

## Ritual Sanctity in Bon Buddhist Religious Practices of Tibet as Visualized in the Lower Shivaliks: A Case of Menri Monastery in Solan, Himachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** Introduction: Menri Monastery (medicine mountain) was the name of a Bon monastery in Tibet that has been refounded at Dolanji in the Sirmaur Himachal Pradesh, in 1967. The name has been derived from the medicinal plants and curative natural springs on the mountain.

Focus: Two organized religious traditions have been existent in Tibet. The first is Buddhism and the second is a faith that has been referred to by its Tibetan name, Bon, ever since its introduction to the population of Tibet in the 8th century. It has been characterized by the rituals and symbols of shamanism with a vast oral tradition of "Shamanism" or "animism", and has been taken to be as a continuation of what supposedly must have been the religious practices prevalent in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism.

Methodology: The fieldwork for the present study was conducted using empirical research tools of enquiry prepared for qualitative approach to data collection in and around Menri Monastery, located at Dolanji village in the Sirmaur district of Solan, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Scope: Thus, here is scope for further research to clear the miasma ambiguities and misconceptions surrounding the Bon to help it attain its pristine and unique identity.

**Keywords:** Bon monastery, medicinal plants, curative natural springs, spiritual leader, conventional education

### Introduction

"Menri Monastery (medicine mountain) was the name of a Bon monastery in Tibet that has been refounded at Dolanji in the Sirmaur district of Himachal Pradesh, India in the year 1967. The name has been derived from the medicinal plants and curative natural springs on the mountain. Menri has become the leading Bon monastery. The abbot of the Menri Monastery is considered the spiritual leader of the Bon." In the year 1970, His Holiness the 33<sup>rd</sup> Menri Trizin established a fresh Menri Monastery for implementing the conventional education system providing an opportunity of learning all the major and minor sciences and subjects of the Yungdrung Bon tradition. Since then more than one hundred Geshe (equivalent to a doctorate or Ph. D Degree) have qualified their courses from here.

In the monastery, monks receive not only an education of the ten sciences of ancient Tibetan wisdom, but also in Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen. Besides that, His Holiness gathered together the children of the Himalayan regions to impart the ancient wisdom and culture of Bon in them and sent them to school to have a quality education for their bright future. Till now, around a thousand scholars have graduated. Many more are continuing to enroll in the school. According to the increasing numbers of both monks and children, the outer facility has been greatly expanded over time. Foremost, His Holiness established a hostel named Bon Children Welfare Centre, then later he established a Bon Children's Home, thereafter, School, Library, Menri Guest House, Redna Menling Nunnery, Retreat Centre for Ngagpa (community of ascetic, esoteric trainees), Stupa Temple and Sorig Bumzhi Medical College.

## Research Methodology

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted using empirical research tools of enquiry prepared for qualitative approach to data collection in and around Menri Monastery, located at Dolanji village in the Sirmaur district of Solan, Himachal Pradesh, India. The universe of study included the Redna Menling Nunnery, located on the opposite side of the valley of Dolanji. It is the first ever Yungdrung Bon Nunnery built outside Tibet. The monks, nuns, Lamas, people working in the monasteries, people living in and around the monastery make up the universe of this study. Snowball sampling method was used. However, despite the sample size being small, ample qualitative inputs were available for the paper. Other than the above mentioned methods, photography as well as voice recording technique were used during the in-depth interviews (which were later transcribed in detail to obtain valuable content) to collect information in the field. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Some of the ancient Tibetan texts referred to were translated for obtaining a better grasp of the concept.

## Conceptual Underpinnings of Buddhism

Two organized religious traditions have been existent in Tibet. The first is Buddhism and the second is a faith that has been referred to by its Tibetan name, Bon, ever since its introduction to the population of Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The Dalai Lama, the present-day head of Tibetan Buddhism, is the internationally respected spokesman of Buddhism in Tibet. The Bon religion, however, has been comparatively much less known. The western view of Bon as a religion has been less than accurate. It has been characterized by the rituals and symbols of shamanism with a vast oral tradition of “Shamanism” or “animism”, and has been taken to be as a continuation of what supposedly must have been the religious practices prevalent in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism. Some workers have described it as a marginal countercurrent containing elements of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Three religious traditions exist among the tenets of the Tibetan Buddhists following. These are:

- a) “The divine dharma (*Iha chos*), or Buddhism”
- b) “Bon dharma (*bon chos*)”
- c) “The Dharma of human beings (*mi chos*) or folk religion”.

