DOUBLE-EDGED WISDOM SWORD
The Dorje Shugden Controversy

Unclear Reasoning in a Stained Tradition

Maik Pehrsson
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The Dorje Shugden Controversy

The Dorje Shugden affair that emerged in the 1970s has brought division and strife to the Tibetan Buddhist community; sadly, murder too. This dispute over an invisible god illustrates the archaic nature of Tibetan Buddhism and is reminiscent of medieval Christianity, when religion, myth, politics, superstition and ethics were entwined under the banner of ‘faith.’

-Schettini.com

Foreword

Since 1996, several hundred – if not thousands – of articles have appeared in online forums, blogs, websites and webzines, as well as newspapers, magazines and books, about the Dorje Shugden controversy, a.k.a. the Shugden or Shuk-ten Affair, the Dolgyal Problem, the Dolgyal Shugden Issue, the Shugden Demon war, the Dolgyal-Shuk-ten-Spirit-Controversy-Problem-Issue, and so on.

...And here is another one! So why have I decided to write this article and who am I to speak about this issue?

In 2007 I began work on a collection of articles about comparative philosophy with regard to Buddhist and Vedic notions on ultimate reality. This would finally result in my first book, Summa DharmaLogica – A Lineage in Spirit-Logic. During that time, I read lots and lots of books, articles and texts, attended many teachings from a variety of schools and got in touch with many different Buddhist practitioners. Although I was not searching for it, the ‘Shugden issue’ was a theme that kept popping up and wouldn’t go away. No matter what I read about, what I searched for or which links I followed, it was there. Although most Buddhists I was in contact with knew little if anything about it, those who did were passionately involved and had strong opinions about it.

I myself had been practising under the guidance of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT-IKBU) for a long time, yet never exclusively and always from a ‘distance’, in a sense; I would regularly study the teachings of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa, Chögyam Trungpa or Karl Brunnhöltzl. Yet in 2008 whilst in a relationship with a Kadampini, I decided to join a couple of protests that were being held against what people called ‘the Dalai Lama’s ban on the Dorje Shugden practice’.

The subject quickly left me disinterested but would not go away. Finally, at the end of 2014 I came to the conclusion that out of the endless talk on the subject, hardly any objective article seemed to exist. Furthermore, those that appeared to be objective lacked any kind of first hand ‘subjective’ experience, rendering them more or less meaningless. Whenever I encountered the subject, I was absolutely astonished by how much time and effort was being dedicated to what I felt was a childish, superficial and futile exercise in name-calling. I thought, I have good, close friends on both sides of this debate, I have amassed a fair deal of information relating to it, I have had experience of it and I truly have...
no attachment or affiliation to any particular ‘camp’, nor to any Lamas on either side; I will write a summary and analysis of the whole thing.

Here is that summary. All the facts presented are, to the best of my knowledge, accurate. I have attempted to present it as impartially as possible while allowing room for my personal experiences and observations as well. While studying this subject, I was struck by the huge amount of pseudonyms, cryptic names and hidden identities who had assumed the authority to tell the world ‘how things really are’. I will not do that here and will remain direct, transparent and open.

Introduction

Dorje Shugden is a deity found within Tibetan Buddhism and has been the focus of worship as a dharmapala or dharma protector within the Gelug and Sakya schools of Tibetan Buddhism since the seventeenth century. As such, this practice is unrelated to other, non-Tibetan Buddhist traditions such as Ch’an, Zen or Theravada, none of which practice any form of rituals or prayers around dharma protector deities.

The Dorje Shugden or “Dolgyal” issue has been a fairly fringe affair within the somewhat superstitious world of Tibetan Buddhism. Yet interestingly, it is an issue that has been most fiercely felt within the Gelugpa mainstream. Those who accept and/or promote the practice refer to it as the practice of the dharma-protector Dorje Shugden, who is an emanation of the wisdom Buddha Manjushri. The function of the practice is protection: first and foremost, it protects the practitioner from their own delusions, it protects their wisdom from degeneration and it protects them from the dangers of sickness, misfortune and the natural elements. In addition, Dorje Shugden protects the doctrine of Je Tsongkhapa and is thus a protector of the ‘Gedān’ or Gelugpa tradition. This includes protecting the tradition from deteriorating by outside influence. For those who believe in the practice and see Dorje Shugden as an enlightened being, he can function as a protector to anyone, from any school, tradition or religion. Furthermore, the practice originally began within the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism where it is practiced without much controversy to this day.

Scholastically the practice is associated with the ‘Prasangika’ school of Madhyamaka, the view on emptiness as expounded by Nagarjuna; specifically within the Gelugpa tradition, which holds the philosophical school of the Prasangika-Madhyamika to be supreme.

Those who do not accept the practice as a genuine Buddhist tradition refer to Shugden as ‘Dolgyal’, a being they say is a malevolent spirit posing as a Buddhist deity. Practicing the rituals associated with this deity is a form of spirit-worship and thus, a deterioration of Buddhism. Some practitioners, including HH the XIV Dalai Lama himself, have even stated that he is specifically a Chinese spirit, whose motive is to destroy the pure lineage of Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419, founder of the Gelugpa tradition) by corrupting it into a form of spirit-worship. The practice functions to turn all the four schools of Buddhism against each other and promotes extreme sectarianism. At its worst, practicing this sadhana (a ritual prayer) is believed to shorten the life of HH the Dalai Lama. For these reasons, practicing the rituals of Shugden are said to damage the Tibetan cause. It is further argued, that suspicion
and doubt has surrounded this practice from the beginning and that scriptural evidence classifies Dorje Shugden not as a ‘supramundane dharmapala’ but as a mundane, worldly protector.¹

The subject has lately become far more prominent, not only due to an increasing number of western organisations getting involved, but also due to the profound effect it has had on Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhists living in exile. Today, this subject alone has split the Gelugpas in two: the ‘Dalai Lama Camp’ who discourage the practice and have, in one way or another, banned it from being practiced in public; and the ‘Shugden Camp’, who continue to practice, ignoring the advice of the Dalai Lama, in some cases resorting to extensive and serious allegations towards him. The Shugden camp is a substantial group, constituting a good 35 -40% of Gelug Buddhists today, if not remaining a part of the practice of the majority of Gelugpas, albeit in secret. Exact figures are not known. They are however not a mere ‘splinter group’, as some of their opponents claim.

As this is by far the biggest dispute in the world of Tibetan Buddhism as well as Western Buddhism and concerns two of the largest western organisations – the NKT-IKBU (New Kadampa Tradition, International Buddhist Union) and the FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition) – as well as HH the Dalai Lama, it warrants an investigation. It is also a fundamental part of ‘Western Buddhism’ as it illustrates how westerners deal with issues that are foreign to them. In this case, it is a religious dispute within the Gelug and Sakya orders of Tibetan Buddhism that goes back at least five hundred years and is heavily cloaked in Tibetan mythology, superstition, politics, struggle for power and identity. The dispute has however moved into the hands of primarily white, middle class Anglo-American Buddhists, most of whom have very little understanding of Tibetan culture, politics and so forth, as recent polls show: The vast majority of the people involved in this dispute have not practiced Buddhism for more than ten years, have never studied ‘Tibetology’ or Tibetan Buddhism in general, know little if anything about the recent history of Tibet and, funnily enough, even less about the deity this dispute is centred around. Nonetheless, as some have fairly noted, this should not prevent people from speaking out against crimes against humanity, if indeed these are being committed.

Discussing this subject, let alone debating it, has proven to be incredibly difficult without offending one side or the other. I have experience of this, having addressed both sides on numerous occasions, which always led to incredible anger, hostility or me being barred from various blogs. Adding to this difficulty is the phenomenon of public refusal to in any way criticise or question HH the Dalai Lama. A similar phenomenon had surrounded Nelson Mandela – it was very difficult to find media coverage that was critical or negative about him. We will touch upon the reasons for this refusal in the study below. Similarly, it seems equally taboo for the Shugdenpas to question the various stories, allegations and

¹ A supramundane protector, in layman’s language, implies a being that is fully enlightened, i.e. a Buddha. A dharmapala is a ‘dharma protector deity’. Mere ‘worldly protectors’ are sometimes employed temporarily to protect certain groups or practices, due to the people of such groups having a strong karmic connection to such a being.
accusations they are being offered by their teachers or leaders. And finally, the ‘Dolgyal issue’ itself has become so deeply mixed with other non-Shugden issues that it’s almost impossible to isolate this topic from others. Both sides of the debate have dragged other subjects into it, accusing their opponents of myriad things that have nothing to do with the Shugden issue at all. This is such a typical ploy: we see it often in advertising and politics. One side tries to win a certain debate or a certain market, but in order to do so they need to completely destroy and defame their competition. What we see happening between the Pro Shugden camp and the Anti Shugden camp fits this profile perfectly. I will try to stick to the main issue below, but we will touch upon a couple of the other topics that have become intermingled with the main one.

The Origin of Dorje Shugden

Since the rise of this problem, proponents of the Dorje Shugden ban and supporters of the Dalai Lama have tried to prove that the problem of Dorje Shugden is as old as the practice itself and that it has always been associated with strong sectarianism and suppression of non-Gelugpa schools. In order to understand this and check if it’s true, we need to investigate the history, culminating in the life and teachings of one of the most influential Gelug teachers, Je Phabhangka Rinpoche.

By his adherents, Dorje Shugden is regarded as an emanation of Manjushri, the wisdom Buddha, and as part-and-parcel of Je Tsongkhapa (1357 – 1419), the founder of the Gelugpa order. Critics of this viewpoint point out that Dorje Shugden did not exist at the time of Je Tsongkhapa, who, like other Buddhists from a variety of traditions, prayed to the dharmapala ‘Nechung’, a spirit-being originally known as ‘Pehar’ who was oath bound to protect the Budhadharma in Tibet by Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Wrathful protectors such as Mahakala or Yamantaka had also been around for some time at this point.

According to the mythology, a Buddhist monk named Duldzin Dragpa Gyeltsen, one of Tsongkhapa’s closest disciples, saw a dove appear after one of his master’s teachings. The dove transformed into a young boy dressed in white, who was an emanation of Nechung. He explained that he was bound by oath to protect the Buddha-dharma in general and the lineage of Padmasambhava specifically\(^2\), preventing him from protecting the Latter-day Kadampa lineage of Tsongkhapa\(^3\). He said a special protector would be necessary and asked Duldzin Gyeltse directly if he would promise to take this role, protecting Tsongkhapa’s dharma from here on out. Gyeltse accepted. Critics of Shugden claim that this story was added to the Shugden biography much later on (which of course is true about many stories attributed to Buddhist masters, including the Buddha himself).

It is believed that Gyeltse incarnated as Panchen Sonam Drakpa, a famous abbot and teacher at several monasteries, whose texts are used to this day for Geshe study programmes. The real start of the Shugden story however, begins in his incarnation as Tulku  

\(^2\) This lineage became known as the Nyingma and formed part of the Kadampa, Kagyü, Sakya and Gelug schools later on.  

\(^3\) The original Kadampa lineage began with Atisha (982 -1054 AD) just before the founding of the Kagyü school. After Tsongkhapa’s ‘reformation’ and strong emphasis of Atisha’s teachings, his followers became known as the new Kadampas, as well as Gelugpas.
Drakpa Gyeltsen, one of the candidates for the title of 5th Dalai Lama (1642-1682). Although Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso was chosen, Gyeltsen was recognised as the emanation of Sonam Drakpa, and hence also Duldzin Drakpa Gyeltsen, as his current name suggested (Tulku being the title for a reincarnated Lama). He became extremely popular and influential, surpassing in fame even the Fifth Dalai Lama himself. It is said that during one of his teachings, the protector Nechung spoke to him through an oracle. He reminded him of the promise he had made three lifetimes ago and told him to meditate on it. Accordingly, Gyeltsen remembered his promise but questioned how effective he would be as a ‘dharmapala’, as he was the least wrathful person imaginable.

As westerners we may find such stories silly or superstitious, but we should bear in mind that they constitute a major artery of Buddhism and that, indeed, much of India and the Far East are filled with similar stories, sometimes even with evidence to back them up.

What happened next is fairly well documented: due to Gyeltsen’s fame and influence, he became known as superior to the 5th Dalai Lama. Desi Sonam Chopel, the Fifth Dalai Lama’s regent, along with a few attendants, supposedly attacked and killed Gyeltsen in a planned assassination. Legend has it that Gyeltsen knew what was coming, pretended to be weakened by sickness and waited for his assailants to strike. They tried poisoning him and stabbing him but these methods failed. They finally choked him to death with a khatag (Tibetan ritual cloth). Some say the Fifth Dalai Lama knew of the plot while most people claim he didn’t: being a friend and fellow student of Gyeltsen, he was deeply saddened and even more so when he found out the truth. He wrote a letter of shame and apology in honour of Gyeltsen which was read out at the funeral pyre. Some strange omens, signs and events took place, which led all the people present to believe that Gyeltsen was an enlightened being and continued to live in a different form.

Due to this, several bones and ornaments from Tulku Drakpa Gyeltsen’s body were collected and placed in eight different stupas in the surrounding area. However, locals complained of strange voices and eerie sounds emanating from these stupas, so eventually the relics were removed from them. Apparently it was done according to the instructions of the Nechung oracle, who also told the regent Desi to place the items in a box and throw it into the Kyichu River nearby. It eventually came to rest in lower Lhoka Dol, which is known today as the White Spring of Dol (‘Dolgyal’ = the spirit from Dol).

What follows at this stage of the story seems rather strange: the disembodied spirit of Gyeltsen flies around from place to place, eventually making his way to the town of Tashi Lhumpo, in hopes of meeting his previous guru, but is not able to enter due to other guardians and protectors in that area. He then travels to Sakya. This is very significant, because it connects the practice to the Sakya school (Later on, one of the incarnations of Dorje Shugden was believed to have been the famous Sakya Pandita).

When the spirit arrived at Sakya, the Sakya Dagchen Dorjechang Sonam Rinchen recognised and enthroned him as a Dharma Protector. Therefore, the practice is originally a Sakya one and was practiced in the Sakya school up until modern times, without much debate or controversy.
The Gelugpas however continued to experience a lot of problems and it is at this stage that the true ‘Dorje Shugden Controversy’ begins: As the tale goes, the Fifth Dalai Lama was experiencing many problems. His offerings and tormas would constantly be destroyed or fly off his shrine; when he gave teachings or empowerments, strong gusts of wind or other obstacles would take place. Understandably, he felt like him and his monastery were being haunted by an angry spirit and he realised that this must be the ghost of Gyeltsen. So he set out to destroy the spirit, or at least to get rid of it. This he did with the aid of many tantric rituals, mantras, prayers, pujas etc, enlisting the help of some of the most renowned tantric masters, including Gadong Ngarampa of the Nyingma sect.

Stories vary somewhat in details, but it is generally said that, whenever the Nyingma priests attempted to capture the spirit in a ritual vase or box, an image of the primordial dharmapala Yamantaka would appear. This quickly led many Nyingmapas and Gelugpas to believe that the ‘angry spirit’ may in fact be an emanation of Yamantaka himself. Yamantaka, unlike various other so-called ‘mundane’ dharma protectors like Nechung, is regarded as an emanation of Manjushri, a wrathful aspect of the wisdom of a Buddha. It is based upon this event that Dorje Shugden is also regarded as non-different from Manjushri, which is why his followers believe him to be a supra-mundane dharmapala, i.e. a fully enlightened Buddha. During a ceremony, the Nechung oracle proclaimed eventually that this was indeed the spirit of Gyeltsen/ Ngawang Lobsang, whom he addressed as ‘Dorje Shugdän Tsel’, meaning Endowed with Vajra Power. The Fifth Dalai Lama rejoiced, as did all the disciples and the ‘angry spirit’ was enshrined as an official protector of the dharma. A temple called Trode Khangsar was built in honour of Shugden, as ordered by the Fifth Dalai Lama, and remains standing to this day. The Dalai Lama built a statue of the deity himself which he offered to the Phelgyeling Monastery in Kathmandu – this statue exists in that very monastery to this day.

Paradoxically, the Fifth Dalai Lama is recorded to have said: “The so-called Drakpa Gyaltser pretends to be a sublime being. But since this interfering spirit and creature of distorted prayers is harming everything, both dharma and sentient beings, Do not support, protect or give him shelter, but grind him to dust.” (Source: ‘Letting Daylight into Magic, Stephen Batchelor).

Eventually, the oracle, while in trance with Dorje Shugden, was enshrined and inaugurated by the Fifth Dalai Lama in a grand ceremony, granting him the yellow pandits hat, thereby declaring him one of the official protectors of the Gedän tradition, which he was until 1996. Still, many believe that he was enshrined out of fear and that the doubts the Fifth Dalai Lama had early on were never actually dispelled. Considering the quote above, this may be true.

Naturally several details in this story make it understandable that many Tibetan Buddhists may still fear the ‘angry spirit’ that later became known as Dorje Shugden. But what we also need to remember is that this story is very similar to many other tales about deities, dharmapalas and Mahasiddhas, stories that often involve terrifying spirits, hauntings, evil spells and death. It is therefore certainly not an exception.

4 Though primarily a Gelug and Sakya deity, there are a handful of Nyingma temples with images of Dorje Shugden, such as the Nyingma Temple in Sarnath, outside of Varanasi, India.
Those against the practice explain that the Fifth Dalai Lama built the statue and temple out of fear: he knew this was a powerful, evil spirit. It is believed that the ritual performed to capture Gyeltsen’s spirit was a special fire puja, in which demonic or wrathful spirits are bound by the force of mantras, rituals and highly realised Lamas. They are either oath-bound and forced to become worldly protectors of the dharma (as was the case when Padmasambhava arrived in Tibet and turned wrathful demons into guardians and protectors of the dharma), or they are killed. This ‘killing’ is an act of virtue, for the evil spirit is not only set free, it is sent directly to a Pure Land. A third option is also possible: the attendants of the ritual are not able to do either, because the spirit is too strong. In such cases, the spirit is accepted as a Buddha, for a Buddha cannot be oath-bound nor destroyed.

A Tibetan Creation?

Many scholars on Buddhism who come from a non-Tibetan angle point out that this protector myth is typical of Tibetan Buddhism and indicates a very ancient problem within Tibetan Buddhism in general. Indeed, since its arrival in Tibet in approximately the late seventh century, it has been highly ritualistic and even magical, introducing a vast array of gadgets and customs, as well as inclusion of spirits, guardians and gods in their sadhanas. None of this, it is said, existed in the first few centuries after the historical Buddha and none of these characteristics are present in his original teachings.

It is certainly true that the lineages of Buddhism that spread throughout China and South East Asia are far less ritualistic, have a plainer appearance and don’t have much to say about spirits and ghosts. Nonetheless, talk of spirits can be found quite easily in the Pali Canon, teachings that were given to a society in Northern India who most definitely believed in the existence of nature spirits, guardians, nagas, demons and benefactors. Not only that, they were often employed by spiritual practitioners and called upon to protect temples, practitioners or villages. Some of the earliest extant Buddhist temples have been found with carvings of voluptuous ‘yakshinis’, female nature spirits, guarding the entrance. They were given offerings in hopes of granting their protection in return. This and similar traditions predate Buddhism by several centuries and can be found in much Vedic and Puranic literature.

Furthermore, the highly ritualistic style of Tibetan Buddhism is simply Vajrayana Buddhism, the tantric aspect of Buddhism. This developed in India quite some time before taking root in Tibet. The concept of ‘infusing’ mundane or worldly people or spirits with Buddha-nature or transforming worldly enjoyments into the spiritual path with the aid of ritual objects and even sexual consorts evolved in India, not in Tibet. All the early ‘Tibetan’ Buddhists who brought what some see as highly esoteric forms of Buddhism with them came from India.

To conclude, we have to acknowledge the existence of rituals that incorporated the aid of spirits from the earliest days of Buddhism. However, the specific use of dharmaapalas to protect specific traditions, as well as the tradition of oracles – the people whom the dharmaapalas speak through – is exclusively Tibetan and may have been influenced by the indigenous Bön religion of Tibet.
As far as the events surrounding the birth of Dorje Shugden, we will never know exactly what happened, of course. According to various scholars and writers – Stephen Batchelor, Robert Thurman, Barbara O’Brien to name a few – the myth of Dorje Shugden that has been propagated is in all likelihood exaggerated, partially made up and twisted. It has also changed and evolved over time, which makes it difficult to discern what exactly happened to Drakpa Gyeltsen, especially in a culture that was notoriously bad at keeping clear historical records. We therefore need to conclude that it is not possible to ascertain whether or not Shugden was ‘correctly’ and unanimously authenticated and enthroned.

What we can say is that Dorje Shugden has never been enthroned as one of the Eight Dharmapalas. The Eight Dharmapalas are eight deities that have become the standard and most widely accepted protectors. They are Mahakala, Yama, Yamantaka, Hayagriva, Vaishravana, Palden Lhamo, Tsangspa Dkarpo and Begtse.

The Chinese Connection

In light of the current situation, it is interesting to find out that there was a connection between Dorje Shugden and the Qing dynasty in China, starting with a strong religious-political bond between The Emperor Shunzhi (1638–1661) who ruled over China proper from 1644 to 1661, and the Fifth Dalai Lama. What is seen by some historians as a strategic move to affirm control of Tibet, Emperor Shunzhi invited the Fifth Dalai Lama to Beijing in 1652. At that time, and for two more centuries to come, the Tibetans viewed the Chinese Emperors as highly realised and auspicious beings and believed them to be emanations of Manjushri, the Wisdom Buddha. The various Dalai Lamas have often been associated with Avalokiteshvara, Compassion Buddha (Tib.: Chenrezig). After a two month visit in 1652, the Fifth Dalai Lama was granted an honorary Seal of Authority and given many gifts by the emperor.

The real connection to Shugden however, began with the second Qing Emperor, Kangxi (May 4, 1654 – December 20, 1722) who ruled China from 1661 to 1722. As well as being known as the longest-reigning Emperor of China, he was also known as one of the most compassionate Chinese emperors, bringing peace and prosperity to the country. The Emperor was not only interested in strengthening China but also in promoting Buddhism in Tibet. He endorsed the Seventh Dalai Lama, Kelzang Gyatso, helping him take the throne at Kumbum Monastery and once again offering him a state Golden Seal of Authority.

And here is the interesting cue: According to an historical text by Sumpa Khenpo concerning the Tibetan Wood-Sheep Year (1655-1656), Emperor Kangxi is listed as an incarnation of Tulku Dragpa Gyeltsen, i.e. Dorje Shugden. This view was apparently adopted by many Tibetans at the time and once again shows that Shugden, Dragpa Gyeltsen and Manjushri were almost synonyms, benevolently entangled with the Dalai Lamas and the Yellow Hat Sect, i.e. the Gelugpas. It should be noted here however, that those against the practice point out the fact, that there are very few scriptural references, thangkas (paintings) or specific sadhana practices of Dorje Shugden during this time.

