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Introduction

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The series of thangkas published in this volume have been painted recently by Tibetan artists in order to provide an overview of a particular cycle of Bon deities, thus contributing significantly to the study of the immensely rich and complex iconography of Bon. Outside Tibet, this field of study is still in its incipient stages.¹

The deities presented here are divided into four sub-groups, corresponding to four 'Ways' (*theg pa*)²:

1. *bya ba gtsug spyod ye bon gyi theg pa*
2. *rnam pa kun ldan mngon shes kyi theg pa*
3. *dnogs bskyed thugs rje rol ba'i theg pa*
4. *shin tu don ldan kun rdzogs kyi theg pa*

These four 'Ways' together constitute the 'Way of Result' ('*bras bu theg pa*) – the first two being the 'External Way' and the last two the 'Internal Way' respectively – of the Nine Ways into which the entire teachings of Bon are divided according to *Theg pa'i rim pa mngon du bshad pa'i mdo rgvud*.³ In this scheme they constitute the fifth to the eighth Way. The text belongs to the dBus-gter tradition of Bon, i.e. the 'Treasure' discovered by the Ban-dhe Mi-gsum at Brag Yer-pa about 30 kilometres northeast of Lhasa.⁴ This Treasure is described as being a 'Cycle of Bon (texts or teachings) from India' (*rGya gar gyi bon skor rnams*)⁵, hence not originating, as is claimed of so many other Bon texts, from Zhang-zhung.

A different division into 'Nine Ways' is that found in the twelve volumes of the *gZi brjid*, believed to be a 'mental treasure' (*dgongs gter*) revealed to Blo-ldan sNying-po in the fourteenth century.⁶ The latter version is well-known outside Tibet thanks to the pioneer study of David Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, which was published in 1967, but does not concern us here.

There are conflicting indications of the date of the Treasure of dBus. Kong-sprul Yon-tan rGya-mtsho (b. 1700) says that the Treasure was found in the fifth *rab byung*, i.e. between 1267 and 1326,⁷ but in his *Legs bshad mdzod*, Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mtshan (1859-1934)⁸ states that it was handed on to Mi-la Ras-pa, who lived between 1040 and 1123.⁹

The first (actually the fifth) Way, *bya ba gtsug spyod ye bon gyi theg pa*, is connected with twelve deities:

1. Kun-dbyings (Thangka 1)
2. dGe-bsnyen (Thangka 2)
3. Byams-ldan (Thangka 3)
4. Dus-'khor (Thangka 4)

5. Kun-rig sgron-ma (Thangka 5)
6. Kun-bzang rGyal-ba rGya-mtsho (Thangka 6)
7. rNam-par 'Joms-pa (Thangka 7)
8. sMan-lha (Thangka 8)
9. sMon-lam mTha'-yas (Thangka 9)
10. rNam-dag Yum (Thangka 10)
11. Kun-gsal Byams-ma Chen-mo (Thangka 11)
12. dGe-spyod rNam-par Dag-pa (Thangka 12)

This is a group of twelve deities, all of them (except No. 7, rNam-par 'Joms-pa) in peaceful mode, known collectively by a term referring to their respective rituals, viz. Cho-ga bCu-gnyis, 'The Twelve Rituals'.¹⁰

The second group, representing the second (sixth) Way, *rnam pa kun ldan mngon shes kyi theg pa*, comprises five deities:

1. sGrib-sbyong Mun-sel sGron-ma (Thangka 13)
2. bZlas-mchog Rin-chen sGron-ma (Thangka 14)
3. Phywa-sras Keng-tse (Thangka 15)
4. rNam-dag Padma Klong-yangs (Thangka 16)
5. Byams ma (1st thangka) (Thangka 17)
- Byams ma (2nd thangka) (Thangka 18)

These deities, too, appear in peaceful mode. The first, a naked, white figure sitting in the pose of meditation, would seem, from these iconographic characteristics, to be identical with Kun-tu bZang-po.¹¹

The second figure has strong points of resemblance with No. 4 of the first group, viz. Dus-'khor; both have blue bodily colour and grasp the Bon scepter, the *phyag-* (or *lcags*) *shing* in their right hand.