“The first category forms the package of doctrines and practices that are thought to be distinctively Buddhist. Bon is taken to be the indigenous religious tradition of Tibet, a system of shamanistic and animistic practices performed by priests whom they address as shen (**gshen**) or bonpo (**bon po**). Early records show ‘bon’ denoting a particular type of priest who performed rituals to propitiate local spirits and ensure the well-being of the dead in the afterlife. The previous rituals have been observed to differ substantially from contemporary Bon. These rituals often involved the sacrificing of animals (mainly horses, yak and sheep), making offerings of food and drink and burying the dead with precious jewels. The benefits of these practices were taken to accrue to the giver of such possessions which were apparently transferred to them in the afterlife through shamanistic rituals.” The Tibetan folk religion encompasses indigenous beliefs and practices, many of which existed before the introduction of Buddhism and which are considered distinctive from the mainstream practice of Buddhism.

Folk religious practices the world over have been known to rely heavily on myths, magic and rituals which are built up on the inherent belief systems of the desire of the community to seek protection from harm for self and family, for crops, livestock, wealth, etc. “In the Tibetan mind the world is comprised of multitudes of powers and spirits. For them the welfare of human beings requires that these dwellers of the spirit world be propitiated and sometimes even subdued. Every part of the natural environment is believed to be alive with various types of forces that live in mountains, trees, rivers and lakes, rocks, fields, the sky and the earth. They have their own native supernatural beings and people living in these areas are strongly aware of their presence. Tibetans are known to give them offerings, perform rituals to propitiate them and sometimes refrain from going to particular places so as to avoid the more dangerous forces.”

## The Advent of Buddhism in the Spirit World of Tibetan Belief Systems

“When Buddhism entered Tibet, it did not attempt to suppress belief in the indigenous forces. The most powerful deities are often considered manifestations of Buddha, bodhisattvas, Oikinis, etc., The mundane forces are thought to be merely worldly powers, that have demonic natures and which have been suppressed by Buddhism. Buddhist practitioners are thought to be free from the influences of this indigenous fold of religion. These beliefs

and practices which are prevalent at all levels of Tibetan society and it is common to see learned scholar-Lamas, masters of empirically-based dialectics and thoroughly practical in daily affairs, refuse to travel at certain times in order to avoid dangerous spirits or decide their travel schedules after first performing some or the other divination to determine the most auspicious time.” According to common Tibetan folk beliefs, the world has distinctive parts: sky and heavens, earth and the “lower regions”. Each of these has its own distinctive spirits, many of which influence the world of humans.

- (i) “The upper gods (steng Lha) live in the atmosphere and sky”
- (ii) “The middle tsen (bar btsan) inhabit the earth”
- (iii) “The lower regions are the home of yoklu (g.yog klu), most notably snake-bodied beings called lu (klu naga), which live at the base of lakes, rivers and wells and are reported to hoard vast stores of treasure”

The spirits that reside in rocks and trees are called nyen (gnyan); “they are often malicious and the Tibetans tended to associate them with sickness and death. Lu are believed to bring leprosy and so for this reason they felt it is important to keep them away from human habitations. Sadak (sa bdag, ‘lords of the earth’) are beings that live under the ground and are connected with agriculture. Tsen are spirits that live in the atmosphere and are believed to shoot arrows at humans who disturb them. These arrows cause illness and death. Tsen appear as demonic figures with red skin, wearing helmets and riding over the mountains on red horses. Du (bdud, mara) were apparently the original atmospheric spirits, but they came to be associated with the Buddhist demons called mara which are led by their king (also named Mara), who had the primary goal to lead beings into ignorance, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of the worldly life or ‘samsara’.”