The fourth Qing emperor to rule over China was the Emperor Qianlong (1711 –1799), reigning from 1735 to 1796. Qianlong promoted the expansion of China and was interested in conquering as much land as possible, including parts of Burma, Nepal and Xinjiang. More
notably, he was the first Chinese Emperor to recognise the Dalai Lama lineage as political rulers of the Tibetan area. He even sent armies into Tibet to make sure the Dalai Lama was established as the official ruler; not without leaving his own guards and regents posted around the Potala palace, of course. This gave him a special leverage over Tibet. In addition, he converted the Yonghegong Palace in Beijing into a Gelugpa monastery in 1744. This is regarded by many as the solidification of State-Church union and the inauguration of the Gelug sect into the world of politics. It also indicates a planned ‘infiltration’ in a sense of Chinese political control of Tibet through the Gelug order. Can we say Roman Catholic?!

Shortly thereafter, the sixth Emperor Tao-Kuang took over. At that time one of his ministers, Amben Che Trungtang, was living in Tibet and wished to speak directly to Dorje Shugden through an oracle⁵, primarily about political affairs. After receiving favourable answers, Trungtang developed strong faith and devotion in the deity and informed the Emperor about the good news. The emperor must have been impressed by Trungtang’s account, as he arranged for the Dorje Shugden oracle to be awarded a special golden hat in a ceremony of extensive praise. All attendants, including the Dalai Lama, the Emperor and the regent, enthroned Dorje Shugden as the official protector deity of the Gelugs (again). Whether or not we can also interpret this as casting Shugden in the role of the ‘mascot’ for Chinese political infiltration into the Gelugpa sect remains uncertain. Interestingly, many on the anti-Shugden side site this part of the history as evidence that the evil spirit of Dolgyal was meddling in political affairs and planting the seeds for future problems between China and Tibet; while many pro-Shugden people site this as evidence of the Dalai Lama lineage meddling in non-spiritual affairs and mixing politics with religion.

In summary, we can safely conclude that since the time of the ‘Great Fifth’ Dalai Lama in the mid seventeenth century, Dorje Shugden has been a prominent and mainstream protector deity within the Gelug and the Sakya school. His story is certainly tied up in a lot of politics, primarily through the Fifth Dalai Lama, who for many Gelugs remains something of a hero and for many others, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He has been accused of ordering all kinds of murderous sieges and pillages and of cleverly planting seeds of tremendous influence within the powerhouse of the Chinese Qing dynasty.

Under his leadership, the Tibetan army launched an attack on their neighbour Bhutan and according to some scattered reports, this was nothing short of a wide-spread genocide, including the slaughter and torture of many people and the rape of many women, even nuns. The Bhutanese eventually drove the Tibetans out with the aid of Mongol soldiers.

The question here would be: does this validate or invalidate the Shugden practice? We know that the mainstream Gelugpas today, who deny the Shugden practice, regard the Fifth Dalai Lama as one of the most important and virtuous of all the Dalai Lamas. The current Fourteenth has cited the Fifth as the forerunner he feels closest to. But, despite the Fifth’s doubts at the beginning, it seems he eventually endorsed and became a practitioner of Dorje Shugden.

⁵ For those unfamiliar with this: an oracle is an appointed lay or ordained person, often believed to be highly realized, but sometimes also the village drunk, who goes in to trance during a special ceremony and channels, or gets possessed by, the deity. The deity then speaks and gives teachings, predictions or warnings through him.
As we will also see below, those in support of Shugden and against the ban have not gotten their facts straight on this issue: on the one hand, they use the Fifth as an example to illustrate the authenticity of the Dorje Shugden practice. On the other, they use the Fifth as an example of the corruption and evil motives present in the Dalai Lama lineage.

**Je Phabongkhapa – Double-Edged Wisdom Sword?**

Je Pabongkha, aka Kyabje Je Phabongkhapa or Pabongkha Dechen Nyngpo (1878 – 1941) was one of the most influential, charismatic and powerful Gelugpa Lamas of Tibet and is seen by many as one of the first prominent ‘modern’ Buddhists, in so far that his direct students were instrumental in bringing Buddhism to the west. His style of teaching is also seen by many as progressive and modern for his time. He is essential in this study due to his strong emphasis on Dorje Shugden as the main protector practice. This, coupled with what many see as an incredibly sectarian attitude, has led many Buddhist scholars (including Gelugpas in his lineage) to doubt his qualifications and even accuse him of having been an evil, power hungry religious dictator of sorts. On the other hand, he has been regarded as an emanation of Heruka, a tremendous fountain of wisdom for future Buddhist generations.

In general, he was a teacher of Tsongkhapa’s tradition and emphasized the Lamrim (his teachings were written down by Trijang Rinpoche and translated by Michael Richards in ‘Liberation in the Palm of your Hand’, Wisdom Publications) and the Tantra practice of Heruka. He was a renunciate and took no interest in worldly attainments or politics, which he disliked. His followers described him as being incredibly happy, jovial and patient, never getting angry or showing any irritation. He put a lot of emphasis on teaching lay practitioners, saying that Buddhahood did not depend on ordination, nor did the job of upholding Buddhism fall only on the shoulders of monks and nuns. He was the first well known Lama to publicly teach subjects which beforehand would have been exclusive to the monastics.

However, Pabongkha did become involved with a warlord named Liu Wenhui who was invading Kham at that time. By befriending him he hoped to find a new patron who would help spread the Gelugpa tradition in that region and beyond. Due to the fact that the majority of Kham was of the Nyingma tradition, this intention has been interpreted as an aspect of Pabongkha’s sectarian motivation. Add to this the fact that he often spoke rather degradingly of the Nyingma school. Nonetheless, Pabongkha was by no means a vessel of Tsongkhapa-Proper, for many of his teachings emphasized practices that came from the three other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. His emphasis on the Vajrayogini practice for example was not ever taught specifically by Tsongkhapa but was probably soaked up by Pabongkha from various Kagyü and Sakya teachers he came across. His emphasis on Tara as a major meditational deity with regards to tantric practice was also not generally part of Tsongkhapa’s tradition but once again is found prominently in the Kagyü and even the Nyingma schools. Georges Dreyfus writes in his article:

6 Though nowadays many anti-Shugdenpas point this out, I have found little evidence to suggest that Pabongkha was any more ‘anti-Nyingma’ than Je Tsongkhapa or any other Gelugpa for that matter. The philosophical disputes between the two schools are well documented.
He did not introduce these practices himself, for he received them from teachers such as Ta bu Pe-ma Baz-ra and Dak-po Kel-zang Kay-drub (dwag po bskal bzang mkhas grub). Where Pa-bong-ka was innovative was in making formerly secondary teachings widespread and central to the Ge-luk tradition and claiming that they represented the essence of Dzong-ka-ba’s teaching. This pattern, which is typical of a revival movement, also holds true for Pa-bong-ka’s wide diffusion, particularly at the end of his life, of the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den as the central protector of the Ge-luk tradition.

In hindsight therefore, many see the practice of Dorje Shugden as a major protector within the Gelug tradition as something that was introduced by Pabongka. Why? As a sort of reformer of what Dreyfus calls a ‘revival movement’, Pabongka strongly emphasized the supremacy of the Gelug school over the other three. In doing so, he needed a strong vehicle for unifying the Gelug and, if you like, giving it a bit of a kick. Dorje Shugden had been around for a while as we’ve seen and lent itself to Pabongka’s vision.

Pabongka often spoke of non-Gelug traditions as being ‘evil’, ‘perverted’ and causes of being reborn in hell realms. His teachings about the Bön religion were incredibly harsh, allowing for no tolerance towards them at all. Be that as it may, from a purely textual point of view, these statements were normally within the context of philosophical differences, often expressed within a debate. As such, these harsh remarks are certainly not unheard of in the long history of religious debate in Tibet and India. Beyond that however, Pabongka has been accused of ordering (or at least strongly suggesting) the destruction and burning of Nyingma temples, homes, books and Thangkas. He was also openly and vehemently opposed to the ‘Rime’ movement. This is significant: The Rime movement was founded by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and Jamgon Kongtrul in the 1870s. It was essentially a collective of Nyingma, Kagyü and Sakya practitioners and teachings, established as a reaction to the dominance of the Gelugpa tradition. The Rime movement preserved and saved many texts which were more or less forgotten and was able to revive some interest in these three schools. Pabongka strongly believed that this kind of “mixing of different traditions” would destroy pure dharma, dilute each lineage and finally give rise to a perverted form of Buddhism. It is also believed that he felt it would threaten the supremacy of the Gelugpa tradition, which is why he spearheaded a Gelug revival for the sake of destroying Rime.

Though much criticism has emerged around Je Phabongkhapa in the last few years, nobody denies the vast and powerful influence he has had on the Gelugpa school, whether Shugden practitioners or not. There are more or less no established lineages or monasteries within Gelug that have not been influenced, if not directly instructed by Pabongka. Specifically his student Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor to HH Dalai Lama and root guru of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, as well as a major teacher of Lama Thubten Yeshe: It was Trijang who authored one of the main texts on the Shugden practice, a text often used as evidence for the legitimacy of the practice by the Shugdenpas, and equally used by the anti-Shugden clan who claim the text states clearly that Shugden is a worldly spirit. Either way, Trijang was instrumental in the Dalai Lama’s education, in Geshe Kelsang coming to the West and in the promotion of Dorje Shugden as a major Protector Practice. Unlike Pabongka, there is no Gelugpa who would ever dare criticize Trijang Rinpoche, as he remains one of the most loved and treasured Gurus of the tradition. His currently accepted
incarnation, interestingly enough, has been ‘allowed’ by the Dalai Lama to practice Shugden, which he continues to do. Festivals with him have been held in Rabten Choeling, Switzerland (Geshe Rabten’s old Tharpa Choeling Centre) with many Shugdenpa monks and nuns of the Gelug. I would need to conclude that the Dorje Shugden controversy seems to have split the opinion held by Gelugpas concerning Je Phabongkha.

The view of the supremacy of the Gelug tradition that Je Pabongkha is said to have enforced can be found in Je Tsongkhapa’s own teachings, such as in the Lam Rim Chenmo. Here, he often speaks of the Prasangika school as the supreme view and all the others as inferior. The Gelugs have since endorsed the Prasangika and generally regard those who do not do so as mistaken. As for the specific ‘dislike’ for the Nyingma school, again this is difficult to ascertain. Gelug myth tells the tale of the Chinese explorer-teacher Hashang who represented a kind of vague ‘advaita’-style view, claiming that all conceptual minds are to be abandoned and enlightenment is to be spontaneously experienced. He debated with the Madhyamika Indian master Kamalashila, who according to the Gelugs, won the debate hands down. Ever since, Hashang has been vilified as the heathen who attempted to destroy the true doctrine of Buddha; furthermore, early Tibetan Buddhism – i.e. Nyingma – supposedly obtained and retained a lot of Hashang’s teachings –specifically within the Dzogchen branch in Kham! - thereby representing false views.

The truth is that Hashang, who was actually called Hvashang Moheyen (Moheyen referring to ‘Mahayana’), was a well-established Mahayana teacher of the Chinese Chan tradition whose teachings are incredibly subtle, intelligent and poignant. Though not directly related, his views are not too dissimilar from the Yogachara school of Vasubandhu (a school also criticized by Tsongkhapa). As you might expect, Chinese sources say Hvashang won the debate.

The Battle

Brief Overview

The battle consists of two main voices: those fighting for the right to practice Shugden by attempting to defame the Dalai Lama and those fighting the allegations by defending the Dalai Lama and defaming their opponents. There is recently also a third voice: those against both sides and Tibetan Buddhism in general.

It is first of all not really clear what this dispute is about: is it about the right to practise Dorje Shugden without being persecuted, is it about whether or not Shugden is a legitimate part of Gelug lineage, is it about whether he is a Buddha, is it about the China-Tibet problem, is it about a power-struggle between current-day Lamas and lineage holders in the west?

What we can conclude from the analysis is this: both ‘sides’ have taken what I believe we can call a childish approach. We have all kinds of scholars, or people who think they are scholars – Kelsang Rabten, Morten Clausen, or Kelsang Pema on the Shugden side, Robert Thurman and anti-NKT activists Tenzin Peljor or Linda Ciardiello on the DL side – tied in to an endless feud which when taken at face value comes to little more than name calling. Since the protests started back in 1996, Robert Thurman seems to have seen it fit for him to
defend the stance of HH Dalai Lama by doing two things consistently: badmouthing and insulting the NKT and avoiding, if not outright lying about, the actual ban and horrific results it has had. Other activists, who have attempted to take a ‘scholarly’ approach, such as Tenzin Peljor, seem to have found enough hours in the day to write pages and pages of blogs about the horrific cult that is the NKT, reading much like many other baseless conspiracy theories on the web today. However, we will consider these views fairly.

We then have the Pro-Dorje Shugden population, the majority of which are actually Tibetan but the loudest of which constitute the organisation now called the International Shugden Community, or ISC – previously the International Shugden Society and before that, the Western Shugden Society. The organisation is run and organised by a handful of people of the NKT and is heavily promoted throughout the world in NKT centres. It is a movement however, that is being supported or at least condoned by many high-ranking lamas, not only Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, the founder of the NKT. I will state right now for the record that the vast majority of Shugden practitioners are not actively involved with the ISC at all and continue with their practice, BAU7.

The ISC’s claim is that the Dalai Lama has imposed a ban on a religious practice and has used his political position as well as his unquestionable influence to enforce this ban. It is regarded as a violation of human rights, a misuse of political power towards a religious issue, as well as causing a schism within the Gelug order and a deterioration of pure Dharma. They also claim that the Dalai Lama’s motives for doing this are power: to get rid of a protector who represents the Gelugpas (the order of the Dalai Lama himself) as this promotes continued separatism between the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, so that he and possibly his successors may become the head or highest authority of Tibetan Buddhism in its entirety. They believe that prominent followers of the Dalai Lama, such as Robert Thurman, have publicly and forcefully spread false accusations against them, their practice, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and others, yet never being open to any dialogue. Many – though not all – of those in the Shugden Camp also believe there to be a hidden ‘game’ being played out by the Dalai Lama with the Chinese and that in some way, the banning of Shugden was instigated to create more political autonomy for Tibet – albeit indirectly (and that would have to be very very indirectly!)

The ISC have published two books and several pamphlets, the bulk of which have nothing to do with Dorje Shugden at all. Instead, they have accused the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government of countless crimes against their own people, many of them very serious ones. They believe the Dalai Lama to have been falsely yet intentionally enthroned by those in power at the time.

The claims of the Dalai Lama Camp are varied, and they have brought so many non-Shugden topics into the debate that the issue has become muddled. Nevertheless, the following position can be established: The Dalai Lama has not actually banned the practice, he has simply voiced his opinion about it and has advised his disciples not to practice it. His

7 If only the activists would recognize this fact, it might point them in the right direction? Interestingly, the vast majority of lamas and teachers featured on the dorjeshugden.com website are not involved or do not seem to be interested in the activist’s cause.
reasons are well founded and go back at least three decades, during which time he did a lot of research and investigation. As advised by his oracle Nechung and others, he came to believe that Shugden is in fact a non-enlightened spirit who promotes sectarianism and poses a threat of allowing the Gelug order to degenerate into spirit-worship. Prior to this, one of Dalai Lama’s most prominent teachers, the Kyabje Ling Rinpoche had apparently warned practitioners against the Shugden practice. Yet on the other hand, we know he authored a well-known prayer to Dorje Shugden and also suggested it to some of his disciples. Therefore, Kyabje Ling’s role in this subject remains shrouded. In an article published in the Huffington post on March 5th, 2014, Prof. Robert Thurman explains that when the Shugden ‘cult’ started being promoted in the West, especially in the UK, in the late 1980s, Dalai Lama began requesting high-ranking lamas and resident teachers to stop the practice. By the mid nineties most of them had agreed to do so, some had refused (by what means those who agreed were persuaded to do so remains unclear). Those who refused are believed to be cult leaders and, again according to Thurman, represent “exclusively the super-orthodox fundamentalists of the majority Gelukpa sect or order.”

A special ‘warning’ or distain is held by the Dalai Lama Camp for the NKT and their founder, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, presumably because he was the first (though by no means only) high-ranking lama to reject the Dalai Lama’s advice – and because the NKT made up the bulk of the ISC. Today, one can see why this is: The NKT is the only Gelug tradition I know of who are actively campaigning against the Dalai Lama. However, the dislike, or even hatred, felt by other Gelugpas for the NKT prior to 2008 seems to be the result of Thurman’s severe (but widely read) misrepresentation of the tradition. I will not make any conclusions as to his motives, but it does indeed look like the typical ‘slander your enemy to win the fight’ type of approach. And by the way, the severe hatred felt by many Shugdenpas for the Dalai Lama (though they would never admit to that kind of emotion) seems to have been fuelled by the slander-campaigns from the Shugdenpas, particularly their book ‘A Great Deception’. More on that later.

Is there a ban?

Let us begin by quickly answering the first discrepancy: Is there really a ban on the Dorje Shugden practice? A ban generally implies something enforced by law. I would however suggest that in the case of the Tibetan Government in Exile, law and faith are divided by a very thin – at times invisible – line. Taking both points into consideration, here are a few extracts from talks given by the Dalai Lama concerning this:

“There are, however, some cases of people pretending not to have heard what they have heard; especially, there are still some cases in which I feel that persons deliberately practice and propagate Dolgyal. To mention specific names in Tibet, there are some local monasteries in Chamdo with their principal of Chamdo Monastery. In the Dragyab region too, some such at the branch Dragyab Monastery and in the Markham region also, I feel that there are people who deliberately retain and propagate the practice. Denma Gonsar passed away last year. In the region where he lived too, there are people who continue and propagate the practice of Dolgyal. In the Rawatoe region of Nyethang there are among the
monks and nuns coming to Lhasa from Markham, Dragyab, etc., people who propagate the practice. There are monks from the Markham region who have followed their tradition of joining the Ramoche Temple in Lhasa, where they are still propagating the practice of Dolgyal. Whatever is the case, if such people are designately reciprocating in negative kind the gratitude we owe to the successive Dalai Lamas and are thereby knowingly showing nothing but scorn for the religious and political causes of Tibet and the kindness of the Dalai Lamas, I have no suggestions to offer." – Public address, 2006.

“These monks must be expelled from all monasteries without hesitation. I fully support these actions – I praise them! If monasteries find this difficult, tell them the Dalai Lama is responsible for this” - Talk at Drepung Monastery, India 2008.

In addition, it is a documented fact (and one that was never disputed) that the Dalai Lama announced his ‘advice’ publicly for the first time in 1996, upon which guards and officials were sent to monasteries and people’s homes, forcing people to declare on paper whether they practice Shugden or not.

Tibetan monk Geshe Tashi Tsering, in his talk at SOAS during a very interesting panel discussion held there on the 15th of August 2014, stated, along with an example, how the ISC – specifically Kelsang Rabten, whom we will mention later – twisted the facts concerning what the Dalai Lama had said, whom he had been addressing and what the context was. He insists that there is no ban, only ‘strong advice’ from the Dalai Lama for his people.

Despite this, we have two undisputed facts: countless Tibetans were forced to sign a declaration regarding whether or not they practice Shugden; Dalai Lama continues to ‘strongly advise’ against the practice. We can therefore conclude that there is a ban in place and that this fact cannot be reasonably denied. Prof. Robert Thurman disagrees and has written in his article from the Huffington Post “The worship of their chosen deity was not "banned" by the Dalai Lama, since he has no authority to "ban" what Tibetan Buddhists practice. "Banning" and "excommunicating" are not Tibetan Buddhist procedures.” Of course, we can split hairs over definitions or procedures, but as we have seen, the systematic forbidding of the practise and continual organised suppression of it validates calling this a ban.

At present, even the most vehemently anti-NKT bloggers and websites, though thoroughly opposed to the protests, have started acknowledging the reality of the ban, and in some cases even what they deem to be mistakes made by the Dalai Lama and the CTA.

The quotes also prove that the Dalai Lama has, even if unwittingly, pointed the finger at specific monasteries, lamas and regions, many of which were shunned or ransacked by followers (or, could we call them super-orthodox fundamentalists?) after he gave his speech. Critics claim he should have been well aware that this would happen and that he did so on purpose. More shockingly perhaps, is the fact that the CTA issued and publicized a sort of ‘hit list’ of the ‘Enemies of the Dalai Lama’. Originally the list featured Gyatso but this was quickly removed after the CTA received legal threats. The list gives a brief description of each
person, who is listed alongside a photograph, in an obvious attempt to create animosity towards them. This is a rather extreme measure for a political cabinet that prides itself as being in line with international humanitarian laws, to take.

The first part of the claims made by the ISC have been well documented since the late nineties, including a shocking German documentary, which revealed the extreme extent to which Shugden practitioners were expelled from temples, beaten in the street and ousted from their communities. Today, this extreme form of discrimination is available for all to see, thanks to wifi, twitter, Facebook, etc. Photos of countless temples, shops and hospitals with signs that say ‘Dorje Shugden Practitioners not welcome’ are said to be a common site within Tibetan communities in India and Nepal. On my own travels in India, I came across two Gelugpa Buddhist temples with the same sign hanging at the entrance, one in Sarnath and one in Bylakuppe. As many activists rightly point out, this is no different from the perverse racial segregation that took place in the USA up until the 1960s. But of course, we also need to be aware of media-impartiality and not trust everything we see. Many on the Dalai Lama-side of the debate, who either travel extensively or live in India, say that these incidents are rare and have been blown out of proportion.

The second part of the Pro-Shugden claim – the Dalai Lama’s motive – has not been clearly documented and seems strange, to say the least. It is also true that Robert Thurman has indeed written things about Dorje Shugden practitioners and the NKT specifically which are not based on any facts whatsoever and are deemed by many to be politically incorrect and biased.

What exactly the motive of the International Shugden Society is, remains unclear. They themselves claimed through spokesperson Kelsang Pema in 2008 that they were fighting for religious freedom from the Dalai Lama’s ban. As they do not follow the Dalai Lama and are free to practice Shugden without any problems, this is clearly not true. They have also said that they are engaging in their activities for the sake of helping those who are being discriminated against in India and elsewhere. But then why don’t they make an equal effort to help those suffering from the recent earthquake in Nepal? Why not protest the countless crimes against humanity committed by their own governments? Why not raise money to help the homeless? Although it is very possible that, as individuals, they actually do engage in such actions, we know that officially, the NKT – which makes up the bulk of the ISC – does not.

What we can deduce from the demonstrations themselves, from their website and Facebook page, is that the vast majority of these people really have no idea what they are demonstrating about: there is a severe lack of in-depth knowledge about the real Tibetan situation and the Dorje Shugden history. Not being able to get the results they wanted back in the 90s, they now follow the Dalai Lama around the world, shouting ‘liar’, ‘hypocrite’, ‘evil dictator’ and ‘false Dalai lama’ – making themselves guilty of everything they have criticised Robert Thurman of doing. When prompted to ‘read up’ about the issue, they typically turn to ISC-run websites, such as dorjeshugden.com, for example.

8 The ISC proudly displayed a letter of condolences sent to Nepal in which they claim some money was raised for charity following the Earthquake. This is followed by the usual pro-Shugden tirade and seems to be more of a publicity stunt than anything else.
On a more sober note, one of their initial goals seems to have been to engage in open dialogue with HH Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cabinet regarding this issue. Since 1996, members of the NKT and specifically Geshe Kelsang Gyatso himself have sent open letters to the Dalai Lama’s office. According to the ISC, responses were usually minimal and deflective and there was never a proper response by Dalai Lama himself. Instead, Thurman sent defamatory articles about the NKT and Gyatso to several newspapers such as Newsweek or the Washington Post. These articles mark a turning point in the quality of conduct for this debate. The 1996-98 demonstrations were rather quiet and peaceful events, with a few monks and nuns standing outside of various Tibetan Embassies singing Buddhist prayers. True, they announced very clearly their disapproval of the Dalai Lama’s ‘advice’ on Shugden and that he had no right to do so; but there were no “Liar” banners. Thurman, in retaliation, began writing extremely reactionary and derogatory articles, targeting the NKT alone as a kind of Buddhist Taliban and describing them as a completely unauthorised ‘version’ of Gelugpa Buddhism, led by a “false Geshe”, referring to their founder, Gyatso. His opinion has not changed to this day, nor has the tone of his articles.

