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The Emergence of a Myth : In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon
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CHAPTER FOUR

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE OF SHENRAB MIWO AND ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA

INTRODUCTION

Shenrab Miwo is the mythical founder of the Bon religion. What follows is a comparison between the life stories of Shenrab and Śākyamuni, from a Mahāyāna perspective. This reveals many parallels between the two stories and shows that numerous narratives in the *mDo 'dus* most likely were appropriated from Buddhist sources. My comparison will be based primarily on the *mDo 'dus*⁷⁸ and the *rGya cher rol pa*, the Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara*. Occasionally, the comparison will also be extended to the *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* and the *mDzangs blun*, and on other earlier Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts containing the stories of the Buddha's past lives. The *rGya cher rol pa* is a well-known Mahāyāna account of the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni in Tibet. It is known that this text was available in Tibet before the emergence of the earliest known Bon texts. It is highly likely that the early Bonpo authors had access to this text when creating the account of Shenrab.

My analysis is divided into three main sections: Shenrab's early life, his life as an ascetic, and his later life. The first section includes his descent from heaven, the dreams and the visions of his parents, his miraculous birth, his education, and his journey to teach in other continents. In the second section, I shall look at the similarities between the ascetic lives of Shenrab and Śākyamuni, in relation to the following: the four sights, their departure from home, becoming monks, practicing austerity and Māra Khyapa Lagring and his family performing magical tricks to hinder their practice. I will also dwell on the episode of five tigers in the *mDo 'dus* and compare that with other relevant Buddhist sources. In the third section I shall

⁷⁸ The complete account of Shenrab Miwo's life is recorded in chapters eight to twenty-four; the remaining chapters provide supplementary materials.

look at similarities in the later parts of the lives of Shenrab and the Buddha, including their attainment of ‘enlightenment’ and Māra’s sceptical views of this accomplishment.

THE EARLY LIFE

Descent from Heaven

As in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in Bon it is also believed that there are multiple teachers who have descended, or will descend to the earth to teach. Shenrab and the Buddha Śākyamuni were teaching in a heavenly realm before teaching on earth. According to the *mDo ’dus* there were ten brothers⁷⁹ in a heavenly realm called Sipa Gungsang.⁸⁰ They were the sons of the divine King Triöd and a divine lady (Tib. *gsas za*) named Kunshema. The first nine brothers⁸¹ were known as Tonpa (Tib. *ston pa*). In Tibetan, the word Tonpa specifically refers to the founding fathers-cum-teachers. For instance, Tibetans refer to the Buddha as the Tonpa of Buddhism (Tib. *nang pa’i ston pa*) and Shenrab Miwo as the Tonpa of Bon (Tib. *bon gyi ston pa*). For Bonpos, Shenrab Miwo is the eighth among ten brothers, and he is the eighth Tonpa of Bon as well as the Tonpa of the present aeon. The seven elder brothers were Tonpas of the past aeons and the ninth one is the Tonpa of the future. All the nine brothers, including Shenrab, descended or will descend from heaven to guide the people of this world towards total freedom from suffering. Traditionally, Bonpos believe that these are ‘enlightened ones’⁸² who

⁷⁹ The ten brothers in the *mDo ’dus* (pp. 32-33, p. 38ff) are: Nangwa (Rangjung Thugjechen), Gewa (Khorwa Kundren), Kunshe (Nyonmong Dugseg), Legpa (Tseme Thugjechen), Nyompa (Thamche Khyenzig), Jampa (Kunshe Thangpo), Dagpa (Togyal Yekhyen), Salwa (Tonpa Shenrab Miwo), Shepa (Yene Sibuchung).

⁸⁰ This is probably the first of the five Pure Abodes (Skt. *Śuddhāvāsa*) in the Form Realm (Skt. *Rūpadhātu*) called Miche Sipa Gungsang (Skt. *Avṛha*) according to Bon and Buddhist cosmology (cf. Mimaki 2000, p. 93).

⁸¹ These nine brothers are not to be confused with the nine brothers of Shenrab in his present life (see *mDo ’dus*, pp. 41-42). More discussion on the latter is supplied in chapter five.

⁸² Both Tibetan Bonpos and Buddhists similarly describe that ‘the state of the enlightenment’ is completed when one obtains universal knowledge and passes beyond all suffering.

took rebirth in this world one last time to demonstrate the path to ‘enlightenment.’ They were each appointed this task by their predecessor. The tenth and the youngest brother was called Dulshugchen (Tib. *rdul shug can*, cf. *brtul zhugs can*) who was later reborn as Māra Khyapa Lagring, who challenged and tried to hinder Shenrab’s ascetic practices. I will come back to this later.

Each of the nine teachers taught the next brother, with each younger brother then succeeding his elder. It is said that each of Shenrab’s seven elder brothers completed their assignments. Shenrab’s immediate predecessor, the seventh brother Togyal Yekhyen,⁸³ descended to earth as the saviour of all beings. When he completed his teachings, he appointed his younger brother Salwa Chime Tsukphu to be his successor. When Salwa was reborn, he was given the name Shenrab Miwo. Shenrab was instructed by his elder brother to be born to the most respectable family, in the most civilized place and at the most suitable time.⁸⁴ The most civilized place to be born was in the Barpo Sogyé palace, on the nine-stacked swastika mountain, in the city of Olmo Lung on Jambu Island. The most respectable caste to be born into was the royal caste, to his parents Gyalbön Thökar and Yöchi Gyalzhema. The most suitable time to be born was when people lived an average life of one hundred years.⁸⁵

The theory of the nine teachers owes a great deal to the Mahāyāna interpretation of multi-Buddhas. This interpretation also seems to have originated from earlier Buddhism (cf. *Mahāpadānasuttanta*, fourteenth chapter in the Pāli Dīgha-Nikāya). As Mahāyāna Buddhism was already at its peak when it reached the land of Tibet, it is likely that most of the Buddhist teachings that reached Tibet

⁸³ The name is also found in a Bon ritual text *gTo nag mgo gsum* as the initiator of the ritual. Cf. Gurung 2009, pp. 268-69.

⁸⁴ According to Tibetan Bonpos, after achieving Buddhahood one can accomplish anything one wishes for. Based on this concept, Shenrab can choose the place and time of his birth.

⁸⁵ According to a Bon cosmological text, *mDzod sgra ’greI*, all human beings used to live longer than a hundred years. Due to falling moral standards, the human life span has decreased over time from 10.000 to 1.000 to 500, to 100 and will further decrease to 10 years. When Shenrab was born, it was the time that people lived an average of 100 years.

came from the Mahāyāna tradition. The theory of multiple Buddhas is similar to the theory of multiple teachers found in Bon texts. In the *Lalitavistara* (Bays 1983, p. 10), there are three immediate Buddhas of the past and there are six in the *Mahāpadānasuttanta*,⁸⁶ who taught the people of this world before Śākyamuni. The three Buddhas are Krakucchanda (Tib. *'khor ba 'jig*), Kanakamuni (Tib. *gser thub*) and Kāśyapa (Tib. *'od srung*). Śākyamuni is the Buddha of the present aeon and Maitreya (Tib. *byams pa*) will be the Buddha of the future.

When Shenrab left his heavenly abode to teach in the human world, he appointed his younger brother Shepa to teach in the heavenly realm, in his place. He prophesied, in the same way as his predecessor did, that this younger brother would some time become his successor in the human world. For this reason Shepa is considered to be the future ‘Tonpa’ of Bon, which is comparable to the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva Maitreya becoming the future Buddha. Let me illustrate this with a passage from the *mDo 'dus* (p. 52).

Chime Tsukphu⁸⁷ gave his crown [in turn] to his younger brother Shepa and said “You, the younger brother shall become the teacher to guide gods in my place. After I complete my three teachings on the Jambu Island, you,

⁸⁶ I am grateful to Vincent Tournier for sharing this information with me. There are seven Buddhas including Śākyamuni according to the *Mahāpadānasuttanta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* ch. xiv, Walshe 1987, pp. 199-201). Detailed descriptions of the Buddhas and the life span of the people during their time on Earth are also similar to the descriptions of the Buddhas of Bon in the *mDo 'dus* (see comparative table in appendix 1). The future Buddha Maitreya (or Metteyya) is mentioned elsewhere in the *Cakkavattisihanādasutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* ch. xxvi, Walshe 1987, p. 403). A similar description of people’s life-span decreasing, as I have noted above (see the previous footnote) from a Bon cosmogonical text, is also found in this chapter of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Although there seems to be no Tibetan translation of these texts, I do not rule out the possibility of these texts as one of the sources for the Bonpos. In fact, there are few other chapters of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (or its Sanskrit version *Dirghāgama*) that were translated into Tibetan (cf. Martin 2006, p. 105, and *dBa' bzhed*, f. 24v: “*nyan thos kyi mdo sde lung ring po dang gang po rtogs pa nyung ngu zhig bsgyur*” in Wangdu & Diemberger 2000).

⁸⁷ All three versions of the *mDo 'dus* contain Drime Tsukphu in place of Chime Tsukphu. However, since the name Chime Tsukphu is more commonly used in other Bon sources, I also use this here to reduce any confusion that may occur by using different names.

Shepa Yene Sibuchung, will guide [the human world] when the people's life expectancy is only ten years.”⁸⁸

In this paragraph, it is clearly explained that Shenrab, in his previous life before he came down to teach in the human world, taught in a heavenly realm. The idea that Śākyamuni, in his previous life when he was still a bodhisattva, before descending to earth, taught in a heavenly realm, is evident from the following passage (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 47; Bays 1983, p. 71).

