Mara Lisa Arizaga

When Tibetan Meditation Goes Global

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Edited by
Blain H. Auer
Maya Burger
Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz
Angelika Malinar
Ingo Strauch

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Mara Lisa Arizaga

When Tibetan Meditation Goes Global

A Study of the Adaptation of Bon Religious Practices in the West

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For my Teachers.
For Theo.

Foreword

The propagation of the teachings of Buddhism or Bon in lands where they were previously unknown is expressed in Tibetan by the term *dulwa*, a word with a wide spectrum of meanings ranging from gentle instruction at one end to something considerably more assertive at the other. Each case is different, and the methods that are chosen depend on the enlightened assessment, by the bearers of the doctrine, of the needs and capacities of the recipients. The teachers cannot simply transpose the didactic methods they have used in their own native environments to these new settings but must decide which parts of their vast and complex systems are to be left to one side, and which should be transmitted as the part of their religion that is to stand for the whole. Bon has been described by numerous authors as *the* religion of Tibet because of its eclecticism, embracing as it does doctrines that it shares with Buddhism as well as beliefs and practices that are probably best understood as indigenous. While the Western scholars who pioneered academic research on Bon were well aware of the range of its doctrines, it was precisely because of its close geographical and cultural identification with Tibet that the religion was generally considered an unlikely candidate for globalisation. In the event, those reservations have proved to be unfounded, and this book tells the story of how the Bon religion has made the leap from the stepping-stones it had established in South-Asian exile to even firmer ground in the West. "The West" is of course not a homogeneous entity, and the form that Bon has taken in North America is quite different from the one it has assumed in Europe. Here too, quite apart from the multiplicity of national backgrounds involved, with the cultural and religious inheritances these imply, each person in the international sangha came to Bon by a unique set of circumstances, and the individuality of these accounts is conveyed with great sensitivity by the author. A researcher and practitioner of Bon for many years, Mara Arizaga has been an important figure in running the Bonpos' main European centre in France and in supporting the educational projects of its Tibetan founders, something for which she is abundantly equipped thanks to her considerable powers of organisation and empathy. For someone who is self-avowedly an "insider", maintaining the objectivity essential too writing an analytical account such as this is no small matter, but she has succeeded in her task; I have no doubt that this book will be appreciated by Mara's Tibetan teachers and fellow students as much as it will be valued by readers from a range of disciplines in the international academic community.

Charles Ramble
EPHE – PSL, CRCAO, Paris

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While studies of the expansion of Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, into the "West," and the resulting emergence of a global Buddhism are virtually legion, the same cannot be said of Bon, Tibet's indigenous religion. Although Bon studies has established itself as an important field of research within Tibetan studies in recent decades, the expansion of Bon, or more specifically, Yungdrung Bon, as a religion attracting an ever-growing Western following has been virtually overlooked. This may be due to the still prevailing view that the Bon religion does not have the characteristics of a potentially global religion, but is tied to a particular region and people. I myself have fallen prey to this erroneous opinion before I was proven wrong by Mara Arizaga. In numerous conversations that accompanied the writing of her thesis, it soon became clear to me that the Bon religion is by no means a local indigenous Tibetan religion, but that it is now not only global in its spread, but also formulates a global claim. Covid-19 has accelerated this global religious aspiration, as highlighted in this study. Mara has authored a truly pioneering work to locate Bon on the global map of religions. No one could have done a better job of exploring the history of global Bon than her, who has studied Bon in its global orientation for decades. Not only does she know the major religious proponents of global Bon, but she is intimately familiar with important Bon centers established in the West through her own practice. The work presented here is a landmark in the study of the Bon religion, and I hope it will find its due place not only on the shelves of tibetologists but also in social anthropological and religious studies research.

Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, University of Bern

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Note on Tibetan Language Terms

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

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Glossary of Key Terms

Dakini in Sanskrit, or *khandro* (Wylie: *mkha' 'gro*) in Tibetan, is referred to in Bon as a type of enlightened or spiritually advanced female being. They are often represented as consorts of enlightened male beings.

Dharma in Sanskrit, or *Chos* (Wylie: *chos*) in Tibetan, refers to Bon and Buddhist religious teachings about the underlying nature of the universe.

Dzogchen (Wylie: *rdzogs chen*) is a tradition of teachings that are considered to be the highest of the nine vehicles and the fastest route to enlightenment in Bon. The four main cycles of Bon Dzogchen are: Atri, Dzogchen, Zhangzhung Nyengyud, and Yetri Thasel.

Geshe (Wylie: *dge bshes*) is a Bon (and Buddhist) academic title given in monasteries to monks and nuns after many years of study.

Gomdra (Wylie: *sgom grwa*) designates meditation centers or schools held at Bon and Buddhist monasteries.

Kangyur (Wylie: *bka' 'gyur*) is the section of the Bon canon that refers to the words of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, considered to be the founder of the Bon religion. It contains texts related to monastic discipline, ethics, and the like, as well as sutras. In Bon it is more usually referred to simply as Ka (Wylie: *bka'*).

Katen (Wylie: *bka' brten*) the part of the Bon canon that is presented as containing commentaries that rely on the Buddha's words from various succeeding masters throughout history.

Kusum Rangshar (Wylie: *sku gsum rang shar*) is a Dzogchen text written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (Wylie: *shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan*) (1859–1933), who is considered by his followers to have been an extraordinary Bon Dzogchen master, known for his nonsectarian approach and for having realized the Rainbow Body.

Lopon (Wylie: *slob dpon*) is a title that literally means "the teacher" and usually designates the head instructor of a group of students at a monastery.

Lung (Wylie: *lung*) To fully receive a teaching, a person is required to receive the Bon text through oral transmission or oral authorization, called *lung,* from a qualified teacher or lama.
Olmo Lungring (Wylie: *'ol mo lung ring*) is considered by Bonpos as a sacred place where Buddha Tonpa Shenrab incarnated as a prince. It is believed that this land is part of a region called Tagzig (Wylie: *stag gzig*), which some scholars identify with Central Asia.

Sangha in Sanskrit or *Gendun* (Wylie: *dge 'dun*) in Tibetan, refers, in the context of this research, to a Buddhist or Bonpo "community." For instance, participants refer to the "Shenten sangha," meaning the entire group of lay and monastic Bon followers who attend or are part of the Shenten community.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thögal (Wylie: *thod rgal*) refers to specific procedures that practitioners follow to enter and abide in the Natural State, which result in the development of so-called "thögal visions."

Tonpa Shenrab (Wylie: *ston pa gshen rab*) literally means "Teacher Shenrab." He is also known as Shenrab Miwo and is considered by Bonpos to be the Buddha who founded the Bon religion.

Trekchö (Wylie: *khregs chod*) refers to the practice of the Natural State of the Mind.
Trulku (Wylie: *sprul sku*) is a person who is believed to be the reincarnation of a highly advanced master.

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

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

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

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

1 Introduction

The expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the so-called Western world during the twentieth century coincided with unprecedented globalization processes, including what scholars have identified as a radical shrinking of linguistic, cultural, economic, and geographical frontiers.[1] At the same time, and partly in response to the fluidity of boundaries triggered by globalization, other boundaries, including religious divisions, have sharpened.[2]

Globalization has led to new religious landscapes, including novel forms of interaction between the secular and the religious. Although there is much literature focusing on the diffusion of Buddhism into Western cultures, research examining this process for the Tibetan tradition known as Yungdrung Bon[3] (hereafter referred to as Bon) remains limited. The wealth of research that focuses on Bon as a religion does not specifically look at its expansion to countries considered to be part of the "West." Thus, this volume traces the expansion of Bon into the West, looking at how and by whom it is being received and adopted, bearing in mind the historical context and the dynamics of globalization processes in which this expansion takes place. In this study, I follow Martin Baumann and Charles Prebish's interpretation of the expression "Buddhism in the West." By this, he does not mean the West as "the sum of geographic regions outside of Asia collectively" but, rather, "non-Asian industrialized nation states where Buddhist teachings, practices, people, and ideas have become established."[4] The same notion applies to mentions of "Westerners." In this study, a "Westerner" refers to a person who lives in the so-called West and who is not a Tibetan.

The initial open-ended research questions I asked, in line with the research method of grounded theory, were these: What are the dynamics that are taking place in the arrival of Bon in the West? Who is transmitting Bon in the West and how? Who in the West is receiving it and how?[5]

To address these questions, I look at some consequences of the interactions between expanding religions – in particular, the Tibetan Yungdrung

1 See: Robertson 1992: 179–80; Kanter 1995: 45–46; Scholte 2000: 45–56.

2 Warburg 2007: 97–98.

3 Perhaps the only study so far that focuses on Bon in the West is the master's thesis by Ieva Rute titled "Yungdrung Bön Spread in the West"; Rute 2010. See also: Rute 2007. I am grateful to Ieva Rute for sending to me her master's thesis to consult.

4 Baumann/Prebish 2002: 5.

5 This book does not compare the parallel changes that took place and continue to evolve in religious institutions in China and Tibet or the propagation of Bon among Chinese people. While interesting topics of research, they are beyond the scope of this study.

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Bon tradition – and people in a globalized world. I consider how the availability of the Bon religion in the West affects followers and, conversely, how Western people affect the Bon tradition. I will attempt to contextualize these interactions through a concrete example of lived religious experience, considering Bon in the context of globalization and the transnational movement of peoples and looking at the history of the arrival of Bon in West, its organization and expansion, and its reception by Western students. I then assess the developments taking place within Bon as it is practiced in the West, including the negotiation and production of identities – individual and collective – and the formation of a "global Bon" religion in a global society, using key entry points that emerged from the participants' narratives and the literature reviewed. These entry points represent meaningful areas of a dynamic field, including how Bon is evolving along with deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes; what adaptations and selections are taking place; how "Western Bonpos" narrate what it means to them to be Bonpos (Bon followers), including how they situate themselves vis-à-vis what they received from the lamas and Tibetan teachers; and how they negotiate their own identities as "Western Bonpos;" and what the role is of new technologies in the transmission of Bon teachings in West.

Since I defended the thesis on which this book is based in October 2019, the COVID-19 health crisis has affected many aspects of our lives, and its effects, of course, have also reached the Western Bon universe and touched upon the core theme of this study. The two main trends analyzed in this thesis, the "modernist versus traditionalist" approaches, which form the nucleus of the ethnographic work of this volume, have been considerably impacted.

As we will see later, digital transmissions of religious activities have been welcomed by many in the Bon world in the West but also rejected by others.[6] Nevertheless, it is a fact that "virtual Bon" is developing into new forms of online activity that allow Westerners to engage in the teachings, and sometimes even ritual events, without leaving their living rooms. This is happening at a pace that is sometimes as difficult to grasp as it is to study, occurring even as we try to understand the impacts of the emerging technologies of the Internet, including social networking sites and the attendant cultural changes. But as Christopher Helland puts it in his 2005 article "Virtual Religion," "Online religion is not representative of some form of extraordinary activity – rather it shows 'ordinary' religious engagement in an amazing and extraordinary environment."[7]

6 Helland 2015.
7 Helland 2015.

1.1 Advancing Our Understanding of Global Bon

By considering both the historical development of Bon in the West and contemporary experiences of "Western followers" of Bon, we can see that the expansion and reception of Bon in the West is a relatively recent development. The globalization of Bon has been precipitated by the convergence of three characteristics: the ability of some Bon religious leaders to adapt to a particular culture and setting; the interest of Westerners in exploring so-called Eastern teachings; and the high speed and global reach of information in the digital age. The first of these three characteristics is closely related to the path that was first paved by the arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. The way in which Western scholars and earlier propagators of Buddhism in the West narrated "what Buddhism is" heavily influenced the particular context in which Tibetan Buddhism and Bon were established and started growing, as we will see in Chapter 4. It should be noted that our understanding of Bon in the West is still developing alongside the translation of its language, philosophy, and practical applications in a new cultural and social environment.

When analyzing Bon in the context of globalization, it becomes apparent that religion plays a key role and constitutes a driving force in globalizing processes. These processes are marked by an increased opening of political borders, exchanges of ideas, and flows of transcultural and transnational faiths, where both universalizing and particularizing tendencies coexist and where "deterritorialized"[8] cultural resources are embraced, reinterpreted, and utilized accordingly by different social groups. These appropriation processes often include the reterritorialization of cultural resources and their reinsertion into new geographical spaces and sometimes a resignifying of their symbolic meaning.

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

8 The term "deterritorialization" was first coined by the French philosohpers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. See: Deleuze/Guattari 1972. The term nowadays is widely used in the context of studies on cultural globalization, often in relation to the concept of "disembeddedment," which will be discussed below.

Indeed, globalization has erased the political and geographic boundaries of Bon, leading this tradition to become deterritorialized from its borders, no longer embedded within one social system. In this context, a "social system" refers to what Parsons defines as "a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors . . . whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols."[9]

There exists a clear intersection between Bon and globalization, given that Bon has been integrated into different cultures and societies, and the way in which it is transmitted has been adapted and translated to new audiences. Its new followers have also reinterpreted Bon, marking an expansion that is both fluid and dynamic at its core. In this process, which occurred in parallel with the development of so-called global Tibetan Buddhism, global Bon has a dual characteristic whereby it "takes both the modern form of a global flow and transnational network, and the traditional form of territorialized cultic practices, within the boundaries of communities."[10] A central aspect in this dichotomy is the "territory," both in the physical/cultural dimensions and in the "imaginary topography of Tibet as 'mystical' – a major factor for the reception of Buddhism in the West."[11]

Finally, there is no doubt that both globalization and religions are affected by modern technology, above all the Internet, which provides rapid and widespread communication. Bon practitioners around the world can access the teaching schedules of the lamas online and make plans to visit in person and can enter online forums to discuss Bon or a center's publications. Moreover, sacred ceremonies, practices and teachings that a few years ago were considered secret or appropriate for transmitting only to students who had passed certain preparatory practices, are nowadays available on YouTube or broadcast live, demonstrating that the Internet is "clearly changing the face of religions in the world today."[12]

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

9 Parsons 1951: 5.
10 Obadia 2012: 189.
11 Obadia 2012: 189.
12 Veidlinger 2015: 1.

The three primary contributions of this research are as follows:

1. An exploration of the modern history of the Yungdrung Bon religion, particularly after 1959, as it was received in the West.
2. A new perspective on the expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the West.
3. Advancing our understanding of religious expansion and reception and the dynamics underlying it.

Throughout this book, I will follow Martin[13] in using the word "Bonpo" for followers of Bon, and "Bon" as a noun for the religion or as an adjective for describing it when required in English.

1.2 Scope of the Study

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

1. It is the major Yungdrung Bon center in Europe affiliated with one of the two main Bon monasteries in exile from Tibet: Triten Norbutse in Kathmandu, Nepal.
2. It receives students from all over the world (in contrast, for instance, to Ligmincha in the United States, which mostly receives Americans, or Ligmincha Poland, which mostly receives Poles).
3. It has both monastic and lay institutional structures, in the form of the Shenten Congregation and the Shenten Association, respectively.
4. Some of the students come from Ligmincha, while others come from schools taught by different Tibetan teachers, such as Sogyal Rinpoche, the founder of the Rigpa community,[14] and Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, the founder of the Dzogchen Community.[15]
5. Its founder, referred to with his honorific titles as Yongdzin[16] Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche (hereinafter referred to as "Yongdzin Rinpoche") is considered or

13 Martin 2001: 4, Footnote 7.

14 For more information, see: Rigpa 2021. See also references to Dapsance's ethnography on Ripga (Chapter 4).

15 For further information, see: Associazione Culturale Comunità Dzogchen – Merigar (2021).

16 Yongdzin is an honorific title given to highly accomplished Buddhist teachers. In this case, it refers to Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, who is also known by his previous title of "Lopon" and Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche. Lopon is the Tibetan word for "teacher."

presented as the main teacher of most (if not all) other Bon lamas teaching in the West, including Tenzin Wangyal, founder of Ligmincha International.

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

This volume is organized as follows:

In Part I, I provide the context of the study of Bon in the West through a general discussion of how religion and globalization are entwined, aiming to show that the relationship between religion and globalization is best understood by analyzing them as an interconnected phenomenon and by looking at the new possibilities as well as the emerging and multidimensional challenges arising from this interaction. This is followed by an overview of the Bon tradition, with some of its major historical aspects and key concepts, as seen by scholars and Bon religious representatives, as well as an account of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to the West, for the purpose of comparing that process and its features with those found in the study of Bon in the West.

In Part II, I give an overview of the modern history of Bon as it spread to Europe and the Americas. I explore the personal journeys of the main figures who brought Bon to the West as well as the key scholars who contributed to the academic understanding of Bon in Western countries. This part then looks closely at the history, organization and activities of Shenten Dargye Ling, the Yungdrung Bon Center in France. It also looks at how other Western centers associated with Shenten Dargye Ling are influencing Bon in the West. In particular, it analyzes a network of centers called Ligmincha International and its significance for the history of Bon in the West.

Finally, in Part III, I present the bulk of my research findings and the themes that emerged from personal interviews with Bon practitioners, teachers and scholars. The questions asked were open-ended at first and included queries about the interviewees' religious backgrounds, how they encountered Bon, what Bon means to them, whether they would describe themselves as "Bonpos," which practices they use, and whether or not they actively sought out specific practices. I further asked how they see Bon evolving in the future.

Lastly, Chapter 12 "Implications of a Globalized Bon" summarizes the findings and conclusions of this project and outlines the major implications of this research for the study of religion and globalization, Tibetan and Bon studies, and other fields such as religion and psychology, including leads for future research.

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

For the sake of clarification, this book does not intend to deal with doctrinal issues, nor does it address aspects and domains in which the beliefs of Bonpos are at odds with the conclusions of scholars dealing with the history of religion. It also does not tread into areas where the current state of knowledge about Bon is insufficient for researchers to gather evidence either to support or to challenge some of the Bonpos' historical claims, including the dating or even the actual existence of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, whom adherents view as the founding figure of Bon. Rather than presenting a critical history of Bon, the main object of this study is to describe and analyze how Western followers of Bon interact with Bon. Therefore, my aim is to describe how Bon has been presented to my interlocutors by their Tibetan teachers.

1.3 Note on My Involvement in Bon

> *It is well known that 'Buddhist' and 'scholar of Buddhism' are not always exclusive categories.* – Cristina Rocha and Martin Baumann[17]

My decision to pursue research into the development of Bon in the West arose out of my own experience as a practitioner over several years. I have participated in several long-term intensive meditation retreats, undergone many practices and have a personal involvement in the tradition. I would thus be considered, in Christopher Queen´s distinction among religious researchers, an adherent.[18] When I decided to work on the topic of Bon for my doctorate, I understood that this journey would entail a fundamental re-evaluation of myself in relation to the tradition. There are advantages and disadvantages in being an "insider" versus being an "outsider."[19] While less objectivity can certainly be a potential drawback to insider research, it is also true that being an outsider does not mean that

17 Rocha/Baumann 2008: 81.

18 Queen 1998.

19 For a comprehensive analysis on the "insider/outsider" and "emic/etic" debates in the scientific study of religions, see: Jensen 2016; Mostowlansky 2016; Mostowlansky/Rota 2016.

there is no influence from one's personal perspective or that an outsider is more objective. A key for me to remain as objective as possible was keeping detailed reflections on the subjective research process, maintaining a close awareness of my own personal biases and perspectives, since there can be no interpreting without some degree of "othering."

1.4 Note on Methodology and Grounded Theory

Data collection, analysis and development of theory for this study have been guided by the method known as *grounded theory*, which originated in the 1960s in the United States in the fields of health care and nursing. Its main concern is the generation of theory that is "grounded in the collected data." Key issues and concepts should "emerge" from the data, rather than being the result of the researcher forcing the data into "preconceived categories."[20] This is different from traditional research design, which "requires the investigator to structure each phase of the research process to verify or to refute . . . theories."[21]

For this study, I followed Kathy Charmaz's constructivist approach[22] (as opposed to an objectivist or postpositivist approach) to learn about individuals' perceptions and experiences regarding a particular subject area – in this case, their journeys, experiences and perceptions of being Western Bonpos – based on empirical data obtained mainly from semi-structured in-depth interviews. For such purposes, this grounded theory method offered me an adequate methodological framework to learn about individuals' perceptions. Constructivist grounded theory assumes that data are co-constructed through the interactions between interviewer and respondents. This is markedly different from the objectivist view, in which grounded theory consists of deriving an objective explanation or theory of things, considering data as real, without considering the processes that lead to their production.[23]

The main characteristics of grounded theory that are shared with other qualitative methods in the social sciences include focusing on everyday life experiences, valuing the participants' perspectives and employing an interactive process between researcher and respondents. Many of the participants are not English native speakers, and have various degrees of English-language proficiency. The data collection and analysis for this present study followed a cyclical

20 Charmaz 2006: 516.
21 Charmaz 2008: 47.
22 See, in particular: Glaser/Strauss 2009 [1967]; Corbin/Strauss 1997.
23 Charmaz 2006: 131.

process, typical for grounded theory, by using early findings to shape the ongoing data collection.

I used this approach to collect data gathered through a pilot study of in-depth interviews (ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours) with four people, followed by a much more extended period of observation and focused, in-depth interviews with another thirty-two individuals (for a total of forty-three individuals, of whom thirty-six are "practitioners" and seven Bon teachers). I did content analysis after both stages of collecting data. Interviews were conducted mostly in English, and a few in Spanish. For most of the interviewees, English is not their native language, and they have various degrees of English-language proficiency.

Grounded theory scholars have different opinions about the most suitable time for literature review. I followed the advice of Charmaz and carried out an initial review of the literature before the first data collection (in the pilot study) took place. The reason for this early review was both to learn what relevant research had already been conducted in this area and to become familiar with questions still needing investigation. For more on the development of grounded theory and my data collection methods, see Appendix A.

Part I: **Contextualizing a Study of Bon in the West**

2 Religion and Globalization: Impacts on Religion and Individual Practice

Globalization and *religion* are both contentious terms, and both have been the subjects of crucial debates.[24] Indeed, the term "globalization" itself is not easy to define. Some scholars maintain that globalization is a myth,[25] so they often describe it in paradoxical terms such as "globalization is everything and its opposite."[26] The literature on the subject has tended to describe globalization primarily in financial and political terms in relation to an increasing economic integration across the entire globe.[27] Other perspectives focus on globalization as a process of time–space compression;[28] as synonymous with Westernization;[29] or in terms of distinguishing it from the process of Westernization and acknowledging the contribution of other regions of the world.

2.1 The Intersection Between Religion and Globalization

The above-mentioned perspectives have either ignored the role of religions in globalization processes or subordinated them to something else.[30] In contrast, other scholars have argued that, while religion and globalization might appear to be distantly linked, the role of religion cannot be relegated to the sidelines in the study of globalization.[31] Indeed, in light of recent studies,[32] scholars now believe that religion has played a much more relevant role in globalization than previously thought; therefore, the limited attention given to religion's role in globalization in academic literature has been subject to considerable discussion and debate. For example, Herrington maintains that "the economic-centric ap-

24 Altglas 2010: 1.
25 Held et al. 1999: 5–7.
26 Friedman 2000: 406. See also: Van Pelt Campbell 2007: 281.
27 Beyer 2007: 167.
28 Harvey 1990.
29 Robertson/White 2003: 6:15–19.
30 Stahl 2007: 338.
31 Jones (2002): 115.
32 See for example: Adogame/Shankar 2013; Beyer 2013; Beyer/Beaman 2007; Casanova 2011; Robertson 1994; Herrington 2013."

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proach to globalization fails, in part, because a force more primal, more enduring, and more important has been fueling this process for millennia – and that force is religion."[33]

Therefore, since religion has arguably been undergoing globalization throughout time and across cultures, it is something that should be accounted for. However, no fixed, universal model of religious globalization has been developed; rather, multifaceted and ever-changing models are discussed.[34] Thus, it is now clear that religions must be addressed in light of the overall globalization processes to understand them fully. Similarly, as religion has been described as "a driving force in the process of globalization,"[35] globalization must also be discussed in light of the expansion of religions.[36] In doing so, it is critical to understand how religions – such as Bon in our case – become integrated into new societies and the way in which a religion's teachings are selected and adapted by those who transmit or follow it. For the purposes of this analysis, I follow Beyer's understanding of what he calls "systemic religions," that is, "institutionalized, organized, specialized forms of religion that have religious professionals associated with them."[37]

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

1. *Glocalization* is a term that denotes the importance of the local in globalization – which, along with related processes of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization," can and often does occur simultaneously.
2. Responses to globalization by religious and other actors are varied and include seeing it as an opportunity (or opportunities) and – often at the same time – causing resistances.
3. New forms of communication and new technologies have a great impact on these processes. For instance, the Internet has been cited as the cause for altering the "traditional" master–student relationship, and it has been predicted that, as a result, the practice of passing down practical skills and knowledge, including memorizing specific religious passages, from teachers to students may eventually disappear.[38]

33 Herrington 2013: 146.
34 Beyer 2007: 183–84.
35 Beyer 2013: 225.
36 Beyer 2013: 225.
37 Beyer 2013: 225.
38 Kawanami 2012: 143.

4. In these interactions, the encounters with "others" imply a reflective process in which different actors reassess their religious identities, religious narratives and other aspects of their traditions.[39]

It could be argued that some religions, including Bon, inherently have a tendency toward globality if their worldview is deeply concerned with the idea of "wholeness"; or if they attempt to grasp ultimate truths; or if they provide a totalizing explanation of the universe and its origins, the beginning and end of time, the essence of nature and humankind, or the meaning of life. Given this appraisal, we could surmise that "world religions" – noting the contested nature of this concept, which refers mostly to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism[40] – have always been global in the sense that they have never been isolated from each other.[41] Casanova points out that for world religions, "Globalization offers to all the opportunity to become for the first time truly world religions, that is, global,"[42] especially for religions like Buddhism that have always been "transnational." In the case of Bon, globalization does indeed represent an opportunity to expand its reach, but "it also threatens them with de-territorialization." The same process can also be perceived as a threat to what its adepts consider to be its identity and values, as we will see in Part III.[43] Moreover, scholars of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and more recently of Bon have demonstrated that religions have contributed significantly over many centuries to international cultural and commercial exchanges across civilizations.[44]

There can be no doubt that the process began long before the term "globalization" was even coined, as "globalization is a process that has worked silently for millennia without having been given a name."[45] But although the transmission of

39 Altglas 2010: 4.

40 According to Masuzawa, the concept of "world religions," particularly since the nineteenth century, "enabled Europeans to imagine anew their own identity in relation to the new world order." It is in this context that, Masuzawa argues, Buddhism and Islam received special attention: Buddhism was associated with being an Aryan religion and Islam a Semitic religion, in opposition to Christianity, which was portrayed as the "universal religion." The term is also contested because it suggests that there is a common structure shared by all religions or a model that accommodates all cultures of the world in how they experience "religion." See: Masuzawa 2005.

41 Altglas 2010: 4.

42 Casanova 2011: 94.

43 On globalization as an opportunity and a threat, see: Altglas 2010: 11.

44 On the spread of Bon influence beyond the Tibetan Plateau, see Karmay 1998a; Bellezza 2014; See also: Ermakov 2008.

45 Chanda 2008: xi.

ideas, including religious ones, the sharing of meanings and values, and the exchanges of cultural, political and economic values across borders are by no means a unique characteristic of our contemporary era, contemporary globalization is marked above all by what Casanova refers to as a condition in which we are aware that we are all living at this very moment in one single, global humanity in the same time and space. This awareness – which actually does not depend on whether we want to be aware – is a key aspect that differentiates contemporary globalization from the cultural diffusion and other types of exchanges that occurred, for example, along the Silk Route. The shrinking of distances and the accelerated speed in which this shrinking takes place results in an intensification of the process. This means that there are more interactions and an awareness of this global way of being and interacting. What makes globalization different is not its novelty but the awareness of the fact that we live in a global world coexisting with pluralism, for example, of religions, most of which claim to be universal. In this context, the movements of ideas, information, values and people who carry ideas and information with them, including religious ideas, have been occurring on a larger scale and at a faster speed than ever before, in part due to the Internet, which plays an essential role in these processes.

As religions become less rooted in a particular place and are deterritorialized due to diasporas and transnational ties, globalization triggers diverse responses, reactions and interpretations as well as resistance from the representatives and followers of religions. At the same time, a process of reterritorialization often also takes place, for example, in the case of Bon, as exemplified in this study by the Bon Center of Shenten Dargye Ling. This reterritorialization refers not only to real or physical places but also to imagined territories and symbolic landscapes. In this sense, "the location of religious Otherness is still installed in a topographic model (the West versus the East) and the transnationalisation of Eastern wisdoms does not disconnect them from their national origins."[46] Commenting on this issue, Raphael Liogier refers to what he calls a "virtual Tibet" which, he argues, was shaped mostly through the influence of the Dalai Lama. This is a Tibet that is deterritorialized and that exists everywhere except in the physical Tibet.

> It is everywhere. It is as if every Buddhist in the world, not only Tibetan Buddhists, were in fact some kind of virtual citizen of this non-territorialised Tibet . . . With the image of the monasteries, the mountains, and everything that is pure, where the cities are pure, it is peaceful, etcetera . . . So Tibet became in itself not only a cause but also a symbol of something that is everywhere except in Tibet.[47]

46 Obadia 2012: 188.
47 Liogier 2015.

"Territory" in this context also refers to "imagined spaces and mental mappings,"[48] because "if Buddhism is indeed a globalized religion, and one of the fastest spreading, and therefore a religion on the move, it is in many ways linked to territorial issues, be they material or symbolic."[49]

Together, these studies support the notion that religions have contributed significantly throughout many centuries to international cultural and commercial exchange across civilizations,[50] that is to say, to globalization processes, even if they were not referred to as such.

2.2 Between Universalizing and Particularizing Tendencies

Globalization, as mentioned above, is not a homogeneous process; it encompasses the development and maintenance of cultures as well as changes within them. Furthermore, as Stahl notes, all religions are being radically transformed by globalization and these transformations are varied rather than unidirectional.[51] As religion has, in Beyer's words, become globalized, it is also dynamic and ever-changing, and it is not necessarily grounded in a particular formulation.[52]

Borrowing from the work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, Beyer contends that religion and the formation of religions must be perceived in the context of their social systems. Luhmann argues that social systems have evolved through the use of a matrix of communication. However, such communication is limited by social constraints and the broader context in which they exist. One of the central characteristics of religion in the globalized world, as one functional system among others, is its particular binary code, which Beyer identifies as the opposition of "blessed and cursed,"[53] which accounts for all other binary codes that are associated with other systems, such as true/false for science or legal/illegal for the field of law. He further argues that, as a consequence of globalization, religion is affected by modern technology, particularly in the field of communications. Global communication breaks down geographic barriers and facilitates communication between social groups, even dissimilar social ones.[54] According to John Hinnells, "'the other' is encountered more often,

48 Casanova 2001: 84.
49 Obadia 2012: 186.
50 See Martin 2001: 14.
51 Stahl 2007: 2.
52 Beyer 2007: 183–184.
53 Beyer 2013.
54 Beyer 1994.

more closely and by more people than ever before."[55] Importantly, these communication processes go in all directions and are clearly not limited to the "West to East" or even "East to West"[56] but include what we may call "East–East," "South–North," and so forth, impacting "old identities" and generating not only "sameness" but also differences.[57] Moreover, that "other" is less the so-called East and more an "Other that is desired, fantasized and represented as such."[58]

Tenzin Wangyal and many of the participants of this study refer to the concept of "a Western mind," perpetuating the assumption that societies can be divided into a fundamental dualism between East and West – an assumption that I believe to be a discursively constructed duality.[59] East and West, indeed, are not fixed concepts but relative ones. Moreover, if there were such a thing as a "Western mind," it would not account for some Bon followers in Shenten Dargye Ling who are, for instance, Africans or Asians.[60] In the same vein, stereotypes related to Tibet are many and varied, idealizing Tibet's complexities and reinforcing the myth of Tibet as "an idyllic society devoted to the practice of Buddhism."[61]

As indicated above, one of the most notable effects of globalization is what has been referred to as deterritorialization. This refers to the disembeddedness of cultural phenomena from their "natural" territories. Scholars who argue this perspective, such as Casanova, hold that throughout history cultural systems have been territorially embedded in specific physical environments.[62] This is of particular importance to the Bon religion, which was heavily influenced by the original Tibetan context in which it developed. A parallel process involving the "reterritorialization" of religious identities has also often occurred with the rooting of religions into new spaces, for instance with the establishment of religious centers or temples.

It is also important to understand the effect of the globalization of religions in terms of the cultural identities of adherents to a particular religion. This raises a number of critical questions. How and by what means is a culturally particular sacred space reconfigured or "remade" in a different cultural environment? How

55 Hinnells 2005: 2.

56 For more on Africa's religious dynamisms and globalization, see: Adogame/Shankar 2013.

57 Beyer 2015: 268.

58 Altglas 2007: 236.

59 See: Wangyal 2000: 36.

60 To the reference of a "Western mind," we can add the images of exoticism, spirituality and purity often associated with Tibet, in parallel with the "Orientalism" once described by Edward Said. See more in: Said 1995[1978]; and Said 1985.

61 Lopez, Jr. 1998: 9.

62 Casanova 2001: 84.

is a religion adapted, selected and even transformed by its new followers? In the case of Bon, for instance, do the same rituals and practices occur regardless of location, or are they recreated and reinterpreted in new spaces? Additionally, do some aspects of Bon religious practices travel better than others?[63] Religious messages in the context of the Bon tradition in Tibet were conveyed mostly by and within a monastic context. As these messages enter the global environment, will they need to be simplified? Or have they already been simplified? Finally, how do representatives of a religion perceive new ways of transmitting their messages? Issues such as these will be explored in the interview data presented in Part III.

2.3 The Transformation of Religions?

A relevant issue emerging from the effect of globalization on the cultural assumptions of religions is the impact of different communities interacting with each other. While considering that culture is not a monolithic entity and that there are manifold interactions and entanglements that make up societies, these interactions may lead to a borrowing of the cultures or a re-examination of their premises. This intercultural relationship may even lead to the development of newfound practices and communities.[64]

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

For instance, when we look at the case of Tibetan schools of Buddhism and Bon and Tibetans in exile, or as Baumann calls them, "deterritorialized Tibetans,"[65] we can see that a distinctive process is taking place. While the experience

63 Knott 2005: 574.
64 Dietrich 2011: 539.
65 Baumann 1997b: 378.

of exile has posed questions of continuity and even survival for Tibetans, it has also created an environment for new and different presentations of Buddhist teachings. In addition to reaching new audiences in the West, Tibetan lamas now also cater to Tibetans who receive a modern education and may even work in modern economies in the People's Republic of China, India or elsewhere. The predicted destruction of Tibetan Buddhism did not occur; instead Tibetan Buddhism has flourished in Tibet itself as well as in India, Bhutan, Nepal and the West.[66]

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

1. Globalization *facilitates* the creation of new religious landscapes and new forms of interactions between the secular and the religious, transcending borders and history.
2. Globalization *deterritorializes* cultural phenomena and religious systems, causing them to become *disembedded* from their "original" territories, while at the same time countervailing processes of reterritorialization also take place, with both processes being two sides of what Robertson called religious "glocalization."[67] This occurs while individuals are aware of the fact that they are living in a global world where different religions claiming to be universal coexist and where the movements of religious ideas happen on a larger scale and at a faster speed than ever before.[68]
3. The intersection of globalization and religion involves processes of *selection*, *interpretation* and *adaptation* to local settings. This happens in a multidirectional flow, in which encountering "others" makes different actors rethink their own religious identities, the nature of their religions and similar issues.[69] Thus, the study of one specific religion can shed light on this intersection in general.
4. In the current world, the transmission and transformation of religious ideas have been accelerated in large measure due to the impact of contemporary communication technology.
5. Globalization is an ongoing process in a complex field open to diverse interpretations.

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66 Oldmeadow 2001: 267.

67 See: Robertson 1992.

68 While deterritorialization started for Buddhism and other religions long before the twentieth century, the influence of new information technologies, particularly the Internet, as well as the possibilities of traveling faster and farther have accelerated these processes, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. See: Casanova 2001: 84.

69 See: Altglas 2010: 4.

2.4 Lived Religion

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

Religious studies scholars, including Robert Orsi and David Hall, popularized the concept of lived religion in the late twentieth century. The study of lived religion has attracted interest in a wide range of subject areas as an increasing number of scholars are exploring and emphasizing what a religious person does and believes. Orsi, a professor of religious studies at Northwestern University in Chicago, defines lived religion as including "the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves."[70] Orsi argues that in order to study and understand lived religions the researcher has to pay attention to how religious adherents act and how they interpret religious institutions, texts, rituals, practices and so forth.[71]

Nancy Ammerman's most recent book,[72] *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, documents the way religion and spirituality operate across the many domains of daily lived experience, the way religious adherents perceive and experience what they narrate as "encountering the sacred," both within and beyond the boundaries of official religious institutions and practices.[73] In her book *Lived Religion*, Meredith McGuire encourages researchers to focus first on individuals rather than on their affiliation or organizational participation. The focus should be on those experiences that individuals consider most important as well as the practices that they actually engage in and that comprise their personal religious experiences.[74]

From the outset, one of my main focuses of inquiry related to why "Westerners" are engaging with Bon. What role does Bon play in their lives? What is the significance of Bon in their (constructed) identities? How are they receiving and adopting Bon practices? The concept of lived religion appears to be useful to explain some of the multiple ways in which Bon religious teachings and Bon practices are applied in practitioners' lives. McGuire's approach in particular

70 Orsi 2010: 39.
71 Orsi 2010: 37.
72 Ammerman 2013.
73 See also: Ammerman 2007: 13–18.
74 McGuire 2008.

allowed me to look at religion "at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often even contradictory amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those [that] religious institutions consider important."[75]

McGuire echoes anthropologist Talal Asad in affirming that religion does not have a "transhistorical essence" and asserts that not only do religions change over time but so does what people understand "religion" to be. Thus, she proposes a frame to look at "individuals' religions as practiced, in all their complexity and dynamism . . . . [At] the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary or even coherent."[76]

This research looks at how Bon is lived by Westerners in a particular time and cultural setting, acknowledging that "people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that inter-subjective reality."[77] It was clear from the first pilot study that participants shared similar or common meanings and experiences, learned practices and a borrowed imagery that drew from the Bon teachings, materials and generalizations they had access to. A subsidiary question this study also analyzed was what Bon proponents in the West promote as "religious." My goal is to understand individual religion through the case study of Bon and how it is experienced and narrated by Westerners, particularly in Shenten Center.

Participants spoke of how they appropriated certain elements and rejected others and how they selected aspects of the Bon religion that better suited their personal lives. They also spoke of the differences between how they practice Bon in the context of a formal retreat at the center, Shenten Dargye Ling, and how they practice at home, noticing "precisely those defined-out elements that have become invisible to researchers."[78] Religious belief is, for McGuire, as much about an individual's experience of religion as it is about attending church. Some participants said that at Shenten they prostrate to the lamas and perform rituals – such as the Refuge practice and the Bodhicitta practice[79] – and recite dedication prayers before and after each practice. At home, however, they do not recite prayers and they perform certain practices by choosing some elements and omitting others. N. N., a participant at Shenten,[80] said,

75 McGuire 2008: 4.
76 McGuire 2008: 12.
77 McGuire 2008: 12.
78 McGuire 2008: 45.
79 See Chapter 5.
80 For the sake of preserving their anonymity and the confidentiality of their statements, in this work I denote individual participants by two randomly chosen letters.

> I think also there are people who don't even practice that much throughout the year because the connection isn't there, because you forget. You know? It's like you come here and you're full of inspiration, and you're hearing Rinpoche[81] telling you to practice, and you practice; everyone's practicing. And then throughout the year it's like slowly – it's like writing in your diary: at first you write every day and then once a week, and then once a month and then, it's like I haven't written in a year.

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

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

These examples are in line with what McGuire describes as the malleability of lived religion, with people drawing from a number of different religious traditions for practices and teachings. Malleability also refers to the possibilities of modifying religious traditions, institutions and personal practices, including changing the way teachings are presented in order to enhance the religious engagement of participants and the financial survival of the religious institution.[82]

81 The title "Rinpoche" is an honorific term meaning "the precious one." In the context of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, it refers to a teacher, an individual, a place, or so forth to denote respect.

82 See: McGuire 2008.

3 The Bon Religion: Contested Assertions

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

The following section provides an overview of some aspects and key concepts of the Bon religion, which are expanded in Part III. The focus lies on certain aspects that are usually spotlighted in the field of Bon studies, echoing what Bon religious representatives often highlight about their religion and, consequently, what Bon followers in the West also emphasize when defining Bon. These are:

1. Bonpos consider themselves, and are regarded by most Tibetans, to be following the oldest religious tradition from Tibet.
2. Bonpos claim to have a historical and geographical origin distinct from Buddhists.
3. Their main Buddha is not Shakyamuni but Tonpa Shenrab.
4. Bonpos claim to have a historical connection with the kingdom of Zhangzhung and believe that their religion originated there.
5. Bonpos consider Dzogchen[83] to be the highest of the Bon teachings.

In contrast to Buddhists, who regard India as the land of origin of Buddhism, in Bon history, the ancient kingdom of Zhangzhung is viewed as the country of origin from where these teachings were later propagated into Tibet.[84] The central Buddha of Bon is considered to be Tonpa Shenrab, who, according to Bon doctrine, predates Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. Dzogchen is the core of Bon teachings and the ultimate path toward liberation, and Bon adherents consider it to be "the most revered system of thought and practice among the ancient Buddhist and Bon traditions of Tibet."[85] Bonpos have had past conflicts and confrontations with Buddhists, particularly with the newest of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa sect, and have experienced persecution.

The majority of modern Western Tibetologists distinguish two types of Bon: the ancient form of Bon, active prior to and during the seventh and eighth

83 Wylie: *rdzogs chen*.

84 For more on the dominant point of view among researchers on the idea of Zhangzhung, see: Kvaerne 2008. See also: Aldenderfer 2007; Aldenderfer/Moyes (2005); Bellezza 2008; Bellezza 2001; Norbu 1995; Norbu 2009; Thar 1989.

85 Klein and Wangyal 2006: 3.

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centuries when it was suppressed in Tibet in order to be supplanted by Buddhism; and a form of Bon that, according to these Tibetologists, is a mere reworking of Buddhism and is similar to the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Jean-Luc Achard, however, indicates that representatives of Bon, including Yongdzin Rinpoche, reject these categories.[86] According to Tenzin Namdak, Bon can be divided into three main categories:

1. Primitive Bon: the religion that existed in Tibet before the entrance of the Yungdrung Bon religion. This early form of Bon was not written down and was not supported by any formal philosophical system.
2. Yungdrung Bon: the religion that was introduced into Tibet from Zhangzhung and constituted the official religion of the kingdom of Tibet until the seventh or eighth century. It is the religion as reflected in the Bon canonical text collections, the Kangyur and Katen (see below).
3. New Bon: the tradition that started as a consequence of the persecution of Bon by Buddhists in the eighth century. According to Yongdzin Rinpoche, it later became an eclectic tradition, combining elements of Bon and Buddhist teachings.[87]

David Snellgrove explains that Bon is "a heterodox form of Tibetan Buddhism, being more ancient in its origins than the more orthodox forms of Tibetan Buddhism,"[88] the early literature of which was translated from a language of Zhangzhung.[89] In broader terms, Bon can be defined as "Tibet's non-Buddhist religious system, which traces its own origins to western Tibet and beyond to lands called Olmo Lungring[90] and Zhangzhung in the centuries before Buddhism arrived."[91]

Jean-Luc Achard expresses the notion that "the Bon religion is generally considered to be the oldest spiritual tradition of Tibet, but what should be properly understood as Bon differs quite widely according to individuals."[92] In part, this is because an intentional approach promoted by Buddhist masters helped create a specific image of what the Bon religion is, associating it primarily with sanguinary rituals and human sacrifices, based mainly on "poorly documented

86 See: Achard 1997; Karmay 2007: 220–223.
87 Namdak 2006: 2.
88 Snellgrove 2007: 11.
89 Snellgrove 2007: 11.
90 Wylie: '*ol mo lung rings*.
91 Hatchell 2014: 5.
92 Achard 2008: ix.

polemical works filled with partisan opinions."[93] Indeed, in the earlier travel books on Tibet, Bon was described as "a fusion of animism and shamanistic beliefs."[94] Categorizing Bon as shamanism was mostly couched in pejorative terms, equating Bon to "strange and sinister . . . the sinister other that is indigenous to Tibet."[95] Yongdzin Rinpoche says that, from the religious perspective, Bon existed in some way before Tibet was founded as a kingdom: "This way is what we currently refer to as shamanism [but] this has nothing to do with Yungdrung Bon."[96]

Furthermore, the word "Bon" can mean different things, according to where and how it is used. Géza Uray noted that only the following meanings can be attributed with certitude to "Bon": to ask; to give, offer, and possibly also to murmur and recite prayers and charms; and to invoke, summon and call.[97]

3.1 So What Is "Bon"?

R.A. Stein emphasizes that the word *bon*, which refers to ancient *bon po*s as mentioned in Dunhuang texts, is not equivalent to the word "Bon" that designates the institutionalized religion as it came to be in the eleventh century[98] and which claims "to continue the tradition of the ancient priests."[99] John V. Bellezza remarks that indeed, "the term Bon/ *bon* has proven a loaded term, one engendering quite a bit of scholarly controversy in the last half century."[100] As Per Kvaerne notes, in Western scholarship, "Bon" can refer to the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, as mentioned above, which, among other characteristics, focused on the person of the king. Our knowledge about this early form of Bon is rather fragmented; the only thing we can say for sure is that its religious system differed from today's Yungdrung Bon or Tibetan Buddhism. "Bon" can also refer to the institutionalized religion that appeared in the tenth and eleventh centuries in Tibet, following "the rediscovery and recreation of texts supposedly hidden during a

93 Achard 2008: ix. See also: Kvaerne 1996a: 10.
94 Woznicki 2007: 58.
95 Bjerken 2004: 30. On Bon and shamanism, see also: Kvaerne 2009.
96 Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, quoted in Woznicki 2007: 58.
97 Uray 1964: 334. See also: Kaloyanov 1990: 77–78.
98 Stein 1988 (French original); Stein 2010 (English translation). For an analysis of the word Bon and *Chos* in the Tibetan imperial period, including an overview of the references to these words found among the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave, see: Van Schaik 2013.
99 Kvaerne 2008: 6.
100 See: Bellezza 2015. See also: Kvaerne 2008: 4.

wave of persecution in the late 8th century CE."[101] This religion, referred to as Yungdrung Bon, has much in common with Tibetan Buddhism, sharing ethical, doctrinal and philosophical aspects related to mysticism.[102] Samten Karmay further adds that "there was no such teaching in Tibet as 'pure' as some Tibetan Buddhists might like to claim. In other words, Bon and Tibetan Buddhism are like two sides of the same coin – on viewing, one must also turn it over to see what is on the other side."[103] Finally, "Bon" can also refer to what Stein called "the nameless religion," namely, a formless corpus of popular beliefs, including divination, and the cult of local deities as well as conceptions of the soul.[104] The term "Bon" is also applied to localized religious traditions that are practiced in the Hindu Kush, Pamirs, Siberia, Mongolia and China, and that may or may not be related to the ancient Bon of Tibet.[105]

Yungdrung, the Tibetan term for the ancient motif of a swastika, evokes what Bonpos callthe "eternal and indestructible nature" of the Bon religion.