Today however, I have seen no evidence of an attempt at open dialogue coming from the ISC. More on that below.

A popular worldpress blog on the subject under ‘buddhism controversy’ entitled ‘Tibetan Buddhism – Struggling with Difficulties’, written and organised primarily by Tenzin Peljor (an ex-NKT monk now ordained by the Dalai Lama) and various so-called ‘NKT Survivors’⁹, states several points to the contrary, such as: Dalai Lama never issued a ban, only advice; Trijang Rinpoche, the root guru of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso actually warned against Shugden many times; The WSS/ISS/ISC have been asking for open dialogue but have constantly been refusing it once offered. Their only motive is slander; the protesters are completely uneducated on the subject of Tibetan history, culture and current situation; evidence for the falsity of the Dorje Shugden practice is available, clear and nothing new.

They have posted one response sent to Morten Clausen, the author of one of the letters sent by ISC, in which Clausen asks the Dalai Lama to sign a declaration removing the ban and allowing everyone to practice Shugden. Tenzin Geyche Tetong, a secretary to Dalai Lama responded, stating that DL had his reasons and would not be signing the declaration. Indeed it is true that the letter by Clausen does not intend to engage in dialogue, but simply requests the Dalai Lama to sign a declaration they themselves had drafted. This is clearly not an example of attempting dialogue.

That was in 1998. Since then, the ISC have sent numerous letters, petitions and declarations. But are they themselves really attempting to have open dialogue? Interestingly, Morten Clausen himself attended a lecture given by Robert Thurman in 2014 and asked him some questions regarding the Shugden ban (Thurman only laughed, said he felt pity for Clausen and advised him to leave “whatever cult” he was in; might be deemed rather arrogant and disrespectful for a well known Buddhist scholar?). I think this may be seen by some as an attempt for dialogue, but in this instance, it came across as laughable and

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⁹ A group of ex-NKT practitioners, many of them previously ordained within the tradition, who have formed a group whose function it is to warn others of the supposedly corrupt and evil intentions of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and the NKT.
made people cringe; furthermore, of course it was denied by Thurman. Perhaps it was the wrong setting.

As to the statement about Trijang Rinpoche: The blog claims that Trijang (and even Je Phabonka) regarded Dorje Shugden as a ‘mundane’ protector, i.e. a worldly spirit who helps practitioners mildly in their practice. He also is said to have warned many of the practice. This is a very significant assertion, as Trijang is regarded as one of the primary ‘old timers’ of Dorje Shugden practice and as the author of one of the most extensive texts on the practice. According to his own words however, it is very clear that he regarded Dorje Shugden as an enlightened emanation of Manjushri, a supra-mundane protector appearing in a mundane or ‘worldly’ aspect. We can check this directly by reading Trijang’s well known texts on the matter. A contemporary of Trijang Rinpoche, HH Kyabje Zong Rinpoche, also one of the Dalai Lama’s primary tutors and root guru of a large number of present day Gelugs, was a Dorje Shugden practitioner and regarded Shugden as none other than Manjushri.

Who then, are the Tibetan spiritual leaders involved in this? After all, this is a political issue cloaked in Buddhist garb, and it is certain that nothing takes place within Tibetan Buddhism without the input, guidance, advice and will of certain very powerful and influential Tibetan Lamas. The Dalai Lama camp tends to see this as a battle between Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (whom they call Kelsang Gyatso, the “false Geshe”) and HH Dalai Lama. For them, Geshe Kelsang is a bitter, power-hungry individual who has been trying to steal as many Gelugpa branches as possible and get them under the banner of his NKT-IKBU company. Refusing the Dalai Lama’s “advice” to stop practising Shugden is a) another way to separate the NKT from mainstream Gelug society (which is inseparably associated with the Dalai Lama), and b) a way of working with and getting support from the Chinese government. What exactly the motive for this is remains to be seen, though there are countless theories out there.

From the Shugden camp’s perspective, the picture looks different. There is no doubt that HH Dalai Lama is viewed as the main culprit, along with many of his more outspoken advisors, ranging from the CTA (Central Tibet Administration), Robert Thurman and Namkhai Norbu. In truth however, the opposition is not only Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, as the defenders of the Dalai Lama claim, but a vast array of Tibetan Gelugpas residing mostly in the West. Some of these prominent figures include Lama Gangchen Rinpoche, a well-known and well-respected Gelug Lama living in Italy, Gonsar Rinpoche, the heart disciple of Geshe Rabten, living in Switzerland, the current HH Trijang Rinpoche, HH Gangchen Choktrul Rinpoche, Ven. Yongyal Rinpoche, Tsem Tulku Rinpoche, Achok Rinpoche, as well as the current incarnation of Kyabje Kundeling Rinpoche, who led a lawsuit against the Dalai Lama with regards to the ban of Shugden. Lamas Ling Rinpoche and Zong Rinpoche, heart disciples of Je Phabongka and Trijang Rinpoche respectively have been regarded as two of the most prominent, and important Gelugpas in modern times and have been instrumental in HH the Dalai Lama’s education. Zong Rinpoche was an ardent Dorje Shugden practitioner and Ling Rinpoche wrote prayers to Shugden (note however that the worldpress bloggers do not agree with this and insist that Ling Rinpoche was always very dubious about Shugden). Ironically, the founder of the FPMT, Lama Thubten Yeshe, practiced Shugden every day. He is regarded as one of the most accessible deliverers of Buddhism to the West. There are as mentioned countless other well-known teachers, Lamas, Geshes and Rinpoches in the present day who...
have maintained their practise of Dorje Shugden despite the ban. None of these people are affiliated with the NKT.

Nevertheless, it is probably Geshe Kelsang Gyatso who is the most prominent of these lamas as far as the Dorje Shugden issue is concerned, as it is the NKT – of which he is the sole founder and guide – who primarily organise and promote the demonstrations and their cause. For them, the Dalai Lama has forcefully banned the practise of Shugden, which has had horrific consequences, such as monks, nuns, families and communities being ostracized, refused medical treatment, not allowed into shops, having their homes burned down, being beaten, receiving death threats and so on. There is no doubt that these things have happened and continue to happen: they have been well documented and can be seen on several news programmes. Their actual cause however, as well as the history of this practice, are far from clear. Again, despite an endless array of blogs and posts, the NKT Survivors and bloggers have mostly stayed clear of this subject, neither acknowledging it nor denying it.

There is more to the ISC than the demonstrations mind you. The organisation has published two full-length books, ‘A Great Deception’ from 2008 and ‘The False Dalai Lama’ from 2013. I have read both of them from cover to cover, which is in all likelihood more than 99% of ISC followers have done\(^\text{10}\). It might be presumed that many supporters of the ISC cause would turn away in disgust or at least disillusionment if they knew the content of those two books\(^\text{11}\). What can be ascertained by any well-read individual reading these books is their poor literary quality, grammar, structure and general style of writing. The books have been described by critics as ‘childish’, ‘inconsistent’ and ‘badly written’. The books dig up all kinds of loose facts and tales and attempt to portray the Dalai Lama as a ruthlessly evil, hateful, Nazi-sympathizing megalomaniac.

One of my favourite parts of the book is when the writers attempt to prove that the Dalai Lama was a supporter of Mao in disguise who helped initiate the Chinese invasion. They base this on the fact that, as a young boy, he wrote a text praising and respecting Mao. This was before any sign of an invasion. So in other words, a young boy with already far too much responsibility than any young boy should have, meets Mao and finds him pleasant, leading him to write a text of praise about him, proves that the Dalai Lama always was for the invasion and secretly supports the Chinese….how convincing.

The book is full of such total garbage. On the other hand, the first book raises a couple of interesting points, if one cares to sift through the rubbish, and backs them up with a variety of documents. This includes among other themes the Tibetan Government’s involvement with the CIA with regards to several crimes or the Dalai Lama’s intentional refusals to meet with the Chinese to discuss autonomy and other proposals. But this again goes back to the politician’s ploy and leads us nowhere. If you look hard enough, you will find dirt on everybody. Of course, if we had evidence showing that a certain dictator is systematically murdering millions of Jews, for example, we would have to react right away. But to compare this situation to the Holocaust (as NKT teachers Gen Khyenrab and many others do) is not only pathetic but, quite frankly, disgusting. Considering that most of the

\(^{10}\) I base this on many conversations I have had with people who actively participate in the protests.

\(^{11}\) The books reach far beyond the Shugden issue, accusing the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government of a huge number of horrific and violent crimes, comparing Dalai Lama to Hitler and Stalin. To many, the book reads like a sort of superstitious self-parody.
spokespeople for the ISC and the whole campaign are well educated middle class westerners, it is unlikely that they have made these kinds of statements out of ignorance. Rather, they seem to have been led to believe that the Dalai Lama really is the most evil and dangerous dictator the world has ever seen. This is baffling, to say the least.

The real battle, as with everything these days, is taking place online. The ISC run various websites, most of which are self-incriminating after some investigation. For example, the dorjeshugden.com website includes countless articles chronicling the “un-Buddhist” actions of the Dalai Lama. One of these articles states that, because he has officially recognised the Bon religion as part of the Buddhist family, he is destroying pure Buddhism. Another states that, because it can be argued that his family background is Muslim, he can’t be trusted as a proper Buddhist lama. Naturally, these kinds of arguments are not likely to win many adherents and make Dorje Shugden practitioners out to look like racist fanatics.

Western Buddhism has, in recent years, been criticised for being islamophobic; to then go out and proclaim, as the protesters do “Tenzin Gyatso is a saffron-robed lying Muslim, a false Dalai Lama and the worst dictator in the world” is perhaps not very profound.

We then have a minority third party, which has really only emerged and entered into this debate in the last year or two (2013/14). This is a group of people against both sides. However, they are not opposing both sides from a positive, live-and-let-live standpoint, but rather from a position that thoroughly rejects Tibetan Buddhism as legitimate.

This is kind of interesting. Ever since Westerners have studied Buddhism, there have been several academics who would categorise Tibetan Buddhism as the “odd one” among its Sri Lankan, Chinese, Vietnamese or South-East Asian counterparts. This sentiment led to the term ‘Lamaism’ – a term strongly opposed by all Tibetan Buddhists. The idea of these academics is that Tibetan Buddhism does not represent a pure form of Gautama Shakyamuni’s teachings at all, but rather a conglomerate of purely Tantric Buddhism, Tibetan Bön, shamanism and Hinduism.

The active ‘voice’ representing this view with regards to the Shugden affair comes mainly from the wordpress blog ‘Dialogue in Ireland’. It is a site dedicated to raising awareness of religious and cult practices that can be found in Ireland. They have followed some of the key players in this feud – Tenzin Peljor, Linda Ciardiello, Kelsang Rabten, etc – and have (quite rightly) criticized them all of accusing each other of the very things they are each guilty of. At some point, Ciardiello, who asked them to publish a guest post which supposedly proved that the NKT manipulated the media to get their point across, had approached them. Instead of printing her article, they responded with their own, in which they noted:

“ALL of what this woman accuses NKT of, is exactly what Tenpel, (Tenzin Peljor) and his crowd do. They always accuse others as a tactic to distract and divert. Surely accusing NKT of being a cult was a masterstroke so that the world wouldn’t see that Tibetan Lamaism is a cult. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!”

As far as the Shugden-NKT-Dalai Lama feud is concerned, this third voice offer some very valid observations and interesting points. On a more general level however, their position stands on shaky ground. The writers (who are anonymous) of these articles, insist that Tibetan Buddhism is simply “...A Hindu Brahmin cult of Tantra originally brought to Tibet by
Indian tantric sadhus and India tantric yogis, whatever Mahayana disguise they put on it.” They claim that Tibetan Buddhism, like Hindu Tantrism, is not much more than a form of sex magic highly abusive to women.

The study of Tibetan Buddhism within the larger context of things would warrant far deeper studies and hundreds of pages. Suffice it to say here, that these claims are utter nonsense. First of all, the Tantric Era of India was an evolution of practical philosophy that was far more complex than is suggested above. The Buddhist Vajrayana (tantric) path is older than most known Hindu tantra practices and rituals and was never taught without teaching the entire corpus of Pali Suttas (Buddha’s original teachings) or the tripitaka (the three baskets of sutras, moral and ethic training and wisdom teachings). Furthermore, while indeed there were influences between the Tantrikas and the Vajrayanists, as there were earlier between Buddhists, Jains and Vedantists, Tibetan Buddhism remains very different from Hinduism. The reasons for this are numerous and a study thereof is not warranted here. The statements made by the DialogueIreland group also incriminate Hindus and suggest that Tibetan Buddhism is a woman-hating form of sex magic, which anyone who just briefly studies the subject will find is nonsense.

Institutional Differences

There is the institutional aspect of this dispute, which spills into all kinds of non-Shugden related subjects. It could be said to center around the NKT and various other Shugden practising Gelug groups, rejecting the Dalai Lama’s ban on Shugden and speaking out against it. On this level alone there is a lot of confusion and animosity. The FPMT for example, who alongside the NKT are one of the largest Buddhist organisations in the West (and Gelugpas) are endorsed by HH Dalai Lama and therefore strongly opposed to the NKT’s stance and their teachers, specifically Geshe Kelsang. This difference of opinion has also opened another can of worms from the eighties, when, according to some bloggers and activists, Geshe Kelsang ‘stole’ Manjushri Institute in Ulverston, UK from the FPMT after Lama Thubten Yeshe passed away and began constructing the New Kadampa Tradition as an independent organisation with its own centres, rules and regulations. According to the NKT, there was no such motive from their side, but a group of people affiliated with the FPMT were involved in criminal activity. Calling themselves the ‘Priory Group’, they began running the centre as their own business, cutting legal corners and making some illegal profits, while supposedly also using Manjushri Institute as a drug smuggling hub. Eventually the issue was settled, the Priory Group dismantled and Manjushri Institute suspended from FPMT control. Just prior to this, Gyatso had opened his own Buddhist centre in York, Madhyamaka centre, without the authority of the Manjushri Institute Head Office. Various people requested Lama Yeshe to sort out this issue and the latter requested Gyatso to resign. What happened next is not quite clear, nor are the events that led up to this event. The anti-NKT group allude to what they call the ‘blackmail tape’, a recorded message spoken by Chip Rodarmor, today known as Gen Kelsang Tharchin in 1983 and apparently written by Gyatso as a direct letter to Lama Yeshe. The tape was delivered by Rodarmor directly to Lama Yeshe’s secretary in California. An extract from the message:
"Please know that we are sincerely and faithfully trying to protect you from these dangers but that you are ignoring us. Please do not ignore us now. The situation at present is that present trustees of the Manjushri Institute, including Peter Kedge and Harvey Horrocks, are involved in irregularities with respect to and violations of the terms of the Manjushri Institute Trust Deed. These constitute civil illegalities and please appreciate that some of these are major. They are very important – and that some of these are viewed by the Charities Commission as extremely serious and could constitute a basis for the removal of three of the four trustees of the Manjushri Institute, including Peter Kedge, Harvey Horrocks and yourself, Lama.”

The overall tone of the message is not particularly hostile, but alludes to all kinds of illegalities taking place at Manjushri institute and the threat of legal action. It is highly unlikely that the message was spoken or composed by Gyatso as it implies deeper knowledge of charity law, juridical procedures and financial mismanagement – themes a Tibetan monk who had only been in the western world for five years without administrative roles, would be unlikely to know. However, it seems to have been officially endorsed by him and delivered by Chip Rodarmor, who at that time and until the late 1980s was deeply involved with centre admin, finance and other affairs.

Critics of the NKT including members of the Survivors site this as a perfect example of Gyatso’s meticulous planning for dominance. Many who were around at that time and knew the people involved, have come forward in the last few years to give their side of the story. Rodarmor has been called a psychopath, a crook and one of the key players in stealing Manjushri from the FPMT. Supporters of the NKT have a different story, of course: one group simply deny this event ever took place (the ‘official’ NKT defense-website nkttruth mentions nothing about this). The other group have proclaimed that the message is not hostile nor in the slightest a form of blackmail. Rather, it was, as the message itself claims, an attempt to save Lama Yeshe and Manjushri Institute from certain doom, a tarnished reputation and possibly the end of the FPMT. They also point out that if it had not been for the ‘illegalities’ being committed by FPMT directors, none of these problems would have existed. As for Chip Rodarmor/ Kelsang Tharchin, it might be fair to note here that within the NKT, he is today one of the most highly respected teachers and has been the main retreat coordinator for many years.

Perhaps he has changed over the years. But I have noticed in this study, that people involved in this dispute don’t seem to accept that their opponents change at all; a strange attitude for a Buddhist. I wish to add here that I know of at least five people who were FPMT students and regard Lama Yeshe as their root guru, who continuously attend and participate in NKT retreats run by none other than Kelsang Tharchin / Rodarmor. Four of them were at Manjushri Institute in the early and mid eighties during which time they knew all the personnel involved in this dispute very well. They maintain positive and close ties with old friends from the FPMT but now practise under the NKT, except for one of them, who continues to be an FPMT member with a taste for Tharchin’s retreats. All of them disagree that there was ever any serious kind of friction or bad blood between Gyatso and his ‘team’ and Lama Yeshe.

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12 For the whole message, see http://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2010/07/14/good-night-lama-the-blackmail-tape/
and the FPMT. One of them also stated that although Chip was a bit of a hot-headed eccentric, he would not have blackmailed one of his own teachers.

Interestingly, these events – whether true or not - had been more or less forgotten and positive ties remained intact between Geshe Kelsang/NKT and Lama Zopa Rinpoche/FPMT. It was really only during the demonstrations, especially post-2008 that various anti-NKT bloggers began digging up the past and writing about it. According to the NKT, their motive is to smear Geshe Kelsang and the NKT in defence of HH Dalai Lama. But according to others, these facts indicate a long history of meticulous planning and scheming from the side of the NKT for the purpose of power and control. These and other similar themes have resulted in various anti-NKT sites appearing (nktworld, nkt survivors, buddhism.controversy) and, as a reaction, various defence-websites appearing (nktruth, dorjeshugden.com). At this point, a sizeable "survivors" society has formed made up of ex-NKT members (this is the only Buddhist ‘survivors’ group I have ever encountered). Most of their concerns and criticisms are not related to the Dorje Shugden issue per se, but to personal experiences they had whilst ‘serving’ in the NKT: talk about being psychologically abused, about receiving no help whatsoever when in need, about being overworked and about centres banning and even burning books by all authors other than Geshe Kelsang.

### The Buddhist Demo

The demonstrations began in 1996. There are various versions of events that supposedly led up to this, but to sum it up: in 1996, HH Dalai Lama made several speeches, mostly within a political context, in which he ‘suggested’ that the practise of Dorje Shugden be stopped. He also said that after consulting his oracle, he now believed that the practice of Dorje Shugden would shorten his life span and destroy the dharma. As one may expect, the reaction of the majority of Tibetans, who would rather die than to question His Holiness, was rather extreme: many monks and nuns who were known to be Dorje Shugden practitioners were expelled from their communities, beaten, banned from temples, shops and hospitals and shunned by their community. Many well-known temples, including Sera Je monastery, hung up ‘black-lists’ of the names of Shugden practitioners who were no longer allowed to enter the temple. Despite knowing about this, Dalai Lama said and did nothing to stop it, which is why many view him as the cause of the problem.

Shortly after this, several monks were able to contact Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and tell him about the situation. They asked him to ‘do something’ about it. As a naturalised British citizen and well-respected Tibetan monk, it was thought he would have some power in opposing the Dalai Lama. He then asked some of his disciples if they would help, and this resulted in very quiet, small-numbered demonstrations outside the Tibetan Embassy. After about a year and a half, the demonstrations stopped. During this time however, there had been murders of monks in Dharmsala, India: Lama Lobsang Gyatso, a close friend of Dalai Lama, had been murdered and Dorje Shugden practitioners were suspected. In the wake of this, several articles and letters surfaced criticising the NKT for creating disharmony in the Buddhist community and accusing Geshe Kelsang Gyatso of being an impostor and ‘false
The primary instigator of this wave of criticism was Robert Thurman. Whether he did this of his own accord or was asked to do so is not known. In response, Geshe Kelsang published an open letter in Newsweek to the Dalai Lama, refuting the accusations made against him and requesting the ban on Shugden to stop.

The letter indicates clearly that the Dalai Lama is seen as the primary reason for all the problems and violence, as they are all the result of this dispute, caused by the ban. Though much has been made of the ‘harsh nature’ of this open letter, an objective read through reveals it to be very respectful, factual and non-derogatory. Geshe Kelsang accuses his critics of making up facts and having allegations without backing them up, which indeed was the case at that time (i.e. there was no proof that Geshe Kelsang was not a real Geshe, there was no sociological basis for comparing the NKT with the Taliban, etc). In 1998 there was once again some media coverage concerning the Shugden ban and Gyatso was interviewed for a BBC documentary called ‘Unholy Row’. He very bluntly and blatantly states that the Dalai Lama is the source of the problem and cannot be viewed as a realised, holy being. When challenged with the observation that his own followers view him as a living Buddha, he laughingly replies ‘What’s wrong with that?’ Today, with all the bloggers looking for ways to incriminate Gyatso and the NKT, this is evidence proving Gyatso’s cult-like status and his promotion thereof. On the other hand, many have stated that everything he said in that interview is completely in line with Buddhism.

In a 1998 interview with Tricycle shortly after the first wave of demonstrations had stopped, Gyatso said:

“If he (the Dalai Lama) is an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara why he is causing so many people suffering? Why is he causing the spiritual life of so many people to be destroyed? Now there is big confusion. Since His Holiness the Dalai Lama removed Shugden statues from Gelugpa monasteries and temples and claimed that Shugden is a worldly, harmful spirit, people throughout the Buddhist world have begun to have doubts about the general dharma of the Gelugpa tradition, and in particular the dharma of Je Pabongka and Trijang Rinpoche. Now you can see the belief pervading everywhere that these lamas and their tradition are invalid and impure. How can His Holiness the Dalai Lama do this, unless he thinks that the dharma taught by Trijang Rinpoche is not the real dharma? What he is doing now is putting great effort to destroy the Dharma taught by his own spiritual guide.”

**Yellow Book**

So what led to the ban, the oracle’s advice and Dalai Lama’s sudden decision? Perhaps the origin of it all, at least in modern times, can be found in 1973 with the publication of the so-called Yellow Book. According to the dorjeshugden.com website:

“The controversial Yellow Book, published in 1973, was named after the yellow cover of a Tibetan book called the Thunder of the Stirring Black Cloud: The Oral Transmission of the Intelligent Father. According to the introduction, Kyabje Zemey Rinpoche authored this book in 1970 based on teachings given by Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor to the 14th Dalai Lama.”
It is thought that this book was essentially a commentary on a text of praise to Dorje Shugden written by Kyabje Dagpo Rinpoche. The book credits Trijang Rinpoche as the source of the teachings, which were written down by Zemey Rinpoche. There was strong reaction against the book, which Zemey Rinpoche never intended to publish in the first place. The Sakya Lama Dongthon Rinpoche and Nyingma Lama Sangye Dorje each wrote texts damning the Yellow Book and complaining about the hostile things it said about non-Gelug schools of Buddhism. It was after reading this text that the Dalai Lama stopped his own practice and began secretly advising close disciples and friends to do so as well.

