

# TIBETAN MANDALAS, ARTS AND TRADITIONS

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**A DEPICTION OF THE  
TIBETAN MIND: A RARE  
PORTRAIT OF THE ANCIENT  
BON MASTER TAPIHRITSA**

*John Vincent Bellezza*

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Hidden away in western Tibet is an ancient rock painting of great cultural significance. This extremely unusual portrait depicts Tapihritsa (*Ta pi hri tsa*), the propagator of a tradition of personal cultivation that is central to the Bon religion. Perhaps the oldest known portrait of this hallowed figure still in existence, it embellishes the ruins of a hermitage nestled at the base of a towering rock escarpment. This long-abandoned place of

retreat is known either as the Red-coloured Temple (*Lha khang dmar chag*) or Deer Face Temple (*Sha ba gdong lha khang*).

A partial view of the ancient Bon hermitage called either the Red-coloured Temple or Deer Face Temple, as the case may be. The portrait of the religious master Tapihritsa is out of view on the right side of the photograph. Note the red and white striped



façade in the foreground and the profuse assortment of Bon symbols and inscriptions scrawled on the shelter in the background.

Overlooking the limpid, turquoise waters of Darok Yumtso (*Da rog g.yu mtsho*), several brightly painted rock shelters of the Red-coloured Temple once housed individuals immersed in meditative practices believed to offer deep insight into the formation and character of the universe. According to the teachings of Tapihritsa and other great sages of his lineage, reality at its most fundamental level is comprised of the mind in its primal or pure luminous state. This understanding of the nature of existence was not restricted to great saints living in solitude. In fact, it had a profound influence on how Tibetans see the world and their place in it.

Until the 12th or 13th century, the Red-coloured Temple and other sacred sites at Lake Darok belonged to Bon, Tibet's indigenous religion. Traces of archaic temples and residences dot the north shore and two islands in the lake. Monuments associated with the Bon religion of more recent centuries are lacking at Lake Darok. This suggests that, by the 13th century, the region had been

converted to Buddhism in the relentless spread of this religion across much of Tibet. The Red-coloured Temple has been abandoned ever since, a forlorn reminder of past religious glories. For the most part, Buddhist monks and meditators avoid ancient Bon sites at Lake Darok, perceiving them as haunted with the memories and spirits of the older religion.

The Red-coloured Temple and surrounding rock formations of many hues were ideal for contemplative pursuits. The desirability of the site was further enhanced by holy Lake Darok and its potable waters. According to the Bon sacred geographic tradition, Lake Darok is home to a beneficent goddess named Dayarse Mengodema (*Da yar se sman go de ma*). Originally a lake protectress of Zhang Zhung, she is the protector of Bon devotees and monks, as well as the countryside, domestic and wild animals, and subterranean treasures.

The rock painting of the Bon sage Tapihritsa, one of the oldest known artistic portrayals of this personality in Tibet. It is written that he was born into a shepherd's family in the kingdom of Zhang Zhung (his name is in the Zhang Zhung language).



The image of Tapihritsa at the Red-coloured Temple was identified as such by Bon's most senior scholar, the Ven. Lopon Tenzin Namdak. Lopon Tenzin Namdak was so kind as to re-examine photographs of the fresco in 2016, providing further comments. I first documented this rock painting in November 1997, on my first expedition to Lake Darok. Travelling on foot, I was directed to the lake's north side by local shepherds (*'brog pa*), who explained that there were many ancient Bon ruins there.

Situated on the eastern edge of the Red-coloured Temple, the image of Tapihritsa and accompanying mantras appear to have had a dedicatory function, identifying and legitimizing the religious lineage of his successors. The style of painting belongs unmistakably to the tradition of western Tibet, but it is the only fresco known in the entire region identifiable as Bon. The painting of Tapihritsa possesses major iconographical traits still associated with him in that religion; however, it also contains curious features not seen in the extant artistic tradition.

Painted in red and orange ochre and a calcareous white pigment, Tapihritsa's likeness is bold and elementary in form, ornamenting a huge expanse of otherwise unadorned rock. In making this depiction, a thick layer of clay and mud plaster was initially applied to the escarpment and carefully smoothed. Then, a thin veneer of fine clay was added over the base and polished. With the backing in place, the actual painting of the image could commence.

The outline or aureole around the figure of Tapihritsa consists of white and red lines drawn in parallel. His body was painted in white, with fine anatomical details like the

eyes and hands outlined in a greyish pigment that seems to underlie the entire painting. Unfortunately, the fresco has been heavily damaged, precluding a detailed iconographic analysis of its aesthetic elements. In Bon texts, Tapihritsa is described as a translucent white figure devoid of clothing. While he is white-coloured in the Lake Darok rock painting, it is not clear that he is naked. Rather, he may possibly be cast as a bodhisattva, wearing garments and ornaments. In the fresco, as well as in more conventional Bon renditions, Tapihritsa's hands meet on his lap in a gesture of meditative equipoise.

The trilobate aureole, the stepped throne upon which the meditating figure sits, the prominent folded legs, and the palette suggest that it was painted circa 1050–1300. That was a period in which Buddhist fresco painting flourished in western Tibet, spreading to many temples, both parietal and freestanding.