After the Bodhisattva [to be born as Śākyamuni] had instructed the great assembly of gods with this discourse on the Dharma ..., he spoke again: “Friends, I shall go now into the land of Jambu” At this the Devaputras of Tuṣita wept. Embracing the feet of the Bodhisattva, they implored him: “Noble Being, if you leave, this Tuṣita realm will lose all its glory!” In response, the Bodhisattva replied, “Bodhisattva Maitreya will teach you the Dharma.” He placed the diadem from his own head upon the head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya and said: “Noble Being, after me you will become the perfect and completely enlightened Buddha.”

In Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, the theory of reincarnation is used as an important tool to weave stories together in the biographies of various Tibetan saints and masters. Reincarnation is defined as the transference of consciousness from one life to the next after leaving one's physical body. The theories of karma and re-birth in Tibet were without a doubt borrowed from Indian Buddhism. This model of reincarnation in Tibet also incorporates the idea of gods descending to earth and taking human form, which is a common feature in early Indian religions.

⁸⁸ According to our Bon text, all human beings will eventually only live an average of 10 years. However, this life span will slowly increase when the people start to perform virtuous activities again.

Parents' Dreams and Visions

In Tibet and the Indian sub-continent, dreams and visions that parents receive before the birth of their child, as well as auspicious signs during the actual birth, are thought to have prophetic qualities. This phenomenon is still widely seen in Tibetan communities today. Dreams and visions have been used as an essential method to identify someone as the reincarnation of an important figure. The children that are identified in this way usually play an important role in their community as a reincarnated lama (Tib. *sprul sku*) or a lineage lama, or as a kind of 'religious celebrity'.

The dreams and visions of Shenrab's parents in the *mDo 'dus* are cited as evidence that he was a special child, as are the dreams and visions of Śākyamuni's parents in the *rGya cher rol pa*. According to the *mDo 'dus*, Shenrab's parents had several visions and dreams before he was born. For instance, Shenrab's father, Gyalbön Thökar, had a vision of the Tibetan syllable 'A', which was white in colour, dissolving into the crown of his own head through a secret path of a white light (Tib. *'od kyī gsang lam dkar po*). Shenrab's mother, Yöchi Gyalzhema, had a vision of a drop of seminal fluid (Tib. *byang sems*) entering her womb and transforming into a gleaming white swastika. She also had a dream of finding a shining precious jewel and seeing a white lion entering her body. Another dream involved the light from the sun and the moon emanating from a white Tibetan syllable 'A', illuminating the world and dispelling darkness, and finding a white swastika.

Many miracles are also said to have occurred, such as the blossoming of a fig tree (Tib. *u du 'bar ba*, also spelled as *u du 'bar ra*, derived from Skt. *uḍumbara*)⁸⁹ next to the right door of the palace, and a rose-apple tree (Tib. *'dzam*

⁸⁹ According to Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary (Zhang 1996, p. 3138), it is also called *bdud 'joms shing*, the plant which rarely blossoms, but easily and quickly perishes. Apte (1989, p. 184) calls it *Gūlara*, and Monier-Williams (1899, p. 175, column 1) describes it as a fig tree (*Ficus glomerata*).

bu shing, Skt. *jambu*)⁹⁰ growing spontaneously next to the left door. These elements can also be found in the *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 63, pp. 83–84; Bays 1983, p. 123).

In a dream had by Śākyamuni's mother, [the bodhisattva] entered her womb through her right side, in the form of a white baby elephant with six tusks. When ten months had passed and the time for the birth of the Bodhisattva had drawn nigh, thirty-two precursory signs appeared at the palace. In the ponds, blue, red and white lotuses opened their buds and extended their flowers. In the gardens, young flowering trees and fruit trees blossomed. ... From the slopes of the Himalayas, lion cubs found their way into the city of Kapila and circled joyously around the city three times. ... Five hundred young white elephants appeared and touched the feet of King Śuddhodana with the tips of their trunks.

In the above stories, the motifs of the white lion and the white elephant entering the mother's wombs are very similar, as are the blossoming of flowers and the occurrence of other auspicious signs. Other similar elements in the narratives of the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa* are the seeing miracles and virtuous signs, the birth of the child from mother's right arm-pit and lotuses growing where the baby took his first steps.

The dreams and auspicious signs that are described in the *mDo 'dus* are not recorded in the *gZer mig*. This demonstrates that not all of the early Bonpo authors agreed with the account of Shenrab's life as it is presented in the *mDo 'dus*. It seems that the author of the later work selected only the parts that he considered suitable for an account of the life of the founder of Bon. In addition, it provides an example of the fact that the *mDo 'dus* contains more (elements of) stories that are comparable to the legend of the Buddha than the *gZer mig*.

⁹⁰ See Monier-Williams 1899, p. 412, column 2.

A Miraculous Birth

The birth of the Buddha and the birth of Shenrab are said to have occurred under miraculous circumstances. There are many similarities including emerging from their mother's right side, the appearance of two Hindu gods and other celestial beings, the instantaneous growth of lotus flowers where the children took their first steps, and prophetic declarations that they would become great teachers.

According to the *mDo 'dus*, Shenrab was born from his mother's right arm-pit after a ten month pregnancy. He was born under the care of the goddesses of the four elements. Tshangpa (Skt. Brahmā, one of the Hindu trinity) and Gyachin (Skt. Śakra) immediately lifted the baby up in their arms with white scarves. A female nāga called Kunshema bathed the baby. The gods, humans and *gshen* ritual priests recited auspicious songs. After the ceremony, the baby was dressed in divine clothes. When the baby took his first steps in each of the four directions, many lotuses and swastikas sprang up wherever he set his feet (see *mDo 'dus*, ch. viii). These episodes seem to have been derived from the following account given in the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 89–91; Bays 1983, pp. 130–32).

The end of the ten months having arrived, the Bodhisattva [Śākyamuni] now came forth, possessing full memory and knowledge; from the right side of his mother he emerged, untouched by the taint of the womb. At that very instant, Śakra, the lord of the gods, and Brahmā, the lord of the Sāhā world, stood before the Bodhisattva. Filled with profound reverence, they remembered and recognized him; full of respect for the tender form of his body, they wrapped the Bodhisattva in a silken garment⁹¹ woven with gold and silver threads and took him in their arms.

The nāga kings Nanda and Upananda, showing the upper half of their bodies in the expanse of the sky, caused two streams of cool and

⁹¹ In the Tibetan version, it is a divine cloth called *ka shi pa* (Tib. *lha'i gos ka shi pa*, cf. Skt. (*divyavastra*) *kāśika* in Monier-Williams 1899, p. 280, column 2).

warm water to flow forth to bathe the Bodhisattva.

Knowing the thoughts and the conduct of all beings, the Bodhisattva took seven steps towards the east and lotuses sprang up where he set his feet. The Bodhisattva then took seven steps to the south, seven steps to the west and seven steps to the north. He took seven more steps, he faced below [downwards], and taking seven final steps, he faced upwards.

These narratives are similar in the following respects. Firstly, according to both accounts the gestation period was ten months. This is at odds with the period of nine months and ten days (Tib. *zla dgu ngo bcu*) widely accepted by Tibetans. As we know also from Monier-Williams (1899, p. 472, column 1), the child just before birth is called *daśamāsyā* ‘ten months old’ in the Vedic literature. This shows that the gestation period during the Vedic age is ten months, probably calculating twenty-eight days of the lunar month. Therefore, the gestation period of ten months recorded in the *Lalitavistara* and in its Tibetan translation *rGya cher rol pa* is normally accepted in India.⁹²

It is not certain what kind of calendar was used in Tibet before the 11th century, yet, it is clear that during Yarlung dynasty Tibetan years were named after the twelve animals, like in the Chinese calendar. The standard Tibetan calendar was only introduced only in 1027 AD, when the *Kālacakratāntra*⁹³ was translated into Tibetan. Tibetans have adopted the Kālacakra calendar, but combined it with the Chinese lunar calendar system. In the Tibetan lunar calendar a month consists of 29 or 30 days with an average of 29.53 days a month. To complete the

⁹² The gestation period of exactly ten months for Buddha is reported as an exceptional case in the *Mahāpadānasuttanta* of the Dīgha Nikāya chapter xiv. It is written, “It is the rule that whereas other women carry the child in their womb for nine or ten months before giving birth, it is not so with the Bodhisatta’s mother, who carries him for exactly ten months before giving birth. That is the rule.” See Walshe (1987, p. 204, line 1.23) for this passage.

⁹³ This text deals with Buddhist meditation practices, philosophy, and the physical world, including the Kālacakra calculation system and the process of human development. A partial translation can be found in Wallace 2001 and 2004.

maximum gestation period of forty weeks or 280 days, according to this calculation system takes nine and half months in the Tibetan calendar. Thus, this calculation system may have determined the gestation period of nine months and ten days known to Tibetan embryologists,⁹⁴ which is also recorded in the Bon text, *gZer mig*.

