

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Bonpo Mandala*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

Ca. 17th or 18th century

Museum #: 97.272

By Chris Moore

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Bon, the indigenous religion of Tibet, was a fully developed and highly ritualized faith before the emergence of Buddhism. It may have stemmed from the shamanic religions of Central Asia, and was based around death rites and the propitiation of localized, often hostile deities. However, with the spread of Buddhism, Bon both absorbed and contributed to the Buddhist pantheon and practices. The nature and extent of this exchange remains unclear. However, by the time this mandala was created, there was little difference between the arts of the two religions.

Some scholars consider Bon to be merely another Buddhist sect, for Bon arguably shares many features in common with the Nyingma sect. This aside, Bon and Buddhist practitioners regard their religions as being separate and irreconcilable. This distinction is marked by a long period of animosity, which has resulted in an almost complete squelching of the original Bon faith. Indeed, Padmasambava's success in establishing the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet was based in part on the suppression of Bon. Bon rituals often required actual animal sacrifice to appease deities, a practice which the Buddhists abhorred. Thus, Padmasambava was invited to Tibet to eradicate these deities or "demons", converting many into the Buddhist pantheon as Dharmapala. In addition to his success in converting local demons, he was also successful in converting Bon priests, reportedly converting five hundred (Karmay, 88). With the increased acceptance of Buddhism, the Bon faith dwindled and was all but eradicated, only reemerging in the eleventh century. However, even then Bon was altered, for this new form incorporated much of the Buddhist pantheon and ideas about transcendence.

This Buddhist inspired form of Bon is commonly referred to as "White Bon," while the older form is referred to as "Black Bon." This mandala from the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art is probably from the "White Bon" tradition. However, even "White Bon" is distinct from Buddhism in many of its important tenants. For example, the Bonpos do not trace the origins of their religion to India. Rather, they trace their origins to Zhang Zhung, a land believed to have been located to the west between Tibet and Tazik. Also, they do not trace their teachings back to the Buddha Shakyamuni. Rather, they believe that Tonpa Shenrap, a Zhang Zhung prince, is the true Buddha and source of their *sutras* (Kvaerne, 13©4).

The Bonpos view their religion as the eternal, universal, and unchanging faith, for at one time, they believe, everyone was Bon. This idea is embodied within the swastika or *yung drung*, perhaps the most important symbol in the Bon religion. The *yung drung* can be seen in the lower right hand corner of the Mandala and serves to distinguish it as Bon. The arms of the *yung drung* are pointing counterclockwise rather than clockwise (Kvaerne, 11). Although some esoteric Buddhist practices are

also performed in a counterclockwise manner, this is not generally present in the art. Bon practices, however, such as circumambulation and the spinning of prayer wheels, are all performed counterclockwise. Thus, this serves as another way of distinguishing Bon from Buddhism.

In this mandala ([#97.272](#)), the *yung drung* represents one of the Bon deity families present in the mandala. The other three families are represented by the symbols within the remaining corners, the lotus, the wheel, and the jewel. The figures along the top of the mandala, with the exception of the central figure, also represent these families, as indicated by their attributes: the jewel, the lotus, the wheel, and the *yung drung* respectively. The central figure is likely an ultimate deity comparable in function to Vairochana. Likewise, the four remaining deities may be comparable to the jina Buddhas. The internal structure of this mandala is as yet unclear. However, the symbol groupings probably correspond to gods and goddesses of the four great families, each represented by their respective symbols and sequence of colors.

The purpose of this mandala is also uncertain. However, it possibly relates to a mandala described in the "gZi-brjid", translated by David Snellgrove as the "Nine Ways of Bon". This work describes a transcendent system through which devotees seek enlightenment. In one section entitled "A Dkar Theg Pa" or "The way of pure sound," a mandala is described, ironically enough, as a "mandala of recognizable signs" (Snellgrove, p. 181, 7). Unfortunately, these signs are not mentioned by name. However, the purpose of the mandala described in the text is consistent with the form of the mandala in question, and is consistent with the identification of the upper row of figures as deities akin to the jina Buddhas. In the meditation described, the five evils are transformed into five wisdoms, echoing a similar transformation that takes place in Buddhism through the agency of the jina Buddhas. In Bon, these evils are regarded as demons and the Buddhas as the destroyers of these demons. The blue destroyer transforms wrath into love. The red destroyer transforms desire into generosity. The yellow destroyer transforms mental torpor into mental peace. The turquoise destroyer transforms envy into openness, and the crystal destroyer transforms pride into peace (Snellgrove, 173©7). However, because of the nature of the text and the lack of similar identified mandalas, this correlation cannot be verified.

Regardless, the basic structure of the mandala shares many features in common with Buddhist mandalas. Like Buddhist mandalas, the eight charnel fields are depicted within a band in the outer ring of the mandala. In an adjacent band, a standard array of Buddhist offerings are depicted. These offerings are further mirrored by those depicted in the lower register of the painting. Also, figures are depicted holding up the walls of the inner palace, another common Buddhist element. Thus, although clearly Bon, this mandala characterizes the iconographic and ritual exchange that occurred between the two faiths.

#### References:

- Karmay, Samten G. trans. "A Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon". New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Kvaerne, Per. "The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living tradition. Boston: Shambala, 1996.
- Snellgrove, David. trans. "The Nine Ways of Bon". Boulder: Prajna Press, 1980.

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