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Unsolved 'bon' Puzzle: The Classical Definitions of Bon

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Introduction

What is Bon? Theoretically, one may compare this to the question “What is Buddhism?” and try to define Bon in the way that it is mostly known today. That is to say that Bon is a religion of Tibet, to some extent different from Tibetan Buddhism.¹ However, Bon is not a religion that is entirely separate from Tibetan Buddhism or *chos* (or *dam pa'i chos*, meaning ‘holy dharma’), which was introduced in Tibet since the 8th century AD, because the two have in fact considerable overlap and similarities. Although Bonpos claim that Bon is the native and indigenous religion of Tibet and was founded far-before Buddhism, it appears like another form of Tibetan Buddhism, which also follows Indian Buddhist principles, just like the other Tibetan Buddhist schools do, and therefore it cannot be considered non-Buddhist.

Traditionally, even while Bonpos do not consider themselves as the followers of Śākyamuni Buddha, they do consider themselves *nang pa*. For Bonpos, the term *nang pa* refers to all the followers and believers of the teaching of any *buddha* (Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa*). For them, the Tibetan term *sangs rgyas* does not only refer to the Buddha Śākyamuni, but also to their founder Shenrab Miwo. Therefore, for Bonpos, the Tibetan term *nang pa* and the English term Buddhism do not carry the same meaning. This Bonpo conviction is very much based on their theory that the Bon religion existed long before the emergence of Buddhism in India, and was initiated by Tonpa Shenrab Miwo. Tibetan Buddhists, however, consider Bon to be a non-Buddhist and heterodox religion, as Bonpos do not take refuge in Śākyamuni Buddha, and therefore they do not consider Bonpos to be *nang pa*. For Tibetan Buddhists, *nang pa* and Buddhist carry the same meaning, and that applies only to those that follow the traditions based on the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha.

¹ A brief overview of Bon is given in Irons 2008: 54–55.

The theoretical debates in regard to the history and nature of Bon religion can be read in a number of publications, I shall therefore merely refer to these publications.² However, there have not been many studies carried out about the literal as well as classical definition of the word ‘*bon*’ (pronounced as *bön* or *pön*), and therefore this still remains an “unsolved puzzle“. As I will show later, the term ‘*bon*’ does not only refers to the Bon religion (Tib. *bon chos*), but also to the phenomena exactly in the same way as the term *chos* or *dharmā* is translated. It is not evident yet whether ‘*bon*’ originally was a Tibetan word. Some Tibetan scholars, including the author of a 15th century Bon text (see below), consider it to be the nominal form of the verb ‘*bon pa*’, i.e. “to chant“.³

Beckwith’s theory that the name ‘*bon*’ possibly originates from the Chinese term *fán* (pronounced as *bian*) that is referring to Tibetans for at least a half of a millennium since the late T’ang dynasty is interesting. Beckwith writes:

The Chinese text of the west face of the Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription, erected in Lhasa in 823, regularly refers to the Tibetan Empire not as the expected, usual *tī-fān*, but as *dà-fān* or *dà-fān*. The latter name means ‘Great Tibet’, precisely parallel to [...] *dà-táng* ‘Great T’ang’, referring to the Chinese Empire of the time. [...] When Tibetans (*fán*) have peace in the Tibetan country (*fānguó*), and Chinese (*hàn*) have happiness in the Chinese country (*hànguó*).⁴

Beckwith argues that the people of northeastern Amdo and southern Kansu pronounced the closed vowel *o* in standard Tibetan as *wa* (pronounced as in *lwan*), but they would write *lon*, exactly as the latter sounds, and he thus points to the possibility that the standard Tibetan ‘*bon*’, in northeastern Amdo and southern Kansu, was pronounced as *bian/bwan*, but was still written as ‘*bon*’, exactly as it is in standard Tibetan. Based on this, he concludes that ‘*bon*’ derives from the Chinese term *fán* and thus, indeed, confirms a connection of the ‘*bon*’ term with the Chinese term. Beckwith’s conclusion certainly adds a valuable contribution to this subject from linguistic perspective. However, in absence of concrete evidence, we cannot be perfectly sure whether the word ‘*bon*’ may indeed be traced from the above Chinese term *fán*, or whether, the other way round, ‘*bon*’ was actually the source of the Chinese term. Furthermore, it must be noted that Amdo people pronounce the

² For few examples, cf. Hoffmann 1961, Karmay 1983 (English version in Karmay 1998: 157–68), and Stein 2003. For a summary of these theories, see Gurung 2011a: 10–14.