“Tibetans have widespread belief in the importance of being aware of their powers and remaining in their good graces. The folk religion is a rich and varied system, with a large pantheon, elaborate rituals and ceremonies, local shamans with special powers who can propitiate and exorcise and indulge in divinatory practices that allow humans to predict the influences of the spirit world and take appropriate measures are the propagators. All of these are now infused with Buddhist influences and ideas, but undoubtedly retain elements of the pre-Buddhist era culture and practices.”

“The pre-Buddhist, or shamanic, medical tradition deals with a broad range of misfortune ranging from inconveniences that could be as benign as losing things to illnesses that could be as deadly as the plague (Bawden, 1960: Humphrey & Onon, 1996). Misfortune in a vast varieties of forms like accidents, depression, miscarriages etc., were explained by recourse to a field of powers identified as malignant humans, animals, or ancestors (eg. ongon, lus savdag, elriye, chidkun, tuid-ker, ada, eliye (Bawden, 1960, Heissig, 1980; Humphrey and Onon, 1996). Ember and Ember (2004) remarked that these forces can be set in motion by external actions, such as a curse, or by an individual’s own actions, such as the breach of a taboo.”

Treatments under this system usually invoke the powers of specific spirits. Tsagaan Ovgon (The white old man) for example, has been known among the Buriats to protect humans from poxes and a number of feverish illnesses (Heissig, 1980). “The task of a healer is to prevent misfortune by appealing to specific spirits or to correct (zasa-) a misfortune or malady by severing the oppression (dani-) of specific forces.” Ember and Ember (2004) further describe how various scholars have examined and dealt with several ill-health conditions when they say “different spirits require different ritual activity such as ecstatic trance induction (Humphrey, 1996), like manipulation of a patient’s bones and muscles (Hruschka, 1998) or more material forms of treatment (Cleaves, 1954). The workhorses of this ritual repertoire and effigies that absorb an individual’s illness or misfortune (Heissig, 1986, Humphrey and Onon, 1996).”

“Adherents of Bon tend to view their traditions as being distinct from Buddhism, although it clearly contains many Buddhist elements.” The term ‘Bon’ for Bonpos (practitioners of Bon) signifies “truth,” “reality,” and “the true doctrine” which provides a path to liberation. Bon today has absorbed many Buddhist elements, and many of its teachings are strikingly similar to those of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Buddhist literature the Bonpos have been commonly portrayed as malicious reactionaries.

## Differentiating Bon and Buddhism: Historical Perspective

“Lord Buddha is the founder of Buddhism while Bon religion came from Lord Tonpa Sherab Miwo, born at Wollmolungring in Shangshung. The teachings and life history of Bonton Sherab Miwo are similar to those of Lord Buddha who was born at Lumbini in the Sakya clan in 566” B.C (Tamdang, 1998). Both the belief systems have played a significant role in shaping the life of the population in Tibet and across the mountain tracts in the Himalayas. “The worshipping of spirits by erecting prayer flags and burning incense (Lhabsol) and throwing effigies of evil spirits (Lud Tongwa) are contemporary examples of Bon influence upon Buddhism” (Tamdang, 1998). Very little is known of the expanse and extent of the commonly termed “Tibetan Buddhism” or as has been termed in recent times as ‘Lamaism’. These are connotations of western thought as within the lexicon of the Tibetan or the Himalayan religious followings’ these terms do not exist.

The foundation of Buddhism was firmly laid after the advent of Padmasambhava, the great Guru who gave a mystic dimension to the earlier propagated forms of Buddhism including present day Mahayana, (Greater Vehicle) Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) and Vajrajana (Middle Path). “Historical evidence shows that King Trisong Deutsen of Tibet (born in 742 A.D.) invited Khenchen Bodhisattva to Tibet to preach Dharma. Apparently the evil spirits caused calamities among the people and Khenchen Bodhisattva was forced to advise the king to invite Guru Padmasambhava, the powerful Tantrik saint, from India. Also called Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava was adept at subjugating the evil spirits of Tibet and converted them into the guardians of the Dharma. It was in 764 A.D. when Guru Rinpoche and the Bodhisattva visited Tibet and in the same year they laid the foundation stone of Tibet’s first monastery, Samye Migyur Drubpai Tsuglakhang.” This laid the foundations of Buddhism in that land (Tamdang, 1998).

