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## Bon and Tibetan Buddhism

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### Preliminaries

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Let us quiet down by focusing on the breath. If our minds are very distracted we can count the breath – out, in, one; out, in, two – up to eleven a few times. If our minds are relatively quiet there is no need to count. We can just focus on the sensation of the breath coming in and out of the nose.

Then we reaffirm our motivation. In the West, "motivation" seems to imply the psychological or emotional reasons for doing something. That is not the meaning of the Tibetan word *'dun-pa*. It is rather the aim, it is what we want to accomplish. Our goal or aim in coming here and listening to this talk is to get a clearer picture of Bon and its relationship with Buddhism. We are doing this so that we can follow whatever path we are on, whether Bon or Buddhist, with more clarity and without sectarian views. This is so that we can put our full attention onto the spiritual path to reach enlightenment for the benefit of everyone. We reaffirm this aim.

Then we make the conscious decision to listen with concentration. Just as we make such a decision before meditating, it is also important before a class, before work, or before doing anything. We decide that if our attention wanders, we will bring it back and if we become sleepy we will try to wake ourselves up, so that we can take full advantage of being here. We make that conscious decision.

### Introduction

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This evening I have been asked to speak about the Bon tradition and its relation to Buddhism. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of the Tibetan traditions, he often refers to the five traditions of Tibet: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Gelug and Bon. From His Holiness' point of view, Bon has an equal place with the four Tibetan Buddhist lineages. His Holiness is very broadminded. Not everybody has agreed with such a stance. There have been and still are a lot of very strange ideas about Bon amongst Buddhist teachers. From the Western psychological point of view, when people are trying very hard to emphasize positive things in their personalities before they have really resolved things on a deep level, then the shadow side gets projected onto an enemy. "We are the good guys on a proper pure path and they are the devil." Unfortunately, the Bonpos have been the traditional objects of this projection in Tibetan history. We will look at the historical reasons for this. It definitely needs to be understood within the context of Tibetan political history.

It is just a fact that Bon has received a lot of negative publicity and a bad image within Tibet itself. Westerners are often attracted to controversy, as if something that receives a bad image is more interesting. The other traditions are boring and straight. An equally strange idea is that Bon is more exotic than Tibetan Buddhism. Some Westerners look at it as a place where they can find magic, Lobsang Rampa type of stuff like drilling a hole in people's foreheads to open their third eyes. Neither view is accurate. We need to try to get a more balanced perspective and look at Bon with respect, as His Holiness does. It is important to understand Tibetan history to see how a negative view of Bon has developed and to see how its approach to spiritual development relates to Tibetan Buddhism.

## Tracing the Origins of Bon - Shenrab Miwo

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According to the Bon tradition itself, it was founded by Shenrab Miwo, who lived thirty thousand years ago. That would place him somewhere in the Stone Age. I don't think this means he was a caveman. A common way to show great respect to a lineage is to say it is ancient. The actual dates of his lifespan are not possible to prove in any case. Shenrab Miwo lived in Omolungring. The description of this place seems to be a mixture of ideas about Shambhala, Mt. Meru, and Mt. Kailash. It is the description of an ideal spiritual land. It was said to be within a larger area called Tazig. The word "Tazig" can be found both in Persian and Arabic to refer to either Persia or Arabia. In other contexts, it refers to a nomadic tribe. In the Bon tradition, Tazig is described as being to the west of the kingdom of Zhang-zhung, which was in Western Tibet.

This suggests that Bon came from Central Asia, and probably an Iranian cultural area. It is possible that Shenrab Miwo lived in an ancient Iranian culture and then came to Zhang-zhung. Some versions say he came sometime between the eleventh and seventh centuries B.C.E. That is also a very long time ago and, again, there is no way of proving one or the other position. What is clear is that by the time of the founding of the Yarlung Dynasty in Central Tibet (127 B.C.E.) there was already something of a native tradition. We do not even know what it was called at that time.

## The Iranian Connection

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The Iranian connection is fascinating. There has been much speculation about it. It has to be looked at not only from the Bon point of view, but from the Buddhist point of view as well. There is a tremendous amount of material in common between Bon and Buddhism. The Bonpos say that the Buddhists got it from them and the Buddhists say the Bonpos got it from them. Each side claims to be the source. It is a difficult issue to decide. How do we know?