³ See also Tibetan dictionary by Btsan lha Ngag dbang tshul khriṃs (1997: 542) for its definition with some classical references.

⁴ Beckwith 2011: 178–79.

first letter *b* as *w* and thus would say *wön* rather than *bön*, as it is pronounced in standard Tibetan. And the occurrences of the word ‘*bon*’ and ‘*bon po*’ in the old Tibetan documents from Dunhuang cave do not confirm the speculative argument that ‘*bon*’ was derived from *fän*, because the usage of the word ‘*bon*’ and ‘*bon po*’ in those documents are limited to a priestly function rather than to mean Tibetan in general as is referred by the word *fän*.⁵

Solving this problem satisfactorily requires more research and one could even wonder if it can be solved at all. As said, the origin of this term is not yet identified and any theory about the origin remains as speculative. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to shed some light on the problem by discussing how the Bonpos use the term today. For my discussion, I have selected three important Bon texts from different periods, to present different classical definitions of ‘*bon*’. I will try to find out how far back in time those definitions to explain Bon religion can be found. In particular, a few questions that will be considered here are: how many different definitions of ‘*bon*’ can we find in the *Mdo ’dus* and how they have been reinterpreted by later Bonpos, even in ways that are comparable to the context of Buddhist definition of *chos*.

Classical definitions of ‘*bon*’

In later Bonpo texts, the ‘*bon*’ is described with several different meanings. I shall explore here in what senses the word ‘*bon*’ is used in the *Mdo ’dus*, one of the most important Bon sources dateable at least since the second half of the 11th century AD,⁶ and how the meanings from this text have probably been organised by the later Bonpo authors as the definition of the word ‘*bon*’. Such organised definitions can be seen from the historical text written in 15th century by Spa btsun Bstan rgyal bzang po and the commentary to Bonpo *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* by one of the most influential Bonpo master Nyi ma bstan ’dzin (1813–1875). I will discuss them in reverse order in the following. Firstly, there are eight different definitions of the word ‘*bon*’ in the commentary. Nyi ma bstan ’dzin writes:

There are two [sub-divisions] in the first: explaining the general usage of the word ‘*bon*’ and description of the nature of ‘*g.yung drung bon*’ in particular. Firstly, there are eight [different meanings in general]. First, ‘*bon*’ means “object of knowledge” (Tib. *shes bya*, Skt. *jñeya*); as it is said [in a scripture], “the entire ‘*bon*’ is classified into two truths”.⁷ [Second], it means the phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*

⁵ Cf. Stein 2003, Blezer 2008 and Dotson 2008.

⁶ I have published a detailed study regarding the dating of this text in Gurung 2011.

⁷ For a detailed study on the two truths in Bon, see Kumagai 2011.

(Tib. *'khor ba dang myang 'das*), as it is said “the entire phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*“ . [Third], it means the object of the sixth consciousness, the mental cognition (Tib. *yid kyi rnam par shes pa*); as it is said “from the eye [consciousness] and form until the mental cognition and *bon*“ . [Fourth], it means merit (Tib. *bsod nams*), as it is said, “by action, one must practise the ‘*bon*’ of eternity, the word that is rare to be heard“ . [Fifth], it refers to the meaning (Tib. *don*), as it is said, “the ‘*bon*’ of the meaning of the natural state (Tib. *gnas lugs*)“ . [Sixth], it means the path (Tib. *lam*), as it is said “the ‘*bon*’ of the path [of the enlightenment]“ . [Seventh], it means the scripture (Tib. *gsung rab*), as it is said, “the teacher taught the ‘*bon*’ of four portals and the fifth treasure“ . [Eighth], it means the greater vehicle (Tib. *theg pa chen po*), as it is said, “the uppermost vehicle is the ‘*bon*’ of eternity“ .⁸

According to this commentary, we can understand the eight different definitions of the word ‘*bon*’ as follows: object of knowledge, phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, object of the mental cognition, merit, the meaning, the path, scripture and the greater vehicle.

