Mind to Become a Suitable Vessel

A student who wishes to become a qualified recipient should undergo the *ngöndro*, the preliminary practices discussed above, before receiving Dzogchen teachings. According to the teachings given at Shenten, the first step includes

to meet a "qualified master and have devotion to him."[599] Second, the aspiring student offers a *ganapuja*[600] to the teacher and asks them to teach, to "give the initiation," and then to "give the transmission," so that the practice is "protected from disturbances."[601] The actual Guru Yoga practice requires sitting in the "Five-Pointed Body Posture."[602] The practitioner should then visualize Tapihritsa (the Twenty-Fifth Master of the Zhangzhung Nyengyud Dzogchen cycle of transmission) in front of them but should not think that Tapihritsa 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."[603]

As explained in the teachings at Shenten, Tapihritsa lived in the eighth century; Tenzin 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 Zhangzhung Nyengyud Dzogchen cycle. After this encounter, Tapihritsa received the instructions of the Zhangzhung Nyengyud 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, nine years later, he achieved a "Rainbow Body." His master, Dawa Gyaltsen, the Twenty-Fourth Master, is also believed to have achieved the Rainbow Body.[604]

There are two reasons why Bonpos maintain that Tapihritsa 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. As the tradition goes, Dzogchen teachings 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

599 Namdak 2006a: 6.
600 The Sanskrit word *ganapuja* and its Tibetan equivalent *tsog* refer to various forms of offerings or feasts involving specific rituals, which are considered to be methods for accumulating merit and wisdom and purifying obstacles that impede the ability to achieve buddhahood.
601 Namdak 2006a: 6.
602 The position adopted in the Five-Pointed Body Posture is to sit cross-legged, with the spine straight, the neck slightly bent, eyes gazing at nose level, and the mouth slightly open.
603 Namdak 2006a: 7.
604 Namdak 2006a: 7–8.

someone, and they also had to check whether the student was qualified, whether they had devotion and determination."[605] The tradition holds that it was only after Tapihritsa that Dzogchen teachings started to be taught openly due to the dangers posed by conflicts at that time. Because of them,

> Tapihritsa allowed the teachings to be written down rather than continue being kept as the oral transmission of a single lineage. His pupil Nangzher Lödpo wrote down his teachings on paper. The second reason 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.[606]

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."[607] Visualizing Tapihritsa and not a living master is the advice students often receive 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.

Some Tibetans Don't Take Westerners Seriously

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 4), those who discussed the challenges of being a Bon practitioner in the West revealed a different perspective. These dissenting voices referred to issues such as the need to have money in order to practice, the difficult situation of ordained Westerners in relation to the Tibetan ordained community, the cultural gap between Tibetan lamas who are not willing to become acquainted with the culture of the place where they teach and lamas who do not see Westerners as equals compared with their Tibetan students. M. M., for instance, speaks about this cultural gap:

> 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 . . . But, you know, you feel that – [I'm] not necessarily saying that for my own teachers. But yeah, basically, since I was saying, that they don't take Westerners seriously.

605 Namdak 2006a: 7–9.
606 Namdak 2006a: 7–9.
607 Namdak 2006a: 10.

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 [a highly reputed teacher, believed by Bonpos to have been born in the eight century in Khyunglung Ngulkhar] 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 said 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." She argues that a practitioner should only do whatever is helpful for their 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 expressions of how they sometimes lack the time or the discipline to actually do the practices they wish to do, denoting two different and even opposing attitudes that are combined in their narratives.

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."

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 4. Participants noted that attending retreats can be expensive in the West whereas in Tibet, traditionally no fees are required to attend teachings. This once again points to their notions of an idealized Tibet, where in fact, attending teachings is by no means always free of charge.

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 has 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, that "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 imbalance 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 seen by some as a positive aspect and by 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 *ngöndro* and so on and so on and so on.

This refers to a point raised by D. R. and others, emphasizing that in the Tibetan centers in the West, "There is the sense that if you wish to 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.[608] In the case of Bon, participants noted that indeed, having sufficient finaincial resources is a prerequisite for following teachers and undertaking retreats. They also noted that Shenten's retreat fees, in comparison with other centers like Rigpa and Dzogchen Community, are considerably lower.[609] Participants in 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

608 See, for example: Mullen 2001: 48; Kosmin 2011; Eldershaw 2007: 89.

609 At Ligmincha, as of 2019, a private room with shared bathroom cost $55 per night. The meals are included in the retreat price, which for January 2019 was $705 (with early registration) or $775 per week. See: Ligmincha/Serenity Ridge 2019. At the Rigpa center in France, Lerab Ling, as of 2019, the fees for a personal retreat include a daily fee of €26, the cost for an individual room with shared facilities (€45) and three meals (€21). Discounts are offered for students. See: Rigpa Lérab Ling 2019.