A common classification of Bon doctrine is a system known as the "The Nine Ways of Bon."[106] Within these Nine Ways, the first four "Lower Ways" contain Bon teachings related to day-to-day life, including astrology, rituals, medicine and so on (distinguished from the "Higher" five ways, which focus on "enlightenment" and "liberation"). Bellezza notes that these first four vehicles of Bon have many characteristics in their customs, rituals and historical views that predate the eleventh century CE and that "in their earlier forms these non-Buddhist traditions do not appear to have constituted a fully institutionalized

101 Bellezza 2015.

102 Kvaerne 1996a: 9.

103 Karmay 2007b: 55.

104 Kvaerne 1996a: 10.

105 Bellezza 2015.

106 The Nine Ways are as follows: 1. The Way of the Shen of Prediction (*phywa gshen theg pa*), concerned with divination, astrology, diagnosis and healing techniques; 2. The Way of the Shen of the Visual World (*snang gshen theg pa*) concerned with protection rituals and exorcism; 3. The Way of the Shen of Illusion (*'phrul gshen theg pa*) concerned with rituals and techniques to overcome negative forces; 4. The Way of the Shen of Existence (*srid gshen theg pa*), which contains explanations on funerary rituals; 5. The Way of the Virtuous Adherers (*dge snyen theg pa*) containing rules for lay followers; 6. The Way of the Great Ascetics (*drang srong theg pa*) concerned with rules for monastic discipline; 7. The Way of Pure Sound (*a dkar theg pa*) with tantric practices; 8. The Way of the Primeval Shen (Ye gShen theg pa) including higher tantric practices based on the Generation and Perfection stages; 9. The Supreme Way (*bla med theg pa*), i.e. Dzogchen. See: Snellgrove 1967; Rossi 2000: 20–21, n. 19. For a comparative description of the Nine Ways in the Bon tradition and in the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingmapa tradition, see: Samuel 2017: 127. Table 6.1.

or systematized religion."[107] These first four vehicles are classified as The Causal Ways, or the Bon of Causes. The following four are known as the Ways of the Result, or the Bon of the Fruit. The Ninth Way contains the teachings of Dzogchen, considered to be the highest philosophical, doctrinal and meditational practices of Bon.[108]

3.2 The Teachings and Structures of "Institutionalized" Bon

The Bon scriptures, or "Bon canon," is traditionally divided into the Kangyur,[109] which refers to the words of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of the Bon religion, and the Katen,[110] or "that which relies on the Word,"[111] sometimes also called the Tibetan Bonpo Tenjur.[112] The Katen is presented in Bonpo websites as containing "commentaries of all kinds that rely on the Buddha's Words"[113] from various successive masters throughout history.[114]

The Kangyur contains texts related to monastic discipline, ethics and the like, as well as sutras. *Sutra* is a Sanskrit word often translated as "discourse" or "threads," which it is used to label texts that are believed to contain the words of the Buddha. In Bon, the texts regulating the monastic life (which correspond to what in Buddhism is called Vinaya) are part of the sutra section, and although there are similarities to the Buddhist monastic rules, one also finds unique characteristics peculiar to Bonpos.[115] In the Bon canon, moreover,

107 Bellezza 2015.

108 Karmay delineates a history of the emergence and development of Dzogchen, where he links it with the history of Buddhist tantrism in Tibet. He points out that it is not clear whether Dzogchen as a philosophical branch existed before the eight century, but he asserts that it was around that time that Dzogchen, originally coming from the tantras, was placed as the highest of the nine categories of Buddhist doctrines, called *atiyoga*, which were elaborated during that period. It was only in the tenth century, he argues, that Dzogchen became mainstream as a philosophical doctrine, in parallel to tantric Buddhism. See: Karmay 2007a: 10–13. See also: Rossi 2000: 21–22.

109 Wylie: *bka' 'gyur*.

110 Wylie: *bka' brten*.

111 See: Nagano 2003.

112 See Karmay's forward in Nagano/Karmay 2001.

113 See: Triten Norbutse Monastery 2019. The version of the Bon Katen preserved at the Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, belongs to the version of the Katen that was published in Lhasa in 1998, containing over 300 volumes.

114 For a critical assessment of a history of the "Bon Canon" and for an overview of its content, see: Nagano/Karmay 2001; Kvaerne/Martin/Nagano 2003.

115 See: Roesler 2015.

some confessional and consecrational texts are included in the sutra section as well,[116] and some texts that are considered tantric are classified as sutra. In fact, all of the sutras of the Bon canon contain tantric elements.[117] In a Bon context, Ligmincha International refers to sutra as "teachings that came directly from the historical Buddha. Sutra teachings are based on the path of renunciation and form the base of monastic life."[118]

Sutra, as presented in Bon texts, is one of the three main methods to attain liberation from samsara; the methods and descriptions corresponding to the sutra way are explained in the Fifth and Sixth Ways of Bon. The sutra path is considered the slowest of the three methods, in contrast to tantra and Dzogchen, which are the fastest "due to the lack of division into development stages of the practice; a direct attempt is made to recognise the nature of the mind."[119]

The Kangyur also contains the three versions of the biography of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. In the longest version of these three, as explained above, the teachings of Yundgrung Bon are explained within the context of nine different ways or vehicles.

3.3 Dzogchen

The translation of the term "Dzogchen," usually rendered as "the Great Perfection," has different variants. Scholars such as Anne Klein and Dan Martin choose to translate this term as "Great Perfectedness" rather than "Great Perfection" or "Great Completion." The latter two would imply "a process that would lead toward utter perfection,"[120] while Great Perfectedness refers to something that is already perfected.[121]

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

116 Martin 2003.
117 Martin 1991: 107. For instance, what we may call the "Bon version of the Kālacakra" tantra is classified in the Bon canon as a sutra, see: Ramble 2013: 210.
118 Online "Glossary of Bon Terms", Ligmincha International 2019a.
119 Trzebuniak 2014: 219.
120 Martin 2001: 14.
121 Martin 2001: 14.

any of it. Our ultimate nature is said to be pure primordial awareness, which has no form of its own but is capable of perceiving, experiencing, reflecting or expressing all forms.

Dzogchen also designates a meditation practice and body of teachings aimed at helping an individual to recognize the Natural State of the Mind, which is "the original, primordial abiding mode of the Mind . . . endowed with primordially pure Essence, a spontaneously accomplished Nature, and an all-embracing Compassion."[122] In this state, which is beyond thoughts, everything is perfect and complete "just as it is"; nothing has to be transformed into something else, nothing has to be perfected. The Natural State of the Mind, Bonpos explain, means perfection, clarity, purity and the already perfected qualities of nature. In Dzogchen practice, the adept obtains self-liberation by recognizing his or her own primordial Natural State and remaining in that state of awareness in which all phenomena are experienced without adding anything to it, without attachment or conceptual labeling.[123] In summary, the Dzogchen practice consists of recognizing that all manifestations are the projection of one's own mind and the emanation of one's energy.[124] Dzogchen, in sum, refers to the self-perfected nature of each individual, which a student must first discover and become familiarized with "until all dualistic limitations are overcome."[125]

3.4 From Olmo Lungring to Tibet

According to Bonpo narratives, Shenrab Miwo, another name of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab, who is regarded as the founder of the institutionalized form of the Bon religion as we know it today and "the ultimate source of all their doctrine,"[126] was born a prince in the royal family of Zhangzhung, a kingdom in Western Tibet.[127] He is believed by Bonpos to have lived some eighteen thousand years ago.[128] Yungdrung Bon is believed to have developed in Zhangzhung with the support of the royal family for centuries, before it was finally

122 Achard 2017: 187.
123 Namdak 2002: 47–49, 93, 99.
124 Clemente 2016: 5.
125 Clemente 2016: 1.
126 Ramble 2019.
127 It is relevant here to reference Kvaerne, who emphazises that from an academic point of view concerning Zhangzhung, "We know nothing – and it bears repeating: nothing – about what its condition was in cultural or religious terms." See: Kvaerne 2008: 8.
128 For an analysis of Bon texts and the different intepretations made by Bonpos on Tonpa Shenrab's birth date and lifespan, see: Gurung 2011: 19–25.

introduced into Tibet during the reign of Nyatri Tsenpo,[129] considered by Tibetan sources to be the first king of Tibet. According to Bonpos, from the reign of Nyatri Tsenpo to that of Songtsen Gampo,[130] the thirty-fourth king of Tibet who ruled in the seventh century, Bon was the only religion in Tibet. Kings and their private doctors, they claim, had several Bon spiritual tutors. Most of the spiritual tutors were invited from the neighboring country of Zhangzhung, and they became supporters of the kings and spread the Bon religion in Tibet.[131]

The introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the seventh century began a long conflict between Bon and Buddhism. The thirty-eighth king of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, organized a famous debate dealing with a controversy between Bonpos and Buddhists in Lhasa in the eighth century.[132] According to some sources, the Bonpos lost the debate. From that time on, Trisong Detsen persecuted Bonpos and encouraged the spread of Buddhism. Bonpos were forced to convert to Buddhism or to escape and seek refuge in remote places such as Ngari, Khams and Amdo. The origin of many master lineages and teaching traditions in Amdo can be traced to refugees fleeing central Tibet under persecution.[133] According to Karmay, the official abolition of the Bon religion took place in 785 CE. After this persecution, there was a period of decline[134] in Bon history for more than two centuries.[135]

In the historical narratives that Bonpos present, the eighth century was marked by tragedy. During the reign of King Trisong Detsen,[136] Bonpos were persecuted, repressed and forced to change their religion to Buddhism or leave the country. As Kvaerne explains, "according to its own historical perspective, Bon was introduced to Tibet many centuries before Buddhism . . . . It is claimed that before reaching Tibet, Bon prospered in a land known as Zhangzhung . . . . Zhangzhung was subsequently converted to Buddhism and assimilated into Tibetan culture, losing not only its independence but also its language and its Bonpo religious heritage in the process."[137] Zhangzhung, Bonpos claim, was

129 Wylie: *gnya' khri btsan po*.
130 Wylie: *srong btsan sgam po*.
131 Thar 2016: 10–12.
132 Lhagyal 2000: 435.
133 Thar 2008: 538.
134 This period of decline very much resembles the Buddhist period of decline between the "earlier" and the "later" spread. See: McKay 2003. For a comprehensive study on the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet, see: Davidson 2005. For a critical overview of the periodization of Tibetan history, see: Cuevas 2006.
135 Karmay 1972: 24.
136 Wylie: *khri srong lde btsan*.
137 Kvaerne 1996a: 13.

totally absorbed by Tibetan culture "to the extent that only its name remain[s] in written sources."[138] Nevertheless, Zhangzhung is believed by Bonpos to have contributed vastly to the development of Tibetan culture in the early period.[139] It should be noted that the belief that Zhangzhung was a historical place that made a significant contribution to Tibetan civilization has not been supported by scientific evidence, according to Kvaerne, who regards it as "a new narrative within the Bön religion."[140] This narrative, he argues, possibly began during the Tibetan exile some fifty years ago, in a context where Bonpos "needed to assert their identity in a situation of cultural pressure and rapid and radical social change."[141]

Bonpos, however, describe Zhangzhung as a sacred place and consider most Bon scriptures to be translations of texts that were originally written in the Zhangzhung language; indeed, some of their scriptures begin with words they believe are in Zhangzhung, a language that "although no one really knows it yet, there is hope, justifiable hope, that we will come to know Zhang-zhung better."[142]

One of the consequences of the tragedy of the eighth century was that, in order to save the sacred texts for future generations, many Bonpo texts are said to have been concealed as *terma*,[143] "hidden treasures," in different places, including in religious monuments, in the ground, in rocks and so forth. During the Bon revival of the tenth century, the texts are believed to have been rediscovered by *tertöns*[144] or "treasure-discoverers" and translated from Zhangzhung into the Tibetan language over several centuries by scholars and translators.[145]

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

138 Karmay 1998b: 12.

139 Norbu 2013.

140 Kvaerne 2008: 9.

141 Kvaerne 2008: 9.

142 Martin 2013: 189. In this article, Martin presents a comprehensive account of existing knowledge on Zhangzhung language. Bonpos, including Tenzin Namdak and John M. Reynolds, maintain that Bon texts were translated from the Zhangzhung language into Tibetan. Blezer claims that linguistically, it is not possible to confirm these claims. See: Blezer/Gurung/Rath 2013: 105. See also: Eimer 2010; Jacques 2008; Karmay 1998b: 12; Kvaerne 1996a: 13–14; Liu 2014.

143 Wylie: *gter ma*.

144 The Tibetan word *tertön* (Wylie: *gter ston*) refers to a person who is a "discoverer" of texts that were hidden.

145 See: Blezer/Gurung/Rath 2013: 105.

transformation and reshaping of the Bon religion."[146] Particularly important for the Bon religion were the discoveries of numerous texts by the *tertön* Shenchen Luga[147] (996–1035) in 1017.[148] His discoveries are considered to be the beginning of the later flourishing of the Bon religion.

3.5 Buddha Tonpa Shenrab

As mentioned earlier, in contrast with Buddhism, which traces the origin of its doctrine to the Buddha Shakyamuni, Bonpos assert that the ultimate origin and source of the Yungdrung Bon teachings and doctrine goes back to a sacred land, Tagzig Olmo Lungring (hereafter Olmo Lungring).[149] It is from this land, located somewhere to the north of Tibet at the center of the world, that a prehistoric buddha, the source of the Bon revelation, came. Religious legitimation of the Bonpos has its source in this very land.

Buddha Tonpa Shenrab is considered by Bonpos to be the first buddha to have propagated the teachings in our era,[150] at an time before the Buddha Shakyamuni.[151] They believe that "many millennia before the historical Buddha

146 Samuel 2017: 132.

147 Wylie*: gshen chen klu dga'*.

148 Kvaerne 1996b: 138–46.

149 The translation of the Name Olmo Lungring has been proposed as follows: "'Ol' symbolizes the unborn, 'mo' the undiminishing; 'Lung' denotes the prophetic word of Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon, and 'ring,' his everlasting compassion"; see: Kvaerne 1987. Martin translates it as follows: "'Ol because it is unproduced. Mo because it fulfils desires. Lung because the oral transmission of the Word was taught there. Ring because of the long reach of compassion"; see Martin 2007: 104. Martin notes that "no attempt is made to interpret any part of the name as if it were in Shangshung language." He references a source, the *Zhang-zhung–Tibetan–English Contextual Dictionary*, published in Bonn by Dagkar Namgyal Nyima in 2003. This source says that Olmo Lungring is what the people of Shangshung call it (Martin op. cit., 104, 121 footnote v.).

150 Since there are inconsistencies in the spelling of his full name, its meaning has been interpreted in different ways. For Yungdrung Bon adherents, Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche means "the great important man, the excellent priest who is the teacher." The word *tonpa* designates the teacher. *Shen* designates a class of early Tibetan priests whose functions are yet not clear. *Rab* an mean "family," "social class," "the best," or "the excellent." Depending on the spelling, his name can also mean "The great important man who is a member of the Shen clan." As such, some scholars argue that his name referred to a class of hereditary priests rather than to a specific individual. See: Kvaerne 2007: 83. Namdak translates the title of Shenrab Miwoche as "the great human being who is the supreme Shen practitioner." See: Namdak/Reynolds 2006: 4; Ramble 2019.

151 For a comparative analysis of the hagiographies of Shakyamuni and Tonpa Shenrab, see: Gurung 2011. Gurung argues that Shenrab Miwo's life account has been heavily influenced by

Shakyamuni lived, the tantras[152] were taught by the Buddhas of past eras to both human and nonhuman beings."[153] Bon followers see the historical figure of Shakyamuni Buddha as "one Buddha among many."[154] In this context, "buddha" refers to an "enlightened" being. Bon and Buddhist followers consider that millions of buddhas, that is, beings who attained liberation, have existed throughout history.

Several texts describing Tonpa Shenrab's life story are known to exist[155] and there are three main texts dealing with his life. The first is entitled *Dodu*,[156] or concise sutra, which is the oldest and shortest of the three versions[157] and consists of one volume. It can be dated to the eleventh century or even earlier and is said to have been translated in the eighth century by a Bon master from Tagzig called Lishu Taring, who hid it in a religious monument at Samye Monastery.[158] Bonpos describe that the text was rediscovered later by two custodians of the Samye Monastery temple[159] named Rinchen Drakpa and Drekya Radza. The second version is called the *Zermig*,[160] comprising two volumes and eighteen chapters. The first seven chapters of this version were published and translated by Hermann Francke.[161] The longest version of Shenrab's biography is known as the *Zijid*.[162] It consists of twelve volumes and sixty-one chapters, which were transmitted orally to a master known as Loden Nyingpo.

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the life accounts of Shakyamuni Buddha and asserts that the composition of the Shenrab Miwo legend was made by borrowing stories from various sources, concluding that the origin of Bon philosophy and its religious system lies in Indian Buddhist ideology.

152 *Tantra*, a Sanskrit word for which the equivalent is *gyud* (Wylie: *rgyud*) in Tibetan, refers to what is considered in the international Bon milieu to be the teachings of the Buddhas relating to the path of transformation; see: Online "Glossary of Bon Terms", Ligmincha International 2019a. For an expanded discussion on Tantra, see Chapter 7.

153 Norbu/Katz 1992: 11.

154 Kvaerne 1996a: 83–97.

155 For a summary of Tonpa Shenrab's hagiography, see also: Achard 2008: xv–xvii.

156 Wylie: *mdo 'dus*, or in its long form: *dus gsum sangs rgyas byung khungs kyi mdo*.

157 For an index of the two longer versions, see: Wangyal 1986.

158 He is believed to have hidden the text inside "the red stupa (a religious structure, discussed further below in Chapter 6) of Samye Monastery," in Wylie: *bsam yas mchod rten dmar po*.

159 See: Karmay 2005: 160–62.

160 Wylie: *gzer mig*, or in its long form: *'dus pa rin po che'i rgyud gzer mig*.

161 Francke 1924; Francke 1926; Francke 1927; Francke 1928; Francke 1930; Francke 1949/50.

162 Wylie: *gzi brjid*, or in its long form: *'dus pa rin po che'i rgyud dri ma med pa gzi brjid rab tu 'bar ba'i mdo*.

Similarly to the life of Shakyamuni,[163] as outlined above, Tonpa Shenrab Miwo was born a prince in the royal family of Zhang Zhung, a kingdom in western Tibet. The similarities with Shakyamuni's life, according to Bonpos, "are due to Buddhism having borrowed the relevant texts from Bön, and not, as the Buddhists insist, the other way around."[164] Tonpa Shenrab then became a monk and retired to practice austerity. He is thought to have brought the higher teachings of Bon to the land of Zhangzhung, which is centered on the sacred mountain Mount Kailash in Western Tibet.[165] As Martin argues, his life is "an illusory event, of course, as he is from the start an immortal and omniscient being. His apparent passing beyond the suffering of birth and death, therefore, has a purely pedagogical purpose, i.e., to prevent the mistaken belief from arising that there is anything eternal and indestructible in this world of phenomena."[166]

There is no historical evidence to date proving that Shenrab Miwo lived; there only exist references to his name in ninth-century manuscripts found in Dunhuang.[167] This lack of historical evidence,[168] however, does not represent a problem for Bonpos, since they are more "concerned with providing the means to overcome the limitations inherent in existence conditioned by the round of birth and death, and it is therefore on the basis of its efficacy in this respect that it must, in the view of its adherents, be judged."[169]

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

163 For a comparative research of the hagiography of Shenrab Miwo and the legend of the Buddha, see: Gurung 2011.
164 Kvaerne 2008: 7.
165 Kvaerne 2007: 13.
166 Martin 2007: 98.
167 Kvaerne 2007: 83.
168 See: Kvaerne 2008: 7.
169 Kvaerne 2007: 84.

4 Tibetan Buddhism in the West

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

In an article written in 1951, the Dominican priest Victor White (inaccurately) predicted that "Westerners who profess and call themselves Buddhist are, and will probably remain, few in number."[170] On the contrary, the West has seen an unparalleled interest in everything Buddhist as well as increasing attention being paid by the media and high-profile personalities to Tibetan Buddhism.[171]

4.1 Is It Really "Tibetan," Is It Really "Buddhism"?

When analyzing the situation of the Tibetan tradition in the West in 1976, Karl Springer noted that "certainly, there was a religion and cultural tradition in Tibet prior to the development of Buddhism. The Bon tradition . . . also provided a framework, which was adapted and transmuted into a Buddhist foundation."[172] Referring to Tibetan Buddhism in the West, he cautioned that, in his view, certain "Tibetan dimensions" of these teachings are often not seen as applicable to the lives of Westerners. He noted the necessity of applying these teachings "in terms of one's own inspiration and one's own cultural background."[173] Through Springer's approach, interpreting Buddhist teachings in the West represents a "psychological portrait of ourselves."[174] He focuses on Tibetan Buddhism as a "living tradition" through which knowledge is primarily transmitted through personal experience, asserting that it is not only a matter of studying Buddhism intellectually but also a question of practicing the teachings, which ensures that "the tradition is always up to date."[175] He also notes that, since Westerners cannot "become" Tibetan, it is unnecessary for them to accept or glorify the exterior aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.[176]

170 White 1951: 587.
171 Baumann/Prebish (2002): 1.
172 Springer 1976: 75.
173 Springer 1976: 77.
174 Springer 1976: 77.
175 Springer 1976: 78.
176 Springer 1976: 79.

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Recent studies on so-called Western Buddhism highlight the point that most Western Buddhists do not realize how different their religion – even the most traditional and allegedly "authentic" forms of it found in the West – are from so-called traditional Asian Buddhism. Another term used to refer to the phenomenon of Buddhist expansion is "world Buddhism," which is sometimes equated with "modern Buddhism" (not to be confused with "Buddhist modernism," which will be discussed later). A dominant feature of how Tibetan Buddhism has been – and is being – portrayed is the attachment of certain notions and the emergence of groups that, even though they draw on traditional Buddhism, attempt to create new styles of Buddhist practice.[177] For instance, Chögyam Trungpa, the founder of the Shambhala meditation movement and a key figure in the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, noted that he intentionally wanted to strip away specific Tibetan attributes from traditional Buddhist methods of working with the mind in order to transmit the essence of those teachings to his Western students.[178]

The apparent tension between the "Tibetan" aspects of Bon teachings versus their "universal" aspects which transcend Tibetan features – including the fact that the Bon texts used for transmitting these teachings are in the Tibetan language – is a point that the participants of this study emphasized again and again, as we will see in Part III.[179] Some participants I interviewed also believed that reliance on Tibetan teachers alone would impede the development of Tibetan Bon and Buddhism in the West. To support this view, they first suggested that Tibetan teachers have their own financial, personal and cultural issues to deal with in the West. This includes the fact that they are faced with the starkly different behavior of Westerners, many of whom are women, with complex lives that are not easy for Tibetans to understand or to interact with.[180] I should note here, however, that this idea of a "complex" Westerner and a "simple" Tibetan is also tainted by an Orientalist perception.

Another characteristic of Buddhism's arrival in the West is a diminished role for Buddhist monastics. In my case study, the diminished role for Buddhist monastics observed in Western Tibetan Buddhism mostly applied to the so-called modern trend in Bon, particularly in the Ligmincha International network, discussed in

177 Lopez, Jr. 1998: 9.

178 See for example: Trungpa 2002b.

179 In a similar vein, Schopen notes the peculiar way in which Indian Buddhism has been studied by modern scholars, who have shown a preference for certain source materials without evident scholarly justification, a choice that has had direct consequences for the "Western" perceptions of Indian Buddhism. See: Schopen 1991.

180 Cozort 2003: 222.

detail in Part III. In relation to the financial and cultural issues mentioned above, participants noted that many Tibetan Buddhists and Bon monasteries in Asia are supported by funds raised in the West, which go mostly to support monasteries in which the great majority are male monks and where women have a secondary role, if any, to play.[181]

4.2 Local Adaptations

While Tibetan Buddhism retains certain features from Tibet in its migration to different Western locations, it can also take on specific characteristics according to each region or even country in which it has been introduced.

Daniel Cozort has argued in his paper, "The Making of the Western Lama," that early on in Buddhism's spread to Europe a number of "practitioners" wanted the religion to become a normalized part of their religiously diverse cultures: "Buddhists hope, however, that being a Buddhist in Europe is less regarded as a trendy affair, an expression of romantic exoticism, or a clinging to Asian roots. Rather, Buddhism, in whatever shape, should become a nonsensational, normal, and accepted part of Europe's landscape of religions."[182]

Authors write about British Buddhism, European Buddhism,[183] American Buddhism, and secular versus traditional Buddhism. In Canada, for instance, the main source of the spread of Buddhism was the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa, who founded the Nalanda Foundation and the Shambhala training centers, with branches in various locations throughout the country. Even when Westerners have run the foundation and centers, they claimed to be "spiritually" associated with the Kagyupa and Nyingmapa lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.[184] Many other Tibetan groups associated with Tibetan masters are found throughout Canada; for the most part, these groups are aimed at non-Tibetans.[185] In Australia and New Zealand, as in most Western countries, Tibetan Buddhism began as an attractive tradition due to its "otherness," but it is being adapted in a way

181 On issues related to woman's roles in Tibetan Buddhism, see: Gyatso 2010.

182 Cozort 2003: 222.

183 Baumann has dealt extensively with the expansion of Buddhism in Europe, Buddhism and modernity, and global Buddhism. See, for example: Baumann 1994; Baumann 1995; Baumann 1997a; Baumann 1997b; Baumann 2000; Baumann 2001; Baumann 2012; and Rocha/Baumann 2008.

184 See: Shambhala International 2014-2021.

185 Matthews 2002: 126–127.

that is becoming "more and more acceptable to the mainstream."[186] The same process happened in Ireland, where, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new way of looking at Tibetan Buddhism emerged; Tibetan lamas were brought to Ireland and centers were established, such as Kagyu Samye Dzong, the oldest organization in the country, founded in 1977.[187] In places such as Switzerland, in contrast to what has occurred in the United States, Buddhism has not entered the mainstream and also not been considered a remarkable object of interest for scholars or the media. Nevertheless, Swiss Buddhists have been involved in the establishment of Buddhist monasteries and institutions that carry a significance beyond Switzerland per se.[188]

My research on Bon in various countries shows that, in each place, its teachings and practices have been adapted and modified in a distinctive way, influenced by the existing cultural context. For instance, participants and teachers noted that in Mexico there is a tendency to have a significant interest in Bon rituals and a positive attitude toward the "religious" and "devotional aspects" of Bon. In the United States, by contrast, participants expressed a rejection of religious elements in Bon and a tendency to favor a more "modern" approach to Bon, best exemplified by Ligmincha International (discussed later in Part III).

4.3 Orientalism and the "Idealized Tibet"

Frédéric Lenoir and Juliet Vale pointed out that one of the major characteristics of Buddhism in the West is the culturally distorting prism through which it is reinterpreted. They point to the evolution of Western interest in Buddhism in general, which I have found to closely parallel the interest in Yungdrung Bon, in which the purely "scholastic" point of view started to give way to a "spiritual" perspective from the 1960s onward. It was then that Westerners started to seek out Tibetan masters to receive initiations and to undertake a spiritual path, mainly through the practice of meditation.[189]

It is important to underscore the fact that even the scholastic point of view of the era was tainted by Orientalistic notions of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism and

186 Spuler 2002: 149.

187 For an overview of recent research focusing on Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in specific countries, see, for example: Obadia 2001; Spuler 2002; Borup 2008; Cox/Griffin 2009; Loss 2010; Marques 2011; Queen/Williams 2013; Wilson 2014.

188 Baumann 2000: 159.

189 Lenoir/Vale 1999.

Bon, as I will discuss below. While the collaboration between academia and religious representatives from Tibetan schools of Buddhism and Bon after 1959 had a considerable impact on the way these were portrayed, it did not free the field from deeply rooted Orientalist and romanticized visions, which – in line with Edward Said's definition of Orientalism – reflect more the West's ideas of the "other" than the other itself.[190] However, a more complex dynamic of "othering" happened in Bon, involving a process that began earlier in Tibet itself and is still being developed up to the present, as we will further see in Part III.

In 1993, Massimiliano Polichetti noted the increasing interest in so-called Asian religions in the Western world, highlighting a transition from an interest confined only to select and small groups of scholars and practitioners to a growing audience interested in "spirituality" more generally.[191] Translations of Tibetan canonical texts started to become available, and Polichetti predicted that Vajrayana Buddhism[192] "will continue to expand in the West for the foreseeable future, along the lines already established during the past twenty-five years." He pointed out the influence of the charismatic lamas, whom he called "Tibetan tantric adepts, with their gentle lucidity and thought and powerful compassion,"[193] as a key element behind Westerners' attraction to Tibetan Buddhism. The term "adept," in this context, refers to practitioners who are highly trained or considered advanced in their practices.

Another key element that Polichetti highlights is Westerners' disenchantment with what he referred to as "their materialistic society" – suggestive of an Orientalistic approach in which the West is considered materialistic and the East spiritual. Polichetti also mentions that Westerners often approach Tibetan Buddhism with many fantasies and a "childish request for the exotic and the miraculous."[194]

In a further exploration of the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, Prebish and Baumann state that "the practice-based features of meditation and liturgy seem to have enabled Buddhism's rapidly increasing diffusion since the

190 See: Said 1995[1978]; Said 1985.

191 Polichetti 1993: 65.

192 *Vajrayana* refers to what is called "Tantric Buddhism" or the Tantric tradition of Buddhism. Often translated as the "Diamond Vehicle," Vajrayana includes practices that make use of mantras, mandalas and the visualization of various deities and enlightened beings. Vajrayana is also considered one of the three vehicles to enlightenment, the other two being *Hinayana*, a Sanskrit word usually translated as the "Inferior" or "Smaller" vehicle, and *Mahayana*, the "Great" or "Higher" vehicle. See Chapter 7.

193 Polichetti 1993: 67.

194 Polichetti 1993: 67.

1960s."[195] In contrast, Buddhism in Asia reached "the masses" particularly through the rituals, performances, and the folk religious and shamanic aspects of Buddhism. These characteristics are lacking in the diffusion of Buddhism and Bon in the West, where the emphasis is on individual experience and on aspects of Buddhism and Bon that some participants consider to be "rational" or "scientific."

In 1996, a symposium entitled "Mythos Tibet" was held in Germany, which looked at the "constructed" Tibet, the object of an imaginative construction made up of projections and fantasies. In it, Toni Huber emphasized the "reverse Orientalism" that reflected how Tibetan communities in exile created images of Tibet that represented what Westerners' perceptions of Tibet were, including issues of environmentalism, pacifism and feminism. Huber argued that these did not necessarily reflect ancient Tibetan traditions but rather contemporary Western concerns.[196]

Donald S. Lopez, Jr., a symposium participant, later published one of the first in-depth studies looking specifically at the Orientalization and idealization of Tibet in the West and the West's fascination for Tibet; in it he points out that Tibetan Buddhism in the West involves many conceptions, processes and myths from the West rather than reflecting the reality of Tibet. Even the word "Tibet" has connotations that include images of simplicity and a heroic place of "unpolluted original sources of spirituality."[197] It is also significant that the Othering of Tibet continues to be widely practiced in Tibetan Buddhist studies, a field that "still continues along the lines of an Orientalist descriptive mode, with no trace of the new line of inquiry that has developed in Western theory."[198]

The analysis of my interview data provides ample evidence of an emphasis on individual experience, individual practice-based features of meditation and liturgy, and aspects of Bon that my interlocutors considered to be "rational" and "scientific" rather than what they viewed as its "folk religious" and "shamanic" aspects. Orientalistic attributions to the "East" continue to have a place in today's perspectives on Bon, as I will discuss in Part III. As we will see, while most of the research participants echoed the romantic view of Tibet described by Huber, a few others noted that Buddhism (and Bon) in the West reflects the institutional, political and social struggles of Tibetans who have been transplanted to the West.[199] It is also worth mentioning that, in line with what Baumann

195 Baumann/Prebish 2002: 1.
196 The proceedings of the symposium were first published in German: Dodin/Räther 1997.
197 Baumann 1997b: 377.
198 Shakya 2001b: 183.
199 See: Lopez, Jr. 1998; See also: Shakya 2001a.

describes as a characteristic aspect of most modern Buddhist interpretations, Bonpos in the West emphasize a "return the essentials," i.e, Dzogchen, catalogued as the timeless, pure, and original teachings of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. And as Baumann points out, referencing Ernst Troeltsch, "A determination of the essentials is actually the construction of an ideal."[200]

4.4 Buddhist Modernism

These unique characteristics of Buddhism in the West point to what David McMahan refers to as "Buddhist modernism." He suggests that we talk about Buddhist modernism rather than "Western Buddhism" because of its key characteristics, such as scientific intellectualism and romanticism. Buddhist modernism refers to "forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity."[201] It refers to a global Buddhist phenomenon that focuses on meditation while de-emphasizing ritual, mythology and hierarchy.[202]

One feature of this Buddhist modernism is that the participant does not have to follow strict rules to be a Buddhist or believe in any religious tenets in particular (in this context, meditation is not considered a "religious practice"). Focusing mostly on Buddhism in North America, McMahan identifies three characteristics that separate traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism: detraditionalization, demythologization and psychologization. Detraditionalization denotes the elimination of traditional aspects of a religion; demythologization refers to separating elements related to the cosmological and historical accounts of the religion from its philosophical, canonical and ethical aspects; and psychologization refers to selecting certain aspects of a religion and transforming them in line with Western psychological approaches. These all point to the emergence of a "new Buddhism," a hybrid Buddhism whose success, he argues, relates to a widespread loss of faith in Christianity, potentially leading to the "disenchantment of the world"[203] and a sense of meaninglessness.

Thomas Tweed coined the term "night-stand Buddhists" to refer to Westerners who "sympathize" with Buddhism in different ways – they meditate or they decorate their house with statues of Buddha or they read popular Buddhist

200 Baumann 2012: 130.
201 McMahan 2008: 6.
202 See: McMahan 2008.
203 The phrase "disenchantment of the world" was borrowed from Friedrich Schiller by Max Weber, see: Weber 1993: 270.

books – but never formally convert to Buddhism or describe or identify themselves as Buddhists.[204] Other issues that Tweed touches upon include the belief among Westerners that meditation is the main Buddhist practice, ignoring the fact that traditionally, in Asia, Buddhist practice is mostly aimed at accumulating merit and is a part of a variety of rituals. In her writing on Sogyal Rinpoche's Rigpa center (discussed in more detail below), Marion Dapsance notes how meditation, presented to Europeans as the essence of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, is actually unknown in most Asian religious Buddhist settings. Referring to Asian Buddhism, Cozort writes that, "meditation is always said to be important, but there is little time for it in the monastery."[205] As David Lopez remarks, this emphasis on meditation signified a drastic change of modern Buddhism in relation to how Buddhism is practiced, particularly in Asian countries, where meditation was one practice among others and not necessarily a generalized, even in monastic institutions.[206]

The participants I interviewed in the course of my research reported extensively on the issues of detraditionalization, demythologization and psychologization which David MacMahon identified in the modern "hybrid" Buddhism developed in the West in response to widespread loss of faith in Christianity and "disenchantment of the world." It is worth asking whether disenchantment and meaninglessness are still the problems they seemed to be thirty to forty years ago. I think they still are, to some extent, since some participants whom I interviewed emphasized these aspects of disenchantment and seeking spiritual therapy as a cause for their looking for spiritual guidance and finding Bon. Some people could even be defined as sympathizers, or "night-stand Bonpos," to mimic Tweed's phrase "night-stand Buddhists."

Yet my research shows that, while disenchantment with a Western materialistic society is certainly one reason given by Westerners for their interest in Bon, it is not the only reason why they claim to engage with Tibetan Bon or Buddhism. The data also show that there are some Western followers of Bon whose motivations are not simply to seek a therapeutic or spiritual path to "self-fulfillment" but who have made a significant commitment to study Bon teachings and to practice over a sustained period, even a period of several years.

204 See: Tweed 2002.
205 Cozort 2003: 238.
206 See: Lopez 2002.

4.5 Shattering Idealism: Criticisms and Scandals

The time of romantic ideas and enchantment with Tibet seems to be, at least in some spheres, coming to an end, as several scandals in recent years involving high-profile Tibetan lamas have negatively affected the image of Tibetan Buddhist orders around the world.[207] These "disgraces" have a bigger impact today than they would have had some forty or fifty years ago due to the Internet and the ability of information to travel more quickly and farther.

By the beginning of the 1990s, several scandals concerning Buddhist groups in the West had already broken, among them surrounding Shambhala's founder, Chögyam Trungpa, who has been described as "a well-known womanizer and alcoholic,"[208] and later his American disciple, Thomas Rich, appointed as his successor in 1976. Rich was given the Tibetan name Ösel Tendzin and was the heir of Trungpa's "spiritual and administrative authority." In 1988 members of the board of directors revealed that Ösel Tendzin was HIV-positive. He had known of his condition for at least four years but, according to Sandra Bell, he "had continued to practice unprotected sex with male, and some female, members of the Sangha."[209] It also came to light that members of the board had known about the regent's condition for some time but had taken no action.[210] In 1990, Ösel Tendzin went into retreat and died a few months later.[211]

Two of the other most high-profile scandals to have shaken the image of Tibetan Buddhism in the West are the cases of Sogyal Rinpoche and Kalu Rinpoche. In 2011, Kalu Rinpoche openly said in a YouTube video that at the age of twelve he was sexually abused by older monks from the monastery where he lived.[212] Sogyal Rinpoche, on the other hand, the famous founder of the Rigpa network of centers and groups, was defined by Bell as a "criminal tantric lama."[213] Dapsance's critical work regarding Sogyal Rinpoche's Rigpa center and the publication of her Ph.D. thesis (later as a book)[214] opened a heated debate. She states, for example, that:

207 See, for example, Finnigan 2012; Whitaker 2017; Marsh 2018); Sawerthal n.d.

208 Tenpel 2018.

209 The Sanskrit word *sangha* (or *samgha*) refers, in the context of this research, to a Buddhist or Bonpo "community." For instance, participants refer to the "Shenten sangha," meaning the entire group of lay and monastic Bon followers who attend or are part of the Shenten community.

210 Bell 2002: 234.

211 Bell 2002: 234–235.

212 The video with the disclosure can be seen on Youtube; see spiceyourday (2011).

213 Bell 2002: 123–35.

214 Dapsance 2013; Dapsance 2016a.

> The whole organization is dedicated to the master's personal well-being . . . Among other recommendations, he needs to have a heated pool nearby, a double bed, and a special brand of tea, beef-based meals, and a chauffeured Mercedes. He also needs access to CNN wherever he goes, and has a cook and masseuse on call 24 hours a day. Rather surprising for a spirituality that rejects materialism.[215]

Dapsance's research has been criticized by some[216] but praised by others who state that it was time to openly discuss these claims of abusive behaviors. Critics focused on treating her book as an attack on Buddhism itself, an example of how the support and condemnation of Buddhist institutions in the West are perceived as personal, subjective beliefs rather than just intellectual issues.

Several debates on the Internet have followed such scandals; they include defending or attacking as well as analyzing from a more critical perspective the situations described and the impact that these scandals might have on the image of Tibetan Buddhism in general.[217] In all of the scandals and allegations of abuse, the main point emphasized by victims and others is the master–student relationship, which is central in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon organizations. Bell notes that these relationships involve complete devotion to the teacher, which can cause emotional attachment "with feelings that parallel those associated in Western culture with romantic love and its stress on self-abandonment and glorification of the other."[218] Therefore, "without careful management there is always a danger of manipulation of the student by the teacher, or that the teacher will succumb to sexually flirtatious students."[219]

In a book dedicated to discernment on the spiritual path, Mariana Caplan discusses what discernment means and the dangers associated with being in a relationship with a spiritual teacher in the modern West.[220] The term "spiritual bypassing," a concept that comes from psychotherapy, refers in this context to the use of spiritual practices to avoid pain, and it is considered a potentially harmful behavior that can result in "extreme detachments, numbing of our emotions, the inability to allow for negative feelings, especially anger, lack of boundaries, and an overdeveloped rational way of seeing the world."[221] The American clinical psychologist John Welwood writes that, "when people use

215 Dapsance 2016b.
216 Lesegretain 2017.
217 See, for example: Bartone 2015; Brown 2017; Editors/The Tricycle Foundation 2017; Rapgay 2017; Sperry 2017; Delrue, 2018; Whitaker 2018; Sawerthal n.d..
218 Bell 2002: 239.
219 Bell 2002: 239.
220 See more in: Caplan 2009.
221 Masters 2010: 194.

spiritual practice to try and compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice."[222]

The examples discussed above are evidence that "Tibetan Buddhism" is neither a single entity nor a monolithic tradition in all its ramifications. Similarly, Western Bonpos are not a single entity with an identical motivation or method of making meaning. They make sense of the Bon teachings and practices in an array of ways, individually and collectively interpreting and negotiating their own understanding and application. It is true that some participants describe some aspects of Bon or of Tibet in a rather idealized manner or came to Bon after becoming disenchanted with their own traditions, perhaps looking for an idealized "other." But some participants did not; they were not naively "enchanted" with an Eastern tradition, nor were they using Buddhist meditation practices as "spiritual therapy" techniques. Their range of statements shows how rich and diverse the approaches and experiences are. It also demonstrates how Bon as a "lived religion" is undergoing a transformation in its transit to new realities in the West, as it paves its way in the process of becoming a true globalized religion, as we will now see.

222 Welwood 2000: 206.

Part II: **The Emergence of a Global Bon**

5 Bon Comes to the West

The spread of Bon into the West by Tibetan lamas can be directly related to the loss of their country after the Chinese People's Liberation Army occupied Tibet in 1950.[223] The following year, the signing of the "Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," generally known as the Seventeen-Point Agreement,[224] marked the beginning of China's de facto control over Tibet.[225] In the agreement, representatives of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama[226] and representatives of the recently established People's Republic of China affirmed Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and provided for a so-called autonomous administration led by the Dalai Lama.