Because of his active position as the twenty-third abbot of Menri monastery in Tsang Tibet, the most important institution of Bon tradition since its established in 1405 AD, and as the first head teacher of Yungdrung Ling Bonpo monastery (established in 1836 AD), Nyi ma bstan ’dzin was very influential in the history of systematizing Bon teachings. His scholarly works are considered authoritative, and therefore are used as text books in many important Bonpo monasteries. He is respectfully known as *kun mkhyen*, ‘omniscient’. Thus, it is needless to stress here that his definitions of the word ‘*bon*’ are what most Bonpo scholars accept as authoritative today.

According to Nyi ma bstan ’dzin, ‘*bon*’ is defined as equivalent to the Tibetan word *chos* (Skt. *dharma*).⁹ It is clearly indicated in the definitions such as, (1) Object of

⁸ Nyi ma bstan ’dzin (1982: 62): *dang po la bon gyi sgra 'jug pa'i yul spyir bstan pa dang/ g.yung drung bon gyi rang bzhin bye brag tu bshad pa dang gnyis/ dang po la brgyad yod de/ dang po shes bya la bon gyi sgra 'jug ste/ bon thams cad bden pa gnyis su 'dus so zhes pa'o/ 'khor ba dang myang 'das la 'jug ste/ 'khor 'das kyi bon thams cad zhes gsungs so/ rnam shes tshogs drug yid kyi rnam par shes pa'i yul la 'ang 'jug ste/ mig dang gzugs dang zhes pa nas yid dang bon zhes gsungs so/ bsod nams la'ang 'jug ste/ spyod pas sgra thos par dka' ba g.yung drung gi bon la spyad zhes/ ces so/ don la 'jug ste/ gnas lugs don gyi bon zhes gsungs so/ lam la 'jug ste/ lam gyi bon zhes dang/ gsung rab la 'jug ste/ ston pas bon sgo bzhi mdzod lnga gsungs/ zhes so/ theg pa chen po la'ang 'jug ste/ theg pa bla na med pa g.yung drung bon/ zhes gsungs pa'i phyir/*

⁹ Ten definitions of the term *chos* (Skt. *dharma*) are given in the *Rnam par bshad pa'i rigs pa* (Vasubandhu 1986: 71): *chos ni shes bya lam dang ni/ mya ngan 'das dang yid kyi yul/ /bsod nams tshe dang gsung rab dang/ /byung 'gyur nges dang chos lugs la'o//* The *Rnam par bshad pa'i rigs pa* is the Tibetan translation of

knowledge (Tib. *shes bya*), (2) Phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, (3) Object of the mental cognition (Tib. *yid kyi rnam par shes pa'i yul*), and (7) Scriptures (Tib. *gsung rab*). His definition as the object of knowledge is explained more elaborately in another text by him (Nyi ma bstan 'dzin 1982a). He has clarified this definition by listing 'bon' among the eight synonyms of the object of knowledge (Tib. *shes bya*).¹⁰ The eight definitions of 'bon' that Nyi ma bstan 'dzin has suggested in this commentary evidently are not his own interpretations, but he has adopted these definitions from earlier Bon sources. For instance, the 15th-century Bon text *Bstan pa'i rnam bshad dar rgyas gsal ba'i sgron me*¹¹ by Spa btsun Bstan rgyal bzang po presents a list of almost identical definitions.¹²

Firstly, there are seven objects [that 'bon'] refers to: [first] the object of knowledge; [second] the path, [third] the phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, [fourth] the

Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* by Viśuddhasiṃha, Śākyasiṃha and Devendrarakṣita. I owe thanks to Rolf Scheuermann for this reference. For the authorship of *Vyākhyāyukti*, cf. Skilling 2000: 299–302. Mathes (2008: 193) translates these verses as: “[The term] dharma refers to knowable objects, path, *nirvāṇa*, mental objects, merit, circumstances of life, sacred words, the future, certainty, and law”.

¹⁰ Nyi ma bstan 'dzin (1982a: 6) writes: *gnyis pa khyab mnyam ni/ yul shes bya gzhal bya/ gzhi grub yod pa bon srid pa rten 'brel rnams yin khyab mnyam/*. “Second, the equal pervasions are: object, object of knowledge, object of comprehension, established base, existent, bon, possibility of existence and interdependence. For a Buddhist description of the synonyms of the object of knowledge (Tib. *shes bya*, Skt. *jñeya*), cf. Klein 1986: 142 as follows: existent (Tib. *yod pa*, Skt. *sat*), established base (Tib. *gzhi grub*), object (Tib. *yul*, Skt. *viśaya*), and object of comprehension (Tib. *gzhal bya*, Skt. *prameya*).