Buddhism went from India to Afghanistan very early on. In fact, two of the disciples of the Buddha himself were said to have come from Afghanistan and to have brought Buddhism back there. In the first and second centuries BC, we do find Buddhism going over into Iran itself and up into Central Asia. Buddhism was there. If Bon says ideas that look very similar to what the Buddha taught came from a Persian area into Western Tibet during a period long before it came directly from India, it is quite possible that it came from a mixture of Buddhism and the local Iranian cultural ideas that were present in that area. The area that seems the most logical source for Iranian Buddhist ideas is Khotan.

## Khotan

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Khotan is to the north of Western Tibet. As you know, Tibet is a very high plateau with a lot of mountains. As we go further north to the end of that plateau, there is another mountain range, and then it goes all the way down to below sea level to a desert in east Turkistan, which is now called the Xinjiang province of China. Khotan was at the foot of those mountains as we enter the desert. It was an Iranian cultural area; people came from Iran. It was a tremendous center of Buddhism and of trade. It made a significant cultural impact on Tibet, although the Tibetans downplay this and say everything came from either India or China.

Even the Tibetan writing system came from the Khotanese alphabet. The Tibetan Emperor Songtsen-gampo sent a minister to Khotan to get a writing system for the Tibetan language. The trade road to Khotan went through Kashmir, and as it happened, the great teacher from Khotan that they were hoping to meet happened to be there. So, they got the writing system from him in Kashmir, and the story became that they got a writing system from Kashmir. If we analyze the writing system, we can see that it actually comes from Khotan. Of course, the Khotanese system originally came from India. The point is that there was a lot of cultural contact with Khotan.

We can see that the Bon presentation is very plausible. It certainly could be that it came from Khotan. From

this point of view, we could say that Buddhism came to Tibet from two directions: from Khotan or the Iranian cultures into Western Tibet and then later from India. In the former case, it could have come in the form of early Bon. It is quite possible that Buddhism, and in particular dzogchen, came from both sides and that each side borrowed from the other. That is probably closer to the truth.

## Description of the Universe and the Afterlife

One element of Bon that comes from an Iranian cultural belief is the account of how the universe evolved. Buddhism has the abhidharma teachings on Mt. Meru and so on, but that is not the only explanation. There is also the Kalachakra explanation, which is slightly different. The Bon texts also contain the abhidharma explanation, just as it is in Buddhism, but they also have their own unique explanation with certain aspects that look quite Iranian, such as a dualism between light and darkness. Some Russian scholars have seen similarities between the Tibetan and ancient Persian names for various gods and figures. This Iranian connection is what they are pointing to.

What is quite unique to early Bon is an emphasis on the afterlife, particularly on the in-between state. When kings died, they went to an afterlife. Because they needed things for their journey, there was animal sacrifice, and possibly even human sacrifice, although that is debatable. Certainly, they buried pictures, food and all the things that a person would need on their journey after life.

It is quite interesting to note that Tibetan Buddhism adopted this emphasis on the in-between state. There is mention of the bardo in Indian Buddhism but it receives very little emphasis, whereas there are a lot of bardo rituals and so on in Tibetan Buddhism. We can find the emphasis on preparation of an afterlife in ancient Persian culture as well. The only aspect of early Bon that we can actually speak of with confidence is the practice of burial rituals and what is found in the tombs shows that belief in an afterlife. Other than that it is just speculation. We can actually examine the burial tombs of the ancient kings.

The influence of Zhang-zhung went over into the Yarlung area of central Tibet and lasted from the very earliest times until the founding of the first Tibetan empire by Songsten-gampo. He made alliances by marrying princesses from different countries. It is very well known that he married a princess from China and one from Nepal. However, he also married a princess from Zhang-zhung. Consequently, this first Tibetan Emperor was influenced by each of these cultures.

The full teachings of Buddhism did not reach Tibet during this earliest period and its influence was actually very minor. However, the Emperor did build Buddhist temples on various "power points." Tibet was seen as a female demon lying on her back and it was thought that building temples on various acupuncture points would subdue the wild forces. Seeing things in terms of acupuncture points, subduing demons and so on is very Chinese. This is the form of Buddhism present in Tibet at that time. What is relevant here is that Emperor Songtsen-gampo, for all his adoption of Buddhism, maintained the Bon burial rituals that were practiced in Yarlung before him. This was obviously reinforced by his Zhang-zhung queen. So, the burial rituals, with the sacrifices and so on, continued into this early Buddhist period.

## The Exile of the Bonpos

Around 760, Emperor Songdetsen invited Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, from India. They built the first monastery, Samyay, and began a monastic tradition. They had a translation bureau at Samyay to translate texts not only from Indian languages and Chinese, but also from Zhang-zhung, which was apparently already a written language at that time. There are two Tibetan writing systems. The printed system is what Emperor Songtsen-gampo got from Khotan. According to the research of some great scholars, like Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, Zhang-zhung had an earlier writing system, which was the basis for the handwritten form of Tibetan. At Samyay, they were translating Bon texts, presumably on burial and so on, from the Zhang-zhung language in its own script into Tibetan.