The Khenchen Bodhisattva then ordained seven Tibetan boys into monkhood. These seven “Tibetan monks were called ‘Semi-Mi-Dun; or seven experimental monks’. They were namely;

- (i) “Paghor Vairocana”
- (ii) “Chimbhu Shakya Deva”
- (iii) “Ba Salnag”
- (iv) “Nganlam Gyalwa”
- (v) “Ma Rinchenchok”
- (vi) “Khon Luyi Wangpo”
- (vii) “Tsang Legdrup”

All Buddhist monks have been reported to have originated from these seven monks. “It is believed Chogyal Trisong Deutsen was enthusiastic about translating the entire Buddhist teachings from Sanskrit to Tibetan. He initiated a translation chamber and named ‘Samye Dragyurling’ and requested two Indian teachers to teach Sanskrit to the Tibetan monks. Guru Rinpoche prophesized the emergence of an extraordinary boy named Ganjak Thanglha who was later renamed by Guru Rinpoche as Vairotsana. He was personally taught by Guru Rinpoche and Khenchen Bodhisttva along with other boys. Vairotsana was deputed to go to India along with Tsang Legdrup to study Sanskrit.” The two boys completed their studies successfully but Tsang Legdrup died on the way back home. “Vairotsana returned successfully and Chogyal Trisong Deutsen accepted him as his Guru. Vairotsana became the greatest Tibetan translator and translated countless volumes of Buddhist texts into Tibetan. The reign of Chogyal Trisong Deutsen in the 8<sup>th</sup> century established Buddhism and saw the decline of the Bon.”

Bon historical records, however, report that “during the time of Nyatri Tsenpo there lived twelve highly reputed Bonpo scholars who were famous for their mastery in their respective fields of specialization such as Tibetan medicine, astrology, handicrafts and the like. Under the patronage of the ninth king Gyalpo Pudhe Chungyal the Bon religion reached its zenith. He is reputed to have invited one hundred scholars at a time and some of the most famous Bonpo scholars that he invited from Shangshung were Shangshung Lhade, Khyungpo Mukhyung Gyen and Lhakhyung Gyen.” They taught the people

- (i) “How to make divinations” (*mo gyagpa*),
- (ii) “How to worship spirits” (*Lha solwa*),
- (iii) “How to exorcise evil spirits” (*De donpa*)

(iv) “How to practise Bon religion in general” (*Bon je pa*)

In his book, ‘Political History of Tibet’ (1967), the Tibetan historian, T.W. Shakabpa, says that “Lha Thothori Nyentsen was born in the year 173 A. D. When he was 60 years of age Buddhist texts and gold stupas rained down on the roof of the Yumbu Lagang Palace. This historic event took place in 233 A.D. corresponding with the 777th death anniversary of Lord Buddha. According to Shakabpa this year has been recognised by the government of Tibet as the year of establishment of Buddhism in Tibet and its commemoration is printed on the Tibetan legal currency.” The actual establishment of Buddhism in Tibet came during the time of the 33rd monarch, Chogyal Songtsen Gampo, known as the greatest king of Tibet who invented the Tibetan script with his famous minister, Thonmi Sambhota, for preserving the teachings of the Buddha. “In the year 633 A.D. the king sent 16 Tibetan boys to India with lavish gifts of gold for studying the language of India (Gyaghar gyi ke). Only one boy returned. His name was Thonmi Sambhota. The king, Songtsen Gampo, accepted him as his Guru and provided him the palace of Nyangdren Phaphogkhai Kukhar Maru for his residence. It was here that Nyalpa Thonmi Anu's son, Sambhota, invented the Tibetan script based on Devanagiri script (Legjar Lhayi ke) and formulated the Tibetan alphabet on the basis of Sanskrit as well as made an entirely new Tibetan grammar which has been in effective use for the last 13 centuries.”