In 1959, amidst escalating tensions and fearing for his life, the Dalai Lama escaped to Dharamshala,[227] India. The newly established Central Tibetan Administration in exile declared the above-mentioned signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement as unlawful, alleging that Tibetan representatives signed it under coercion. A few years later, the Tibet Autonomous Region was officially established within China in 1965. The Tibetan government-in-exile also declared later, in 1977, that five religious traditions of Tibet exist: four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug)[228] and a fifth Tibetan religious tradition, Bon.

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

The connection between globalization and the spread of Bon can be seen clearly in the following story told to me by Yongdzin Rinpoche about LoponSangye

223 For a comprehensive modern history of Tibet, see: Shakya 1999; Van Schaik 2011.

224 On the Seventeen Point Agreement, see: Shakya 1999: 89–91.

225 For an historical overview of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, see: Shakya 1999: 33–211; Van Schaik 2011: 207–37.

226 The complete name of the current Dalai Lama is Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso. His childhood name was Lhamo Thondup.

227 For a detailed account of the escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet to India, see: Shakya 1999: 200–211. For a first hand account of the escape, see: Dalai Lama 1990.

228 The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelug tradition.

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Tenzin, his teacher. Lopon Sangye Tenzin received a prophecy warning that if they were not taught openly, Dzogchen Bon teachings were at risk of disappearing. Yongdzin Rinpoche explains:

> During the time of my teacher, the Zhangzhung Nyengyud[229] teachings started to be openly transmitted. Before, the name "Zhangzhung Nyengyud" was popular, but very few people actually received these teachings. Even one [of] my main teachers, for example, I think he received something but not the complete teachings. My teacher Sangye Tenzin, during his time, he told me that [for these] essential teachings [on] Dzogchen [it was] better not to keep them secret.[230]

Sangye Tenzin emphasized that up to that point these teachings were considered to be secret and were only transmitted to a select number of students, but with the Chinese already occupying the region after the battle of Chamdo (1950), Sangye Tenzin advised Yongdzin Rinpoche to study and teach them as much as he could: "Better not to lose it. So he started to make block printings. First, he made a beautiful calligraphy book, after he made blocks for printing. From there it started, he didn't have much time, he was busy. He left me to transmit these teachings, as Menri's Ponlob."[231] With that, Sangye Tenzin had decided that Bon teachings, and Dzogchen in particular, should no longer be considered secret but instead should be taught as widely as possible so as not to be lost.

In relation to the transmission of this set of teachings in the West, Achard notes that a new development had taken place whereby the oral transmissions of the Zhangzhung Nyengyud precepts were being transcribed by Western students. He points out that, according to Bonpos themselves, it is forbidden to write down commentaries on the root texts of this cycle. Because of this, Achard points out that the transcripts available to students, for instance at

229 The teachings known as the "Oral Transmission of Zhangzhung," or Zhangzhung Nyengyud, is a set of Dzogchen teachings that contains oral transmissions and instructions which, according to the tradition, can also be received by "qualified" students or practitioners from a "qualified" teacher, who should be a lineage holder of the teaching. This collection of teachings is believed by Bonpos to have originated in the land of Zhangzhung. It has several parts, including a core or root text and complementary texts classified into outer, inner, secret and innermost secret cycles or divisions. For a comprehensive introduction to the Zhangzhung Nyengyud cycle and a translation into English of its main root text, called "the Six Lamps", see: Achard 2017. See also: Rossi 2000: 29–30. For an "insider" perspective, see also: Namdak 2013. For more on the lineage, the history of ideas around the cycle, and a bibliographical tool with references to published versions of the texts, see: Blezer 2011.

230 Namdak 2015.

231 Namdak 2015. The Tibetan word *Ponlob* is a title that, like Lopon, also means "teacher."

Shenten's shop, "constitute a transgression of the rule."[232] He further elaborates that teachings are being adapted to the level of the Western audience, which, he argues, "is rarely, if ever, at the level of understanding properly the actual teaching."[233] He goes on to explain that this does not mean that students in the West are incapable of understanding these teachings, instead the way the teachings are transmitted to them is rather "light" and adapted by the transmitters. In his view this is a situation which will eventually result in the actual disappearance of the original teachings.[234]

Turning now to the actual transmission of Bon in the West: When three Bon lamas – Geshe Samten Karmay, Geshe Sangye Tenzin (who later adopted the name Lungtok Tenpai Nyima and the title His Holiness, the Thirty-Third Menri Tridzin, upon become the abbot of Menri Monastery), and Lopon Tenzin Namdak (nowadays addressed as Yongdzin Rinpoche) – first traveled to the West in 1961 and visited England (which will be detailed below), they initiated an expansion that would take Bon to distant parts of the globe, including Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Spain; Canada, Mexico, the United States; the United Kingdom, Argentina and Peru.[235] At that time, not only were there no Bon followers in the West, but also few people, even those who were educated or well-traveled, who knew of their existence. This visit represented the start of the true globalization of Bon through a direct route of transmission.

5.1 The Transmission of Bon in the West: Key Figures

Key figures in Bon teaching, scholarship and transmission into the West include Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Geshe Samten Karmay and Geshe Sangye Tenzin, the late "His Holiness" (abbreviated as H. H.) Menri Tridzin.[236]

232 Achard 2017: 153.

233 Achard 2017: 153–54.

234 Achard 2017: 154, fn. 184.

235 The newsletter of Shenten Dargye Ling comments on this expansion of Bon: "Due to the Buddha's compassion and the karmic sources of sentient beings, the precious doctrine of Yungdrung Bon began to be introduced in Western countries, starting in 1961." Yungdrung 2006.

236 As we will see in the last two chapters, participants take it as a fact that Tenzin Namdak and Menri Tridzin are the most important Bon representatives worldwide. This reflects the way Bon is presented in Shenten, Ligmincha and other similar religious centers. Further important actors, such as Chongtrul Rinpoche, Latri Nyima Dragpa and others were not mentioned by

It is not the purpose of this chapter to provide a survey of Bon institutions in the regions that are now part of China or to enumerate the many and varied activities in these institutions that have contributed to the transmission of Bon traditions to current generations; rather, the aim is to take a close look at the parallel implantation of the two main Bon centers – Shenten and Ligmincha – in the West. Far from being a monolithic reality, the Bon religion takes on manifold forms, and a discussion of these complexities is beyond the scope of the present study. The following descriptions of the impacts that main historical events had on the lives of both Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Tridzin are not meant to address the complexities of Bon in its territory of origin. Such an analysis, particularly since the revitalization processes that began in 1985, would be a valuable topic for future study. Here, the narrative instead seeks to show how the lives of these two central figures are perceived by Bon followers in the West. It also aims at recording the chronology of how Shenten and Ligmincha were brought to the West. The perception of the two main characters as the "saviors" of the Bon tradition, which will be portrayed below, reflects the common understanding of Bonpo Westerners as it is presented to them, although the reality is far more complex and nuanced.

His Eminence (abbreviated as H. E.) Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, (see Figure 1), born in 1926 in Khyungpo Karru in the Khyunpo district of Kham, eastern Tibet, has been indispensable in the advance of Bon in the West. Considered to be the most senior teacher of the Bon tradition and widely regarded as the world's foremost expert on Bon, he belongs to the last generation of Tibetan masters to have been fully educated in Tibet. His life reflects the turbulence, changes and dramatic socioeconomic transformations experienced in Tibet over the last few decades. From living as a monk in a cave to founding a Tibetan settlement for Bonpo refugees in India and then traveling to England, he has been instrumental in bringing Bon to the West.[237] He is widely consid-

participants. In any case, the vast majority of Bon institutions in the West recognize the authority, spiritual hierarchy and leading role of those two figures in contemporary Bon.

237 An English translation of a biography of Yongdzin Rinpoche (previously available only in Tibetan) by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung and Charles Ramble was published in 2021. The English version was expanded to include interviews and accounts by Yongdzin Rinpoche himself. See: Ramble/Yungdrung 2021. A documentary called "Lopon" which focuses on the experiences of Western Bon practitioners and students of Yongdzin Rinpoche, was released in 2020; see "Lopon" 2020. In addition, a film on the life of Yongdzin Rinpoche called "Ponse Lama, Divine Protector" is to be released soon. The film was directed by Gelek Jinpa and produced by EFD and the Triten Nortbuse Institution; see: "Making of Ponse Lama: Divine Protector" 2020.

Figure 1: Yongdzin Rinpoche at a ritual ceremony in Shenten Dargye Ling, 2014. © Christophe Moulin.

ered by co-religionists to be the driving force through which "Yungdrung Bon is experiencing a revival both within Tibet and beyond."[238]

Yongdzin Rinpoche's religious life began at the age of seven when he entered Tengchen Monastery, where his uncle served as chant leader. He took his vows as a monk when he was fourteen. When he was fifteen, he traveled with his uncle to Yungdrung Ling, a Bon monastery in central Tibet. There he helped execute wall paintings, given that he was already viewed as an accomplished artist and painter. In 1943, he began his studies in philosophy. For several years, he studied with his tutor and master Gangru Tsultrim Gyaltsan Rinpoche, who had retired after eighteen years of service as Lopon (principal teacher) of Yungdrung Ling. He spent "long periods in seclusion, in a remote cave at Juru Tso Lake in northern Tibet. There, he learned from his teacher grammar, poetics, monastic discipline, cosmology and the stages of the path to enlightenment according to Sutra, Tantra[239] and Dzogchen."[240]

In 1948, Yongdzin Rinpoche moved to Menri Monastery (see Figure 2), located in central Tibet, which is considered the main Bon monastery in the country. After

238 Jinpa 2013: 22.

239 In their own definition, the Sanskrit word *Sutra* (in Tibetan, Wylie: *mdo*) refers to "teachings that came directly from the historical Buddha. The teachings of sutra are based on the path of renunciation and form the base of monastic life." The Sanskrit word *Tantra* (in Tibetan *gyud*, Wylie: *rgyud*) refers to "teachings of the Buddhas. They are based on the path of transformation and include practices such as working with the energy of the body, the transference of consciousness, dream and sleep yogas, and so on." See: Online "Glossary of Bon Terms", Ligmincha International 2019a.

240 See: Ligmincha Germany, "S.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche."

Figure 2: Menri Monastery in central Tibet @ Mara Arizaga.

fifteen years of studies, he obtained his *geshe*[241] degree at age twenty-seven under the tutelage of his main teacher at Menri, Lopon Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, eventually succeeding his teacher and becoming the Lopon of Menri. After the Thirty-First Abbot of Menri died, Yongdzin Rinpoche decided to support the newly appointed abbot, who was inexperienced. He went north to teach among the Dangra nomads, and he sent whatever donations he received to Menri. While he was in a monastery called Sezhig, located on the Dangra Lake in northern Tibet, conflicts escalated in Tibet due to the occupation of Chinese Communists, so he stayed in Shezig in retreat until 1960. The violence and chaos intensified and many Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, left their homeland. Carrying only a few texts and relics, Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche tried to escape on foot accompanied by lamas and monks of Menri Monastery, among them the Thirty-Second Abbot of Menri. Chinese soldiers impeded Namdak's escape by shooting him in the leg. But, "thinking him dead, the Chinese left the great master lying in the dirt."[242] Thanks to the help of local people, he recovered from the bullet wound and then made a second attempt to escape. After almost a month of walking by night with a small group of companions he managed to reach the safety of Nepal.[243]

Yongdzin Rinpoche (Figure 3) first traveled to the West in 1961 after meeting the renowned English Tibetologist David Snellgrove of the University of London, who invited him, along with Geshe Sangye Tenzin and Geshe Samten

241 Wylie: *dge bshes*.
242 See: Ramble/Yungdrung 2021: 136–137.
243 See: Ligmincha Deutschland e.V. 2018.

Figure 3: Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Shenten Dargye Ling, 2013 @Christophe Moulin.

Karmay, to London. During his three years in England (1961–1964) and in collaboration with Snellgrove, Yongdzin Rinpoche worked on the preparation of the book *The Nine Ways of Bon*, which was published in 1967. It was the first major scholarly study of the Bon tradition in the English language, establishing the foundation of Tibetan Bon studies in the West.[244]

Yongdzin Rinpoche's life story helps us to introduce a number of illuminating elements of the growth of Bon in the West, including the emergence and development of Bon studies and Bon followers.[245] Snellgrove recounts how Bon first arrived in Europe when the Rockefeller Foundation made grants available for research on Tibet, funding the travels of Tibetans who had recently escaped from China and were now living in Nepal and India.[246] Since then, a great deal has happened, as was demonstrated at a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Bon studies in the West, which was held in 2011 during a conference marking sixty years of Tibetan studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and the founding of the London Shangshung Institute for Tibetan Studies.[247] Indeed, beginning with the work of Snellgrove in the 1960s, SOAS became the first institution of higher education in the United Kingdom to establish a permanent academic position in Tibetan studies.

244 Jinpa 2013: 21.
245 See: Samuel 2003: 465.
246 Snellgrove 2008: 1.
247 The conference took place on September 9, 2011.

In May 1960, Snellgrove went to northern India and Nepal to conduct research, meet "educated Tibetans"[248] and invite them to London for the Rockefeller-funded project. He believed it would be valuable to invite Bonpo monks rather than "regular Buddhist ones." The next winter, while visiting Dolpo in western Nepal, Snellgrove heard that the abbot of Yungdrung Ling Monastery (in central Tibet) was staying nearby on his return journey from the Bon monastery of Samling, located in Dolpo. Like other Tibetans who had recently fled Chinese-occupied Tibet, he was looking for block prints and manuscripts in small monasteries in the Tibetan cultural regions outside the political borders of Tibet in order to reproduce them in New Delhi as a means of reestablishing a monastic system in exile.

The abbot was accompanied by Sangye Tenzin, a young monk. After borrowing a large number of Bon texts during their travels, they were on their way to New Delhi to reprint them. "This was my first contact with a Grand Lama of an important Bonpo establishment in Tibet itself," Snellgrove added.[249] When he returned to the Kathmandu valley, Snellgrove went to a monastery where he was supposed to meet with Sangye Tenzin. There he met Lopon Tenzin Namdak for the first time; he recalls that Tenzin Namdak "also impressed me by his learning, his cordiality and his cheerful good humour."[250] For his part, Tenzin Namdak recalls this moment when he met Snellgrove:

> He came suddenly. He tested me. He has been to Dolpo, to some monasteries, he asked me some questions. I was very pleased. I had no hopes absolutely for any of this to survive. So seeing him and his interest was very exciting. Very much. Then he asked about our living, eating, food, we said nothing, not much money. He took me to the Red Cross to eat. So great. He took us down to Kathmandu to eat there. There was a Swiss man in charge, to organize in Patan where the Tibetan refugee camp [had] started to be organized there.[251]

Later in New Delhi, Snellgrove attempted to track down Sangye Tenzin at the address given him by Tenzin Namdak, an address for a printing business in Old New Delhi. Sangye Tenzin was not there, having gone on pilgrimage, "but we found his younger companion Samten Gyaltsen [Karmay], who impressed us very much indeed," writes Snellgrove.[252] Samten remembers how he met Snellgrove:

248 Snellgrove 2008: 2.
249 Snellgrove 2008: 2.
250 Snellgrove 2008: 2.
251 Namdak 2014.
252 Snellgrove 2008: 2.

> When Snellgrove arrived in New Delhi, he came quite early in the morning, came to the printing place. He came early at 5 o'clock. Then, he knocked. I was sleeping under the table. As a Tibetan, I could sleep everywhere. I see this European man for the first time in my life. He said something I couldn't understand. He spoke some sort of Dolpo dialect. In the end we managed to understand each other. He said he would come back midday. He came back with his Sherpa assistant. Snellgrove was furiously fighting with a driver, and he was telling nothing to do with you. I offered Tibetan tea. The weather was very, very hot. That was the first time I met a European man. A few days later, he proposed to go to London.[253]

After this encounter, Snellgrove formally invited Samten Gyaltsen, Sangye Tenzin and Tenzin Namdak to London, a trip they managed to make in 1961. As part of the formalities they underwent before traveling, the three Tibetans met with the Dalai Lama and explained their travel plans to him.[254] Snellgrove says that the three "were willing to accompany me into a different world, entirely unknown to them personally."[255] In addition to these three, a young aristocrat from Lhasa (named Sonam Panden Trangjun) and a Tibetan monk (named Lhakpa, from Sera Monastery in Lhasa) also joined them on the trip to England.[256]

Before starting the journey to the West, Snellgrove taught them basic English and gave them lessons in world geography. He also bought European-style clothes for them, which they wore for the first time. On their journey to England, they made a stopover in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to visit Buddhist historical sites, and then another in Rome, Italy, where they met Snellgrove's mentor, the famous Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci. It was also their first encounter with "the important Lama of the Old Tibetan Religious Order, namely Namkhai Norbu, whom Tucci had just then invited under the same Rockefeller scheme."[257]

After they had arrived in London, "the three monks rapidly accustomed themselves to this entirely new life of study, but during the first year little of academic value was accomplished, and I had problems with our aristocratic layman Sonam Panden, who did not fit in at all with the others," writes Snellgrove.[258]

Yongdzin Rinpoche says that he "was purely Tibetan" when he arrived in London.[259] Samten Karmay describes their situation vividly: "If I think from where we came, if I think of that period, we were like yak, like sheep. From the eighteenth century in Tibet it was closed, so we never had connection with other people. You can't use the word 'pure' but we were more or less pure in that

253 Karmay 2016.
254 Snellgrove 2008: 3.
255 Snellgrove 2008: 3.
256 Snellgrove 2008: 3.
257 Snellgrove 2008: 4.
258 Snellgrove 2008: 4.
259 Namdak 2015.

sense."[260] Yongdzin Rinpoche further adds, "Now it is not possible to be 'pure' Tibetan."[261] He is once again echoed by Karmay, who recalls: "We were purely Tibetan, no language. We were completely Tibetan. We started with A, B, C, D. During lunch we went to the garden. He [Snellgrove] gave us book notes, pencils and started A, B, C, D. Those were the first English lessons for us."[262]

Yongdzin Rinpoche observes that he could not have imagined then that he would eventually have his own Bon center in Europe. There were no Europeans interested in Bon as a religion, he recollects: "At that time I had no hope, no expecting to teaching or nothing." In these early days, he also noted that, to the Tibetans, the outward appearance of Westerners "look very good, very luxury, [but] inside [the] individual person [they were] very stressed. [During the] three years [I was there], [it was] very rare to meet a content person. I traveled to some places, seeing people, connected with the outer world."[263]

Yongdzin Rinpoche further recalls how they were sometimes invited to the Tibet Society and the Buddhist Society in London (both of which had the same president), a place where there was a monk trained in Burma (Myanmar): "He used a bowl and we had to sing three, four times, then silence." Only ten to fifteen people attended, most of whom were interested in learning about Tibetan culture. He made a few presentations there of the work he was doing with Snellgrove in translating the Nine Ways of Bon. Yongdzin Rinpoche also studied English in Cambridge, where he spent three full months. Highlighting that being a Tibetan in the West in those days was unusual, he says: "Sometimes, on the weekends I met with the Dalai Lama's nephew, he was there studying. There were many foreigners, I was the only Tibetan."[264] Regarding any interest in Bon from the point of view of practicing, Yongdzin Rinpoche said, "In Western culture at that time, [there was] no talk about religion, only scholarly interest."[265]

Snellgrove described the journeys of the three monks in the West as an "extraordinary success." At the end of the three-year grant, in 1964, Samten was invited to Paris to work with Professor Rolf Stein. It was at that time that he started to teach at the university on religious topics: "I thought the Nine Ways of Bon was useful and I did work on the historical side of Bon. I started giving

260 Karmay 2016.
261 Namdak 2015.
262 Karmay 2016.
263 Namdak 2015.
264 Namdak 2015.
265 Namdak 2015.

lectures. I chose Olmo Lungring, the birthplace of Tonpa Shenrab, who Tonpa Shenrab is, as the topics of my lectures."[266]

Snellgrove concludes that Sangye Tenzin and Tenzin Namdak "both wanted to return to India, Tenzin Namdak was interested in building up an ever-larger collection of Bonpo literature, now that so much appeared to have been lost in Chinese-occupied Tibet, while Sangye Tenzin had hopes of founding a Bonpo center for laymen and monks in some suitable place in the Himalayas."[267]

Samten Karmay mentions that when he arrived in England, Snellgrove was giving lectures, not necessarily on Bon religion. He recounts how Snellgrove started working with Tenzin Namdak; they worked on the *Zijid* (i.e., Buddha Tonpa Shenrab's hagiography, discussed in Chapter 4), and while Karmay worked for him on *the Four Lamas of Dolpo*.[268] These were not necessarily Bon studies, except for their work on the *Zijid* with Tenzin Namdak, which was later published as *The Nine Ways of Bon* (1967). Karmay notes that Snellgrove was the only person interested in his knowledge on the Bon religion at the time.[269]

Snellgrove compares the experiences of these three men to those of other Buddhist Tibetan teachers, such as Namkhai Norbu and Chögyam Trungpa, who, after arriving in the West, founded Buddhist centers remarking that, "famous and not so famous Tibetan lamas who arrive in the Western world usually become the center of a group of Western Buddhists." He notes further that, after spending time in the West, it was rare for these Tibetan teachers to return to their communities. Indeed, "Very few, perhaps only these two, have returned to India or Nepal, to further the cause of their own people, and only one simple Tibetan monk has become an outstanding worldwide scholar in a Western world."[270]

In 1965, Per Kvaerne, a Norwegian scholar from Oslo University, went to India and met Sangye Tenzin Jongdong (who later became the abbot of Menri Monastery at Dolanji in 1969, receiving the name Lungtok Tenpai Nyima). The two began a lifelong friendship that would also later connect Kvaerne with Samten Karmay. This encounter, like that between Snellgrove and the three Tibetans he brought to Europe, was a key impetus for Bon studies in the West.[271]

After his return to India, Yongdzin Rinpoche's main focus was to revive and the keep Bonpos and the Bon tradition alive in exile.[272] The recently published

266 Karmay 2016.
267 Snellgrove 2008: 5.
268 He is referring to Snellgrove 1992.
269 Karmay 2016.
270 Snellgrove 2008: 6.
271 Havnevik 2015: 10–11.
272 Ligmincha Deutschland e.V. 2018.

biography of Yongdzin Rinpoche mentions that, while searching for a suitable place to establish a settlement for Tibetan Bonpos in India, he faced the opposition of "certain Tibetans due to their sectarian affiliations."[273] However, in 1967, with financial support from the Catholic Relief Services, Namdak acquired land at Dolanji, near Solan in Himachal Pradesh in northwest India. There he founded a Tibetan Bon settlement, including establishing a small school and Menri Monastery, which nowadays is one of the two largest Bon monasteries in exile. At that time, Abbot Sherab Tenpa Gyaltsen of Yungdrung Ling Monastery in central Tibet became temporary spiritual leader of the Bonpo community in exile. His successor, Sangye Tenzin Jongdong (H. H. Lungtok Tenpai Nyima) was selected in the traditional way as Menri Tridzin, the abbot of Menri Monastery, in March 1968. The two of them, Tenzin Namdak and Menri Tridzin, slowly built the monastic community in Dolanji, then the only Bonpo monastery in India.[274]

Yongdzin Rinpoche's second visit to Europe took place in mid-1968, when he was a visiting scholar at the University of Munich. The following year, he went back to Dolanji where, until 1978, he focused his energies on writing, publishing, transmitting initiations and teaching. His teacher Lopon Sangye Tenzin passed away in 1977, and Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche was given full responsibility for teaching the younger generation of monks. The Menri Dialectic School was established in 1978, and the first *geshe* degrees were awarded in 1986. That same year, Yongdzin Rinpoche traveled to Tibet. On his return via Kathmandu, Nepal, he acquired a small piece of land where he later built Triten Norbutse Monastery. Formally founded in 1987, it "has since become one of the two main Bon monasteries outside Tibet, providing an extensive and rigorous comprehensive study of the broad spectrum of Bon teachings and traditions."[275]

In the beginning, this monastery was very small; there were no beds, only three rooms, one toilet and a kitchen. In 1988, Yongdzin Rinpoche moved there with two Geshes. By 1989 the monastic quarters were built, and refugees coming from Tibet slowly joined the monastery. The construction of the monastery continued, and in three years, the basic structure was in place. Tenpa Yungdrung was elected in 1996 to be the senior teacher at Triten Norbutse. In 2001, he was appointed its abbot.[276]

Before moving on to the next section, it is important to note that the precarious new settlement in Dolanji, India, established by the late Abbot Lungtok

273 Ramble/Yungdrung 2021: 178.
274 See: Ligmincha Deutschland e.V. 2018; Namdak 2015.
275 Ligmincha Deutschland e.V. 2018.
276 For an overview of the history of Triten Norbuste Monastery, see: Yungdrung 2012.

Tenpai Nyima and Yongdzin Rinpoche after returning from London is no longer what it used to be. Nowadays, young monks and Geshes speak English and travel to the West and to Tibet; some have moved permanently to the West[277] and cater to a Western clientele.[278] In a recent collection of Bon studies in honor of Per Kvaerne, Hanna Havnevik indicates that "in these centers monks often show an eclectic attitude, incorporating elements from New Age, New Shamanism and healing in their teachings. Bonpo monasteries in India and Nepal likewise tend to attract Westerners seeking fulfillment of their spiritual needs, and through this interaction the Bonpos have been influenced by global trends."[279]

It is also important to underline that, despite the succinct narrative above, Bon "has never been a monolithic tradition." Although "there were important institutions which worked to consolidate and articulate an orthodox point of view of the tradition as a whole, in reality, many tendencies and currents challenged this and continue to change Bon according to the tides of trends and ideas of modern society and culture."[280] In particular, after the Cultural Revolution and with the beginning of rebuilding Bon institutions in the Tibetan Bon religious landscape after the 1980s, both Menri and Yungdrung Ling monasteries, which had been destroyed, were slowly rebuilt. Marc des Jardins points out that the traditional role of Menri Monastery was taken up by Nangzhig Monastery in Amdo, Ngaba county. The current Lopon of Menri Monastery had, in fact, previously been the abbot of Namzhig. He was trained and educated in both the Menri and Triten Norbutse monasteries in India and Nepal. He then went back to his traditional monastery in today's People's Republic of China. As noted by des Jardins, this return to the monastery is more the exception than the rule. However, a few other Geshes who trained in India and Nepal have followed the same path and returned to their monasteries in present-day China in recent years. Des Jardins observes that, for instance, Namzhig Monastery possesses authority, lineages and knowledge, which means that it is actually an "independent" center, "leading to new patterns of religious authority which may in turn change the religious landscape of Bon in Tibet and China."[281] Moreover, the religious authority of Menri Monastery, despite its importance and reputation among Bonpos, has been contested in the past by local traditions or

277 There are resident lamas in most centers in the West, including in France, Mexico and Austria.

278 Havnevik 2015: 14.

279 Havnevik 2015: 14.

280 des Jardins 2013: 74.

281 For more on the dynamics of religious authority in Bon institutions in today's Tibetan territories, see the work of J. F. Marc des Jardins, in particular des Jardins 2009.

local institutions. Des Jardins highlights that, for instance, the former Menri Throne-holder (the late H. H. Menri Tridzin) visited China and Tibet a few times with a view to "rekindle old alliances and gather support for his institution,"[282] but, he remarked, "His real influence on the fare of Bon in the PRC does not appear to be matching that of his predecessors before 1959."[283] While the Indian Menri Monastery has a clear (though not necessarily uncontested) authority in the exile community, the Menri Monastery in Chinese territory, which was reconstructed in central Tibet after the 1980s, is nowadays in lively operation.

As mentioned by des Jardins, since the Chinese government's opening to the rebuilding of Tibetan religious institutions and practices since the end of the 1980s, three main institutions have been in charge of transmitting Bon to new generations. Of these, the Nangzhig and Bongya monasteries have produced Geshes and teachers who are currently in charge of the vast majority of Bon institutions in Chinese territory. Others, such as Lama Nyima in England, are transmitting family lineages, and they also have an impact on Bonpos in the West. These complexities of Bon in the West and in Chinese territory can be the subject of future research.

5.2 Bon Studies in the West

While Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline started in Europe "as an offshoot of philology, in which scholars of Sanskrit also read Buddhist texts,"[284] Bon Studies came into existence as a subsidiary branch of Tibetan Buddhist Studies. If a majority of scholars of Tibetan Buddhism "shy away from certain genres of Tibetan literature . . . and gravitate to others . . . [such as] texts that demonstrate unequivocally that the chief religion of Tibet is a direct and legitimate descendant of Indian Buddhism,"[285] some of the leading scholars of Bon have laid the foundations for a distinct branch that we can call Bon Studies.

In parallel with the efforts of Bon savants, an understanding of the Bon religion in the West became more meticulous in the 1950s and particularly after the mid-1960s, thanks largely to the efforts of David Snellgrove. A landmark publication in this process was Helmut Hoffmann's 1950 monograph on Bon,[286] which, along with his next book *The Religions of Tibet*, contributed to making Bon

282 des Jardins 2009: 239.
283 des Jardins 2009: 239.
284 Lopez, Jr. 1998: 158.
285 Lopez, Jr. 1998: 179.
286 See: Hoffmann 1956; See also: Hoffmann 1940; Hoffmann 1950; Hoffmann 1969.

Studies a field of scholarly interest in Europe. His publications also contributed to the idea of Bon as an animist tradition, a vision that started to change in the 1960s. This decade marked an expansion of Tibetan Buddhist Studies in the West that emerged in cooperation with Tibetan informants (monks and lamas).[287] However, compared to studies of Tibetan Buddhism, the field of Bon Studies developed more slowly.

Gradually, Bon began to be recognized as possessing a religious identity of its own, even though it was closely related to the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The scholar Per Kvaerne helped to found the International Association for Tibetan Studies at this time.[288] He and Samten Karmay contributed greatly to the field of Bon Studies and to the differentiation between Buddhism and Bon. They provided a perspective on the Bon tradition that differed from what was prevalent at that time, when Bon was often described dismissively as a shamanist and animist religion.[289]

Specifically important in this regard was Karmay's translation of a nineteenth-century Bon historical work that was published as *A Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, which started a new direction in Tibetan Studies by presenting an indigenous view of its historical development. The works published by Karmay and Kvaerne established the basis for understanding the vast collection of Bon texts.[290] Kvaerne's publication of the translation of a "chronological table" of Bon[291] and his analysis of the content of a catalog of the canonical scriptures of Bon were particularly influential. Kvaerne further contributed to the establishment of Bon Studies in the West by bringing together a team of Western and Tibetan scholars for one year at the Centre for

287 In Russia, however, the cooperative work of Buddhist lamas and Russian scholars was established in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Russian study of Tibetan Buddhism was very much informed by these "native" informants, some of whom became scholars in a Western sense, having received a formal university education at Russian universities. The first such native scholar was the Buryat Dorji Banzarov, who defended his Ph.D. thesis at Kazan University in 1846. For an interesting comparison, the work of Vera Tolz tackles the ways in which intellectuals in early twentieth-century Russia shaped how "Oriental cultures," including Tibet, were to be understood, perhaps anticipating Said's postcolonial scholarship by pointing out how knowledge of "the Orient" was the result of political and cultural constructs. Tolz further argues that there is a direct correlation between the anticolonialist critiques of early Soviet Orientalists and the ideas of Edward Said. See: Tolz 2011.

288 Havnevik 2015: 11.

289 See particularly: Kvaerne 1996a; Kvaerne 2007; Kvaerne 1985b; Karmay 2007a; Karmay 1998a; Karmay 2007b.

290 As discussed in: Havnevik 2015: 12–13.

291 Kvaerne 1985a.

Advanced Study in Oslo for the "simple but formidable" aim of providing a detailed catalog of the Bon Kangyur.[292] That goal "seems to have been successfully achieved"[293] and the project led to the publication of a catalog on the Bon Kangyur.[294] One team member was the former Director of Tibetan Studies at the Minzu University of China, Tsering Thar, who is now a leading scholar on Bon in China.[295]

Along with Karmay and Kvaerne, the French Tibetologist Anne-Marie Blondeau also had a formative influence on the field of Bon Studies, particularly on pre-Buddhist history in Tibet.[296] Thanks to these authors, there is a growing recognition that one must understand, and critically pay attention to, how Bonpos themselves narrate their own historical developments in order to fully appreciate the scope of Bon traditions. Snellgrove eloquently summed this up: "In giving an account of any religion we cannot ignore what the practitioners have to say about themselves."[297] From this perspective, accepting and understanding the Bonpos as they see themselves goes hand in hand with tracing the historical trajectory of their religion.

The works of Chogyal Namkhai Norbu on early Tibetan narratives, symbolic languages and Dzogchen teachings[298] are also relevant to the discussion of how the nature of Bon is portrayed. Norbu's publications on the role of Bon in the origins of Tibetan civilization have influenced the way Bon is perceived by a considerable number of Tibetans in Tibet and in exile. His works, which were published in Tibetan in China,[299] were pivotal in situating the Bon tradition as an equal and independent Tibetan religious tradition in the contemporary religious debate, an almost unparalleled development in Tibetan sectarian relations. His influence on this matter was significant also because Norbu, besides

292 Nagano 2003.

293 Nagano 2003.

294 Kvaerne/Martin/Nagano 2003.

295 Apart from Minzu University of China (formerly the Chinese Central University for Nationalities) in Beijing, the most important centers for Tibetan studies in Chinese institutions are the China Tibetology Research Center in Beijing and Lhasa, the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, the Northwest University for Nationalities in Langzhou, the Qinghai Nationalities University in Xining, and the branches of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, principally in Lhasa, Xining, Chengdu, Langzhou and Kunming.

296 See, for example: Blondeau/Chayet 2014; Blondeau 1984; Blondeau 1988.

297 Snellgrove 1967: 2.

298 See, for example: Norbu 1995; Norbu 2009; Norbu/Clemente/Simmons 2004.

299 An outline of research on Tibetan issues and the development of Tibetan studies in China both by Tibetans and Chinese after 1945 can be found in: Wehrli 1993. To compare with the development of the study of Bon in China, see: Arizaga 2009.

being a highly respected "master," was himself not Bonpo but Buddhist. Apart from his scholarly works, he was one of the first Tibetans to teach Dzogchen to a Western following in Italy after establishing a center called the Dzogchen Community in 1967.[300] In this context it is relevant to note, as Ana Cristina Lopes points out, that "many of the elements that were previously associated with the old institutions of Tibetan Buddhism continue to play a central part in the diaspora, but in the current context they acquire new configurations."[301]

Other key authors include Charles Ramble, who has contributed to the understanding of religions in the Himalayas and their relation to Bon as a religion, including making texts available and documenting rituals of the Bon tradition.[302]

As with Tibetan Buddhism since the 1960s, Bon Studies has likewise witnessed a development in which academics who are also Bon practitioners are writing about and conducting research on Bon. The work of John Myrdhin Reynolds is notable especially in relation to his close collaboration with Yongdzin Rinpoche.[303] The appearance of Dzogchen meditation manuals in English – such as Kvaerne's *The A Khrid System of Meditation*, published in 1973; Lopon Tenzin Namdak's commentary on the Bon text *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya*, written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (1859–1933 or 1935),[304] one of the first such publications in a Western language; and *The Stages of the A khrid Meditation*[305] – have made the doctrinal perspective of Bon more accessible. Several other Dzogchen meditation manuals were subsequently published, including the thirteenth-century Gyalwa Chaktri of Druchen Gyalwa Yungdrung, the Bon Dzogchen practice manual for the Zhangzhung Nyengyud called "The Sevenfold Cycle of the Clear Light," and the Dark Retreat practice manual from the same tradition, translated with commentaries and notes by John Myrdhin Reynolds.[306]

It is instructive to recognize how modern scholarship and spiritual engagement have worked together and contributed to the spread of Bon, which seems to be a main characteristic of the process that led to the globalization of Bon

300 See: International Dzogchen Community 2016.

301 Lopes 2014: 240.

302 See, for example: Ramble 2000; Ramble 2008; Ramble 2009.

303 His publication *The Oral Tradition from Zhang Zhung* includes biographies of the principal early masters in the lineages of transmission of the Zhangzhung Nyengyud. He has also published important works on Dzogchen teachings; *Bonpo Dzogchen Teachings*, for example, is a compilation of teachings given by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, which Reynolds transcribed, edited, and annotated and then wrote the introduction to the book. See: Reynolds 2007a; Reynolds 2007b.

304 Namdak 2002.

305 Gyalba/Kvaerne 1996.

306 See: Reynolds 2013.

practices. As a consequence, Bon is currently gaining a place as an independent tradition, being described as "not only a fascinating religious phenomenon, but also, if not more importantly, [as] one of the most precious assets of the Tibetan cultural heritage."[307] However, Kvaerne himself has asserted in recent years that, while he does not challenge the way Bonpo followers represent themselves, he does note that this image cannot be exported into the West as if it were a historical reality; he has been cited as arguing that "it is mandatory to read the texts critically, which he admits he did not do sufficiently in the past."[308]

5.3 Scholarship and Spiritual Entanglements: Bon as the "Other"

As described by Yongdzin Rinpoche above, when he first arrived in Europe, people at that time possessed "only scholarly interest."[309] Similar remarks were made by Karmay, who did not encounter any Westerners interested in Bon from the religious point of view when he first came to England.[310] It was only when that scholarly interest met with spiritual engagement that Bon took off and became "global." Of particular significance in this process of popularizing Bon were the books of Namkhai Norbu[311] as well as the translation of Dzogchen practice texts[312] and in particular Tenzin Wangyal's books,[313] especially those that he published after founding the Ligmincha Institute, which rendered Bon accessible to a neophyte audience.

At the same time, the parallel process of expanding academic studies on Bon and the beginning of Bon religious groups in the West, which started informally with Westerners inviting Tibetan lamas to teach in their countries, resulted in an expansion of Bon that continues to the present day.

The entanglements of academic studies and religious affiliations in the field of Buddhist Studies, particularly in North America, are well documented. For Bon, as seen above, the process shared some similar characteristics, but it had and continues to have its own specific elements, which will be briefly enumerated.

307 Rossi 2000: 20.
308 Havnevik 2015: 15.
309 Namdak 2015.
310 Karmay 2016.
311 See, in particular: Norbu 1986; Norbu 1995; Norbu/Clemente/Simmons 2004.
312 For instance: Gyalba/Kvaerne 1996.
313 See: Wangyal 1998; Wangyal 2000; Wangyal 2002.

While some long-enduring Orientalist notions still pervade the study of Tibetan Buddhism, there has been a shift away from these over time. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism, once portrayed in academic spheres in the West as the "polluted" Other in contrast with Indian Buddhism, was gradually converted into the pure, holy and pristine doctrine from "Shangri-La."[314] At the same time, Lopez has remarked how neighboring countries have always perceived Tibet as peripheral. Bonpos (and also Buddhists) contributed to this notion with their historical narratives in which Tibet was represented as an uncivilized land until "culture" was introduced from Zhangzhung, in the case of Bonpos, or from India, in the case of Buddhists.[315] Moreover, as already discussed, Bonpos were often described in Tibet and in the West as "animists" and "shamans" belonging to the exotic "original" tradition of Tibet. Indeed, Bon Studies (and practice) were situated as the Other in relation to Buddhist Studies and practice, and "all such descriptions of the 'other' are framed in the ideological structure of the objectifier, with the native being a passive object in the objectifier's gaze."[316]

But the initially pejorative way of referring to Bonpos also came to represent an opportunity vis-à-vis Westerners attracted to "new age spirituality;" in this context, Bon was deemed appealing due to its reputation as an "ancient" and "authentic" religious tradition related to shamanism. As Tenzin Wangyal asserts, for instance, "contributing to the richness and depth of the Bon heritage are its shamanistic practices, such as healing and soul retrieval, which carry with them a deep respect for nature and the spirits that abide there, and which continue to play an important role in Tibetan culture."[317]

In addition, Françoise Pommaret has pointed out how labeling any Buddhism as "pure" in contrast to other "adulterated" forms of Buddhism is also part of a nineteenth-century Western invention, since "Buddhism as it is practised – we are not talking here about dogma – is essentially a polymorphous religion that evolves according to the specific cultural context that it encounters."[318]

In this interplay, Bonpos are still finding their own place, which is being shaped by the joint efforts of scholars and practitioners, a distinction that in many cases cannot be clearly made.

As with Buddhist Studies, grants from the Rockefeller Foundation were instrumental in facilitating Bon Studies in the West, despite the fact that, unlike Buddhism, no graduate programs focusing on Bon had yet been established at

314 See: Lopez Jr. 1994.
315 Lopez, Jr. 1998: 156–80.
316 Shakya 2001b: 184.
317 Hunter 2002.
318 Pommaret 2012: 89.

Western academic institutions. This disparity is not so surprising considering that the Tibetan Buddhist teachers who came to the West greatly outnumbered the Bonpo ones. Moreover, one of the key figures in the spread of Bon in the West, Yongdzin Rinpoche, initially returned to Asia following the Rockefeller grant with the aim of rebuilding the Bonpo communities in exil, instead of staying in the West. Nevertheless, Dan Martin's hopeful wish "for a future Tibetan studies that will finally come to fully include Bon studies"[319] has in some sense come into being.

Yet to a certain extent even today, the study of Bon continues to occur at the margins of Buddhist studies. As discussed above and like the field of Buddhist Studies, Bon Studies, as a field of research undertaken in cooperation with Bonpo informants from Tibet, began systematically in the West following the 1959 diaspora; some of the more influential works on Bon were produced as a result of such cooperations. Karmay, in fact, was himself a Bon Geshe, and his works constitute essential readings for the modern understanding of Bon. He was a sort of bridge between two universes. However, in contrast with Buddhism, there are no examples of Westerners taking Bon vows, studying at Bon monasteries and obtaining titles such as Geshe or others, and subsequently returning to the West to take up academic positions in Western universities. In fact, very few Westerners have to date become Bon monks (or nuns) and none of them, at least to my knowledge, is fluent in the Tibetan language. Despite this, the publication of books on Bon by scholar practitioners and Bon teachers, particularly Wangyal, were key in popularizing Bon. Furthermore, due to the persistent influence of the vision of Tibet as the "pure land," the most popular Bon genres of Western scholarship were related not to rituals or the like but to works on Dzogchen, meditation and philosophy. At Bon centers, including Ligmincha and Shenten Dargye Ling, alongside transcripts of teachings by Bon masters, academic books on Bon are sold to devotees, who read them with interest.

Moreover, the study of Bon in the West is in many ways permeated by the notion of the "need to survive" due to the political struggles of Bonpos both in Tibet and in exile as a consequence of the Chinese invasion and of Buddhist persecutions of Bonpos in Tibet. This desire for Bon to survive has created a perceived need to preserve the knowledge of the tradition, which might otherwise be lost. In their own words, the avowed objective of Shenten, for instance, is above all "to preserve this ancient tradition and to transmit it to Western students."[320]

319 Martin 2003: 19.
320 Shenten Dargye Ling 2018b.

To sum up the circumstances described above and paraphrasing Edward Said,[321] Bon, as the Other, has been and continues to be "Bonponized" in a multidirectional flow, including not only an "East/East" and "West/East" dynamic but also a "Buddhism/Bon" and even "Bon/Bon" interplay. These processes occur in parallel with what Per Kvaerne sees as the emergence in Bon of what could be called a *new historical fundamentalism* by which "Bonpos strive to imbue their religion with the same kind of factual, historical basis and prestigious status that the Buddhists claim for their own tradition . . . an identity in which the role of India is downplayed and that of an imaginary Zhangzhung civilization takes center stage."[322]

The historical events narrated above, in conjunction with the academic study of Bon in the West and the trends related to the identity negotiations that were and are taking place in the repositioning of Bonpos in the West, occur in parallel to relocalization processes, which entail not only the establishment of new centers, such as Shenten, but also symbolic acts such as the erection of stupas. Erecting stupas is seen by both Buddhists and Bonpos as an important means to physically and symbolically anchor their religions. An exemplary representation of this is the establishment of the major center of Yungdrung Bon in the West, Shenten Dargye Ling, which, on the one hand, reflects the culmination of the transition of the "delocalized" Bon religion to the West, and, on the other, the departure point for a "relocalized" Bon in France's Loire Valley. The following chapter will look at how and why Shenten was created and its key role in the setting and development of Bon in Europe and beyond.

321 See: Said 1995[1978].
322 Kvaerne 2008: 9.

6 Shenten Dargye Ling

The Western Bon center called Shenten Dargye Ling (see Figure 4) is central to the investigation of global Bon because it serves as the best example of the monastic Bon tradition in the West. The name "Shenten Dargye Ling" means "the place for spreading the Teaching of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab." Understanding the process of how this center came to be will help to contextualize how Bon was introduced to the West; how the religion itself is being adapted, if indeed it is, to local settings; and how it is reaching new audiences. Recounting the story of Shenten also helps us to historically contextualize the experiences of Western Bon practitioners, which are explored later on in this book.

Figure 4: Shenten Dargye Ling @ Christophe Moulin.