The text tells of events that befell famous lamas who lived around the turn of the last century. We hear about how these Gelugpa lamas encountered severe obstacles whenever they took teachings outside of the Gelug tradition. They got sick, had nightmares and even died; in many cases, they realised their suffering was being caused by Dorje Shugden because their actions were causing the Gelug tradition to deteriorate and lose its purity. Indeed the theme of the whole text goes along these lines and has little to do with the deeper, spiritual and tantric aspects of Dorje Shugden practice. Some have compared it to the constant threat of hell and endless purgatory employed by the Catholic Church in the middle ages (and beyond) for the sake of keeping their followers on a tight leash.

There are two points worthwhile considering to perhaps allow for a more balanced understanding. First of all, the Yellow Book comes directly from Trijang Rinpoche’s stories and teachings, which were available through his text *Music Delighting an Ocean of Protectors* since 1967. This text was widely used, taught and received by many high Lamas including the Dalai Lama, yet nobody seems to have had an issue with it. As I mentioned earlier in the account on Je Pabongkha, this kind of wrathful language, which to us democratic, secular westerners appears to be a form of suppressive religious intolerance, is rather common throughout Buddhist scriptural history.

The second point concerns the context in which these stories originated. Between the end of the 19th century and the 1920s, the Gelug school of Buddhism had long passed its heyday. The Nyingma tradition was the largest school and philosophically the most influential and the Sakya lineage still held a lot of church-state power. The Kagyü was the HQ for Mahamudra and the tantric lineages of Naropa. In addition to this, these three schools still felt suppressed by the Gelugpas and, partly as a result of this, formed the conglomerate Rime movement. We must remember that the Gelug school was formed as a type of reformation, which was promoted and enforced politically as well throughout the centuries.

In what some scholars have called a ‘desperate attempt’ by the Gelugpas to re-find their footing and claim dominance, they rediscovered Dorje Shugden, the specifically gelug dharma protector. There is some evidence that various abbots and lamas from the major Gelugpa monasteries warned other teachers and practitioners about the dangers of mixing their tradition with others. This makes sense, of course: If you fear the depletion of your tradition, you will do what you can to preserve it. We do this all the time with languages, customs, cultural festivities, etc. And as we know, religion has always done this through fear. Therefore, this movement of Gelug-exclusivism continued and became almost a new reformation, culminating in the life and teachings of Je Pabongkha.

Gelugpas quite commonly and openly condone this kind of exclusivist (or what we would call sectarian) attitude. But they see it very differently. To them, the mixing of the
different traditions is detrimental to them all, not only the Gelug. They would say, as Gyatso has done for example, that all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism are equally precious and pure, there is no need to mix them. Furthermore, due to differing traditions, methods and wording, mixing them can cause severe confusion, thereby being of lesser benefit to sentient beings. From a Buddhist perspective, this is indeed a very serious downfall. In a spiritual context, they would also add that Shugden doesn’t harm any living beings because he is a Buddha. The author of the text on the dorjesugden.com site adds:

“Consider the facts. Great teachers like the Panchen Lamas, Taksak Rinpoche (Kundeling Rinpoche) and Pabongka Rinpoche are known to be highly attained masters, having shown miraculous signs and accomplished great works in their previous lives. Ultimately, these highly attained masters cannot be harmed due to their yogic abilities that allow them to have full control over death and rebirth. Therefore, these lamas manifested the appearance of receiving harm from Dorje Shugden, perhaps as part of a ‘divine play’ to set a powerful example for future practitioners, thus ensuring they would go all the way with the Gelug lineage and gain its immense benefits. It was not meant to sideline Nyingma teachings but to safeguard the integrity of the Gelug lineage, which is Dorje Shugden’s sworn purpose.”

The article rightly points out that there are many examples of Nyingma monasteries that have depictions or statues of Dorje Shugden, so there seems to be a bit of a paradox here. The author of the article attempts to explain this by stating that Shugden will only harm those who mix traditions, not those who remain within their own, whether Gelug or Nyingma. He even goes so far as to explain Shugden’s wrathful actions of killing some such ‘mixers’ as necessary acts for the sake of preserving the purity of the Gelug lineage. In the same breath, he says “An enlightened being, Dorje Shugden is non-sectarian and should never be accused as such”.

To me, there are obvious problems with this article and the author’s attempt at reconciling the paradoxes or oddities. On the one hand, we have the history of Shugden, which like countless other Buddhist tales is filled with ghosts, spirits, hauntings, predictions and finally a peaceful, victorious resolution; though wrathful, there is nothing sectarian about it. On the other, we have scriptures from the last century written by great Gelug masters - accepted as bona fide by all Gelugpas - that are blatantly sectarian, whether so intended or not. Add to this the tremendous miscommunication and Chinese whispers created by westerners trying to adopt a twelve-hundred year old Tibetan culture into a thirty-year old ‘modern’ western culture. What emerges is a situation that is unlikely to be resolved, as nobody seems to be on the same page.

After the 70s, the issue continued to brew underneath the surface, eventually leading to more public requests by the Dalai Lama to other teachers about stopping the practice. But it was not until 1996, after consulting his oracle, that the actual ban was put in place.

Since 2008, the demonstrations have re-emerged, this time with a new surge of energy: loud chanting, signs, banners and drums, hundreds of people and lots of media coverage. Armed with their book ‘A Great Deception’, the Shugdeners have been following the Dalai Lama all over the world, showing up wherever he has been teaching and shouting ‘Liar’, ‘Give religious freedom’, ‘False Dalai Lama!’ and so on. Naturally this has not been in their favour at
all. The NKT is viewed more and more as a strange demon-worshipping cult, there are more and more articles appearing — many by Robert Thurman of course — that strongly criticise the NKT and there is an ever-growing ‘Survivors’ group who are themselves becoming ever more vocal about their horrible experiences within the NKT. There also seems to be more and more friction within the NKT itself, as many practitioners are adamantly against the demonstrations, the books or the websites. This is not a sweeping statement I have just made up. As a reader, you can simply google ‘NKT’ or ‘Kelsang Gyatso’ and see what you find. Speak to other Buddhists, mention the NKT and see how they respond. It was very different before 2008.

What is interesting to note, however, is that the ISC, particularly various monks and nuns from the NKT, have been requesting dialogue concerning the issue yet have never been given it. They have approached Kashag of the Tibetan Cabinet, Robert Thurman and several representatives of the Dalai Lama, not to mention the Dalai Lama himself, attempting to engage in a discussion or some form of dialogue; it has never worked, as every person they approached either quickly slipped away or just bombarded them with personal insults. Robert Thurman himself can be seen on numerous occasions — on the street as well as during lectures — avoiding any questions or discussion by resorting to all kinds of accusations and insults, ranging from Chinese-funding conspiracies through to calling NKT monks and nuns Buddhist Jihadists, or, at best, fakes. As for the Dalai Lama himself, he has never responded to any letters, requests or dialogue about the subject. This could be seen as normal; after all, as a religious leader and political guide, he may not give a matter as this one much thought. This is however not the case, as he has devoted a huge amount of time to the subject, speaking very openly about his dislike of it, his conviction that it is a spirit practice, a form of evil demon worship and a primary cause against Tibet.

Critics of the ISC however have rightly pointed out, that most of the letters, requests and petitions sent to the Office of HH Dalai Lama have not been requests for dialogue as much as requests for the Dalai Lama to sign declarations to end the ban on the practice. Although we saw attempts at dialogue coming from Shugdenpas in the late 90s (which were primarily ignored), we have to accept that these attempts have more or less ceased. It no longer appears to be a wish for dialogue from either side at this stage. My experience from attempting to discuss the issue with bloggers from either side has always been met with a denial to see things objectively and no openness to dialogue at all.

Who are the demonstrators? The majority of them seem to be ‘normal’ people of a wide demographic and have the appearance of rather happy, smiley individuals who simply happen to be chanting “False Dalai Lama”. Tenzin Peljor, Carol McGuire and other members of the ‘NKT Survivors’ have written many blogs and letters in which they have spoken of the violence and danger presented by the demonstrations. The Tibetan cabinet representatives have also often warned the police that the demonstrators would be violent and dangerous. However, aside from making a lot of noise, there has not been a single incident of any form of violence in any demonstration since 1996. We can therefore conclude that the demonstrations themselves are conducted peacefully (at least physically).

What we may want to question however, is the ethics concerned with the demonstrations. The protesters carry with them books and pamphlets that accuse the Dalai Lama not only of religious totalitarianism, but of being a traitor of the Tibetan people, a Nazi sympathiser, a weapons dealer and a power-mad Muslim in disguise. It is suggested that the
Dalai Lama has never actually tried to do anything for the Tibetan cause, that he was offered open dialogue several times with the Chinese government but turned these down for dubious reasons. Most of these allegations are sketchy at best, if not mere opinions. In addition to this, the demonstrators have resorted to simple-minded defamatory tactics in the form of caricatures of the Dalai Lama and Robert Thurman, blatantly exaggerating certain characteristics that most people would find rather offensive (i.e. depicting Thurman as rather stupid looking with an exaggerated glass eye, as well as a South-Parkian image of a Muslim Dalai Lama trampling on the Tibetan People – an image many would deem as somewhat racist).

As with any activist-movement, there are a handful of ‘ring leaders’, people more intensely involved in the issue than most others. We have mentioned Kelsang Khyenrab, one of the most senior and longest running monks in the NKT. One look at his Facebook page illustrates that he (or someone hired by him) posts up to ten messages a day on the subject of the False Dalai Lama – a lot of posts for a meditating Buddhist monk, wouldn’t you say? His defence is always the same: ‘we are practicing dharma with the protests, nothing else. This comes from a pure motivation’, etc. Others include Kelsang Jangdom, a dear friend of mine, who has been appointed to maintain and ‘correct’ websites such as Wikipedia and who has become an active blogger, daily tweeter and preacher on the subject. Unfortunately many of his statements have only invited ridicule due to their incorrect assertions (in one tweet he retorted to one NKT critic that the NKT is a pure Buddhist tradition that continues to help hundreds of thousands of followers; as there are barely one hundred thousand practicing Buddhists in the Western world, this seems unlikely). I can say on a personal note, having known him before he became ordained and having seen him change under the guidance of certain Western Shugden Society activists from a calm and inspired guy interested in Buddhist meditation to an anti-dalai lama activist, I feel quite sad. On the other hand, we all have our own discriminatory faculties and responsibility.

Others, such as Kelsang Tubchen and Kelsang Pema will be considered below. We then have a handful of virtual characters, appearing on all kinds of blogs, chat rooms, social media sites and so forth. One of these calls themselves ‘Atisha’s Cook’, presumably comparing themselves to someone who is loud and annoying, yet serves his master and inadvertently provides him with priceless dharma teachings. I have yet to see evidence of these gems in this online-version of the Cook.

Another point the demonstrators and their pamphlets make however, raises some interesting questions: what is the Dalai Lama’s real motive? In the last fifty years, there has not been any improvement or signs of any resolution between the Chinese and the Tibetans. What exactly have the Tibetan Government been doing to attempt to resolve the issue other than decades of promises which have amounted to nothing? The CTA, based in Dharamsala, form the hard-core of the Tibetan Government in exile. They have been deemed as uneducated, unskilful and ineffective by a vast amount of politicians, historians and academics. Today, they present themselves as a Nationalist Front, a kind of extreme right-wing socialism in a sense, blending national pride and patriotism with religious zealousness and a church-state dictatorship. More on them below.

Furthermore, the protesters insist that the moment the Dalai Lama lifts his ban, they will stop protesting – it’s that simple. However, representatives of the Dalai Lama have
continually insisted that the injustices against Shugdenpas in India are the acts of a few crazy individuals. An article in the Independent says:

‘A spokesman said examples of Shugden Buddhists being barred from entering shops are “actions of individuals” and are not associated with the Dalai Lama. “Some individuals may have put those posters up but His Holiness has not encouraged those practices, nor has he condoned them,” a spokesman said. “His Holiness cannot be responsible for actions of individual Tibetans.”’

As already mentioned, the protests and the ISC in general have moved far beyond merely opposing the ban on Shugden. Their primary aim is to destroy the reputation of the Dalai Lama. In one of their posts, they write ‘But while the world fetes the Dalai Lama as a great Buddhist leader the truth is that through his lies and deception he is destroying the spiritual heart of the Buddhist religion and transforming it into a vehicle for naked personal ambition and political gain’ They don’t back this up directly in the article but instead offer the reader a PDF download or downloadable copies of their books. One of their claims is that the Dalai Lama and his government have systematically played the western media with regards to freeing Tibet from the Chinese in order to accumulate vast sums of money through donations. Of course, it is not only possible but likely that a lot of money donated to this cause has not been accounted for – we would probably find the same result when studying any charity, anywhere in the world. The authors of the books however, tend to derail from their central arguments by reverting to seemingly non-related speculation: the Dalai Lama is fascinated with the Nazis and with war; the Dalai Lama was chosen incorrectly by Retin Lama (for a bunch of reasons); the Dalai Lama is connected to the CIA; the Dalai Lama is power-mad and wants to take over the entire world of Buddhism, etc etc.

Something that struck me over the years, especially in the last two, is that most of the more sensible and learned talks, posts and videos by pro-Shugdenpas come from Tibetans, not from the NKT teachers. Talks by Kyabje Kundeling Rinpoche, Tsem Rinpoche or Geshe Tseme Chering prove to be substantially more informed, culturally aware and knowledgeable than posts, videos and blogs by the likes of Kelsang Rabten, Khyenrab or Morten Clausen. It is almost as if they are required to come to the rescue...

**War of Morality**

What a lot of these defence-statements seem to get locked in to is a battle for sympathy. The Shugdenites are revealing countless photos, videos, news reports and eye witness accounts about the extreme violence, injustice and crimes against humanity that are being sanctioned by the Dalai Lama and the CTA. They have pointed out that the CTA are openly withholding medical treatment on the basis of a person’s faith, which is of course illegal, encouraging children to bully, shun and beat up children from Shugden families and lying about the state of health of various senior Lamas. There are videos and testimonies from Shugden families telling their stories as well as a growing number of Tibetans in exile angry at the Dalai Lama for not only destroying their homes and kicking them out of their temples, but for creating friction, schisms and countless feuds within the various Tibetan Buddhist schools and the Tibetan people in general. Examples of this are the Dorje Shugden issue, the Dalai Lama’s meddling in the Karmapa affair (a subject privy to the Kagyü lineage, not the Gelug
lineage), Dalai Lama’s ‘cat & mouse’ game with the Chinese and Dalai Lama’s countless broken promises for autonomy.

On the other side are the supporters of the Dalai Lama. They are disgusted by the allegations being made and point out that it is solely due to the Dalai Lama that there still remains a strong and largely positive spirit of Tibet and a strong unity between its peoples. Although the world tends to forget about the Tibetan situation, the fact remains that all kinds of Buddhists living in Tibet continue to be suppressed, beaten, imprisoned, tortured, raped and murdered by Chinese police, military and other authorities. This cannot be denied and, like the facts about the CTA and their policies, are available for people to see directly, at face value. Supporters of the Dalai Lama point out that he has worked tirelessly to promote peace, unity and strength between the four major Buddhist schools – an important step to take, considering the exodus of Tibetan culture all over the world, not to mention centuries of suppression of the schools by the Gelugs. His role in the Karmapa controversy is seen as nothing more or less than simply offering guidance and building a bridge of trust and companionship between two schools that, for various reasons, were often at odds with one another (and perhaps an attempt to clean up the ‘sectarian’ mess Je Pabongkha has been accused of creating). Dalai Lama’s ‘failure’ to find a resolution to the China problem is not his fault, but the fault of the Chinese. He is doing everything he can to maintain a good relationship while still holding on to his request for autonomy. And finally, his advice against Shugden is not a ban but simply guidance; it is not him beating people up or barring them from hospitals.

Perhaps more importantly, the Dalai Lama is seen as being the very first to attempt modernising a very old, undemocratic and superstitious religious system: The Dalai Lama is doing everything he can to right past wrongs, to reconcile problems that have been growing over centuries between the different schools and to help Tibetan Buddhism in its passage towards westernized modernity. This is no easy task and, even if just on a psychological level, the Dalai Lama has functioned very much as a unifying principle for Buddhist traditions in general and the Tibetan people specifically. While many Gelugs believe his undermining of four separate traditions is an attempt to gain power over them all, his supporters see this as a wise and compassionate method of changing some outdated aspects of Buddhism, none of which were originally part of Buddhism anyway (such as having four distinct schools of Buddhism).

Finally, both sides end up resorting to childish politics. The Anti-Dorje Shugden camp rely heavily on the fact that the Dalai Lama is world famous as a peace keeper and a do-gooder; the Pro Shugdens rely heavily on power and credibility granted them by endorsement from other high-ranking Gelugpas, actors, media buffs and news reports. If anything has changed since 1996, it is only that both sides now appear less credible than they did before and that many individuals are clearly spending less time on the meditation cushion and more on Google and Wikipedia.

Something funny I noticed over the years is the way in which someone’s opinion is judged to be too gullible or too egocentric, depending on their position. If for example I discuss this issue with a Shugdenpa and take the side of the Dalai Lama, defending my standpoint with a variety of thoughts, facts and ideas, I will be told that I am not questioning enough: I am simply swallowing the nonsense I have been told when I should, as Buddha
himself instructed, question everything. However, if I present arguments to the Shugdenpa for why I think they are wrong, indicating that I have questioned what I have been told by them, then I am an ego maniac who has elevated himself above the advice of enlightened masters. The same is true the other way around, of course.

**The ‘Extremists’**

This is the third level on which the battle is unfolding: in the lonely, private and mostly web-based world of the ‘extremists’. I use that word to describe someone who obsessively and compulsively tries to set their views through, regardless of consequence, opposition or facts.

The extremists in this case are the following: On the Shugden side, we have first and foremost the authors and propagators of the two books that have been written. Unfortunately many of them have chosen to remain anonymous (like most of their Facebook counterparts), acquiring a lot of criticism from their opponents for doing so. However, several of them are known and they are within the NKT. NKTers who support the cause believe that Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has given his full blessing for it, that he has helped in putting these books together and that he continues to encourage the demonstrations. The anti-NKT groups believe the same and hate him for it. Some of the more active people in the Shugden camp follow here: First we have Gen Kelsang Rabten, a long-time teacher and monk who has become the more or less official spokesperson of the ISC. He has been sent to all kinds of talks, forums, panel discussions etc – always dressed in a suit instead of his robes – where he eloquently and carefully puts forward his reasons for why the ISC are doing what they are doing; his alter ego it seems prefers to don the robes and join the protests, where he shouts somewhat insulting slogans at the Dalai Lama. Ani Kelsang Pema – the initial spokesperson of the cause and one of the prime organisers thereof (now retired or possibly fired); Ani Kelsang Tubchen, British nun and resident teacher in Oslo, who helped write and compile much of ‘A Great Deception’. According to her, much of her work on the book was researched and written together with Gen Kelsang Tharchin (Chip Rodarmor), something many find hard to believe; Gen Kelsang Khyenrab, one of the most senior monks in the NKT and one of the most active and outspoken in the Shugden cause, often attacking those who disagree with harsh language and disrespectful comments. One may wonder what a senior monk, who was for a short time the successor to Gyatso, is doing spending large parts of his day on Facebook. Well, it is not for the sake of spreading messages of love and wisdom.

In a reply to a comment left by someone on one of his posts, Khyenrab writes: ‘...you don’t know what you’re talking about, wake up or shut up’. Kelsang Khyenrab is well known for his constant slogan “Dalai Lama: the worst dictator the world has ever seen!” and for taking part in every demonstration – at the expense of charity raised in local centres. He is furthermore the creator of the (completely perfunctory) website http://kadamemanation.

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13 Gen Tharchin, head of the NKT’s retreat centre Tharpaland and coordinator of most major retreats, is also probably one of the most respected senior monks in the tradition, often regarded as a very simple, pure yogi. As his daily life consists primarily of meditation, his deep involvement in the book ‘A Great Deception’ is questionable. He was the director of NKTs retreat programmes until about 2012, since when he has stepped back due to health reasons. He still leads retreats in various centres.
com/my-words-are-the-law, a site dedicated to –surprise surprise – exposing the false Dalai Lama and bigging-up the NKT.

Although the NKT centres have vowed to keep the demonstrations completely separate from the spiritual program, Bodhisattva Centre in Brighton, UK recently collected money for their resident teacher Gen Kelsang Chodor so that he may attend the annual ‘Fall Festival’ in New York. They failed to mention that he was attending several demonstrations in the area over the course of a couple of weeks, leading many to question the ethics behind the centre, and indeed the financing policy of the NKT in general. As will be investigated below, this would not be the first time the NKT has been criticized for breaking laws and regulations concerning charities.

There are several NKT teachers and students working tirelessly online, keeping so-called ‘smears’ off the Wikipedia page, making sure various other blogs and sites are updated “correctly” (i.e. in favour of the NKT and/or Dorje Shugden) and getting more and more entangled in various public relations battles and stand offs with opponents. One of these missionaries as previously mentioned is Gen Kelsang Jangdom, who is resident in Oslo, Norway, Neil Elliott (former Gelong Thubten) and Lucy James, who was asked to step down from her role some years ago. Then there are a handful of Tibetans who have joined the movement for the sake of slandering and destroying the Dalai Lama with whatever information they can. Resorting to calling the Dalai Lama a Nazi sympathiser because he acquainted a man believed to be a Nazi war criminal and to denouncing Dalai Lama to a mere Saffron Robed Muslim, rather than a true Buddhist Tulku. Naturally both statements completely backfired and defamed nobody other than the authors, for they a) imply that the love of a Buddhist should be partial and judgemental, and b) that Muslims are somehow bad or of a lesser quality. In 2010 I was involved in a long dialogue with an anonymous ISC activist and I asked what he thought about this islamophobic statement. He replied ‘I don’t mind Muslims, but I’m a Buddhist; I want a Buddhist guru’. Considering that every single western Buddhist was a Christian, Jew or atheist before they became Buddhist, his statement is ridiculous.