**Bon Perspective on Religious Practices**

Bon scholars, however, do not agree with the theory that the present form of the Tibetan written language was invented by Thonmi Sambhota. “They feel that a written form of language in Tibet during the time of Songtsen Gampo was based on the text of Shangshung called ‘Shangshung Maryig’. Though they are ready to agree that the existing written language of Tibet, based on ‘Shangshung Maryig’, might have been in a crude form and that Thonmi Sambhota might have refined and polished that existing language, they are not ready to believe that Thonmi Sambhota invented the Tibetan alphabet for the first time.” Reverend Namkhai Norbu (1998), a renowned Bonpo scholar, in his book titled ‘Necklace of Zhi’ argues that “the Tibetan written language based on ‘Shangshung Maryig’ was in existence even during the time of Tibet's first king Nyatri Tsenpo. He feels that during that time the founder of Bon religion, Tonpa Sherab Miwo, visited Central Tibet and gave extensive preachings on the Bon religion in places like Kongpo-.” Taking this as a reason he says that, “Without having a language that was in written form at that time it was not just possible for the human memories” to effectively recall the extensive teachings of the Bon Master.

During the time of Tibet's 41st king, Chogyal Trisalpachen, “Buddhism was at its highest peak. Under his reign extensive revision were done upon the translations that had already been made, and catalogues of Buddhist texts were prepared. The Tibetan written language was restructured and repolished as ‘Ke sarche kyi ten la phab’ and out of respect the state provided seven families to each monk.”

**Resurgence of Bon in Himachal Pradesh on Decline of Buddhism in Tibet**

Lang Dharma ascended the Tibetan throne as the 42<sup>nd</sup> king. In his short reign Gyalpo Lang Dharma destroyed Buddhism by almost uprooting it from the soil of Tibet. The Bon Cultural Centre at Solan in Himachal Pradesh has published books on Bon religion that signal towards its resurgence and later translation to a prospective land. As brought out in the discussions held at the Menri monastery at Solan the Bonpo pantheon consists of a number of deities. The classification of deities is very complex but they can be divided into those who are peaceful and those who are wrathful. The four highest deities of the religion are known as Transcendent Lords including Lhamo, Lhachen, Sidpa and Shenrab. The gods can also be classified as the Protector gods, the Mountain gods and the spirits etc. The deities include the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, sky gods, demons and many others. These deities play an important role in the lives of the followers and are expected to guide and protect them.

**(i) Animistic Bon**

“Being a shamanistic religion Bon is characterized by mystic rituals, spells, sacrifices and spirit manipulation. It lays much emphasis on meditative practice as well. The current traditions of Buddhism like using the prayer wheels, sky burials, prayer flags, spirit traps, festival dances and rubbing holy stones have all come from the Bon religion. The original Bon was native to Tibet as is also known as Animistic Bon. The first form of this religion is known as Black Bon or Bon of the Devils. The second form of Bon is a rather controversial phase as it is based



on the claims of the Bonpo texts and traditions.” The traditional texts claim that Bon can be traced to a Buddha like founder named Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche who renounced his kingship to become a monk Namkhai, 1995 (as is true of Prince Siddhartha of the Shakya clan who left his kingdom and became the Buddha after penance and enlightenment).

## (ii) Yungdrung Bon

Lord Tonpa gave his teachings to the people of ZhangZhung region of western Tibet. They had been practicing animistic Bon, earlier but witnessed a wave of change thus leading to the establishment of Yungdrung (eternal) Bon. “The devotees believed that the deities who controlled the world, Shepa, Dagpa and Salba resided in ‘SridpaYesang’ (heaven) and Tonpa Shenrab Miwo was considered as the earthly manifestation of these deities and was attributed with the powers to control the present.”

## (iii) New Bon

“The Bon followed contemporaneously is referred to as the ‘New Bon’ and emerged approximately in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when some Bon teachers adopted practices of Tibetan Buddhism related to the Lotus born or the Padmasambhava. New Bon was primarily practiced in the eastern regions of Amdo and the practices of New Bon vary to some extent from those of Yungdrung Bon (Namkhai, 1995). The practitioners of New Bon still honor the Abbot of Menri as the spiritual leader. The present spiritual head of the Bon is Lungtok Dawa Dargyal.”

“Bon occupies a very significant place in the unique cultural identity of the Great Himalayan Range of Nepal, Sikkim and northwestern India. Bon experienced periods of growth and revival after the 11th century, so that prior to the Chinese occupation it was practiced in many parts of the country. The followers of Bon religion are known as Bonpo”.

