

# Introduction

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“Well, we could read the story of the life of Tönpa Shenrap” – this answer from a Tibetan monk to a somewhat timid request for suitable reading matter was the beginning of a life-long friendship and turned out to be decisive for the academic career of a twenty-year old student from Norway.

I came to India early in 1966 – neither by air nor overland, but by boat, and when I returned to Norway in November that year, it was likewise by boat, having boarded a Norwegian cargo ship at Cochin in Kerala which brought me all the way to Hamburg. The voyage took three weeks. It gave me a concrete experience of distance that very few people can have today. My purpose in going to India was, like so many young people from the West (or injis, as we soon realized we were collectively called by the Tibetans) in the 1960s, was to work as a volunteer teacher in a Tibetan refugee school. We were idealistic and perhaps naïve. Looking back, like so many others, I realize that the Tibetans I met – then and later – gave me far more than I am likely to have given them in return.

But to return to the life story of Tönpa Shenrap. The kindly monk, whose monastic name was Sangye Tenzin, was, I realized, an adherent of the Bon religion. The little I knew about this religion I had learnt from reading Helmut Hoffmann’s *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion* from 1950, about which more below. But above all I had already been intrigued by Fosco Maraini’s caption of a photo of two Bon monks in his book *Secret Tibet: “The Etruscans of Asia”*. In my imagination, the Bonpos were the custodians of an ancient and enigmatic tradition, surviving in out-of-the-ways parts of Tibet, now doubly inaccessible through the Chinese occupation. And yet, here was a Bon monk, not only willing to share his knowledge with me, but also speaking excellent English, having spent several years in England as the assistant of Professor David Snellgrove before taking up a teaching assignment in India. I vaguely felt that this might give direction to my studies, indeed to my life, and, as it turned out, I was not mistaken.

Through daily reading sessions over the course of several months I was introduced to the two volumes of the *Gzer-mig*, the account of the exploits of Tönpa Shenrap, the divine teacher of Bon. I gradually understood that Bon was not a thinly disguised form of shamanism nor was it a sinister perversion of Buddhism; I realized that in the eyes of its adherents Bon is an immutable and profound doctrine and practice leading to spiritual illumination and ontological liberation. At the same time, I was - and have remained - fascinated by the lively and dramatic narrative of the *Gzer-mig*.

During my stay in India in 1966, I had the privilege of meeting most of the senior Bonpo monks who had escaped from Tibet around 1960: the abbot of Yungdrung Ling; the retired head teacher of Menri Monastery in the province of Tsang, commonly known as Horpa Pönlob; Tsöndrü Rinpoche, and others. The Bon religion, I realized, was a living, complex and sophisticated spiritual and cultural tradition.

To cut a long story short, I invited my Bonpo teacher and friend to come to Norway the following year to live with my family. Compared to the present time, when a huge bureaucracy is guided by laws reflecting deep mistrust to any visitor from outside our own part of the world, the procedure was simple: a phone call (at which I was present) by the head of the newly-formed Norwegian 'Help Tibet' association (which already ran a school in Norway for forty Tibetan boys) to the 'competent authority', ran as follows: "Good morning sir, this N.N. We have a Tibetan monk in India that we would like to invite to Norway for a couple of years. Would that be all right?" The answer, which I still remember verbatim: "Why, yes of course! He is most welcome". A simple visa application being the only subsequent formality, Sangye Tenzin soon found himself in Norway, where he spent almost two years. My own teacher at the University of Oslo, Professor Nils Simonsson, had studied Tibetan in Paris with Marcelle Lalou, but had never heard the language actually being spoken before. Accordingly he was delighted to engage a deeply learned Tibetan monk as part-time teacher of Tibetan - those were the days when a professor could just go ahead and do that sort of thing without writing a fifty-page project proposal!

By this time, a new departure in the study of Bon had been marked by the publication, in 1967, of the volume entitled *The Nine Ways of Bon*, a selection of passages from the 14th-century text *Gzi-brjid*, translated and presented by David Snellgrove. The importance of this book can hardly be overrated. Here, for the first time, Bon was presented as a vast and coherent religious system of ritual, healing,

thought and meditation – on the basis of its own texts. While – needless to say – the translation conformed to every exigency of a rigorous academic approach, it had been made possible by a close and respectful collaboration with Tenzin Namdak, an extraordinarily learned Bonpo monk who had been the Head Teacher (slob dpon) of Menri Monastery in Tibet. Lobsön Tenzin Namdak is still active today, forty-five years later, as an internationally revered scholar and spiritual guide.

For my Master thesis, I wished to make a similar, although of course far more modest contribution: I wanted to present a significant text from the Bon literature. Following the advice of my teacher Sangye Tenzin, I started translating part of a Dzogchen text, the A khrid thun mtshams bco lnga. At the time, apart from the excerpts published by David Snellgrove in *The Nine Ways of Bon*, hardly anything was known of the Dzogchen system of thought and meditation. Sangye Tenzin introduced me to Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, who came over to Oslo. Samten, who soon became and has remained to this day a very dear friend, had started to prepare his thesis based on a translation of the history of Bon by Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen (1859-1935) (eventually published in the London Oriental Series in 1972 as *The treasury of good sayings: A Tibetan history of Bon*), and he, too, provided invaluable help with my thesis, perhaps more than I realized at the time. I therefore take this opportunity to thank him again most sincerely.