I have met and spoken to Kelsang Tubchen about the issue; likewise with Kelsang Jangdom and a vast host of NKT practitioners from different corners of the world. I also spent many summers working in the kitchen at Manjushri Centre with Kelsang Rabten. Icelandic Kelsang Lobon, once a resident of Bodhisattva Centre, has raised very strong anti-DL sentiments and does not fare well in discussions on the subject (when I challenged him to provide sound arguments against some of the points raised by the ‘Survivors’, he could only respond by saying they were all mad and insane, as was the Dalai Lama). Danish teacher Kadam Morten Clausen and Australia-based Kelsang Rabten have become two of the most outspoken teachers on the subject. What I have gathered from the first three I mentioned was that they were deeply convinced by what they were saying and there didn’t seem to be much room in their minds for discussion or persuasion. For them, the act of demonstrating and revealing to the world the hypocrisy of the Dalai Lama is of great spiritual importance, and finally, a tremendous offering to their spiritual guide, Geshe Kelsang. A lot of their arguments were based upon the ‘bad press’ that the ISC had been trying to give the Dalai Lama and not so much on the actual ban of Shugden practice itself. Both individuals however showed me that they were in firm but respectful dialogue with equally firm
opponents. As teachers of Buddhism in general I found them to be very practical, warm and accurate. As for many others I interviewed, most of them were simply not informed of the situation and had very little knowledge of the subject in general. Morten Clausen stands out from the crowd; although he has been sent to various talks and conferences for the purpose of asking testy questions, he seemed rather more open to discussion than many others and had somewhat deeper an insight than some of his peers. Nonetheless, he too has contradicted himself by stating on the one hand that he has nothing against the Dalai Lama and just wants him to lift the ban, and on the other shouting extremely crass and insulting allegations at him.

It is quite common for the protest organisers to give their ‘soldiers’ motivational pep-talks along the lines of ‘Just imagine what an amazing offering this is to our kind spiritual guide’, or ‘Geshe-la has asked for our help. Now is our chance to offer it to him. Oh, how fortunate we are’, etc etc. Well, NKT, we must reward the ‘Survivors’ with a point here: this is indeed a form of Stasi-like propaganda. A demo I attended in 2008 began with a long talk from Pema along these lines. It would have been completely unnecessary and indeed idiotic, had everyone there been secure in their belief and conviction in the first place.

We then have the extremists on the other side, who consist of mainly two groups: The CTA and the NKT Survivors.

The NKT Survivors was founded around 2005 by David Cutshaw, a part time visitor to an NKT centre in North Carolina, USA. David was a self-confessed manic depressive, apparently suffering from various kinds of problems. At some point he was told by someone from an FPMT forum that the NKT were a dangerous, demon-worshipping cult. He was intrigued and investigated this claim, coming into contact with one website and blog after another. It was in one of these chats that he met Tenzin Peljor, an ex- Kadampa monk (‘Gen Kelsang Tashi’ in the NKT and ‘Michael Jäckel’ in Christ’s eyes) from Germany and the single most prominent and consistent anti-NKT activist I have come across. Peljor encouraged David to break away and told him of many other ‘survivors’ of this mad cult. This inspired David to establish the ‘NKT Survivors’ group, which today consists of 50+ members (though probably no more than ten active ones). Although David has disappeared from the scene, Tenzin remains increasingly active and posts from him can be found on virtually any site, blog or chat relating to the NKT, Dorje Shugden, cult groups and Geshe Kelsang controversies. He is convinced that Geshe Kelsang is an evil, full-fledged cult leader, whose only interest is power, autonomy and independence. According to an article on dialogueireland.wordpress, Peljor is affiliated very strongly with the CTA – Central Tibet Agency, who rely heavily on his posts, articles and blogs. He also works within the Deutsche Buddhistische Organisation – DBO, supposedly as a non-biased, objective spokesperson. Peljor himself denies any kind of connection to the CTA. In a recent article on his own wordpress blog ‘Tibetan Buddhism: Struggling with Difficulties’, he stated that the NKT, whom he defines as synonymous with the ISC, have systematically and consistently attempted to tarnish his personal history and connect him to the Tibetan Government for the sake of discrediting his claims. He believes that this is simply further proof of the NKTs cult status: as a Gelug tradition who have carefully split away from any other ‘normal’ Gelug organisations, they are now a
stand-alone powerhouse, a brand that needs to be defended at any cost. Aside from criticizing their involvement in the protests, Peljor has often spoken of the NKTs scriptural deviation from the Gelug lineage they claim to represent: he suggests that Gyatso’s books have distorted the teachings to elevate the Guru’s importance and downplay the importance of studying other schools or traditions. This development can be clearly seen when we look at NKTs history: establishing their own centres in the early eighties, breaking away from the FPMT in the late eighties, changing Tharpa Publications from a publisher of books on Buddhism in general to exclusive publisher’s of Gyatso’s books, establishing the NKT in 1991, ridding all major centres of non-Geshe Kelsang books, etc.

I have met and discussed both the NKT and the Dorje Shugden issue with Tenzin Peljor. While I strongly disagreed with many of his points, some of them were reasonable, valid and important. Overall, while I do not personally understand how someone can spend such vast amounts of time attempting to steer potential victims away from a certain tradition (which in the eyes of the vast majority is harmless and ‘positive’), I found him to have deep, practical knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and to be a good teacher of Buddhism. Interestingly, both Tenzin Peljor and Kelsang Khyenrab have stated that their ‘activism’ is part of their spiritual path and is done out of compassion for others.

As for his credentials, he has become a bit of a shadow-figure in the world of western Buddhism. As the author and creator of countless websites since 2008 he has appeared under at least eight known pseudonyms, such as Tenpel, Losang Tashi and Michael J.. Investigators such as online journalist “Indy Hack”, linked to ‘dialogueireland’, ‘Inform’ and other forums (and since exposed as an NKT activist), have commented on odd facts surrounding Tenzin, such as that he left the NKT in 2000 but only started actively writing against them after becoming ordained by the Dalai Lama. It is also known that many of his articles have been referred to and uploaded by the CTA, suggesting a possible connection and leading many to believe his blogs, websites and other posts may in fact be funded or at least encouraged by the Tibetan Government. After leaving NKT in 2000 together with his teacher (an NKT nun at the time), he continued a close disciple-relationship with her, eventually leaving and joining the Rime movement in India. After ordaining with the Dalai Lama, he suddenly became prominently active in fighting the NKT and is seen as the main protagonist of the NKT Survivors, or NKT Survivor Activists. Strange yet obvious connections between Peljor and Robert Thurman have been found as well, specifically surrounding the Lama Gate Incident. With regards to a new website entitled shugden.info, dialogueireland posted:

“Following Hamburg a new website was created specifically for the media to counteract the protests. It was a website that was designed to be both anonymous, yet have the support of Tibet House in the US. .. It was all very mysterious and Tenzin Peljor made no mention of the website until someone posted a comment on his website drawing his attention to it. He pretended to know nothing about the website until this comment on October 19th, however he had set one of his own websites to redirect to this new website two days previously, on October 17th. The mystery deepened when I was discussing some of the controversy with Professor Robert Thurman… On 30th October Prof. Thurman stated to me that, “we prepared shugdeninfo.com for you @IndyHack”… Prof. Thurman was saying quite clearly that he was involved with the creation of the new website (shugdeninfo.com)
and yet Tenzin Peljor had redirected his own domain name (shugden.info) to Thurman’s new site. It was too much of a coincidence for me to drop and I was encouraged that there was now a direct link between Thurman and Peljor.

“The fact Prof. Thurman had admitted direct involvement with the shugdeninfo.com website went beyond the mere approval of the site by Tibet House US and indicated that he had been directly involved in its creation with one or more other people. Tenzin claims the purpose of his websites are, “to counter the misinformation campaign of the NKT”, yet his own approach appears to be promoting the disinformation campaign of the Tibetan exile leadership. He also created a declaration and canvassed for signatures on it because he was instructed to by people who objected to even the slightest criticism of the Tibetan community. His new website in response to the media coverage of the protests in 2014 appears to have been created in collaboration with Professor Thurman.”

The author of the article concludes:

“Tenzin Peljor is well funded and has significant resources and time to invest in this issue... For instance at one point he offered to fly to Ireland to discuss his Stasi background when issues about it arose. The logical conclusion is that Tenzin Peljor is acting in accordance with the wishes of the CTA as one of their de facto agents. The persona he projects as being an ex-NKT “survivor” simply trying to right the wrongs he experienced is nothing other than a smokescreen.”

Both Tenzin and Carol McQuire have voiced strong criticism towards this article. Peljor has published several articles that attack IndyHack as a fraudulent journalist, possibly an NKT-‘spy’ of sorts. IndyHack was also recently incriminated in the Twitter ‘scandal’, in which countless fake twitter accounts had been created by NKT/ISC activists for the sake of attaining a record-high tweets about the evil Dalai Lama. They failed in their attempt and are also being investigated by the Twitter regulatory body (cue Nelson from South Park: ‘Ha, ha!’) An additional fact that was highlighted however, is the manifesto of the Survivor Activists: The original document, though completely in favour of the Dalai Lama and against the Shugdenpas, nonetheless suggested that there may be some room for criticism towards the CTA regarding how the problem was handled. This was removed and the document now available on the CTA website (affiliated no doubt with webmaster Peljor) makes no mention of the slightest bit of criticism towards the Tibetan Government. So although the Survivors continuously blame the NKT for never accepting blame or allowing for transparency, the same can be said of the CTA, perhaps to a far greater degree: just like the Chinese Communist party, they too have clearly been suppressing bad press and withholding information that in any way allows for the slightest amount of criticism.

Website Fundamentalism

Aside from my personal meeting with Peljor in 2012, I believe I first met him as ‘Michael’ in an online discussion in 2008, in which he used very harsh language, some dubious sweeping statements and wild theories about my motivation (including accusing me
of being a Chinese spy and religious fundamentalist). In one blog that featured him prominently, I posed as an anti-Shugden Dalai Lama supporter. I purposely used very poor and aggressive language to test Michael’s reaction (the blog also featured ‘Davcuts’, i.e. David Cutshaw). Parallel to this, I had been writing in an overly polite and careful style in support of both the demonstrations and the NKT (at that time I felt it was the right thing to do). Many of my posts were removed or not posted at all, often followed by a message from ‘davcuts’ saying my messages were pure nkt-propaganda, offensive and not welcome on their site. My inflammatory pro-dalai lama messages, which said things to the effect of ‘nkt and shugden are crap man, dalai lama rules dude! We all know this’ – these messages were not only left on the blog, they were answered very affirmingly and positively. I must add here however, that I have received the same kind of ‘talk to the hand’ reaction from pro-ISC bloggers, many of whom use derogatory language, insults and threats.

In March 2015, Peljor posted a new article on the blog he manages under Buddhism-controversies, ‘Struggling with Difficulties’ in which he defends himself in very much the same way that the ‘nkt truth’ website attempts to disprove all the ‘smears’ against them. He says he does not and never has worked for or with the CTA, that he does not represent the Dalai Lama and that all the other various ‘conspiracy theories’ about him are false. In this article he has quoted a message from Inform regarding the original analysis from ‘Indy Hack’, which supposedly lets him off the hook, shall we say. Finally, he concludes that his work on this and other websites is done out of compassion for others, so that they may be informed of the cult that is the NKT. I think that probably a lot of these statements are true; as in all such feuds, probably too much has been made of Peljor’s involvement with the CTA and the Thurman shugdeninfo case. On the other hand, just like the article from dialogueireland says, there are too many coincidences to white wash Peljor’s potential involvement or at least support from powerful yet shadowy sources. And once again, one wonders what motivates an individual to spend what must be the better part of everyday working on countless blogs of this nature. Peljor runs a considerable list of articles, including critiques and criticisms of other Buddhist groups such as the Diamond Way or Triratna. One may say that he credits himself as having a hell of a lot of insider knowledge of these other groups that he has never been affiliated with. Nonetheless, there is no single institution he drags through the dirt as much as the NKT.

Possibly a result of a group effort involving Peljor, is the website nktworld. This website is run by a handful of ‘Survivors’ and presents itself as an objective form of ‘Buddhist journalism’. The site is hardly in use these days, possibly due to its derogatory nature (often featuring sweeping statements about individuals that are simply nasty). The site attempts to prove that Gyatso is a false and evil Geshe, that NKT monks and nuns are all frauds and that the NKT and their demonstrations are funded by the Chinese. Not a single allegation is backed up. Instead, many photos of protesters are posted alongside paragraphs ‘narrating’ these photos for the purpose of portraying the activists as insane morons.

What is more valuable to this study, is that the site has a section called ‘Reader’s Essays’, where anybody could write in (provided it was a negative experience with the NKT) and leave a kind of testimony. Many of these testimonies are deeply troublesome and, if they are true, would warrant severe criminal charges against the NKT. The authors of these articles, most of whom remain anonymous, tell of severe sectarian bullying, mental and emotional punishment, resulting in severe depression, anxiety and stress in an alarmingly high
amount of individuals – and in a couple of cases, apparently suicide. One guest writer, who claims he was asked to work on behalf of Gyatso’s security team around 2002 writes:

“I was told that we were creating the cause to become Dharma protectors in the future. I asked how serious the threat was and I was told sternly that HH The Dalai Lama had placed a contract out to have Geshe Kelsang assassinated. During the festival I also had to be trained in how to search for and identify bombs and other incendiary devices. This whole thing was becoming absolutely insane. However, I was told that is was necessary to protect Geshe-la and to protect Lama Tsongkhapa’s doctrine. Again as I wanted to be accepted I accepted my job. Wore my stab proof vest and was ready for confrontation. I believed this to be perfectly normal as every one was responding as though this was perfectly rational.”

He goes on to explain how, after distancing himself slightly and questioning some of the ‘advice’ that trickled down the hierarchy, he was not only asked to leave his center, he was banned from attending any NKT activities and literally thrown out of and escorted away from Manjushri Centre in Ulverston.

Unfortunately the stories presented on this website are hearsay, opinions or personal experiences and it is very difficult to verify them. I have spoken to as many NKT practitioners – current and ex – as possible, trying to find out if anybody could give me a similar testimony directly. The truth is, online, there are countless testimonies along these lines, and they are quite serious in nature. From my conversations, I found that while some people had encountered some issues and problems relating to the hierarchy and exclusiveness of the NKT, only one person told me a real horror story. More on that later.

What I can confirm myself from direct experience, was that Gyatso was indeed followed around by truly menacing looking bodyguards during the NKT Summer Festivals between 2002 and 2004. They all carried guns, had bomb squads on location (checking the temple and priory) and ‘detained’ many young kids walking around the camp at night on suspicion of ‘threatening activity’. We were told that this was all because Gyatso had recently received an alarmingly high amount of death threats and the perpetrators of these messages were believed to be near by. Naturally, all of us Buddhists were quite disillusioned by this attitude.

Another prominent ‘activist’ is Carol McGuire, from Brighton. Unlike Peljor, Carol is a very public activist, often speaking at conferences or to people on the street near protests that are taking place. Carol was also ordained by Geshe Kelsang but disrobed in 2006 after an incident involving sexual relations between her ordained teacher and a resident nun caused very severe factions and bullying in her centre (Brighton’s Bodhisattva Centre...again). Prior to that, she had been given various tasks and duties at the centre which went well beyond a full working week, leaving her exhausted and sleep deprived. Aside from never receiving the slightest bit of gratitude, her requests for assistance or guidance were met with verbal punishment. She is convinced that she was abused, at least emotionally and psychologically. When she requested help from Geshe Kelsang she did not get it, or was barred from him by a kind of NKT-office elite (a common problem in many religious organisations). She has explained that there was a culture of authoritarianism within the NKT; Geshe-la was more than just a spiritual guide, he was entrusted with the status of a
god-king with nobody ever daring to question his wishes, teachings or commands. This attitude was also encouraged by her friends, both lay and ordained, creating a kind of aura of blind, cult-like devotion within the NKT. The fact that all books by other authors were banned, teachers from other Gelug traditions were not welcome and the NKT was accepted as the last pure dharma lineage in the world were symptoms of this attitude.

Curiously, the fact that the Dalai Lama is adored by millions who do not question his actions does not seem to bother her. Critics of her statements have often pointed out, that her description of Gyatso and the NKT could ultimately be applied to many religious (or other) organisation, certainly the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile.

Today, Carol spends a large part of her time on anti-NKT websites, preparing press statements that denounce the protests against the Dalai Lama or standing outside of various NKT events handing out flyers. She has become, somewhat like Kelsang Rabten, the ‘official’ spokesperson for the Survivors and is also the author of an official declaration, used by the CTA on their website, demanding the NKT/ISC to stop their activity.

Along with Tenzin Peljor, her view on the subject is far wider than the protests and the Dorje Shugden practice. She is completely convinced that the NKT’s use of Shugden is part of a more sinister, psychological design:

“...I believe the NKT is a closed society that needs to silence those who try to interfere with its claimed authority and I believe they use Shugden to do this. Shugden is used in the NKT as a psychological technique used to silence critical outsiders.”

She goes on to explain that the Shugden issue is used to make it difficult for insiders to ask difficult questions, to challenge previous incidents of sexual abuse or misconduct and to question the authority of Gyatso. Around the same time as this was spoken, she wrote an open letter to Kelsang Rabten (read it here: http://buddhism-controversy- blog.com/2014/09/14/dear-kelsang-rabten/); although now ‘fighting’ on opposite sides, they were old friends and she had always respected him. She sees his front as the shrewd Shugden journalist as puppeteering by the NKT and fears that once he has been used up, he will be dropped, fired or expelled, much like Pema had been.

On the more extreme end of the scale, she has been known to approach people she knows to be Kadampas, shouting “it’s a cult, it’s a cult! You know that?! It’s a cult!” A friend of mine reported this happening in a restaurant – everyone stopped eating due to her tirade. As an artist, she completed a ‘piece’ which featured her old NKT robes cut to shreds and stuck on a board as a kind of ‘shedding’ of her old, tormented self. In 2014, following a huge boost of demonstrations surrounding Dalai Lama’s visit to Oslo, Carol and Tenzin put together a manifesto and changed their name from ‘NKT Survivors’ to ‘NKT Survivor Activists’.

Like Peljor, she is convinced that Gyatso’s books have subtly and intentionally changed traditional Gelug Buddhism to help achieve his goal of exclusive power. But this motivation is rather strange if one considers the next stage: If Gyatso has shut out other Gelugpas and is helming the NKT as his own powerhouse, what exactly is he aiming to take control over? He has no other Gelug institutions, organisations or centres to take over as, according to Carol, he has purposefully shut them all out. At any rate, Carol also claims that the NKT’s packaged ‘modern Buddhism’ is a kind of simplified, light and fun version of the traditional forms of Buddhism, which being boring to many westerners wouldn’t sell as well. Dr. Nathan Hill, who organises Panel Discussions for the Tibetan Studies Outreach Lecture
Series at SOAS University of London, claimed not to have found anything specifically different about the NKT when compared with other Gelugpa groups. Up until the mid 1990s a handful of Gyatso’s books had even been used by non-NKT Gelugpas including some FPMT teachers in study programmes. Specifically the books ‘Clear Light of Bliss’ (1982), ‘Guide To Dakini Land’ (1991) and ‘Ocean of Nectar’ (1995) were often cited by non-NKT gelugpa authors before the late 90s and continue to appear in bibliographies, though less so these days. All three were at some point regarded as one of very few authentic translations of their respective subject (Tantric Mahamudra, commentary on Vajrayogini practice and commentary on Chandrakirti’s Guide to the Middle Way). To be fair, Carol and Peljor generally refer to Gyatso’s later books – ‘Transform your Life’, ‘How to Solve our Human Problems’ or ‘Modern Buddhism’ – as indications of NKTs move to simplify traditional teachings. As the older books are still being used and re-issued, this motive remains highly questionable. On that note, I wonder what Carol has to say about the little “populist” Buddhist pocket books by the Dalai Lama, such as ‘The Little Book of Wisdom’ or ‘The Art of Happiness’ – two fantastic books in my opinion, but undeniably simple repackaging of tradition-laden Tibetan Buddhism.

I have often bumped into Carol or met her through mutual acquaintances. I have heard many people describe her as ‘crazy’, ‘nuts’, ‘insane’ and the like. My own opinion is of little relevance here, although I believe her to be psychologically unstable and the picture-perfect profile for a religious zealot who’s been let down and now suffers a severe case of Anger-at-God. Her full statement can be found on a variety of websites, including Tenzin Peljor’s ‘Struggling with Difficulties’ and makes for a rather insightful read. Among her many complaints is the fact that she was so poor, her daughter and her had to cook the rice that was left over in their mandala kits … Aside from finding it difficult to believe such a banal scenario (in a country where, especially back then, anybody could get on the dole in the worst case and in her case, get child support), I see this as a further indication of blame-seeking. Carol was instrumental in putting together a kind of manifesto by the ‘NKT Survivor Activists’ (signed by 28 people, several of whom claim not to be affiliated with this group at all! In fact, Graham Smetham, author of numerous excellent books on Quantum Buddhism, though a good friend of Carol’s, has absolutely no affiliation with this cause. Although he is totally opposed to the tactics of the ISC, he has no interest in the subject and doesn’t ever wish to get involved), a document that was also posted by the CTA on their website – albeit not before they edited out a passage that admitted that there were a few ‘problems’ with the Tibetan Government and some minor issues.

Although most of Carol’s allegations and assertions are mere opinions, her concern about the authoritarian exclusivity of the NKT is by no means an isolated observation. It is a fact that shortly after the NKT was officially established in 1991, all books by authors other than Gyatso were given away (the Survivors have claimed the books were burned in some sort of Wicker Man ceremony). Prior to this ritual, Manjushri institute was home to thousands of books and texts by a variety of authors of varying traditions. Even their own publishing house, Tharpa, published books by many different authors such as Geshe Rabten and Sankharakshita, founder of the Triratna (aka FWBO) tradition. By Gyatso’s order these were completely discontinued by 1992. Since then, and continuing to this day, the NKT have moved more and more in that direction, albeit through subtle steps: Many well known artists
of Buddhist thangkas (such as Andy Weber, Graham Dyer or Robert Beer) have either disassociated themselves from the NKT or been cut off; today, 90% of NKT produce is NKT-made: digitally constructed thangkas, sparkly polystyrene statues etc. Every NKT Gompa (meditation room) has the identical shrine in the identical style in much the same way that every McDonald’s you enter anywhere in the world looks basically the same. Teachings given by the current director Gen-la Kelsang Dekyong lay a lot of emphasis on “kadam dharma” as opposed to just dharma, the kadampa tradition, the purity of this specific tradition, the rarity of kadam dharma, etc.

‘A Good Dose of Propaganda Never Hurt Anyone’

The NKT is not part of any greater Buddhist union, of which there are several. In the NKT Summer Festival of 2014 at Manjushri KMC (Manjushri Institute), Dekyong gave perhaps what were to date the most exclusive or even sectarian talks; although other traditions or other Gelug lineages are never criticised, the constant drilling of how pure and correct the NKT and Gyatso’ presentation of the dharma is implies as much. While a bit of motivational talk to boost confidence never hurt anyone, these talks dominated the entire teachings; so much so that next to nothing was said about the actual subject, which that year was related to Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara. Many teachers, students, monks, nuns and members of the more general public were very disillusioned by the teachings Dekyong gave that year. I spoke with many of them and there was a deep sense of discomfort, which gave rise to a sudden surge of reflection, questioning and re-evaluating. I could write more about this here, but I do not wish to divulge personal information nor turn this study into a psychological and emotional study of a few selected individuals. Suffice it to say that this aspect of the NKT lends some credence to allegations of propaganda and brainwashing made by Peljor and other Survivors.