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

The opening statement on Shenten's website reads that Bon is "the native religion of Tibet . . . one of the world's most ancient spiritual traditions. It has a

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unique and very rich heritage. Its knowledge helps sentient beings to cope with the demands of daily life and ultimately leads them all the way up to full enlightenment."[323] This opening statement contains two interesting key phrases: It aims to reach both people who are looking for solutions to their "daily life challenges," usually called "worldly" issues in contrast to "spiritual" issues, and those who are looking for "enlightenment." As will be seen later, this opening statement resonates with both the participants who are attracted by a "modern" Bon approach and those who feel attracted by a "traditionalist" one.

Figure 5: Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung @ Christophe Moulin.

6.1 The Place for Spreading the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab

Shenten Dargye Ling was founded in 2005 with the aim of "preserving the Bon tradition and transmitting it to Western students in a completely authentic way, in its entirety and at the highest quality."[324] In 2006, the French Ministry of the Interior recognized Shenten Dargye Ling as a "Religious Congregation." In Shenten Dargye Ling's second newsletter, "Speech of Delight," Abbot Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung (see Figures 3 and 5) indicated that "receiving the status of

323 Shenten Dargye Ling 2018b.
324 Shenten Dargye Ling 2019a.

congregation from the French government is a very special opportunity for us. This will surely also be very important for all Bonpos, both inside and outside Tibet. Wherever Bonpos are, they will know about this positive development and feel supported."[325] He elaborated on what this opportunity represented, indicating that Yungdrung Bon is now recognized as an "authentic" religion in Europe, at a critical time for Bonpos and for Tibetan culture and religion in general. This is why, he emphasizes that, "the establishment in Blou will be very significant for the future of our religion." He further delineates his wishes for Shenten, which he envisages as a place where the Bon religion and culture will not only be preserved but also expanded into the West. Shenten, he adds, was established with the aim to become an educational center that will offer besides religious activities, "practical aspects of our religion . . . [including] medicine, art, language, and so on."[326] Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung further believes that the establishment of Shenten opened "a new chapter in our history as, although Bon was the indigenous state religion of Tibet for many centuries in ancient times, it has since come under several waves of persecution due to political changes."[327] The congregation statutes, he underscores, facilitate carrying out religious activities for preserving the Bon tradition and for educating "young monks and lay people to ensure Yungdrung Bon continues to benefit future generations." Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung also envisioned Shenten as "an important center for Bon studies both in terms of spiritual practice and academic research . . . We consider this work to be of prime importance for the future of our tradition."[328]

The acquisition of Shenten was financially supported by Loel Guinness, founder of the Kalpa Group.[329] The Kalpa Group, the successor of the Loel Guinness Foundation, aims to support research by individual scholars and professionals on a wide array of issues, including Bon. Notably, Guinness has recently published a book entitled *Rainbow Body*,[330] in which he narrates his encounter with Bon and his ensuing practice under the guidance of Bon teachers. On the Shenten website, Yondzin Tenzin Namdak openly acknowledges that: "Loel Guinness's support has been a great help to us. He supports the preservation of our religion and culture in many ways and although we have long been hoping to establish a center like Shenten Dargye Ling, it was only thanks to his generous

325 Yungdrung 2006.
326 H.E. Yongdzin Rinpoche, see at: Kalpa Group 2018b.
327 Kalpa Group 2018b.
328 Kalpa Group 2018b.
329 See: Kalpa Group 2018a.
330 See: Guinness 2018.

donation that this project was able to get off the ground."[331] Guinness's role in the establishment of Shenten should be kept in mind when discussing the significant contribution of some Westerners in facilitating the spread of Bon in the West.

6.2 The Precedents

As early as 1961, Yongdzin Rinpoche, then called "the Lopon,"[332] came to Europe to work as a scholar with the renowned Tibetologists David Snellgrove in London and Helmut Hoffmann in Munich. However, it was only in 1989 that he first began to teach Yungdrung Bon in Europe to a small group of students, some of whom had met him in Nepal. As he visited other European countries, the work, teachings and commitments of Bon teachers in the West increased considerably, particularly since the establishment of Shenten, where he has spent a few months every year for the past thirteen years. As a consequence, a number of organizational structures have evolved among the students.

The precursor of Shenten Dargye Ling was the Yungdrung Bon Association, which came to life as a result of the peregrinations to Nepal by a Western student of Bon named Bilal Hondo. The board of directors of the Yungdrung Bon Association, with a legal address located in Paris, was established in 1996. The first president was Jean-Luc Achard, a Tibetologist and researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France. He is also the editor and publisher of the *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, an online academic journal of Tibetan Studies. The initial treasurer and secretary were two Western students of Yongdzin Rinpoche.

One of the first Westerners to be involved in Bon practice, Hondo studied Bonpo teachings at Triten Norbutse Monastery under the guidance of Tenzin Namdak, and he transcribed and edited Yongdzin Rinpoche's commentary on the Bon text *Heartdrops of Dharmakaya*, about Bonpo Dzogchen practice, into a Western language (French).[333] The original purpose of the Association was to bring Bon masters to Europe to teach Dzogchen theory and practice to their disciples. Masters included the Lopon Tenzin Namdak, who resided in Kathmandu,

331 Kalpa Group 2018b.

332 As indicated before, Lopon is a title that literally means "teacher" and usually designates the head instructor of a group of students at a monastery. Tenzin Namdak was called "Lopon" for many years. His current title "Yongdzin" means, according to Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, "the one who holds all the lineages."

333 Namdak 2002.

and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who was already based in the United States. In 2001, the Association started to facilitate Dzogchen practice throughout the year in several French cities (Paris, Nice, Montpellier) with the help of Geshes sent by Lopon Tenzin Namdak to liaise with other European and American organizations to help promote the teachings.[334]

The first website of the Yungdrung Bon Association highlighted that the Tibetan Bon tradition does not originate from India and the Buddhism of Shakyamuni, but from Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, hailing from the kingdom of Tagzig and born in the region of Olmo Lungring. According to his three hagiographies, Tonpa Shenrab is supposed to have come to Tibet once and to have converted an important number of local priests called Bonpos.[335]

In these early days, the Dalai Lama's teaching events in Europe were announced on the website, and Tenzin Wangyal was portrayed as a guest master (see Appendix B).

A few years later, a new association called Shenten Dargye Ling was founded. Unlike the Yungdrung Bon Association, it was able to receive funds and donations from any source (private, corporate, or public) and any country, according to French and European laws. Its main objective was to become financially able to buy real estate so that members could build a Dzogchen practice center according to Lopon's wishes for Europe. The center was to be devoted to the Gyalwa Menriwa[336] lineage and aimed to organize the trips and stays of the Bonpo masters involved in the teachings, either during retreats or throughout the year.[337] The public launch and first General Assembly of the Shenten Dargye Ling Association took place in Paris in October 2000.

334 Information flier, under the following copyright "©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000."

335 This information was shared by Christophe Moulin based on a screenshot of the Yungdrung Bon Association's first website from 2005.

336 Gyalwa Menriwa refers to the lineage of teachings as transmitted by the abbot of Menri Monastery and spiritual head of the Bon religion. There are two Menri monasteries: the original Menri located in Tibet and the Menri Monastery in exile, located at Dolanji (India). The head of the Bon religion resides in Menri Monastery in Dolanji. The former "Menri Tridzin," an honorific title to refer to the abbot of Menri, the Thirty-Third Gyalwa Menri Tridzin Rinpoche, passed away on September 14, 2017. His successor, the Thirty-Fourth Menri Tridzin Rinpoche, was announced on January 1, 2018. Following a process that included prayers and rituals to Bon deities and protectors, Geshe Dawa Dargyal was selected for this position from among sixty-four candidates. See more at: Ligmincha International 2019b.

337 Information flier, under the following copyright "©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000."

In 2000, a third association linked to Shenten was also created: The Triten Norbutse Association was founded by active members of Shenten Dargye Ling.[338] Until 2013, it functioned as a charitable organization in line with French and European law. Its main objective was to support the Asian communities "which are linked to the Yungdrung Bon spiritual and religious Tradition, in order to help maintain a continuous presence of this perennial (but recently endangered) Tradition, in countries close to its original birthplace."[339] The term "Asian communities" refers mainly to Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu and to other villages in Nepal and India where Bonpos live. To meet this objective, the association multiple aims: to help build schools, community clinics and monasteries; to promote medical follow-up visits in such places; to provide and send medicines; to send funds to present and future institutions when needed; and to promote the sponsoring of individuals (such as young monks or orphans) or groups of such individuals; and to utilize all possible means of communication to inform the public at large in Western countries. The funds of this new association, apart from its members' subscription fees, were to be constituted by donations from individuals, institutions or other associations.[340]

6.3 Looking for a Place

When Shenten Dargye Ling was inaugurated in 2005, it was the first center for the Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon to be established in continental Europe. In 2000, the European students of Tenzin Namdak received a message sent by the Yungdrung Bon Association, explaining the basis upon which Shenten would be established. In this message, they were told that Yongdzin Rinpoche had the "deep feeling" that it was time and that the ground was fertile to establish such a center "for the benefit of all sentient beings and especially for his current and future students." He further indicated that it was best to concentrate efforts toward first establishing a single center in the heart of Europe. Already a year before, in the summer of 1999,

338 Yungdrung Bon Association and and Triten Norbutse Association are French associations established according to "Loi 1901" or the French Law of Associations of 1901, while Shenten Dargye Ling is a French association established under "Loi 1905" or the French Law of Associations of 1905.

339 See: Association Triten Norbutse France 2019.

340 Information flier, under the following copyright "©HD for YB/SDL/TN, c/o Golfe du Lion Sept. 2000."

> as a sign of the great importance he places on this initiative Rinpoche has given the name Shenten Dargye Ling to this center: "The place for spreading the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab." At this moment of violent communist uprising and political instability in Nepal, the transmission and continuity of the ancient Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon is threatened with extinction; therefore it is even more important to open our hearts and raise our good intention in practical matters in order to establish a safe ground for the survival, the study and practice of Lopon's teachings.[341]

This message also outlined the primary objectives for establishing Shenten: to play an important role in "maintaining the precious teachings for benefiting future generations" and to be the place where the Yungdrung Bon tradition teaching would grow its roots in Europe and play a role in "sustaining and safeguarding the tradition for future generations."[342]

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

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

This list of characteristics provide evidence that from the outset Shenten was envisaged as a place that would fulfill three major purposes: 1) safeguarding the Bon religion for future generations; 2) establishing Bon in France, centrally located in Europe; and 3), expanding Bon in Europe and in the West in its "authentic form" from this center. These three objectives demonstrate the process in which, regarding the spread of Bon, the global and the local interact and where adaptations are made according to the environment, while simultaneously allowing a stronger Bon religious identity to be asserted and a process

341 Doerler/Manusch/Van Canstein 2005.
342 Doerler/Manusch/Van Canstein 2005.

of reterritorialization to take place under the influence of both Tibetan Bonpos and Westerners who were followers of Bon.

At first, a location in the Vosges mountains near Colmar in eastern France was identified by Yongdzin Rinpoche as a site that met all the criteria. This location was considered the most suitable among the other possibilities identified in Germany and France. However, the acquisition of this location fell through, and a new option was considered when Loel Guinness offered to donate a tract of land in his possession in the Normandy region of France. Finally, the current location in Blou was later identified and successfully acquired through a donation from Guinness, who recalls:

> When I met Tenpa and Rinpoche, I was very surprised by their anxiety and the sense of urgency they conveyed to find new places to undertake their yearly summer retreats. They were obliged to change locations every year. This was time consuming, costly and very inconvenient. More important, it demonstrated a certain weakness and indicated that the tradition was somewhat vulnerable and did not have the status or resources to settle in one location. It gave the tradition a reputation of being a rather insignificant, nomadic offshoot of Tibetan Buddhism – mobile with no firm base and therefore rather fragile and unimportant. It was not granted the importance it deserved, by any means.
>
> Both Charles [Ramble] and I agreed that the purchase of a centre would change the profile of the tradition – it would provide them with strength, stability and a base from which to operate and expand.
>
> We decided to move forward on this as a priority of our 6 part program. French practitioners started inquiring and looking for such a location and found the Chateaux de la Modtais. Both Tenpa and Rinpoche found it ideal and we decided to purchase it.
>
> The evolution has been continuous and very rapid. It became the home of the Bon in Europe – the seat of their tradition and the place from which they could expand undisturbed. It offered stability and transmitted a strong and powerful message to all. Bon was there to stay![343]

An initial legal framework, which afterwards evolved into what today are the Shenten Association and the Shenten Congregation (explained further below), was established to provide for transparent governance in accordance with the ideas of Lopon Tenzin Namdak and with Western legal and financial standards. Guinness foresaw that if Bon,

> continues to expand as it has these past decades, I think Bon will be an established international religion in the near future. We have accomplished and accumulated an important capital of translations, texts, books, research and other. Also, Shenten has contributed significantly to the stability of the tradition in the West. Global awareness has increased and the Bon are now solid, stable and well established. Now it is time to make all this public

343 Guinness 2021.

> and exploit this precious capital, increase the number of interested practitioners and make Dzogchen accessible to many more. It is the role of qualified publicists to determine the best and most effective way of doing so. The groundwork and the tools they need to do this job are now available.[344]

Shenten Dargye Ling was first administered by a non-profit organization established and maintained in conformity with French law. This entity served as the legal conduit for the activities of the center. The main objective of the organization, as laid down in its articles, were to spread and maintain the Teaching of Lord Tonpa Shenrab according to the ancient Tibetan tradition of Yungdrung Bon as transmitted by Lopon Tenzin Namdak or his spiritual heirs.

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

The spread of Bon into the West was facilitated not only by the charisma of Tibetan lamas and teachers, as previously noted, but also by the efforts of certain Western individuals to give it an institutional structure. For instance, after the first efforts undertaken by Hondo to bring Bon to France, Jean-Louis Massoubre, a disciple of Lopon Tenzin Namdak, played an essential role, along with Loel Guinness, in the establishment of Shenten.

When the first board of directors was set up, Massoubre was appointed directly by Rinpoche as the responsible advisor, "channeling all information and advice from different members and other sources of the Buddhist and Western world – traditional religious as well as from the cultural background of France and the whole of Europe." He later served as the treasurer of the association. Massoubre was a former member of the French National Assembly and, in parallel with his political career, he "found his path in Buddhism."[345] He is considered to have had a great impact in bringing Tibetan Buddhism to France, notably through his contributions to the institutionalization of Buddhism and Bon in the

344 Guinness 2021.

345 Office of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa 2016.

country. He was instrumental in setting up various Buddhist centers and a congregation belonging to one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Kagyu school.[346] Massoubre was an assiduous visitor at Shenten Dargye Ling until his death in 2016. Upon his passing, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung expressed his condolences and deep appreciation, describing him as "a meritorious practitioner and supporter of Tibetan Bon and Buddhist spirituality."[347]

It is remarkable that one of Massoubre's sons, Karma Trinlay Rinpoche[348] (born Ananda Massoubre in 1975), was the first Westerner recognized as a *trulku*[349] (reincarnation of a Buddhist higly realized being) by the late Sixteenth Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage.[350] He was raised at a monastic center, trained in both traditional Buddhist and Western academic studies, and currently teaches Buddhism around the world. This precedent is relevant to the view expressed by some interviewees (discussed later) who consider that for Bon to be firmly established in the West, there is a need for Westerners who achieve enlightenment and thereby become "Western Buddhas."

A memorial posted on the website of Thaye Dorje, considered by his followers to be the legitimate Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, maintains that Massoubre "devoted the last years of his life to practicing the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) as much as possible."[351] It is significant that there is no mention in this memorial of the strong and fluid links Massoubre had with the Bon religion, perhaps bearing witness to the political divides between Buddhist schools as well as between Buddhism and Bon in Tibet, which seem to have been carried forward in the West. As discussed in Chapter 5, this omission also reveals that some elements of the way in which Buddhist (and Bon) institutions and structures interacted in Tibet continue to be significant in the diaspora.[352] In

346 It must be noted that Trinley Thaye Dorje, considered by his followers to be the Seventeenth Karmapa, heads the Tibetan Buddhist school supported by Massoubre. However, following the death of the Sixteenth Karmapa in 1981, two candidates were presented for his succession, one of whom was Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the other Trinley Thaye Dorje. In a controversial move, both candidates were "enthroned" as the Seventeenth Karmapa. But it was Ogyen Trinley Dorje who was recognized by the Dalai Lama, and therefore by most Tibetans, to be the successor of the Sixteenth Karmapa.

347 Yungdrung 2016.

348 See more at: Bodhi Path Buddhist Center 2019.

349 Wylie: *sprul sku*.

350 For more information on the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage and the Karma Kagyu Buddhist school, see: Office of Thaye Dorje, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa n.d.

351 Bodhi Path Buddhist Center 2019.

352 See: Lopes 2014: 240.

this sense, Casanova points out that globalization "facilitates the return of the old civilizations and world religions not only as units of analysis but as significant cultural systems and as imagined communities,"[353] representing both an opportunity and a threat.

Loel Guinness's personal journey with Bon is outlined in the preface of his recent book *Rainbow Body*.[354] As mentioned above, Guinness (see Figure 6) has had a major influence on the establishment of Bon in the West. In his frank and thoughtful narration of what could be considered "intimate" experiences, Guinness recounts how and why he learned and practiced Bon teachings:

> One should not forget that Bon is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. It has an enormous wealth of knowledge attached to it, most of which remains unknown for it has never been translated or studied. It predates Tibetan Buddhism by over a millennium and ruled Tibet and surrounding regions long before the arrival of Buddhism. No one knows its exact history. What we do know, is that it left us a superb collection of studies in all fields of activity – religious, medical, astronomy, rituals and so on.
>
> Charles [Ramble] and I were not only trying to save what existed but we wanted to create a platform to promote the Bonpos and give them the status they deserved. Our aim was to provide the stability they needed to expand, reveal their extraordinary inheritance and allow others to benefit from the intelligence they offered.
>
> I believe that our successes over the past two decades are only the beginning of what could become a series of rather surprising cultural breakthroughs. There is much to discover and learn from the Bonpos – knowledge which is too precious to neglect and ignore.[355]

Guinness further explains how, through the Kalpa Foundation, he funds projects associated with the promotion and preservation of Bon, because:

> We wanted to prove, scientifically, that Dzogchen meditations were genuine and not a figment of the imagination. The objective was to demonstrate how potent and powerful advanced practices truly are and to what degree they can alter physical functions – and this at the will of the practitioner. For that, we invited the best scientists. This was one part of the 6 part program Charles and I devised.[356]

He notes that the research related to the phenomenon of Rainbow Body fascinates him, "Nourishing my soul and sustaining the inquisitive side of my intellect for over a decade."[357] He also shares how he set out to finance a long-term project to make the Bon tradition "secure and credible globally." In his account,

353 Casanova 2011: 430.
354 Guinness 2018.
355 Guinness 2021.
356 Guinness 2021.
357 Guinness 2018: 13.

Figure 6: Loel Guinness and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung. Shenten Dargye Ling, 2005 @ Christophe Moulin.

Guinness details his experiences under the guidance of Geshe Gelek Jinpa at a 100-day Atri meditation retreat. At the beginning, he could hardly sleep, as if his mind were waking up: "You cry, you scream in frustration, you feel lost and desperate."[358] He considers the realization he reached through the practice of Dzogchen to be "one of the principal components of my psyche, which never really leaves me."[359]

6.4 This is the Place

By 2005, it was clear that the establishment and functioning of the center Shenten Dargye Ling could only be realized with the support of the international community of students of Lopon Tenzin Namdak.[360]

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

358 Guinness 2018: 19.
359 Guinness 2018: 21.
360 Doerler/Manusch/Van Canstein 2005.

Bon in Europe has become a reality."[361] The property, previously known as the Château de la Modtais, was previously used as a pedagogical medical institute and as an educational center.[362] Located on approximately seven hectares, it was owned by L'Association Regionale Les Chesnaies, which sold the property to the Association for the Congregation of Shenten Dargye Ling[363] on March 14, 2005.

When it was bought, the buildings needed extensive repairs. Under the supervision of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the building was renovated and adapted to Bon functions by a group of Bonpo monks and local supporters, mostly volunteers who contributed their time and work, doing what is referred to as "karma yoga."[364]

6.5 Structure and Objectives of Shenten Center

In addition to the aim of spreading Bon teachings in the West, Shenten was established also to preserve the Bon tradition, as Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung noted, "this is a very critical time for the Tibetan religion and culture as regards its future safety, so the new establishment of Shenten Dargye Ling in Blou, a nice French country village with its friendly and courteous people, will be extremely significant for the future of our tradition."[365]

In 2006, a year after it was founded, a document entitled "Aims for a Transparent Financing of Shenten Dargye Ling" established that:

> The board of directors will be required to act prudently in all matters relating to the foundation and will always bear in mind the interests of the foundation. They will not let personal views or prejudices affect their conduct as board of directors. The board of directors acknowledges the need to exercise the same degree of care in dealing with the administration of the foundation as a prudent business man or woman or those of someone else for whom he/she was responsible.[366]

361 Doerler/Manusch/Van Canstein 2005.

362 See: Meitour n.d.

363 In French: Association pour la Congrégation Shenten Dargye Ling.

364 Literally "the yoga of action." In this context, karma yoga consists of individuals carrying out certain tasks, contributing to the activities of Shenten and providing services in exchange for discounted fees for retreats or free accommodation or meals. The aims of karma yoga are said to be the accumulation of merit and the purification of obstacles.

365 Yungdrung 2006.

366 Shenten Dargye Ling Board 2006a.

Also in 2006, an internal document entitled "Note for Shenten Dargye Ling's management"[367] indicated that many jobs would need to be filled year-round in order to develop the Center's activities and ensure their smooth operation for the lamas who live there and for participants engaging in personal retreats practicing Bon and karma yoga, students taking weekly courses and visitors. The first official team was composed of three members and sporadic volunteers. The need for regular team members, including reliable volunteers, included a housekeeper,[368] a "chaplain" to support the lamas and perform rituals and ceremonies, a treasurer and a gardener.[369] It was ultimately determined that a secretary-manager was needed to assure the application of the administrative board's decisions, to represent the congregation to the French government, to report activities and proposals, and to perform related tasks. In addition, people were needed to handle the audio and video recordings of teachings, the post-production tasks of translation and transcription, and maintenance of the library's collection. Some Western founding members contributed financially to the purchase of the property; others became sustaining members; and many others helped by painting, gardening, fixing the plumbing and doing other maintenance tasks.

At the time, a local newspaper described Shenten as "a thriving religious center," reporting that it was "developing courses on the Tibetan language, traditional Tibetan medicine and *thangka* painting (traditional scroll painting) and initiating projects to transcribe teachings and translate Tibetan texts."[370] Shenten was also described in the local media as a Buddhist research center in an article entitled "Two Tibetan monks this week at the Château de la Modtais in Blou."[371] The article mentioned that the Dalai Lama considers Yongdzin Rinpoche to be the living memory of the Bon tradition.[372] This way of presenting Bon in the media suggests that, at least at the time, it was easier to present Bon as a form of Buddhism rather than as a separate tradition. However, this portrayal has changed over time: in the same local media, the center has been presented as a place for researchers from all over the world to come and study "the

367 Shenten Dargye Ling Board 2006b.

368 An "official" job posting for the job of caretaker was published. The housekeeper's job description included: to cope with the center's upkeep, to manage the buildings and to call in professionals (plumbers, firemen, electricians, and the like) if necessary, and to supervise the volunteers.

369 Shenten Dargye Ling Board 2006b.

370 Kalpa Group 2018b.

371 D.R. 2005.

372 Shenten Dargye Ling 2018b).

ancestral knowledge" of Bon, including religion, philosophy, astrology and medicine.

As discussed above, in its early days, Shenten board members set up the center to serve both as a place for the practice of Bon in the West and as a place to house a complete set of the Bonpo scriptures (Kangyur and Katen) and other collected works safely in Europe.[373] This was considered essential at that time in view of the political instability in Nepal, where Triten Norbutse Monastery is located, further highlighting the significant link of Shenten with this Nepalese monastery.

During the first decade of Shenten's existence, several significant milestones were achieved, including setting up the main assembly hall with a statue of the Buddha, a wooden carved traditional altar and a stupa (a religious monument discussed below) placed in it. Moreover, a digital archive was created containing the teachings given by Yongdzin Rinpoche in Europe and the United States since the 1990s as well as teachings given by other Bon lamas in the West. A group of volunteers regularly transcribes these teachings.[374] Some Tibetan texts have been translated into English and French, and starting in 2010, into German and Spanish as well. Many are available for purchase in Shenten's small shop. As I will discuss in detail below, a traditional stupa was inaugurated and consecrated at the end of 2009 and a second one was consecrated in 2017. Since its establishment, teaching and practice programs have been organized all year long.

With the aim of promoting research on Bon, the first academic conference on Bon was held at Shenten on June 22–27, 2008.[375] The journal *East and West* published the proceedings in a special issue.[376] Presentations included topics on philosophy, history, philology, myth, ritual, meditation, medicine, religious music and dance, anthropology, architecture, art history and Zhangzhung linguistics. Eight years later, a second conference, "International Conference on Bon – Ancient and Modern," was again hosted by the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation

373 In addition to a complete set of Bon canonical scriptures, the collection of Tibetan texts in the library continues to grow; for example, in 2010, the collected works of Nyamme Sherab Gyaltsen, the founder of the original Menri Monastery in Tibet, arrived from Nepal.

374 A great number of transcriptions and translations into English have been made by Carol Ermakova and Dmitry Ermakov. They later founded the "Foundation for the Preservation of Yungdrung Bon," which works "to preserve the rich teachings of Yungdrung Bon." See: Foundation for the Preservation of Yungdrung Bön 2021.

375 More precisely, this is the second conference of its kind, the first one called "New Horizons in Bon Studies" having taken place in Tokyo on August 23–27, 1999, under the auspices of the National Museum of Ethnology of Japan. The proceedings, edited by Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano, were published under the same name; see Karmay/Nagano 2004.

376 See: Karmay/Rossi 2009.

from June 29 to July 1, 2016. These conferences were attended by leading Bon scholars, including Samten Karmay and Charles Ramble (co-organizers of the conferences), Marc des Jardins, John V. Bellezza, Mark Aldenderfer, Colin Millard, Matthew Kapstein, Philippe Cornu, Heather Stoddard, and Katia Buffetrille, as well as several Tibetan students and Geshes. Both conferences, which are representative of the adaptations of Bon in the West, introduced an innovation specific to Bon in the West, whereby members of academia and Bon religious leaders met and shared their views on different aspects of Bon from their own perspectives.

6.6 The Congregation and the Association

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

In 2006, the Shenten Dargye Ling Congregation ("Shenten Congregation") became the main administrative entity of the center, the owner of the site, and the holder of spiritual and moral authority. In addition, the responsibility of managing the production, translation, reproduction and dissemination of teachings and texts belongs to the Shenten Congregation. The lay community is organized under the Shenten Dargye Ling Association (hereafter "Shenten Association"), which was created to be in charge of hosting retreats and managing public hospitality. In sum, Château de la Modtais (the physical space) is owned by and operates under the responsibility of the Shenten Congregation, while the Shenten Association rents the place.[377] This division of Shenten into a congregation and an association exemplifies how Bon institutions have had to adapt to the French legal structure and, more broadly, to Western law. This adaptation required the active involvement of Westerners versed in French (and European) legal systems. Massoubre was one of them, playing a significant role in supporting the setting up of the legal framework of Shenten, with the support of Loel Guinness and his

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

lawyer, once again attesting to the high degree of participation of a number of Western individuals in the spread of Bon into the West.

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

One of the characteristics already touched upon that precipitated the expansion and reception of Bon in the West is the ability of some Bon religious leaders to adapt to a particular culture and setting. This ability can be exemplified in Shenten by how the center's administrative and legal structure evolved over time and how it changed as the center's organization became more complex. The religious leaders had the indispensable support of a group of Western individuals who played a significant role in moving these processes forward. During the annual meeting of the Shenten Association in 2010, for instance, a call was made for organizational change, so later that year, some Western students formed a group to prepare a five-year plan for the maintenance and upgrading of Château de la Modtais. The year 2010 was particularly significant in Shenten for other reasons as well. The Shenten yearly teaching program started in the spring with a one-week retreat led by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung; this retreat was replicated the following years up to 2018. A "traditional" three-week summer retreat also took place for the first time in 2010 and has been held every year since then. Over the course of several years, Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung have transmitted different Dzogchen cycles of teachings during these retreats. In addition, at the end of summer 2010, the late abbot of Menri Monastery in India, considered by the Bonpos to be the spiritual leader of their tradition, visited Shenten (Figure 7). "He blessed our place . . . This is a unique occasion that many Bonpos in Tibet, India, Nepal and the rest of the world followed with intense interest. They would have loved to participate."[378]

Moreover, from September until November 2010, the Gomdra[379] or Meditation School (see below) went into its second year under the guidance of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung. Nineteen participants continued to receive the teachings on the Atri Dzogchen cycle while they engaged in several sessions of meditation practice. Other retreats in 2010 included the winter retreat led by Geshe Gelek

378 See: Yungdrung 2010.
379 Wylie: *sgom grwa*.

Figure 7: H. H. Menri Tridzin visits Shenten. From left to right: Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung; the late Abbot Menri Tridzin and Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak. Shenten, July 2010. ©Mara Arizaga.

Jinpa, modeled on the practice of Sherab Chamma,[380] a Bon female enlightened deity. In addition to the program at Shenten, Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Geshe Gelek Jinpa, Geshe Tendzin Yeshe and Lama Sangye Monlam taught in many countries, including Germany, Italy, Austria, Poland, England, and the Netherlands, as well as in various cities in France. Members of Shenten and other communities organized these teachings, facilitating the spread of Bon in several places in Europe and the Americas.

The significance of the year 2010 was noted in the following year's General Assembly meeting, with the president of the Shenten Association explaining that five years after establishing and inaugurating Shenten Dargye Ling at Château de la Modtais, Shenten's annual program has fully developed into a consistent whole. He added that the program allows people with different levels of interest, development and knowledge to partake in the teachings.[381]

380 Wylie: *shes rab byams ma*.

381 Speech delivered by Shenten Dargye Ling's President at the time, Florens van Raab van Canstein, in August 2011 at Shenten, Blou, France.

6.7 Retreats

In 2006, over the four weeks of that year's summer retreat, a total of 203 people traveled to Shenten. Although the majority were from Europe, participants came from all over the world. About a third were visiting Shenten for the first time, and thirty-six people were meeting the teachers for the first time. It is telling that, while the center has grown, the number of retreat participants has not increased significantly. As of 2019/2020, the average number of participants in Shenten's summer retreats continues to be around two to three hundred per year, in contrast, for instance, to the United States-based Ligmincha Ligmincha (discussed below), which has a greater number of participants in summer retreats.

Gomdra (Meditation School)

The Shenten Dargye Ling Dzogchen Meditation Training (Shenten's Gomdra) is presented as an opportunity for intensive study and practice and generally follows the curriculum of the meditation school established by Yongdzin Rinpoche in Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal. However, the curriculum has also been adapted to meet the needs of Westerners, for example by shortening the duration of some practices (see below). In traditional Bon monasteries in Tibet, Nepal and India, schools have a four-year program, each year involving the transmission and practice of one of the four main cycles of Dzogchen: Atri, Dzogchen, Zhangzhung Nyengyud and Yetri Thasel. In Shenten, however, only one cycle is transmitted over the course of four years, in retreats each lasting seventy days. During each year, students study the texts and engage in the preliminary and main practices of the relevant cycle. These consist of Guru Yoga, Reflection on Impermanence, Bodhicitta, Refuge, Purification, and Mandala Offering.[382] The last weeks

382 Here, the term *Bodhicitta* refers to the "Enlightened Mind," that is, the mind that aims toward awakening, with a sense of compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. As a specific practice, it involves visualizations intended to generate the Enlightened Mind as part of the *ngöndro*, or preliminaries. *Refuge* refers to the act of "taking refuge" in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and the sangha (community of practitioners). It refers to the formal rite of entry into the religion by "taking refuge" in front of a teacher, with a specific ritual and visualizations. It also refers to a specific practice that a person does, visualizing what is called the Refuge Tree, in which the person takes refuge in the Three Jewels by means of complex visualizations. This is one of the practices undertaken as part of the *ngöndro*. *Mandala Offering* refers to a specific practice that involves certain visualizations as one of the *ngöndro* practices. All these practices have different levels of understanding according to the level of the practitioner. See: Namdak/Reynolds 2006.

are dedicated to the "main practice" of the cycle, which is Dzogchen practice, following a practice manual written by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen.[383] For the first year of the first Gomdra retreat, which lasted one hundred days (and was shortened to seventy days the following years), Charles Ramble and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung compiled a booklet of the biographies of the Atri lineage masters. During the course of a full four-year Gomdra cycle, each student is meant to practice a specific hundred-day *tsalung*[384] retreat called *tummo*.[385] A description of Bon *tummo* practices is found in the Dzogchen text known as Kusum Rangshar,[386] in which the practices of heat (*tummo*) are described in detail.[387] Traditionally, practitioners enter into this *tsalung* – sometimes translated as the "Yoga of Channels and Winds"[388] – *tummo* retreat for one hundred days during winter, combining special breath-retention techniques with physical movements and complex visualizations of the "channels and winds"[389] in the third year of the Gomdra and, in the fourth year, the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat (explained below). However, the *tummo tsalung* practice was adapted in Shenten to last only seventy days instead of the traditional hundred days. This change in the duration of the retreats was made for "practical reasons," which included the fact that some participants coming from abroad could only receive a ninety-day visa to stay in France. It was also meant to accommodate Westerners who, because of their professional commitments, were not able to leave their jobs for that many days, showing yet again a specific confluence of the

383 Shardza Gyaltsen, also known as Shardza Rinpoche (1859–1933) was, according to Bonpos, an accomplished Bon Dzogchen master who had disciples from all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. He is considered the most significant Bon teacher in the *Rimé* (Wylie: *ris med*) or nonsectarian movement. The *Rimé* movement began in eastern Tibet during the late eighteenth century and took an "unbiased" approach to all religious schools, considering each school as valuable in its own right, a position that contrasted with the prevailing sectarianism of the time. Shardza is widely known for his works on Dzogchen and Bon history, his nonsectarian attitude and his attainment of the Rainbow Body or "body of light", *jalü* (Wylie: *'ja' lus*), at the end of his life. *Jalü* is the highest attainment for a Dzogchen practitioner: when the adept undergoes the dying process, there is "the intentional dissolution of the physical body into its subtle 'elements,' yielding uncanny appearances of multi-colored lights as well as the absence of an ordinary corpse." See: Achard 2008; See also: Gorvine, 2018 and Guinness, 2018.

384 Wylie: *rtsa rlung*; *rtsa* means "channel," and *lung* means "vital wind."

385 Wylie: *gtum mo*.

386 Wylie: *sku gsum rang shar*.

387 Achard 2008: 266.

388 Achard 2008: 41.

389 Klein/Wangyal 2006: 16.

global and the local, where globalized structures like the Bon religion operate simultaneously at both levels.

At the beginning of the retreat, Rinpoche, following the traditional practice, conferred upon the participants the full *Atri lung* (an oral transmission from a master to students, in which the master reads directly from the canonical text in Tibetan). The students started their retreat by performing a ritual meant to "secure the boundaries." The daily program consisted of four sessions of meditation, along with the performance of rituals. Yongdzin Rinpoche stayed at Shenten during the retreat, teaching occasionally. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung led the first hundred-day retreat and gave teachings during the following years (Figure 8) (see Appendix B for the students' daily program during such a retreat).

Figure 8: Westerners doing meditation practices at Shenten Dargye Ling. ©Christophe Moulin.

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

In the Triten Norbutse and Menri monasteries in Nepal and India, respectively, monks and nuns follow both or only one of these two paths called the Shedra[390] and the Gomdra. The first consists of a monastic college for the scholastic study of Bon, and the second involves a meditation school for the practice of the Bon teachings, particularly Dzogchen. Since those who follow the Gomdra need to be free of distractions and dedicate themselves fully to the practice, they spend most of the time during the retreat in silence, avoiding contact with the "outer world."

Yongdzin Rinpoche has stated that implementing a Shedra in Shenten is an impossible task, because Westerners do not have the cultural context or the required Tibetan language skills.[391] Despite this remark, an adapted Shedra started in 2019 at Shenten; it will last five years and will be delivered during annual three-week teaching retreats. The course is presented as being based on the curriculum of the traditional Dialectical School at Menri and Triten Norbutse monasteries.[392]

These curricula in monastic settings include the study of dialectics (*tshennyi*), logic (*tshema*), and perfection of wisdom texts (*pharchin*), the basic and gradual paths or stages to enlightenment (*salam*),[393] philosophy, cosmology and metaphysics, monastic discipline, tantra and Dzogchen. It also includes studies in history, poetry, orthography, astrology, medicine and Tibetan grammar among others. Monks also study religious rituals, arts, monastic dances and the like.[394] Notably, studies related to rituals (*to*)[395] and to the "ten cultural sciences" are absent at Shenten.

The Shenten Gomdra also aims to replicate the program as organized in Triten Norbutse and Menri monasteries but adapted to the Western reality. While certain aspects have remained identical, such as cutting off contact with the "outer world" and keeping the same number of meditation sessions as in the monasteries, other aspects, such as the duration of the program, were adapted to meet the local needs. Other obvious adaptations are the translations

390 Wylie: *bshad grwa*. This word designates the educational program followed both in Tibetan Buddhist and Bon monasteries and nunneries.

391 Namdak 2015.

392 See: Shenten Dargye Ling 2019b.

393 Wylie: *mtshan nyid; tshad ma; phar phyin*; *sa lam*.

394 For the curriculum of studies at Triten Norbutse Monastery (in Tibetan), see: Namdak 2005: 13. See also: Cech 1987/8; Skorupski 1968. For more on how the syllabus was established both in Menri and Triten Nortbuste in India and Nepal, see: Ramble/Yungdrung 2021: 184–202.

395 Wylie: *gto*.

of the teachings, while still keeping the recitations during the performance of rituals, the *lung*[396] transmissions, and certain practices strictly in Tibetan.

Dark Retreat

The practices most often mentioned by participants interviewed for this research include what is called the "Dark Retreat." In Bon, this is considered one of the most powerful and suitable environments for working with the teachings of Dzogchen and the practice of the Nature of the Mind, often referred to as the direct path of liberation. This path, Wangyal affirms, allows practitioners to recognize experiences exactly as they are, without treating them "as having power of [their] own or requiring any response."[397]

The Dark Retreat consists of isolating oneself in a space that is completely absent of light. According to Yongdzin Rinpoche, this practice is useful for people at two distinct stages: 1) those who are beginning to embark upon Dzogchen meditation and 2) more advanced practitioners. In the first case, the Dark Retreat is a matter of clarifying and stabilizing the participant's experience of the mind. In the second case, the purpose is to develop a certain kind of vision associated with the practice of Dzogchen and to deepen the practitioner's experience of them. During the Dark Retreat, "the visions and thoughts in the dark tell us what life is like in the unnoticed regions of our being. And the darkness is both intimate and boundless simultaneously."[398]

In the Bon context, Dzogchen practice is intended to help practitioners recognize the Natural State of the Mind, thereby "stabilizing the experience of the natural state and contemplating its dynamic manifestation in ever-increasing visions."[399] Two methods called *thögal* and *trekchö*[400] (further explained Chapter 9) are used to allow practitioners to experience it.

According to the Bonpo texts, there are three main methods to develop *thögal* visions. These methods consist of practice in a Dark Retreat as explained above, contemplation with space, and contemplation with sunlight. The first method is to be applied by the practitioner who, after being stable in the experience of the Natural State of Mind, is looking to develop *thögal* visions. While the

396 Wylie: *lung*.
397 Lowenthal/Wangyal 2003: vxi.
398 Lowenthal/Wangyal 2003: vxi; See more in: Reynolds 2014.
399 Achard 2017: 14.
400 Namdak 2010: 50.

word *thögal* does not appear in the Zhangzhung Nyengyud text,[401] its practice is explained in practice manuals, such as the Gyalwa Chaktri. There is a specific cycle of forty-nine days called "The Seven Cycles of Clear Light,"[402] appended to the Gyalwa Chaktri, containing seven sessions of practice, each involving breathing, visualization, body postures and so on, which are practiced in succession for one week each.[403] Traditionally in Tibet and in Bon monasteries in Nepal and India, and now in Bon centers in the West like Shenten, practitioners dedicate seven weeks (as defined in the Gyalwa Chaktri cycle) to complete the Dark Retreat.

Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains that in the Bon tradition, the Dark Retreat is considered to be one of the essential methods in Dzogchen practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that such a retreat can present certain difficulties. That is why, he adds, any practitioner who decides to undergo the Dark Retreat must have proper guidance and has to be prepared. The basic requirements are that the practitioner needs to "have a solid base of practice but one also needs to be in good shape both physically and mentally."[404] The texts, he emphasizes, outline the conditions that the dark cabin must meet in order to be suitable for the practice, such as proper ventilation and enough space.[405]

In the context of Gomdra retreats in monasteries in Tibet, India and Nepal, monks and nuns, as part of their Dzogchen practice, perform the forty-nine days of the Dark Retreat right after they have completed the series of practices called *tsalung tummo* mentioned above, where they apply the visualization exercises and breathing practices, as well as the combination of breath-retention techniques with physical movements and visualizations of the "channels and winds."[406] These channels and winds of the "subtle body" consist of "energy channels" (*tsa*) through which subtle energies or winds (*lung*) circulate.[407] Although a detailed description of these practices requires extensive explanation and is beyond the scope of this book, it is important to understand that "training for the most esteemed monastic scholars – who typically spend ten or more

401 The term *thögal* does appear in the text but with a different meaning from the one mentioned here; see: Achard 2017: 14.

402 Achard 2017: 14–15; See also: Achard 2008: 24.

403 See: Yungdrung 2006. See also Achard 2017: 19–20.

404 Yungdrung 2006: 2.

405 Yungdrung 2006: 2.

406 Klein/Wangyal 2006: 16.

407 For more on the winds and their role in the development of the human body, see: Hatchell 2014: 249, 301–3. Achard mentions that a detailed explanation of the techniques related to *tsalung* can be found in the Dzogchen text Kusum Rangshar, see: Achard 2008: 159. For an introduction to *tsalung* and *tummo* practices in Bon, see: Wangyal 2011a and the3doorsacademy 2016.

hours a day studying for nine to fifteen years and longer without any holiday except at New Year's – does not revolve around texts alone."[408]

The practice of the "retreat into the darkness" is related to the concept of "the Clear Light," whose practice involves performing difficult physical postures while watching the sunlight. The theory of the "Rainbow Body" *or jalü*[409] – the utimate attainment for a Dzogchen practitioner, resulting in the intentional dissolution or returning of the physical body into its subtlier elements – is linked to the theory of the natural luminosity of the mind.[410] Dzogchen teachings refer to the mind as luminous, and light plays an essential role in it as the creator of all phenomenal existence. Karmay eloquently explains this concept by saying that, from a Dzogchen perspective, "Enlightenment is nothing other than the mind itself when it is approached through spiritual means of realization."[411] The luminous mind is in fact "the creator of the world, the world being nothing but is only illusory projections."[412]

Wangyal recounts his own experience in the Dark Retreat,[413] when every day his master, Yongdzin Rinpoche, would come and talk to him, reminding him to do the visualizations: "My Dark Retreat was very successful and brought about a great change in my personality. During the first few days, it was not easy for me as a young boy with a lot of dynamic energy to stay confined and still in such a small, dark room."[414]

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

408 Klein/Wangyal 2006: 15.
409 Wylie: *'ja' lus*.
410 Karmay 2007a: 187, 190–94.
411 Karmay 1998b: 11.
412 Karmay 2007a: 203.
413 Wangyal 2000: 24–33.
414 Wangyal 2000: 33.

Currently, the Dark Retreat house offers three rooms. They have windows but these are completely covered in black, and each room has a private bathroom and shower. The participants receive their meals through a serving hatch, which preserves full obscurity. Geraldine Dubreuil, a French former assistant who served those doing Dark Retreats in Shenten by preparing their meals and managing other practical matters, refers to this practice as "a very deep purification on many levels. We are here for practitioners to give them all kinds of support and advice depending on their mind and specific circumstances."[415]

In 2012, twenty-seven people underwent Dark Retreats, staying for an average of seven days.[416] By 2017, some had completed the forty-nine-day cycle, including some of the participants interviewed for this research.

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

6.8 A Western Bon Stupa

Stupa is a Sanskrit word that refers to a type of religious structure containing sacred relics. The corresponding Tibetan term is *chörten*,[417] which indicates a Buddhist or Bon shrine, typically the tomb of a master or a monument to the Buddha. The history and the significance of stupas in Buddhism are extensively documented.[418] In contrast, Bon stupas have received far less attention.[419] The origins of stupas are possibly pre-Buddhist,[420] and they developed in India as a commemorative monument containing sacred relics of the Buddha.