In 1969, after the passing away of the abbot of Menri, Sangye Tenzin was elected as his successor, becoming the 33rd abbot in a line stretching back to the founder, Sherap Gyaltzen who had founded the monastery in Tibet in 1405. Sangye Tenzin therefore returned to India and started organizing the monastery on land provided for the Bonpo community at Dolanji, near the town of Solan in Himachal Pradesh. He was henceforth known by his new monastic name of Lungtog Tenpai Nyima.<sup>1</sup>

After I obtained my M.A. in 1970, I decided to attempt three tasks in the hope of contributing towards a foundation for future studies of Bon. Firstly, I felt that *The Nine Ways of Bon* provided the key for some kind of overview of the Bon religion in the Tibetan context, but also in the broader context of the history of religions, and that a criticism of older approaches to Bon in the West could now be justified. This, then, I attempted to do in an article, published in the journal *Numen*.<sup>2</sup> Although Hoffmann's book, referred to above, already appeared to be outdated, I have since realized that it is

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<sup>1</sup> The only biography of the Abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima is by Bya-phur Nam-mkha' rgyal mtshan (1994) *Bon gyi gong sa chen po skyabs rje Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa kun bzang dgyes pa'i mchod sprin*, Ochghat, H.P., India.

<sup>2</sup>(1972) Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet. *Numen*, 19(1), 22-40.

in fact a remarkable piece of scholarship, a learned attempt to make sense of the little information about Bon which was available in the West in the 1940's. As an aside, I might mention that in my article in *Numen* I suggested, in an entirely unsystematic way but possibly for the first time, the link between the ancient language of Zhang-zhung, as transmitted in Bon texts, and the present-day dialects of Kinnaur. This is a field that has since been vastly developed by linguists, but at the time the only real contribution to what one today may call Zhang-zhung studies was a slim (but extremely useful) volume by the Danish scholar Erik Haarh.<sup>3</sup>

The second part of my plan (I avoid the word 'project', as this term nowadays seems to apply mainly to attempts at obtaining research funding) was to establish a chronological frame for a study of the history in Tibet of the Bon religion. Fortunately the Bonpos in India had already published a *bstan rtsis*, a 'chronology of the Doctrine', composed in 1842 by Nyima Tenzin, one of the abbots of Menri Monastery. Thanks to the encouragement of Dr. Haarh, my translation was published in *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) in 1971.<sup>4</sup> While all dates provided by the *bstan rtsis* certainly could not be taken at face value (Tönpa Shenrab, for example, is stated to have lived some 17,000 years ago), it nevertheless provided a chronological framework to which scholars continue to refer.

The third part of my plan was to provide some kind of overview of the canonical texts of Bon, the Bon Kanjur. The existence of such a collection had been long known – George Roerich, for example, mentions seeing a set consisting of 140 volumes in a Bon monastery near Nagchu in 1928.<sup>5</sup> The contents were, however, largely unknown. Nevertheless, a catalogue (*dkar chag*) had been published in New Delhi by Dr. Lokesh Chandra in the 1960's, and I set about analyzing the contents. It emerged that practically all the texts belong to various types of 'textual treasures' (*gter ma*), and furthermore that the older ones – more or less up to the 11th century – tended to have been 'discovered' accidentally while the later ones usually came to light as the result of the intervention of supernatural beings, or even as inspirations arising in the minds of spiritual masters. This study was published in *Indo-Iranian Journal* in 1974, providing

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<sup>3</sup>(1968) *The Zhang-zhung Language. A Grammar and Dictionary of the Unexplored Language of the Tibetan Bonpos.* *Acta Jutlandica* XL:1, Aarhus.

<sup>4</sup>A Chronological Table of the Bon-po. The *bstan-rtsis* of *Ñi-ma bstan-'jin*. *Acta Orientalia*, vol 33 (1971), pp. 205-282.

<sup>5</sup>George Roerich (1931). *Trails to Inmost Asia. Five Years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition.* New Haven, p. 365.

the titles, number of volumes etc. of each section of this vast textual heritage.<sup>6</sup> For many years this was the only overview in the West of the Bon canon.

Times have changed; now several editions of the Bon Kanjur are available. In the early 1990's the Oslo University Library acquired a complete set. In order to catalogue it, I organized in 1994-95 a team at the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo, in which Tibetan as well as Western scholars participated. No less than three Tibetan scholars from the PCR, two from Lhasa and one from Beijing, spent a full academic year in Oslo; two of them had grown up in Bonpo communities. The result of this project was a detailed catalogue providing all kinds of information about every text in the Bon Kanjur. Through the kindness of Dr. Yasuhiko Nagano, this catalogue eventually (2003) appeared in the Senri Ethnological Reports series, published by the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka.