There was the famous debate between Indian and Chinese Buddhism at Samyay, then a religious council was set up and, in 779, Buddhism was declared to be the state religion of Tibet. There were undoubtedly a lot of political considerations involved. Shortly afterwards, in 784 there was a persecution of the Bon faction. This is where all the bad blood begins. It is important to analyze this. What was actually going on?

Within the imperial court were a pro-China faction, a pro-India faction and an ultra-conservative xenophobic native faction. Emperor Tri Songdetsen's father had married a Chinese queen who had a lot of influence and consequently the father had been pro-Chinese in many policies. The conservative faction had assassinated the father. I think this is one of the reasons for the Chinese losing the debate. There was no way that they could win a debate anyway. The Chinese had no tradition of debating and they were matched against the best debater in India. They did not have a common language, so what language did they debate in? It was all being translated. Obviously, it was a political move to get rid of the Chinese faction. Because of the Chinese, the Emperor's father had been killed. Now, in addition, the king wanted to get rid of the anti-foreign faction as well. The Indian faction was the least threat to the political power of the Emperor. So, the conservative political faction was sent into exile. Those were the Bonpos.

What is confusing is when people say that the Bonpos were doing burial rituals in the court. Those were not the Bonpos who were sent into exile. The Bonpos who were exiled were these conservative ministers and political figures who were kicked out. Interestingly, burial rituals and sacrifice rituals continued in the court even after their exile. To commemorate a treaty with China signed in 821, a pillar was erected that described the ceremonies. They sacrificed animals. Although they no longer had imperial burials, there was still some influence there. I think it is quite important to realize that the bad blood between the Buddhists and the Bonpos was actually a political thing; it was not really about religion or rituals.

The conservative faction was sent to two areas. One is Yunnan, in the area of present day southwestern China, north of Burma, and the other was Gilgit in northwest Pakistan, very close to where Guru Rinpoche came from. We can infer that the Bonpos might have gotten some teachings on dzogchen from that area, where Guru Rinpoche received them as well, and that the Bonpos could have brought them back to Tibet later, independently of Guru Rinpoche. There are many possible explanations for Bon's having a tradition of dzogchen separate from the Buddhist tradition that came from Guru Rinpoche. It is not just a matter of someone says so and therefore it is true. One has to look at the history.

## Bon Buried Treasure Texts

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Many Zhang-zhung texts were buried at the time of exile, put into the mud walls of Samyay monastery by a great master named Drenpa-namka. Guru Rinpoche was burying texts at the same time, because he felt the time was not ripe, people were not sophisticated enough to understand them. He buried only dzogchen texts. The Bonpos buried all of the Bon teachings, including dzogchen. So, while both Bonpos and Nyingmas were burying texts at the same time, the reasons for doing so and the texts buried were quite different.

The next Tibetan Emperor, Relpachen, was a fanatic. He decreed that seven households support each monk. Many of the taxes were diverted to supporting the monasteries. The monks in the religious council had a tremendous amount of political power. The next Emperor to come along, Langdarma, gets portrayed as the devil because he persecuted the religious council and stopped all the taxes from going to the monasteries. He disbanded the monasteries, but he did not get rid of the libraries. We know this because when Atisha came to Tibet in the eleventh century he remarked at how wonderful the libraries were. Langdarma basically stopped the monastic institutions because they were becoming too strong politically. So there was a time in which the monasteries were deserted.

The Bon texts buried in Samyay were first discovered in 913. Some shepherds were staying in the monastery and when they leaned against a wall, it crumbled revealing some texts. The bulk of the Bon texts were discovered about a century later by a great Bonpo master named Shenchen Luga. In 1017, he codified

them. They were mostly non-dzogchen material, covering what we would call teachings in common with Tibetan Buddhism. It was only after this that Nyingmas start to discover texts in Samyay and in other monasteries. A number of masters found both Bon and Nyingma texts, and often in the same place. The Nyingma texts were mostly about dzogchen. We are on a more solid historical ground when we consider the new phase of Bon, the old phase being before the exile and burial of texts.