415 Dubreuil 2012: 22.

416 See: Dubreuil 2012.

417 Wylie: *mchod rten*.

418 See, for example: Bentor 1996; Dorjee 1996; Harvey 1984; Ricca/Lo Bue 1993; Snodgrass 1992[1985]; Tucci/Chandra 1998[1932]. Concerning studies of specific Buddhist stupa, various works have been written on the stupa of Gyantse (located at Shekar Gyantse Monastery, in Gyantse, Shigatse Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, China. It was first documented by Giuseppe Tucci in 1937 and consequently studied by Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, see: Ricca/Lo Bue 1993.

419 Philip Denwood's article on Bon stupas was one of the first to deal with the subject, see: Denwood 1980.

420 Fussman 1986: 67.

It is clear that the symbolism of the stupa changed over time according to the spread of Buddhism: "Buddhist speculations and metaphysics evolved differently at different times and in different countries so that it is likely that the symbolism of the stupa did not remain the same through the ages."[421] The symbolism, functions, origins and ritual meanings[422] of Tibetan Buddhist stupas are described in detail in manuals that prescribe the various aspects of building a stupa. As monumental reliquaries, stupas are erected in special places and can have an array of different structures,[423] with the structural components and their proportions being precisely described in these manuals.[424]

A common element in the construction of Tibetan Buddhist (and Bon) stupas is the requirement that specific rituals should be performed. A person possessing certain qualities should guide the rituals for the stupa construction, which, in broad terms, is divided into three phases: the rituals done before, during, and after the construction.[425] These rituals include recitations, examining the place where the stupa will be built and the direction of the site, looking at the earth and whether it is appropriate, taking possession of the site, and purifying any adversities that the site may have.[426]

The relics contained in stupas can be of different types, such as physical relics of Buddha himself or of masters, and they are believed to preserve the "spiritual force and purity of the person they once formed part of."[427]

Apart from being reliquaries, stupas have "a system of overlapping symbols."[428] In the case of Bon, it is important to note that rituals related to the construction of stupas (and other types of buildings) are meant to maintain the "good relations between the human and preternatural realms."[429] This is the rationale behind the many rituals that are performed before any building activity. Stupas can be physical, but they can also be of an immaterial nature, belonging to the visionary or imaginary realms.[430]

421 Fussman 1986: 38.
422 For a comprehensive study on tantric practices of consecration for stupas in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, see: Bentor 1996.
423 Dorjee 1996: 3.
424 Dorjee 1996: 9.
425 Dorjee 1996: 24.
426 Dorjee 1996: 25–27.
427 Karmay 2009: 69.
428 Harvey 1984: 67.
429 Ramble unpublished.
430 Ramble unpublished.

The first stupa built at Shenten[431] was inaugurated in 2011. It was constructed according to the traditional Tibetan practices by Western builders and financed by a Western student. The process of choosing the place, constructing the stupa, and following the different phases of the rites and ceremonies had a far-reaching symbolic meaning, which A. M., one of the Shenten participants, described as "a Western Bon stupa to radiate Bon energy in France and in Europe." M. P. also referred to it as a "symbol of Shenten as the center of Bon in the West," while F. H. said the process of constructing it was a "way to bring us closer to the sangha [community of monastic and lay practitioners] and to the ultimate goal of enlightenment."

Figure 9: Shenten Dargye Ling Stupa, 2017. ©Mara Arizaga.

The stupa was built in traditional Tibetan style (Figure 9). Shenten's newsletter states that this stupa is "the first of its kind in a Western country, built in such a precise way, under the guidance of Yongdzin Rinpoche and with the performance of the full extensive rituals. Thus, its construction constitutes a unique and special event for Shenten Dargye Ling and its community, and for the continent in general."[432]

431 Apart from France, Bon stupas have also been built so far in the West in Mexico, Madrid, England and Austria.

432 Yungdrung 2016. In the same article, it is also noted that to be more precise, the first Bon stupa built in a Western country was constructed during Yongdzin Rinpoche's first visit to England, in David Snellgrove's private garden in Berkhamstead.

In 2008, "on an auspicious date," Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung selected the site for the construction of the stupa at Shenten, performing the "rituals for the earth purification." Subsequently, the builders laid the basic foundation. However, due to a lack of qualified stupa builders in France, the construction was postponed until 2009. Finally, just after the end of the autumn retreat, the first Shenten stupa was built by Paljor Norbu, a Tibetan who came from Nepal for this purpose, together with two Western students who had learned how to build stupas from Norbu, Yongdzin Rinpoche, and other Geshes and lamas who taught them the techniques.

In an extensive article detailing the different stages of the construction of the stupa, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains that traditionally, "devoted practitioners engage in the construction of these supports of Buddha's Body, Speech, and Mind, in different sizes, qualities, etc. according to the individual circumstances."[433] The construction followed elaborate rituals and several phases, which included the consecration of written mantras prepared in the prescribed way. A sacred "pill," containing 108 "holy substances" and representing Buddha's relic, was placed on top of the main axial "Tree of Life" at the center of the stupa. Written mantras were inserted, along with a solid, pure crystal marked with a [counter-clockwise] swastika,[434] which represents the "eternal" nature of Bon, and two "precious treasure vessels" that had been prepared and consecrated for the occasion. Different types of grains and medicinal herbs were inserted into the stupa as well. Extensive offerings were performed, and several volumes of sacred texts were then inserted into the stupa, with ceremonies led by Yongdzin Rinpoche. The final consecration was performed by Yongdzin Rinpoche and the monks, with the participation of Shenten's sangha members.

Traditionally, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung explains, the construction of stupas is considered as part of the Guru Yoga practice, where "the stupa is the support of Buddha's Mind. Therefore, whatever activities one performs with the aim of building and paying reverence by doing prostrations, circumambulations, presenting offerings, or even just by thinking of this, one can obtain inexhaustible merits."[435] Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung also indicates that in order to connect with the body aspect of the Buddhas, practitioners should "support the building of statues, pay devotion to them and consequently receive blessings." In order to connect with the speech aspect of Buddhas, they should "receive

433 See: Yungdrung 2010.

434 The swastika, as a Tibetan symbol, has no relation whatsoever with the Nazi swatiska. The figure has been widespread in Buddhist, Hindu and other East Asian religions for thousands of years. The Bon swastika is a counter-clockwise one.

435 Yungdrung 2016.

the Buddhas' teachings, and study them devotedly." Finally, he explains, a major practice for connecting with the Minds of the Buddhas is to "engage in the construction of the Kudung or stupas. Revering them by remembering Buddha's knowledge, one should pay respect, do prostrations with the three doors (of Body, Speech, and Mind); ask for blessings to pacify the obstacles and to strengthen one's practice."[436]

The Shenten stupa was described by S. G. as a step forward that "implanted Bon in France and beyond." The rituals performed around the construction of the stupa were also done following most of the traditional rules and steps as described in Bon texts. Westerners, who in most cases did not understand the meaning of the different rituals, actively participated in the different stages of the process.

Shenten is indeed not only a deterritorialized space but also a reterritorialized Tibetan/Western place, where Bon is being implanted in a new geographical, social and cultural milieu through a process of transplantation that results in adaptations and transformations, as we will see below. The Shenten Bon stupa serves as a concrete material object that represents Bon in the West, symbolically linking the "West" to Tibet. The stupa, called by a participant the "vision of Yongdzin Rinpoche," might even eventually become a pilgrimage site for Bonpos around the world. The practice of stupa circumambulation, which one can witness in Shenten regularly, is an example of how modern Bon, despite the general assumptions of the "scientific" and "nonritualistic" forms it can take, is able to accommodate devout practitioners, who do not necessarily disregard magical, ritualistic and devotional practices and aspects as cultural baggage. The meanings of religious symbols and places themselves are not rigid but fluid and multifaceted. While globalization, in the case of Bon, erases the geographical boundaries, new scenarios are created, which are both deterritorialized and reterritorialized spaces where Tibetan religious representatives and Westerners seemed to have shared symbols, exemplified by the Shenten stupa.[437]

6.9 Newsletters and Other Means of Disseminating Information

In 2006, Shenten began publishing a newsletter in French and English and mailing issues by post to all subscribed members of the Shenten Association. Initially

436 Yungdrung 2010.

437 See: Parsons 1951: 5. Toni Huber's research on the transposition of key sacred sites from India to Tibet and back again provides a useful comparison with the present case study. See: Huber 2008.

its purpose was to communicate the "non-teaching" activities at Shenten, such as possibilities for the practice of karma yoga. Each issue comprises no more than three pages, including a foreword by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung or other lamas; an extract of teachings given at Shenten or short texts translated from Tibetan into English and French; a calendar of the teachings, practices and other activities; and contact information for people who want to visit the center. In addition, the newsletters include short reports written by the people responsible for specific tasks at the center, such as one by the treasurer and another prepared by those in charge of translations and transcriptions about their ongoing activities. Contact information was provided for each person responsible for certain activities. There were also articles about Shenten and about the Yungdrung Bon Association in an effort to make its functioning transparent, as well as news about Triten Norbutse Monastery, events regarding the Yungdrung Bon tradition worldwide, and the activities of local groups.

The newsletter has evolved and changed since 2006, focusing today mostly on the calendar of activities of Geshes and lamas in the West. It is a periodic newsletter now sent by email to all members registered in the Shenten database. Typically, the newsletter begins with a letter from the president of the Shenten Association, followed by news regarding the center and the calendar of activities, retreats, and teachings related to Shenten's Geshes and lamas. Volunteers administer the newsletter, and its leadership has changed several times over the past few years. The goal is to publish four issues per year, but this is not always met due to delays in writing the articles or translating them into French or English. Thus, its periodicity depends more on the available time of the volunteers than on a fixed publication schedule. Often, academic articles on Bon studies are also included, particularly from scholars who are also Bon practitioners or who attend Shenten retreats.

An overview of the main events that have occurred since the beginning of Bon's arrival in the West can be seen in the timeline below:

6.10 Other Centers Associated with Shenten Dargye Ling

Several centers, groups of practitioners and communities related to Shenten Dargye Ling have emerged in Europe and abroad. For example, in 2012, the Yungdrung Bon Religious Association, The Native Tradition of Tibet (Asociación Religiosa Yungdrung Bön, la tradición nativa de Tíbet) was founded in Buenos Aires with the goal of spreading the Yungdrung Bon teachings in Argentina. Since 2011, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung has traveled annually to Buenos

Aires to deliver teachings to a group of some sixty participants. A small group of ten participants meets twice a month in a rented space to practice together.

Similarly, groups and centers have been established accross Europe, for example in Austria, the Netherlands, Romania, and elsewhere:[438]

- The Yungdrung Bön Cultural Association in Oradea, Romania, often receives Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche as a leading teacher.[439] Students of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung who attended retreats at Shenten Dargye Ling founded this association in 2011.
- In Austria, Yongdzin Rinpoche inaugurated the Yeshe Sal Ling Bön Center in July 2015, with Lama Sangye Monlam as its resident lama. The center is set up as a non-profit organization and its objectives are similar to those of Shenten, including promotion of the teachings and preservation of the Yungdrung Bon tradition. It offers several retreats throughout the year and facilities for the practice of the Dark Retreat.[440] An Austrian student of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Lama Sangye Monlam who was a regular attendant at Shenten retreats provided the funds to acquire the building that was converted into the Bön Center.
- The Yungdrung Bön Association in Hungary organizes teachings by Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and by Geshe Gelek Jinpa.[441] Hungarians who had attended several retreats at Shenten Dargye Ling founded this association in 2016.
- The Tapihritsa organization in the Netherlands organizes teachings by Triten Norbutse Ponlop Tsangpa Tendzin Rinpoche and Geshe Kalsang Gyatso.[442] It was founded in 2016 by Dutch students of Yongdzin Rinpoche who attended retreats at Shenten.
- There is also a small group of approximately twenty persons in Lithuania who practice Bon together and attend retreats in Shenten every summer.

One common element of these Bon centers in the West is the emphasis they place on Dzogchen practice and teachings. The essential features of Dzogchen are presented to Western students in the following terms: Dzogchen practice

438 Yeshe Sal Ling 2018; Stichting Tapiritsa 2018. See also, for example, the following websites: Asociația Culturală Bön 2018. See also: Asociación Yungdrung Bön en Argentina (since 2011).

439 See: Asociația Culturală Bön 2018.

440 See: Yeshe Sal Ling 2018.

441 See: Jungdrung Ten Gye Dü De 2018.

442 See: Stichting Tapiritsa 2018.

aims to reveal, within a person's immediate experience, the state of *rigpa*,[443] the Primordial State of the individual, which is beyond all time, conditioning and conceptual limitations. The ultimate goal is enlightenment, which reveals the true Nature of the Mind. According to Bon Dzogchen texts, this nature neither improves on enlightenment nor becomes flawed in conditioned existence. It is said to be present in all living beings as the abiding condition of every mind. Enlightenment is simply the full manifestation and experience of this enduring condition. This Natural State is spoken of in terms of its intrinsic primordial purity and its spontaneous perfection in manifestation. The realization of the Natural State of Mind depends on the capacity of the individual to "realize"[444] the Dzogchen teachings.

The Bon teachings, as conveyed at Shenten and the other Bon centers in the West described above, regard Dzogchen meditation as extremely powerful; it is described as being like the sun shining in the sky, which can easily purify deep darkness. Yongdzin Rinpoche equates Dzogchen to Yungdrung Bon by noting that "when we say Dharma or Yungdrung Bön, or whatever term we use, the real Dharma is this: one's Natural State of Mind, because this is the direct antidote of negative emotions."[445] Another common element of Bon centers is an emphasis on the "purity," "authenticity" and "originality" of Yungdrung Bon teachings, as well as its alleged unique origins in Zhangzhung. A third common characteristic is the link with Yongdzin Rinpoche and with Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal. All these centers were founded by students in their own countries, who first either visited Nepal and India or a Bon center in the West, often Shenten. They later invited the lamas to visit their countries and then created a formal and legal framework, usually in the form of a religious or a cultural association or foundation.

In this section, we have seen how Bon is spreading in the West, starting from the first teachings of Bon lamas who first came to Europe, mostly from Tibetan Bon monastic institutions in Nepal and India. These first Geshes, teachers, and lamas in Europe were able to adapt their way of teaching in the monasteries to new and varied Western audiences, most of whom, with some notable exceptions, did not have the time to engage in extensive retreats or the

443 Wylie: *rig pa*.

444 In this context the words "realization" and "to realize" refer to achieving a high level of experience in a given practice. A "highly realized" master, person or practitioner refers to someone who has achieved a high level of accomplishment in a given practice or along the path toward "enlightenment."

445 Namdak 2006d: 8.

inclination to join a religious institution. Westerners' main interest in Bon was the practice of Dzogchen.

The active role played in this process by certain Westerners in ensuring a physical installation and a legal framework for Bon in France, as a major international Bon center in the West, was essential for this initial establishment and consequent expansion into other European countries and beyond.

In the next section, I will explore another phenomenon of Bon in the West, called Ligmincha International, which was also started by the joint efforts of Westerners interested in Bon in conjunction with a Tibetan Bon Geshe, a student of Yongdzin Rinpoche and former monk. While the foundation of Ligmincha is closely linked with the history of Shenten, it also has unique characteristics in terms of how it is changing and adapting Bon teachings into a new form of practice, particularly through its Three Doors Academy.

7 Ligmincha International

Ligmincha International is a network of centers across North and South America and Europe led by *Geshe* Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, a former Bon monk who was the first to extend Bon teachings to the United States. The Ligmincha International website lists centers in almost twenty countries, illustrating the geographical spread of the Bon religion. The network is also active in releasing publications and information for followers and those interested in the religion and its teachings.[446]

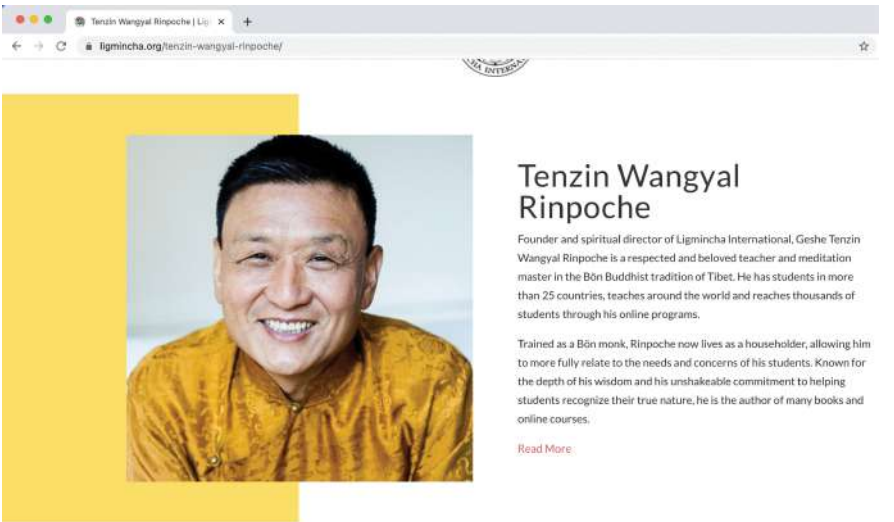

Figure 10: Image of Tenzin Wangyal in the header of the Ligmincha website (www.ligmincha.org). ©Ligmincha International.

Regarding his own personal journey, Tenzin Wangyal (Figure 10) recounts how he first came to the West in 1987 at the invitation of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche:

> I knew Rinpoche for a long time, of course, and he invited me, I came just as a visitor. I came for three weeks. After three weeks I applied for a little work to ISMEO[447] in Rome. I just stayed continuously and I began to teach, Norbu Rinpoche asked me to teach sometimes. So I taught a little bit. Not so much, I don't think there was so much. It wasn't

446 See their website: Ligmincha 2021.
447 International Association of Mediterranean and Oriental Studies (ISMEO).

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> because they planned [for] me to teach; but as I was there, they asked me to teach here and there.[448]

Tenzin Wangyal then went to Oslo University, where he received a scholarship to work with Professor Per Kvaerne. He spent a few months in Oslo and also visited Namkhai Norbu's center in Italy. He says that seeing Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, the founder of the Dzogchen Community, and the way he started to build his center in the Tuscany region of Italy, inspired him:

> Rinpoche definitely inspired me. I saw what he was doing, how he was doing [it]. I don't take anything light, I try to perceive and hear everything and have some positive influences. So, then I felt that I was at a personal level, I was 33 years old or something like that and interested in the world, exploring. I left my home, my teacher, my family, I left everybody. For a few years, I didn't get in touch with anybody. Even I could not; I remember I could not know when the Tibetan Losar [Tibetan New Year] was, [I was] so totally disconnected. Probably not intentionally, not intentionally I did that, but I think maybe unintentionally there was something there.[449]

He slowly began to feel that "maybe there is a purpose here" when he realized that by 1987, there were several Tibetan Buddhist centers in the West but not a single Bon center.[450] This motivated him to look at new possibilities other than only teaching at the Buddhist center already establish by Norbu. In 1990, he traveled to the United States and met Professor Anne Klein at Rice University. She invited him to return, and he visited the university during the following summer for a few weeks. She then encouraged him to apply for a Rockefeller fellowship, which he did with success. He returned to the United States for one year and felt that the "USA is the place to be."[451]

He started to teach a group of Westerners in Virginia, as yet without a center, until 1992, when a few students decided that they wanted to start a Bon center: "It was the first Ligmincha. I began to teach, but people wanted me to stay there. But I am not the kind of person to stay in one place; I like to travel. Because in my life, until I became a Geshe, I never traveled anywhere. Once I began to travel, I liked it." Furthermore, he highlights a revealing aspect of why he likes to travel "I began to like it, [but] also if you stay with a few people, you never know, I met lots of people, resources."[452]

448 Wangyal 2016b.
449 Wangyal 2016b.
450 Wangyal 2016b.
451 Wangyal 2016b.
452 Wangyal 2016b.

Tenzin Wangyal recounted how these first students were people he had met before during his first trip to the Dzogchen Community in Virginia: "They were very young people; we were all very young. Nobody knew exactly what we were doing . . . But these people had a house, so we said, okay, let's start." With Wangyal's own financial resources and that of some of the students, they hired a lawyer and set up a non-profit organization in 1992. This was the beginning of Ligmincha International.

Tenzin Wangyal recalls that during the first ten years of Ligmincha's existence, Yongdzin Rinpoche, who was then known as "the Lopon," and His Holiness Menri Tridzin were invited to the Ligmincha center in Virginia every year to impart teachings over three consecutive weeks.[453] In 1995 or 1996, Wangyal and his students were able to acquire land and to raise funds to establish the first center:

> We were looking for a center, but we had no money. We had no idea where money would come from. Funny story is to some of my students I asked them to look for that. They said they went to look for land, and the real estate agent asked, "What is the budget?" And they answered, "Money – don't worry about that." The real estate agent said, "Wow! We want these people." I told them how come you said no problem from money? Where is the money going to come from? I don't know. I said this is a good omen, you know.[454]

When I asked him how he decided which teachings to transmit to his students, he noted that,

> many of them only had a connection [to Dzogchen]. Some had already received teachings, some of my students they had access to teachings already through Norbu Rinpoche, so they were more interested in Dzogchen teachings. Specifically, all the time we taught Dzogchen, we also taught a little bit of different pieces from Zhangzhung Nyengyud cycle.[455]

Wangyal exemplifies in this statement that the spread of Bon in the West was influenced both by the promulgators of Bon and by the receivers, the Western students, who also influenced how Bon was being presented by a teacher, as Wangyal reveals. Insights into these dynamics further sheds light on the transnational religious relationships at multiple levels that take place among Bon and Buddhist centers, such as Namkhai Norbu's Dzogchen Community, that use the practice of Dzogchen as a common and core element.

453 Wangyal 2006b.
454 Wangyal 2006b.
455 Wangyal 2006b.

7.1 Modernist Bon

The creation of Ligmincha International was a cornerstone in the process of adapting Bon to a Western audience, particularly in the United States. It has been successful in attracting Westerners and led to even greater innovations, including mixing Bon teachings with Western psychotherapy. Wangyal asserts that "any teaching taught in the West by a Tibetan teacher will undergo change by the very fact of being taught in a new and different cultural and linguistic context, and the more successful a teacher is in communicating with the 'Western mind,' the more he will have to modify the teachings."[456]

The Three Doors Academy

In association with Ligmincha International, a recent development is the creation of the Three Doors Academy, an institution founded by Tenzin Wangyal that "teaches meditation methods with practical applications for everyday life."[457]

In the first issue of *Ligmincha Magazine Europe*, the Three Doors Academy was presented as "an educational organization developed in response to Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's desire to open Bon-Buddhist practices to a worldwide audience."[458] With its headquarters in the United States, a group of Western students of Tenzin Wangyal runs the organization. The Academy offers a "special three-year training program to those *sangha* members in the United States, Europe and Mexico who are interested in working deeply with these practices," which as a certified training exemplifies yet another adaptation of Bon in the West. Students who complete the training, the article indicates, "will be authorized to then share these practices with others."[459]

A Modern Bodhisattva Training

Presented as "profound teachings for today's world," the first Director of Operations of the Three Doors Academy, Kallon Basquin, explained that it was Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche who, about fifteen years previously (around 1997),

456 Wangyal 2000: 36.
457 See: The 3 Doors 2018.
458 Basquin 2011: 10.
459 Basquin 2011: 10.

had started "thinking outside the box of the traditional training he received."[460] Realizing that "planting the Dharma" in the West was going to require a unique approach, Wangyal is believed to have had a series of dreams in which he saw the first signs of what is now called the Three Doors program. According to this narrative, Tenzin Wangyal often discussed matters with His Holiness Menri Tridzi and the Lopon, "seeking their support and encouragement in developing his vision of opening the teachings to today's world."[461] As already noted, Yongdzin Rinpoche is the teacher of most Bon masters who teach in the West and being associated with him is perceived as a source of legitimacy.

Four years before the opening of the Three Doors Academy, Wangyal selected a group of senior students who began practicing privately with him to explore what they conceived as a new way of doing certain practices. Many aspects of what is now the Three Doors training evolved out of their discussions.[462] The Three Doors, Basquin adds, is considered the vehicle through which Tenzin Wangyal's vision is presented to the world.[463]

A "Western Way to Enlightenment"

When in August 2011 the Three Doors Academy training began its first three-year meditation and training program, it was announced as having been created "with the blessings of Yongdzin Rinpoche and His Holiness Lungtok Tenpai Nyima."[464] Initially, the legitimization of these religious leaders was still emphasized. Wangyal stated that the Three Doors Academy empowers trainees to become "tradition carriers" of his "Heart Drop," utilizing a metaphor often quote in Bon texts. "You learn not only how to transform your own life using the Three Doors Practices, but also how to present these practices to others."[465] After obtaining the certificates to be official teachers, graduates

> may then choose to take these teachings into the world in their individual ways and settings. While maintaining the *authenticity* of what they have been taught, they can provide teachings in public programs, hospitals, educational organizations or business environments. It

460 Basquin 2011: 11.
461 Basquin 2011: 11.
462 Basquin 2011: 10.
463 Basquin 2011: 10.
464 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.
465 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.

> will be up to the participants to determine where to take the fruits of their Academy training [emphasis added].[466]

John Jackson, one of the first to complete the three years of training, categorized it as "the richest training and practice experience of my life. These practices reached the source of issues that I had never been able to fully resolve through psychotherapy or other meditation methods."[467]

Another student who completed the program described his being part of the Three Doors training over the last three years as a phenomenal experience also linked to Bon practices:

> I thought I had understood the practices, but the Three Doors program took me deeper in a very direct and intimate way. I connected to a subtler level of my pain body, speech, and mind, and dissolved patterns that had eluded me. I also realized that the Three Doors Academy is Rinpoche's precious gift from his heart essence, and am grateful for his vision in bringing these teachings to all of us in this very accessible way.[468]

The developments described above reveal that, borrowing from McMahan's expression "Modernist Buddhism," we can speak about a "Modernist Bon," which hybridizes Bon practices and traditions with Western ideologies, particularly psychology and psychotherapy. Other elements highlighted by McMahan are also relevant to the phenomenon opf global Bon, including an emphasis on aspects of Bon that seem to resonate well with Western audiences and the simultaneous suppression of aspects of Bon that appear to stand in contradiction with what "makes sense" to Westerners.

Some of the Western characteristics that seemed to have also influenced Wangyal's reformulation of Bon teachings are Westerners' rejection of whatever they perceive as being "religious," as I will discuss in detail in Part III. In this regard, A. M., one of the first participants to complete the Three Doors training, explains:

> the Three Doors is a lay program. It uses the Bon teachings but, for example, we don't refer to Tenzin Wangyal as "Rinpoche," we call him only by his name. We don't pray, we read what we call "the poems of inner refuge" developed by Tenzin Wangyal. And it is clear for me that these are techniques that came from Bon, but it is not religious. There are no images.

466 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.
467 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.
468 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.

A "Rare Chance for Radical Transformation"

A student of Wangyal who interviewed one of the participants of the Three Doors Academy wrote in the Ligmincha magazine about her impressions of the program as follows: "Talking with Rose about the training made a strong impression on me. Before our conversation, I already felt the program was very useful and important. But now I see why the training is such a rare chance for a radical transformation."[469] By 2018, the Three Doors Academy was presented in a secular way, as "a program that helps you unleash your full potential and truly transform your being. As you transform, you can see the impact on others – your family, coworkers, friends, relatives, and society."[470]

In October 2018, the fifth North American academy began at the Serenity Ridge Retreat Center in Virginia, opening a two-and-a-half-year program built around six in-person group retreats, along with interactive online support. The Academy newsletter reports that after graduation, participants "support each other in maintaining an ongoing commitment to their meditation practice and serving the well-being of others."[471] The Academy also evolved to support online practices, for example, an online meditation program that "explores the body as a powerful doorway into open awareness and the vibrancy of direct experience," which is presented as an opportunity to connect with stillness and increase "inner stability."[472] This online course is also available in a Spanish version.[473]

The title of a section of the Ligmincha magazine poses the question to readers, "A Traditional Path or The 3 Doors?"[474] – explicitly positioning these two as opposite paths. The Three Doors Academy appears specifically "Western" in its activities, its way of functioning and its scope. Although de-emphasizing the elements of Bon religion on its website, Wangyal explains that as part of the training, students have to do what the Academy calls "sixty-three transformations." He explained in an interview that these transformations mean that students actually apply the Bon teachings, though "not just accumulating mantras but changing the conduct."[475] For example, he elaborates, "if somebody has a

469 Ligmincha Europe 2011a: 13.
470 Ligmincha Europe 2018: 16.
471 Ligmincha Europe 2018: 16.
472 Ligmincha Europe 2018: 16.
473 Ligmincha Europe 2018: 16.
474 See: Jackson 2017.
475 Wangyal 2006b.

bad relation with food, so they change their relation with food, or they change the relation with their partner; with their profession, with money."[476]

The Three Doors, he explains, is for people who are interested in awareness "but who are not Buddhists." The syllabus was created by an early group of students, including Basquin, who were also doing Bon practices, and Tenzin Wangyal actively participated in this process. A relevant singularity is that most of these first students who laid the basis of the program were trained therapists. Recounting the experiences of the first group of students while developing the curriculum of the Academy, Rose Najia, one of the participants, remarked:

> Out of that sharing, our mutual support began to grow. Our main learning experience was selecting and writing about the sixty-three transformations we were all committed to making in our lives, using the practices. This took three years and some of us are still working on them. Some people completed all sixty-three transformations two or three times. We did what Rinpoche teaches to all his students to do – we selected issues, problems, and limitations in our lives and then used the practices to transform them.

She explains that one of the main reasons for giving her support to this initiative was that Tenzin Wangyal tended to the group while they were doing the training. She added that she "could see it was a radical step on his part to take this risk, to go against the centuries of monastic tradition and open these teachings to the public. I think all of us in the training group could feel his commitment, so I felt a great desire to support him in that."[477]

While there is no reference to Bon on the website of the Three Doors Academy, Tenzin Wangyal has specified that the first and second cohorts of students at the Three Doors Academy were also following Bon practices and he had a personal relation with them. But this was not true of the third cohort, which was composed of participants who did not have a Bon background or direct contact with Bon teachings. He further notes that "we are not intending [the Three Doors Academy] to be preserving Bon culture, we don't. I look at it more as a social thing, and whatever the spiritual impact it will have, and that's all. I see impact."[478] Looking back over his experience in the West over the last twenty years, Wangyal says that he witnessed many people benefit in their personal, relational and professional lives from "Bon's legacy of wisdom and compassion." Over those two decades, he adds, he has continually worked on how best to present the teachings "coherently and effectively in a cultural context so different from my own. Almost without exception, the teachings and practices for healing body,

476 Wangyal 2006b.
477 Ligmincha Europe 2011a: 14.
478 Ligmincha Europe 2011a: 14.

speech, and mind [The 'Nine Purification Breathings' of *Tsalung*, the 'Five Warriors Syllables,' and the 'Practices with the Five Elements']479 have been the most useful and transformative."480

The Three Doors Academy has Western coordinators in North and South America and Europe, indicative of its reach across much of the globe. According to Wangyal, it has designed its retreats and teachings with the modern Westerner in mind while attempting to remain true to the fundamentals of Bon teachings but in a nonreligious form. Wangyal further says that he sees the Three Doors Academy as an opportunity to help Westerners according to their own circumstances. At the same time, he emphasizes that the approach taken at the Academy has also been effective for long-standing students of his who previously followed a more traditional Bon path:

> People who are a more traditional form of practitioner, it really touches them and I see people who change their behavior, they change physical attitudes. I see changes, which means basically that it supports keeping their spiritual practice. [For] other people, it also depends on how to define spiritual practice. My definition of spirituality is that these people, they have an introduction to their Nature of Mind.481

This statement denotes a particular definition of spirituality, one that is connected to a specific aspect of Bon considered by Bonpos as the essence of Dzogchen practice, the introduction to the Natural State of Mind. Wangyal notes that, according to his experience, the "main power to change" an individual comes not from analysis and reflection but from "who they are in the Nature of their Mind." He further differentiates this approach, in which the "source of power" from which change comes is very different from, for example, therapy. Because of that, the practices at the Three Doors Academy can actually deepen a person's spiritual practice, he believes.

Do You Have to Have a Tibetan Teacher . . . To Be Introduced to The Nature of Mind?

In this discussion, Wangyal further posed a question that was echoed by some participants interviewed for this research: "Do you have to have a Tibetan teacher, or is there a specific form to be introduced to the Nature of Mind, or can somebody awaken by circumstances in their life, awaken by enough mentoring, or just

479 Wangyal 2000; Wangyal 2002; Wangyal 2011b; Wangyal 2012.
480 Ligmincha Europe 2011b.
481 Wangyal 2006b.

by reading texts?"[482] He goes further by asking whether the Nature of Mind can be seen as belonging to a specific tradition or if it is universal, therefore questioning whether it is relevant if we call it a "Bon practice" in contrast to calling it, for example, a "Nyigmapa practice." Wangyal recalled that he had discussed this matter with Yongdzin Rinpoche, asking him, "Does it matter if you call it Bon? If Buddha is Buddha, does it matter if you call it Buddha?" He added that it matters for Bon, it matters at the level of preserving transmissions and lineages, touching on issues of authenticity discussed before.

Wangyal has compared the impact of the Academy to a health program connected with the hospital[483] where one of his earliest students, Alejandro Chaoul, works.[484] Wangyal elaborates thus:

> I really believe in Dzogchen teachings and I really believe that, for example, pain, physical pain, we have done some research and I have my own very experiences that in physical pain you can change . . . The reason pain goes away, as we all know, [is that] our conceptual mind, our pain identity is the one that created it. But when you are able to separate it, as we call in Dzogchen, separate the mind with the Nature of Mind, pain changes so much. So I use very different language. But still for me [it] is pure Dzogchen. But I make it understandable in different ways.

Wangyal underscores that he believes in social change through the principle of Dzogchen, an issue about which he is considering writing a book. He has also taught a course called "Enlightened Leadership,"[485] transmitted via webcast.

> Basically, it is all about how to become a good leader with principles based in these teachings. I feel it could be very good for people in the business world. Again, if you question about how much spiritual practice they will reach, it is difficult to say; but at least it will give them some spiritual perspective.[486]

He explains that in addition to Ligmincha and the Three Doors Academy, he also founded Lishu Institute[487] in India, where Western students receive a traditional approach to studying Bon: "They [the teachers] go traditionally line by line, teaching the Nine Ways of Bon." He notes that he has invested "more money and energy in India than anywhere else in the West. Sometimes I doubt if it was a good thing to add. There is a small group of people but very dedicated, three years, so I

482 Wangyal 2006b.
483 For more on this program see: Chaoul/Cohen 2010.
484 Chaoul is an Argentinian based in the United States and one of the trainers of the Academy.
485 See the videos at: Wangyal 2016a.
486 Wangyal 2006b.
487 Ligmincha/Lishu 2021.

believe in it, so I am [also working in] preserving [the tradition]. We have five, ten people, if I would not believe in it, I would not put so much energy."[488]

At the same time, he adds, Ligmincha holds a retreat every winter focusing on the explanations of the *Gyalwa Chaktri*, the practice manual of the Zhangzhung Nyengyud Dzogchen cycle. Participants include students who have undergone the full preliminary *(ngöndro)* practices and who have been following Bon for as many as thirty years. Some of them have completed the seven-week Dark Retreat (see Chapter 5). However, the objective of the Three Doors Academy, he explains, is "to help society, and it may bring some people in Ligmincha, and into Bon. Or it might not." A point that Wangyal made clear is that his expectations do not include making "these people become Bonpos." Yet, he sees the Three Doors Academy as a way of supporting the spread of Bon, because, he argues, the practices at the Academy were initially inspired by Bon.[489] Many lamas, he recounts, tell him that wherever they go people who have heard something about Bon usually did so through one of his books, which are now also being published in China. He adds,

> I just try to see whatever and whenever I can help. Of course, deep inside there is a wish, it would be nice to be able to do exactly what you want, but this is not the world. When it doesn't support you, you don't want to close yourself up and don't do at all. So you help whatever you can help.[490]

Wangyal further believes he is lucky to attract "capable people, resourceful people. They initiate things." This aspect – the involvement of Westerners who are willing to invest time, financial resources and their own professional expertise – has proven to be essential in the establishment of Bon in the West, including for Ligmincha International.

In his analysis of what he refers to as "global Buddhism," Baumann points to two predominant groups of Buddhists in Europe, which he identifies as traditionalists and modernists. "Modernist Buddhists" are characterized by having demythologized and rationalized traditionalist Buddhism. Baumann argues that, in a similar way, some postmodernist Buddhists have secularized Modernist Buddhism. In this regard, an important part of what is described as Modernist Buddhism "is constituted by approaches and understandings that no longer refer to them as Buddhist."[491] While the curriculum and the structure of the Three Doors Academy is based on the Bon teachings, in a similar manner, it is

488 Wangyal 2006b.
489 Wangyal 2006b.
490 Wangyal 2006b.
491 Baumann, 1996; Baumann 2001.

presented as a secular institution, free of any devotional or ritualistic element and with a strong emphasis on psychological dimensions that were surely influenced by the fact that the curriculum of the program was mostly developed by therapists. This "psychologization" of Bon, which shares certain characteristics with Buddhism in the West as it has also undergone a similar process, implies presenting – and transforming – certain Bon ideas and practices such as Dzogchen under new labels and names, in order to reach wider audiences. Future developments will show to what extent the program will still be able to be described as "based on Bon."

Another characteristic of the Three Doors Academy, as discussed above, is that it makes extensive use of the Internet, digital media and digitized structures. This in turn shapes the way that the practices are experienced by imprinting a largely individual approach rather than a community approach. In relation to Buddhism, Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo have noted that "as Buddhist practice increasingly takes place online, the space of meditation itself is recontextualized into the blur and motion of contemporary urban life, such that practice often becomes something that people do while they are doing something else."[492]

Apart from Shenten and Ligmincha, the existence of various centers across Europe and the United States highlights the breadth and diversity of the Bon religion across the Western world, accessible to all and ever-growing. It also demonstrates the capacity of the promulgators of Bon in the West to adapt and integrate their religion into Western modern societies through a process in which Westerners themselves also play a significant role in shaping how this religion is transformed and adapted in this new context.

492 Wagner/Accardo 2015: 134.

Part III: **Western Bonpos**

8 Where Did We Come From?

Globalization has affected the diffusion of religion and has advanced the spread of traditionally non-Western forms of religion into Western cultures. Does this mean that new forms of Westernized Bon are emerging? Does the expansion of the religion pose a threat, an opportunity or perhaps even both, in relation to the continuity of the tradition?[493] The literature on these issues shows no apparent agreement about whether Tibetan Buddhist (and Bon) traditions could under threat through contact with the modern and postmodern world.[494]

Baumann notes the often-tense relationship between traditionalist and modernist forms of Buddhism.[495] His term "global Bon" highlights two main characteristics that are present in the current processes of transmission and diffusion of Bon in the West. According to Baumann, "global" encompasses both the transnational and transcontinental flow of Buddhist ideas and practices, as well as the international travel of Buddhist teachers and students. He views it as the most recent of four processes he identifies in the history of Buddhism: canonical Buddhism, traditionalist Buddhism, modernist Buddhism, and what he calls "post-modernist" or "global" Buddhism, marked by its geographical spread outside of Asia along with its modern adaptations.[496] He also notes that neither the forms nor the periods of Buddhism are static or fixed. "Rather, an ongoing change is observable, and the cumulative tradition of Buddhism constantly engenders new interpretations of Buddhist practices and teachings."[497] One might add that the same applies to Bon. The following analysis shows that the global is always permeated by the local dimensions of the individuals' experiences, which have allowed a global Bon to take roots in the West.

The context in which Bon has become global can be further explained as a transnational religious field[498] where, without a doubt, the Internet has played a key role in the spread of Buddhist religious concepts. We will see that many Bonpo Tibetan lamas, Bon centers and followers make extensive use of the Internet. At the center of this transnational religious field, the primary actors are the lamas or the teachers (in many cases, former lamas) who are transmitting the teachings to the West.[499] Their success – at least for those who decide to

493 Oldmeadow 2001: 269–70.
494 Oldmeadow 2001: 275.
495 Baumann 2001.
496 Baumann 2001.
497 Baumann 2001: 31.
498 Lopes 2014: 85.
499 Lopes 2014: 87.

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follow them and become their students – is based, among other factors, on their position as representatives and "holders" of a tradition, on their charisma (as mentioned by Karmay above and by some participants), and also, in the view of other participants, on their capacity or efforts to transmit religious concepts in a secular language, in many cases, using examples that are relevant for the new audiences.

Based on these criteria, it is possible to speak about a "global Bon" with specific characteristics, which is in a process of change and adaptation. In the following chapter, I will analyze the main findings from interviews with Bon followers in the West to see further how this process is marked by conceptual fluidity and flexibility, highlighting the various ways in which different people appropriate, negotiate and adapt Bon practices to their personal lives and circumstances.

By focusing in this chapter and the next one on the experiences narrated by individuals, I delineate the "personal" religious experiences of Bon as they are actually lived.[500] I have listened for patterns that emerge from their narrations, including how certain elements are appropriated and how others are rejected, creating a constant dialogue between the "formal" and the "real" practice in everyday life. Other patterns that have emerged from participants' voices include how certain aspects of Bon are being emphasized in the West, particularly the rational and scientific parts of Bon and Dzogchen practice. Displaying characteristics similar to what David Lopez has described in relation to "modern Buddhism," some participants perceive of Bon as not dogmatic and as a path that emphasizes individual practice rather than institutional belonging.[501]

These two chapters explore in depth the six major themes that my research uncovered, which are reviewed and analyzed by providing extended data from the interviews. The first section of this chapter, "Narrating the Past," highlights one of the salient themes shown in the data: participants represent a variety of geographical backgrounds but far less diversity of religious backgrounds. The second major section, "Becoming a Bonpo," describes the interviewees earliest encounters with Bon, from its first mention to attending a teaching or a retreat. This section addresses the process of transitioning from a Western religion, in the majority of cases Catholicism (or no religion, or an Asian religion in the case of a Hindu participant) to Bon, the participant's interpretation of this process, and what it means to them to identify as a Bonpo. The third section, "What

500 See: McGuire 2008.
501 See: Lopez 2002.

is Bon for Participants?" looks at how adherents define Bon, whereby they sometimes had difficulty putting their understanding of it into words.

8.1 Narrating the Past

One of the major themes of my research is the way in which participants selectively narrate their past before encountering Bon. This reconstruction of their autobiographies is in line with characteristic ways of communicating the past noted by scholars of religious conversion, as I will further analyze below.

Themes of geographical diversity and their relation to the religion of their upbringing are divided into four subthemes, which include participants' views of who they are and where they come from in relation to their encounter with Bon. These subthemes are grounded in specific quotes from the interviewees as follows:

1. Some interviewees specifically differentiated themselves from Tibetan Bon practitioners, positioning themselves as individuals who "take" only specific aspects of the Bon tradition that are not "culturally Tibetan."
2. Many interviewees noted they were not raised with religion but now consider themselves to be a religious participant. For those who were raised in a religious context, there is a common narrative of a separation between the participants' attitudes toward "religion" or "spirituality" and their parents' religious understanding.
3. In connection to the above, many participants felt that in order for them to practice Bon properly, they needed to renounce (not necessarily formally) their previous religion. While only one participant had formally renounced Catholicism, others expressed what Lewis Rambo would classify as an "apostasy" stage, in which they abandoned their religion and joined a new religion, belief or spiritual movement.
4. Most participants expressed disenchantment with the idea of "religion" and "organized religion," pointing out that religion had been "imposed on them." This led to ambivalence about whether Bon, in their view, is – or is not – a "religion."

In reconstructing their past, thirteen participants mentioned a key experience that took place during their childhood and made them question or ultimately reject their childhood or family religion, most often Catholicism. What is relevant for my research is not the specific incidents themselves but the meaning participants have attributed to these incidents for rejecting or leaving their

family's religions. I focus on how participants narrated the journey that brought them to the point of deciding to follow Bon.

Participants were mainly Christian or Catholic at one point, although the religious backgrounds also included Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and self-professed agnostics and atheists. More than twenty-two interviewees (out of a total of thirty-six participants) specifically mentioned "Catholicism" as part of their background, especially those from Europe or Argentina. They indicated that they were bought up in a Catholic environment, and their narrations of the past often include highlighting how their positioning vis-à-vis "the Church" was crucial in their becoming Bonpos.

Furthermore, from the outset, participants identified themselves as being part of a group that is distinct from what they refer to as "the original" Tibetan Bon followers. This is further explored under the third theme, "What is Bon for Participants?" in which I look at how participants describe themselves – as either Bonpos or members of other denominations, which also reveals how their religious identity changes over time – keeping in mind that a religious identity is always being negotiated and constructed.