Many dedicated NKT practitioners who acknowledge these facts see them as positive: the NKT is very focused and the teachings are not being mixed with those of other traditions, which is likely to lead to confusion. This statement, prominently voiced by NKT teachers when confronted with questions concerning the above, is rather exclusive to the NKT – I have not come across Buddhists from other western traditions warning about the dangers of mixing their own tradition with others; rather, it seems to be left up to the individual to decide for themselves. More critically, the NKT’s constant emphasis on not mixing traditions as this would lead to confusion can be seen as outrightly patronising. It furthermore goes against Shakyamuni Buddha’s own advice to test various teachings, question them and thereby validate or invalidate them. In a discussion I had with a monk from London in 2011, I mentioned having attended a protector empowerment and ceremony in Spain within the Karma-Kagyu tradition. The monk (whom I prefer not to name here) was literally beside himself in disbelief: How could I attend a ceremony in another tradition, for another protector? How dare I take initiation outside of the NKT, let alone for a non-Dorje Shugden protector?

Nonetheless, despite all these points, they remain open to interpretation and discussion and do not in and of themselves incriminate the NKT as a whole.
As mentioned – and as you the reader might be gathering from the story so far – an unimaginable amount of time and effort has been devoted to this ‘cause’ from both sides of this tug of war. There is so much incrimination, slander and negativity being aimed at the opponent of each side, one quickly forgets about Buddhism all together. This is a far cry from the simple, non-judgemental teachings once spoken by Gautama Shakyamuni (and Je Tsongkhapa, for that matter). Tsem Rinpoche commented on his website:

“We can go on endlessly on social media and criticize another lama over and over again, its not going to change the lama, its not going to change the situation, it doesn’t make us a better person, nor does it make me a better spiritual person. And to recite Om Mani Padme Hung on one breath and then another breath to criticize another lama seems contradictory and not complimentary.”

Tsem Rinpoche is a contemporary Tibetan teacher, ordained by the Dalai Lama, whom he regards as one of his main teachers, yet who practices Dorje Shugden and had as his root Guru Kyabje Zong Rinpoche. It is perhaps no surprise that his credentials, history and person have been attacked, yet interestingly only by the anti-Shugden side. In fact, recent developments reveal that Tsem Rinpoche has begun receiving the usual array of death threats supposedly by Dalai Lama fundamentalists. If this is true, then it really is a very serious issue and needs to be brought to the attention of the Dalai Lama and CTA, who need to react right away with a reasonable course of action.

Severe Allegations or Seductive Allegories?

Linda Ciardiello is another NKT survivor who has recently published her testimony on DialogueIreland (June 2015) along with many posts on Peljor’s ‘Controversy’ webblog. She was a practitioner within the NKT between roughly 1992 and 1997. Her testimony presents us with nothing new: accusations of the NKT being a cult, Gelong Thubten’s history of sexual abuse and Gyatso’s intentional cover-up of this, NKT’s systematic manipulation of the media regarding their own history and the Dalai Lama, etc. She also tells of an ex-NKT monk she recently bumped in to. He had been sent to Spain where he fell in love with a girl, got her pregnant and was then subjected to tremendous verbal abuse by Gyatso. Eventually however, he was told that his actions had been forgiven, that he should forget the girl and the baby and return to England: the NKT office would make sure his story remained hushed-up.

Linda’s article, like that of every single other Survivor, is a testimony based on hearsay, opinions and the re-telling of other people’s stories. She recounts all kinds of little snippets of things she heard from a variety of NKT monks and nuns that apparently ‘prove’ their cult-like status. In one of her many recounts, she mentions an NKT monk looking at a magnificent building of the Sokkai Gakkai tradition who said ‘they must have very powerful protectors to own such a building’. To Linda, this statement was a sign that the NKT is materialistic and use the Dharma Protector for non-spiritual purposes. In other words, she has provided us with another childish and more or less useless article.

This is actually very unfortunate, especially if the allegations are true: Many of these kinds of allegations constitute criminal offences and would warrant a very serious investigation. The problem however, is that Linda’s article makes statements that are not
sourced or documented and are then followed by her own personal conclusions; i.e., it was believed that Gyatso knew of Thubten’s sexual affairs with women and it was believed that he helped cover this up – he is therefore a cult-leader. Like Carol and Peljor, she too has concluded that Gyatso is an unqualified teacher who uses and abuses his closest disciples for his own aims. Linda left after the Dalai Lama-Shugden issue began brewing in 1996 and she heard Gyatso’s ‘paranoid’ theory that the Dalai Lama’s motive for the ban was to take over all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Certainly it is true that Gyatso has said this; but he has also given a rather diplomatic interview on the subject where he states:

“The Dalai Lama needs to say publicly what evidence he has for saying that Dorje Shugden is an evil spirit who is harming Tibetan independence and his life. Just saying Dorje Shugden is bad is not enough. He needs to say why, so that people can understand. Of course we have many good reasons why we think Dorje Shugden is a buddha. Believing this doesn’t harm anybody. If the practice of Dorje Shugden is bad, then definitely we have to say that Trijang Rinpoche is bad, and that all the Gelugpa lamas in the Dalai Lama’s own lineage would be bad. It is his responsibility to clarify this.” (Tricycle Magazine, 1998)

Linda writes in her article on Peljor’s ‘Controversy’ blog:

“Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Professor of Indology and Tibetology at the Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich, explains the dilemma of the Dalai Lama by pointing out, that this protective deity carries with it, ‘……a constant potential for conflict, both within the Gelugpas and between the Gelugpas and the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The fact that Shugden is definitely not a protective deity for Tibetan Buddhism in its entirety, but that the followers of other schools reject it, and some even vehemently, is of the utmost importance in understanding the dilemma in which the Dalai Lama finds himself today.’ According to Hartmann, the Dalai Lama’s ‘intentions accordingly can be interpreted as that he considers the balance between the different schools as a supreme good, rather than exclusively favoring his own school in the style of a party politician, and that he is even ready to pay for this a high price of massive conflict within his own school. Only by doing so would he be able to fulfill his stated claim to be the Dalai Lama of all Tibetans’.”

There are some interesting points here, most of them once again rather self-defeating. Prof. Hartmann’s assertion that this protector deity carries with it a constant potential for conflict is nonsensical, since no historical documentation exists that substantiates this claim. It also doesn’t affect the other schools of Buddhism: The Kagyü couldn’t care less about Shugden and the Sakyas have never had internal issues concerning the practice. The Nyingmapas have only recently shown signs of disagreement with Shugden, not least of all since the ‘ban’.

The second point is a lot more essential, as we have seen that there may indeed have been sectarian uses of Shugden. Considering the Tibetan situation since the Chinese revolution, it is not only plausible, but likely that the Dalai Lama will try to suppress or get rid of aspects that may be harmful to the idea of a unified Tibet. But to those critical of this approach, this is simply evidence of a grand plan of sorts for the Dalai Lama’s lineage to take control of all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The problem with this theory however, is that it
is not only without a shred of evidence, it is currently being completely undermined: the Dalai Lama has already retired, there is talk of the entire Dalai Lama-lineage being discontinued and furthermore, should it continue, it will do so by election.

**Thurman and the Lama Gate Incident**

The Lama Gate incident has been blown somewhat out of proportion; nonetheless it is a relevant point to cover as it shows the lengths respected academics are willing to go to protect whatever it is they stand for. In this case, it was the attempted illegal hacking of twitter accounts belonging to “anti Dalai Lama Shugden people” by Robert Thurman.

On October 29th, 2014, Thurman sent a tweet asking help of the Anonymous Group (GroupAnon) on Twitter to help bring out information about Shugden people targeting the Dalai Lama. Thurman was apparently cautioned by several tweeters who informed him that this line of action may be seen as somewhat risqué. A webpage from arebuddhistsracist.com dedicated to this event states:

"In the following hours Thurman published a series of tweets identifying specific Twitter accounts to target. He identified each of them as "key Anti HHDL Shugden Twitter Spam Accounts", and followed the account name with the tags #anon and #OpShugden. #OpShugden was devised by another Twitter user (@OpTsampa) who appeared to be working alongside Thurman in his campaign. @OpTsampa also tweeted an offer of 50 BitCoins ($16,967) to anyone who could link the most accounts together that had been identified by Thurman.

Exactly what information Thurman wanted Anonymous members to "get out" of each of the identified accounts is uncertain, although it appears that he was trying to reveal the identities of the owners of the accounts. The only way to get this information would be to gain access to the users accounts without their consent, as such it appears that Thurman was soliciting computer hacking against each of the individually named Twitter accounts."

We need to ask ourselves if this allegation is really true. However, tweets don’t lie.. unless somebody else is posing as Professor Thurman. Several of the ‘targets’ issued a statement which they filed with the NYPD as well as the FBI. Their statement:

"It is alleged that Professor Robert A. Thurman (@BobThurman) did knowingly solicit others to commit computer hacking and provided information to direct said computer hacking against several users of Twitter in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1030 (a) (2). On October 29th 2014 it is alleged Professor Robert A. Thurman directed computer hackers associated with the ‘Anonymous’ group to hack Twitter’s computer servers and extract information about the following users: @tompotter1945, @TalkingTibet, @wisdomdakini2, and @Vajralight. I am making a formal complaint about alleged criminal activity by Professor Robert A. Thurman and asking you to investigate whether any criminal activity has taken place."
As may be suspected not much came of this. However, considering Thurman’s very close ties with the Dalai Lama and even more so with the CTA alongside Tenzin Peljor, many suspect their involvement or at the very least knowledge and consent of Thurman’s actions. The Anonymous Group did respond to Thurman, stating they would not be helping him. Naturally, as one might expect, Tenzin Peljor has published a post on his Buddhism Controversy blog about the ‘false’ journalist IndyHack, whom he accuses of creating ‘arebuddhistracist.com’ and articles such as the above as part of the Shugden propaganda machine. Beyond this opinion however, Peljor provides little if any strong arguments against the claims made on the website.

As seems to be the pattern with this feud, the ISC have recently been incriminated for creating a false Tweet-storm by creating countless fake twitter accounts.

The Absurd Stance of the FPMT

There has actually been very little animosity expressed towards the NKT and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso from most Tibetan Lamas and teachers residing in the west, possibly in part due to the fact that many –possibly the majority- really don’t care about this issue; and because many of their friends and peers deeply respect and support Geshe Kelsang and his cause. One notable exception to this is Namkhai Norbu, a Dzogchen Tulku, who has often warned students about the evil spirits that surround the NKT and the dangers of associating with their followers. Does this advice harken back to the harsh language against Nyingmapas used by Shugden-wielding Je Pabongkha? Is it inspired by large cheques from the CTA? Or possibly just a person’s opinion?

As for other established institutions, most Tibetan Buddhist groups, like most human beings, really don’t care about this matter, as it is exclusively within the Gelugpa tradition. What does that mean? It means this: There are roughly 400 million Buddhists in the world, most of them in China. Most of the rest live in South-East Asia, such as Thailand, Laos or Vietnam. There are less than 10 million Tibetans and associated Buddhist cultures (practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia, for example), of which possibly a fifth are associated with the Gelugpa tradition. For this reason, when NKT London teacher Kadam John McBretney states (as he did in a recent panel talk) that many millions of Buddhists’ lives have been destroyed over the Shugden issue, he is simply completely wrong. And even within the Gelug population, I believe it remains a minority who really care about this issue, which has been blown out of proportion simply by the will to be right on both sides.

Nevertheless, the FPMT have officially declared that they will ‘do as the Dalai Lama instructs’ and have often requested that no Shugden practitioners attend their teachings. On the homepage of their website there is a link to ‘Advice on Dolgyal (Shugden)’. Here there is an article highlighting the dangers of the practice and explaining its illegitimacy. Specifically point 1, ‘The danger of Tibetan Buddhism degenerating into a form of spirit worship’ claims that:
“The problem with Dolgyal practice is that it presents the spirit Dolgyal (Shugden) as a Dharma protector and what’s more tends to promote the spirit as more important than the Buddha himself.”

According to the paragraph, this type of practise does not align with a tradition of great philosophical scrutiny and ‘critical analysis’. Why the practices of other protectors such as the Nechung oracle (the dharma protector ‘Pehar’, whose history and function has been connected primarily to political power and motives) or Mahakala should be exempt from the same tradition of critical analysis is not explained, nor are examples given of Shugden being elevated above the Buddha himself. The article goes on to explain that the practice promotes sectarianism and, specifically, harms the cause of Tibetan freedom and the wellbeing of Tibetans:

“Propitiating Dolgyal is particularly troublesome, given the Tibetan people’s present difficult circumstances. Textual and historical research demonstrates that the spirit Dolgyal arose out of hostility to the great Fifth Dalai Lama and his government. The Fifth Dalai Lama, who assumed both the spiritual and temporal leadership of Tibet in the 17th century, personally denounced Dolgyal as a malevolent spirit that arose out of misguided intentions and is detrimental to the welfare of beings in general and the Tibetan government headed by the Dalai Lamas in particular.”

Again this passage lacks any form of critical analysis and relies instead on opinions. As we saw in the history of Shugden, the Fifth Dalai Lama was in fact instrumental in developing and promoting the practice of Shugden. On the other hand, the strong connection and blend between the Tibetan Government and the spiritual tradition of Buddhism has long been viewed as problematic; perhaps there are Shugden practitioners who believe that a real dharma protector should harm the political cause of Tibet, as it may interfere with the religion. No doubt we are familiar with this problem in the west.

The FPMT, during the time of writing this, actively encourage their students to avoid Dorje Shugden practitioners, to stay away from centres or teachers who are associated with Shugden and forbid Shugden practitioners from entering their study programmes. As an independent registered charity they have, of course, every right to do this. From a more humanitarian point of view however, we might view this attitude as highly discriminative. Some have said that this is no different to the Catholic Church banning people who pray to a certain saint more than another. As a comparison, the NKT have never promoted this kind of ousting nor does their website include a similar sort of manifesto regarding the Shugden cause or the Dalai Lama problem; there is no mention of Dalai Lama followers not being allowed in to their temples or study programmes and their websites make it clear that everyone without exception is welcome, including disciples of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, for example. This is not to say they are a better or purer institution, it is simply an interesting observation, as it indicates, to a certain degree, the extent to which this Shugden issue has infiltrated the spiritual organisations in question.

There are other big differences between the NKT and FPMT, such as the fact that the FPMT has a vast array of books by different authors and traditions and in some respects, despite being primarily Gelug, does not adhere to any one specific institution. Yet it has its own exclusive or even cult-like qualities, such as those already mentioned concerning the abjection of Shugden practitioners. Within the FPMT it is not only taboo, it is downright
forbidden – at least publicly – to dispute or question the Dalai Lama. The ‘propaganda machine’ that the NKT have been accused of setting in motion is just as visible here. Many FPMT monks rehash the same old anti-Shugden ‘facts’ and issue warnings against associating with Shugdenpas. There is little difference between this and the rehashing of anti-Dalai Lama ‘facts’ coming from NKT monks and nuns within the ISC. Many of the more dedicated FPMT practitioners display a strong form of pride with regard to the idea that they were the ‘first western buddhists’ and the original establishers of Tibetan Buddhism in the West (which is not true at all). This subliminal feeling or attitude, though subtle, is comparable to the exclusivity of the NKT. Even though the FPMT is a vaster network of sorts, acting as a kind of hub for various Tibetan Buddhist organisations, it is nonetheless carefully governed and finally adheres to HH Dalai Lama. I wonder if I could throw the following rhetorical question out there at this point: Could it be that the NKT simply had bigger balls than the FPMT by speaking their mind? Could we say that the FPMT in some ways betrayed their founder Lama Yeshe?

On the other hand, Lama Zopa Rinpoche has never expressed a negative word towards his old colleague Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, with whom he spent a lot of time in Ulverston, pre-NKT. On the contrary, letters written to ex-NKT practitioners asking him for guidance clearly advise them to go back to Geshe Kelsang, to respect him as their guru and to pray to him for forgiveness:

“By giving up Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, you have created heavy negative karma in this life. Since you haven’t given me up, I suggest that you confess to Geshe Kelsang Gyatso about what happened, and devote yourself again to this virtuous friend.... So, change your attitude and apologize to Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. Confess to him and follow him again, unless he says, “No”. This will help lighten your heaviest negative karma.”

It should also be noted that Geshe Kelsang himself has not publicly said a negative word about any Lamas who have chosen to follow the Dalai Lama’s advice and stop their Shugden practice. He stated in interviews held in 1998: “The source of the teachings and practices comes from Lama Tsongkhapa. We have never said that here we are pure, whereas others are not pure. The dharma is the same.” He goes on to say in the same interview however, that he believed the Dalai Lama was responsible for this issue and that he doesn’t view him as enlightened or otherwise special.

At least two people who had been living in the NKT’s Madhyamaka Centre in York in 2002, claimed that the resident teacher had called them to a house meeting during a teaching tour by Lama Zopa. The teacher read out a letter from Gyatso that said, anybody was free to attend Zopa’s talk, but if they did so, Gyatso would no longer view them as his students and they would not be welcome in the NKT anymore. Unfortunately more information on this has not been forthcoming, nor was this letter or email ever seen by anybody.

What remains debatable is Geshe Kelsang’s views on the strong animosity held by Shugdeners towards the Dalai Lama. If, as some say, he is behind the bulk of the ISC and their books, then his opinions are not only clear, they are also largely against Buddhist principles. If, as many others say, he is not behind the book but has simply encouraged people to ‘help in whatever positive way they can’, then we cannot officially tie him to the ‘extreme’ level of the dispute. In the same way, Lama Zopa Rinpoche may or may not be directly behind the FPMT’s discrimination and segregation. Gyatso stated in 1998 that the
demonstrations had stopped and had been intended only as a brief attempt to stop the ban. He said these actions are never to be mixed with NKT in general and would stop for good, which they did towards the end of that year.

He changed his statement in 2008 when he announced that he had been requested, once again by close friends of his (presumably Tibetans) to help them; he appointed Kelsang Pema and Kelsang Tubchen to lead this project, while simultaneously removing long time editor Lucy James from her previous role (allegedly because she disagreed with starting new demonstrations) and put her in charge of the ‘anti-smear’ website nkttruth.com.

Tenzin Peljor has observed that generally, nothing in the NKT is done without Gyatso’s explicit order or consent, so why should the activities of the activists be any different? On the other side, we have ‘Atisha’s Cook’ claiming the same: all his and other ISC activities have been condoned and ‘approved’ by the highest authority in the world, Geshe Kelsang. In his own words, when responding to a blogger who questions this, he says that neither him nor anybody else in the ISC have been requested by Gyatso to stop or change their actions; and since they must know about what is going on, we must conclude that they condone it. But of course, this line of reasoning – not to mention its’ source – is dubious at best.

I believe we can conclude that Gyatso definitely allowed and quite possibly requested the demonstrations, promoted the ‘fight’ against the Dalai Lama’s ban and acted as the main inspiration for the ISC. Beyond that we cannot prove anything. In his own words, he said the following:

“Generally, the Kadampas before Lama Tsongkhapa are known as Old Kadampas, and after Lama Tsongkhapa, in books the lineages are called New Kadampa. This is because Lama Tsongkhapa had a slightly different way of presenting the dharma. But the only title used nowadays is Gelugpa. I called our dharma centers the New Kadampa Tradition. All the books that I have written are commentaries on Lama Tsongkhapa’s teachings. The source of the teachings and practices comes from Lama Tsongkhapa. We have never said that here we are pure, whereas others are not pure. The dharma is the same.”

It has been suggested that, aside from appointing people to helm the project, Gyatso has not been involved. Many believe that he is not aware of the defamatory tactics being employed by the ISC, nor of the content of the two books they produced. Even Tenzin Peljor agrees this may be the case, albeit for other reasons: “That Gyatso is not aware of the extent of the ISC activities might be true. Rumours go he might have certain old age sicknesses which make him unable to think for himself.” Someone who has chosen to remain anonymous has even stated that Gyatso has expressed deep concern and even fear over the monster this feud has become. It is not unusual for a situation like this to turn in to a Frankenstein: we have a movement that is now simply driven by its own passionate momentum, with little if any resemblance of its original purpose. A monster has been let loose and nobody really knows what it wants, let alone how to stop it.

We can say for certain that the loudest and largest sector of people involved in this dispute is made up of Westerners, particularly British, American, German and Spanish Buddhists, mostly from or associated with the NKT. We can also say for certain however, that a huge number of prominent Gelugpa Lamas and practitioners of Tibetan origin fully support and agree with the actions of the Shugdeners, the NKT, Geshe Kelsang and so on. We can therefore
conclude that various statements made by defenders of the ban and of the Dalai Lama in general that describe Dorje Shugden practitioners as representing a small, cultish splinter-group of the mainstream, is false and made up.

We can similarly say that allegations of large-scale crimes against humanity (including condoning torture, murder, etc) that have been thrown at the Dalai Lama and the accusation of him being the ‘worst dictator the world has ever seen’ are completely banal, without any solid evidence and purely emotive. A brief look at Facebook pages or Tweets by Pro-Shugden activists shows very clearly that this is a war based on opinions and fuelled by strong emotional attachment to one’s view. One often wonders how much time and money the middle-class Shugdenpas of the Western world have, as they appear to be either posting messages or travelling around the world singing songs about Dalai Lama’s lies.

The ISC Refuse Open Dialogue

Just as the anonymous writers of Dialogueireland said, each party in this fight is guilty of what they accuse their opponents of. The latest news (July 2015) is that the ISC, who have supposedly been fighting righteously for open dialogue, turned down an offer of just that. The shugdeninfo website states:

> “In December 2014 NKT/ISC senior most figures were contacted with the offer of a concrete proposal to bring to an end the suffering Shugden devotees were allegedly experiencing, by removing instances of discrimination from the public arena. They were asked for substantial, up to date evidence of any discrimination (the medical center “no admittance” sign photograph their press pack contained was 15 years old) so that any instances could be rectified. The offer was conditional however. It asked that, if all instances of alleged discrimination were removed, would the NKT/ISC cease their demonstrations. This offer was made directly to NKT founder Kelsang Gyatso, his seniormost representatives, Elliot, Foley and Pitts-Rabten, and receipt acknowledged by the latter. The NKT/ISC were asked to respond by January 5th 2015, but no response was received. The deadline was then extended, but this time with the caveat that a lack of response would be taken as confirmation that neither did they wish to accept the offer nor enter into meaningful dialog over the issue. Again, no response was received.”

Naturally, the ISC will have some argument for why this happened, but it really doesn’t warrant further investigation. At this point, we have seen that the ISC is just as whimsical, fraudulent and inconsistent as the worst of the Survivors. Allow me to juxtapose this with a quote from an interview with Kadam Morten Clausen, conducted shortly before the above message:

> “We want an open discussion. Why is there no dialogue? We need to ask ourselves this. We have nothing personal against the Dalai Lama at all – we just want him to lift the ban.”
And Kelsang Rabten:
“We have tried to have dialogue on this with the Dalai Lama and his representatives for nearly twenty years ... So even though they’re not here, maybe this is a step in that direction, who knows?”

The Results

The result of this ‘debate’ is that Gelugpa Buddhism and indeed Buddhism in general has lost a fair amount of respect and admiration from Westerners. Whether or not the activities of the ISC will lead to a future of harmony and a solution cannot be determined, but I personally find it unlikely. What we can say with certainty is that their activities to date have backfired and harmed the repute, credibility and authenticity of Dorje Shugden practitioners all over the world; yet there has not been a proportionate move in the direction of lifting the ban or solving the problem. As far as specifically the NKTs involvement, this has backfired as well for three discernible reasons: firstly, it has created and continues to expand a gap between those involved in the ISC cause and those opposed; it has blurred the line between spiritual activities under the rubric of a democratic charity and inappropriately funded political agendas, making the ethos and direction of the tradition questionable; and finally, it is turning both long-time practitioners as well as potentially interested practitioners away in ever increasing numbers. We live in a time where people can check up on such things as their local meditation group or Buddhist classes that are on offer. What will people find who google ‘meditation classes near me’ in the UK? It is likely to lead to an NKT-affiliation, further googling of which is certain to lead to a plethora of NKT ‘smears’. A good friend of mine who broke away from the NKT a couple of years ago said ‘I get enough conflict in the world out there. I don’t come to a dharma centre to get more of it’.