“The original religion relied heavily on shamanistic magical practices, mudras, yantras and mantras. New Bon features include making a ‘kora’ of religious monuments and mountains and turning prayer wheels counter-clockwise (in contrast to Tibetan Buddhism), reciting the mantra ‘om matri muye sale du’, chanting customary salutations, and performing water offerings. The religion has a number of unique gods and owns a vast number of sacred texts like, ‘Nine Ways of Bon’. For the religion, the holiest mountains include Mount Kailash and Mount Bonri where pilgrims are visiting frequently and fervently.”

According to the Chinese census, “about 10% of Tibetans (about 100,000 people) follow Bon. Before the Cultural Revolution in China, there were more than 300 monasteries in the region belonging to this religion. The major ones included Menri and Yungdrung monasteries which were the centers of study for Bon practices. According to a recent survey, there are 264 active Bon monasteries, nunneries, and hermitages in the region” (Dondrup, 2003).

## Hierarchical Structure of the Bon Community and the Menri Monastery at Solan

The Bon community in exile since its ouster from Tibet can be divided in three groups:

- The Abbot occupies the highest position in the Bon community. The Abbot is considered the spiritual leader of the entire Bon community all over the world. All the important decisions about the monastery and the community are taken by the Abbot.
- The monks and the Lamas who fled from the Tibet occupy the second position in the community. They perform the religious ceremonies of the temple and for the inhabitants of the village.
- Below them are the young men who have taken vows and are completing their training for Geshe which is equivalent to the doctorate or Ph. D degree.
- Then come the boys from 7-14 years of age who go to the Central Tibetan School but also take part in the temple ceremonies. The monks in the monastery have special teaching programs for these boys especially those who have a home in the Bon Children Welfare Centre. Though some of them came here on their own most of them were sent to Dolanji by their parents.
- The lay people of the community occupy the last position.

**Vows:**

The noblest way to practice religion is to join the monastic life as a monk or nun, it is the life which offers the best chance of attaining spiritual perfection. Through the centuries, the monastic life has formed an essential part on the Bonpo religion. Being a monk or nun is completely one's own choice and once they decide to join the monastic life as a monk or nun, they have to abide by some rules which are then to be followed throughout their lives.

There are four sets of religious vows.

The two lower set of vows are taken by lay-persons who want to practice religion perfectly these are:

- (i) The vows of Nyenne (the four "root" vows) which can be taken for any period of time
- (ii) The vows of Genyen (the four 'root' vows + one vow) that are taken for the entire.

The two higher sets of vows are taken for life alongwith the Tsangtsug vows (novice monk) (the four 'root' vows + 21 vows) and the Drangsong vows (fully ordained monk) (250 vows, that include the four 'root' vows).

Owing to differences between men and women, the vows differ for women: there are the Tsangtug-Ma vows (novice nun) (eight-root vows + 21 vows), the Balopma (intermediary vows) and the Drangsong-Ma vows (fully ordained nun) (360 vows including the eight 'root' vows).

Before taking the Tsangtsug (novice) vows, the candidate is examined before the monastic community and questioned. If found worthy, his/her hair is cut and he/she receives monastic robes and the various items a monk/nun should possess: begging bowl, mendicant's staff, needle box, rosary, vase and shaving blade. He or she then receives a new name and takes the vows.

The following list of vows is taken by novice monks. As mentioned before there are more vows for fully ordained monks and nuns.

The first four vows are called the four roots (For nuns there are four more 'root' vows):

1. To abstain from taking life
2. To abstain from taking what is not given
3. To abstain from false speech
4. To abstain from unlawful sexual behavior

The next six vows refer to six the non-virtuous ways of behaviors:

1. To avoid idle speech
2. To avoid harsh language
3. To avoid divisive talk among people
4. To avoid witched thoughts about others
5. To avoid poisoning the mind with evil intentions
6. To avoid abandoning religion at any stage of life

The next four vows refer to diet.