The third, Keng-rtse, is styled Phywa-sras; in other words, he is one the ancient *phywa* deities of Tibet.¹²

The last two are both variants of the major benign goddess of Bon, Byams-ma, who is represented in the first group also, in two forms (Nos. 10 and 11).¹³

The third group, associated with the seventh Way, *dngos bskyed thugs rje rol pa'i theg pa*, is the largest one, comprising no less than 21 deities. With the exception of Nos. 1, 15, and 16, who are in peaceful mode, they are of the wrathful type. (One might add No. 2, rNam-par rGyal-ba, who occupies an intermediate position in this respect). All are *yi dam* deities. Many of them are extremely important deities in Bon and are at the centre of elaborate rituals, and to a large extent the religious activity of lay people as well as of monks focuses on them.

1. sMra-seng (Thangka 20)
2. rNam-par rGyal-ba (Thangka 19)
3. dBal-gsas rTsod-zlog-gi zhi-ba (Thangka 21)
4. Khro-ba Mun-nag 'khyil-ba (Thangka 22)
5. Lha-rgod (Thangka 23)
6. dBal-chen Ge-khod (Thangka 24)
7. Ma-rgyud (Thangka 25)
8. gSang-ba dByings-rol (Thangka 30)
9. sTag-la sPu-gri dKar-po (Thangka 31)
10. sTag-la sPu-gri dMar-po (Thangka 32)
11. sTag-la sPu-gri Nag-po (Thangka 33)
12. sTag-la bDag-rdzogs (Thangka 34)
13. gShed-dmar sPyi-'dul (Thangka 35)
14. Drag-sngags dBal-mo (Thangka 36)
15. Zhi-ba gSer-mig g. Yu-spras (Thangka 37)
16. Zhi-ba gSas-mkhar Rab-'byams (Thangka 38)
17. dBal-gsas Las-rim (Thangka 40)
18. dBal-gsas rTsod-zlog (Thangka 39)
19. rTsod-zlog Yang-snying (Thangka 41)
20. Zhang-zhung Me-ri (Thangka 42)
21. gShed-dmar bKa'-srung gShed-nag (Thangka 43)

The first deity, sMra-seng, "Lion of Speech", is related to its Buddhist counterpart Vādisimha, a form of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva who bestows wisdom and eloquence.¹⁴

rNam-par rGyal-ba is one of many forms of the Enlightened Teacher of our age according to Bon. sTon-pa gShen-rab, viz. the form he assumed when he established Bon in the land of China; in this form he is invoked as "the invincible subduer of demons and, in general, the remover of hindrances."¹⁵

dBal-chen Ge-khod (No. 6) is one of the major *yi dam* of Bon. Like Me-ri (No. 20), he is associated with Zhang-zhung. The word *ge-khod*, of uncertain origin and etymology – it said to be a Zhang-zhung word – denotes a class of deities who, numbering 360, are believed to reside on Mount Ti-se (Kailāśa).¹⁶

Another major *yi dam* is Ma rgyud (No. 7). He is the chief deity of the class of Bon Tantras styled 'Mother Tantras' (*ma rgyud*), hence his name.¹⁷

Stag-la is a deity that can manifest himself in various forms, as here in four different forms (Nos. 9-12). His epithet *spu gri*, "razor", refers to "his power to destroy obstacles and demons".¹⁸

Two forms of the *yi dam* dBal-gsas are represented in this group (Nos. 17 and 18); there is little to distinguish them except their names, their colours, attributes etc. being identical, and are also identical with the form of the deity bearing the name dBal-gsas

rNgam-pa.¹⁹

Me-ri (No. 20). "Mountain of Fire", is the great protector god of the land of Zhang-zhung, and as such associated with the holy mountain of Ti-se. Among the major *yi dam*, he is remarkable for being clothed in armour and being without a female consort.²⁰

The fourth and final Way, *shin tu don ldan kun rdzogs kyi theg pa*, is associated with six deities:

1. mKha'-'gro sKal-bzang nang-sgrub (Thangka 44)
2. Dran-pa gsang-sgrub (Thangka 45)
3. Dran-pa yang-gsang (Thangka 46)
4. Dran-pa dbang-sgrub (Thangka 47)
5. Tshe-dbang rMe-thub (Thangka 48)
6. Dran-pa tshe-sgrub (Thangka 49)

The first of these is a *dākini* (*mkha' 'gro ma*), the remaining five are *siddhas*. The most important of these, Dran-pa Nam-mkhha', appears in four different forms. He is beyond doubt a historical figure who lived in Tibet in the eighth century A.D., but like the contemporary Buddhist *siddha* Padmasambhava, he became the object of a cult in which he assumed superhuman characteristics. He is regarded as the father of another important *siddha*, Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin (No. 5).²¹ Dran-pa Nam-mkha' is in particular associated with important groups of texts, which he hid when Bon was persecuted, to be discovered as 'Treasures' (*gter*) and diffused when the time should be ripe.²² Among them were the texts of the dBus-gter, referred to above.