One possible explanation of why the gestation period of ‘ten months’ is recorded in the *mDo ’dus* could simply be that the author(s) faithfully rendered the gestation period recorded in the *rGya cher rol pa* or in other related sources, based on the knowledge of embryology in India.⁹⁵ Another possibility is that the author(s) might have considered the ten months pregnancy period as an exceptional case reserved for extraordinary beings, like the Buddha or Shenrab, for the Bonpos. The time frame of ten months might also be the result of the use of a different calendar system, possibly another type of lunar calendar, before the implementation of the Kālacakra calendar system in Tibet.

Secondly, according to both the *mDo ’dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa*, the baby was born from its mother’s right armpit. In Tibetan literature, this way of birth is reserved for great figures. Once more, the story of the manner of the Buddha’s birth was borrowed to compose the story of the birth of Shenrab.

According to a Bon cosmological text (*mDzod sgra ’grel*, p. 142), there are four ways in which birth can take place. The two that relate to human birth are ordinary birth from a mother’s womb (Tib. *mngal skyes*) and a miraculous birth (Tib. *rdzus skyes*), which is usually believed to occur from the upper parts of body. Both Buddhists and Bonpos believe that great figures like the Buddha and Shenrab should avoid being born in the normal way, thus it is claimed that they were both born from their mother’s right arm-pit. However, there are different

⁹⁴ A very elaborate and traditional Bon account of embryology is given in the 13th-14th-century text called *rTsa rgyud nyi sgron* (pp. 149-67). See Garrett’s dissertation (2004, p. 38) regarding the early Indian sources that have informed Tibetan understanding of embryology.

⁹⁵ There is a single occurrence of ‘nine months and ten days’ in the *mDo ’dus* (ch. 20, p. 191), which seems to have been amended later.

reasons given in these two accounts for why the birth occurred from the right arm-pit. According to the *rGya cher rol pa*, it was prevent pollution by the supposed impurities of the mother's genital organ. Impurity is not mentioned in the *mDo 'dus*; instead it is written that the baby could not be born from the mother's womb because it was blocked by Māra.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the parallels in the two stories show that one account was derived from the other.

Thirdly, the Hindu gods Brahmā and Śakra were present during the birth of both Śākyamuni and Shenrab. However, the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* also lists them among the celestial figures that became Shenrab's audience when he was teaching. This suggests that early Bonpo authors may have had limited knowledge about these two mythical Hindu figures and the role that they ought to play in the story of Bon.

Fourth, the baby Shenrab was bathed by a female nāga called Kunshema, and it were the nāga kings Nanda and Upananda who were the first to bathe the baby Buddha. Although there are minor differences in the gender and number of the figures bathing the infants, both sources equally categorized them as being nāgas.

Fifth, the accounts of the newborn babies taking their first steps in the four directions (north, south, east and west) and the growth of lotuses where they placed their feet are similar. The author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* doesn't specify the number of steps or the number of flowers that grew, but according to the *rGya cher rol pa* the baby took seven steps in each of the four directions and seven more steps facing upwards and downwards.

Another point of similarity between the two narratives is that both children were examined by wise men, who predicted that they would become great teachers. After Shenrab was born, the Brahmin Salwa arrived at the gate of the

⁹⁶ It is mentioned in the following passage in the *mDo 'dus* (ch. xxiii, p. 216), "when I was first entering into a womb [of the mother], [you] overshadowed [my] mother by illness, but the nectar of gods cured that illness. And when [I was] taking birth, [you] *rākṣasa* blocked the door of the womb, [so] I came out from the right arm-pit of my mother."

Trimon Gyalshay palace. He inspected the baby and predicted that he would become ‘Tonpa Shenrab’. This is similar to the following passage from the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 110–11; Bays 1983, pp. 152–53).

When the great rishi Asita examined the Bodhisattva, he saw that his body bore the thirty-two signs of a great man, and the eighty secondary marks. Then he expressed his thoughts, saying “truly a great wonder has appeared in the world.”

After circumambulating the Bodhisattva, Asita pressed him to his breast and gazed thoughtfully at the thirty-two signs marking the body of the Bodhisattva. For the great man endowed with these signs, there are two ways of being and no other. If he remains at home, he will be a Cakravartin king with four armies of victorious troops, a great leader devoted to the Dharma. But if he departs from home to wander as a homeless monk, he will be a Tathāgata, a prefect and complete Buddha, a guide unequalled by any other.

The soothsayer Brahmin in the story of Shenrab was named Salwa. Like in the Buddha legend, Brahmin Salwa also inspected the baby and prophesied his future. In the *gZer mig*, the Brahmin soothsayer who inspected Shenrab was known by a different name, Salkhyab Oden. He is identified as having been the family priest since the time of Shenrab’s grandparents. This Brahmin also named Shenrab’s father, *Mi bon lha bon yo bon rgyal bon thod dkar* (*gZer mig*, p. 15). I will return to this name in chapter six of this dissertation. The soothsayer Brahmin fainted when he saw the baby Shenrab and declared himself to be an unfortunate old man (see *gZer mig*, pp. 49–50).

The parents asked Brahmin Salkhyab to come to the palace to check the boy’s birth mark. At seeing the baby’s face, the soothsayer cried and

fainted. When the king asked the reason for his anxiety, the soothsayer explained that he was unfortunate because he had already become an old man at this time, when the teacher had just been born.

This account from the *gZer mig* parallels the following account given in the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 111–12; Bays 1983, pp. 153–55), which actually is not recorded in the *mDo 'dus*.

Looking upon the Bodhisattva, Asita began to weep and uttered a deep sigh. With strong apprehension [King Śuddhodana] asked the great rishi, “Why are you weeping rishi, and uttering great sighs? Is there some danger you see for the young prince?”

At these words, the rishi Asita spoke the following, “Great King, it is not for the young prince that I am weeping, because for him there is truly no danger. It is for myself that I weep. Why is that, Great King? Because, I am old and feeble.”

[He further said], “I will not see this jewel of a Buddha. And this is why, Great King, I am weeping, I am distressed, and I utter deep sighs, for I will not become free from sickness and from attachment.”

As it is presented here, it was the great rishi Asita, who in the legend of the Buddha examined the boy and predicted that the boy would either become a King and ‘world conqueror’ or a Tathāgata and ‘world renouncer’.

A final similarity is that in both accounts celestial beings and people from various castes like Brahmins and Kṣatriyas gathered to make offerings to the newborn children. According to the *mDo 'dus*, the gods of the five elements performed auspicious songs; celestial beings recited praises and circumambulated the Barpo

Sogye palace; and the young gods, goddesses, nāgas and scent eaters⁹⁷ showered flowers on the baby Shenrab from the sky. These events are also recorded in the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 127–28, p. 130; Bays 1983, p. 181, p. 184).

A Brāhmin named Udāyana, the father of Udāyin, attended by five hundred Brāhmins, sought audience with King Śuddhodana: “O Royal One”, he said to the king, “it is time that ornaments be made for the young prince.” [The ornaments were made.] The king said [to the Brāhmin], “You may honour and ornament the young prince with the jewellery that I have had made for him.”

“The prosperity of the son of the Śākya family will be supreme and extensive!” Having spoken, the goddess showered flowers on the Bodhi-sattva and disappeared from the garden.

Similar to the way the Brahmin Udāyana was appointed to honour and ornament the boy in the legend of the Buddha, the coronation of Shenrab was performed by members of Brahmin and royal classes. Moreover, in the *mDo ’dus* the offering of flowers was carried out by gods, goddesses and other non-human beings, in the same way as the ceremony was sanctified with a shower of flowers by the goddess in the *rGya cher rol pa*. Comparing these events enables us to see the import of the relevant narratives of the *rGya cher rol pa*. In brief, the evidence reviewed here suggests that the mythical account in the *mDo ’dus* is construed on the basis of the legend of the Buddha Śākyamuni. This account became an important source for the story of the life of the founder among later Bonpos.

⁹⁷ The Tibetan word here is *dri za* (Skt. *gandharva*) and the Tibetan translator has understood this as a class of beings living on scent (Tib. *dri*, Skt. *gandha*). Therefore, I translated the term here as ‘scent eater’, which is possibly what the author meant.

Education and Visit to Other Continents

Shenrab's education is only referred to briefly in the *mDo 'dus*. It says that as he was growing up he received instruction in reading, writing, mathematics and sporting activities and mastered them all. However, there is no mention of any teacher. In contrast, the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 130–35) states that the young Śākyamuni had a teacher named Viśvāmitra. Śākyamuni displayed great skill in mathematics, archery and other worldly arts during numerous competitions (*rGya cher rol pa*, pp. 141–62). He is also said to have been born with skills acquired in past lives. For example, he was an expert in all sixty-four scripts and their corresponding literature (see *rGya cher rol pa*, pp. 132–33; Bays 1983, p. 189–90 for the list of scripts).

Although not specifically mentioned, Shenrab's academic and physical abilities are implied in the *mDo 'dus*. He supposedly began teaching when he was only three years old, even visiting other continents to do so. The idea of a child travelling on his own accord from one continent to another is of course difficult to imagine. The point of this probably is to underline that Shenrab possessed extraordinary or even supernatural powers, even since his early childhood.

At the age of three, he visited the city Langling. He took a bath in Mulehe Lake and then paid homage to his maternal grandfather King Sala.⁹⁸ The goddesses of the four elements, viz. wind, water, earth and fire, made offerings to the boy.⁹⁹ Then the boy visited the northern continent of Uttarakuru (Tib. *byang sgra mi*

⁹⁸ The Tibetan passage relevant here is “*rgyal po sa la phyag 'tshal te*”, which can be translated in the following two ways. The first translation may be “the king prostrating to the earth” by taking the word *sa* as for the earth/ground and the word *la* as a locative particle, but the problem with this translation is that the word *rgyal po* ‘king’ becomes irrelevant in this passage. Therefore, I prefer the second translation “paid homage to the King Sala.” Since the King Sala is identified as Shenrab's maternal grandfather, Shenrab may have visited him to pay respect.