Most of the Buddhist sites contemporaneous with the Red-coloured Temple were located in the extreme western Tibet and in Spiti and Ladakh, far from Lake Darok. From historical accounts, such as the *Royal*

*Annals of Western Tibet* (*Mnga' ris rgyal rabs*) and the edicts of Lha Lama Yesheö (Lha bla ma ye shes 'od, 947–1024), we know that Buddhist elites moved to suppress Bon beliefs and customs beginning in the late 10th century. Far removed from the major population centres of the lower elevation western valleys, the Red-coloured Temple evidently persisted as a Bon place of worship because of its remoteness. Set on the high plateau or Changthang (*Byang thang*), it seems that Lake Darok largely escaped Buddhist missionary activities in the early second millennium.

Tapihritsa is thought to have lived in the 7th to 8th centuries, the 24th and final master of a prehistoric line known as the Oral Tradition of Zhangzhung (*Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*). This succession of saints transmitted a powerful system of mind training known as Dzogchen (*Rdzogs chen*). Dzogchen constitutes the highest teachings of Bon (also found in the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism), a tradition that both encapsulates and supersedes all other doctrines of the faith. Tapihritsa is believed to have realized the natural state of the mind, the fabric of consciousness in which all things are



wrapped. Simply put, this is a non-conceptual, non-dualistic state of being.

A child prodigy, Tapihritsa received the Dzogchen teachings from his father and other great masters. As part of his training, he spent nine years alone in the wilds of the Changthang, leading to both mundane and extraordinary attainments. He is said to have assumed the ultimate form of being or *bonku* (*bon sku*) in his lifetime and to have left the world in a rainbow body (*'ja' lus*), leaving no mortal traces behind.

The main student of Tapihritsa was Nangsher Lödpö (*Snang bzher lod po*), a highly adept Dzogchen master in his own right. In order to instruct this formidable figure, Tapihritsa appeared as a boy, humbling Nangsher Lödpö with his superior knowledge of the supreme path. According to Bon historical texts, Nangsher Lödpö went on to become the chief priest of the Tibetan emperor Trisong Deutsen (*Khri srong lde'u btsan*). This is supposed to have occurred after punishing King Trisong Deutsen for orchestrating the assassination of Likmi-gya (*Lig mi rgya*), the king of Zhangzhung. The exploits and teachings of Tapihritsa, Nangsher Lödpö and other great Dzogchen

adepts are told in Bon scriptures such as the 14th century biographical text *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud bla ma'i rnam thar*, composed by Patön Tengyal Sangpo (*Spa ston bstan rgyal bzang po*). While very few Tibetans are accomplished Dzogchen practitioners, the conviction that reality is all-inclusive, transcending thought processes, permeates the faith of ordinary Tibetans still today.



The stucco panel with bichrome painting of Tapihritsa. Three Bon mantras are written below it in red ochre.

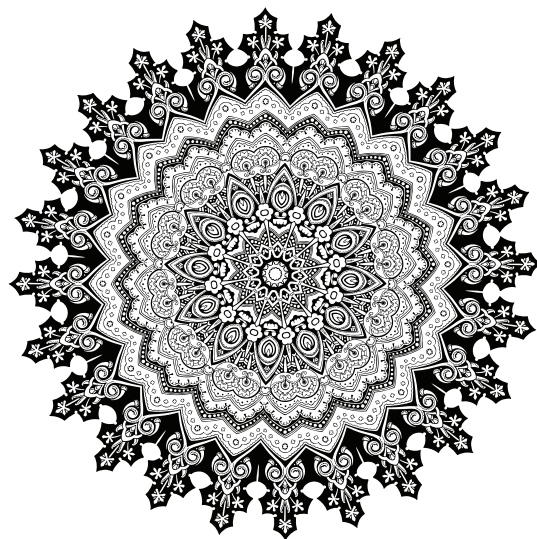
In addition to the painting of Tapihritsa, three Bon mantras were written in red ochre on the same stucco panel. The top line begins with the three seed syllables (*sa bon*) for meditative practice rendered in an

obsolete style: A *Om hum*. The highly fragmentary lettering to the left of this mantra is no longer legible. In this spot, one might expect to find the eight-syllable *matri* mantra (*Om' ma tri mu ye sa le 'du*). This sacred ejaculation is held to purify the male and female principles and six realms of the universe and is written on the ruins of the Red-coloured Temple. To the right of the mantras on the first line is a swastika, one or more circles, three flaming jewels (*nor bu me 'bar*), and perhaps other sacred motifs now obscured. While these religious pictographs are of significant age, they seem to have been added to the panel after the creation of the Tapihritsa fresco and mantras. There is also much holy graffiti on the nearby rock shelters.

The second and third lines of the panel consist of a mantra attributed to the founder of Bon, Shenrab Miwo (*Gshen rab mi bo*), which is dedicated to the primordial Buddha Kuntusangpo (*Kun tu bzang po*). It reads: "A' A dkar sa le 'od A yang Om' 'du. A dkar A rmad du tri su nag po zhi mal".

Although the painting and epigraphy of the Red-coloured Temple are as much as a thousand years old, they are instantly

recognizable in the Bon religious milieu of today. This unique monument and art help corroborate historical accounts concerning the primary role of the Changthang in the dissemination of Bon Dzogchen practices. The fresco of Tapihritsa, made some three to five hundred years after he is supposed to have disappeared into the sky, goes some distance in establishing the historicity of this noble personage. At the very least it shows that he was indeed known to Bon practitioners in western Tibet prior to the codification of texts for the Oral Tradition of Zhangzhung.



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