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¹ The only book-length study of the iconography of Bon is Kvaerne 1995. A useful study of the wall-paintings in a Bon monastery is Mori 2000. I refer to my study from 1995 wherever relevant; in it, further references will be found which are not repeated here. However, below I give references to later publications, including Mori 2000.

² On the reason for translating *theg pa* 'Way', see Snellgrove 1967, p. 8.

³ Karmay 1988 p. 174.

⁴ Karmay 1972 p. 152, text p. 311, l. 22; Karmay 1977 p. 144 (No. 74). On Brag Yer-pa, which has numerous traditions linking it with the eighth century A.D., see Batchelor 1987, pp. 192-195.

- ⁵ Karmay 1972 p. 311 l. 6.
- ⁶ Snellgrove, p. 3, n. 2.
- ⁷ Karmay 1972 p. 152 n. 2.
- ⁸ It should be noted that Karmay 1988 p. 202 corrects the year of Shar-rdza's death, given in Karmay 1972 as 1935, to 1934.
- ⁹ Karmay 1972 p. 152. Mi-la practised the art of creating hail-storms on the basis of a text from this Treasure, id. p. 153 n. 1.
- ¹⁰ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 36-37. Several of the Cho-ga bCu-gnyis deities are illustrated in Kvaerne 1995. The following are also found in Mori 2000: Byams-ma (Plate 5, p. 525); sMan-lha (Plate 10, p. 527); rGyal-ba rGya-mtsho (Plate 18, p. 531, and Plate 46, p. 545); Kun-rig (Plate 21, p. 533)
- ¹¹ Kvaerne 1995, p. 29; Plate 12 (pp. 56-57). The same thangka has been reproduced in Prats 2000, Plate 86 (p. 138).
- ¹² On the *phywa* deities, see Karmay 1998 pp. 250-251.
- ¹³ On Byams-ma, see Kvaerne 1995, pp. 28-29; Plates 10 and 11 (pp. 52-55).
- ¹⁴ Kvaerne 1988 provides a brief, illustrated presentation of the ritual of sMra-seng, as well as an illustration (p. 156) of the deity in its fivefold manifestation. In the form illustrated there, sMra-seng raises the sword above his head; likewise in Mori 2000, Plate 4 (p. 524).
- ¹⁵ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 33-34; Plates 20 and 21 (pp. 66-69). A complex thangka with numerous narrative scenes is reproduced in Tanaka 1999, Plate 97 (pp. 208-209).
- ¹⁶ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 80-84; Plate 30 (pp. 98-99). The same thangka is also reproduced in Van der Wee 1995, p. 134 (Fig. 64, wrongly identified as dBal-gsas rNgam-pa).
- ¹⁷ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 74-75; Plate 24 (pp. 86-87).
- ¹⁸ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 117-118; Plates 37-39 (pp. 121-125). To the three forms referred to in this work must be added sTag-la bDag-rdzogs (No. 12), who, it may be noted, has a consort, as opposed to the white, red, and black forms. The 'red' manifestation is also reproduced (same thangka as in Kvaerne 1995) in Van der Wee 1995, p. 133 (Fig. 63). Another thangka, likewise of the 'red' sTag-la, in Prats 2000, Plate 84 (p. 136), and wall-paintings in Mori 2000, Plate 16 (p. 530) and Plate 45 (p. 545).
- ¹⁹ For dBal-gsas rNgam-pa, see Kvaerne 1995, pp. 77-80 (Plates 27-29; pp. 92-97) and Tanaka 1999, Plate 99 (pp. 212-213). Mori 2000 reproduces three wall paintings where the central ones are identified as "dBal-gsas" (Plates 15, 20, 47); unfortunately, the quality of the reproductions does not permit further identification.
- ²⁰ Kvaerne 1995, pp. 84-86; Plate 31 (pp. 100-101). The same thangka has been reproduced in Prats 2000, Plate 85 (p. 137). A detail from a modern thangka, showing the heads of Me-ri, in Baumer 2002, p. 174.
- ²¹ Baumer 2002, p. 172, has a photo of a statue of Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin from a monastery in Kong-po, but in a different, peaceful form. Wall-painting in Mori 2000, Plate 14 (p. 529).
- ²² Kvaerne 1995, pp. 119-120; Plates 42-44 (pp. 128-129). Statue of Dran-pa Nam-mkha' in Baumer 2002, p. 118.