⁹⁹ The goddess of the wind offered a turquoise drum (Tib. *gyu nga*, another reading *gyu rta* ‘a turquoise horse’), the goddess of the water offered a vase (Tib. *bum pa*) filled with drops of nectar (Tib. *bdud rtsi*), the goddess of the earth offered food (Tib. *zhal zas*) crowned with jewels, and the goddess of the fire offered a banner (Tib. *ba dan*) decorated with shining green leaves (Tib. *'od kyi ljang lo*).

snyan, ‘unpleasant sound of the north’) where the people ate nectar and wore leaves. He prayed for these people to live for a thousand years and he gave them teachings on selflessness. Then he went to the western continent of Aparagodāna (Tib. *nub ban glang spyod*, ‘cattle utilizing of west’).¹⁰⁰ The inhabitants there were wealthy so he taught them about generosity and giving. The boy then went to the eastern continent of Pūrvavideha (Tib. *shar lus ’phags po*, ‘supreme body of east’) and taught them about tolerance. Lastly, he returned to his homeland Olmo Ling (*mDo ’dus*, pp. 57–58).

As seen above, the boy is described as having visited three of the four continents and taught Bon to the people there. In cosmogonic theories of both Bon and Buddhist traditions, there are four continents located in the four directions (north, south, east and west) with the mythical Mount Sumeru as the axis of the universe. The four continents are Uttarakuru in the north, Aparagodāna in the west, Pūrvavideha in the east and Jambudvīpa in the south.¹⁰¹ These continents are also recorded in the *rGya cher rol pa*, although in a different context. The first three continents are considered to be less civilized than Jambudvīpa, and so inappropriate places for a Buddha to be born. Therefore, the Buddha is said to have chosen to be born in the most civilized continent, Jambudvīpa.

According to the *mDo ’dus*, the education of Shenrab took place before he reached the age of three. It is also recorded that he was enthroned at the age of ten, upon returning to his homeland. Therefore the teachings he gave in the three continents must have taken place when he was between three and ten years old (*mDo ’dus*, p. 58). There is no mention of the Buddha being a teacher at such a young age or travelling to other continents.

¹⁰⁰ Although the Sanskrit word *godāna* means ‘gift of cattle’, the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word preserved in Buddhist and Bon texts is *ban glang spyod*, which means ‘cattle utilizing’. There seems to be either a miscontextualizing of the Sanskrit word *dāna* or it may be simply a Tibetan scribal error from the Tibetan word *sbyin* (Skt. *dāna* ‘to give’) to the word *spyod* ‘to utilize’ (cf. Skt. *bhoga*). The current Tibetan understanding of *Aparagodāna* is the country where people live on cattle.

¹⁰¹ These four continents are sometimes referred as the four islands; see Bays 1983, p. 36.

THE ASCETIC LIFE

The Four Sights and Departure

Like the Buddha, Shenrab abandoned his family life and became an ascetic at the age of thirty-one. For both of them, this renunciation was inspired by four incidents that they witnessed while outside the palace. As described in the *mDo 'dus* (ch. xiii), Shenrab saw the four causes of suffering at the four gates of the Trimon Gyalshay palace. These were the suffering caused by birth, aging, illness and death. This corresponds to the account in the *rGya cher rol pa*, in which the young Śākyamuni is said to have witnessed four events at the four gates of his palace. The four sights are explained in the *rGya cher rol pa* in the following way (Bays 1983, pp. 285-90). First, the Buddha saw an old decrepit man on the road as he departed through the eastern gate of the city towards the pleasure garden. Second, he saw a man who had been stricken by disease, when he passed through the southern gate. Third, he saw a dead man on a palanquin covered with a cloth canopy when he departed through the western gate. Fourth, he saw a monk when departing through the city's northern gate (*rGya cher rol pa*, pp. 190–92). The only difference is that Śākyamuni saw a monk upon exiting the palace whereas Shenrab is said to have witnessed a birth.

In the *rGya cher rol pa*, the four causes of suffering: birth, old age, illness and death, are recorded separately from the four sights. It is very likely that the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* derived these four causes of suffering from this Buddhist theory, and interpreted them as the four sights.

Table: The Four Sights of Shenrab and Buddha

<i>mDo 'dus</i>		<i>rGya cher rol pa</i>
1. Birth	=	None
2. Aged	=	1. An old man
3. Illness	=	2. A sick man
4. Death	=	3. A dead man
[see below]	=	4. A monk

After witnessing these four sights, both the Buddha and Shenrab chose to give up their lives of luxury and search for a way to overcome suffering. Like the Buddha, Shenrab left his parents, wives, children, royal assistants and the comfort of his palace to embrace a solitary life. However, there is a minor difference in the way they left their families. According to the *rGya cher rol pa*, the Buddha left the royal palace without his family members knowing that he intended to do so; while Shenrab's family knew about his intention to leave and requested that he postpone his departure, although he refused. This difference may be explained by the fact that there are different accounts of how the Buddha departed from his palace. Not all accounts say that he left the palace unnoticed. For instance, in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (the middle length discourses of the Buddha), it is recorded that his father and surrogate mother were aware of his intention to leave and they objected and wept (see Schumann 2004, pp. 45–46 and Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995). It can thus be inferred that the Bon account of Shenrab's departure could have been derived from a Buddhist source other than the *rGya cher rol pa*. It also demonstrates that not all Buddhist authors agree that the Buddha's departure from home was unnoticed by his family members. However, one might wonder about the relevance of this Pāli Nikāya to the *mDo 'dus* because this Nikāya was not available in Tibetan when the *mDo 'dus* was written. I hypothesize that the early Bonpo authors had access to fragments of stories about Buddha, probably derived from legendary accounts like those in the *Majjhima Nikāya*.¹⁰²

In the *mDo 'dus*, it is also mentioned that when Shenrab left the palace he rode a horse that was as white as conch shell (Tib. *dung rta*).¹⁰³ The horse was led by a servant, whose name is not given in the *mDo 'dus*. The four great deities (Tib. *gsas chen ru bzhi*, see their names given below) lifted the feet of the horse so that he could leave the palace immediately and peacefully, and reach his intended

¹⁰² See Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, pp. 35–36) about this source.

¹⁰³ According to the *mDo 'dus* (ch. ix), this is the first among the four horses that the four great deities offered to Shenrab during his teaching of Bon. The horse is called *gar rta 'phyo ba*, whose colour is white like conch.

destination, the island of ascetic practice. This story can be compared almost word for word with the story presented in the *rGya cher rol pa*. When the Bodhisattva arose from his couch, the whole earth shook in six ways. He mounted the king of horses, which was as white as the disk of the full moon. The Guardians of the world lifted the supreme horse with their hands, pure as a spotless lotus (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 219; Bays 1983, pp. 333–34). The simile used to describe the colour of the horse in this passage is ‘as white as the disk of the full moon’ whereas in the *mDo ’dus* it is ‘as white as a conch shell.’¹⁰⁴ However, the fact that both horses are described as being pure white may be sufficient to confirm a link between the two sources. Likewise, as Śākyamuni was accompanied by his subject Chandaka when he left the city of Kapilavastu, Shenrab was also accompanied by a subject. As the guardians lifted the hooves of the horse to silently clear the way for the Buddha,¹⁰⁵ the four great deities also lifted the hooves of the horse for Shenrab. Furthermore, the four great deities in the *mDo ’dus* are described as appearing from the four directions: Garse Tsenpo from the east, Goese Khampa from the north, Sejay Mangpo from the west and Namse Khyungrum from the south.¹⁰⁶ The four great kings in the Buddha legend, who were also known as the four guardians of the world (Bays 1983, pp. 327–28), also came from the four directions: Dhṛtarāṣṭra from the east, Virūdhaka from the south, Virūpākṣa from the west and Vaiśravaṇa from the north.

There are three main similarities here. Firstly, both the horses are white. Secondly, four great beings lift the feet of the horses in both stories and for exactly the same purpose. Thirdly, the four great kings and four great deities came from the four directions.

¹⁰⁴ This simile ‘a white horse like a conch shell’ is also found in the 13th-century legend of the Buddha, *Jinacarita* written in Pāli by Vanaratana Medhakara; see stanza 178 in Rouse 1905.

¹⁰⁵ This line appears in the *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 200) as, “the four great kings, having entered the royal palace of Aḍakavati, said to the assembly of Yakṣas, ‘Today, friends, the Bodhisattva leaves home; as he leaves, you must lift up the hooves of his horse’.” Cf. Bays 1983, p. 306.

¹⁰⁶ The four great deities are also listed among the thousand Bonpo Buddhas in the *Klong rgyas*, a funeral ritual text of Bonpos.