## Comparing Bon and Tibetan Buddhism

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We find that there is a tremendous amount in common with the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. This is why His Holiness calls Bon one of the five traditions. The Bonpos would not like it, but we can call them another form of Tibetan Buddhism. It depends on how we define a Buddhist tradition. Most of the terminology is the same. Bon talks about enlightenment, attaining enlightenment, Buddhas, and so on. Certain terms are different as are the names of various deities, but the basic teachings are there. There are some very trivial differences such as circumambulating counterclockwise rather than clockwise. The type of ceremonial hat is different. The monks' robes are identical except that part of the vest is blue rather than red or yellow.

Bon has a tradition of debate, exactly as the Tibetan Buddhist traditions do. The debate tradition goes back very far, so again we have to wonder who started it. It was certainly present in the Indian monasteries much earlier than its appearance in Tibet. It could have come into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, however, through Bon. On the other hand, it does not necessarily have to be that one copied it from the other.

What is very interesting is that the Bonpo debate tradition follows the Gelug debate tradition very closely. Many of the Bonpo monks even train in debate at the Gelug monasteries and even receive Geshe degrees. That suggests that although Bon has dzogchen, the interpretation of Madhyamaka is closer to the Gelug interpretation than to the Nyingma one. Otherwise, they could not join in the Gelug debates. The similarities between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism are not exclusively in relation to Nyingma. It is not just a clone of Nyingma with different names. It is much more complex.

Bon also emphasizes the various traditional Indian sciences, which they study much more intensely than in the Buddhist monasteries – medicine, astrology, poetic meters, and so on. Within the Buddhist monasteries, these subjects are emphasized much more in Amdo in eastern Tibet than in central Tibet.

Both Bon and Tibetan Buddhism have monasteries and monastic vows. It is quite interesting that although many of the vows are the same in the two traditions, Bon has certain vows that one would expect Buddhists to have but they do not. For example, Bonpos have a vow of being vegetarian. Buddhists don't. The Bon morality is a little stricter than the Buddhist.

Bon has a system of tulkus, which is the same as that in the Buddhist monasteries. They have Geshes. They have Prajnaparamita, Madhyamaka, Abhidharma, and all of the divisions that we find in the Buddhist texts. Some of the vocabulary and the presentations are slightly different, but the variation is no more dramatic than that between one Buddhist lineage and another. For example, Bon has its own account of the creation of the world, but we find a unique account in Kalachakra as well. This is a general picture. Bon is not so strange.

## Tibetan Culture and Essential Teachings

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I think it is important to try to discern the aspects of Buddhism that were adopted from Bon, which reflect the native Tibetan approach, so that we have a clearer idea of what is Tibetan culture and what is essential Buddhism. It is also important to try to discern cultural aspects from the essential teachings of Bon.

A fourfold process of healing has been fully adopted by all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Someone comes with a sickness and the first thing one does is to throw a mo, which is a method of divination. That comes out of Bon. In ancient times, they did not do mos with dice, as they commonly do now, but with a rope tied

into various knots. The mo indicates if harmful spirits are causing the sickness and if so, which rituals to perform to propitiate them. Secondly, one consults astrology to determine the most effective time for performing the rituals. Astrology is done in terms of the Chinese elements – earth, water, fire, metal and wood. Then thirdly, the rituals are done to clear away external harmful influences. Afterwards, fourthly, one takes medicine.

The theory behind rituals is slightly different in Buddhism and Bon. From a Buddhist point of view, we work with karma and look at the external situation as being basically a reflection of karma. A ritual or puja helps to activate positive karmic potentials. Bon places an equal emphasis on harmonizing the external forces and then the internal karmic situation.

In both cases, these pujas for healing use tormas, which are toned down remnants of the ancient sacrifice rituals. The tormas, made from barley flour, molded into the form of little animals, and used as scapegoats undoubtedly comes from Bon. They are given to the harmful spirits: "Take this and leave the sick person alone."

The whole issue of sacrifice is very interesting. The Bonpos say, "We didn't do that, that was an earlier tradition in Tibet." The Buddhists say, "It was the Bonpos, we didn't do that." Obviously, everyone wants to deny having made sacrifices and undoubtedly there were sacrifices. Milarepa mentions that they were going on his time. Even as recently as in 1974 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave the Kalachakra empowerment in Bodhgaya for the first time, he spoke very strongly to people coming from the border regions of Tibet about stopping animal sacrifice practices. This is something that has been around for a long time.

Pictures of various deities are used in Bonpo bardo rituals and in many Buddhist bardo rituals as well. This goes back to the Iranian/Bonpo burial rituals where things were put into the tomb with the dead person.