¹¹ According to the colophon, this text was composed in the Tibetan year of Wood-bird, which is either in 1405 or 1465 AD (cf. Gurung 2011: 260, note 319). The colophon in the 1991 edition reads Wood-mouse which corresponds with 1444, but this is probably a result of misreading the vowel, which changes *bya'i* (bird+genitive) to *byi* (mouse). Other information in the colophon, such as that 460 years have passed until the Wood-bird year from the discovery of Gshen chen glu dga' in 1017 AD, dates its composition to somewhere in the late 15th century. A complete English translation of this text has been prepared by Tadasu Mitsushima & Kalsang Namgyal and was published under the title *The Bright Light of Bon* in 1981. According to the translators, they had access to the manuscript kept in Bsam gling Bonpo monastery in Dolpo (Nepal), and we may see by comparing the number of folios and lines that it is identical with the facsimile published in *Bon bka' brten* 215: 498–770 in 1998.

¹² Spa btsun (1998: 504) writes: *dang po ni/ yul bdum la 'jug ste/ shes bya dang/ lam dang/ 'khor 'das dang/ yid kyi yul dang/ [bsod nams dang] don dang/ gsung rab bo// de yang rim pa ltar/ khams brgyad las/ bon thams cad ces dang/ mdo las/ lam gyi bon dang ces dang/ bsod pa las 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa'i bon dang ces dang/ khams brgyad las yid dang bon dang ces dang/ yang rtse las spyod pa bas sgra thos par dka' ba'i g.yung drung gi bon la spyod ces dang/ yang de nyid la phyi rol don gyi bon dang shes pa'i bon ces dang/ mdo las sgo bzhi mdzod dang lnga ces gsungs pas/ yul de dag la 'jug go// gnyis pa/ bon ni snyan du bon pas bon ces par dung phor ma las bshad do//* In Tshe ring thar's edited version, there are a number of insertions that were cut and misread in the text.

For the comparison, I like to present here this edited version too. Tshe ring thar (1991: 5–6): *dang po ni yul bdum la 'jug ste/ bon dang/ shes bya dang/ lam dang/ 'khor 'das dang/ yid kyi yul dang/ bsod nams dang/ don dang gsung rab bo// de yang rim pa ltar khams brgyad las/ bon thams cad ces dang/ mdo las/ lam gyi bon zhes dang/ 'byung ba las/ 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa'i bon zhes dang/ khams brgyad las/ yid dang bon zhes dang/ yang rtse las/ spyod pa bas sgra thos par dka' ba'i g.yang drung gi bon la spyod ces dang/ yang de nyid las phyi rol don gyi bon dang shes pa'i bon zhes dang/ mdo las/ sgo bzhi mdzod dang lnga zhes gsungs pas/ yul de dag la 'jug go/ gnyis pa sgra don ni/ snyan du bon pas bon zhes par dung phor ma las bshad do//*

object of the mental cognition, [fifth] [merit¹³], [sixth] the meaning [of the natural state], and [seventh] scripture.

As it is respectively said [first] in the *Khams brgyad* text, “the entire *bon*”; [second] as said in the *Mdo*, “‘*bon*’ of the path [of the enlightenment]”; [third] as said in the *Bsdud pa* text, “‘*bon*’ of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*”; [fourth] as said in the *Khams brgyad* text, “the mental cognition and ‘*bon*’”; [fifth] as said in the *Yang rtse* text, “by action, one must practise ‘*bon*’ of eternity, the word that is rare to be heard”; [sixth] again in the same text, “outer ‘*bon*’ of meaning and ‘*bon*’ of knowing” and [seventh] as said in the *Mdo*, “the four portals and the treasure as the fifth”. Those are the objects to which the word ‘*bon*’ refers to.

Second, according to the *Dung phor ma* text(s),¹⁴ ‘*bon*’ means to recite in the ear.

The seven definitions of ‘*bon*’ that Spa btsun has presented are as follows: object of knowledge, the path, phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the object of mental cognition, merit, meaning, and scripture. Although the author of this 15th-century text did not include the greater vehicle (Tib. *theg pa chen po*) as one of the definitions, it is evident from his list and citation that the eight definitions described by Nyi ma bstan ’dzin were already known in the 15th century. Could we trace these definitions further back, in the older Bon text? The list is not organised in a way that later Bonpo scholars did, but it is obvious from the 11th-century *Mdo ’dus* that the different meanings of ‘*bon*’ were introduced already earlier.