1. To abstain from drinking alcohol
2. To abstain from eating meat
3. To abstain from eating garlic
4. To abstain from taking food after midday

The next six vows refer to sitting and worldly possessions:

1. To abstain from sitting on high seats/beds
2. To abstain from using colorful seat coverings
3. To abstain from jeweled and decorated seats/beds
4. To abstain from accepting gold and silver
5. To abstain from using ornaments or perfumes
6. To abstain from participating in worldly celebrations and festivals

Last five additional vows.

1. To shave the hair and cut the finger nails
2. To keep clean and wash regularly
3. To carry and use the personal items
4. To only wear monastic robes
5. To use only the new ordained name

### Ceremonial Calendar at Menric

In the Menri Monastery, the festivals and ceremonies are performed on occasions like New year, Purnima (full moon), Amavasya (new moon), birth and death anniversaries of lords (Abbots, founders), retreat of various deities etc.

The calendar of the Menri Monastery marks all these ceremonies and is very different from the commonly used calendars like that of the Vikrami era used by Hindus.

Table-1 shows the important dates and ceremonies of the Menri Monastery for the year 2020-21.

**Table No. 1: Calendar of Menri Monastery (2020-21) for one Cardinal Year**

Lunar Month	Lunar Days	Date	Ceremonies
1 <sup>st</sup> Lunar Month	1-3	24-26 Feb 2020	Losar : Tibetan New Year Celebration
	4-5	27-28 Feb 2020	Commemoration of birth anniversary of Nyamed Sherab Gyaltsen, Founder and First Abbot of Menri Monastery.
	5-15	28 Feb – 8 Mar 2020	20 <sup>th</sup> Geshe Ceremony of Menri Monastery
	7	1 Mar 2020	Shen-gyi Gar-cham Chen-mo: The Great Masked Dance Festival.
	14-15	8-9 Mar 2020	Commemoration of birth anniversary of Lord Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Yungdrung Bon.
	21-22	15-16 Mar 2020	Sang-ngag Ma-gyudkyi Tshog-chhod: The Tshog Offering ritual of the mother Tantras, (Shen tradition).
	24-30	17-24 Mar 2020	Ma-seng Drub-ba: The Great retreat of Mawe Senge, the Wisdom deity.
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lunar Month	9	2 Apr 2020	The 42 <sup>nd</sup> Foundation Day of Bon Dialectic School at Menri Monastery.
	23-29	15-21 Apr 2020	The retreat of the wrathful and peaceful deity Walse.
3 <sup>rd</sup> Lunar Month	6-22	28 Apr – 14 May 2020	Menri Drubchen Oser Khyilwa: The Great Medicine Retreat of Menri.
	23-29	15 – 21 May 2020	The retreat of the three principle deities of Bon (Tsa-Sum Bon-kyong)



<b>4<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	14-15	4-5 Jun 2020	Reading of the Great Teachings of the Lord Tonpa Shenrab.
	23-29	14-20 Jun 2020	The retreat of the deity Rigzin Duepa.
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	12-16	2-6 Jul 2020	Kha-long Sang-Dhoe: The Great Ritual of crossed threads.
	23-29	13-19 Jul 2020	The retreat of Chamma Chenmo, the Great Loving Mother.
<b>6<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	8	28 July 2020	Commemoration of death anniversary of Nyamed Sherab Gyaltsen, the Founder and First Abbot of Menri Monastery.
	10	29 July 2020	The ceremony of Drubkhang, the Protector Temple.
	14-15	2-3 Aug 2020	The Tshog Offering Ritual of Peaceful and wrathful Shingey dedicated the dead and ritual of Nyi-zerZhag-pai Jangchen.
	23-29	12-18 Aug 2020	The Great retreat of Shenrab Nampar Gyalwa, the lord of complete victory.
<b>7<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	14-15	1-2 Sep 2020	Commemoration of death anniversary of Shenrab Tenpai Gyaltsen, the Abbot of Yungdrung Ling Monastery.
	23-24	10-11 Sep 2020	Commemoration of 3 <sup>rd</sup> Parinirvana anniversary of the root Lama, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, the 33 <sup>rd</sup> Abbot of Menri Monastery.
	22-29	10-16 Sep 2020	The Great retreat of the Purity deity (Namdak Pema Longyang).
	27	14 Sep 2020	Commemoration of death anniversary of Sherab Lodoe, the 32 <sup>nd</sup> Abbot of Menri Monastery.
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	1-7	18-22 Sep 2020	Shen-gyi Ka-thub Chen-mo : The Great Ordeal retreat according to Shen tradition
	22-29	9-15 Oct 2020	The retreat of Gekhoe Sangwa Drakchen : secret and wrathful deity of Solar Chakra.
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	1-30	17 Oct-15 Nov 2020	Yeru Chetsoe Chenmo: One month intensive teaching of Tsedma (Valid Cognition) according to Yeru tradition.
	23-29	8-15 Nov 2020	The retreat of deity Takla Mebar, the fire Chakra deity.
<b>10<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	22-29	7-14 Dec	The retreat of deity Trowo Wangchen, the wrathful deity.
	30	14 Dec	Commemoration of death anniversary of Lord Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Yungdrung Bon.
<b>11<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	4	18 Dec 2020	The Tshog Offering Ritual of Magyud Gyalwa Gyatso, the ocean of Mother Tantras.
	7-8	21-22 Dec 2020	Commemoration of death anniversary of Kyabgon Dawa Gyaltsen, the founder of Yungdrung Ling Monastery.
	23-29	6-13 Jan 2021	The retreat of the deity, black Walphur.
<b>12<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month</b>	27-29	8-10 Feb 2021	Gutor Chenmo : End of Year ritual of Trowo and Phurpa cycles for averting the negativities before the New Year.