Another thing borrowed from Bon into Tibetan Buddhism is the "space harmony web," a spider web-like configuration of multicolored strings representing the five elements. It comes from the idea of having to harmonize the external elements before one can work on the internal elements or karma. A web is designed according to divination and so on and is hung outside. Sometimes they are called spirit catchers, but that is not quite what they are. They are meant to harmonize the elements and tell the spirits to leave us alone. It is very Tibetan.

The concept of life spirit (*bla*), which is in Bon and Buddhism, comes from the Central Asian Turkic idea of *qut*, the spirit of a mountain. Whoever ruled the area around a certain sacred mountain was the Khan, the ruler of the Turks and later of the Mongols. The king was the person who embodied this *qut* or life spirit. He had charisma and could rule.

Someone's life spirit can be stolen by harmful spirits. All the Tibetan Buddhist traditions have pujas to hook back a life spirit that has been stolen by harmful spirits. They involve a ransom: here is a torma, give me back my life spirit. How do you know that your life spirit has been stolen? From a Western point of view, we might call it a nervous breakdown or shell shock, where someone cannot cope with life. Someone whose life spirit has been stolen is unable to organize his or her life. This life spirit rules our life like the Khan rules the country. The Tibetan word for life spirit, "la," is used in the word lama. A lama is somebody who really has a life spirit. La is also used in some contexts to translate white bodhichitta, so it is a very strong material force or essence within the body.

Then there is the prosperity spirit. If it is strong, everything will go well and we will be prosperous. The Tibetan word is "yang" (*g.yang*). "Yang" is also the Chinese word for sheep. At Losar, the Tibetan new year, one eats a sheep's head and moulds a sheep's head out of tsampa, toasted barley grain. This represents the prosperity spirit. It clearly comes in from old Bon rituals.

The idea of prayer flags also comes from Bon. They are in the colors of the five elements and are hung to harmonize the external elements so that things will be in balance and we can do internal work. Many prayer

flags have the image of the wind horse (*lungta*, *rlung-rta*), which is associated with the horse of fortune. China was the first country to develop a postal system, in which the postmen rode horses. There were certain places where they would stop and change horses. Those postal stage horses were the wind horses. The Chinese words are the same. The idea is that good fortune will come on a horse like the postman bringing goods, letters, money, etc. It is very Tibetan/Chinese.

Certain aspects of Bon healing came into Buddhism such as sprinkling consecrated water with a feather. In all Buddhist initiation rituals, there is a peacock feather in a vase. The burning of leaves and branches from the juniper tree, called *sang* in Tibetan, is done on the tops of mountains to greet someone who is coming. They do it along the side of the road when His Holiness comes back into Dharamsala. It is associated with making offerings to local spirits.

The emphasis on oracles in Tibetan Buddhism is often confused with shamanism, but oracles and shamans are quite different. An oracle is a spirit who speaks through a medium. It is channeling. Shamans, found in Siberia, Turkey, Africa, etc., are people who enter a trance in which they go to different realms and speak to various spirits, usually the spirits of ancestors. The spirits give them answers to various questions. When the shamans come out of trance, they deliver the message from the ancestors. In contrast, a medium usually has no memory whatsoever of what the oracle said through him or her. Oracles became associated with protectors. The Nechung oracle is also the protector called Nechung. A trace of shamanism, however, is reflected in a division of things as being on, above and below the earth, which is prevalent in Bon material and then came into Buddhism.

Buddha taught a tremendous amount on many topics. Wherever Buddhism went in Asia, people emphasized elements that resonated with their culture. There is mention of pure lands in Indian Buddhism but it was not emphasized. The Chinese, who had the Daoist (Taoist) idea of going to the Western land of the immortals, put tremendous emphasis on the pure lands and expanded it tremendously. Thus, we get pure land Buddhism. It is one of the most significant Chinese Buddhist schools. Likewise, within Indian Buddhism, we do find discussion of protectors, of various spirits, offering pujas and so on, but the Tibetans expanded these elements tremendously because it was in their culture.

## Conclusion

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I think it is very important to have a great deal of respect for the Bon tradition. There are many things that can be identified as Bon or as Tibetan culture which are not completely in common with Tibetan Buddhism. There are various elements in the Buddhist teachings found in Bon as well. The debate about who copied what from whom is pointless. Buddhism and Bon had contact with each other and there is no reason why they would not have influenced each other.