In the *Mdo ’dus*, the word ‘*bon*’ occurs quite a number of times throughout the text. Translating all those occurrences by a single word or sentence is impossible, because their meanings differ considerably from one to the next occurrence. For the sake of convenience, I should like to categorise the occurrences of ‘*bon*’ in the *Mdo ’dus* into two sections: the definitions that are grouped together in one long-list and those that are scattered throughout the text.

The former category consists of nineteen meanings of ‘*bon*’. According to the *Mdo ’dus*, Tonpa Shenrab Miwo had explained these enumerations of ‘*bon*’, upon a question by Devendra Śakra (Tib. *lha dbang brgya byin*), during their meeting. Some

¹³ As the citation given after the list confirms, the missing definition of *bon* out of seven in the text is obviously the merit (Tib. *bsod nams*). Tshe ring thar has inserted this missing one in his edited version. See the previous footnote for Tibetan text.

¹⁴ The author does not specify if this is in one particular text or in a genre of the *Dung phor ma* collection, that this description is recorded. According to Martin (1994: 28, note 104), the texts excavated by Gu ru mnon rtse (b. 1027/1136) are known as the *Dung phor ma*. For Gu ru mnon rtse (alias A ya bon po lha ’bum) see Martin 1994: 27, note 102.

definitions among these correspond exactly with the definitions that appear in the two texts that we have discussed above, as well as in an earlier Bon text, the *Srid pa'i mdzod phug*. The earliest version of the *Mdzod phug* is considered to have been discovered by Gshen chen klu dga' in 1017 AD.¹⁵ Some definitions implicitly cover the meaning by their context, while some are not clear, even not from later Bon literatures. To get a better overview, I will divide the long list from the *Mdo 'dus* into three groups:¹⁶

[Passage 1] *de la bon gyis rnams grang na/ 'dus byas 'khor ba'i bon rnams/ 'dus ma byas pa mya ngan la 'das pa'i bon/ thugs rje rgya chen po bon rnams/ 'phrul ngag bden pa'i bon/ srid par brgyud pa'i bon/ dge sdig 'byed pa'i bon/*

The enumeration of 'bon' are: 'bon' of *saṃsāra*, of all compounded [phenomena] [1], 'bon' of *nirvāṇa*, of all un compounded [phenomena] [2], 'bon' of extensive compassion [3], 'bon' of the true magical word [4], 'bon' of the worldly transmission [5], 'bon' of separating virtue and non-virtue [6].

[Passage 2] *ston pa'i bka' ni gnam bab bon/ rang shar rig par rang rdol bon/ rgyu mthun rang lug bon/ rdo shing rang 'gyur bon/*

The Teacher's word is 'bon' descended from the sky [7], 'bon' of self arising awareness came forth itself [8], 'bon' of favourable cause as one's [philosophical] tradition [9], 'bon' as the evolution of the nature [10].

[Passage 3] *skye med gdod nas dag pa'i bon/ snang med dpe' las 'das pa'i bon/ tshad med lhun la rdzogs pa'i bon/ zad med g.yung drung dbyings su gnas pa'i bon/ brtsal med (cf. brtsol med) lhun gyis grub pa'i bon/ 'gyur med g.yung drung thob [pa'i bon]/ 'chi med skyes nas rtsan nas [pa'i bon]/ chag med rnams par dag [pa'i bon]/ rngos (cf. dngos) med yong(s) la khyab/*

Unborn and primordially pure 'bon' [11], non appearance and unequalled 'bon' [12], immeasurable and spontaneously perfected 'bon' [13], everlasting 'bon' situated in the sphere of eternity [14], effortlessly and spontaneously accomplished 'bon' [15], 'bon' of achievement of unchangeable *svastika* [16], 'bon' of immortal

¹⁵ Martin 2001: 53; 239–40.

¹⁶ *Mdo 'dus* 1995: 123–24.

from its birth [17],¹⁷ non-attached and pure ‘*bon*’ [18], and insubstantial and all-embracing ‘*bon*’ [19].

