



The Legend of Tönpa Shenrab

Yungdrung Bön Tradition - Tibet

Legend has it that, in a place inaccessible to ordinary mortals, there is a kingdom called Stag-gzig, where peace and bliss are everlasting. A city of dreams rises there, and its name is Olmo Lung Ring. It is called a 'city' because thousands of human beings dwell there, but in reality it is a place where the natural world and human structures coexist harmoniously.

Olmo Lung Ring lies to the west of Mount Kailash, in a hidden and inaccessible valley between high mountains. From the sky it looks like an eight-petalled lotus. At the centre rises a pyramid-shaped mountain, the Yungdrung Gutsek, from which four rivers flow down in the four directions of the world. It was here, in Olmo Lung Ring, that Tönpa Shenrab Miwoche was born.

But let's start at the very beginning.

In time immemorial, in a region of heaven called Sidpa Yesang, there lived three brothers: Dakpa, Salwa and Shepa. These brothers studied for a long time under the guidance of a great master until, having reached a high spiritual level, this master referred them to the teachings of the Enlightened One of Compassion, Master Shen Lha Okar.

Not long after, the brothers asked Shen Lha Okar:

'Master, looking from here at the human beings and the other sentient beings in the world, we cannot help but feel deep sorrow for their sufferings and pain. What could we do to free them from the sufferings of the cyclical world?'

Shen Lha Okar answered:

‘Perhaps you could be born as human beings in three different eras, so that each of you could help the sentient beings of that time to achieve liberation.’

From that moment on, the three brothers set about planning and organising their respective journeys into the human experience.

The first to descend to the phenomenal world was Dakpa, the eldest brother. He did so thousands of years ago, taking the name of Tönpa Togyal Ye Khyen, and, after doing his work, returned to the celestial regions.

The second brother, Salwa, lit the way to liberation in this age, while the youngest brother, Shepa, will come in the future to point the way for generations yet unborn.

But before being born in human form, Salwa first manifested himself in this world in the shape of a cuckoo. Having wings to fly, he went to the top of Mount Meru to decide with his two disciples, Malo and Yulo, where and from whose parents he would be born. In the end, he decided that he should be born in Olmo Lung Ring, south of the central mountain, the Yungdrung Gutsek. His father would be King Gyalbön Thökar and his mother Queen Yöchi Gyalzhema. So, to them was born Tönpa Shenrab Miwoche.

Tönpa Shenrab was born in the capital of the kingdom of Stag-gzig 18,000 years ago - although others say it was about 4,000 years ago; in any case, a long time ago. There he married and had eight sons and two daughters, living the human life in a mortal body. But when he reached 31, he renounced worldly things, cut his hair and abandoned the luxuries of his princely life, distributing among the poorest of the poor his wealth and everything else his family did not need. After this, Shenrab withdrew from the world and gave himself up to meditation in great austerity.

It was then that he came to the attention of a māra, a demonic entity – actually an illusion generated by a state of mind – called Khyapa Lagring. Seeing that the number of his followers was dwindling as Shenrab's awakening progressed, he tried to distract him from his meditation in a variety of ways. He tried everything until, powerless in the face of Shenrab's steadfastness, he decided to throw his army of a

billion demons upon him in order to terrorise him and force him to abandon his contemplation.

The demons rushed at him with swords, spears, arrows, chakram, maces and other kinds of weapons, but they failed to bring Shenrab out of his meditation. Although he had the power to take the lives of all of them, Shenrab chose to turn the first onslaught of their weapons into lotus flowers; and he transformed the second, consisting of a shower of arrows, even poisons, into garlands of flowers and gemstones.

The next morning, Tönpa Shenrab had attained liberation in his human form. But even in this he was confronted by the māra Khyapa Lagring, who, sceptical, demanded that Shenrab bring a witness of his liberation. Upon hearing him, the earth goddess Tenma herself emerged from the ground waist-deep to testify that Shenrab had attained liberation.