Table: The Four Great Deities and the Four Great Kings

Four Great Deities	Four Directions	Four Great Kings, alias Four Guardians
Garse Tsenpo	From the east	Yul 'khor srung (Skt. Dhṛtarāṣṭra)
Goese Khampa	From the north	Lus ngan (Skt. Kubera alias Vaiśravaṇa)
Sejay Mangpo	From the west	Mig mi bzang (Skt. Virūpākṣa)
Namse Khyungrum	From the south	Phags skyes po (Skt. Virūdhaka)

Becoming a Monk

There are important differences in the way Shenrab and Siddhārtha became monks, although the stories contain common threads. In the Mahāyāna, the enlightened ones, including the Buddha, are said to have practised an ascetic life before being born into this world to liberate sentient beings. In the *mDo 'dus* this concept is applied to Shenrab. He is said to have been a monk who had already achieved enlightenment in his previous life, but descended to this world as a *nirmāṇakāya* to subdue and to liberate other sentient beings. Thus, he had already detached himself from worldly properties before his descent. Such a description is not found in the case of the Buddha.

However, there are important similarities. For example, Shenrab also met a monk who encouraged him to become a monk. This account seems to be influenced by the ‘fourth sighting’ in the legend of the Buddha, when the young Śākyamuni saw a monk, when exiting the northern gate of the palace (see *supra* p. 75), and was inspired to take up an ascetic life.

According to the *mDo 'dus*, the monk’s name was Legden Gyalwa. He was a disciple of Shenrab’s predecessor, Togyal Yekhyen, and is described as having had a good moral disposition and the desire to benefit others. A deep appreciation arose in him and Shenrab asked the monk to ordain him as a monk as well. The sage welcomed his request and initiated him as a monk. He also informed Shenrab that all the previous teachers of the Bon tradition had left their families to become

monks. They all followed the vows, wore the sacred clothes (Tib. *rmad gos*), practiced austerity and gained victory over the five māras.

Shenrab was thirty-one years of age when he left his home and became a monk. While he was receiving initiation, all the celestial beings including the subduing deities¹⁰⁷ and *bonpos*¹⁰⁸ congratulated him with flowers. Thereupon, Shenrab cut his knotted hair (Tib. *gtsug phud dbu skra*) in front of a self-emerged stūpa. Brahmā and the Śakra collected the hair in their hair washbasin (Tib. *skra gzhong*). Shenrab washed himself with nectar-water (Tib. *bdud rtsi (khrus chab)*, Skt. *amṛta*, water considered to be *amṛta*) dropped by the sky goddesses. Celestial beings offered him six sacred garments (Tib. *rmad gos*) to wear, which were made by a miraculous technique.¹⁰⁹ A mendicant's staff (Tib. *hos ru*), a cooling fan (Tib. *bsil yab/g.yab*) and an alms bowl (Tib. *pad phor*) also fell into his hands. All the enlightened beings gathered like clouds in the sky and showered flowers while singing auspicious prayers (*mDo 'dus*, pp. 111–13). After the initiation was complete, Shenrab handed his horse over to his subject and asked him to return it safely to his father. In the *rGya cher rol pa*, Śākyamuni also asks his assistant Chandaka to take his ornaments and his horse back to the palace. Then Shenrab followed the monastic discipline on the island of the right rules (Tib. *nam dag*

¹⁰⁷ There are six Bon deities known as the subduing deities (Tib. *ḍul ba'i gshen*) and they are believed to be the saviours of the six realms. According to the *Srid rgyud kha byang chen mo* (pp. 300-306), they are: 1) Kokhen Tsukphu (a.k.a. Yeshe Tsukphu) is the saviour of the god realm, 2) Chegyal Barti is the saviour of the demi-god realm, 3) Drachin Donpung is the saviour of the human realm, 4) Tisang Rangzhi is the saviour of the animal realms, 5) Mucho Demdrug is the saviour of the hungry-ghost realm, and 6) Sangwa Ngangring is the saviour of the hell realm. All of them are said to be emanations of Shenrab.

¹⁰⁸ See appendix 2 for the list of thirty-three *bonpos*. I use italics here to separate it from the Bonpos, the name used nowadays for followers of the Bon religion.

¹⁰⁹ The six sacred clothes are 1) sacred upper garment (Tib. *rmad gos*), 2) sacred hat (Tib. *rmad zhu*), 3) sacred lower garment (Tib. *rmad sham*), 4) the lotus shoes (Tib. *pad lham*), 5) a lotus cloth (Tib. *pad shun/shud*) that is not identifiable, and 6) the cushion (Tib. *gding ba*). For a different list of the six clothes, see *A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms* (Nagano 2008, p. 126). *Pad shun* is described separately on p. 140.

khri(m)s kyis(kyi) gling).¹¹⁰

There indeed is a noticeable difference between the way Shenrab and the Buddha became monks. For instance, Shenrab met a monk who ordained him, in contrast there is no account of the Buddha requesting ordination from any monk. Shenrab had a formal ordination ceremony, but the Buddha did not follow any formal procedure. According to the *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 223; Bays 1983, pp. 339–40), Śākyamuni transformed himself into an ascetic monk just by giving up all his princely clothing and ornaments, cutting his own hair and taking a saffron robe in an exchange with a hunter. However, there is a passage that describes Śākyamuni approaching Rudraka, the son of Rāma, to receive the instruction on meditation that he needed in order to discover the source of suffering and the path to liberation (Bays 1983, p. 374).

Shenrab followed the monastic discipline, which indicates that there was already a monastic discipline to be followed by a monk. This is different in the case of the Buddha, as there is no mention of a monastic discipline in the *rGya cher rol pa* that the Buddha was supposed to follow. In other words, when Shenrab took his ordination, there already was a concept of the discipline that a monk is supposed to follow.

Despite these differences, there also are some significant parallels in the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa* in the way these two figures became monks. Firstly, Shenrab cut his hair in front of a self-emerged stūpa and in the place where the Buddha cut off a lock of his hair there also appeared a stūpa (Skt. *caitya*; *rGya cher rol pa*, p. 223; Bays 1983, p. 339). Secondly, Brahmā and Śakra honoured Shenrab's hair by collecting it in their wash basins and similarly thirty three gods took the Buddha's hair to their heaven for worship (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 223, Bays 1983, p. 339). Thirdly, saffron garments were offered to both Shenrab and the

¹¹⁰ The traditional account that the Buddha became monk or left his family at the age of twenty-nine is commonly accepted by scholars (cf. Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, p. 18) and Hirakawa (1998, p. 24). Hirakawa also writes that according to different accounts the Buddha became monk at the age of nineteen or thirty-one, but unfortunately he does not specify the accounts.

Buddha by celestial beings. Fourthly, enlightened beings gathered and sung auspicious prayers on the day of Shenrab's ordination and similarly a hundred thousand joyous Devaputras sung after the Buddha's ordination. Finally, Śākyamuni sent his assistant Chandaka back to the palace with his ornaments and horse Kanthaka (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 222, Bays 1983, p. 338) and Shenrab also asked his subject to return his horse safely to his father.

Practising Austerity

According to the *mDo 'dus*, Shenrab carried out his ascetic practices after he became a monk, on an island called the right rules or 'pure discipline' (Tib. *rnam dag khrim(s) kyis(kyi) gling*). The influence of the story of the Buddha on the narrative of the *mDo 'dus* can be seen here too, although the details differ somewhat.

Similar to the six years of austere practices carried out by the Buddha near the Nairāñjanā River, Shenrab also abstained from eating food for three years without interruption. Each consecutive year of this austere practice was called the human, the monkey, and the bird fasting, respectively. The first year of fasting was completed near the Gyimshang river,¹¹¹ during which Shenrab took only one drop of water per day. The second year was practised in the land of the gods called 'the four great kings',¹¹² by eating only one piece of fruit per day. The third year was completed in the land of the thirty-three gods (Tib. *sum bcu rtsa gsum*, Skt. *trayastrimśa*),¹¹³ during which he ate and drank nothing, and remained in a state of total abstinence. In the above narrative, Shenrab's three years of austere practices

¹¹¹ Two names of rivers separately recorded in the *mDo 'dus*, p. 207, *gyim shang* and *na ra 'dza ra*, which flow in opposite directions (see also Martin 1999, p. 266). The name of the second river is apparently derived from the Nairāñjanā river, near which the Buddha completed his six year austerity practices.

¹¹² The four great kings, known in Tibetan as *rgyal chen rigs bzhi* (Skt. *caturmahārājakāyika*) are probably derived from Buddhist cosmology (see Mimaki 2000 for a detail study in this regard). They are considered to be gods of the desire realm (Skt. *Kāmadhātu*).

¹¹³ This is another level of gods in the desire realm (Skt. *Kāmadhātu*); see Mimaki 2000, p. 90.

are clearly described.¹¹⁴ The *rGya cher rol pa*, on the other hand, makes no mention of the three types of fasting nor of any visit to god realms. However, Siddhārtha's fasting also began with eating very little and ended with eating nothing. He started by eating only a single juniper berry every day, which was then reduced to a single grain of rice, then a sesame seed and finally he ate nothing at all. This ascetic practice lasted for six years (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 247; Bays 1983, pp. 386–88; cf. also Dewu Josay 1987, p. 28). Although based on the same motif presented in the *rGya cher rol pa*, Shenrab's austere practice is recorded differently in the *mDo 'dus*. Shenrab not only conducted his practice in the human world, but also went to the land of Caturmahārājakāyika and Trayastrimśa, which are considered to be heavenly realms.