As seen above, in the first passage, *bon*’ of *samsāra* (1) and *nirvāṇa* (2) corresponds exactly to the second definition by Nyi ma bstan ’dzin and the third by Spa btsun. Among the others, ‘*bon*’ of the true magical word (4), ‘*bon*’ of the worldly transmission (5) and ‘*bon*’ of virtue and non-virtue (6) implicitly cover the meaning by their context. Also the list in the third passage is comparable, almost word by word, to a list in the *Mdzod phug*.¹⁸ The four types of ‘*bon*’ (i.e. 7–10) in the second passage are not known from later Bon literatures. This shows the shift of focus in defining the word ‘*bon*’ in later Bon texts. It is certainly worth studying these unique references on ‘*bon*’ in more detail. These four could have been a source,¹⁹ perhaps by misreading and misinterpreting the passage, of the Buddhist description on the tripartite origin of Bon widely known as *brdol bon*, ‘*khyar bon* and *bsgyur bon*, which, in fact, is not older than 13th century AD.²⁰

Among the definitions of ‘*bon*’ that are widely scattered throughout the *Mdo ’dus*, I will present here only those that are not yet included in the above long list and those that are clear to some extent. First, ‘*bon*’ refers to the doctrine and teaching. For instance, the nine ways of Bon (Tib. *theg dgu bon*), *mahāyāna* Bon (Tib. *theg pa chen po’i bon*), the four causal Bon (Tib. *rgyu’i bon bzhi*), the wheel of Bon (Tib. *bon gyi ’khor lo*), and the Bon teaching propagated in the land of gods, *nāgas* and humans.²¹

¹⁷ According to the *Zhangzhung* Lexicon (Nagano and Karmay 2008: 16), *skyes nas rtsan* (*skyes rtsan*) is translated as “born and undying, immortal and deathless”.

¹⁸ For the comparison, the list in the *Mdzod phug* (chapter xiii: *Mtshan nyid bstan pa’i gnas*: 195–97): *skye med gdod nas dag pa ste / g.yung drung bon gyi phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ’dzin / mi skye mi ’gag mtshan nyid ’dzin / snang med dpe las ’das pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / snang stong gnyis med mtshan nyid ’dzin / tshad med lhun la rdzogs pa ste / g.yung drung bon gyi phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / yongs su rdzogs pa’i mtshan nyid ’dzin / zad med g.yung drung dbyings nyid de / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / klong la spyod pa’i mtshan nyid ’dzin / brtsal med lhun gyi grub pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / thig le gcig gsal mtshan nyid ’dzin / ye nas ’gyur med brten pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / sku dang gnyis med mtshan nyid ’dzin / ’chi med skyes snang brtsan pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / mtha’ la ’das pa’i mtshan nyid ’dzin / chags med rnam par dag pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / skyon gyi ma gos mtshan nyid ’dzin / dngos med yongs su khyab pa ste / g.yung drung bon ni phye ba med / ma ’dres pa yi mtshan nyid ni / khyab gdal chib pa’i mtshan nyid ’dzin / ngo ra de shin drug snis ni / rang gi rig pa nyid kyi yang / mdun gyi mtshan nyid bstan par bya’o /*

¹⁹ I owe thanks to Samten Karmay who has pointed out this connection at first.

²⁰ Martin 2001: 41.

²¹ *Mdo ’dus* 1995: 150–51: *bka’ dang rjes su bstan pa’i bon rnam shod / mi lo sum brgya drug bcu nas / lha dang klu dang mi yul du / bsgrag pa’i bon cig ’byung ’gyur ste / rgyal po gsum mnga’ ri ’byung ’gyur ste / lha ri gyang ma gyang ter ’byung / mthar ni nga’i bstan pa ni / mang la rgyas pa’i bon sde dang / nyung ma ’dus pa’i bon sde dang / gsang la zab pa’i bon sde rnam / lha yul klu yul mi yul du / rgyud nas ’byung ste dar rgyas so /*

Second, the word ‘bon’ refers to the Scriptures, for instances the six collections of teaching taught by six different teachers before Shenrab Miwo²² and the collection of the teachings (Tib. *bon sgo bzhi mdzod lnga*) by Shenrab Miwo.²³ Third, there is a single occurrence of ‘bon’ referring to astrology (Tib. *gtsug lag rtsis gyis bon*). Fourth, the word ‘bon’ in some places also refers to the phenomena or the object of mental cognition, as it is listed among the six types of objects (Tib. *yul drug*, Skt. *ṣaḍ viśaya*).²⁴ Fifth, the word ‘bon’, as an abbreviation of ‘bon po’, refers to priests, spirits, goddesses, diviners, etc., and appears as a part of their name.²⁵ The meaning of the term ‘bon’ in these names is certainly related to the words ‘bon’ or ‘bon po’ that occurs in old Tibetan documents; however, in terms of their etymology and original meaning they still remain unknown.