At Shenten, as of 2019, the fees for a personal retreat including an individual room with shared facilities cost €30 and three meals €20 per day. There is a daily fee for teachings of €35 per day of teachings. Discounts are offered depending on the individual's income. See: Shenten Dargye Ling 2019c .

the need to choose carefully which retreats to attend due to financial constraints. Of the forty-four participants, thirty-six were Bon practitioners, four were key Bon teachers in the West, and four were Bon scholars. Of the thirty-six Bon practitioners, three had a professional link with Bon, either teaching at academic institutions on topics related to Tibetan Buddhism and Bon or using Bon techniques as part of their work as coaches or therapists.

Participants were predominantly white and almost all had high levels of educational attainment and professional occupations. Thirty-seven had a bachelor's degree and twenty-eight had an MD, a PhD or equivalent. Their professions included a journalist, university professors, an information technology specialist, a banker, entrepreneurs with their own business, a web designer, a yoga teacher, a therapist, a tourist guide, an opera singer, consultants, an English teacher, an architect, a PhD student and a musician. At the time of the interviews, the youngest participant was twenty-six years old, and most participants were in their forties, with a few in their sixties and one over seventy.[610]

Also in relation to the costs of doing retreats, 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, D. R. says, 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."

Other challenges discussed by participants include issues related to gender biases they have 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.

610 Only details that are strictly relevant to the findings of this study are given in order to protect the identities and confidentiality of the participants.

Can It Evolve?

Tenzin Wangyal pointed out another theme about 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 well 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, [I] either want to communicate with this individual more, or I want to stop.

He further explains that the Three Doors Academy (see Chapter 5) functions under the understanding that many people have no interest in 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 [them] 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 [to] 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 critique 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 has changed over time. He acknowledges that some people "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 that some monks dislike rituals,

> "Why do we have to do it that way?" And I really, what I believe, like even the monasteries . . . 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 [it] is a lot for Westerners. So the question is, is it really important to continue in that same form? Or can it evolve?[611]

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 4). He points 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"[612] and how these messages are, in the words of some participants, "simplified" in order to reach wider audiences in a global environment.

Differences in Hierarchies

The issue of hierarchies at the Ligmincha center also refers to the fact that, unlike the policy 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 fact that Tenzin Wangyal designates "instructors" as well as "guides of practice," 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 (a particular) sangha because of that, because of conflictive situations. It is a big challenge."

Another difference noted by participants in this respect is again the cultural gap between the lamas and the Westerners. D. R. said,

611 Wangyal 2006b.
612 Knott 2005: 574.

> The problem is that Geshes 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've 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 highlight that the "saving Tibetan culture" slogan both has served to mobilize and attract Westerners and 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. This tension reveals 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 at the other end of the spectrum.

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 the Shenten center and the teachings of Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung and other related lamas. In the other approach, the teachers mix Western philosophical and/or psychological concepts with traditional Tibetan Buddhism. This, he says, was the case of Chögyam Trungpa (discussed in Chapter 4). 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 United 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 Chögyam 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 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 became involved with Tibetan Buddhism, there were very few books available: there were four books by Walter Evans-Wentz and Anagarika 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 Zhangzhung. In the past, some Western scholars argued that the existence of a so-called Zhangzhung Kingdom was mostly fantasy. This view has been challenged by other scholars, such as John V. Bellezza, who, during his numerous field trips, documented the existence of ruins, tombs and archaeological sites from Zhangzhung in northwest Tibet. Reynolds also highlights the role of Japanese scholars who have been studying the Zhangzhung 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 produce a catalog of the Bon Kangyur and Katen. The Katen was cataloged in Oslo by a team headed by Per Kvaerne (discussed above in Chapter 5). 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 Lopon 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 the 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 that 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."

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 or monastic practices. "For some reason, he decided to put aside that and he stopped 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's arrival in the West (discussed in Chapter 4), namely the diminished role for Buddhist monastics and an emphasis on the psychological nature of meditation and practice.[613] 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.

In this section, we have seen 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.[614] Participants perceive Dzogchen as 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 Bon practitioners and where they believe the changes in Bon practices will lead.

613 Wallace 2002: 35.
614 Bellezza 2016.