It is important to understand that making the Bonpos into the bad guys is, on the one hand, political – a leftover from their being super-conservative in the eighth century. On the other hand, it is psychological – people who emphasize their positive sides will tend to project their negative sides onto somebody. This phenomenon is found particularly in fundamentalist Buddhist traditions with super guru devotion and a big emphasis on a protector. The protector becomes the important thing. The texts say terrible things about anyone who is against the Dharma or against the said tradition. Smash our enemies, trample them, tear their eyes out, etc. I think it is much more appropriate to follow the example of His Holiness in thinking of there being five Tibetan traditions, each of which teaches completely valid paths to enlightenment. They share many things in common and they talk about reaching the same goal, enlightenment.

Within what they share in common, there are certain things that can be identified as Tibetan culture and others which are more Buddhist. It is up to us to decide what we want to follow. If we want to accept certain things from Tibetan culture, fine, why not. However, it is not necessary. If we can distinguish Tibetan elements from essential Buddhism, then at least we can be clear about what we are following. We cannot be

purist in Buddhism. Even Indian Buddhism was in keeping with Indian society. We cannot divorce Buddhism from the society in which it was taught, but we can be clear about what is cultural and what is about the four noble truths, the path to enlightenment, bodhichitta and so on.

## Questions and Answers

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*Question:* One argument about the difference between Bon and Buddhism is that Buddhism comes from Buddha, a fully enlightened being, it is well documented and there is a lineage, whereas Bon does not come from a fully enlightened being.

*Alex:* How do we know that Buddha was a fully enlightened being? Nothing was written down and there were no tape recorders. How do we even know that the Buddhist scriptures are actually what the Buddha taught? Nothing appeared in writing until about four hundred years after the Buddha. It was all transmitted orally. How do we know that the people who transmitted the teachings remembered everything correctly? Is it that everyone in the lineage had photographic memories and never got a word wrong even if they just heard it once? That is pretty far-fetched.

I do not think that is a valid argument to say Buddha was enlightened, but Shenrab Miwo was not. How can we say he was not? I have not studied his biography, so I am not familiar with the details, but what difference does it make? This leads to a big discussion about whether the Buddha taught the Mahayana Sutras. It is the same type of argument. Everything depends on how we define a Buddha. If we define a Buddha as Hinayana does, as an historical person, then clearly Buddha did not teach the Mahayana sutras, unless we say he taught them secretly and that they were not transmitted publicly. Actually, the teacher of the Mahayana sutras was Buddha *as described by* the Mahayana sutras – as having three bodies, manifesting in a zillion forms throughout space and time, and so on. That kind of Buddha could easily have taught the Mahayana sutras. Likewise, when we talk about the source of a lineage, I think we have to be very clear about what concept of Buddha we are referring to. Are we talking about an historical person, like Shakyamuni Buddha or Shenrab Miwo, or are we talking about the way that they themselves would describe an enlightened being?

Ultimately, the test is whether the person's teachings actually work to bring someone to enlightenment. That is how we know the validity of a teaching. Unless we have attained an omniscient mind, we cannot perceive whether someone else has achieved it. So how do we know if someone else has achieved it? We don't know. We can get some idea from the fact that each tradition has produced some fantastic beings. For me, that is enough. I am not one who takes things literally. I think we have to be a little bit more objective in viewing these things. One's description of a Buddha very much affects one's presentation of the origin of a teaching.

*Participant:* They speak of three types of Bon: the old Bon, before the texts were buried; the Yung-drung Bon, referring to the more traditional type of Bon with dzogchen, madhyamaka, prajnaparamita and so on; and then the new Bon, with common lineages with Guru Rinpoche. Shartse, a great master in the beginning of this last century achieved rainbow body through this new Bon method.

*Alex:* I had not heard of new Bon. It is quite clear that there are people who practice both Bon and Nyingma together with no problem. And there are Bon scholars who go to Gelug debating schools. As I mentioned, many people who discovered buried treasure texts discovered texts from both traditions. Translators were working together from both languages at Samyay monastery. There was always some cross influence. I don't know what the specific distinction would be between the Yung-drung Bon and the new Bon. The Yung-drung also has lineages in common with Nyingma. Maybe it is just in terms of whether or not Guru Rinpoche is in the lineage. I think the lesson to be learned is that Bon is a lineage of Tibetan spiritual teachings and not something to be frightened of as if they were the bad guys or devil worshippers.

*Question:* Is this more open knowledge about Bon a recent development?

*Alex:* I think it is. Projecting the negative onto a group it is usually based on total lack of knowledge about



that group, like making the Muslims into the devil. Certainly, open knowledge about Bon is more recent. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been very instrumental in that, but he is not the only one. During the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Mongols put an end to a 150-year civil war and made the Fifth Dalai Lama the political head of Tibet. There were many reasons for that.