Further similarities can be seen in the events that occurred upon completion of the three years of austere practices. Shenrab descended from the land of the gods and went to his home land of Olmo Ling. On his way, a daughter of Brahmin Sala¹¹⁵ offered him some milk soup (Tib. *o ma'i jam*, which is usually a rice soup cooked with milk) and the king of honeybees offered Shenrab a bowl of honey (*mDo 'dus*, p. 113).¹¹⁶ The narrative structure here also closely resembles the following passage from the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 263–64, Bays 1983, pp. 407–78).

¹¹⁴ In the short text on the twelve deeds of Shenrab entitled *mDzad pa bcu gnyis*, Shenrab is said to have practised austerity for the period of nine years, which is different from the account in the *mDo 'dus*.

¹¹⁵ Cf. the Brahmin Salwa who inspected the baby Shenrab and prophesied his future, whom I discussed in a previous section.

¹¹⁶ The relevant passage in Tibetan is “*bong(bung) ba'i rgyal pos sbrang rtsis pad phor drangs*”. In the *mDo 'dus* Karmay (f. 54b), the phrase *bong(bung) ba'i rgyal po* is written without an agentive particle *gis* after the noun *rgyal po*. On the contrary, there is an agentive particle in the other two versions, thus I have translated the passage as “the king of honey bees offered a bowl of honey.” Nevertheless, I prefer a genitive particle *gi* instead of agentive particle *gis*, and the phrase should read as: *bong(bung) ba'i rgyal po'i sbrang rtsis*, ‘the honey of (from) the king of bees’. The confusion between an agentive and a genitive particle is seen very often in Tibetan texts. With this alteration, the preferable translation of the passage will then be “[the daughter of Brahmin Sala] offered a bowl of honey from the king of bees” and this corresponds with the story in the *rGya cher rol pa*.

Sujātā, daughter of Nāndika the head villager, immediately took the milk of a thousand cows, drew from it seven times the purest cream, and poured this cream together with the freshest and newest rice into an earthen pot which she put on a new fireplace. Sujātā offered the Bodhisattva a golden bowl filled with milk and honey.

As the Buddha was offered a bowl of milk by Sujātā, daughter of Nāndika, Shenrab also received an offering of a bowl of milk from a Brahmin girl. The offerings were made when the Buddha and Shenrab were completely exhausted after their severe practices. There are similarities in the act of offering, the gender of the person making the offering, the time at which it was made and the substances that were offered. The daughter of the head villager offered a golden bowl filled with milk and honey to the Buddha. This is only one offering but it consists of the same two substances that were offered to Shenrab separately: a bowl of milk and a bowl of honey.

Māra's Magical Tricks

Both Shenrab and Śākyamuni are said to have been challenged by a māra who tried to distract them from their goal of achieving enlightenment.¹¹⁷ According to the *mDo 'dus* (ch. xii), Khyapa Lagring¹¹⁸ performed magical tricks to distract Shenrab from his meditation (*mDo 'dus*, pp. 91–107). As the first challenge, Māra Khyapa created magic mountains, rivers and fire to demonstrate his power when Shenrab was resting at the city called Langling. Shenrab through his spiritual

¹¹⁷ Māra Pāpīyān manifested in billions of different forms to disturb Śākyamuni's practice in the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 298ff; Bays 1983, p. 466)

¹¹⁸ Tib. *khyab pa lag ring* can be translated as 'pervasive long hand'. See *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 304) for a similar name, *lag rings*, 'long hand' (Skt. *dirghabāhu*). The name is found in the list of māras (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 303ff).

power transformed them into a lotus garden.¹¹⁹ In the *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 309; Bays 1983, p. 480), Māra threw mountains to injure or kill Śākyamuni, which he transformed into a canopy of flowers.

There are two more episodes involving Māra in the *mDo 'dus* that can be compared to events in the *rGya cher rol pa*. These involve beautiful maidens trying to seduce Shenrab and an army of demons trying to destroy Shenrab's practice.

i) Six Daughters of Māra

Māra Khyapa appeared in the form of six girls and performed thirty-six deceptive tricks (*mDo 'dus*, p. 118) to distract Shenrab from his meditation, but Shenrab transformed these young girls into six old ladies. Here I shall paraphrase the episode from the *mDo 'dus*.

When Shenrab renounced his kingdom, wealth, wives, sons, daughters and followers, and wandered alone as a monk, Khyapa did not leave him alone and sent his six daughters to distract him from his meditative concentration. They were beautifully ornamented with various garlands, showing their beautiful faces, performing a seductive song and dancing in front of the teacher. They said in one voice, "Oh the best of men! We are six daughters of the gods, who possess the qualities of being loveable, pretty like a blooming flower or a beautiful lotus, full of desire and enjoyable to be with. If you accept us as your life partners, then there will be no fault or regret. Therefore, abstain from this cloth of pure morality and put on beautiful clothes instead. Stop trying to achieve enlightenment and come and have fun with us." The teacher replied, "I do not desire the lotus-like face of the daughter of a god, because it is like a pot filled with vomitous impurity. It is

¹¹⁹ Some more stories regarding the tricks of Māra are recorded in the *mDo 'dus*. For instance, Māra miraculously appeared as Shenrab's father and gave him false advice, he appeared as Shenrab's mother and tried to persuade him to perform a non-virtuous activity, he appeared as the four great deities (Tib. *gsas chen ru bzhi*) when Shenrab was preaching, and he miraculously appeared as the son of a god and seduced Shenrab's wife, the *dpo* princess Thangmo (see the next chapter on this princess). However, I do not discuss these tricks here as I cannot find any parallel stories in the *rGya cher rol pa*.

like an old lady, who is eighty years old and still desperately desires love. Instead of indulging in that kind of love, I prefer stable meditation as an antidote. Desiring love is like an itch, such as one suffers when one has a skin infection like scabies. The more you scratch, the more you itch, thus to stop scratching is the only way to reduce that irritating feeling. It is also like thirst increases when one drinks salty water. I am not attached to those illusionary objects of desire. If you are able to perceive that illusionary object as your mental creation, then no desire will arise.” After saying that, the teacher snapped his fingers and the six daughters transformed into six ugly old ladies.

The six old ladies confessed and praised the teacher, “Glorious teacher! You have left [your worldly possessions to become a monk]. You have no attachment to your royal possessions or home. You consider the objects of desire to be like an illusion, and you remained like the lotus in [muddy] water. To deceive [your practice], we have said many embarrassing and shameful words, but we immediately received your punishment and we became old and ugly. [Therefore] we want to confess our crime and ask you, the great teacher, to forgive us. The heart of the great teacher is [vast] like the sky, and is without any stain like the lotus in muddy water. The signs and the marks of Shenrab Miwo are blazing.¹²⁰ We praise and prostrate to you, the one who possesses the great knowledge. If you can do us a favour, then kindly release us from this state of discomfort.” With this prayer they offered flowers. They then received initiation, became nuns and were admitted into the lady’s group at Khoma Neuchung. The son of Māra, Sharwa Kyadun also became a monk and was admitted into the men’s group (*mDo ’dus*, pp. 103–105).

This story might have been based on two separate accounts in the *rGya cher rol pa*. The first account appears in chapter twenty-one (The Defeat of Māra)

¹²⁰ It refers to the thirty-two major signs and the eighty minor marks. According to both Bon and Buddhist traditions, these signs and marks are special characteristics of ‘the enlightened one,’ and are an indication of completely perfected body. Cf. Martin 1991, pp. 93-100.

and the second in chapter twenty-four (Trapuṣa and Bhallika). According to chapter twenty-one, Māra Pāpīyān¹²¹ sent his daughters and they manifested the thirty-two kinds of feminine wiles (Bays 1983, pp. 483–84). Then in order to excite the desires of Śākyamuni they sang to him, including the following two verses (Bays 1983, pp. 485 & 487).

“We are well-born, well-made to give pleasure to gods and men, for this do we exist. Arise, enjoy your beautiful youth. Supreme wisdom is difficult to attain; dismiss it from your thoughts.”

They know the arts of music, singing, playing instruments and dancing. They are ruled by love, they live to give pleasure. If you disdain these great beauties you will truly be robbing yourself.

Śākyamuni responded to these activities of Māra’s daughters calmly, free from all passion, hatred, and confusion and with his mind perfectly firm (*rGya cher rol pa*, pp. 314–15; Bays 1983, pp. 487–88).

Having renounced emotionality, he had entered the gate of wisdom, and now with a voice as soft and pleasant as the song of the nightingale, a voice which surpassed Brahmā’s, beautiful and heart-touching, he answered the demon’s daughters: “Desires collect much suffering; desires indeed are the root of suffering. They corrupt the contemplations, the supernatural powers, and the austerities of those who do not take care. The wise speak well: there is no satisfaction to be found in the quality of desiring women. By means of knowledge, I will satisfy the ignorant. Like the man who has drunk salty water, the one who nourishes desires finds his thirst increasing endlessly; indulging in the passions, he is useful neither to himself nor to

¹²¹ This name appears in the *rGya cher rol pa*, as an epithet of Māra, in Tibetan *sdig can*, ‘the sinful one’, rather than as a proper name as given in the English translation (Bays 1983, p. 483).

others. But I have the wish to be useful to both myself and others.”

There are noticeable similarities between these passages and the above two paragraphs from the *mDo 'dus*. For instance, the daughters were sent by their father Māra, they showed their attractive bodies and sung seductive songs, in which they proposed their love. Furthermore, both Shenrab and the Buddha rejected these proposals and explained the negative effects of desire to the daughters using the same simile. Both of them said that desire is like salty water, which only increases thirst when one drinks it.