We are not Tibetans

Three interviewees made a point of differentiating themselves from Tibetans. N. N. asserts plainly, "We are not Tibetans." C. F. mentions, "I was never fascinated by [the] Tibetan world or the Tibetan aspects of the tradition." These participants underlined that Bon is not attached to a specifically Tibetan culture, but rather that it is "universal" and as such cultural specificities are not relevant. These assumptions also diverge from the often-encountered notion held by Westerners in Buddhist and Bon centers that frames Tibetans as Others who are simple and pure, wise and calm, and sees Tibet as a pristine ecological paradise.[502] Perhaps their opinions were influenced by the recent scandals in the world of Tibetan Buddhism (Chapter 4), or it might also be related to Westerners spending longer periods in face-to-fact contact with the lamas and consequently deconstructing ideas of Tibetans as "vegetarians," for example, after seeing them eat meat.

Moreover, the social and cultural backgrounds of the interviewees influenced a range of meanings that they attributed to their becoming Bonpos, due to their prior conditions that represent, in Rambo's conversion theory, the stage

502 See: Lopez, Jr. 1994.

called "the context," which "has shaped a distinct transpersonal psychology of Buddhist converts, especially in non-Asian cultural environments."[503] Among the interviewees Bon is defined according to how it is presented and how it is received and is heavily influenced by standardized discourses replicated on the Bon websites, as well as by the participants' cultural, social and psychological contexts.

No Religious Background, But . . .

Some participants mentioned that they had "no religious background" but noted that at critical moments in their life, religion had played a role. D. F. was born into a family of schoolteachers, and he explained that in his country of origin, "There is no religion in school, it's forbidden. Religion is for outside school and outside university. All my parents, my grandparents are teachers. There is no spiritual background at all in my family." He was baptized because he was born prematurely at seven months: "I was baptized out of urgency because they thought I would die, so they baptized me [in the Catholic clinic] so I would be saved." He recounts that, "the only person in my family who somehow had some words of wisdom is my grandfather on my father's side. He was a musician, and many times he was asking people what makes you happy. He had some – he enjoyed talking about philosophy. This is the only person in my family who had some reflection on life."

F. H. claims that he had no religious background but noted that his father, toward the end of his life, opened up and revealed that he was a Christian and that he went to church and believed in God. F. H. thinks that his father's beliefs were "childish, I mean, [I know] 'childish' is a negative word . . . And he died with that . . . which was very good, but I was really brought up without religion. I wasn't baptized."

C. I. asserts that his family did not practice any institutionalized faith. He was brought up with no religion, "apart from just the everyday Christianity that is in the background in [his country], which is not so much, really." He mentions that once, when he was fourteen, he voluntarily went to a church service because he was bored. He did not find it interesting, so he never went again. Later when he was seventeen, he became intrigued with all different forms of "mystical philosophy," and so, for years, he explored different forms of such philosophies, including Celtic religion and occultism. He asserts that "a lot of people, for example, they bring their Christian religious preconceptions to

503 Yü 2014: 475.

Tibetan religion. Obviously, they will do that so when they have confession, they'll obviously . . . think about it, even if they don't consciously think about that. There's going to be some unconscious thing."

Similarly, C. F. mentions that his parents were not religious at all, but he adds, "Mysteriously, I was interested by that when I was a child. I had the best notes of my class in religion, and so I think I was interested by spirituality . . . it was very strange for my mother and my father because they don't understand what's happened."

The statement above illustrates a link made by several participants between what they refer to as "religious" and its connection to "spirituality."

It Sounded a Little Bit Stupid

Some participants said that religions sound stupid and unintellectual. M. M. was brought up as a "fervent Catholic," but when he became a teenager and started asking questions, he thought the answers "sounded a little bit stupid," although he underscores the fact that perhaps he "didn't ask the right person." M. M. continues by saying that the biggest problem for Christian theology is the existence of evil. Noting that Buddhism has its own difficult questions, she highlights how Christianity says that "evil exists because God loves humans so much that he leaves them free will. It just sounded so stupid to me." Due to this, she started searching to find answers to her questions: "I went from New Age stuff to more occult Kabbalah stuff. But I was always feeling that it was not the real thing. Finally, I was anti-Buddhism. First of all, because I really didn't like the trendy, it was so modern now. Hollywood people like celebrities, etc. I really hated the kind of show-off that came with."

In the case of S. A., encountering Bon was the result, as she narrated it, of a "disenchantment with samsara."[504] She emphasizes that from the beginning of her life, she always had "what Khenpo calls disenchantment with some samsara." She thought people were following totally meaningless pursuits and believed that "this can't be all." At the same time, she felt that she was:

504 The Sanskrit word *samsara*, like its Tibetan equivalent *khorwa* (Wylie: *'khor ba*), denotes the Buddhist and Bon doctrine of rebirth, which asserts that every sentient being goes through an endless cycle of repeated births, mundane existences and deaths in one of the six realms of existence (heaven, demigod, human, animal, ghosts, hell); one's time in samsara ends when a person attains enlightenment.

> on a certain path and I have to find people who know about this path, because I myself cannot reconstruct everything just from my own. I need to find the experts for this very path. It is very strange. Even as a child, I remember thinking, because if I don't find the people who know this path, it would be much too hard to reconstruct everything, including the rituals. Somehow I find this very strange for a child to think, "I have to reconstruct rituals."

She remembers that she tried to remain conscious when she fell asleep, believing that "great things will be revealed. I tried, and tried, and tried, and didn't succeed. But anyway, I tried." At the same time, she recognizes that she grew up completely nonreligious: "I did not associate this path with religion at all. It was just this sort of nameless thing I couldn't talk to anybody about." After she read a book by an Austrian writer who made allusions to meditation, she thought this might be the path she was looking for.

> S. A. mentions that all human beings have "emotional holes" and that these are often filled by beliefs, blocking "the door for any opportunity that we might have to learn something later about the things we don't know anything about." This was her reason for being against believing something, "and all religions involve beliefs. So I thought religions are just for stupid people." This thought prevented her from finding Bon, because, she argues, it is usually wrongly labeled as a religion, "and I just did not look for my path anywhere labeled religion."
>
> Another subtheme, related to the previous one, is being suspicious of the rules of religions. This presents an obvious contrast with the fact that Bon centers, like Bon monasteries, follow strict rules and guidelines that both lay participants and ordained persons are expected to follow. The narratives below shed light on how participants see their experiences in the Bon tradition as not fundamentally religious, even when they do follow rules, perform rituals and are actively involved in a center that has a monastic structure. One of the main reasons alluded to by participants is that they found answers in Bon to their quest for meaning from a practical or rational perspective. In this perspective, they referred to meditation as a practice that is not aligned with dogma, religion, gender or nationality.

Negative Religious Experiences

Other participants grew up with a religious background but reported that it was not a positive experience for them. Eight interviewees described a moment in their lives when they started doubting the beliefs of traditional religions, particularly Catholicism, and the authority of the Church. They described their disappointment in the inability of the Church to provide answers to their questions or the unsatisfactory answers they received from family members or priests, leading them to look elsewhere for explanations and meaning.

E. S. was brought up in a strict Catholic household. She feels that the problem with Catholicism is that it imposes rigid rules on people. But she maintains that there is one aspect of Catholicism that is useful for practicing Bon, and that is devotion: "When you enter here, devotion comes easily." It is significant to note that most Westerners find it difficult to digest the notion of "devotion," which is the reason, two participants remarked, that lamas use the word "trust" instead.

A. M. mentions that, as a child, people "wanted to influence my religious part, but I did not allow it." Her relatives questioned how it was possible for her and her sisters to grow up without religion, but her parents did not want a strict religious upbringing for their children. "They talked about it and agreed that, during our childhood, they would have an inclination toward Catholicism," says A. M. "The truth is that when I entered a church, I was terrified. I rebelled; I did not want [to] kneel. Blood, open hearts, tears – all of that disturbed me. I could not find [any]where to look. The drama of Catholicism bothered me so much. I never understood anything and neither made any move to understand anything."

A. M. explains that one day, when she was twelve years old, her aunt told her that she should have her first communion, just as all her cousins had done. And so A. M. took her first communion. She says further:

> When I see Catholicism and all the tragedy that has resulted in the world and so much suffering it has caused and confusion, judgments, prejudices, hurts me pretty bad, I see a lot of human population [interested in finding] something, a significance, and it really hurts that the priests have a captive audience that could be helping a lot, and you hear them and it's like complete darkness.
>
> Although Tibetan Buddhism was once portrayed as the "polluted" Other in contrast with Indian Buddhism, as well as in relation to Catholicism, and the sanguinary images found in Tibetan monasteries were once described as proof of its evil nature, the statements above exemplify the changing nature of the "othering" of Tibet (analyzed in Chapter 5). Tibet is still viewed as the Other but now of a positive kind, as the pure, non-religious tradition[505] in contrast to the negative judgments of the Catholic Church and its darkness.

Another participant, D. E., mentions she is Jewish by background "because my father was Jewish and my mother converted to Judaism. We were not [overt] practitioners, and also my father, when I was sixteen years, stopped really practicing at home." D. E. adds,

> Other than that, as a child when I was five years old, I actually doubted the existence of God. I mean, those concerns came to me when I was very little, and I used to ask my

505 See: Lopez, Jr 1994.

> parents, and the responses they gave me they were not helpful, and then I thought that no, there was no God, and the responses in my surroundings about what religion was did not convince me and I wasn't a believer.

M. N.'s family was Catholic, but M. N. did not have a positive experience in the church. Her father was against religion "in the sense of the general opium of the people and that sort of thing. So he didn't want me to be baptized, [but] my mother [did]. So finally I got baptized after my mother divorced and married someone else. But I followed this thing, how do you say, catechism?" She remembers the first two years of catechism as a "nice experience" but notes that in the last year, it was, as she puts it,

> a disaster. I started to see that the priest, he believes only what he sees. Because once I didn't bring my [workbook], and I said I forgot it and he says, "No, you didn't do it. I believe only what I see." . . . I hated that I had a small pink book and you had to stamp [it] every time you go to the Mass so you can prove you've been there. It was ridiculous. So this put me [off] from all that for long, and I didn't like to be a, how do you say, a sheep that follows everything.

S. G. is the only participant from Africa. He was raised in a strong Catholic tradition. At the age of thirteen, he left Catholicism and became interested in many "spiritual avenues." He explains:

> As I was looking for more explanations and I couldn't get more in this tradition. I only became interested in religion again many years later when I came to France . . . I was eighteen when I came here. In Africa I was already practicing martial arts, and I had interest in Zen and Asian traditions. When I came here, I was deeply interested in different ways, like hypnosis, magic, alchemy, occultism and so on.

Some participants felt a need to renounce their past religion before moving on. This rejection of their previous religion is indeed a salient element of Buddhist conversion in today's world.[506]

U. G. was raised in a Catholic family. When he was very young, he had the feeling that the Catholic Church was not for him. "I had a feeling that the 'institution' and the actual 'messages' from the New Testament were actually very different," he asserts. He slowly started to move away from the Church. In his youth, he became interested in different religions, "esoteric sources," and Buddhism. But it was reading the biography of the Dalai Lama that awoke his interest. He explains that in [his country], every person categorized as Catholic usually has to pay a church tax. When he was twenty-two, he "said goodbye to

506 Yü 2014: 467.

Church. I officially renounced the Church, and from then on I was very interested in Buddhism."

These findings closely resonate with those of Marion Dapsance, who, in her thesis on the Rigpa Buddhist Network entitled "Ceci n'est pas une religion: L'apprentissage du dharma selon Rigpa,"[507] highlights the palpable contradictions between the behaviors and statements of Western Buddhists. They claim that the Buddhism they follow is not a religion while at the same time they observe strict hierarchies, participate in rituals and practice devotional activities. She notes how individuals who criticize Catholicism for its religious nature are also willing to surrender to their Tibetan masters; while proclaiming their total trust in the rational Buddhism, they perform rituals to invoke divinities, prostrate before their teachers, make offerings and pursue many other activities that are nonrational.[508]

My Strange Dad Having a Hobby

In relation to the experiences described above, a pertinent question is whether a person's childhood context matters concerning a person's attraction to the Bon tradition. If so, to what extent does it play a role in attracting them? What difference does it make to grow up in a Bonpo family – having an altar in the home, seeing lamas since childhood and experiencing the cultural aspects of the Bon religion integrated into everyday life – in contrast to a person who grows up in another religion and whose daily life does not have the codes, language or symbols related to Tibetan Bon? This is a question relevant to the issues explored in this research project, one that does not seem to have a single answer.

A particular case is that of I. H., whose father was already a Bonpo when she was a child, while her mother was Catholic. She described the situation in these terms:

> I was going to church with my grandparents. I went to church. My father was always into Bon from [a] very young age, interested and looking for spiritual things. But he never imposed [this] on us. It was like my strange dad having a hobby, but it wasn't a family thing. It was never like, "You have to be part of this." It was something from a distance. I remember a *ganapuja* (a Sanskrit word refering to various forms of offerings involving specific rituals) one time among practitioners. They were offering food. I was looking at

507 Dapsance 2013.
508 Dapsance 2015.

> the food, I couldn't eat it, and it was an offering. It wasn't grabbing me, I wasn't interested in Dharma at that age.

The father of John M. Reynolds (a Westerner who is a Bon scholar and translator) was Protestant, and his mother was Irish Catholic. They married outside the Church and did not raise their children with religion. "But I was very interested," says John. "What got me initially interested was reading Greek mythology when I was a child, and then, when I was twelve years old, I came across a book in my father's library [on philosophies and religions of India]."

D. R. refers to what he perceives as a tendency of Westerners to have blind faith, something that, according to him, is derived from Judeo-Christianity: "Some people counterbalance their personal stories with following a religion. People come with ideas, you know, we came to a Dharma center, it has to be a kind of refuge. Unfortunately, you know how many left?" This internal conflict is evidence of a certain tension pulling Bon centers in two different directions, likewise described in Tibetan Buddhist centers in North America,[509] which reflects the need to preserve the loyalty of long-standing devotees, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to open up the tradition to new (and more) participants.

This section has discussed how participants see themselves vis-à-vis Tibetan Bonpos and in relation to their families' religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds. It has explored participants' perspectives on Christianity, institutionalized religion and spirituality, contextualizing their narratives in the framework of their personal histories. The next chapter will go one step further, looking at how participants narrate their first encounters with the Bon tradition and with Bon masters.

509 Eldershaw 2007: 92.

9 Becoming a Bonpo

Another major theme that emerged from my research is the process of becoming a Bonpo. This transition stage of the participants lives is the focus of the following section, which deals with core questions such as: What does it mean to become a Bonpo? When and how does this happen? Do practitioners self-identify as Bonpos?

For the purpose of this research, a Bonpo is defined as someone who follows a Bon teacher and explicitly attempts to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha Tonpa Shenrab. Such a person meditates (or attempts to meditate) using meditation techniques considered to be "Bonpo," is familiar with some of the Bon teachings (teachings that are translations of texts contained in the Bon Kangyur and Katen) and applies some practices in their "normal" lives (i.e., outside retreats in Shenten or other Bon centers). They have engaged in basic practices, such as Refuge and Bodhicitta, or mantra recitations or practices considered to be "more advanced" ones, such as sitting for meditation, including Dzogchen meditation. "Bon teachings" can also mean practices that are transmitted by a Bon teacher, even if they do not exactly involve translations of Bon texts but rather interpretations of these texts. Nevertheless, sometimes "practice" and "meditation" are used as synonyms, and in almost all cases Dzogchen practice is mentioned as the center of spiritual practice, the core upon which all other practices are related. It was not possible – and not necessarily relevant – for me to determine whether the participants were actually meditating every day or how significant Bon practices were in their lives, as the distinction between who is and who is not a "practitioner"[510] is artificial and, ultimately, a matter of self-identification.

Several stages occur on the path to becoming a Bonpo practitioner, not always in a linear sequence. In their narratives of their journey along this path, almost all participants in one way or another described a certain moment when they felt they needed to find meaning in their life. This was a point in their life when they started seeking something (truth, meaning, a sense to life), sometimes motivated by what they described as a personal crisis or trauma, some-

510 The term Buddhist or Bon (or even Dzogchen) "practitioner" has become part of the international Buddhist lexicon and is commonly used in Buddhist and Bon books, websites, etc. It is also sometimes used by some scholars to describe meditators (monastic and lay) and ritual specialists in Asian contexts. See, for example: Achard 2008; Bellezza 2014; Millard 2013.

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times by "karma"[511] or sometimes by friends. Some participants mentioned a very practical reason for arriving at Bon, such as dealing with stress at work.

In Buddhism and Bon, a formal rite of passage from non-Buddhist or non-Bonpo to Buddhist or Bonpo is called "taking refuge." In Bon, this essential rite of passage means that the person takes refuge, through a ritual ceremony, in the Three (or Four) Refuges: in the "Enlightened Ones," in Bon, in the *Shenrab Yungdrung Sempas* (bodhisattvas), and in the lama or teacher. However, taking refuge was not considered by most participants as the most important or even relevant milestone in their becoming Bonpos. To reconcile this disjunction, I therefore adopt a midway definition of a "Bonpo" in order to understand what it means to be a Bonpo in the West. While taking into account the gradual processes and the different ways in which participants describe their levels of commitment, I consider the turning point to be the first time someone began meditating according to Bon meditation techniques or the first time they called themselves a Bonpo. When applicable, I also define a "Bonpo" as someone who has (also) gone through the Three or Four Refuges.

Half of the participants spoke in some way about "arriving home," using a variety of expressions for a similar experience. These narratives bring the theoretical frame of religion conversion into the discussion. The field of religious conversion studies presents various theories on what actually constitutes "conversion." Systematically analyzing the data obtained from the participants of this study in light of a theoretical frame of religious conversion could possibly be the focus of its own new research project. The way in which some participants narrate their encounters with Bon, as well as the different stages or turning points in these processes, could indeed to be looked at from such perspectives. However, the present analysis is not undertaken exclusively from this standpoint because other perspectives are more relevant to the main questions of this project as a whole. Even though a detailed analysis is beyond the present scope, I will summarize general aspects of my own findings in relation to existing conversion theories, particularly that of the conversion theorist Lewis Rambo. Moreover, wherever appropriate and relevant, I will indicate throughout the following chapters when and why the participants' narrations are significant from the angle of conversion.

The manner in which some participants narrate their encounter and embrace of Bon does indeed accord with narratives of conversion as delineated in theories of religious conversion. Conversion narratives have been defined as a particular way of communicating religious experiences of conversion through

511 The Sanskrit word *karma* literally means "action." In this context, it refers to the principle of cause and effect.

which individuals "reconstruct their own biographies" by way of adapting them to their new religious universe of discourse.[512]

In the field of the psychology of religion, the work of Rambo is of particular relevance to the investigation of Bon in the West. Rambo's proposed model of religious conversion[513] entails seven stages, which are not necessarily sequential:

1. The **context**, that is, the cultural, social and psychological context of the individual, including religious and other institutions that set up the scenario in which the individual is located.
2. A **crisis**, which activates the participant's search or quest.
3. The **quest**, where there is an "active" searching for a meaning explicit in most narratives of conversion, despite some exceptions that Rambo notes of narrations of "passive" experiences.
4. The **encounter**, in which the searching individual meets the religion in question.
5. An **interaction** stage, characterized by the relationship between the individual and the religion, when the roles, the rituals, the relationships and the rhetoric of that religion absorb them.
6. A **commitment** stage, when the individual identifies themself with the wider religious community. It might also include a membership ritual of some sort, for instance, the act of taking refuge in the case of Bon.
7. The **consequences**, the final stage, which refers to the possible repercussions of the conversion.

As stated above, when looking at the accounts of participants in this study, some aspects of Rambo's model are relevant, with the caveat that, as he himself emphasized, it should not be taken as a step-by-step model. As we will see, some stages do not follow a sequential logic, and they do not occur in the order in which they were just introduced. In the case of Buddhism, moreover, "homecoming" can be viewed instead as a process that individuals go through on their way to "awakening" their Buddha nature.[514]

It is worth noting that academic literature covering religious conversion in the context of Tibetan Buddhism is not abundant, but an example that deserved further attention is Parker's doctoral dissertation on the conversion of South Africans to Buddhism.[515] Of the twenty participants included in her research,

512 See: Berger/Luckmann 1969.
513 See: Rambo, 1993; Rambo 1999; Rambo 2003; Rambo/Farhadian, 2014.
514 Yü 2014: 467.
515 Parker 2007.

five were members of a Tibetan Buddhist school. Her analysis follows the seven stages of conversion delineated by Rambo, and her interviews were designed to account for these stages. She concluded that these stages are not adequate for analyzing Westerners' conversions to Buddhism, particularly because of the fact that the theory proposes "stages" which do not account for the narratives of the participants she interviewed, and also because, in her view, Rambo's model is a better fit for monotheistic religious than for one like Buddhism. She proposed another set of stages for conversion that would be appropriate in the case of converts to Buddhism context, exposure, interest invoked, practical application, commitment, and consequences.

From the perspective of conversion, we can see in the accounts below that several participants mentioned a "crisis moment," which was identified as a professional change, a relationship ending, disorientation in general and dissatisfaction with life. These crisis accounts would fit into what Rambo and other scholars of religious conversion consider to be the crisis preceding conversion.[516] Moreover, participants noted that it was due to these crises that they found Bon. The narrated crises were linked to a search for meaning, a quest, which some participants, like D. S. below, described as a quest they had initiated in their past but that became accelerated due to a crisis. However, Parker found that the "crisis" stage of Rambo's theory does not seem to apply to the groups of people she studied (South Africans who converted to Buddhism), which does not accord with the findings in the present case study of Bon. I also disagree with Parker's findings in relation to the fourth stage of Rambo's conversion theory ("encounter"), which she asserts in the case of Buddhist conversions "poses some problems in terms of how Rambo defines encounter." She elaborates by saying that Rambo includes the contact between the potential convert and the religious advocate in a specific setting, which was not relevant to her research, since, she claims, "Buddhism in general is not a proselytizing religion and especially in South Africa there is no major effort by temples, centers or Buddhist groups to advertise or even acknowledge their existence."[517] She argues that in the case of Buddhism the "advocate" can refer not only to a spiritual leader but also to a friend, family member, books or the Internet. In my view, one medium does not exclude the other, since "advocates" often are the ones making books, developing Internet websites, and so on. Moreover, advocates are not necessarily religious leaders, teachers, priests or the like; they can also be Westerners who have converted to Buddhism or Bon. As Dan Smyer

516 Rambo 1993: 165.
517 Parker 2007: 94–95.

Yü notes, "Although tremendously indebted to their Asian masters, non-Asian Buddhist elite converts nevertheless deserve much credit for spreading Buddhism in their home countries."[518] Parker also questions the specific setting of the encounter delineated by Rambo, because in the case of Buddhism, she argues, the fourth stage might take place not necessarily in a religious structure, such as a temple or church, but can happen in an individual's home or a sitting room. The key problem with this explanation is that it does not take into account the global character of Buddhism (or, in our case, of Bon) in the West; this global character, I contend, explains these differences rather than contradicts Rambo's proposed model.

With regard to the stage called "interaction," in contrast to Parker, I found that some (but not all) participants experienced a great degree of interaction. Parker stated that the "encapsulation" process that is characteristic of this stage, involving an intensification of the interaction with the religious group and its worldview, was relevant only for interviewees who were ordained. Moreover, she linked this to the "secular nature of Buddhism" and the fact that "Buddhism does not require that people make drastic changes in their lifestyle, perhaps the only change that most of the interviewees made was to become vegetarians in sympathy of all sentient beings."[519] Such an approach, however, fails to address the fact that the alleged "secularism" of Buddhism is not intrinsic to this religion, being a feature restricted to "modernist Buddhism" (see Chapter 4). The participants I interviewed did, in fact, describe the changes in their lives as being drastic, which we could say was the result of encapsulation. Furthermore, the participants whose experiences were more "encapsulated" were not necessarily the ordained ones. For instance, the two participants who were studying and had some degree of knowledge of the Tibetan language were laypersons. Parker also observed that there were no significant changes in the lifestyle of Buddhist converts, which is contrary to my findings. Most participants I interviewed actively participated in one way or another in religious rituals, prostrated before their teachers and noted the significant effects of these practices on their lives, even when they mentioned that they had rejected any form of religiosity before being Bonpos.

In relation to the sixth stage, "commitment," which in Rambo's theory corresponds to the process of deciding and finally converting, is a process marked by a confrontation with the self: in this case study, a variety of experiences were presented in different forms of narratives. Some participants recounted the moment

518 Yü 2014: 473.
519 Parker 2007: 113.

they took refuge as an important part of their conversion narrative (D.S., E.S., A.M., F.H.), while others considered themselves to be Bonpos but did not focus on whether this had anything to do with "taking refuge." Finally, most participants underlined the positive effects or consequences of their "conversion," and all indicated that they planned to continue being Bonpos. Some expressed their wish to dedicate more time to their meditation practices, whereas others also noted negative effects stemming mainly from difficulties in balancing their religious life with their professional or "worldly" life.

Parker argues that, instead than speaking of "conversion" in a Buddhist context, it is more appropriate to refer to a "development toward becoming a Buddhist." This is because, she claims, participants in her study referred to being Buddhist "before they even heard about Buddhism, or that when they heard the teaching of the Buddha it felt as if they were coming home and that this was something that they always knew."[520] She called this characteristic a "type of proto-Buddhist tendency within the interviewees."[521] I consider this to be a weak argument since it attributes reality to a narrative that is "constructed as a reality" in the narratives of participants. If looked at from the angle of conversion theory, claims of being Buddhist or Bonpo before encountering Buddhism or Bon would be related to the reconstruction of individual biographies, as mentioned earlier, and to the incorporation of symbols and discourses of the new shared religious universe.[522] In my research, participants narrated their life prior to encountering Bon while taking into account their new religious worldview by utilizing words such as "previous lives," "karma," "awareness" and "compassion," which are part of the lexicon of their new Bon symbolic universe.

Closer to my findings are Yü's remarks on Buddhist conversion in the context of global Buddhism, which occurs, he notes, "in a concurrent, rather than linear, fashion"[523] and includes a complex interaction between Buddhist (and Bon, we might add) traditions and local values. By situating the conversion of Westerners to Buddhism in the global context, he highlights how in the West, in contrast with Asia, Buddhism is transmitted in a mostly lay context. He points out that "an increasing number of non-Asians are converting to Buddhism, and, on the other side, the new converts also transform the religion that they have embraced."[524] This is perhaps what is missing in Parker's analysis,

520 Parker 2007: 154.
521 Parker 2007: 154.
522 See: Berger/Luckmann 1969.
523 Yü 2014: 467.
524 Yü 2014: 476.

along with the global dimension of Buddhism that Yü addresses. He argues that "modern Buddhist conversion travels a two-way path: Asian masters have bred non-Asian Dharma teachers, and, in turn, these modern Buddhist teachers and their cultural constituencies have taken the initiative to transform traditional versions of Buddhism to meet their own social and political needs."[525]

In her study on Western Buddhists in two Western Buddhist centers in Australia, Glenys Eddy notes that commitment to Buddhism is often presented as a decision point that occurs after a period of immersion in the Buddhist religious centers, during which participants contrast the Buddhist worldview with their own emerging from their individual, social and cultural backgrounds. Commitment is part of a process that includes the stages of exploration, apprehension and comprehension before reaching commitment.[526] In the Bon case, all the stages presented by Eddy were relevant, even though participants described their experiences in the process in various ways. Therefore, Eddy's classification will complement the analysis according to Rambo's seven-stage conversion theory below.

The theme of "becoming a Bonpo" therefore includes how participants narrated hearing about Bon for the first time, describing the moment they either met a Bon lama, read a Bon book, listened to a teaching or somehow came into contact with Bon. Most accounts are grandiloquent, with participants describing this moment as a sort of magical moment, for example, as "the sword of Yeshe Walmo[527] to the heart." Several participants spoke of the moment they met a particular teacher or the teachings in general as a pivotal moment or a turning point in their lives. They expressed clearly how Bon or Shenten "is my place." Most participants said their lives were completely changed after encountering Bon teachings. Participants described their encounter with Bon as something extraordinary and magical and a special connection. While "coming home" was a central theme for many participants, it was not the case for all. In particular, some participants spoke of the impact of finding "my lama." In the Bon context, the Root Lama is considered to be the lama who introduces the student to the Natural State of Mind. In this regard, an emergent theme was that following Bon was, in many cases, related to feeling a connection with one particular teacher (Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Tenzin Wangyal, and so forth).

Upon deciding to follow Bon teachings, most of the participants also stopped following other teachers or paths and focused their attention only on Bon in

525 Yü 2014: 481.
526 See: Eddy 2012.
527 Yeshe Walmo is a Bon deity; see Glossary.

general and on a particular teacher. Participants also showed different levels of commitment; one participant mentioned that in order to become a real practitioner a person must "forget about having children." This accounts for the seventh stage of Rambo's conversion theory, in which the consequences of conversion are considered.

9.1 Hearing About Bon for the First Time

Participants heard about Bon in a variety of ways:

- Through a friend or family member who was already either Buddhist or Bonpo, who was going to a Buddhist or Bon center or retreat, or who had a general interest in Buddhism
- Through yoga, Zen Buddhism and non-Buddhist meditation
- In the course of traveling: some people had taken trips to India, Nepal or Tibet and discovered Bon or Buddhism there
- From books or the Internet
- Some participants also mentioned a "crisis" that led them to look for a spiritual path

After renouncing his Christian faith, U. G. became fascinated with Buddhism; he read some stories about Tibetan masters when he was in his twenties. Then he started working and was "really into the material world a lot. I mean, still I was interested in spirituality, but I didn't have really time to find the appropriate way." This mention of "the material world" is often found in the voices of participants; in their perceptions Shenten is the place for Dharma/enlightenment and the "outside" is the place for the "worldly affairs" and "samsaric activities," often described in opposition to and as contradicting each other. It is also evidence of Orientalist notions of the West as a materialistic society versus the East as a spiritual society.

When U. G. turned thirty-eight in 2008, a friend took him to meet another friend, who was the founder of the Yungdrung Bon Foundation in his country. U. G. listened to a teaching about Dzogchen and the Bon tradition. Then another friend who was a Bonpo took him to a retreat, and he saw Yongdzin Rinpoche for the first time:

> It was the first lama I actually saw. In this retreat I directly took refuge in Lopon. So I entered Bon tradition and Dzogchen teachings. Then like every year I went to Bon teachings. He has a small group there, and three or four times a year I went to his teachings, and I went to Shenten for first time in 2010, I think. Then also to the teachings of Lopon

> and then of Khenpo, then more and more I followed the teachings and started practicing the Bon tradition.

When asked if he identifies as a Bonpo, U. G. adopted a nonsectarian approach and answered,

> I follow the *Buddhist* tradition of Bon. Because also the values and the ideas are the same, and even Lopon says it is Buddhism. So for me it is not important, if it is, from which route the ideas came. [emphasis added]

When asked if he identifies as a Bonpo, C. I. responded, "Most of my religious, or yoga, or spiritual practices are from the Bon religion. My main practices come from that." But he also said that if he is asked whether *he* follows some kind of "religion," his answer "depends on the context and who is asking me."

It was Like the Sword of Yeshe Walmo to the Heart

Narratives related to initial encounters with Bon focused on themes of reaching home as well as on "signs" that showed the way. For instance, F. F. referred to how one day she was reading a book about Tenzin Wangyal

> and felt that was a call to myself. I then did my first retreat with Tenzin Wangyal in the USA I found it, it is intense. When I went out of the teachings, there were three birds turning around my head, and I saw this in a dream. I then went to an Atri retreat.[528] And I got the introduction to the Natural State. I knew I had to follow this path.

A. M. once had a friend who followed Namkhai Norbu and "all the important lamas." She describes this friend as "one of those that collects teachings and books and everything, but does not practice anything." He showed her a documentary about Vedanta and Dzogchen. The teachings of Namkhai Norbu made an impression on her, so she went to an esoteric bookstore and bought his book on Dream Yoga:

> I read it and I loved it. One day I went for the second book of Namkhai Norbu and saw a poster that said Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche would teach Dream Yoga, and I told myself that I had to go. So I went to hear that Yoga Dream weekend and said, I know he is not [my teacher], but this teaching is [what I am looking for]. And here I am following it. That was in 1997. But two years later, Yongdzin Rinpoche came to [place], and that was like the sword of Yeshe Walmo to the heart, [I] had an open heart.

528 For an explanation of the Atri retreat, see Chapter 6.

When A. M. met Yongdzin Rinpoche in 1999, she asked him for permission and told him that she was following a Vedanta master but wanted to follow Bon. "He told me laughing clearly that I had to follow the Bon and come to Triten Norbutse. I took it as a fact, and in 2000 I went there," she adds. Later she took novice vows.

In narrating her process from encounter to "conversion," A.M recounts a dream where she was in a lake called Dangra Yumtsho,[529] considered sacred by the Bonpos, "a dream with footprints and all." Then she bought a book by John V. Bellezza called *The Dawn of Tibet*.[530] She said to herself, "I'm going to Dangra Yumtsho. I want to go because it's Zhangzhung territory. I need to sleep and place my head over there." She went on a trip to Tibet with what she described as the intention of finding clarity about whether nunhood was right for her and if she would be "a good nun." She then "had the certainty that I was going to be good at it, and when I came back to [my country], I spoke with His Holiness [i.e., the late H. H. Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, the Thirty-Third Menri Tridzin] and asked for it."

The first work that C. F. read on "spirituality" was a book by Arnould Dejardin, which piqued his interest in "spiritual things." He then read Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*.[531] He describes the impact of this book as follows:

> It was a big shock when I read that. I was with a friend of mine and we begin to search together. We were far from everything in a little town, and we began to read a book and to discuss it. But at that time there were not so many books about Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Not many Buddhist events. And when we went to Paris, we began to go; we went, one time, to see Sogyal Rinpoche. At the time he was not so popular in the area, only about 20 to 25 people listened to him. He proposed to make a retreat in Scotland. So I sold my entire music instruments collection to go to this retreat and it was big change in my life.

In 1997, a friend of C. F.'s suggested they go see the Lopon, so he agreed. He recalls, "In two hours I learned more about Dzogchen than for all the year we studied with Sogyal Rinpoche. So it was very – a shock for me." Then he decided to follow both Lopon (i.e. Yongdzin Rinpoche) and his previous teacher Sogyal Rinpoche, which he did until 2003. With his friend, he was very involved in the organization of retreats with Lopon. In 2000, they organized a retreat, and in 2001 he began organizing retreats by himself. He did so until 2003, when Sogyal Rinpoche asked his students to choose, when they had two masters, between him

529 Wylie: *dangs ra g.yu mtsho*.
530 Bellezza 2014.
531 Trungpa 2002a.

and the other. So C. F. went to see Sogyal Rinpoche and told him, "'I'm sorry but I'm leaving your teachings and I will follow the teachings of Lopon.' [Sogyal Rinpoche] said, 'It's good that you tell me.' He was very, very nice."

The previous statement shows that sectarian approaches are still prevalent and that in some cases teachers do not openly agree to allow their students to participate in or to follow several schools.

Something Magical Happened to Me

Many participants recounted a "magical moment" when they felt a "connection" upon encountering Bon. Words commonly used were "energy," "connection" and "practice."

A. M.1 recounts that one day, without knowing anything about Buddhism or Bon, she read a pamphlet announcing a seminar by Tenzin Wangyal in her city. He was her first contact with Tibetan Bon. Following the instructions in the pamphlet, she arrived at the given address where Wangyal was going to teach, and they asked her, "Are you coming because of the monk?" She says, "I had no idea. It was like 'boom.' I listened for the first time [to the] Guru Yoga [prayer]. I saw the rituals; it was as if I was remembering something that I've lived already. I don't know how, but I knew that I knew it. It was just before Tenzin Wangyal was leading a seminar in [another city]." She continues narrating how that moment represented a turning point in her life, after which she embarked on a journey that would bring her to different countries, following Bon teachers. "Something magical happened to me with Tenzin Wangyal."

Later, A. M.1 visited Shenten: "Every time I saw pictures of Yongdzin Rinpoche, I felt something. As soon as I saw Yongdzin Rinpoche, I couldn't stop crying, and I said: 'It is my master.' Obviously, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, I adore him, but it is a different type of energy."

A.M.1 is representative of a number of participants who emphasized devotional aspects of Bon, again signaling that Bon in the West is not a monolithic tradition but one with a variety of interlinked aspects, some of which are selected or rejected according to the individual needs of participants.

C. I.'s first connection to Bon came through his travels in India. He knew that he was interested in shamanism and had heard that "Bon was the shamanistic aspect of Tibetan culture." After visiting a Tibetan center in his own country, his "big connection with Tibet" started when he pursued academic studies in a related field. He visited Kathmandu in 1994 and wanted to visit Triten Norbutse Monastery, but "there was nobody there. I can hardly remember it, but I remember there was supposed to be a monastery there." In 1996, during the first year of

his doctoral studies, he went again and met Tenzin Namdak. Recounting this, he said that by that time,

> I was a little bit more knowledgeable about what Bon was. I knew there was this thing called Dzogchen. I didn't really know very much about what it was, and I knew about Tenzin Namdak, who was a very respected, scholarly and accomplished lama, and so I thought I would like to meet him and ask him about Tibetan medicine.

During their first interview, Tenzin Namdak told C. I. to "go and work in Dhorpatan, because we have a medical tradition and a medical text called the *Bumzhi*.[532]" C. I. set off to Dhorpatan and recalls,

> It was anthropologically fascinating, because you had a thousand Nepalese there from seven different ethnic groups. Then you had the Tibetans, who also internally divided between the Buddhists and the Bonpos. But the only people doing religion there were the Bonpos. So you had all that going on. The cultural complexity and all focused on this clinic, because the temple was next to the clinic.

At the same time, C. I. told Tenzin Namdak that he was interested in learning about Dzogchen. Tenzin Namdak advised him to "go step by step. First you have to learn the *ngöndro* practices and then go from there." Tenzin Namdak appointed the monastery teacher, who was at the time Tenpa Yungdrung, to teach him the Dzogchen cycle of Zhangzhung Nyengyud: "My Tibetan was not so good, and his English was not so good. So we sat there for two weeks and we went through the whole thing."

M. N. mentions the influences of her social network on her journey, as it was a friend who invited her to Kathmandu. She first listened to Rinpoche's teachings in 2005, when she attended one of the teachings in English at the Triten Norbutse Monastery, which were given "in a very informal way." She did not originally plan to continue attending teachings, but after that first teaching, she decided to follow this path. She explains,

> So I might be the one who knows Rinpoche the longest but the one who came later. [It took me] twenty-five years. I went to one teaching of Rinpoche, the only teaching I went [to] before [was] some Dalai Lama teaching in Manali . . . The only thing I remember is Rinpoche saying, 'Yes, this [experience of the Natural State] is empty, but it is a very special kind of emptiness.' Those words have stayed with me since then. And that was it. It had to click – and it clicked and that's it.

532 Wylie: *bum bzhi*.

I Reached home

D. F. described his experience as a chain of events that were linked in a process leading to a personal crisis, facing an unexpected situation (breaking up with his girlfriend and losing his job) and meeting a teacher who had a great impact on him. "Never before [had] I thought I would be a monk. Never before [had] I wished to be a monk," D. F. said. He spoke of his travels in India, when he visited Menri Monastery for the first time in 1997 and stayed for about seven days. During this time, he felt he had "reached the goal." This is clarified in his statement: "No need to travel more, my wishes to do tourism just vanished. I had only one [goal] . . . I had only one wish . . . to stay there. I did not feel like going to India to travel anymore. I felt like a boat in the sea, a rough sea, and storms, and then when you reach the harbor, this was my feeling. I reached home."

In narrating his life, D. F. revealed,

> I was attracted by a young woman. I realized afterwards I was attracted to her because she was Buddhist. Somehow it was important that she was Buddhist to engage in a relationship with her. At that time, I read the book by Sogyal Rinpoche on the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.[533] I got interested. Eventually, a friend took me to a Buddhist monastery, it was a Kagyu school [one]. Somehow, those are two connections I had with Tibetan Buddhism. Then I went to teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. First, it was in Paris . . . That evening, he gave teachings on the mind and then the workings of the mind. At that time, he said something that made me realize that we are not the slaves of the thoughts. This was a great teaching from His Holiness.

He went to listen to the Dalai Lama again in 1998. At that time, the Dalai Lama had asked many high lamas, spiritual priests and teachers from different traditions to participate. Among them was a Bon teacher, Lopon Trinley Nyima, from Menri Monastery in India. That was his first encounter with Bon. He went back to the monastery at Menri, where he was advised to become a monk. D.F. decided to take this advice because, "I think I had enough of this life, this worldly life."

D. S, like D. F., also had a personal crisis when she was thirty-three years old, when a relationship ended abruptly. She started to rethink what she was doing with her life and "was also very anxious." She felt that she was not following her real interests. She started reading texts on Buddhism and meditating because she suddenly wanted to explore a new path on issues of "spirituality," which she had previously rejected completely. This shift also coincided with her return to her home country after having lived abroad for many years. She "started to absorb

533 See: Sogyal Rinpoche 2008.

like a sponge all that was offered." This crisis left her "very open." Then she visited a Zen center. She tried different things and started doing guided meditations at home. A friend recommended that she visit Shenten, which she did. When I asked about her first impressions at Shenten, she answered,

> I do not know, I don't even remember what the lessons were about or if I learned anything from them, so the truth is I don't know, do not know why that struck me so much. It was kind of rejection and yet, for some reason, in summer I went back for another week and then decided to do a longer retreat in fall, that was a seventy-day retreat. I reached the conclusion that I was going back because I felt a special connection with one of the masters who was there, that I didn't feel on the first visit. It was when I seemed to realize that was my thing.

After attending the Gomdra retreat for seventy days, D. S. made the decision to take formal refuge in Bon, but waited two more years to do so. During this period, she closely followed the tradition. She explained,

> I was very committed and I had dedicated many months; nearly all my vacations were dedicated to doing retreats. But there was something in me that seemed to me that taking refuge was not right, even though many people come into contact with Buddhism or Bon and immediately after a week they take refuge and they love it, but I did not want to do it. I believed it was a very serious thing and I'm glad I waited. The truth is that when I took refuge, it excited me a lot, and I think it would have not been the same if I had done it at the beginning.

Some participants, when speaking of discovering a "home," referred to one place in particular: Shenten. S. G. was a follower of the Kagyupa and Sakyapa Buddhist schools. He had a friend who was close to Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: "I met him in [location]; I asked if the path was open, especially for me as I was Kagyupa and Sakyapa. He said, 'No problem, I see very clearly that you have a path, so go; it is very good for you.' Anyway I had already decided. When I came here, I met Rinpoche in [location], first. When we had this place, I was there already. Since then this is my place."

S.G. also said that his Kagyupa lama had told him to wait and that he would "see something." He followed Namkhai Norbu's practices "until I came here [Shenten]. I arrived to Rinpoche in 2001; before I was practicing Namkhai Norbu's teachings for four years, and before that I was receiving Tantric initiations."

"Reaching home" also referred to the moment of meeting a particular teacher; in most cases, they identified this teacher as Yongdzin Rinpoche but also Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, Tenzin Wangyal and others. M. S. studied with the Tibetan Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu, but "decided to stay with the Bonpos, not because of the religion but because of the Dzogchen aspect: they are the more generous one. They give you all the knowledge they have, they guide you. They help you, in real."

R. S. recounts that before coming to Shenten for the first time, "I just looked at the photo of Lopon and felt, like, an immense compassion. I came and immediately connected, dreamed, etc. Shenten wasn't very welcoming, and also a bit religious so that was a bit overwhelming. I first continued following other masters, until I decided to only follow this path; you have to choose."

V. S. refers to meeting with Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung: "When I met Tenpa, he said only three or four words and it was exactly what I needed to hear. So simple and straightforward."

When asked how she encountered Bon, S. A. mentions that, as a teenager, she had experienced "spontaneous appearances of my Natural State and so on." That is, she narrates her encounter with Bon as prior to the real encounter, by retrospectively reading Bon characteristics into her experiences during her teen years. When she was 28, her boyfriend died, and she "felt just like a dead body . . . . I would say I was traumatized." S. A. says that when she was around forty years old, she felt as if she awoke from this state and started searching for sense in her life once again, having "this time already a more mature idea where to search." She thought her path had something to do with meditation but still did not want any religion. "So I searched for where meditation is taught without any religious indoctrination, and I found some people teaching traditional Indian yoga connected with meditation and that was all fine." After a period of in-depth immersion into this practice, she concluded that while it was a valid path, she did not feel it was what she was looking for. Then she attended a seminar of Tenzin Wangyal, and there again she did not quite have the feeling of "this is it" but felt that it was closer; "it is getting warmer." Tenzin Wangyal talked about Yongdzin Rinpoche, and so after some research, S. A. went to Shenten in 2007: "It felt like this total homecoming."