The Dalai Lama and the entire Tibetan Government in Exile have taken a slow but heavy blow due to this conflict, not least of all due to their double standards, paradoxical statements, denial of certain irrefutable facts and superstitious allegations, many of which have come to the foreground as a result of increasing media coverage. The demand for human rights and the increased investigation within that field in the last decade has also revealed undeniable problems with many of Tibet’s policies, the banning of the Dorje Shugden practise being one of them.

It is true that the vast majority of the world has not read or even heard about this issue, but those who have – and here I mean journalists, lawyers, religious sceptics, etc – have tended to voice more than just a few criticisms towards the Dalai Lama ‘camp’. Robert Thurman himself has appeared all over YouTube avoiding questions and reacting with childish slander, the Dalai Lama continually skips between saying ‘yes, there is a ban’ and ‘no, there is no ban’ and the CTA have been exposed as possibly one of the most dysfunctional and nationalistic governmental cabinets active today. In the wake of this issue, other non-related criticism against the Dalai Lama has begun to grow – steadily – leading many to believe that the days of the Dalai Lama lineage are numbered.

More surprisingly in a way, is the fact that this whole issue is still going on; one might have thought it would have died down by now but it continues to be driven, primarily by the
demonstrations continuing on the one side and the NKT Survivors blogging about it on the other. Both sides have moved further and further away from any kind of factual debate or commentary into a realm of pure hearsay and fiction. In a recent post discussing whether or not the ban was the right thing to do on ‘Struggling with Difficulties’, Tenzin Peljor writes:

“...But those who have some idea how radical and narrow minded Shugdenpas can be, how much the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma and Kaygue, fear that practice and refused to work in a democratic exile government of Tibetans in India (see the research of Mills), how deeply sectarian this practice became, how controversial its origin is, and how much the concomitant sectarian spirit of that practice undermines the harmony among the Tibetan Buddhist schools and Tibetans in general; how much it creates pride, sectarianism, elite thinking and also a lot of negative karma by looking down to other schools (see how bad Pabongkha Rinpoche spoke about other schools at later stages of his life), and then the brutal murdering of Lobsang Gyatso and two of his students ... it appears, at the end, the Dalai Lama just didn’t have any choice than to restrict that practice as much as possible.”

I have included this quote because I feel, from what I have studied, that it is representative of the overall anti-NKT sentiment while simultaneously being fuelled by completely baseless statements. There is not the slightest hint of evidence that the Nyingma or Kagyü fear the Shugden practise (however, if any individuals do, we know this is due to the ban and ‘bad press’). To call Shugden practitioners narrow minded is silly in itself and self-incriminating; perhaps this was lost on the author. Naturally we have found tremendous ‘narrow mindedness’ among those participating in this feud but this hardly warrants a generalisation like this one. The Pabongkha comment is also not backed up in this statement (Pabongkha was indeed very pro-Gelug and outspoken against other philosophical standpoints he regarded as inferior to the Prasangika line. His discussions on this are however generally within a philosophical framework). Peljor then makes this interesting comment:

“Based on my own experiences as a Shugdenpa and as a follower of their lamas, I don’t wish to have any contact with them nor do I wish to live with them, consequently I can also understand others (like the monks in the monasteries or settlements) who have the same wish; and it IS also my and their freedom to decide against living with them and sharing my/our resources with them and that freedom was used by the monks of the three Gelug monastic seats when they expelled them, after a long time of a ‘live and let live approach’.”

Like the majority of those in favour of the ban, Tenzin believes he has found a way to excuse discrimination simply based on his own opinions and wishes, which contradicts many other statements he makes in the same blog. The fact that many of his statements are blatantly un-Buddhist seems to have eluded him and all the Buddhists who share this attitude.

Paradoxically, in an article on his blog from August 2014, he says:
“These protests are a very rare and useful opportunity to practice patience and different Dharma methods to increase the positive mental energy by being mindful of the content of the mind and just observing it or by actively cultivating an antidote of non-hatred or an understanding of dependent arising etc. From a dharmic perspective they are my best friends. They offer the rare chance to practice patience; they help me to learn to be at peace and calm, not getting disturbed. The protesters are my sponsors, donors and friends; no!, they are better than my sponsors, donors and friends because they serve as a basis to cultivate the quality of patience and love, precious gems not even my sponsors, donors and friends can offer me. So they are the best thing I can meet or encounter in order to train my mind! Actually it is a very precious opportunity, which should not be left unused. Thank you, dear protesters!”

Although it is clear that Peljor sees himself as ‘doing the Lord’s work’ to use a Christian phrase, or at least to be doing a positive service to mankind, his efforts are so often ineffective due to his many double standards and inconsistencies. For example, On the one hand, he replies to ‘Jetsun’ in a post on his blog saying ‘I don’t care if the Dalai Lama is true or false only if he has good qualities’. Yet he has mentioned countless times in a variety of posts that Kelsang Gyatso is not a real ‘Geshe’ because he never received his actual degree, making this out to be very important.

I do not wish to judge or speculate, but supposing I was a psychologist, what would I make of someone like Peljor? While on the one hand very intelligent, well-read and sourced-up, he is also very impulsive, indicating (possibly) that many of his thoughts are inspired by mood swings and passionate, or emotional, reactions.

Now, we need to have a look at some of the comments, statements and blogposts from the other side. People like the so-called ‘Atisha’s Cook’, who though hiding behind such a pompous name is none other than a web savvy NKT resident teacher. Together with his friend Khyenrab, he has offered up all kinds of nonsensical, highly evocative and emotive reactionary comments about the evil false Muslim Dalai Lama and the utter supremacy of the NKT and Shugden practice. He has been active as a pro-Shugden/NKT blogger since at least 2008 and it is suspected that he has been active under many different names and guises. In a discussion on the severely anti-NKT site tibetanaltar.blogspot.uk, he actually gets into a discussion with Peljor and is completely defeated. In defense, he simply leaves the conversation!

A brief but fair point: we cannot equate Atisha’s Cook to Tenzin Peljor, for while both are tirelessly blogging and trying to defame each other’s group or position, Peljor presents this in the form of full articles backed up by research and anybody can reply. Atisha’s Cook on the other hand seems keener to blurt out catchy tweets, slogans and shout-outs. He rarely provides the reader with any real information, preferring instead to spout the usual ‘supreme and purest tradition’ propaganda. He systematically erases any posts that are not 100% in agreement with the ISC’s extreme view. How anybody within the NKT can take this character seriously is actually a very interesting question and warrants a thorough psychological group study. He has erased the few critical comments I had left on the ‘Dalai Lama Truth’ Facebook page, simply responding to me with short, arrogant insults.
Here are some bizarre statements made by the Cook:

“It really saddens me when I hear folk say they love Geshe la but not the NKT – as if there’s a difference! Geshe la IS NKT and NKT IS Geshe la”

After the fraudulent Tweetstorm, he writes on the Dalai Lama Truth Facebook page:

“This just makes me so proud of my sangha I could cry”

And then there’s this… I think this is my favourite:

“Hitler destroyed the lives of millions, but the False Dalai Lama is trying to destroy the path of liberation for millions. Hitler’s actions harmed his victims in one life only; the False Dalai Lama’s actions are harming his victims in countless future lifetimes. As Buddhists, we understand that the False Dalai Lama’s actions are FAR more harmful than Hitler’s. The False Dalai Lama is the worst dictator of this modern age.”

This last statement would be truly sad if it weren’t so completely pathetic. Perhaps Atisha’s Cook should spend some time meditating on the gas chambers. Or study his history. I don’t wish to investigate ridiculous claims such as this kind of religious drivel, but just briefly: his very view that the Dalai Lama’s actions have enough power to harm what he regards to be a perfectly pure Buddhist tradition is retarded.

Posts by the Cook’s friend Kelsang Khyenrab, all within one hour of each other, posted on 23/06/15:

“Here is more proof that YOU LIED!”
“Stop your heinous religious discrimination now!”
“You will become known as the Lying Lama”
“Stop lying and stop manipulating the media” (Funny this one after what I learned about Kelsang Jangdom’s role in “updating” important websites to favour the NKT’s position on this issue…)

It should be noted that Kelsang Khyenrab’s entire Facebook page is filled with posts about this issue dating back several years. At times there are more than ten postings in one day. Many other NKT members hold similar Facebook pages.

A Paradox in Belief

If the Shugdenpas truly believe that Dorje Shugdän is an enlightened dharmapala, then they have nothing to fear and thus absolutely nothing to defend. However, having spoken to a very large number of them, I have often encountered a strange counterargument:

Although ultimately Dorje Shugden is a Buddha and the tradition is protected by Tsongkhapa and all the Buddhas, conventionally and due to our karma, the relationship with this deity is being threatened. Due to this, the entire Gelugpa lineage, or at least the purity thereof, is also being threatened and needs to be defended. Now is the time for us to fight. Moreover, the purity of the lineage is being threatened by the wish from some high ranking Lamas to unify all the schools, which will lead to dilution.

Any normal thinking individual can see right away the severe lack of intelligence in this argument; but would it hold up within a Buddhist framework? The answer is definitely no:
There are no teachings, at least none that are regarded as being authentic, validating a position like this. The statement displays a false understanding of karma and conventional reality. It is, of course, a common ploy within religious fundamentalism to twist and turn traditional teachings to suit one's own needs.

For the sake of discussion: If as a practitioner we have strong faith in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, that is our refuge and protection. Therefore, it could be argued that the entire system of dharmapalas, which exists only in the highly ritualistic and shamanic Tibetan form of Buddhism, is completely unnecessary. Aside from this, if we view our dharmapala as a Buddha, conventionally or otherwise, we believe nothing can harm or destroy him or the practice. We also have absolutely nothing we need to defend. Furthermore, a clear understanding of karma should lead one to the opposite conclusion, for if we understand how the mind works, we understand that we are creating causes with our actions. The constant promotion of the Shugden-‘part’ of Gelug Buddhism and ‘fighting’ the other anti-shugden ‘part’ creates the causes for further conflict, segregation, disharmony and war, both in the external world as well as psychologically in individuals. This should be quite obvious.

One intention of the whole Shugden Campaign has been to give a voice to those who have been persecuted as a result of an inhumane ban. But as we have seen, the activities of the ISC and ‘Kadampa Activists’ have gone far beyond this seemingly noble cause. The idea of the ‘pure lineage of Je Tsongkhapa’ being threatened is a thought that can only arise from fear; there cannot possibly be another source. It also relies on a premise that implies the NKT and/or ISC members to be the only upholders of the ‘pure lineage’, which is statistically ridiculous (a group of maximum ten thousand people versus the other 390 million Buddhists in the world). Naturally, if one is led (i.e. brainwashed) to believe this unbalanced view, one will develop fear of losing that rare gem; and as Gen Kelsang Dekyong keeps reminding Kadampas, “we are so fortunate; we are sooo fortunate; we don’t realise how fortunate we are.” etc.

Fear has factored in to the whole style of ‘activism’ that we are witnessing here, namely in the form of passive aggression (i.e. suppressed anger). We see this in the form of degrading cartoons of the Dalai Lama, allegations of him being a Nazi sympathiser and brutal dictator and the constant accusation of oppressing his own people. Paradoxically, Gyatso has written in several books of his (and this is a well known theme within the NKT) that to intentionally aim to destroy someone’s faith in and positive view of somebody is a severe downfall and generates very negative karma. Having faith in one’s spiritual guide is of paramount importance within Buddhism and it is a theme Gyatso writes about often. As the mind of faith towards the Guru is more important than the qualities of the Guru from their own side (qualities we cannot prove anyway), the conscious attempt to destroy the faith that millions of people have in the Dalai Lama seems hypocritical at best, schizophrenic and psychotic at worst.

I had a long chat with several dedicated Kadampa Buddhists from various Swiss NKT centres in the Spring of 2014 after one of them had complained about the violent and insulting reactions they received from those exiting the Dalai Lama’s conference during the demonstrations. All were active participants in the demonstrations as well. I asked them the following question:
Suppose you were going to a conference centre somewhere to receive teachings by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, who only very rarely makes any appearances. You were understandably very excited and looking forward to what you felt would be a deeply meaningful event. As you approached the building, you saw several hundreds of people protesting against Geshe-la, holding up banners that called him a lying fundamentalist and others making fun of his appearance with caricatures. Imagine they were all chanting and shouting together, saying ‘False Geshe’, ‘Worst Guru in the world’ and things like that. They were handing out booklets that accused him of religious intolerance, covering up sexual abuse and destroying the dharma. Suppose you got by them and entered the hall, awaiting Geshe-la’s arrival: Once he arrived and began his teaching, his words were drowned out by the loud shouting and drumming from the protesters outside. Your long journey, the money you spent and more importantly, your intention to receive his teachings were destroyed. How would you feel?

All of the five people I asked this instantly reacted defensively. One of them exclaimed that this was an invalid comparison as “…the function of such a demonstration would be completely different and without foundation.” When asking her to elaborate, she rehashed the usual “facts” that supposedly incriminate the Dalai Lama. When I asked her to simply imagine that the tables were turned and she was in the hall whilst others were slandering her precious Guru, she could only vaguely offer ‘well, I would probably be sad but I would forget about it and know it was nonsense’. Another answered passionately ‘Oh, well I wouldn’t care at all, as I know that none of it is true’. He too commenced to give me a lecture about the Dalai Lama’s distasteful speech at Nürnberg and his obvious Nazi-connections. The point is, none of them, not one of them, was humble enough to empathize with the other side. Empathy, along with compassion, is an indispensable hallmark of Buddhism.

As our discussion progressed into uncomfortable temperatures, one of the people said, ‘Oh well, I think this whole thing is happening on a much higher level than we understand and one day we will all look back and laugh’. So much for intelligent insight.

Now to balance, let’s look at the absurdity of the belief held by those upholding the ban:

The crux of the issue is this: The practice of Dorje Shugden harms the Dalai Lama and shortens his lifespan, while also acting as an obstacle to the Tibetan cause. It furthermore deteriorates Buddhism because it is a form of spirit-worship. In addition to this, it promotes strong sectarianism. In her supposedly objective article *Dorje Shugden Controversy in Tibetan Buddhism*, ‘Buddhism expert’ Barbara O’Brien makes the following points:

“Shugden worship encourages sectarian enmity. His Holiness wants to promote non-sectarianism and tolerance among the major schools and various sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Loyalty to Shugden is counterproductive to this goal. Shugden worship is not Buddhism. This is obviously true. Buddhism is not a spirit-worship religion. I say more about this below. Shugden worship is bad for Tibet. Among other things, it is alleged that the Shugden sect, which goes about protesting the Dalai Lama wherever he speaks publicly, is being supported by the government of China. There is no direct evidence of this. However, the government of China makes robust use of the Shugden protests for propaganda purposes.”
As many scholars have pointed out, if this kind of argument were to be presented in a typical monastic debate, it would be defeated instantly.

The first obvious flaw is this: If Shugden is merely a demonic spirit, how can he harm spiritual practitioners, let alone the Dalai Lama? All Buddhists accept and believe that, if they have taken vows, say the Bodhisattva, Refuge, Pratimoksha or Tantric vows, they are protected by the Three Jewels; there is no Buddhist school who does not agree with this. Therefore, one has realised and attained as HH The Dalai Lama would have absolutely nothing to fear from a worldly spirit, which compared to the Buddhas has no power whatsoever. We need to remember that the people promoting these ideas also view the Dalai Lama as an emanation of Buddha Avalokiteshvara.

The second flaw, which has been much debated, is that those opposing Shugden are either implicitly or explicitly saying that their own Gurus and masters (such as Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, Zong Rinpoche, Ling Rinpoche, etc) were wrong. This is significant and needs to be understood within the Buddhist context: In Buddhism, your Guru is an emanation of Buddha. Once you accept that person as your Guru, there’s no turning back. They are revered and followed without question. This kind of relationship may seem very foreign or even dangerous to many westerners, but in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism it has always been this way and continues to be so. A disciple sees their root guru as the kindest living being on earth, a fully enlightened Buddha and a gateway to their own enlightenment. You would therefore never question your Guru’s qualifications. In banning Shugden and claiming it to be a non-Buddhist practice pertaining to an evil spirit, the Dalai Lama was saying quite directly that his root Guru Trijang Rinpoche, along with most of his other tutors and teachers, were wrong: Even though they were enlightened and supremely realised, they somehow did not realise that they were worshipping an evil spirit. In later talks on the subject, the Dalai Lama actually said, when asked if his teachers and Gurus had been wrong, ‘Yes. They were wrong.’

The third flaw is that if Dalai Lama and the Tibetan populous in general are believed to be true Buddhists and protected by their other, authentic protectors, such as Nechung, Mahakala, Palden Llamo or others, then the threat of a minor mundane worldly spirit would be of no significance whatsoever. To claim it is shortening the Dalai Lama’s lifespan and the cause of the Tibetan people however, suggests that this deity is extremely powerful and that the true Buddhist protection held by the Dalai Lama is very weak.

The fourth flaw is that the practice itself does not promote sectarianism. Although we have seen in the history of Shugden that the deity may have been used, for whatever reasons, as a tool to promote sectarian ideas, we know that the practice itself does not promote sectarianism. The reason we know this, is that the practice is not secret but is written in black on white and is available for all to read. There is no secret prayer hidden away somewhere. Anti Shugden activists have often claimed that the Dorje Shugden sadhana talks about destroying one’s enemies, upholding the Ganden doctrine and suppressing the others and promotes violence towards non-Gelugs. First of all, the verses about destroying one’s enemies is typical tantric symbolism and is found in all protector sadhanas without exception, as well as in most tantric sadhanas (those of Guhyasamvara, Heruka, Hevajra, Vajrayogini or Vajrapani, for example). All Buddhists know that these verses are symbolical and archetypal, referring to the inner battle against our own delusions. The ‘violence’ in the
sadhana is again a typical expression of tantric wrath and is in fact far less prominent in the Dorje Shugden sadhana than in many other dhrmapala prayers. And finally, there is not a single word in any of the Shugden sadhanas that is in any way derogatory, wrathful or negative towards the Nyingma or other schools of Buddhism. This is a public text and is available for anyone interested to read.

Whether or not somebody or a group of people use a practice for worldly or sectarian reasons is a different issue. The fact that the Romans endorsed Christianity and set in motion a centuries-long world wide inquisition does not take anything away from Christ’s teachings, nor the prayers that Christians recite.

Who is Authorised?

Allow us to briefly completely ignore whether or not the practice is good or bad and ask, who, if anyone, has the authority to allow or disallow such a practice? ‘Expert’ Barbara O’Brien writes further in her article on buddhism.about.com:

“His Holiness has countered that Shugden devotees remain free to worship Shugden all they like; they just can’t do it within the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which His Holiness oversees.”

O’Brien’s information is completely wrong, of course. A much-noted fact during this whole controversy has been that the Dalai Lama is precisely not in a position to make decisions on behalf of the Gelugpa School, not even in the slightest. He may be the most famous Buddhist in the world, but he is not the Pope of Gelug. The ‘head’ of the Ganden Throne is, at any given time the current incarnation of the Ganden Tripa. Yet even the Ganden Tripa is not technically or historically allowed to change things according to his liking. The Dalai Lama may be an important guide to the Gelug and other schools but this is primarily a ceremonial position; he has no ‘overseeing’ power at all, this is a religious fact.

O’Brien states that the Dalai Lama claims not to have issued a ban, merely advice, but this is a point we investigated above and found unquestionable proof that there is a ‘ban’, even if simply a heavily promoted and governmentally enforced forbid. She also concludes in her article that it is a fact the Shugden practice harms the Tibetan cause and Buddhism in general, because it makes Buddhism degenerate into spirit-worship. She does not give a single argument, reason or fact to back up these observations of hers. Perhaps Ms O’Brien should not venture too far beyond the mountain of Zen, which she claims to be her tradition; just in case her expertise disappears in the emptiness of a blank wall.

A Mystical Conspiracy?

There are a handful of people within the Shugden Camp who believe that this whole dispute is just a worldly appearance of deeper forces at work. They believe that the Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang are both manifestations of the Wisdom Buddha, playing out different roles in this ‘play’ for the sake of spreading the dharma and Dorje Shugden all over the world. They back this up by pointing out the fact that the Chinese have recognised the 11th Panchen Lama, a Dorje Shugden practitioner. Had it not been for Dalai Lama’s ban, the Chinese would not have promoted the practice for the sake of defying him and them doing so is
likely to lead to the practice spreading far and wide (honestly, I wonder if Mr. Shugden himself has these kinds of delusions of grandeur…). When this is all over (one day), it will become clear and both sides will in all likelihood laugh about it. A strange theory, but then again, humour has never been a strong point in Western Buddhists.

Other Issues

This issue has brought much negative attention to, primarily, the Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso along with their respective traditions. The NKT has been criticized by an alarmingly high amount of ex-practitioners for being too harsh and rigid with practitioners, for overworking volunteers and more importantly, for never standing up to and apologising for problems and suffering they have caused. It is difficult to prove or disprove this and many of the tales and allegations thrown at the NKT by people like Carol McQuire are so convoluted, baseless and angry that no benefit would be gained from giving them too much attention. Some events are however well documented and can be scrutinized. The disrobing and sudden disappearance of Gelong Thubten (Neil Elliot), which left at least one pregnant nun and many disillusioned students in its wake was never explained by the ‘office’ nor was any apology offered by anybody.

More importantly though, was the more recent disappearance of Gen-la Samden (Steve Wass), the would-be successor to Gyatso. He was extremely popular and much loved, but had a taste for a so-called ‘secret path’ within tantra, which got a few nuns and lay women pregnant. Already several years before his disappearance many feared a personality cult developing around him. Apparently one of his victims tried to seek help from other teachers and possibly even from Gyatso himself but was ruthlessly shunned and called a liar (none of this has been clearly established). Finally, when the evidence was so obvious (growing bellies maybe?), Samden was removed from his position and the NKT in general – not only body and soul, but electronically as well: from one moment to the next, every single NKT website had removed him and put Gen Kyenrab in his place. To this day, no explanation or apology has been offered (this happened in 2007).

Aside from these issues, there have been countless other complaints, some more serious in nature and others rather trivial. Yet, instead of taking ownership and admitting imperfection and offering solutions and/or apologies, the NKT has reacted by setting up a website to fight these complaints, which they call ‘smears’. In short, the NKT has never, in its history, admitted to even the slightest form of imperfection or offered any kind of apologies to any of the many people who have suffered in relation to them, in one way or another.