Conclusion

It is still too early to show a complete picture regarding the classical definition of the word ‘bon’, based on the studies of these three texts. However, in order to stimulate further discussion, I will nonetheless present a tentative conclusion. The theoretical definitions of ‘bon’ that we know today through the Bonpo masters is, to a large extent, influenced by the definitions presented in the 19th century Bonpo *Prajñāpāramitā* commentary by Nyi ma bstan ’dzin. As shown here, these 19th-century definitions can be traced further back, to the 15th century, and the latter can in part be traced to the definitions given in the *Mdo ’dus*. However, the various definitions in the *Mdo ’dus* show that the word ‘bon’ was not fixed or limited to those seven or eight definitions, seen in the later two texts. It is obvious from those two texts that the definitions of ‘bon’ have been clarified by and even collated with Buddhist terminology. Some definitions from the *Mdo ’dus* are maintained in later Bon

²² The six collections in the *Mdo ’dus* (1995: 38–41) are: *bon ni srad pa’i gsaṅ ’bum bzhings/ [...] bon ni rin chen klong ’bum byung/ [...] bon ni gyung drung lha ’bum byungs/ [...] bon ni mtha’ bral rgyal chen byung/ [...] bon ni thugs rje klong ’bum byung/ [...] bon ni sa nag klong ’bum byung/*

²³ This is mentioned in the following passages in the *Mdo ’dus* (1995): 68, *bon ni sgo bzhi mdzod dang lnga*; p. 108, *bstan pa bon gyis sgo bzhi bsrungs/*; p. 151, *mdo ’bum rgyud seng mdzod bzhir kha phyeg la/ ’khor rnams bon gyis bsdu ba gyis/ ston pa gnas dang ’khor dus dang/ bon rnams phun ’tshogs lnga’i shod cig*; p. 148, *khyod kyis gsang ba’i bon rnams la/ da rung ci rtsam yod zhes zhus/ [...] gyer sgo bon ni nyi zer ’dra/ ’dul bya gang la gang [149] ’dul ba’i/ bden pa’i don du bon bshad pa’i/ ’dzam gling bye ba phrag brgya nas/ [...] bon sgo bsam gyi mi khyab pa bshad/ de phyir gshen rab bon la zad pa med/ rab tu dag pa gsang ba dri med dag pa’i bon/*; p. 198, *rang rang mos pa’i bon ’chad dang/ [...] de las bon gyi sgo yang byung/*; p. 211, *de ni sngon (=ston) bas bon bshad pa/ hos sgo mdzod lnga ’byung pa’o/ [...] log par mi btul bon la spyod/*

²⁴ *Mdo ’dus* (1995): 120, *bon rnams thams cad cir yang dmigs su med pa’i/*; p. 127, *bon rnams kun gyis ngo bo nyid/ [...] bon rnams thams cad spros pa’i mtshan ma kun dang rnams bral ba [...] bon rnams kun gyis ngo bo nyid/ cir yang dmigs su med pa ste/*; pp. 127–28, *gzugs sgra dri ro reg bya’i bon rnams gyis/*

²⁵ See for example *lha bon*, *klu bon*, *lde bon*, *mi bon*, *rgyal bon* and the like in the list of thirty-three Bonpos (Tib. *’dul ba’i bon po sum cu rtsa gsum*); *rlung bon*, *chu bon*, *sa bon*, *me bon* in the list of five goddesses of the five elements; and diviner *bon po* in such occurrences as *spa gyim shang gong po bon po*, *mo bon*, *bon po*.

texts, while others are disregarded. As shown above, the word ‘*bon*’ can be defined in several contexts; therefore one ought not to presume that ‘*bon*’ when encountered in a text simply means the Bon religion. Unfortunately, we cannot define ‘*bon*’ literally, because it has long ago lost its literal definition.

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