She describes how from that moment, she found her place; she says she had the same feeling with Lama Sangye Monlam, one of the resident lamas at Shenten:

> I immediately [knew] this is my lama. Even though Lama Sangye at the time didn't speak one word of any Western language, and Geshe Gelek did speak a little English, I kept asking the translator to interpret for me with Lama Sangye because I wanted to ask questions; not just of any lama, but of Lama Sangye. I immediately knew this was my lama, even though we could just sort of look at each other, and he told me the same: he immediately felt that I was his student.

She goes further, saying that at one point by looking at her lama, she entered into the Natural State: "Unfortunately, just like one of those mistakes of meditation that Khenpo was talking about today, the sort of labeling the state of perfection, I made the mistake of thinking, 'Ah, wow, absolute perfection,' and the moment

that I conceptualized this, I was out of the state again." But S.A. deemed this experience to be foundational, as she felt she had proof that the Natural State of the Mind exists, "because a lot of people listen to the teachings, and they keep wondering if this is just some story that they tell you . . . I at least have the experience this state exists, even if I am not capable of entering it at will." That encounter was sufficient for her to know that Lama Sangye "is really without a doubt my lama, because I think in most traditions this is sort of the gold standard of recognizing your lama or guru. If you immediately enter this state that the particular tradition is about when you look at him, then that's it. So that's how I found Bon and my lama."

A Strong Connection

"Connection" was used repeatedly by participants in relation to Bon, to teachers, to practices and to places. N. F. believes that making a commitment to Bon is a matter of "having a connection." He believes that "there's people who don't even practice that much throughout the year because the connection isn't there, because you forget." Without the connection, the commitment does not create regular habits.

E. S. mentions that at her first arrival at Shenten there was a retreat going on at the time where the *Gyalwa Chaktri* teachings were being transmitted. The combination of the "power of the teachings and the power of the teachers was what made me stay. It was very strong."

V. S. also refers to her first meeting with Tenzin Namdak as a pivotal change in her life: "I received answers to all the questions I had all my life. He is the kindest person I ever met . . . I had a strong connection since the beginning, I always dreamed about him, sometimes I dreamed about doing practice with him."

More than thirty years ago, F. H. had been living in a Gelugpa center for nine months until he felt attracted to Dzogchen. He first met Yongdzin Rinpoche in 1991 on his second visit to Europe. He had heard from John Reynolds about an upcoming visit and felt an urge to invite Yongdzin Rinpoche to his country. So the next day, he called Nepal, and Yongdzin Rinpoche answered the phone:

> It was quite funny. I had prepared a whole note to be precise with the lamas on what I really wanted. A whole speech of what I wanted to say, and halfway [through] Rinpoche interrupted [and said], 'Yeah, of course, I'll come.' So he came. Since then I have been following him and the Yungdrung Bon teaching because it was clear to me from the beginning that it's true teaching that's going to bring you to enlightenment fully. I had a strong connection to Yongdzin Rinpoche and Zhangzhung Nyengyud. That was very clear immediately.

A. M.1 asserts that, at Ligmincha, "the great majority are students of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and only a few of us 'also connect' with Yongdzin Rinpoche."

Having a "connection" was also expressed using metaphors such as "being grabbed" by Bon when encountering it. I. H. remembers that, when she was a child, Lopon came to her house before the Shenten center existed. Her father had invited Lopon to his country, and he always stayed at their home. She narrates, she was

> afraid [that] Lopon was clairvoyant. Somebody told me he was, so I was afraid he would read my mind. I remember me and my sister were very little. He gave us *khatas* [traditional ceremonial scarves that symbolize purity and are presented at many ceremonial occasions as a symbol of respect] and he said we were the first Bonpos baptized in the West. I felt something special. I was ten. I felt this was special but I was too little still.

When I. H. was nineteen, she went to Shenten, which had recently been established by that time. She describes the experience in this way:

> That was the first time I felt ready. I came with a friend. But this friend didn't like it, she didn't have a connection. There was nothing personal, she was very spiritual but didn't have a connection with this. I remember that time I was really grab[bed]. I thought, this is important and this is very rare. I should keep it and do something with it. At the beginning it was also boring sometimes, you know, your mind is not ready. I remember Lopon [sitting] with other people, and he said to my friend, "Maybe this is not for you." And then he said to me, "But you, you will come back every year." Then I got grabbed.

The relationships with the lamas and teachers are varied and some participants expressed expectations of having a degree of closeness to the teachers that was not fulfilled. A. M. explains, "That's why I'm saying that I'm attached emotionally to Khenpo Rinpoche, that's the word." She explains that she experiences her "connection" to Khenpo as "a negative thing," because it implies her having high expectations that cannot be fulfilled. She expresses a sense of "longing" due to the fact that she does not receive the attention from Khenpo she had hoped for. Although she understands the reasons, such as Khenpo's busy schedule, she also mentions that it saddens her.

C. I. also speaks of his connection to Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung but in positive terms:

> I thought this person is brilliant. I just connected with him totally. I liked the way he explained things. I liked to work together with knowledge and things like that. It was really an exciting experience for me to be working with him, and almost privileged as well, and nobody knew him then, really. Very few Western people knew him, and I thought at the time that when people start to know him he is going to be famous because he is brilliant, and sure, I still think it's going to happen. It's been a little bit slower than I expected.

C. I. believes that most people in Shenten do not really see the greatness of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, "because he is all a bit in the shadow of Tenzin Namdak's resplendent light." He further regards Yongdzin Rinpoche as a true friend.

A. M. refers to her attraction to the traditional way of teaching at Shenten and her "connection" to Khenpo: "I feel attracted for that, I am Bonpo and I am not interested in any other lineage, in contrast with many others who follow different teachers. I can respect a master, but I only follow Bon, my connection is here. This time my connection with Khenpo Rinpoche was deepened, I cry only to see them."

"Recognizing, experiencing and abiding in the Natural State is the main aim of Dzogchen practice," says E. S., adding that for her, arriving at Shenten was the result of years of searching and years of practicing with Namkhai Norbu in particular. So upon arrival, "I already knew the State, because I practiced alone in my place for a year. I also did preliminary practices, which for me were easier than the Natural State. I started many years ago. I even brought my family into this."

This is the Master, This is the Path, This is the Place

The degree of commitment to the tradition expressed by participants varied. However, most, if not all, participants presented themselves as followers with a level of commitment that would qualify them as much more than mere "sympathizers" or people who "have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully . . . those who might place a how-to book on Buddhist meditation on the nightstand."[534]

C. F. believes that the Bon religion "is very rich. I think everything is there." He considers himself to be nonsectarian, affirming that all the other Tibetan lineages have great qualities in them as well. However, he expressed a special affinity with Bon:

> It's not like the Bon is better or something like that, but I feel happy working in the Bon. You know, and I think it is better to focus on one thing. So . . . everything that I need is in the Bon religion. I don't need anything else. I sometimes go to other teachings and things like that and that's good. But my main thing is the practice that I get from the Bon religion. That is actually my main practice and so it is better to concentrate just on that.

534 Tweed 2002: 75.

I. L. remembers that, after being at Shenten for the first time in 2008 and meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche, "all the questions – everything – doubts disappeared. I saw [that] this is the master, this is the path, and this is the place. And since then I understood that I'm going to be coming here year and year and year, like, until Rinpoche will be teaching. Well, we will see the possibilities, but still . . . I had this feeling and I took refuge the same year."

Similarly, R. S. explains that when she came to Shenten, her expectations were met: "I found what I was looking for. This is it. I now know this is not that tangible. This is my body, and it is not. The world as such doesn't work anymore."

J. F. spent fifteen years as a student following another Buddhist tradition. Then a friend told her that a great Dzogchen master was coming to [location]. For a few years, she received teachings from Yongdzin Rinpoche. "So afterward . . . [I realized that] I can do nothing else [but follow his teachings], even it was difficult for me to go back to another master again."

Similar to what Parker noted in the case of South African converts to Buddhism, some people I interviewed indicated that they were somehow Bonpos before meeting Bon.[535] In addition, interviewees had various approaches to classifying Bon as a "religion." C. I. maintains, "if somebody asked me if I followed some kind of religion, it depends on the context and who is asking me [as to how I would answer]. But I would be likely to say that most of my religious, or yoga, or spiritual practices are from the Bon religion." Similarly, E. S. defines herself as Buddhist or as a Bonpo depending on her interlocutors, "because if I say 'Bonpo,' people don't understand. But if I am with Buddhist people who know about Bon, I say I practice with the Bonpos."

9.2 What is Bon for Participants?

The notion of what exactly constitutes Bon varies from participant to participant. The question of whether Bon is a religion, a spiritual path, a tradition or something else was discussed by most participants. These assertions exemplify the style of the Western Bon follower who feels free to mix Bon with the insights and approaches of other Tibetan or Buddhist traditions as well as yoga, reiki, and Western psychology in a clearly nonsectarian approach. But for some, even a general identification as a Bon follower needs to be transcended: "I am not Bonpo. I follow Bon teachings." Some said they wanted to understand what

535 Parker 2007: 154.

Bon was in order to "transform themselves," but this meant they first had to understand what is meant in the Bon context by the Natural State of the Mind.

Since there were several approaches to defining Bon among participants, this theme can be divided into the following subthemes:

- Some participants thought that Bon was a science of the mind; others, however, believed that such an approach was part of a "marketing" plan to present Westerners with only the meditation aspects of Bon (see Chapter 4 on modernist Buddhism).
- Some participants felt reluctant to embrace all of the cultural aspects of Bon but were eager to explore what they defined as Bon's essence.
- Bon as Tibet's original tradition coming from Zhangzhung was also emphasized.
- Dzogchen – considered the pinnacle of Bon teachings and described as a practice where there is "nothing to grasp" – was also emphasized.

Science, Culture and Zhangzhung

C. I. challenges Bon's categorization as a religion, arguing that, according to his own studies and from an anthropological point of view, he believes that the concept of religion known today is a concept created in the nineteenth century based on Western Judeo-Christian notions. C. I. concludes that Bon is "like a science. It's like a science of the mind. It is a technology of the mind if you look at it, and you could argue that many religions are that. But particularly Buddhism is a science."

M. M. casts a wider net, revealing the different perspectives among participants on what Bon is, by defining it as a religion, a science, a tradition and a philosophy: "It's all of it."

"The essence of Bon, to me, is Dzogchen," says N. N., while D. S. defines Bon as "a path in which I trust, if it is a path that has much wisdom and has much truth, and I don't know, I feel that it is like a present with decorations, that I dislike the decorations but what lies inside is what I'm interested in." This is elaborated by I. L., who, when referring to Dzogchen teachings presented in Western languages, says that "words are like ornaments on an outer box but they cannot influence the inner capacity."

U. G. asserts, "If they asked me what is Bon, I think I would say: it is a religion, the oldest religion of Tibet, the religion that was in Tibet before Buddhism arrived. Tibetan Buddhism has actually taken many things, many things, and many teachings from Bon and actually Tibetan Buddhism has more relation with Bon than with Theravada Buddhism. And I would also say that rituals

play an important part and that there is also an aspect associated with shamanism inside the Bon, although they are different things."

S. G. describes himself as a "Dzogchengpa," or a Dzogchen practitioner, saying that before encountering Bon, he was

> very greedy about knowledge. So I read hundreds of books and knew all the stories of all the masters. It was again some ego trip. I didn't do that at all. Sometimes I kind of feel shameful. Because I don't know as he Bon tradition as I do about the Nyingma [school of Tibetan Buddhism]. But it is just that I try to really focus more on, to me, what is essential is the meaning of the teaching and how it can transform me.

I. L. thinks that it is impossible to define Bon:

> I never try to put it into our words, because I don't think that this is important. I had a very strange feeling when I started translating Rinpoche's teachings; I understood that I have to translate simultaneously because I cannot lose anything. And then when I started speaking, inside of me I was speaking. I was translating. I was telling with Rinpoche's speaking. But I had a strange feeling that these words don't matter at all. That it's not the words that matter . . . I was translating. I was speaking but I had such a strange feeling, so I don't see a name to this. I don't think we should call it religion or not religion because all these names are not settled. You can also find in modern times that there are a lot of things called in different ways. Maybe we can call it a spiritual tradition. Like one spiritual tradition that is coming from Zhangzhung, from Tibet, from Zhangzhung.

A few other participants echoed the themes raised by I. L. There was also a sense among them that their experiences in listening, understanding and translating Bon teachings were marked by the influence of a particular Bon teacher and that these transcended the actual content of the teachings in ways that they were not able to put into words. In their views of what Bon is, they do not see it as a religion but feel comfortable in calling it a "spiritual" tradition, which they prefer not to define too narrowly. I. L. elaborates that "there's a feeling that this tradition is so ancient that it predates countries and predates the nations and nationalities. So there's something really very, very deep." I. L.'s remarks denote a notion of a Bon that was always global in terms of what she describes as its intrinsic universality.

Bon and Dzogchen

The interviewees commonly seem to have an allegiance to Dzogchen that is greater than their allegiance to Bon or to the Shenten center. Five participants, for instance, do not describe themselves as Bonpos but rather as "Dzogchenpas," which places the emphasis on the practice over the religion. One participant

(S. A.) stated that she came to Bon from Dzogchen, a practice that, in her view, does not show any resemblance to religion.

The first Westerners who traveled to India to receive Bon teachings were attracted mostly by Dzogchen, the "Great Perfection," which was believed by its followers to be "the most revered system of thought and practice among the ancient Buddhist and Bon traditions of Tibet."[536] The Tibetologist Charles Ramble, for instance, spoke of his time in Nepal and India in the early 1980s when he went to visit Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Tridzin in Dolanji.[537] He noted that some individuals at the time were receiving teachings directly from Menri Tridzin – one was practicing *tummo* (one of the *tsalung* practices discussed in Chapter 6) and another was receiving more general instruction – but he did not observe systematic teaching.

In fact, thirty-two of thirty-six interviewees stated that their main reason for following Bon was due to the transmission of and access to Dzogchen teachings. As R. F. explains, it is "the peak of the teachings, so somehow it is very satisfying for the ego just to go to the highest teachings." On this point, R. F. elaborates that Westerners following Dzogchen "are people that think they are smarter than the other one, basically." He observes that one feature of people following Dzogchen,

> not specifically in Shenten but in general, is that they – but I mean it is according to the doctrine also – that they need to pretend that they are not what you think they are . . . So you can see that right away they want to show that they are not making a show. So they make a show to show they don't make a show. You know? It's just kind of complex.

The participants' reference to the "highest teachings" is derived from the doctrine of the Bon religion usually being classified into the The Nine Ways of Bon,[538] (explained in Chapter 3). Within these Nine Ways, the Fifth and Sixth Ways contain the sutra teachings; the Seventh and Eighth Ways, the tantric teachings; and the Ninth Way, the highest one, the Dzogchen teachings. As already mentioned, these five higher vehicles are also known as the "Ways of the Fruit." The other "Lower Ways," or "Ways of the Cause," do not directly focus on methods believed to lead to liberation from cyclical existence; instead they are supposed to support practitioners in their worldly life.

Dzogchen practice aims at showing practitioners a roadmap so that they can "recognize" the Natural State of the Mind. When this happens, it is believed that all phenomenal existence, all appearances are seen as what they are, that is, as reflections in the mirror, mere manifestations of the mind.

536 Klein/Wangyal 2006: 3.
537 Ramble 2015.
538 See: Snellgrove 1967.

Yongdzin Rinpoche often says that, in order to abide in the Natural State of the Mind, one needs to just "leave it as it is." That is, when in a state of awareness, the actual practice consists in being mindful of all manifestations, including thoughts and emotions, and letting them be, without any intervention or manipulation. It entails simply being present in that state:

> In Dzogchen, a practitioner first needs to receive a direct introduction to one's Natural State from a teacher who has directly experienced it himself. This is why the "Guru Yoga" practice is essential, as it is by this first recognition of the Natural State that the practitioner can know the difference between one's Natural State and the mind that is obscured by thoughts and emotions. The most common method used to reach this state is to look back to a specific thought. By observing it one will discover that the thought does not stay, it soon disappears. After it disappears, the adept has to just remain there. There are different techniques to help the adept not to confuse the Natural State with other mental states, for example, a state of non-thought, which does not mean the Natural State, as even a hawk is always like this, watching when it is sleeping, but it is a state of no thoughts, nothing, no realization.[539]

In sum, Dzogchen practices and methods are presented as aiming to help students first to recognize the Natural State of the Mind. After this has been achieved, the student learns to extend this awareness for longer periods. This entails recognizing what is often explained using the following metaphor: thoughts are like waves in the ocean, they come and go and cease to exist. By staying in that state, without following the thoughts or identifying with them, and just "leaving them as they are," the practitioner experiences the mind in the nakedness of its own natural condition, which in turn leads toward enlightenment. The continuous practice of the Natural State of the Mind implies that, at an advanced level, the practitioner "becomes more stable and clear, then the pure perfect Nature will become clearer and more powerful and the temporary perfection will become weaker and weaker and finally it will disappear . . . The two methods used in Dzogchen to lead the practitioner to experience the Natural State of the Mind are called *thögal* and *trekchö*."[540]

Trekchö refers to the practice of the Natural State and it is usually done by "going along and practicing the Natural State without adding or changing anything, just the State itself as it is."[541] The practice of *trekchö* is done using three "supports": space (meditation under a clear sky), darkness (particularly by undergoing Dark Retreats), and sunlight. These three supports are meant to facilitate the development of the *thögal* visions:

539 Namdak 2002: 47–49, 93, 99.
540 Namdak 2010: 50.
541 Namdak 2010: 50.

> When the student is ready to practice Thögal, there are methods to use – the dark room, gazing in sunlight, and the sky. These are three supports. According to the teachings, in the dark room more visions develop and with sunlight they are clearer but fewer. If your Trekchö is stable enough, it doesn't matter which you use first . . . It is important to be stable with Trekchö and Dzogchen – with Trekchö and Thögal together – and from the beginning you must practice with the preliminaries properly.[542]

Thögal refers to practices related to the development of a certain kind of vision. These visions appear to the practitioner through any of the three supports mentioned above (space, darkness or sunlight). Bonpos say it is a sign that the practice is going well when these visions appear but do not disturb the practice of the Natural State.[543] "Any being, according to these teachings, already has this nature and these visions. Thus, the aim of the Dzogchen practice is to recognize these experientially. An analogy often used is that of a lamp inside a vessel or *bumpa*:[544] one must break through the vessel to see the light within." According to these teachings, the practice of *trekchö* and *thögal* together leads to the disappearance of all visions into empty space, including the dissolution of the physical body. But as already indicated, the word *thögal* is not mentioned in the corpus of the Zhanghung Nyengyud (with the exception of one mention but with a different meaning) or in the oldest Bon Dzogchen texts.[545]

Many interviewees argued that the difference between Bon as a "religion" and Bon as "spirituality" is the commitment to the practice of Dzogchen. F. H. mentions, for instance, that it was "the purity" of Dzogchen, combined with the spiritual realization of Yongdzin Rinpoche that attracted him to Bon. Dzogchen was also explained as a powerful tool of self-discovery. John Reynolds indicates that Dzogchen can be labeled as one of the "Bonpo's success stories."[546] For many interviewees, Dzogchen is such an integral part of Bon that it cannot be separated from how they define Bon as a religion. Moreover, twenty-five participants described it as the essence of the Bon tradition.

The statements above denote a characteristic of how Westerners perceive and experience Bon, and also imply how those transmitting Bon in the West are presenting what Bon is. Only one participant mentioned that he asked for specific practices rather than "received what was given." John Reynolds noted that

542 Namdak 2006e: 1–6.
543 Namdak 2010: 57–58.
544 A *bumpa* is a ritual vase with a spout that is used in the celebration of various Buddhist and Bon rituals.
545 Achard 2011: 206.
546 Reynolds 2015.

Yongdzin Rinpoche feels that Westerners are very good at Dzogchen but that perhaps they would not be so good at Tantra. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal and the main teacher at Shenten Dargye Ling, likewise gives mostly Dzogchen teachings when he travels because he believes this teaching and practice are more relevant to the Western lifestyle.[547]

M. M. remembers that when Yongdzin Rinpoche was first teaching Dzogchen in the West, "It was quite nonritual in that it did not address cultural Tibetan rituals, such as prayer flags." The Western version is therefore tailored to conform to what participants consider "a pure Dzogchen teaching," devoid of the Tibetan cultural background. Moreover, it was offered in small groups to individuals who were able to ask questions and seek personal guidance.

C. F. compares the Dzogchen teachings to a leap of faith:

> When you stay near a cliff: Dzogchen teachings mean to jump into the empty space – you understand? Dzogchen says: you can believe, you know. You can at least know, you can make a step if you want, see? And all the people who want to practice Dzogchen, they are near to the cliff, near the act of jumping. But they say, "I'm not prepared enough to do that." So they speak together, they make some reunions, make some business and make some exercise and make some – but at the end, the only thing to do, you know, to do by yourself, is to take that step into the emptiness. You have to do that alone.

Bon is Not a Religion

It is telling that almost all respondents referred to "spirituality," a "spiritual path" or similar terms when speaking of Bon rather than to "religion." Participants also defined Bon as "a path of wisdom." A few participants described Bon in negative terms, in contrast with what it is not, asserting that it is not a religion. S. A. says that Bon is usually "labeled" as a religion, while M. M. thinks that Bon is intentionally marketed as something that is not a religion: "I really dislike people who say Buddhism or Bon is not a religion just to make it attractive to the masses, because it *is* a religion. There is a religious side to it. But it is just that I try to really focus more on, to me, what is essential, [which] is the meaning of the teaching and how it can transform me." M. P. says "in a recent teaching given in Holland, the lama completely washed out the teachings of any religious connotations."

547 Yungdrung 2014.

R. S. thinks that "Bon is religion. But I would never tell to people I follow a religion. Maybe I say this because Rinpoche always says this is a religion. Here I rediscovered what is religion; we had a wrong interpretation. I discovered I am very religious. I never really stopped believing in God. My Catholic background is deep."

When asked to consider the Tibetan translation of the word "religion," C. I. states that there is no Tibetan translation of the word. He thinks that the word *cho* might be close, but that "this is also possibly a word of Bonpo origin." *Cho* and Bon, he argues, "are the two words that could be used to describe religion, yet *cho* is now translated as Buddhism, and Bon is left untranslated."[548] C. I.'s argument implies that the definition of religion is a matter of translation or semantics and that ultimately, the question cannot be answered using the available words. As mentioned earlier, C. I. says that what we know as "religion" is a Western concept or an academic notion created in the nineteenth century and that Buddhism, in particular, could be considered a science – a technology of the mind.

These statements are representative of what is usually called "modern Buddhism" (presented in Chapter 4), which views Buddhist traditions from a particular angle that de-emphasizes rituals, monasticism, clerical hierarchy and other aspects considered to be religious.[549]

Issues related to how to translate certain Tibetan words into Western languages were also raised by C. I. For instance, he points out that certain words, such as "karma," need to be explained in longer sentences, as there are no Western words that can capture their original meaning. In this regard, Pommaret notes, "Nowadays, most of the Western languages use the word Karma as it has become a common and understood word."[550]

I. L., like C. I., argues that the term "religion" is problematic because it is not settled, and for this reason, she would prefer to call Bon "a spiritual tradition." S. A. also argues that Dzogchen in particular is not a religion. Despite these concerns, D. S. does believe that Bon is a religion, in fact, "the oldest religion in Tibet," preceding Buddhism.

M. N. also defines affiliation in ambiguous terms: "I won't say I'm a Bonpo, but I say I follow the Bon teaching. And that's it."

U. G.'s understanding of "what it is called God" was that of "an entity with pure love, without any judgment and at the same time, everything is coming

548 See more on the term *chos* in: Roesler 2013, Glossary.
549 See more in: McMahan 2008.
550 See: Pommaret 2012.

out of it and everything going back into it, and everything is part of it without any separation. This was my imagination or my understanding of the numinous, of the spiritual path." So when he heard the Bon explanations concerning the Nature of the Mind, it made sense to him,

> because the Nature of the Mind it's actually Kungtu Zangpo, which is all good, all loving, and all present father, but in the end, it's your own mind. You are not separated. So there is no distinction between outside Buddha and inside nature, but it's all in the same, nature and the same kind of space, and this is a spacious Nature of the Mind.

A key element highlighted in participants' statements (and also in descriptions of Bon presented by centers, websites, pamphlets and other means of communication) is that Bon is historically different from Buddhism, both in its geographical origins, Zhangzhung, and as being the "original" religion from Tibet.

S. A. explains that she came to Bon from the side of Dzogchen:

> Of course there are religious aspects in sutra, but this is something I am not so connected with. But with Dzogchen I just do not see any resemblance to any religion. I really think Dzogchen is totally mislabeled if you call it a religion. But you know Dzogchen sometimes – since there are all those vehicles in Bon, the Dzogchen practitioners, they sometimes have to sort of hide behind a more naive facade to be able to practice together with people who really believe in spirits, gods, whatever. And then you can do the same rituals but do them from a Dzogchen stance, but the people outside will not see any difference.

C. F. recounts a story told by Sogyal Rinpoche: When the first Tibetan masters began to teach in Europe and they saw that Westerners apparently understood Dzogchen easily, they thought, "Wow, it's very good. They will be enlightened people very quickly." But later they noticed that these same Westerners would forget everything a few days after and go to search at another center or another tradition:

> They say that this is our problem. Because in Tibet, you say something to [a] Tibetan, but he has a really hard head, no? So you teach and you teach again, you teach again, you teach again, you teach again, you teach again, and after ten years, okay. You say, 'Ah, yes.' Yeah, but after? It's okay. You can let him alone.

C. F. indicates that Yongdzin Rinpoche has a different technique. "He says, Dzogchen, Dzogchen, and Dzogchen." He transmits the Dzogchen teachings, regardless of whether the audience understands them or not. He hopes, C.F. notes, that tthose who are interested in this tradition will began by either practicing or at least knowing about the preliminary practices.

N. N. recalls that Sogyal Rinpoche has some Western disciples "who practiced a lot. I met one, he gives out so much light you can see it. He practiced a lot of compassion type of thing. And he told us a story about a Western disciple who did the Rainbow Body, so it's possible."

On Dzogchen and the different way it is transmitted in Rigpa, C. F. mentions that Nyingmapas choose to prepare the student for many years:

> Prepare, prepare, prepare. I was with Sogyal Rinpoche, you know, [with him] you never speak about Dzogchen. Never. The students remain and continue to follow because they want to hear, but they are courageous to remain because year after year after year, I spend hours and hours doing long practices and waiting for the Dzogchen. And if we received once a sentence related to Dzogchen teachings, it was like very, very precious.

Dzogchen is also described in ways that are abstract and more related to what could be considered religious experiences than to logical understanding. C. F. says,

> When we listen all to the last teaching of the older masters of the Zhangzhung, they often say that they had complete confidence in the Zhangzhung Nyengyud teachings. It is difficult to have complete confidence, because Dzogchen is like nothing, nothing at all. No mantras, no nothing. We have nothing to grasp, yeah? So it's difficult to really trust in it.

C. F. told me about a conversation he had one day with Yongdzin Rinpoche about Dzogchen. "He asked me, 'Do you think they understand?' We were alone. 'Do you think they understand?' 'I'm not sure,' I say. And it was difficult for me to answer him because I was not sure if I understand myself." C. F. elaborated that many people think they understand Dzogchen teachings, but really they don't understand. "And if you don't understand, you miss the point, I think." He refers to the fact that certain metaphors and teachings are repeated often in Shenten by Yongdzin Rinpoche,

> with few words, few stories, but if you know the teaching of Rinpoche, you know a few stories, we know by heart. And we still love when he says the story. Because it's so simple to explain, explain, explain but until people [do] not really, really understand the point, it's not – what do I say? It's not useful at all.

In his view, when a person practices Dzogchen, it is practicing "something so far from your level of your existence now that you don't see the effect at first. You practice something related to the roots, so you don't see the effect. Maybe you can see some effect but the real effect, you don't see it." It is only after years, C.F. adds, that you can see the effects of Dzogchen practice. But he explains that such effects are difficult to put into words:

> It's like the example about the glass, when you put some water in a glass. You change the water, it's not a matter of changing the glass, you don't change the color, and you don't change the form of the glass. So, still you're the glass. It's difficult for you to see that the water changed. You don't realize that it's you who changed. It's like – try to remember how you see the life when you were maybe twelve years old, for example. It's not so easy to remember because, now you are you, you are not a twelve-year-old any more. Actually,

> it is something like that. Sometimes it changes you deeply without changing your manner so you can still be egoistic, or something. But still, Dzogchen increases, it goes in you.

E. S. summarizes the perception that Dzogchen changes individuals by saying, "this practice fundamentally changes you. Sometimes you don't see it immediately. But if you look at your life before and after: less fear, I now say to myself: 'Don't believe this world.' This path means that you are somehow in a continuous crisis, but it gives the possibility of having a distance to observe things, it gives you calm."

D. R. notes that rituals have their function, "but Rinpoche primarily teaches Dzogchen. He told us, 'I came to the West and I was thinking, how can I help people? Everybody is so busy here. We have to teach the essence, because you may not realize Rainbow Body or become a great Dzogchen practitioner, that's very difficult, but at least you will have some sort of inner peace stability regardless of what circumstances are around you.'"

D. F. thinks that the main reason for Westerners' attraction to Yungdrung Bon is Dzogchen because it has become popular and involves the highest teachings, and "because they realize that these teachings are not very – they were not given openly in Tibet, and [are] now coming in the West. Also, maybe they've realized it's the fastest way to enlightenment. That's attractive." However, F. H. feels that there has been an overemphasis on Dzogchen at the Shenten center.

John Reynolds asserts that only a minority of Westerners who come to Bon are scholastically motivated. Most of them, he says, are interested in practice, "particularly meditation practice and particularly Dzogchen, which is what the Lopon emphasizes. He feels that Westerners are very good at Dzogchen. He has his doubts about how good they would be at doing Tantra." Reynolds believes that those from Protestant or Reformed Jewish backgrounds have difficulty going through all the ritual practices but that it is less difficult for Catholics, who "tend to have almost an intuitive understanding of how ritual works and energy flows through things." He believes that with the Bonpos, "Dzogchen has been one of their big success stories." He points to the interconnectivity with other Buddhist centers: "A lot of people [who] came in originally from Namkhai Norbu's group, which also emphasized Dzogchen, have become involved with the Lopon, too." V. S. says that "most people in the beginnings of Bon being taught in the West were with Tenzin Wangyal, coming from Namkhai Norbu. It was my case. I then realized that every teacher that was a Bonpo I met, I immediately connected."[551]

551 Reynolds 2015.

As Reynolds pointed out, at the center of the apparent relatedness between different Buddhist and Bon teachers and centers where Dzogchen is taught is the transmission and the practice of Dzogchen teachings. Dzogchen meditation, in particular, is perceived as somehow to be free of cultural or religious connotations and is often referred to as a "pure" teaching. M. M. explains, for example, that he, like many Westerners, was attracted to Dzogchen first, and then, after meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche, became devoted to him as a Dzogchen teacher. M. M. refers to the mental state achieved through the practice of Dzogchen as something that does not need "cultural Tibetan things, rituals, prayer flags, color. I don't have anything against that. But I think it's absolutely, [I'm] 100 percent convinced that it is totally unnecessary. Because this is talking about reality, not Tibetan rule, about our nature, human nature, sentient beings' nature. So the idea [is] to really get a kind of a pure Dzogchen teaching."

N. N. paraphrases Yongdzin Rinpoche in saying:

> What it is that really matters in the teaching in the end is the Natural State; that is the only thing that matters. And the Natural State is nothing cultural, it's nothing . . . Namkhai Norbu said if you stay in the Natural State, the time it takes for an ant to travel from here to your nose, it's like millions of lifetimes of purifications. That's how powerful it is, and it is also how much we have to purify. But it's very powerful.

In looking at where participants come from in terms of their religious background, their encounter with Bon and their experiences and understandings of key notions, this chapter has laid the foundations for the following chapter, which focuses on what participants believe is the road ahead for Bon and for themselves as Bonpos. In particular, it will explore how participants incorporate Bon into their daily lives, how they perceive and narrate the adaptations that are taking place in the diffusion of Bon in the West, and how they foresee the future of Bon in the West.

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.

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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.

11 Where Are We Going?

When I asked interviewees about the future of Bon and the direction the religion might take, they acknowledged that if some Westerners continued "to practice and follow the Bon path in depth," more such individuals would become teachers and lamas. Indeed, this is already happening in the relatively more modern centers. Participants believe that Bon will continue to grow in the West because, as F. H. put it, in "the past twenty years, there is increased recognition among Tibetans and scientists of the authenticity and the purity of Zhangzhung Bon spiritual tradition and Zhangzhung Bon as the source of Tibetan civilization."[615]

References to Bon as the "authentic" tradition and to its teachings as the "authentic" and "pure" teachings are abundant. While it is not possible to define what is considered authentic, as this would depend on the context, we can say that "it is not an inherent quality but, rather, the product of orchestration, performance and intersubjective negotiation."[616]

Authenticity relates to a longing for connecting a past to the present, something clearly seen in this study. It is easy to see glimpses of nostalgia and the search for the "original" in these narratives, which are always constructed and negotiated according to the social, cultural, and in this case, religious context.[617] Authenticity in this context can be defined as a "proximity to a past material reality" and it also relevant for a "subjective experience or rediscovery of lost premodern values."[618]

My interlocutors also attributed the increasing expansion of Bon to the qualities of the lamas in the tradition, and, in particular, to the "growing need for spiritual life in the world." However, E. H. noted, "We have something to offer that's real and true. So it will develop, but it will not be a huge development, because being the real thing, it requires a commitment to practice and to study." E. H. indicated that this growth would imply changes in the way Bon is presented in the West. D. F. gave an example of this: "While there is a monastic life in Shenten, it's much smaller, and lay is in the majority; whereas in traditional Tibetan society, it's opposite." Furthermore, some participants note that the process of modernization is going to change the monastic institutions, first

615 On Zhangzhung, see the works of John V. Bellezza, particularly on his blog; Bellezza 2006–2021.

616 Finney 2017[2019]: 3.

617 See: Braedder et al. 2017[2019]: 42.

618 Braedder et al. 2017[2019]: 55.

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in the Tibetan context. They also note that in the West, monastic institutions were established for a specific purpose, as a medium to preserve and perpetuate the teachings. C. I. thinks that the greatest advantage of the Bon tradition is that it is "still very much a continuation of the old institutional structure. Many of the current teachers were born in Tibet, which demonstrates that the tradition is continuing vibrantly." However, these participants also argued that monastic settings are not sustainable in the West; therefore, for the tradition to continue in the West, further changes will have to happen. Specifically, U. G. states, "In Shenten, retreats are of three months' duration, as opposed to several years, because Westerners have jobs."

Bon practitioners also talk about how the teachings are now more accessible than they used to be. The use of new technologies has had a great deal to do with this. They mentioned a certain tension existing between the tendencies to use new technologies, on the one hand, and the traditional practice of reserving the teachings only for those who are ready, on the other. In this regard, they cited how the more modern centers like Ligmincha are making use of new technologies, while other centers like Shenten are slower to take these up and are more cautious.

Teachings and rituals, as discussed above, are being modified to be more relevant to Western audiences, "which is an inevitable process, but also one that will promote the survival of the Bon tradition in the West," according to C. F. As C. I. noted, "by the very fact of translation, teachings are adapted in some form." Indeed, languages carry different meanings; moreover, beyond linguistic meanings, the words are interpreted through a cultural filter. "When teachings are interpreted, they are adulterated to some extent, but that does not necessarily mean they have lost their essence." Therefore, "despite efforts to ensure authenticity of teachings, they could never be purely traditional. A pure translation is impossible, despite a naive view that the transmission is completely pure, because obviously it is culturally influenced."

Participants' reflections on the theme of "the future" revealed the following subthemes:

- Bon will continue to change because individuals interpret the teachings according to their cultural and historical backgrounds. Participants noted both the need to "preserve" Bon and the natural "adaptations" that will continue to happen.
- For Bon to really grow in the West, a Westerner has to attain enlightenment or become a buddha. The stories of buddhas from the past may inspire followers, but they are not sufficiently close to Westerners' reality to have a deep or widespread impact.

– Technology will continue to influence the way Bon is spread, received and interpreted.

11.1 Preserving Traditional Teaching Versus Adapting to Modern Cultures

Even individuals from similar backgrounds listening to the same teaching might derive different meanings from it. As Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung points out, "When a new religion or new tradition comes to a new place, people are trying to follow the tradition or religion, and then at the same time, they adapt it to their own local lifestyle and local settings and local tradition."[619] This is, of course, happening as Bon develops in the West. As a result, even those trying to follow the traditional route must adapt it to their lives. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung does not see this as a problem as long as the teachings are not misinterpreted or do not lose their essence. Tenzin Wangyal elaborates that Bon will evolve, because "things always change."

He mentioned that in different places, for instance, he is teaching "more or less [the] same thing every time. For me it is the first thing, no matter where I go, how differently I phrase [it], I teach the essence of Dzogchen. If you look at Zhangzhung Nyegyud teachings, there are minimum of rituals, minimum of images, and more essential type of teachings." He remembers the words of Yongdzin Rinpoche, who often says that "finding the Nature of the Mind, this is it, and everything else is not important. He always said that, always. I take all his words literally in my heart. And not only take it, but I do it that way. I am not trying to convince anybody who doesn't want to do it." Even when his wife is very interested in rituals, Wangyal adds, "I respect her for that."

Another aspect revealing hopes for the future "preservation of the teachings" was raised by E. H., who believes that the "original" Bon texts are the key to ensuring this continuation of Bon. But he also adds that these have to be translated into Western languages, for "those of us who have full trust in the tradition and who think this is a meaningful life . . . In the future there can be changes, or teaching can be mixed, but the base has to be always based on the original tradition."

I. L. thinks interest in Bon will continue to grow in the West. She notices that, when she organized teachings of one lama in her country, the "people and he was very happy with the retreat, because really everybody was doing

619 Shenten Dargye Ling 2019d.

meditation, and they were asking the questions, and they were willing to do. And people are willing to continue."

C. I. believes that Bon's "continuation of the old institutional structure" represents an advantage for it, in contrast to other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, in which "some lamas have come to the West and set up their own thing, a little bit disconnected from the old traditional structures." Then when they pass away, they somehow need to establish a mechanism for the succession of their teachings in the new context of the West. C. I. also points out that Bon in the West is "still in the early days. There are still some teachers who were born in Tibet, who were educated in Tibet." He believes that other centers, such as Rigpa run by Sogyal Rinpoche or the Dzogchen Community of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, are also adapting the way they present Dzogchen teachings. These centers, he notes, are considerably larger in regard to the number of participants they have compared to Shenten. But a common characteristic between them is that they "kind of have a new way of doing things," in contrast to Shenten's approach which "is just an extension of the institutional structures that have existed for centuries." Nevertheless, due to the fact that Shenten has "great teachers around that can . . . who can continue things," he thinks that "the whole thing is continuing vibrantly."

In relation to Namkhai Norbu, N. N. refers to what she thinks is a reaction from conservative forces within Buddhism that are "really angry against Namkhai Norbu in Tibet and Bhutan, because he has extracted the essence of Dzogchen teachings and has created a way of teaching to Westerners." She argues that opponents of this trend believe that in doing so, "he sort of twisted the tradition in a way, in their eyes. He extracts the essence and teaches, but it's better for Westerners." She further reflects on whether these changes and adaptations are suitable for Westerners who are only beginning to embark on the Buddhist or Bon path, or if conversely, they can actually have a negative effect on people's lives.

Several participants noted that the traditional Bon approach is a deeper approach. D. F. believes that "the tradition will be kept the way it is now by conserving the texts." He thinks audiences who can "fit into that [traditional] way of teaching" will be naturally attracted. Like A.M.1, he believes that being "traditional" equals being "profound," whereas "people who like something less profound, they will go to some other place."

Furthermore, D. F. believes that Bon taught in a traditional way is more difficult to follow because there are fewer students at Shenten compared to the Tibetan Buddhist centers that have "modernized." For him, the value of how teachings are given in Shenten is based on the fact that these are translated directly from Bon texts. He also expressed his wish that one day, "Shenten will

develop, and maybe one day when – maybe some rich benefactor may come and help Shenten, and then maybe at that time they would be able to help individual monks . . . and then there would be, it could be a real monastery in the future." His mention of a "rich benefactor" resonates with the tradition in Tibet of monasteries being financially supported by "benefactors." This provides further evidence for how Tibetan customs and structures are continued in exile, in a new context like Shenten, not only by Tibetan religious representatives but also by Westerners who replicate these narratives in their own voices.

I Do Not Want It to Become a "Factory of Enlightenment"

Five participants noted that they appreciate Shenten's small size and low number of retreatants, particularly in comparison to other centers that also impart Dzogchen, such as Rigpa or Namkhai Norbu's centers. They worried that in the future this could change "if a more commercial approach is taken."

S. G. thinks that the evolution of Shenten is directly linked to "the devotion that practitioners have for Rinpoche; even when Rinpoche will not be here, it will last, it is too deep." He adds, "I love the littleness of Shenten. I would not like it to become a factory of enlightenment; it would have another flavor."

D. R. is a witness to the very beginnings of Yongdzin Rinpoche's teachings in the West. He met Rinpoche in 1995. "Retreats at that time were completely different, completely informal. Maybe there were about forty people. No water offering, no prostration, nothing. He was teaching two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon without translations. We received Zhangzhung Nyengyud in Holland, Austria, Germany." D. R. believes that the way teachings are given at Shenten has evolved over time, from a more informal way to a more "religious" way, where certain protocols such as prostrating in front of the lama, are now firmly in place.

C. F. wonders what will happen to the center once Rinpoche passes away. Noting that he is not afraid to speak about the latter's death, he thinks that when that happens, he is not sure whether "activity of Shenten will go down at this time or not . . . Khenpo gives very really, really clear teaching, very clear, pure, authentic and very, very right. I think more and more young people will come."

Referring to lamas traveling to different places and giving teachings, J.C. thinks that there is a need to systematize the teachings and the order in which these are taught in the West. Otherwise, he points out, "many lamas are coming and going and they're giving one talk, another talk, and that's it. And there's nothing left, you know? And here [in Shenten] you have all that we need . . . I

want to do more practice retreats because Gelek [Geshe Gelek Jinpa] is very nice. He's giving very nice talks and very nice things, but I think we lack practice."

F. H. believes Bon is going to change, and that the only way for Bon to be successful in the West is by adapting to its new cultural context, something that he believes is slowly starting to happen now:

> The kind of teachings that are happening now, it's a new thing. We are all sitting there, we are lay people, and we are receiving very powerful teachings and the way they are doing the retreats here. It's a redefinition, doing these Gomdras. Well, there have been Gomdras before. *Gomdra* is a Tibetan word, but they are adapting it. You know, we do three months because we know Western people, they've got jobs.

He believes these adaptations will continue to happen "inevitably . . . and that process is beginning now."

C. I. highlights that one factor impacting the form Bon takes in the West is that in the West Bon represents only one aspect of people's lives, whereas in Tibet it permeates society. C. I. said that we have to think about what circumstances will be like in one or two hundred years' time and what shape Bon teachings will take then. He thinks there is something of great value in the Bon teachings that should be perpetuated and continued into the future:

> We need to think about the right kind of institutions that will be relevant. I think that there are things of therapeutic value in the Bon religion that can be used outside of a religious context. Some of the philosophy is very practical and useful. But anyway, even the old, traditional classification of the Nine Ways of Bon was dividing into things that were practical for everyday life, and things that were focused on enlightenment.

He further says that he once listened to a teaching by Tenzin Wangyal, who "framed it in such a way that people in a Western audience could relate to in their lives, without it being any connection with any religion, and it was very effective and helpful. So I think that is a good thing."

The issue of whether cultural context matters was raised several times in the interviews. Another element related to this issue was pointed out by several participants: the examples of great yogis of the past are inspirational, but they have specific connotations linked to Zhangzhung or Tibet that are either too distant in the past or too different symbolically and culturally from today for modern Westerners to grasp. For instance, I. L. wondered whether Western people should they learn Tibetan first to fully understand the meanings and the teachings of Bon. Is it a prerequisite? She questions whether Western languages have words that can be faithful to the original meaning in the Tibetan language:

> I think that we can talk about Western Bon only when we will have buddhas from the West. I would say, when we will have fully realized practitioners who would be teaching

> in Western languages. That, for me, it was always a question. Can we say prayers in our own languages? Well, prayers were created by enlightened beings. Are we enlightened to put them in our language?