Following this, Shenrab snapped his fingers and transformed the six daughters into six ugly old women. Realizing their error, they confessed their sins to the teacher and offered him praise. Similar events are described in the following passages from the *rGya cher rol pa* (p. 361; Bays 1983, pp. 572-73).

They [Māra's daughters] took on the aspect of youth in its first flower, and blindly approached the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata paid them no heed except to bless them, at which they changed into decrepit old women.

Approaching the Tathāgata, the daughters of Māra implored him: “O Bhagavat, forgive us our fault! O Sugata, it was the fault of ignorant women deprived of light, the action of fools. We were confused and misinformed, for we thought the Bhagavat could be moved! Pray, forgive us!”

ii) Army of Māra Khyapa

The second manifestation that occurs in both stories is the manifestation of an army of demons. The following are detailed accounts from the two sources to demonstrate the comparison more closely. In the *mDo 'dus*, Shenrab is said to have gained victory over a billion of Māra's soldiers at the nine-stacked swastika

mountain (Tib. *g.yung drung dgu rtsegs ri*).¹²² This episode is described in detail in the *mDo 'dus* (ch xii, pp. 105–06).

According to the story, when Khyapa was not able to move Shenrab by any means, he decided to collect an army of demons by seeking help from his grandfather, Garab Wangchug. The latter pointed out that Shenrab could not be defeated by any means, and that the number of Māra's followers was decreasing. Khyapa further conveyed his feeling of anxiety that if Shenrab achieved enlightenment, then the world of Māra would be emptied; he therefore urged that Māra's troops attack Shenrab to disturb his meditation.

Garab Wangchug knew it would be difficult to gain victory over Shenrab, so he advised Khyapa to collect billions of demons for this attack. Khyapa collected a demon army, carrying arrows, spears, swords, cakras (cf. sudarśanacakra of Viṣṇu), maces (Tib. *sgyog chen*) and other weapons called gZu ba (unknown), and he attacked the Barpo Sogyé palace.¹²³ Despite the ferocious attacks of Khyapa, Shenrab remained concentrated in meditation. All arrows shot at him turned into flowers, the stones and the spears turned into precious jewels, the maces into wheels of light, other weapons into divine musical instruments and even Māra's evil mind transformed into a loving mind. Witnessing this defeat, the father of Khyapa Gyalag Thoje¹²⁴ surrendered himself to Shenrab, and became a monk. Yet, Khyapa did not give up his challenge (*mDo 'dus*, pp. 105–106).

A similar story can be found in the *rGya cher rol pa* (pp. 296–309; Bays

¹²² The nine-stacked swastika mountain is believed to be the axis of the land of Olmo Lungring, the birth-place of Shenrab Miwo.

¹²³ According to the *mDo 'dus*, the Barpo Sogyé palace is the home where Shenrab was born. But, according to this passage, it is also the place where Shenrab was meditating during Māra's attack. We know from the *mDo 'dus* that Shenrab left this palace to embrace a solitary life, and therefore his meditation in the palace is impossible. This indicates how the stories in the *mDo 'dus* often are inconsistent.

¹²⁴ According to the *mDo 'dus* (p. 92, 107), Gyalag Thoje (Tib. *rgya lag thod rje*) was the father of Khyapa and a son of Māra Garab Wangchug. Compare *rgya lag* with *lag brgya pa* 'having a hundred arms' (Skt. *śatabāhu*) in the *rGya cher rol pa*, p. 303.

1983, p. 461–480) as I shall summarize here. According to the Buddha legend, Māra Pāpīyān, after becoming frightened, assembled his vast army, attendants, captains and gatekeepers. They were addressed and ordered to strike the Bodhisattva who sits alone at the foot of the tree. Māra hurled weapons at the Bodhisattva and even threw mountains, like Mount Meru, but they were transformed into celestial palaces and a canopy of flowers. The list of weapons used is also recorded a little later in the book (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 310; Bays 1983, p. 480).

Māra aimed at the Bodhisattva all sorts of frightening weapons: swords, arrows, lances, javelins, stones, spindles, axes, rammers, sharp lightening bolts, clubs, discuses, hammers, uprooted trees, boulders, chains, and iron balls. But no sooner did he throw these weapons than they changed into garlands and canopies of flowers.

As Māra Pāpīyān became frightened and worried about the future of Māra's world, Khyapa also expressed his anxiety and concern about Māra's world being emptied by Shenrab. As all the weapons changed into garlands and canopies of flowers in the *rGya cher rol pa*, in the *mDo 'dus* they also transformed into flowers, jewels and other things.

THE LATER LIFE

Achievement, Witness and Rejection

According to the *mDo 'dus* (ch. xiii, pp. 118–19), Shenrab entirely purified *shes bya'i sgrib pa* 'the subtle obscuration'¹²⁵ of enlightenment through serious practice and meditation and achieved perfect enlightenment the following morning.

¹²⁵ Similar to the Buddhist concept of liberation, 'the subtle obscuration', according to Bon philosophy is the final mental obscuration that needs to be eliminated in order to achieve the enlightened body.

Shenrab's enlightenment was also challenged by Māra Khyapa. Khyapa sceptically challenged Shenrab and asked him to prove that he had achieved enlightenment and to present a witness. Hearing this, the goddess of the earth Tenma (Tib. *brten(brtan) ma*, Skt. *Sthāvarā*),¹²⁶ with half of her body rising out of the ground, declared that she was the noble witness and testified that Shenrab had achieved enlightenment.

This story is interestingly similar to that given in the following passages from the *rGya cher rol pa*, in which Māra Pāpīyān expresses scepticism about Śākyamuni Buddha having achieved enlightenment, and the goddess of the earth declares herself to be a witness to this achievement.

“Then Māra Pāpīyān addressed the Bodhisattva with this verse: “In a previous existence, I freely made an irreproachable offering; to this you are the witness; but you have no witness to offer evidence in your support, and so you will be conquered!” The Bodhisattva replied: “Pāpīyān, this earth is my witness”.

Then the goddess of the earth, named Sthāvarā (Tib. *brtan ma*), surrounded by a following of a billion earth goddesses, shook the whole earth. Not far from the Bodhisattva, she revealed the upper half of her body adorned with all its ornaments, and bowing with joined palms, spoke thus to the Bodhisattva: “Just so, Great Beings. It is indeed as you have declared! We appear to attest to it. Moreover, O Bhagavat, you yourself have become the supreme witness of both the human and god realms. In truth, you are the purest of all beings”. ”¹²⁷

The last events of Shenrab's life described in the *mDo 'dus* (ch. xxiv, pp. 220–22) include his last teaching, his illness, and a ritual for his funeral performed by his

¹²⁶ This name of the goddess is given in the *mDo 'dus* on p. 4.

¹²⁷ See *rGya cher rol pa* ch. xxi, pp. 310-12 and Bays 1983, pp. 481-82.

disciples. The most noteworthy passage here is the passage regarding a petition made by Khyapa to Shenrab, because of its similarity to a passage found in the *rGya cher rol pa*.

Māra Khyapa tried to convince Shenrab that he had done more than enough to benefit sentient beings and requested that Shenrab leave this world. Shenrab rejected this request, saying that he had only helped a small number of people, and thus he will not leave until he has benefited large numbers of people. Khyapa became embarrassed and ran away upon hearing this response from Shenrab. In the *mDo 'dus* Shenrab was eighty years old when Khyapa proposed that he 'pass beyond suffering' (enter *parinirvāṇa*). Shenrab not only rejected the proposal, but also postponed his death for two years, passing away at the age of eighty two. The reason given for this is that he wanted to pacify the devil of death and to turn Khyapa's negative mind into a positive one.

A similar passage is found in the *rGya cher rol pa*, in which Māra Pāpiyān approached the Buddha and requested that he enter into *parinirvāṇa* and 'pass beyond suffering' (*rGya cher rol pa*, p. 360; Bays 1983, pp. 571).

[Māra Pāpiyān proposed], "May the Bhagavat enter into Parinirvāṇa! May the Sugata enter into Parinirvāṇa! It is time now for the Bhagavat to pass into Parinirvāṇa!"

[The Buddha replied], "No, Pāpiyān. I will not enter into Parinirvāṇa so long as my monks are not firm, controlled, disciplined, clear-minded, confident, well-versed, and abiding in the Dharma and what is connected with it. No, Pāpiyān, I will not enter into Parinirvāṇa until the renown of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is solidly established in the world."

As seen here, the Buddha rejected Māra Pāpiyān's request and declared that he would not enter into *parinirvāṇa* until he had firmly established proper discipline for his monks, and his teachings regarding the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha were solidly established in this world. As is evident from this similarity, the author(s) of the *mDo 'dus* has utilized these narratives to compose the last events of Shenrab's life. The only important difference is that Shenrab lives eighty-two years; two years more than the Buddha.

THE EPISODE OF THE FIVE TIGERS

The comparisons made so far have mostly been between the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa*. However, there is a narrative from the *mDo 'dus*, the parallel of which is found not in the *rGya cher rol pa*, but in the first chapter of the *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* and in the second chapter of the *mDzangs blun*. It is not absolutely certain which one could have been the source of the Bon hagiographical narrative.