Although his teachings were to spread mainly in Tibet, Tönpa Shenrab visited Tibet only once in his lifetime. And, of course, the māra Khyapa Lagring tried his best to prevent him from reaching his destination.

To hinder the journey, Khyapa ordered his followers to steal Shenrab's seven horses with which he intended to reach the Kongpo Valley in Tibet. But when Shenrab discovered the theft, he shot an arrow that opened a path for him through the mountains until he arrived safely in the Kongpo, where he retrieved his horses. There he would also pacify the evil spirits and demons that swarmed Tibet, blessing a mountain that is now a site of Bonpo pilgrimages, Kongpo Bön Ri Mountain.

In all his travels throughout Tibet, the māra Khyapa tried to prevent Tönpa Shenrab from reaching the places where he planned to preach, but the master would again and again prevail over his advances. Thus, over the months, he instructed Tibetan people in the way of prayer, and taught them various rituals, ceremonies and sacred dances. He showed them the use of prayer flags and a number of healing practices, which are still very popular in the region, and which would end up being absorbed by Tibetan Buddhism. He also taught people ways to eradicate the mental illusions of the māras. But above all, and in opposition to the prehistoric Bön traditions, in whose rituals yaks, sheep and horses were sacrificed to be propitious to the Yenpos, Shenrab urged them to respect

the lives of animals and to replace living creatures in their sacrifices with red torma statuettes, animal-shaped figurines made of barley flour and butter, and moistened with beer.

When Tönpa Shenrab returned to Olmo Lung Ring, he came back accompanied by the m̄ara Khyapa Lagring, who, seeing that he could not defeat Shenrab, ended up declaring himself his disciple – although the master was not fooled by him.

In his old age, 80 years old and ill, Shenrab still had to overcome Khyapa's tricks, when he tried to convince Shenrab that he had done more than enough for all sentient beings. Khyapa told him that he could leave this world feeling at peace. But Shenrab objected that, unfortunately, he had only been able to benefit a small number of beings and that he would not leave until he was satisfied in this respect.

Tönpa Shenrab was to live for two more years with the excuse of pacifying the demon of death and transforming Khyapa's negative mind into a positive mind. Ultimately, he would also die to set an example of impermanence.

Thus, Shenrab offered an example of human life to follow in order to achieve liberation from suffering, by submitting himself to the limitations of the physical world, experiencing birth, sickness, pain, old age and death as every human being does, and having also enjoyed the gifts of life.

The existence of Tönpa Shenrab has enlightened many generations of Bönpos in Tibet. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2025).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

Olmo Lung Ring, the city and kingdom where Tönpa Shenrab was born, is what is known throughout the world, through the Kalachakra tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism, as the kingdom of Shambhala. It is thus the 'original' version of this archetype of the collective unconscious. In this

way, this Bön tradition would be inserted into the stories and mythical figures related to the Myths of the Future Hypothesis, which we discussed in the second book of this Collection (Volume 1) (Cutanda, 2020).

The Bön religion is an important tradition in Tibet, albeit a minority one since the spread of Buddhism between the 7th and 9th centuries. However, its dominance in previous centuries was significant, and its roots extend much further back in time, as it is suggested to have originated in a blending of Siberian shamanic beliefs and practices and those of the Persian Magi of Khorasan. Gharehkhani (2019) states that Shenrab, before arriving in Tibet, was in areas identified as Gilgit and Bactra, present-day Balkh, which some authors have identified with Shambhala and its Sun Temple, Shams-i-Balkh (David-Néel, 1954; Bennett, 1973). All this may fit in with the legend that Shenrab urged people in Tibet to abandon animal sacrifices, probably a remnant of Siberian shamanic rituals, perhaps linking Shenrab to the ancient tradition of the Magi.