Bellezza further adds that "the Western mind is different, there are many things that Tibetans know for granted; it might take years for Westerners to catch things that Tibetans know inherently from birth."[620]

Concerning the development of Bon, D. R. emphasizes that Yongdzin Rinpoche is a Dzogchen master, and as such, he teaches

> regardless of religion, nationality, race and all these kinds of things. The guys who come now, Geshes, they are politicians and businessmen to a large extent. I am not saying completely and everybody, but many. Culture is like that; you have education in [the] monastic system in Tibet, that's [the] only way to get education. Once you get this education, you can have positions in society and it doesn't change here.

Because they cannot go back to Tibet, he believes, "They came here, they have their own schemes going on, money-making schemes, supporting some populations in the East, which I think is good idea but it should be done." D. R.'s words reveal a long-cherished Orientalist notion about a Tibet deeply steeped in religion. But there were private schools and government schools in Tibet where it was possible to get a lay education in secular knowledge. As far back as the eighteenth century, private schools for laypeople were established in monasteries. Moreover, whenever the existence of private education is acknowledged, it usually refers only to the education of a small and privileged group of Tibetans from the higher classes of society. This is, after all, also part of the "imagined Tibet." In fact, as Alice Travers notes, in Tibet prior to 1959, there existed a social group that could be classified as what we may today call a "middle class" that included government secretaries, aristocratic families, merchants, large landholding farmers and military officers who were heavily influenced by the education received at private schools, which were, of course, outside of the monastic sphere. The subjects taught at these schools ranged from calligraphy to grammar and mathematics, but a variety of additional subjects were also introduced according to the needs of the students. For example, foreign languages were taught in some of them, which also received the indirect support of the Tibetan government.[621]

620 Bellezza 2016.

621 See: Travers 2016. For an analysis of how educated lay Tibetans in early modern Tibet struggled to find a balance between the religious and the secular areas of knowledge, see: Townsend 2016.

D. R. also raises themes that were not mentioned by other participants, pointing to what he calls "a dangerous tendency toward business and politics." He reflects on what he considers to be the excessive use of technological devices, such as iPhones and similar devices. This point is linked to a wish to maintain a particular "image," which D. R. attributes to the fact that Bonpos "came late, they came already when Tibetan Buddhism has been here, so they are establishing now, so they are growing some sort of dissent from other Buddhist groups but 99.9 percent monastic. I don't see a bright future."

I. L. said tha, in her view, Bon both as an institution and at the doctrinal level should not have to change. Instead, "I think that the way we communicate, the way it moves, it is changing."

11.2 Influence of Technology

Access to Bon teachings and to teachers of Bon also varied across the group. Even within this small sample, some individuals stated that they had already been part of Buddhist schools for many years and had only recently found Bon teachings. Therefore it is important to consider that, even though it has been argued that globalization and technology have allowed many more people to have access to Bon, this might not necessarily be true for all. Some of the participants said they learned about Bon centers through friends and publications, an indication of the various ways in which people can be reached.

Clearly, the Internet has only become more prominent and will increasingly serve as a source of information on Bon, Shenten and Ligmincha, and the many practices and teachings that come from them. One participant found Shenten through a Google search in 2007, and another stated that the Internet is useful in finding teachers, as his first connection to Yongdzin Rinpoche was through email.

It is impossible to know precisely how modern technology will affect the Bon religion, its spread and its teachings in the future. Technology has lead us into an innovative time, not seen before in history, and the rate of change and need for adaptation is likely to be great. But there is no doubt that both globalization and religions are affected by modern technology, above all the Internet, which provides the possibility for rapid and widespread communication. As presented in Chapter 2, Beyer argued already in 1994 that, as a consequence of globalization, religion is affected by modern technology, particularly communication. Global communication allows for geographical barriers to be broken down, and it facilitates communication between dissimilar social groups.[622]

622 Beyer 1994. Note that this publication is from 1994, when the Internet was still young and before the rise of online social media platforms.

Some participants noted that although technologies such as the Internet and smart phones make teachings more accessible in the West, they will not replace the central role of teachers. As F. H. comments, "practitioners will still need to seek guidance from teachers on important issues." Other interviewees who discussed the difficulties of practicing without a teacher also echoed this sentiment.

It is noteworthy that the very first live broadcast of a religious ceremony at Shenten only occurred very recently, on the occasion of the Grand Du Tri Su Ceremony that took place on October 20, 2018. More than 300 people came from different countries to attend the ritual, and many of them also participated in a preceding seven-day retreat that aimed at accumulating a specific number of recitations of mantras and preparing for the ceremony. Monks from Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal traveled to France to participate in the event. Additionally, a recorded version of the original livestream broadcast of the event was first available on YouTube for a few months.[623] During the retreat before the ceremony, daily live webcasts were available in the mornings and afternoons.

The YouTube broadcast of the Du Tri Su Ceremony by a Bon center as "traditional" as Shenten might well presage the breaking down of further boundaries in the future. It is certainly indicative of how the ongoing process of expansion and adaptation of Bon in the West is driven as much by Western followers as it is by Tibetan Bon teachers. As the voices of the participants of this study revealed, this dynamic transplantation compelled by several forces is resulting in Bon taking roots in the West in various forms. Whether we look at Bon in the West as a hybrid mix of the "original" Bon and the European and American cultures in which it is set, or as a new form of Bon, completely different from the "original" tradition and with no traces (or only a faint reminiscence) of its Tibetan cultural aspects, or as both, it is certain that its unique characteristics are the consequence of the reciprocal influence of Bon in its global dimension and in its localized forms, meanings and interpretations.

11.3 COVID-19 and Bon in the Virtual Sphere

Since the interviews for this study were conducted before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become increasingly evident that the health crisis has already impacted the Bon "virtual religious landscape" worldwide. Indeed, Bon online religious activities have flourished considerably during the worldwide

623 See: Shenten Dargye Ling 2018a.

COVID-19 pandemic, given the initial strict lockdown measures preventing in-person gatherings. As the Internet is an essential part of most participants' lives, it is not surprising that – in an accelerated manner due to the epidemic – it has also become part of their religious or spiritual lives. As a result, digital options were substituted for in-person retreats and meditation practices.

The flourishing of this Bon "virtual religion" is affecting how the members of the Bon religious community interact, which in turn may be affecting issues of authority and identity. Online religious activity is also changing ritual practices. The manner in which those looking for spiritual support are reaching Bon is also affected, as are their religious experiences – that is, how people live their religion as a virtual religious experience. A fascinating line of inquiry would be to look at how Western and Tibetan Bon practitioners are engaging in their spiritual or religious practices in this new virtual environment. An analysis of how online and offline religious participation differ and the impact of virtual retreats and ritual practice on Bonpos' beliefs would be a valuable theme for future research.

Even before travel and public restrictions were put into place in early 2020, the "modernist" trend of Bon, mainly Ligmincha, had already been making extensive use of digital media, but the "traditionalists" have felt pushed by the circumstances of the pandemic to accelerate their presence in the virtual world and to offer teachings, practice sessions and other activities online. This can be seen in the exponential increase in the number and frequency of online Bon teachings that were organized after the pandemic started. Not only have Bon institutions found ways to continue celebrating their retreats, practices and even rituals online, but yearly retreats organized at Shenten that had to be canceled are now being delivered in online versions. These are shorter in duration, lasting two to three days instead of the usual full week, but in some cases, these virtual retreats had twice or more the number of participants than had previously attended in-person retreats at Shenten. Soon after the pandemic began, Shenten started organizing daily teachings and practice sessions called "Daily Gelek," after the current abbot of Shenten, Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, who leads most of them. The digital spaces seem to form a continuation or shared space with the offline places that some Bon followers often visited, such as Shenten Dargye Ling.

11.4 Networked Bon

As noted by Heidi Campbell, to speak of "networked religion" refers to "how religious experience, belief, and practice are lived out online through dynamic

social relations and interaction." She defines "Digital Religion" as a research area that looks at the way religious practice, discourse, and engagement have become embedded in online and offline contexts and the interconnections between those two contexts.[624]

The emergence of this networked Bon poses new questions: Can online Bon be disembedded from "offline Bon"? Can offline practices requiring certain behaviors to be followed be replicated in online settings? For instance, if adepts prostrate themselves before their teachers and sit at a lower level in front of them in a physical setting, what do they do when their presence is mediated by cameras and monitors? How can new media accommodate rituals in which the presence of the lama is required during an initiation? Can their "real" presence be conveyed via digital social media? Are hierarchies maintained online in the same manner as they occur offline?

While Bon institutions may treat digital technology as "practical utilities," particularly when there was no other possibility for congregations to assemble in-person due to lockdowns, the appropriation of technology and the Internet as a medium may then be a matter of individual preferences.[625] However, "the development of a particular media interpretation among the members of a religious community can provide the input toward a more systematic doctrinal reflection that can, in the end, institutionalize or reject such an interpretation."[626]

In the case of Shenten, people who would otherwise not be able to travel to the center have had the opportunity to listen to the teachings and practice with the community while remaining in their living rooms. Furthermore, some people have taken up Bon practices for the first time thanks to online transmissions and have never met a lama in-person.

This leads to the issue of what is considered "real" in the virtual world. When a lama leads an initiation in a physical context, initiates are required to be physically present, to keep certain vows and to follow certain rules. Is the initiation valid when these conditions are not met?

Another aspect to consider is whether Bon religious practices will become increasingly private as they become more virtual, given the complexities involved in online-mediated religious practices through which the religious experience happens at home. Considering the interviewees own assessments of their level of practice and their observations that after attending retreats and upon returning to their homes, their daily practice tended to decrease., it is to be seen whether

624 Campbell 2012.
625 Campbell 2012.
626 See: Rota/Krüger 2019.

online sessions and recorded teachings-on-demand can actually boost individual practice outside of reteat weeks.

It also remains to be seen whether the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will accelerate the creation of more formal online Bon teaching programs and whether and how a community such as Shenten will continue to interact online.[627] More importantly, how are offline contexts being integrated into online virtual spaces?[628] How do Bonpos perceive and integrate their religiosity or their Bon practice between these two contexts? We will have to wait to see how the intensification of the virtual practices of online Bon will have impacted the religious lives of its leaders and followers once the pandemic is over. Will members of Bon institutions try to continue – or even expand – their online presence in order to benefit from certain advantages of this medium, such as increased numbers of participants and truly global reach, in addition to in-person activities? What will be the lasting impacts of this massive switch to online platforms on those affiliated with it?

It is perhaps too soon to attempt to respond to these questions. What is certain is that the Bon religion is going online, which in turn facilitates it becoming more global on an even more accelerated and larger scale than was predicted before the pandemic. It is certain, however, that this shift to online religious practice and the growing "networked Bon" that is occurring in virtual space will have longer-term implications for Western Bon followers.

627 For more on how "offline religious groups" interact online, see: Cheong/Huang/Poon 2011.

628 See: Campbell/Vitullo 2016.

12 Implications of a Globalized Bon

By situating the transmission of Bon in the West in the context of the recent expansion of Tibetan religious traditions, this work sheds light on the scholarly discourse concerning the intersection between religion and globalization. The findings of this research project include the existence of new forms of interactions between the secular and religious facilitated by globalization, through which cultural phenomena are deterritorialized and disembedded from their original territories, followed by processes of selection, interpretation, adaptation and reterritorialization into new contexts.

Considering both the historical development of Bon in the West and the contemporary experiences of Western followers of Bon, the findings of this study are broadly consistent with the postulations set out in Chapter 2. Furthermore, I have shown that globalization has impacted the diffusion of the Bon religion in the West and accelerated its spread, and moreover, that the globalization of Bon, including the relatively recent expansion and reception of Bon in the West, has been precipitated by different factors. These include the following:

1. The ability of the propagators of the religion to adapt it to new cultural settings in a particular context where Tibetan Buddhism had already positioned itself and gained renown through emblematic figures such as the Dalai Lama, who has been perceived as a symbol of peace and harmony.
2. The various ways in which the recipients adapt Bon to their own lives and circumstances.
3. The interest of Westerners in exploring Eastern teachings and Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, as well as the central role played by some Tibetan lamas and teachers and also by some Westerners.
4. The characteristics of the information age, through which the transmission of religious ideas is accelerated by the use of contemporary communication technology, particularly the Internet. But while digital technologies are making teachings more accessible in the West, it is doubtful, some participants argued, that they will replace the importance of teachers. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in accelerating the development of a "virtual Bon," it is yet to be seen whether this prediction holds true in the years to come.

12.1 "Embedded" Bon in Westerners' Lives

While our understanding of Bon in the West is still developing as its proponents and scholars continue to translate the language, philosophy and research on

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the practical application of the teachings to new environments, my results provide evidence for how these teachings are already being actively reshaped by both teachers and students in multiple settings. The findings emerging from the participant's perspectives on Bon also shed light on how global Bon is embedded in their daily lives, switching from an external level of analysis to looking at the practical impact that Bon has on their individual lives and their "collective personal experiences."

Significant conclusions, as well as conceptual and practical implications of Bon as a global religion drawn from the relevant literature and the data I have presented, include the following key elements:

1. **Religion** plays a key role and constitutes a driving force in globalization processes, and Bon is no exception. These processes are marked by an increased opening of borders, flows of ideas, and transcultural and transnational faiths, in which universalizing and particularizing tendencies coexist and where cultural resources are embraced, appropriated, reinterpreted, reterritorialized and utilized accordingly by different social groups.
2. **Globalization** has lifted the boundaries of Bon, which has clearly crossed beyond its original of the Tibetan cultural area and reached new places in Europe and the Americas. The intersection between Bon and globalization is evident in the fact that it has been integrated into new cultures and societies; it has been adapted and interpreted by its followers, demonstrating both fluidity and dynamism, in line with what McGuire describes as the malleability of lived religion.[629] We have seen through the voices of the participants of this study, how religious traditions, institutions and personal practices can be modified, including the way in which teachings are presented in order to increase the religious engagement of the followers and to enhance the financial sustainability of the religious institutions.

12.2 Globalized and Localized, Changed and Preserved

This case study has shown that Bon, like other Tibetan religious traditions, is in fact operating within a global context, one in which coexisting forces are creating changes in the tradition while other forces are enabling the preservation of the tradition despite these changes. Indeed, Bon has become global and its expansion is ongoing, widening our understanding of previous research in the field of the study of religion and globalization. The results of the current study further

629 McGuire 2008: 186–187.

support the notion that religions in a global world are marked by the confluence of universalizing and particularizing tendencies. Religions travel and also take root in specific locales. Some aspects of religions, depending on the social, historical and cultural contexts, travel better than others. But clearly, appropriation processes, including those that result from the reterritorialization of cultural resources, can and generally do result in religious emblems, myths and practices acquiring new symbolic meanings.

Globalization, as Robertson has pointed out, is characterized by a global consciousness, which refers to individuals being directly or indirectly aware of this global status.[630] Moreover, due to the impact of digital technologies in particular, religious actors and followers are aware of the global situation of the religions they belong to, but they are equally aware of the many other religions that exist and that are also global. In other words, they are aware of being part of a global (and local) religion while also being conscious that this is one of many other religions coexisting in a parallel global interconnectedness. At the individual level, the consequences of these interactions between expanding religions and people in a globalized world thus result in individuals knowing that they belong to "one of many existing religions," and that there are Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and many other religious teachers, schools, centers and retreats they could access in the West simply by searching the Internet, booking a place and paying the corresponding fee. Is being a Bon practitioner the same as knowing that Bon is one among many religions and that by being a Bonpo, a person belongs to a relatively small community in comparison to other religious communities? Is this different from being a Bonpo in a rather isolated region of Tibet and thinking that Tibetan Buddhism is all there is outside of Bon? Or in other words: does context matter?

It is clear that the role of the teachers, their individual personalities and in some cases their charisma are central to the way Bon is being assimilated as it spreads globally. The master–student relationship, an essential element of esoteric Buddhism and Bon and an aspect deemed essential in transmitting Bon, is perceived by some participants as having changed in the West, as no longer being the same as the traditional master–student relationship in Tibet, India and Nepal. They ascribe this change largely to the different cultural contexts and to the fact that the transmission of Bon takes place mostly in non-monastic environments. Nevertheless, most Bon followers in the West claim to mainly follow one teacher or to have a strong "connection" with one teacher in particular. Teachers' personalities have a powerful imprint on the way teachings are

630 Robertson 1996: 13.

transmitted, particularly for the more "modern" trend in Bon. According to participants, teachers are at the center of the process of adapting Bon in the West. And, as the history of Bon in the West shows, a small number of Westerners who came into contact with Bon practitioners from the 1960s to 1980s, particularly in India and Nepal, also played a leading role in facilitating this process.

In the field of Tibetan studies, and more particularly Tibetan Buddhism – even more specifically Tibetan Buddhism in the West – significant evidence from this study leads to the assertion that it is possible to speak of a field called Bon Studies. It is yet to be seen whether Bon Studies will be formally institutionalized by academic centers that create programs and institutions dedicated to the field, but it is already happening in seminars and conferences, where panels dedicated to Bon Studies have been initiated.

This expansion of Bon in the West displays at least two major trends: the first can be described as a "modernist approach," in large part led by Tenzin Wangyal. This trend was described by some participants as being a "simplistic" form of Bon, to the point of no longer necessarily being Bon. However, it was also described by Wangyal and his students as a new way of presenting Bon and, in particular, Dzogchen practice, in a manner relevant to wider audiences who do not necessarily wish to be "converted" to Bon or to embrace a (new) religion. The second trend refers to a more traditionalist approach that is associated by participants with a monastic setting and with Shenten Dargye Ling.

One of the main goals of the research underlying this book has been to trace the expansion of Bon into the West, looking at how and by whom it is being received and adopted, bearing in mind the historical context and the dynamics of globalization processes in which this expansion is taking place. The timing or research in this field is important since some of the key actors of the modern history of Bon are of advanced age. Having access to their stories and being able to interview them has generated precious first-hand information, some of which will certainly be lost in the near future if not documented now.

It is noteworthy that limitations in researching Bon in the West have included the lack of prior research studies on the topic, a fact that led me to use grounded theory as a methodology in the first place. This helped me to identify new gaps in the literature and to describe the need for further research, and in the research phase, to identify salient themes that emerged from interviewee statements. Furthermore, the findings of this study may have implications for future research on Bon in the West, particularly in comparison to the history of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

12.3 Bonpos' Unique Journey in Finding Their Place and Asserting Their Identity

In the field of Tibetan Studies, the modern history of Bon since the beginning of the Tibetan diaspora can be considered very recent. The events that have led to Bon becoming global started happening only sixty years ago. While Tibetan Bonpos followed a process similar to that of their Buddhist compatriots, they soon differentiated themselves and are now finding their own way of presenting and narrating what they consider to be their singular identity and their role as "the Others" in relation to Tibetan Buddhists. This is leading to the emergence of new characteristics specific to Bonpos in the West, which occupy a central place in how Bon is presented and perceived.[631]

Historically situating the transmission of Bon in the West, we saw that the first Bon Tibetan teachers who came to Europe and North America were invited by other early influential Tibetan Buddhist teachers who had already established Buddhist centers in the West. That was the case, for instance, of Tenzin Wangyal, who was invited by Namkhai Norbu. Also, the first Bon websites included references to the Dalai Lama and specifically his teaching calendars in the West. However, along the way, Bonpos reassessed their identity, their place in the Tibetan community in exile, and their positioning vis-à-vis other Tibetan Buddhist schools. Nowadays, Bon websites rarely, if ever, mention the Dalai Lama and instead emphasize other aspects, historical accounts and figures. Yongdzin Rinpoche is currently portrayed in the majority of Bon websites as a central, unifying figure, highlighting his role, together with the late Abbot of Menri, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, in preserving and reviving Bon after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. For instance, identifying elements such as Dzogchen, Zhangzhung, Olmo Lungring and Tonpa Shenrab are being strongly emphasized as Bonpos find a way to define "who they are" in a process marked by a search for an identity and a place in the West. What is certain is that this repositioning of Bonpos vis-à-vis the wider Tibetan community and the audiences in the West is, in general, accompanied by a sense of pride in embodying what is widely perceived as "the indigenous/authentic/original" tradition of Tibet, a tradition that is considered to have preceded the arrival of Buddhism there. Such pride can even amount to what Kvaerne describes as an incipient though growing "fundamentalism," indicating again that the confluence of globalization and religion often causes both fluidity of boundaries and the sharpening of religious

631 See: Lopes 2014: 240.

divisions.[632] I myself noticed during a fieldtrip to Tibet in October 2016 how Bonpos emphasized their "Zhangzhungness." Renowned Tibetan Bonpo scholars told me that there were plans to establish a museum about Zhangzhung in Lhasa. The causes for this attention given to the narratives emphasizing the Zhanzhung aspects of Bon's origins are also to be found in how Tibetan Buddhist schools and Bonpos in particular perceived or created opportunities arising from their exile, to redefine who is who in relation to others, and other hierarchical assumptions. Although it was once predicted that Tibetan Buddhism would be destroyed, on the contrary, both Tibetan Buddhism and Bon continue to thrive in Tibet itself, also due to the many Chinese now following these religions, as well as in India, Bhutan, Nepal and, of course, in the West. It is certain that Bonpos in Tibet are also being influenced by this context, which started in the Bonpo communities in exile. As noted by Liu,

> The Bonpos' claims for their religious traditions from 1960 have sought to negotiate the recognition of Bon identity in relation to Tibetan nationalism. To do so, Bonpo monastics emphasize that the tradition of Bon is distinct from that of Buddhism; furthermore, they stress that "the Bon traditions" are an important source of key reference points which frame Tibetan culture, in addition to the influence of Buddhism.[633]

It remains to be seen how this will influence the configuration of power and politics among Tibetan traditions in general and Bon both in Tibet and in the West. Bonpos are defining their position in a larger scheme of Tibetan communities in exile. This process started in the West, but it is most likely also influencing Tibetans in Tibet.[634]

A related discovery to emerge from this research is that certain elements that were relevant in the old institutions of Tibetan Buddhism still play a significant role in the Tibetan diaspora. This includes both the divide between

632 Warburg 2007: 97–98.

633 Liu 2012: 100–101. Sehnalova also notes that some rituals, such as Mendrup (Wylie: *sman sgrub*; a traditional medicinal ritual) and its medicine have a function of asserting Bonpo identity and justifying the legitimacy of Bonpo monasteries as well as their sacred religious knowledge and the power they transmit. She shows that the practice of Mendrup has increased in frequency and popularity. See: Sehnalova 2018: 299. See also: Kind 2012.

634 Another interesting comparison can be made by looking at how the unprecedented speed of current globalization, as a result of the influence of information technology, is also transforming certain aspects of how religion is lived within Tibetan communities, both in China and Tibet and in exile communities in India and Nepal. For instance, concerning divination, clients living in China sometimes request prognostications from Tibetan lamas living in India or Nepal. Because of the constraints imposed by the virtual medium, the lamas perform an "adapted version" of the traditional rite, as the more complex or performative form of divination would otherwise be invisible to the petitioners. See: Smith 2020.

Tibetan Buddhism and Bon and the issues related to hierarchical structures among designated Bon representatives and Bon followers. What I found telling in my research is that some of these elements, such as sectarian views, references to Bon in pejorative terms or issues related to hierarchies and power ploys are also being reproduced by Western followers at the very same time that they are carrying idealized images of Bon or Tibet in general.

Moreover, as in the case of Tibetan Buddhist schools, "narratives about Buddhism [Bon in our case] are found on websites, Facebook comments, or message forums, they are being shaped, told, and retold among a network of Internet users and producers."[635] The special position accorded to anything related to Zhangzhung in all narratives of Bon in the West is also an important factor. The "West–East" flow is worth further research to evaluate whether and to what extent these identity narratives are also followed in Tibetan communities.

12.4 Virtual Bon

A well-thought-out analysis of the narratives on Bon found on the Internet is a promising theme for further research, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has broadened the scope of virtual possibilities to follow and receive teachings, in some regard elevating the importance of the Internet in the transmission of Bon in the West even further. Another possible line of future research is whether the Bonpos' search for a sense of identity has also happened or is happening in Tibetan regions in China, as has been the case in their exile in India and Nepal.

12.5 East–West and Back

In parallel, the political connotations of the reconfiguration of Tibetans belonging to the different Buddhist and Bon schools in exile, and in relation to how the government of China perceives this repositioning in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, certainly deserves further research. However, this line of inquiry would need to take into account the limitations that exist for the study of politically sensitive issues inside China.

Furthermore, in considering how Westerners' adoption of Bon and interaction with the teachers and the tradition are affecting the way in which Bon is evolving along with deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes, it is

635 Osburn 2014: 54.

pertinent to question whether certain significant symbols of Bon – such as the imaginary topography of Zhang Zhung and Tibet as the place where the great masters of the past lived and thrived – will continue to have the same status and prominence in the presentation and reception of Bon in the West. Will the new geographical expansion of Bon play a role in the "sacred geography" of Bon? Will Westerners incorporate new myths and stories related to physical places in France, for instance? Will Tibetans in Tibet see France as a special place because their revered teacher Yongdzin Rinpoche established a center there? My interviewees predicted that in this globalization process, monastic institutions will eventually diminish or even disappear, firstly in the Tibetan context and also in the West. The open question is whether an adapted form of Bon, transmitted in a European Western language by a Western teacher who has never been in a Bon setting in Asia (notably Tibet, India or Nepal) can still be called "Bon." And if so, by whom?

Indeed, as noted by participants, a key element that will show to what extent Bon is established in the West is the emergence – or the absence – of Western lamas, Western teachers or "Western buddhas." In this sense, additional future research can further explore the development of Bon within specific Western cultures, for example, Argentina, and how followers are interpreting and integrating the religion into their own lives in their particular cultural context.

As a dynamic and not a fixed or static phenomenon, Bon is still evolving at the present day, including through the "Westernization" of teachings and the constant interaction between universalizing and particularizing tendencies mentioned above. My research found that some notable ways this is happening include: how Bon is presented in the West with characteristics borrowed from Western psychology; by Westerners becoming teachers, particularly in the case of Ligmincha International; by "secularizing" Bon and by defining it as something different from "a religion"; and by translating Bon texts, particularly into English, Spanish, French, German and Russian. Bon is further evolving as Tibetan Bon lamas frequently travel from East to West, and by Westerners from nonreligious backgrounds starting to explore a "spiritual lifestyle" and become involved in Bon.

Although most respondents seemed aware of the changes and evolution of Bon, and particularly of certain practices as they are experienced in the West, most did not seem concerned by this or express that it had lost any "authenticity." Furthermore, the adaptation of Bon beliefs, understandings and practices to new cultural environments and societies has resulted in transformations ranging, as mentioned above, from the translation of teachings into English and other European languages, to fundamental changes in the step-by-step

process traditionally required to follow the Bon religion. None of these changes were perceived as altering the "nature of Bon." As our case study corroborates, as religions travel, religious messages are transformed by the transmitters and also by the receivers, according to the historical and cultural contexts. But those on the receiving end, in our case study, find it more difficult to acknowledge (or to reflect on) the transformations that they themselves are causing to the religion. Significantly, participants did not perceive that they are agents of change. They did not see themselves as affecting the religion, even when they indicated that they are selective when choosing what parts of Bon they have chosen to follow. For them, this did not represent something that could eventually impact the way Bon is perceived and presented.

Another significant implication of this study, in line with what Snellgrove noted when he published the influential *The Nine Ways of Bon*, is that when looking at any religion and in order to understand it holistically, researchers should take into account the religion's own historical and doctrinal perspective,[636] which involves bringing in the voices of the followers and their own points of view. A religion should be studied by paying attention not only to the texts but, at least as importantly, to the lived aspect of the religion, including what the followers have to say about these aspects. This approach allows for a broader understanding of any religion, which will always be – by its very nature – a dynamic phenomenon. From a scholarly point of view, this has to be done by looking at Bonpos' own self-representations, recognizing that even if they do not necessarily represent a historical reality, they represent a religious reality for the followers. Accompanying such research with the critical study of texts and other sources is key to understanding the many layers of religious meanings beyond the written sources.[637] Without one or the other, the study of any religion would unavoidably be incomplete.

Bon means different things to different participants. The wide spectrum of perceptions, assimilations and definitions show that Western participants select, adapt and interpret their understanding of Bon in relation to other approaches they are already familiar with. However, their approaches are not uniform. When describing their encounter with Bon and the different ways that this event changed their lives, many participants linked this moment to their early lives, describing it as something of crucial significance and narrating the encounter as a "homecoming," "magical," "special," and marked by a sudden sense of "connection." Some participants referred to their "belonging" to Bon in a rather sectarian manner,

636 Snellgrove 1967: 2.
637 Havnevik 2015: 15.

while others indicated that they did not want to follow a sectarian approach. Bon was explained by some participants with characteristics that are aligned to what we understand as "Buddhist modernism" including as a rational, scientific, and methodical path. This "modernist Bon," which combines elements of Bon with psychology and psychotherapy and emphasizes meditation as its core practice, resonates more acutely with the expectations of these participants, particularly those who reject anything they perceive as being "religious." Religions, for some participants, are "unintellectual" and most of them narrate their experiences of Bon as not being of a religious nature. While most Western followers are less interested in the ritualistic aspects of the religion and more interested in meditation practices, particularly Dzogchen, other participants emphasize the devotional and ritualistic aspects of Bon as essential or mention practicing them in their daily lives. These differing accounts suggest that there is no simple way of describing what Bon is and how it is lived by Western participants. Their interpretations, nevertheless, seem focused on how Bon impacted them rather than how they as Westerners have impacted Bon. This may be because they see themselves as only one element of the broader change. Notably, unlike at the beginnings of Bon in the West, participants have more recently started to request specific practices as they learn more or have access to information about different Bon teachings, text cycles and practices.

In this context, in line with McMahan's theory of modernist Buddhism, in today's global Bon it is possible to observe a demythologization and a detraditionalization at work, which are also followed by the "psychologization"[638] of Bon. As McMahan notes, the detraditionalization of Buddhism in the West tends to value reason and experience over tradition and promotes individuals to select, reject, adopt or reinterpret traditional practices accordingly.[639] In my findings, I noted that this shift from tradition to experience is mostly influenced by a group of Westerners who follow the more modernist approach to Bon. Interestingly, most Western participants who in fact follow a more traditional approach to Bon also strongly rejected any identification of Bon as a "religion." Similar to Marion Dapsance's findings in her study of a Tibetan Buddhist center in France, there is a clear reluctance to name Bon as a religion even by those participants who perform the Four Generosity rituals, which involve burning incense and visualizing water as pure realms. This may lead us to question what we actually mean in this context when we refer to "religion"? That is to say, if what we normally understand as a "religious"

638 McMahan 2008: 52.
639 McMahan 2008: 54.

practice is considered by participants as being "nonreligious," then perhaps the academic understanding of the concept itself should be questioned.

Furthermore, the levels of commitment expressed by participants varied, but there was a tendency for a high level of dedication among participants who were actively engaged at Shenten. Some of them had undergone practices considered to be "advanced," such as the forty-nine-day Dark Retreat and other *tsalung* practices. Some dedicated long periods of time during the year to practice, either by doing extended retreats of longer than one month each at Shenten or by reducing their formal work commitments in order to have more time to practice. A few claim to have radically altered their lives after encountering Bon, including changes in their families, their circles of friends and their professional careers. This suggests a type of Bon practitioner who does not fit into what Tweed defined as "sympathizers" or "nightstand" Buddhists.[640] These participants who engage in long meditation periods, sometimes even studying the Tibetan language, usually follow the more traditionalist approach and tend to perceive the approach to Bon that is transmitted at Shenten as the "authentic" form of Bon.

On the other side of the spectrum, for those who are less "traditional" Bon practices such as meditation have been adapted to suit Westerners' modern lifestyle. Specifically, these Westerners are less likely to engage in extended periods of meditation. Instead, they prefer practicing for shorter time periods to achieve a sense of "well-being." The influence of the psychological approach to practice[641] is something that was particularly emphasized by Tenzin Wangyal's students, as mentioned above. They follow instructions via Internet webcasts, they do not necessarily have a relationship with a particular teacher, and their focus seems to be on applying what they learn to have a better life, or, as one participant put it, "to have a nicer samsara." This contrasts with the claim made by the more "traditionalist" followers, who frame their practice in terms of the goal of attaining liberation from samsara.

In this context, meditation, and Dzogchen meditation in particular, is a key element. Dzogchen is what mostly attracts Westerners to Bon and what most participants highlighted as the core of Bon and the reason for their adherence to Bon. Again and again, they mentioned Dzogchen's nuances of being "secret" and "the highest" of all teachings. With the increased interest in Bon Dzogchen meditation by Westerners (even those who have no particular allegiance to a

640 Described in Chapter 4. See: Tweed 2002.

641 Extensive research is available on the application of mindfulness meditation and techniques to different types of modern therapies, such as psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. To cite just a few, see: Wilson 2014; Salmon et al. 2004; Segal/William/Teasdale 2002; Miller/Fletcher/Kabat-Zinn 1995; Kutz/Borysenko/Benson 1985.

religion), it has become an accepted practice to jump into Dzogchen practice without necessarily undergoing the preliminary practices, demonstrating another aspect of how Bon has been adapted in the West. Furthermore, some participants believe that the primacy of Dzogchen increases the alleged compatibility between the teachings given in different centers, for example, the Buddhist forms of Dzogchen taught by Namkhai Norbu and Sogyal Rinpoche, in relation to those given at Shenten or other Bon centers.

A more practical implication of this study relates to one of the questions I set out to answer at the very start: Who in the West is receiving Bon and how? Despite heterogeneities, certain common characteristics are shared by all participants. They are often upper-middle class, with a certain level of education and with possibilities for financing their spiritual practice. In cases of participants who were not financially solvent, they were mostly dedicated to the practice of Bon either full time or for most of their time. Except for cases where people were already wealthy, some participants confonted financial difficulties in their pursuing of practicing Bon. A possible consideration is whether the traditional Tibetan system of richer Tibetans "sponsoring" others will be replicated, but in this case from Westerner to Westerner rather than, as so far, only from the West to India, Nepal or Tibet. A system in which Bon centers create scholarships to broaden the pool of people who could participate in these centers' activities or in advanced practices would impact the relative lack of socioeconomic diversity among participants, something that researchers as well as centers may come to consider when studying Bon in the West.

How the personal lives of participants are affected by their encounter with Bon also varies, but there is a general tendency to narrate its repercussions as being significant and prominent in their lives. It was also interesting to see that some individuals, as they stayed longer at Shenten, had an experience that they presented as one of self-realization – a sense that they are not actually the person they had thought they were. They began to explore their own identity and relationship with themselves and with others, including friends, relatives and intimates, indicating that the meditative practices of Bon were instrumental in these processes of self-discovery. Some participants described their relation to other members of the Bon sangha as having a central place in their lives. But others also noted that the Bon path can be a rather solitary one, tending to refer especially to Dzogchen meditational practices.

These findings are relevant and valuable for those looking at the impact of meditation practices on mental health and well-being. I would particularly emphasize the intriguing and barely studied impact of practices such as Dark Retreat, which for Westerners involves spending forty-nine days in complete darkness doing specific breathing and visualization practices. At least eight of

the participants of this study had undertaken Dark Retreats, and five of them completed the full seven-week retreat. Indeed, little effort, if any, has been made so far into investigating which "advanced" practices Westerners are undertaking and what effects these are having on them. It is worth asking how advanced practices such as the Dark Retreat have impacted the lives of those who underwent them and the implications of these practices from a psychological point of view.[642] Seen from the other side, another theme for future research is which elements from Bon are being incorporated into Western psychotherapy as alternative methods of treatment, as is the case, for example, with "mindfulness" techniques. It is also worth asking whether the conditions for embarking on these practices, which used to be permitted only for advanced practitioners, will be stricter or more relaxed in the future.

Again in the domain of the psychology of religion and spirituality at the individual level, encountering Bon had a significant impact on participants' thoughts about their relationships, family life and future plans. From the perspective of psychotherapy, a significant implication is that it is key for therapists to be aware of affiliations that their patients have to Bon or, indeed, to any religion or belief system. This is a major discovery because knowing which practices patients engage in or have followed can provide significant information for the therapist and potentially influence the entire therapeutic relationship. Conversely, it would also be relevant for a patient selecting a therapist to know whether they are involved in Bon (or any other "religious") practices, particularly considering that this would certainly influence the manner in which therapists interpret their patients' experiences, as evidenced in some of the views shared by participants in this research who happened to be therapists. In other words, the Bon religious framework of patients (and that of therapists) should be taken into account in therapy to assess not only its beneficial and also its restrictive effects, something that has been neglected in most studies in the field contrary to the many existing studies on mindfulness and mental health. The particular nature of Bon practices, particularly advanced practices, calls for focused research.

642 When asked "What could be potentially relevant follow-up research to advance our understanding of the measurable effects of Bon meditation techniques?" Loel Guinness replied: "The best would be an in depth scientific study of the dark retreat to demonstrate how much cerebral functions change during the 49 days and what alterations occur when visions appear. This, I think, is the most significant for it will provide us with a far better understanding of how mind truly works and how a practitioner can control his senses, deprived of light and space, in absolute darkness for an extended period of time." Guinness 2021.

It also became clear in the course of my research that Bon, as it is lived on a daily basis, differs from what is practiced during formal retreats. Indeed, as a consequence of and in relation to globalization, Bon is undergoing a process of expansion in which certain elements, like Dzogchen meditation, are being selected while other elements, like traditional teaching methods and institutional structures, are often being adapted and reinterpreted in the new contexts by Bon followers in the West. Some elements of Bon, particularly Dzogchen meditation, are more likely to be retained than others. Other practices that do not require a formal time for "sitting in meditation," such as mantra recitation, were mentioned by participants as something they normally do in their everyday lives. This is proving significant in still unfolding ways to the lives of contemporary Western people. Thus, the case of Bon exemplifies how globalization can influence religions and vice versa. Many of the respondents were only partially practicing (most expressed that they could have a higher level of commitment), but they rarely acknowledged this as something, however widespread it may be, that is actually changing the practice of Bon. In other words, I did not perceive that they believe their individual practices are having an impact on the evolution of the tradition in the West; however, some participants noted that the way Bon practices are applied by Westerners in general is indeed cumulatively changing Bon.

Much like the interviews conducted for this research, it would now be timely to pursue case studies of the lives of the new Western Bon teachers and instructors. As I focused mostly on one center, Shenten Dargye Ling, the experiences reflected in my research include primarily behaviors and practices at that site, which might not reflect similar tendencies in other centers that either teach Dzogchen or are labeled as Bon centers. Additional research would be needed to verify what the actual similarities or differences are. While I was lucky to have extensive access to Shenten, a potential limitation to such research might be a lack of access to information, key persons and documents in other centers.

A further aspect worthy of research and analysis is the role of global Bon in the context of the Tibetan diaspora, particularly in the process of the formation of "modern Tibetan identities." This would entail looking at the historical roots of Bon, how Bonpos narrate their history including the importance they place on the early history of Zhangzhung, and how Bon as the indigenous religion "of the Tibetan people"[643] is situated in this process.

643 Kvaerne 1996a: 107.

13 Conclusion

This book set out to answer the question: What are the dynamics that are taking place in the transmission and reception of Yungdrung Bon in the West? Grounded in the experiences of participants (Bon followers in the West), this study provides a new viewpoint on the expansion of Tibetan religious traditions into the West. It also furnishes a comprehensive picture of the modern history of the Yungdrung Bon religion, deepening our understanding and broadening our knowledge of Bon as a lived religion.

We can speak of a global (or glocal) Bon that is expanding and adapting in a global environment in a highly dynamic manner, revealing complementary tendencies toward changes in the tradition as well as forces pushing for its preservation. The fact that Bon "went global" has several implications at both the transnational and the more individual levels. These include how Tibetan Bonpos are negotiating their place in the broader Tibetan community in exile and how Bon is presented in the West according to two main trends, a traditionalist approach and modernist one. The latter trend attempts to fuse Bon practices with elements borrowed from schools of Western psychology, which in turn is leading to a secularization of Bon. It is clear that in order to have a deeper view of what Bon is (or any religion, for that matter), we should study it holistically, analyzing both the religions' own historical and doctrinal perspectives and also bringing in the voices of the followers and their individual and collective narratives.

As we have seen throughout this book, global Bon can be looked at from various perspectives. It can be viewed as a historical process undergoing a continuous dynamic development in which global and local tendencies coexist, sometimes in tension and at other times in apparent coherence. It can also mean looking at the individuals who either transmit Bon or receive and follow Bon, and how transmitting or receiving Bon in a new geographical and cultural setting affects what is transmitted and what is received, as well as the reciprocal influences between the two. The manner in which the participants expressed their experiences of these cross-cutting elements were discussed as facets of their lived religious or spiritual reality, allowing us to unpack the human dimensions in the interplay between religions and globalization. That made it possible in this book to move between a theoretical approach and the discovery of the lived experiences of a specific group of Bonpo practitioners in the West. The various ways in which they receive and apply Bon practices – and their perceptions of them – reveal that Tibetan Bon, far from being a monolithic whole, is a complex religion that creatively takes on specific characteristics according to diverse cultural settings and that reflects the rich diversity of voices within it.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Ethics and Methodology

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

1. A key component of ethical research is to collect informed consent from every participant. Everyone assisting me in my research received a clear statement of what the research was about, what it involved, and what their part in it would be. If they were willing to take part, they confirmed this in recorded form.
2. Everyone involved in an interview was offered the option of remaining anonymous. All issues of anonymity were resolved in consultation with informants.
3. I remembered at all times that my role was neither to agree nor disagree with what those involved in the interview were saying but, rather, to facilitate the expression of their views.
4. Anyone involved in an interview could leave at any time, without asking permission or having to offer any kind of explanation.
5. I indicated to participants that only anonymous excerpts of transcripts will appear in the final thesis and will not be attributed to participants in a way that they could be identified.
6. All of them were ensured of data security and anonymity. Most of them, however, indicated that they did not have any issue with being identified in the research.

Additional Information on Participants

In addition to the thirty-six participants or Western Bonpos, I also interviewed four key Tibetan teachers who currently transmit Bon teachings in the West. They are:

1. Yongdzin (Lopon) Tenzin Namdak, considered the foremost living master and scholar of the Bon tradition. His experience represents the transition from a traditional Tibetan world to the Western world. He is part of the last generation of Tibetan teachers who were educated in the strict, traditional way in a Tibet that is now long lost.
2. The late Thirty-Third Menri Tridzin, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima (1929–2017), the previous abbot of Menri Monastery.

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3. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the current abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, founder of Shenten Dargye Ling, and a key transmitter in the West of the more traditional form of Bon.
4. Geshe Tenzin Wangyal, a well-known teacher, founder of Ligmincha Institute in Virginia, United States, and the key transmitter in the West of the more modern form of Bon.

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

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

More on Conducting Grounded Theory for this Study

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

To determine if I had conducted enough rounds of interviews, I considered the "saturation level" of concepts. Reaching data saturation has been described as "a mysterious, subjective, non-linear, gradual, and unfixed process in grounded theory method."[644] Charmaz differentiates between the saturation of data and the saturation of theoretical concepts. If an interviewer asks people the same questions, after a while he or she will hear the same stories. But when the researcher who is doing grounded theory continuously asks analytical questions of the data, the interviews themselves will evolve; therefore, the data that is being collected will evolve and, as a result, the researcher will obtain different accounts from interviewees. Saturation is very different when the researcher tries to find the properties

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

of a concept as well as the range of variations.[645] Moreover, a key aspect of grounded theory method is being alert in order to seize the right moment to write up a substantive theory as it emerges, not after the research is done. The aim is not to discover innumerable core categories, but to build a substantive middle-level theory as discovered within the boundaries of the planned original research.[646]

A weak point of theoretical saturation lies in the risk that researchers may claim saturation after looking at only a few cases. If constant comparison shows that there are no new properties emerging, then it is acceptable to stop. But grounded theory is a process, so at a different point in time, the properties may change because circumstances might change, public opinion might change, and so on. Researchers have to feel they have exhausted different dimensions of the properties identified.[647]

645 See more at: Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*.

646 See: Barney G. Glaser, *Stop, Write: B Writing Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 2012).

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

Appendix B

Example of Participants' Schedule during a Gomdra Retreat at Shenten

Daily schedule

One adheres to the following daily schedule for six days. On the seventh day (the "holiday") the schedule is limited to the early morning and evening practices.

06:00–07:30	Sang offering, meditation & prostrations
07:30–08:30	Breakfast & break
08:30–09:30	Meditation & Water offering
09:30–10:30	Teaching
10:30–11:00	Break
11:00–12:00	Individual accumulation
12:00–13:00	Lunch
13:00–14:30	Break
14:30–15:30	Individual study
15:30–16:30	Accumulation
16:30–17:00	Break
17:00–18:00	Meditation & Sur offering
18:00–19:00	Dinner & break
19:00–20:30	Meditation & Offering of the Body
21:30–22:30	Individual study
22:30–06:30	Sleep & dream yoga

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