

The Tibetan Bon Religion and the “Nameless Religion” of Tibet

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Names and Terms:

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| <i>Bön</i> | 1. “to invoke”; 2. “to take,” “to consume”; 3. A class of priests in 9 th and 10 th -century non-Buddhist Tibetan texts; 4. A ritual, often done to avert misfortune, in 9 th and 10 th -century non-Buddhist Tibetan texts; 5. A body of ritual practices in 9 th and 10 th -century non-Buddhist Tibetan texts; 6. A post-10 th -century Tibetan religion, also called Yungdrung Bön, that adopts an essentially Buddhist soteriological path. |
| <i>Bönpo</i> | 1. A priest who performs rites of healing, soul-retrieval, fortune-calling, and funeral rites in 9 th and 10 th -century non-Buddhist Tibetan texts; an adherent of the post-10 th -century Tibetan religion known as Bön or Yungdrung Bön. |
| Drenpa Namka | An 8 th -century figure who is central to the Bönpo retelling of Tibetan history, where Drenpa Namka is the heroic figure and the Buddhist yogin Padmasambhava and the Tibetan king Tri Songdetsen are the villains. |
| Dzokchen | The “Great Perfection” teaching that is regarded as the most advanced teaching in the Yungdrung Bön religion. The same term refers to similarly valued Nyingma Buddhist teachings of Dzogchen. In Bon, this is also called the “great vehicle.” |
| Menri Monastery | The main Bönpo monastery in central Tibet. Established in 1405. Destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, re-established in Dolanji, India in 1967. |
| Nine Ways of Bön | Yungdrung Bön’s organization of its teachings. It is an ascending arrangement, from worldly to soteriological teachings. The former comprise the first four ways, classed as “Cause Bön” and the latter comprise the next four ways, classed as “Result Bön.” Dzokchen is the ninth way. |
| Ölmo lungring | Mythical land that in some Yungdrung Bön sources is the origin of Bön. |
| Padmasambhava | 8 th -century Indian tantrist who came to Tibet. Revered especially by the Nyingma school, and central to Tibet’s religious memory of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, and the “taming” of Tibet’s gods, spirits, and demons. |
| <i>Shen</i> | A class of priests whose expertise overlaps with that of priests called Bön in 9 th and 10 th -century non-Buddhist Tibetan texts. |
| Shenchen Luga | (996-1037) Central figure in the establishment of Yungdrung Bön in the 11 th century. He revealed “treasure texts” (<i>terma</i>) that became part of the basis for the Bönpo mode of revelation. His students went on to promote the emerging Bön tradition. |
| Tazik | A term that generally refers to the Iranian world. In in some Yungdrung Bön sources it is the origin of Bön. |
| Tönpa Shenrab | The central figure of the Yungdrung Bön religion; the Bönpo equivalent of Shakyamuni Buddha, who he is said to predate. |

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| Tri Songdetsen | (742–c.800) Emperor of Tibet responsible for the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion, and for the establishment of Samyé Monastery. Cast in a negative light in Yungdrung Bön histories, where he vacillates between supporting Buddhism and supporting Bön. |
| Yungdrung | (Sanskrit: <i>svastika</i>); symbol of eternity; central symbol in Yungdrung Bön. Often held as an implement where Buddhists would hold a <i>vajra</i> ; similarly substituted in terms like “ <i>svastika-sattva</i> ” instead of “ <i>bodhi-sattva</i> .” |
| Zhangzhung | Western Tibetan kingdom conquered by the Tibetan Empire in the mid-7 th century. Its prehistory is the focus of quite a lot of Yungdrung Bön mythology and religious memory. Yungdrung Bön texts are often said to be translated from the language of Zhangzhung, just as Buddhist sutras and tantras are translated from the language of India. |

Suggested Reading:

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