However, the Yungdrung Bön – Eternal Bön – is a later elaboration of that Prehistoric Eurasian Bön, or *Domai Bön*, as the older tradition is often called. Yungdrung Bön arose between the 10th and 11th centuries, when Tibetan Buddhism was already established in the region, and has many similarities with it, especially with the Nyingma lineage. It has, therefore, a tantric approach. Also, like Tibetan Buddhism, Yungdrung Bön eventually adopted the monastic approach. Later, a new branch would emerge within the tradition, being called New Bön or *Sarma Bön*, which would develop in Eastern Tibet (Ermakov, 2023).

The myths and legends that deal with Tönpa Shenrab have, according to Xiumei Pu (2016), inspiring elements for our times and for the worldview we need to develop in order to achieve an ecological civilisation. As noted by Pu:

Whereas Tonpa Shenrab's life story is primarily about how to live a meaningful life as a human being in order to reach the state of nirvana in the end, it reveals an ancient understanding of the human-nature relationship and a unique ecospiritual poetics and politics which is hard to imagine today. (p. 34)

Mentioning the scene in which Shenrab is incarnated as a cuckoo, and other subsequent scenes – not reflected in the adaptation we offer

here – in which his figure is linked to other birds and monkeys, Pu says that ‘As an enlightened being, Shenrab does not discriminate between humanity and nature.’ She then adds that ‘He is not the creator of nature but a student of Mother Nature. Mother Nature is the Greater Teacher. To achieve enlightenment, he lives in, with, and as nature’ (ibid.).

In addition, Pu reflects on Shenrab’s battle with Khyapa Lagring’s army of demons in the following way:

Tonpa Shenrab’s art of war is to show his enemy a new possibility, a new way of existence—living the lotus flower Way. The lesson we learn from Shenrab’s art of war—turning weapons into flowers—is that nonviolence and aspiration for beauty leads to true liberation and peace. (ibid., p. 35)

We might also find glimpses of Jung’s archetype of the shadow in the figure of Khyapa himself, accompanying Shenrab to the end of his days – in analytical psychology circles it is said that the work with the shadow never ends – and even offering us clues to understanding the m̄ara Khyapa not only as a symbol of the personal shadow, but also of the collective human shadow. As pointed out by Pu:

Tonpa Shenrab’s battle against the demons has two layers of meaning here. The demon is a metaphor of both the external and internal adversaries to peace and psychological health. The demon that an ecowomanist today has to deal with is both a degrading external environment where various forms of violence such as war, gender violence, and the abuse and contamination of the natural world prevail, and an internal psychological environment that is inextricably linked to this toxic and violent external environment. One’s faith in turning an adversary into something beautiful is imperative. The lotus flower poetics and politics explored in Tonpa Shenrab’s spiritual biography invites us to imagine an ecospiritual art of healing and peacemaking that works toward positive change. (ibid.)

Sources

Bennett, J. G. (1973). *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*. New York: Harper & Row.

- Cutanda, G. A. (2020). *The Earth Stories Collection – Volume 1: The Myths of the Future*. Granada: TESC Press.
- David-Néel, A. (1954). *Les nouvelles littéraires*. Paris: Éditions Larousse.
- Ermakov, D. (2023). *Connections Between Siberian Shamanism, Bön and Taoism*. Foundation for the Preservation of Yungdrung Bön.
<https://yungdrungbon.co.uk/2024/06/09/connections-between-siberian-shamanism-bon-and-taoism/>
- Gharehkhani, Z. (2019). *El budismo iranio: El budismo iranio durante el período parto-sasánida, entre el paganismo y el chamanismo*. PhD thesis. Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
- Gurung, K. N. (2011 May 31). The Emergence of a Myth: In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon.
<https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17677>
- Latri Nyidak Rinpoche (2023 Jun 9). *Yungdrung Bön: Origin and history of Bön*. Latri Khenpo Nyima Dakpa Rinpoche.
<https://latriynyidakrinpoche.org/yungdrung-bon/>
- Pu, X. (2016). Turning weapons into flowers: Ecospiritual poetics and politics of Bön and ecowomanism. *Worldviews*, 20(1), 30-47.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

Principle 16c: Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.

The Way Forward: It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.