The Fourth Dalai Lama was a Mongol. The First Panchen Lama was the tutor of the Fourth and Fifth Dalai Lamas and the one who chose the Fifth Dalai Lama. It is quite reasonable that the Mongols would support the reincarnation of their Mongol Fourth Dalai Lama. The Fifth Dalai Lama's policy was reconciliation among all the different factions within Tibet to end this horrible period of civil war. He not only brought all the traditions together and arranged places for them in the Monlam festival, but he had the various Nyingma monasteries from the two main Nyingma lineages do rituals for the success of the Tibetan government. He had the Bon monasteries also do rituals for the success of the Government. The present Dalai Lama himself says that he tries to continue the policies of the Great Fifth. Now, because of the refugee situation, all of the traditions are thrown equally into the public eye. We now have information about all of them.

*Question:* A Westerner wrote a thesis on Bon in 1927.

*Alex:* Yes. The Bon monasteries were there. Snellgrove was looking at it in the fifties and sixties.

*Question:* Are there dzogchen elements in Iranian culture?

*Alex:* I don't think so. Even the Bon creation myths are quite different from the Zoroastrian creation myths of ancient Iran. What I was saying was that Buddhism was present in Iranian cultural areas quite early. If we define a Buddhist teaching as one that will bring one to enlightenment, with all of the qualities of an enlightened being, then that teaching is Buddhist whether we call it Buddhist or not. Bon did not necessarily come from an Iranian culture area, although the area to the west of Tibet was an Iranian cultural area, and the Bonpos say their tradition came from there. It is likely that through the contact Western Tibet had with Khotan, which is well documented, there was also cultural contact between Western Tibet and Iranian cultural areas. It is at least possible.

*Question:* Isn't it established that Bon is older than Buddhism?

*Answer:* How do we know that it is older? Are we going to accept that Shenrab Miwo lived thirty thousand years ago in the Stone or Bronze Age? How important is that? The way I understand it is that Bon influenced Buddhism in Tibet: they influenced the way that Tibetan Buddhists present Buddhism. That is clear. That I would not argue with. But I don't know how we could possibly ever know objectively who came first.

*Question:* The practice of dzogchen is older than Buddhism, is it not?

*Alex:* Here as well, I don't see how anyone could possibly know. It depends on how we define dzogchen. If we define it as a teaching to bring us to enlightenment, did it come before Shakyamuni? The Buddhists themselves would say there were Buddhas before Shakyamuni who taught methods for achieving enlightenment. If one called Shenrab Miwo an earlier Buddha, fine. Why not? What difference does it make? Are you asking about dzogchen as a fully developed system to bring enlightenment or about certain methods that are used in dzogchen, which come from earlier practices? Dzogchen is certainly not in Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster only lived about fifty years before Buddha, not thirty thousand years before. There is no documented religion going back that far. Another point is that if a tradition is labeled as the bad guys, they will surely compensate for the bad publicity by claiming to be older. Is that to be taken literally? I would not take it literally. If someone wants to take it literally, fine.

*Question:* Is there any historical evidence of dzogchen in ancient Bon?

*Alex:* As far as I know, and I may be mistaken, there is nothing written that has been preserved. The only historical evidence is archeology and the only archeological evidence is from the royal tombs. It is clear that the Bonpos had rituals, but there certainly is not any evidence that they were doing dzogchen meditation. There is a lineage of the belief that they were because, "My teacher said so." "How does your teacher

know?" "His teacher told him."

The fact that the Bon teachings have benefited a great deal of people demonstrates that it is an effective path to enlightenment, or at least what we can see of enlightenment. In my opinion, the dates of the founder are irrelevant. I think the whole debate is like the argument "my teacher is better than your teacher." Somebody gave the dates, and now it is a teaching of the lineage. Why worry about it? Just get on with the practice and try to get the results. Both Bon and Buddhism are lineages that go back to the beginning of the last millennium. That is enough for me. They have been proven over time. Get on with the teachings. It is pointless to get into a "my daddy is better than your daddy" type of debate.

*Question:* Within Tibetan groups, there is competition and bad mouthing each other. Isn't there room for improvement there?

*Answer:* Absolutely. His Holiness the Dalai Lama always advocates nonsectarianism, as do many of the leaders and great lamas of the other traditions. However, there are still sectarian factions. It is really unfortunate, but it is there. We do not have to follow it.

*Question:* Can you say more about the Bon view of Madhyamaka?