Source: Compiled by Authors

## Religion, Instruction, Knowledge Continuum

The Bon Children Welfare Centre was founded for the purpose of offering education, lodging and accommodations to under-privileged children from the Himalayan region. Since then, more than a thousand children have graduated after being nurtured under the comprehensive umbrella of the welfare centre.

A Nunnery was also established for nuns to seek Bon traditional education and a Medical College was started for those who wanted to study traditional Tibetan medicine. A large number of people have been introduced to the Yungdrung Bon tradition by generating more Bon scholars and practitioners who have spread out in both the Eastern and the Western countries. Having accomplished these incomparable humanitarian services tirelessly for five decades it was on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2017, that His Holiness attained Nirvana. It was then that after the completion of all conventional rituals it was on 1st January 2018, that Geshe Lungtok Dawa Dhargye was conferred the honorary title of His Holiness the 34<sup>th</sup> Menri Trizin, receiving recognition from all the great Lamas and Bonpo around the world. Thus, the tradition interfaces with the current across the parameters of knowledge transference and practice.

## Conclusion

Bon Buddhism is an indigenous, native religion of Tibet that finds its roots in the ZhangZhung region believed to have existed somewhere in upper Tibet. It is still practiced today by a comparatively smaller population. As S.C Das in his 'A Tibetan-English Dictionary' wrote that "*Bon is the ancient religion of Tibet which was fetishism, demon worship and propitiation by means of incantation*", Bon Buddhism is a religion that has always been associated with shamanism because the religion believes everything to have some kind of spirit be it good or evil.

Bon Buddhism is often confused with Tibetan Buddhism which is generally referred to as Buddhism. Many people outside Tibet or upper Himalayas do not yet know about the existence of Bon religion and hence consider both the religions as one. According to the Oxford Dictionary "*Contrary to the popular misconception that Buddhism was significantly influenced by Bon when it entered Tibet, it is clear that what is known of Bon today is almost completely influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, which was itself transplanted from India into Tibet virtually unchanged*" (Damien, 2003). The scriptures which include teachings by Tonpa Shenrab are considered precious by the Bonpos. They have not been translated in any language other than Tibetan. Bon religion has a number of pantheons, meaning it not only includes gods but Buddhas, bodhisattvas, spirits etc in the all-encompassing system of worship. His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama said: "*The Bon tradition has bequeathed the present generation a strong legacy of education and training in philosophy, monastic discipline, ritual and meditation. It encourages a combination of literary study, vibrant debate and personal reflection.*" Thus, here is scope for further research to clear the miasma ambiguities and misconceptions surrounding the Bon to help it attain its pristine and unique identity. Students and scholars can obtain the opportunity to translate the scriptures and uncover the rich functional mosaic of this invaluable cultural heritage.

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