The chapter from the *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* (pp. 3–7) runs as follows. I basically paraphrase the translation made by J. S. Speyer (1895, pp. 2–6). It is thus that the Bodhisattva took his birth in a most eminent and mighty family of a Brahmin. He grew up and in a short time he became an expert in all the arts and sciences. Although he obtained prosperity, wealth, distinction and fame, he took no delight in such things. Once, when the Bodhisattva, accompanied by his disciple Ajita, was walking along the caverns of a mountain, he saw a young tigress that could barely move. Her strength being exhausted, her sunken eyes and her emaciated belly showed how hungry she was, and she was regarding her own offspring as food.

On seeing her, the Bodhisattva was shaken with compassion by the suffering of his fellow creature. He sent his disciple to look for some means of appeasing the tigress's hunger immediately. When the disciple went off in search of food, the Bodhisattva considered thus: "Why should I search after meat from the body of another, whilst the whole of my own body is available? Not only is the

getting of the meat in itself a matter of chance, but I should also lose the opportunity of doing my duty.” After making up his mind, delighted at the thought that he was to destroy even his own life for securing the benefit of others, he gave up his body and fed the tigress to prevent her from killing her young ones. The tigress rushed hastily upon the lifeless body of the Bodhisattva and began to devour it.

The pattern of the story in the second source, the *mDzangs blun*, is similar to that presented above, but the story line is different. According to the second chapter of the *mDzangs blun* (pp. 275–80), there was a king named Mahāyāna and he had three sons: the eldest Mahānada, the middle son Mahādeva and the youngest Mahāsattva. The youngest son was of a loving and compassionate nature.

Once the three princes went into the forest, they saw there a tigress that had given birth to cubs and was so exhausted with hunger that she was on the point of eating her young. The younger brother thought, “For long, I have been wandering in *saṃsāra*, wasting life and limb, and through attachment, anger and ignorance have brought forth no merit. Now, in order to bring about merit, I shall give my body to the tigress.”

As they were returning, the younger brother said to the other two to go ahead, so that he could do something private. He went to the tigress and lied down in front of her, but the tigress was unable to open her mouth to eat. The prince then took a sharp stick and pierced his body. When the blood flowed, the tigress licked it and then ate the prince’s body.

The passage in the *mDo ’dus* relevant to the episode of tigress can be found in the section describing the fifth miraculous act of Shenrab, called the miraculous act of instruction (Tib. *rjes su bstan pa*, Skt. *anuśāsana*). As quoted below, there are six lines in total describing two important acts. Only one of these lines describes the episode of the tigress. This single crucial line is missing in the *mDo ’dus* found by Karmay. I will translate all six lines of the two important acts to show their contextual relevance to the episode of tigress, but I will only comment on the one line describing the episode

of tigress.

“*rjes su bstan pa'i* ¹²⁸ *cho 'phrul ni/ 'phrog ma* ¹²⁹ *lnga brgya rtsa* ¹³⁰ *gcig la/*
chang bu byin te sha khrag ni/ ¹³¹ *mi za ba'i sdom pa phog/* ¹³² *stag smad* ¹³³
lnga la bla(= brla) sha byin/ phyis ni 'brog(= 'phrog) gnas lnga ru gyur//” ¹³⁴

“As [the fifth] miraculous act of instruction, the teacher gave a pinch of food (Tib. *chang bu*) to five hundred and one female Yakṣas and bound them to an oath of not consuming flesh and blood. [Shenrab] also gave his thigh-flesh to the five, a tigress and her four cubs. [The place] was later known as the five abodes of the Yakṣas.”

Thus, the second miraculous act is that he fed the five tigers with the flesh from his thigh. As I have shown above, this story of feeding the hungry tigress and her cubs is recorded in the *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* and the *mDzangs blun*, which shows that the story was well known in the Buddhist world. It is evident that the Bon episode in the *mDo 'dus* was appropriated from one such Buddhist source. The passage “*stag smeg*

¹²⁸ *mDo 'dus* Karmay: *pa*.

¹²⁹ *mDo 'dus*: *brog mo*; *mDo 'dus* Karmay: *'phrog ma*, and *mDo 'dus* Lhagyal: *phrag ma*. Among the three different words, the second one, *'phrog ma*, makes the best sense in this context, as it refers to a female *yakṣa*, probably a kind of malignant spirit *yakṣiṇī* (see Zhang 1996, p. 1797, cf. Monier-Williams 1899, p. 838, column 3). The other two variants *brog mo* and *phrag ma* do not make sense here, as *brog mo* means ‘female nomad’ and *phrag ma(pa)* may refer to ‘shoulder’.

¹³⁰ *mDo 'dus* Karmay: *rtsa ba*.

¹³¹ *mDo 'dus* reads *la* in place of *ni*.

¹³² *mDo 'dus* Karmay: *sdom pa'i phob*.

¹³³ Read *stag smeg* in the *mDo 'dus*. The construction of *stag smad* is comparable to *ma smad* (cf. *ma smad* ‘mother and child’ in Tsenlha 1997; or mother and daughter in Zhang 1996, p. 2047). Therefore, I prefer to translate *stag smad* as ‘tigress and her cubs’. I owe this explanation to Geshe Nyima Woser. The numeral *lnga* attached to the phrase *stag smad* indicates that there are five of them, thus it becomes ‘a tigress and her four cubs’.

¹³⁴ The last two lines are missing in the *mDo 'dus* Karmay. See *mDo 'dus* (p. 200), *mDo 'dus* Karmay (f. 89a) and *mDo 'dus* Lhagyal (f. 88a).

Inga la bla sha byin” ‘offered his thigh flesh to five tigers’ that appears in the *mDo ’dus* seems to be a summary of the whole event of the tigress feeding on the Buddha’s thigh flesh, as described in the Jātaka story. However, this passage is not found in the other accounts of Shenrab such as the *gZer mig* and the *gZi brjid*, which seems to suggest that this part of the story was not agreed upon by all Bonpo authors.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have compared those passages from the *mDo ’dus* that have similarities to the legend of the Buddha. It is evident that the life account of Shenrab to a great extent was influenced by the legendary life of the Buddha, since the relevant Buddhist sources studied here predate the *mDo ’dus* and hence have served as prototypes for the account of the life of Shenrab Miwo.

Motifs used in the Buddha legend, such as a white elephant entering the mother’s womb, the blossoming of flowers, the occurrence of other auspicious signs are adopted into the *mDo ’dus*. Remarkably, the birth from the mother’s right armpit after the gestation period of ten months is a faithful rendering of the legend of the Buddha’s birth. Even the events that occurred afterwards, such as the appearance of Brahmā and Śakra, a nāga bathing the baby, the instantaneous growth of lotus flowers where the baby laid his first steps and the prophecy that he would become great teacher simply are restatements of Siddhārtha’s birth story as recorded in the *rGya cher rol pa*.

Shenrab seeing the four incidents, causing him to leave for a solitary life, and even the details regarding the way he left his family, such as the horse he rode and the assistant and the four guardians lifting the hooves of the horse to silently clear the way, are also adopted from the Siddhārtha’s account. Furthermore, meeting a monk who inspired and ordained Shenrab, cutting his hair in front of a self-emerged stūpa, and celestial beings offering sacred clothes and singing auspicious prayers are also traceable to the Buddha legends. The influence of these legends can also be seen in the story of Shenrab carrying out austere practices for

three years, and a girl offering him a bowl of milk upon completion of these practices.

Like Siddhārtha defeated all Māra Pāpiyān's challenges, Shenrab defeated all the attacks and distractions caused by Māra Khyapa during his practice. Shenrab also transformed the magical emanations of mountains, rivers and fire by Khyapa into flowers and transformed Māra's six beautiful daughters, who came there to seduce him, into old ladies. As the earth goddess Sthāvarā attested to the achievement of the Buddha, the earth goddess Tenma (Skt. *Sthāvarā*) also came forth as a witness to Shenrab's enlightenment. Shenrab also rejected Khyapa's request to leave the world and expressed his wish to live longer.

The *mDo 'dus* also contains similarities to the story of a previous life of the Buddha, found in the Jātakas, specifically in the episode of the five tigers. Although this episode is presented in only one line in the *mDo 'dus*, it is evidently appropriated from the story of a Tigress feeding on the Bodhisattva's thigh flesh described in the Jātaka stories. However, this passage is not found in the other accounts of Shenrab, such as the *gZer mig* and the *gZi brjid*, nor is it found in one of the three versions of the *mDo 'dus*. This suggests that this story was not accepted by all Bonpo authors.

The many similarities between the life account of Shenrab presented in the *mDo 'dus* and the legend of the Buddha are certainly not coincidental. For centuries, Bonpos have considered the legend of the Buddha to be a true account of the life of Shenrab Miwo, and presumably have been largely unaware of this.

Although I have presented many similar passages from the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa*, I am not trying to defend Hoffmann's thesis that the life account of Shenrab Miwo, in this case in the *mDo 'dus*, is plagiarized (1961; see chapter one above and chapter five later). The early accounts of Shenrab (the *mDo 'dus* and *gZer mig*) were written in a period and context where our present concepts of authorship cannot necessarily be presupposed, therefore one should be very cautious labelling the accounts of Shenrab's life as plagiarized texts.

However, the similarities presented above clearly show that the *mDo 'dus* was influenced by legends of the Buddha as well as by a Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective. Both the *mDo 'dus* and the *rGya cher rol pa* should be considered myths or legends, and fine pieces of literature with a great deal of wisdom to impart.