During the last couple of decades, the study of Bon has made immense progress, and many scholars are actively engaged in it, to such an extent that a neologism has been coined, viz. 'Bonology'. This is not the place for a roll call of the many excellent contributions, large and small, that have been made in this field over the years. Being in some sense a 'veteran', I may perhaps nevertheless be permitted to offer a few reflections on the present 'Stand und Aufgaben' of the study of Bon.

My first reflection is that being scholars, we should always strive to see Bon as an element in the cultural history of Tibet. We should try to understand Bon in its social, doctrinal and spiritual interaction with other religious traditions over the centuries in Tibet. At the same time, it is certainly not only legitimate, but indeed illuminating to look further afield, and compare the religious configuration in Tibet with those of other Asian countries. For instance, certain structural parallels between Bon and Buddhism in Tibet and Shinto and Buddhism in Japan have been pointed out, and could probably be explored further. Certainly there is also much to be discovered if the contacts between Tibet and neighbouring cultures, especially the Chinese, Iranian and Indian cultures, are explored more energetically. On the other hand, I would warn against the tendency to speak of "Zhang-zhung culture" as if this were a known, or even knowable entity. There was beyond doubt a historical state and/or cultural area, broadly localized in present-day Western Tibet, known as Zhang-zhung, and this entity in due course became the object of Tibetan (Bonpo) literary elaborations and popular beliefs. This is in itself an important and fascinating process, but should not be

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<sup>6</sup> The Canon of the Tibetan Bonpos. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 16,1 (1974), pp. 18-50 and 16,2, pp. 96-144.

confused with historical reality, about which – as far as the pre-tenth century history of the origins of Bon is concerned – we still in fact know remarkably little.

It is rather striking that Bon – at least as now practised and propagated outside Tibet, especially in the West – is in the process of being confused with New Age phenomena such as healing and neo-shamanism. That this new brand of Bon provides spiritual sustenance for Western adherents of Bon is not surprising, and in a certain sense inevitable. Of greater significance, it seems to me, is the fact that this process of change seems to be accepted by many among the younger, monastically educated Bon monks and integrated into their own understanding of their identity. One is reminded of the Tibetan diaspora's somewhat similar adoption of the concept of 'eco-Tibet'. It would be a mistake to applaud or condemn this development. It would, however, be a worthwhile object of study in its own right.

I have supervised many students of Tibetan religion and culture at various academic levels, but as a supervisor I have never been concerned with aiming to focus on studies of Bon in particular. However, I have had the privilege of helping a number of young scholars from Tibet in preparing their dissertations for the M.A. degree; these scholars have chosen various aspects of Bon as their theme and in several cases themselves come from Bon communities. These young Tibetan academics, who thanks to a special agreement with the 'competent authorities' have been able to come to Norway to study at our universities, have never had a traditional monastic training, but are trained in and committed to the critical, source-oriented method of research which is the basis of universities everywhere. Elsewhere in Europe individual Tibetans with a background in Bon have obtained academic degrees and in at least one case, a Ph.D. degree (Leiden). This is extremely encouraging and indeed indispensable if we want our work to be meaningful outside a narrow circle of scholars, and eventually perhaps filter through to Bon communities.

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On a cold and rainy evening in December 1969, the newly-elected abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima and I tried to warm our hands over an old tin bucket containing a few pieces of burning charcoal, the only semblance of heating in a simple farm-house on the land provided for the Bon community at Dolanji. This house, with its earth floor and windows having pieces of sacking instead of glass, was one of only a couple of buildings already standing. When I visited Dolanji again, in 1973, the main temple was already under construction, on the basis of drawings made by the Abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima who also supervised every detail of the work. Some years later, an

organized religious community had been established, windows had been fitted with panes of glass, and the Abbot resided in a small but practical house, the bla brang, that also served as office for the community. Everything was solidly brick-built but faithful to traditional Tibetan architectural style. And so it has continued. Under the dynamic leadership of the Abbot, the Bon monastery at Dolanji is now a flourishing institution housing close to two hundred young Tibetan monks pursuing an eight-year course of study for the Geshe degree; there is a separate temple for rituals performed by lay yogins; there is also a nunnery where the young nuns are taught philosophy and debate, just like the monks. There is a fully equipped, professionally organized library with internet access and books in many languages, a printing centre, a video room, a five-storey hospital, communal kitchen, and a hotel for guests with comfortable room overlooking the valley, all with attached bathrooms.

This is, all in all, a remarkable achievement. It is difficult to conceive of this modern, bustling community as the Asian counterpart to the enigmatic Etruscans. Yet a certain mystery remains, in spite of the increasingly mainstream character of Tibetan monastic life, here as well as elsewhere in the diaspora. Who, exactly, are the Bonpos? How, when and where was this religion formed? These are still questions to which one can still only discern vague contours of an answer, and thus call upon further research from scholars and on reflection and openness on the part of the adherents of Bon.