*Alex:* I have not studied Bon texts on Madhyamaka. The interpretation of Madhyamaka varies in each of the four Tibetan traditions. Even within any one tradition, various textbooks and authors have different views. I would imagine that within Bon as well there are variations. I am just going by inference. If Bonpos are doing debate training in Gelug monasteries – although some debate in Sakya monasteries as well – they must accept the view of the monastery in which they are training. It would not make any sense for them not to accept that view. They could equally do debate training in a Nyingma monastery if they accepted the Nyingma view of Madhyamaka.

One needs a correct view of voidness in order to reach enlightenment. However, there are many ways of explaining the correct view. One has to be very careful when looking at the different Tibetan traditions. They define the central terms very differently. If we give the Gelug definitions to the Kagyu terms, for example, then what they say sounds very strange. But if we read the Kagyu presentation from the point of view of their own definitions, it makes perfect sense.

We have to be careful to bring in each particular school's perception theory as well. If we just look at a school's presentation of Madhyamaka independently of their definition of conceptual and nonconceptual cognition, it becomes very confusing. The Nyingma, Kagyu and Sakya theories of perception are very different from the Gelug. We in the West, coming from a Biblical worldview, want One Truth, One God – this is the way it is, full stop. But it is not like that.

A correct view can be described in many different ways. The major difference being whether we speak of voidness as an object that is understood by the mind or as the mind that understands voidness. Dzogchen describes voidness from the point of view of the mind that understands it. Gelug discusses it, in sutra, from the point of view of the voidness itself. In anuttarayoga tantra, with the discussion of clear light, the Gelug presentation is similar to that of dzogchen. It would seem that Bon follows Gelug in the sutra tradition, but follows the Nyingma style at least in dzogchen. I don't know about the lower classes of tantra. I have not done an in-depth training in Bon. I have only read about it.

I think that one has to conclude from all of this that it is in actuality quite complex. It is not as if these were all just isolated lineages in Tibet. Things do not exist like that. They have had contact and interaction. There is no such thing as an independent lineage. Even within each Tibetan school, there are various tantra lineages, interpretations of Madhyamaka, etc., each with a different history. Some are in common with other schools. It is like an interweaving of different braids of hair, or like a family. It is not that each lineage has been the same since their founding. Things are much more fluid. We like to put a big black line around things and make them into solid entities, but that is not reality.

*Question:* Would you say that religion in Tibet was primarily a family thing, that it was kept local, before

the monastic tradition?

*Alex:* I would not say that. It is not like the Jewish religion, for example, in which, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the rituals were carried on in the family so that the mother led the Friday night services and the family had the responsibility for the education of the children. Religion in Tibet was not a family tradition in that sense. The only evidence that we have is from the official burial ceremonies and sacrifices for the king.

What was it like on a local level? I can imagine that there were local village priests who did rituals for people in the villages just as Buddhists do now. Monks are invited into homes to do rituals and so on. How were the early village priests trained? Was it from father to son? Were women involved? Was it a caste? I have no idea.

Again, there is very little evidence to go by. They must have had a written tradition. There were translators from Zhang-zhung at Samyay who were obviously translating something. I would tend to think that the level of education and sophistication in the remote areas of ancient Tibet was not very high. In many countries of ancient times, rituals were exclusive to the royal courts and were not so widespread to the population, particularly in the remote areas.

Please keep in mind that Tibet did not have big cities. It was not like ancient Rome. There were little villages and nomads. How would education about rituals be spread? People were very isolated. Were there beliefs in local mountain spirits and so on? Surely. Was it organized? Who knows. Pujas and sacrifices to local mountain spirits are still done all over Central Asia.

I really think the main emphasis needs to be put on what we can learn from Bon now. If the teachers, the style of practice and the emphasis suits us – perfect. Whatever we choose, it is important not to get hung up in a sectarian mindset. Rather than saying, “This is the greatest thing in the world!” we can simply acknowledge, “It suits me.”

## Dedication

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Let us end here with a dedication. Dedication is very important. When we do something positive, like gaining clarity about Buddhism and Bon, it builds up a certain positive force. If we don't dedicate it, that positive force acts as a cause for improving samsara. We don't just want to contribute to having more intellectual knowledge so that we can get a good job at a university and teach a course and make money. We dedicate it as a cause for achieving enlightenment. With more clarity about the path and with freedom from sectarian views, we can put all our energies into reaching enlightenment to be able to benefit everyone. If we dedicate the positive force as a cause for enlightenment, it will act as a cause for enlightenment. This is why the motivation is important at the beginning: it sets the tone.

May whatever we have learned go deeper and deeper and act as a cause for truly being able to follow a Buddhist or Bon path to its end, with clarity and without sectarian views, so that we can be of best help to everyone.

Thank you.