To me, this point by itself constitutes the strongest evidence of cult behaviour within the NKT. As far as this issue is concerned, we have to conclude that Geshe Kelsang, as the director and continual founding guide of the tradition, has failed. Those now running the affairs, businesses and websites associated with the NKT continue to fail in this respect. In an open letter to the Washington Post in 2002, Gyatso said: “I can guarantee that the NKT and

\[14\] In line of clearly analysing the various problems, it is important to keep differing subject matter separate. Therefore, this conclusion does not automatically apply to Gyatso’s quality as a spiritual teacher, author or other function.
myself have never performed inappropriate actions and will never do so in the future, this is our determination.” Of course we may accept this as a valid determination, but it does indicate an unwillingness to accept any form of imperfection, such as human error.

However, I feel it relevant to add here, that the tradition generally receives positive feedback, comments and opinions, with most small issues being resolved without much fuss. Teachings, events and festivals tend to focus exclusively on Buddhist practice in conjunction with the three study programmes that are available and are not mixed with talks or plans regarding the Shugden Affair or other similar issues.

The exact same attitude is found on the other side, albeit on a wider scale indicating more of a collective sociological problem: The Dalai Lama, and all the Gelugs who stand by him, are virtually untouchable. All criticism concerning the handling of the ‘Dolgyal’ issue has been mostly completely ignored or defended with loose argumentation. It has been left at that. As we have also seen, systematic defamatory critique and invasion of privacy are tactics that prominent individuals associated with the Dalai Lama have employed. Similarly, all criticism raised towards Dalai Lama’s handlings with the Chinese has been white washed and denied, usually turned around (much to the desire of the general public) to make Dalai Lama out to be a purely compassionate and perfect being whose every action is faultless. Interestingly, all groups affiliated with him, such as the FPMT, have a similar attitude about Tibet. Having met and spoken to many westerners of the FPMT, the image they have of Tibet is striking: a perfect, harmonious pure land inhabited by pure bodhisattvas with no knowledge of violence or war; a kind of fluffy pink Himalayan utopia. In a discussion I was involved in concerning the violence committed by Burmese monks in recent years, two women who were practitioners of Gelug Buddhism said that this kind of violence has nothing directly to do with Buddhism (…so far I agreed). As an example, we should look at the Tibetan history, where no violence whatsoever is to be found and Buddhism has rained in perfect harmony alongside Bön and indeed its own four schools. This is complete fiction of course, but illustrates a widely held view among “Tibetan” Buddhists in the west.

Case Studies of ‘Fired’ Teachers

Within the NKT, there is a large body of practitioners who believe, perhaps hopefully, that Gyatso is not behind all the ‘strange stuff’ that’s been going on. Prominent teachers being ‘fired’ or asked to leave the tradition due to not agreeing 100% with Gyatso’s view on the demonstrations, for example; this would be a problem, especially since the NKT prides itself as being a fair, peaceful Buddhist democracy. So has Geshe Kelsang been behind these harsh dismissals, or is it the NKT Head Office? The facts are these:

Bjorn Clausen had been a prominent teacher within the NKT since the late 80s, together with his brother Morten. In 2008 Bjorn had voiced concerns about the extent to which the demonstrations were being carried out, specifically the incredible amount of time and effort devoted to them at the expense of spiritual development. He was warned once by Gyatso, after which he briefly avoided voicing concerns. He changed his mind again rather quickly however after 2008 saw a tremendous increase in demonstration activity and
the first signs of a serious faction within the tradition became noticeable. He didn’t participate or promote the demonstrations, voiced his opinion and was asked, in a very short, formal letter to resign. He attended the NKT Summer Festival 2009 despite this fact, as it was Geshe Kelsang’s last official teachings. Although this seems to suggest a friendly parting of ways, it is a fact that the decision was one-sided, abrupt and came directly from Gyatso. Bjorn has now established his own programme of spiritual wellbeing in Zurich called ‘Inner Light – Kwanten Bewusstsein’. In a conversation with his brother in January 2012, I was struck by his total rejection of Bjorn’s actions and that he had broken off all contact with him.

Other teachers, such as Kelsang Pema, who had been appointed by Gyatso to organise the demonstrations and act as the primary spokesperson and who was “pushed” into rather tricky and confrontational situations with Robert Thurman and various Tibetan Lamas was ‘fired’ very quickly and directly in 2010 when her actions had been deemed by some as ‘too extreme’. Critics of this event have noted that, to brainwash and push someone to fight for a cause they know little about and then to get rid of them the moment they are of no more use is despicable and should be punishable by law. Nonetheless the exact details of Pema’s expulsion are not totally clear. The anti-smear website ‘NKT-Truth’ treated the departure of Pema seemingly openly and transparently, indicating she had too many responsibilities and decided to accept the request to step down from her position as Temple & KMC Developer. Obviously this was due to the fact she had been asked – along with Kelsang Tubchen (resident in Oslo) to head and organise the demonstrations. The fervent anti-NKT website nktworld (created by a couple of NKT survivors) suggests that Pema was tossed out of her role when she was no longer of any use. Then again, the same page also claims that the NKT protests are funded by NKT funds (i.e. money from classes and temple funds) and tax payers. Aside from some money possibly coming from GP fees and the like, there is no evidence for this at all.

I mentioned earlier the testimonies available on the NKT-World ‘Buddhism under assault’ website. Indeed, even if half of these stories are made up or exaggerated, the NKT needs to acknowledge them and take them seriously: there are simply too many severe allegations to be ignored. A rumour I heard from a resident at NKT’s Nagarjuna Centre claimed that some years previously, a meeting had been held with Geshe Kelsang and some members of the NKT office. Jim Belither had collected many of the serious allegations and testimonies and read these out to Gyatso upon his request. Apparently Gyatso cried silently while listening to them all. Whether this is true or not, or what exactly that implies, is for anyone to interpret.

However, I was able to track down a direct testimony by an ex-NKT nun. I do not wish to divulge details of her name, centre or country as she has long since moved on from this part of her life. Back in 2008 and 2009, she had been an ardent protester; in fact, she believed in it to such an extent that she told me ‘this may well be the very reason I was born’. I remember wondering what sort of influence had led her to such a belief. Interestingly, aside from her activism, she was a very down-to-earth type and quite far removed from the whole NKT Universe: as the resident teacher in a tiny centre (the first in that Country), she had the freedom to be creative and flexible. Instead of just sticking to GP and FP programmes, scheduling daily Heart Jewel pujas and prompting people to go to festivals and protests, she
would organise meditation picnics, spontaneous sadhana nights, walks and excursions. The truth is, the sangha was thriving and it was a happy community.

Things changed in 2010 when, for various reasons, she decided not to attend Gyatso’s supposed ‘last festival’ in Brazil. Good friends of hers accused her of losing her faith, being slack and disrespectful and simply stopped speaking with her. This prompted her to start questioning her role and the religion she was part of. I used to have long chats with her about Buddhist subjects outside of the NKT – about Zen, Lama Govinda, Chogyam Trungpa, Vedic philosophy, etc – and she was very interested to continue studying within a wider field again (she had originally studied philosophy).

The whole thing escalated when one day in December 2010, she got a call from Kelsang Pema, who was phoning from and on behalf of the NKT Head Office. Pema had heard rumors that the centre was not being run according to NKT protocol and reprimanded the nun for her deviation. When I say reprimanded: she cursed her and threatened her with the suffering of the lowest hells for aeons, as she had rejected the guidance of her spiritual guide. The nun calmly told her she would not be spoken to in that way and hung up.

A call along similar lines followed the next day and another from somebody else at the NKT Head Office (not known who). The last caller suggested that she was destroying Je Tsonkhapa’s pure dharma and all the hard work Geshe-la had done to establish it.

After some deliberation, she wrote a simple and kind letter of resignation to Gyatso, offering him back her vows. Since then, most of her friends from that time have cut all connection with her.

It may be worthwhile mentioning, that she never made a big fuss out of these events and certainly never became a Survivor. Today, she holds no grudge towards the NKT and is very grateful for her time there.

As is to be expected with one so prominent a figure as the Dalai Lama, there are many allegations and criticisms that have been thrown his way, mostly with regards to overstepping religious issues and the way in which he has been dealing with the Chinese and the Tibetan struggle for independence. The Karmapa affair, which has already been mentioned above, is a rather clear example of the Dalai Lama using his religious and political influence to meddle in religious affairs that have nothing to do with his own religious tradition or authority. The Dalai Lama, in accordance with various advisors, claimed to have found the identity of the 17th Karmapa in 1992, after the throne had been empty since the death of the 16th Karmapa in 1981. Resident in Tibet, inaugurating him in India could be problematic. Yet in this case, in an act that baffled everyone, the Chinese government agreed with the Dalai Lama and helped Ugyen Thinley Dorje get to India between 1999 and 2000. Yet, his identity as the 17th Karmapa had never been approved or even hinted at by the only living authority on the subject, the Shamarpa. Shamar Rinpoche strongly opposed the Dalai Lama’s choice and rightly stated that this was an ancient Kagyü affair having nothing to do with the Gelugpas, let alone the Dalai Lama lineage. Consequently, Shamar Rinpoche proclaimed Thinley Thaye Dorje to be the real reincarnated Karmapa in 1994. Since then, there has been a struggle over who should mount the throne at Rumtek, the Kagyü mother-centre in Sikkim. Investigations were launched in both directions, apparently exposing an extensive money-laundering project associated with Thinley Dorje and the Dalai Lama’s Government in exile.
Today the Karma-Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism has been split due to this discrepancy. Thaye Dorje has not been allowed to enter Rumtek as it is controlled by the Tibetan Government, who are acting in accordance with Dalai Lama’s religious opinions. The fact that the Chinese so readily accepted and ‘released’ Thinley Dorje and that the Indians reluctantly granted him a Visa despite discoveries of financial crimes has led many to suspect an alternate motive and cover up. Those in favour of Ugyen Thinley Dorje make up the vast majority of the Karma-Kagyüs today; this is to be expected, as the endorsement of the Dalai Lama is bound to have a strong influence. Nonetheless, the Thaye Dorje camp have stood their ground and remain strong in the west – possibly stronger from an institutional point of view, as both Lama Ole Nydahl’s Diamond Way and Lama Jampa Thaye’s Dechen institutions have endorsed Thaye Dorje (both Karmapas have expressed an interest to finally meet each other and find a way to coexist).

Another issue constantly being rehashed by both sides is the mutual accusation of being a personality cult. Peljor and other critics of the NKT are adamant that Gyatso has purposely designed the NKT as a personality cult around himself. He has totalitarian authority, is viewed as the ‘Third Buddha’ and not questioned. Critics of those in favour of the Dalai Lama say that there is no greater personality cult anywhere in the world than that of the Dalai Lama; he is the poster boy of Buddhism and the nationalist symbol for all Tibetans. He is viewed as an untouchable Buddha God, with complete unquestionable authority and supremacy. To me, both accounts are false and valid at the same time. It is not a question of them being inherent personality cults, it depends on the minds of some of the people engaging with them.

Peljor himself writes articles about the Diamond Way tradition and Ole Nydahl, citing them as an example of a personality cult. He concludes that the NKT is worse. I would argue against this observation and also against the basis of comparison: Nydahl’s role as a teacher as well as the whole style of the Diamond Way are so fundamentally different from Gyatso and the NKT – as well as the FPMT for that matter, that a comparison doesn’t work. While the presentation of Buddhism in Nydahl’s books has been questioned by a wide Buddhist-reading audience, Gyatso’s books have generally been well received. Unlike Nydahl, Gyatso’s books have been endorsed and used by teachers outside of the NKT as well.
CONCLUSION

“The manner in which this dispute has been carried out on both sides has been counterproductive to the goals of both”

-Dr Martin A. Mills, Anthropologist, University of Aberdeen

We have seen that the International Shugden Community has become increasingly nasty in their tactics and less transparent in their identity and function. They present themselves on the one hand as respectful journalists campaigning for freedom of religion and on the other as insane hooliganesque protesters, hurling any kind of negative nonsense they can get their hands on at the Dalai Lama. They have completely and thoroughly failed to come closer to their goal, let alone reach it, they have been exposed as manipulating the media and they have even turned down at least one offer of open dialogue from the Tibetan Government.

We have seen that a variety of activists within the ‘Survivors’ have launched endless online campaigns of slander, severe accusations and highly reactive and emotional testimonies for the sake of destroying the NKT’s and Gyatso’s reputation. The bulk of their claims are without evidence and highly personal, making them hard to refute, yet also hard to substantiate. We have seen that the CTA and the Dalai Lama and his representatives have thoroughly failed to react to this situation. Very few ‘democratic’, benevolent governments would ignore issues of abuse, ostracism and religious segregation for over twenty years. The CTA claims they have removed most of the harmful posters and notices in India blocking Shugdenpas from entering shops, schools or hospitals, but this is a vague statement.

At the end of the day, nothing good has come of this conflict, but a tremendous amount of negative energy, effort and relative dogma continues to be invested in it. One thing that is clear right away is that both sides of this argument are guilty of all the things they accuse their opponents of: slander, defamation tactics, covert organisations, conspiring against the opponent in the form of various websites, organisations, publications, blogs, etc, name-calling, sweeping statements and so on and so forth. On a personal note, I feel that this conflict would not exist in a community of people who cherish each other and remember the teachings on emptiness.

This dispute is now about 20 years old and one would hope that some kind of resolution or at least a move in the right direction were visible. But it isn’t: We still see Tibetan Lamas debating with western Kadampas in panel talks whether or not Dorje Shugden is a worldly or enlightened protector - *Like it matters!* How is either side going to prove it either way? It is impossible.

What I find truly surprising however, is that a supposedly well educated and world-wide reputed Buddhist professor like Robert Thurman has gotten as entangled as he has in this debate; and has done so very poorly. He continues to talk of the ‘Dolgyal Cult’ and the extreme and obvious dangers posed by the Shugden ‘Taliban’ when most others involved in this debate are finally moving (very slowly) away from that angle. He has made and continues to make very personal allegations about Shugdenpas and people in the NKT,
sweepingly claiming that they are all nutcases. Yet both his points in defence of the Dalai Lama and against Shugdenpas are false or heavily exaggerated. You can read his thoughts in the huffingtonpost online magazine. Just like the silly defensive messages and posts coming from ‘NKT Truth’ writers, Thurman’s tactics can only backfire due to their impulsive and inconsistent nature. According to Helmut Gassner, a long time translator for the Dalai Lama:

“For his part, Robert Thurman thought it appropriate to portray for Newsweek magazine a murderous Dorje Shugden cult describing it as “the Taliban of Buddhism.” Yet Robert Thurman, presumably before he begot Uma, had been one of the first Western monks with Buddhist vows and had tried twice to obtain Dorje Shugden initiation from revered masters well before the controversy began. Both masters, however, had refused on grounds of his fickle character. Thurman should know quite well what Dorje Shugden actually is about.”

There would be a simple solution: From the side of the Dalai Lama, the solution would be to publicly announce – loud and clear – that there is no longer a ban on the Shugden practice and that all are free to practice whatever they want. This statement should be followed by a warning of severe punishment for all those who in any way abuse, discriminate against or in other ways harm Shugdenpas. So far the Tibetan Government has completely and utterly failed in this respect. Once this statement has been made it needs to be enforced by the Indian Government.

From the side of the ISC, of course their activity should cease the instant the Dalai Lama makes such an announcement. However, if he does not, the solution from their side would be to instantly dissolve their institution, as nobody will take it seriously anymore. They then need to pick up the subject academically, diplomatically and respectfully. They have every right to speak out against the ban, to protest or inform people about the situation, but this needs to be done factually, respectfully, transparently and with openness for dialogue.

As for the various institutions that have become involved: The NKT-IKBU need to shapen up their act with regards to charity law. Any ties with a separate organisation like the ISC need to be completely dissolved and no NKT funds, time or effort should be given to such an organisation. The FPMT should act as a public Buddhist hub, which is what they aim to be, by ceasing all forms of discrimination at once.

The Dalai Lama and his cabinet, as well as Gyatso and his office need to begin admitting to mistakes, accept advice and respond to criticism. This too needs to be transparent.

It is true that one cannot judge a book by the cover and, unlike the popular ideas promoted by Sam Harris in the last few years, it is simply wrong to equate any of the religious organisations or figureheads involved – NKT, FPMT, Sogyal Rinpoche, Lama Ole Nydahl, Geshe Kelsang, Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, etc – with the problem itself. All these organisations and people are primarily involved in activities other than any relating to this issue and one is prompted to wonder, what do lamas such as Geshe Kelsang, Lama Zopa, Samdhong Lobsang, Khensur Lungri Namgyel or HH Dalai Lama really think about this subject and the circus it has turned in to? On the other hand, it is completely undeniable that the
NKT has breached its commitment as a purely spiritual, registered charity by founding and funding the ISC, that most of its prominent teachers are in some way involved in the demonstrations, publication of articles and books, and that Geshe Kelsang has never publicly encouraged them to stop or at least improve their methods. Similarly, it is completely undeniable that HH Dalai Lama has issued a ban, continues to promote it and does nothing to attempt to stop the violence and conflict caused by it, that many of his followers and supporters in East and West have done nothing to investigate further and simply accept his “advice.”

But are these issues really so atrocious? Are not all institutions riddled with imperfections, paradoxes and problems? Is there any known organisation that is flawless? It seems that stainless perfection is what critics like Tenzin Peljor, Kelsang Rabten and others demand – and nothing less. Perhaps a Buddhist teacher would say ‘In that case, you need to get enlightened’. At the risk of offending some, it seems that the majority of testimonies by the Survivors come across as ‘poor me’ wingding. This is simply because they lack substantial evidence and remain highly speculative and open to interpretation.

I should like to insert this comment, written directly to the Dalai Lama from Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, as it really sums things up nicely:

“Nowadays, there is much debate and argument about you, myself and Dorje Shugden, which is causing the reputation of Buddhists world-wide to degenerate. This is shameful; this problem has not been created by the Deity Dorje Shugden but by human beings under the influence of delusion. No matter how much everyone debates and argues, it seems that there is no solution; instead the problem is getting worse.”

**Afterthought – Spiritual Practice**

Due to this noticeable feud, various aspects of Buddhist traditions linked with it have been much maligned and suffered lots of criticism directed at their spiritual teachings. For example, Gyatso’s books and the study programmes of the NKT have been attacked ceaselessly by the Survivors or bloggers like Matthew O Connell. The typical birdsong of these criticisms is that the teachings are sectarian, they promote the idea of a ‘pure lineage’ by avoiding talk of any problems, disagreements or violence within that history; they over emphasise faith in the guru and undermine the need to question teachings; they attempt to dissuade practitioners from studying anything other than their own stuff; etc.

All of these points are mildly true to an extent, but they are true in every single philosophical, religious or spiritual framework extant in the history of literature. Before the late 90s, there was no mention of Gyatso’s books having any specifically negative teachings or sectarian qualities at all. Surely, had they been so obvious, they would not have been endorsed and promoted by the Ganden Tripa, Trijang Rinpoche, Ling Rinpoche and HH the Dalai Lama. My conclusion: Gyatso’s books are of the typical Tsongkhapa-Gelugpa style and attitude, which is highly intellectual and philosophical while emphasising their school (Prasangika) as the supreme wisdom teaching. Please read books by Geshe Rabten, Geshe Wangchen, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe and various treatises and teachings from HH
Dalai Lama. In doing so, you will find the exact same attitude. So as far as criticisms towards these aspects of the teachings go, they should be addressed to Tsongkhapa. It is the silly, over-attached attitude of the Western mind, prone to feeling offended, taking things personally and reacting emotionally that has led many to view the Tsongkhapa – tradition as being too dogmatic, exclusive or even sectarian. These traits have been felt in Gyatso’s books and have since been blown completely out of proportion by those who are involved in this feud. I have found no hard evidence that Gyatso’s books are particularly exclusivist, sectarian or dogmatic. An investigating Buddhist is of course free to take up their practice within the Kagyü, Sakya or Nyingma school if they find Gelugpa Buddhism disagreeable.

A Brief Personal Note

As I have voiced my own opinions from time to time in this article, I thought it fair to leave some of my own thoughts alongside a brief bio. As the reader will have noticed, I have had a lot of personal contact and affiliation with the various Buddhist traditions mentioned. Specifically I have studied and practiced a lot with the NKT between 1998 and 2012, have lived in a couple of their centres and been a representative for Tharpa Publications in Sweden between 2002 and 2004. I am an avid follower of Venerable Chamtrul Rinpoche and the Rime movement which I came across in 2006. I attended several online courses offered by the FPMT and have many friends within that tradition whom I am quite close with. I have also attended many teachings in the Karma Kagyü tradition between 2008 and 2012. Some on the Thaye Dorje side and some on the Ugyen Thinley side. Academically, I have studied Buddhism and Hinduism in general, mostly in my own time but also through several University courses. I have never considered myself religious and have never identified with a specific group or tradition.

My practice slowed down in 2012 as I decided to take a distance and re-evaluate my own spiritual beliefs. In my NKT-related experience, I definitely encountered sectarian attitudes and Kadampa Exclusivity: living in a centre in London in 2000, I was asked to remove a picture I had on my wall of Krishna, as this would cause confusion... In 1999, I was told explicitly by some senior monks from Brazil and San Francisco that not only would I not ever need to read any books other than Gyatso’s, it would be very bad to do so.

This never bothered me and I shrugged it off as the mad talk by religious zealots. I have felt – and others have said the same – that this kind of ‘sectarian’ attitude, which was rather strong in the small NKT community during the 90s has died down. Sadly, it seems to have re-emerged in the form of the ISC.

Having studied this controversy one cannot help but conclude that it is a sad and ridiculous waste of time, as well as a perfect example of stupidity in numbers: The more people get involved, the more ridiculous the whole thing becomes. Most individuals I have met are fine, kind people. Aside from some e-attacks under the name Tenpel, Tenzin Peljor has communicated with me very respectfully, and as an individual person, I like him. His emails to me never indicated any kind of distance or lack of welcome due to me being affiliated with the NKT or Shugden. Kelsang Jangdom is a very good friend of mine and tremendously
compassionate and funny person; Kelsang Tubchen is very kind and sweet; the Swiss Sangha members I spoke to are all lovely people. All these people are well aware of my total disagreement with their activism and there has been no loss of friendship as a result. As for more prominent individuals: I find Robert Thurman to be a very amiable individual and he is a great scholar of Buddhism; Lama Zopa Rinpoche is wonderful. Gen-la Dekyong is tremendously sweet; I like Geshe Kelsang Gyatso very much and continue to benefit a lot from his books and teachings; I find his presentation of the Tsongkhapa tradition very clear and practical. I like the Dalai Lama very much too, find him instantly likeable and believe that he is an important figure within Buddhism. He has been building very important bridges between faiths, disciplines and creeds which is vital for the flexible yet stable continuity of Tibetan Buddhism. As for my personal view on the Shugden practise, I honestly don’t have one. I have practiced the Dorje Shugden sadhanas as well as those of other dharmapalas. I am not bothered whether the practice is officially damned or redeemed; each to their own.

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Dedication

I dedicate this essay to religious peace and tolerance through non-attachment in general;
and to complete peace, harmony and unity within the Gelugpa tradition of the Gedän
Lineage. May wisdom shine through, regardless of what form it takes.

https://mixam.co.uk/booklets

Other Books by the Author:

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In Progress:

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Hare Krishna – Compendium of Vedanta
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Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche, Founder of the NKT-KBU and inspiration for the pro-Shugden movement.
The ban, history and controversy around Dorje Shugden; or, the war between the foremost Gelugpas of modern times. For anyone interested in an objective view.... .... or just a good yarn.