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ON SHOW

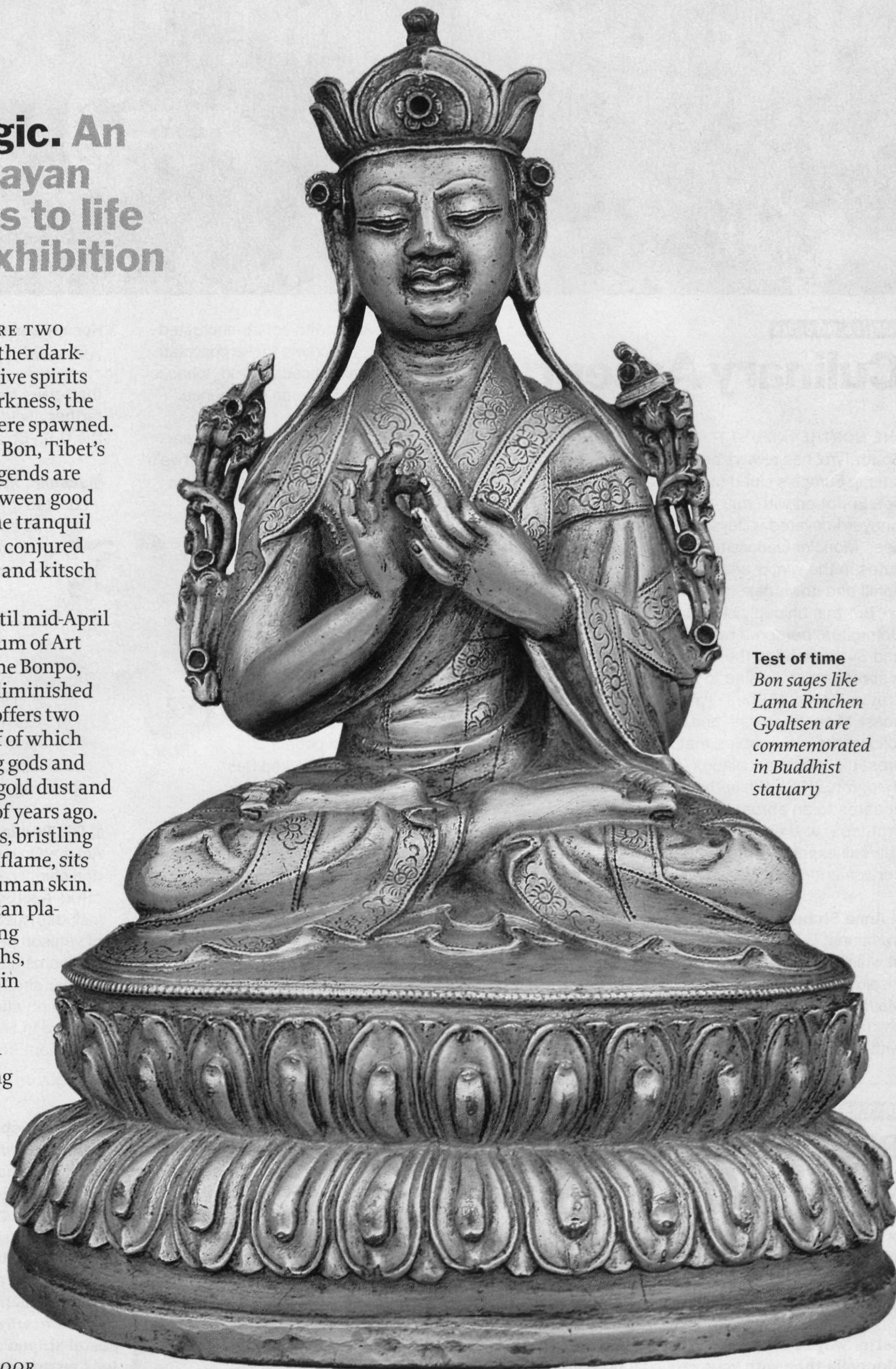
## Mountain Magic. An ancient Himalayan religion comes to life in a striking exhibition

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WERE TWO eggs—one hatched light, the other darkness. From light soared protective spirits to guard the universe; from darkness, the denizens of demonic realms were spawned. So begin the creation myths of Bon, Tibet's oldest spiritual tradition. Its legends are steeped in celestial combat between good and evil—a far remove from the tranquil monasteries and benign lamas conjured up by New Age self-help books and kitsch Hollywood movies.

An exhibition on display until mid-April at New York City's Rubin Museum of Art aims to increase awareness of the Bonpo, the practitioners of this much diminished tradition. *Bon: The Magic Word* offers two floors of Bonpo artifacts—chief of which are the vivid canvases depicting gods and monsters, still glistening from gold dust and animal glue applied hundreds of years ago. On one, a black-skinned goddess, bristling with weapons and wreathed in flame, sits poised atop a saddle of flayed human skin.

Buddhism came to the Tibetan plateau in the 8th century, acquiring territory rich with warrior myths, such as those of Tsemang Ridgzin and his guardian dragons, and Tonpa Shenrab, the mysterious king whose quest for enlightenment would lead to the founding of Bon. Over time, Bon became subsumed into Buddhism and its scattered devotees now number less than 100,000. But the Bonpo's legacy, if not their cosmology, lingers on in the prayer flags and stupas that are the best-known symbols of Tibetan spiritualism today. For more information, see [www.rmanyc.org](http://www.rmanyc.org).

—BY ISHAAN THAROOR



**Test of time**  
Bon sages like  
Lama Rinchen  
Gyaltsen are  
commemorated  
in Buddhist  
statuary