

# An Interview With Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso discusses Dorje Shugden as a benevolent protector god

Tricycle Magazine, Spring 1998

**Professor Donald Lopez:** *What is the importance of dharmapala (Dharma protector) practice in Tibetan Buddhism?*

**Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (GKG):** Although dharmapalas appear wrathful, in reality they are the same as buddhas and bodhisattvas. In order to benefit people and spiritual practitioners, buddhas and bodhisattvas emanate in the form of dharmapalas. Each monastery and practitioner regards their own dharmapala practice as very important because they practice this in their daily life and it has been passed down from generation to generation.

**Lopez:** *Can you describe what the actual practice might look like? Does it take the form of prostrations, or mantras or visualizations?*

**GKG:** Basically, the dharmapala practice includes the practices of refuge and generating compassion for all living beings. Then guru yoga - visualization of the deity and making offerings. Then requests for success in our dharma practice, for the pacifying of obstacles to our practice, and to fulfill the spiritual wishes of practitioners. Finally, there is a dedication of all the virtues accumulated during this practice for the happiness of all living beings.

**Lopez:** *What is the relationship between a buddha and a dharmapala?*

**GKG:** There can be buddhas who are not dharmapalas such as Buddha Shakyamuni. He is a buddha, but we can't say that he is a dharmapala.

**Lopez:** *Can there be dharmapalas who are not buddhas?*

**GKG:** An actual dharmapala is necessarily either an emanation of buddha or an emanation of a Bodhisattva, and is not an ordinary being. A dharmapala who is an emanation of buddha is a buddha and also a dharmapala.

**Lopez:** *What about Dorje Shugden?*

**GKG:** We believe that Dorje Shugden is a buddha who is also a dharmapala. Problems have arisen because of someone's view. So although we say the "Dorje Shugden problem" in reality this is a human problem, not a Dorje Shugden problem. This is not a fault of Buddha-dharma, not a fault of Tibetan Buddhism, or even a fault of Tibetan people in general. This is a particular person's wrong view. He can keep this view, of course, but forcing other people to follow this is not right. For this reason, nowadays we [Tibetan Buddhists] are showing many problems to the world. We are ashamed and sorry that this causes the reputation of Buddhists in general to be damaged. It is not a general Buddhist problem, but a specific problem within Tibetan Buddhism.

**Lopez:** *When you say that one person has caused the problem, you mean the Dalai Lama?*

**GKG:** Yes, that's true.

**Lopez:** *So you would say that a true dharmapala must be either a buddha or a high bodhisattva?*

**GKG:** Yes, some deities have a worldly aspect, but in reality they are higher Bodhisattvas or buddhas.

**Lopez:** *You believe that Dorje Shugden is a buddha?*

**GKG:** I believe this, yes.

**Lopez:** And the Dalai Lama has said that Dorje Shugden is a worldly god - one that is subject to rebirth?

**GKG:** He said that Dorje Shugden is a evil, harmful, interfering spirit.

**Lopez:** *This raises a difficult question because we have the Dalai Lama saying that Dorje Shugden is a worldly god, and Geshe Kelsang and Trijang Rinpoche [the junior tutor of the Dalai Lama and a Dorje Shugden advocate] and a number of great Gelugpa lamas saying that Dorje Shugden is a transcendent god, or a buddha. How does one make a decision as to which position is correct?*

**GKG:** 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.

**Lopez:** *Some Nyingma lamas say that because the Gelugpas worshiped Dorje Shugden the Chinese took over Tibet. Some Gelugpas feel that because the Thirteenth Dalai Lama did not permit the worship of Dorje Shugden, the Chinese came in. How do you understand the relationship between the worship of Dorje Shugden and Tibetan history?*

**GKG:** Some Nyingmapas have doubts about whether Dorje Shugden is harmful or not. They have reasons. The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) created this problem. At that time, in Drepung monastery there were two groups, called the Upper House and the Lower House. The Fifth Dalai Lama was in the Lower House, and a lama called (Ngatrul) Drakpa Gyaltsen, lived in the Upper House. Both these lamas were very famous, and there was rivalry between their followers. In particular, the Fifth Dalai Lama's ministers opposed Drakpa Gyaltsen and according to many history books, and even some prayer books, they killed Drakpa Gyaltsen. The Fifth Dalai Lama then thought that Drakpa Gyaltsen had appeared as Dorje Shugden. Initially the Fifth Dalai Lama was afraid that Dorje Shugden was a harmful spirit trying to destroy him. Then he requested some Nyingma lamas to destroy Dorje Shugden. Then later, after realizing that he had made a mistake, the Fifth Dalai Lama wrote a special prayer to Dorje Shugden of apology and confession. Then, after Drakpa Gyaltsen passed away he appeared in the form of Dorje Shugden. Because the lamas in Drakpa Gyaltsen's lineage of incarnations are manifestations of the wisdom buddha Manjushri, and because Drakpa Gyaltsen appeared in the form of Dorje Shugden, we believe without doubt that the very nature of Dorje Shugden is that of a wisdom buddha.

**Lopez:** *Some people have the view that because people worshiped Dorje Shugden, the Chinese came and took over Tibet. Do you feel that Dorje Shugden played any role in the fall of Tibet?*

**GKG:** This is complete nonsense.

**Lopez:** *Why do you feel that the Dalai Lama is against Dorje Shugden?*

**GKG:** You need to ask him why [laughs].

**Lopez:** *Do you believe that the Dalai Lama is an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara?*

**GKG:** If he 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. This is a very horrible example, because every Buddhist practitioner believes that relying on the spiritual guide is the root of the path and the very essence of the practice. He is showing that the lama or spiritual guide doesn't matter. How can Avalokiteshvara do this?

**Lopez:** *We know that he asked that people who were worshipers of Dorje Shugden not take tantric initiations from him. Do you think he has the right to do that, to make that kind of request?*

**GKG:** This caused so many people suffering. Tibetan people love him and then he said that those who practice worship of Dorje Shugden cannot come to his initiation. This caused people pain. It looks like these people are removed from the Tibetan community which is under the Dalai Lama's mandala. Tibetan people are under his mandala and he removed these people, so this is why I am saying that thousands of people are suffering.

**Lopez:** *One of the arguments put forth is that the Dalai Lama is now the head, in a sense, of all Tibetan Buddhists and the head of a government-in-exile. And that from this view, it is not right for there to be sectarian attachment to one particular dharma protector. Dorje Shugden is closely associated with the Gelug and is seen not to be a Protector of the Nyingma, for example, so it is not right to have members of his government worshipping Dorje Shugden.*

**GKG:** He is not the spiritual leader of Gelugpas. The spiritual leader of the

Gelugpas must necessarily be a Gelugpa. For example, the spiritual guide, spiritual leader of the Nyingmapas necessarily must be a Nyingmapa because he must be within that lineage. The spiritual leader of each religious tradition must necessarily be from that tradition.

**Lopez:** *So in your opinion, the Dalai Lama is not a Gelugpa, and therefore has no right to tell Gelugpas which dharmapala they can worship?*

**GKG:** That's right.

**Lopez:** *Who is the head of the Gelugpa lineage?*

**GKG:** The Ganden Tripa.

*[Since the death of Tsongkhapa in 1419, the Ganden Tripa or "throneholder of Ganden (monastery)," has been the official head of the Gelugpa sect. Traditionally, this was an elected position. The current Ganden Tripa was appointed by the Dalai Lama. - Lopez]*

**Lopez:** *The present Ganden Tripa has also denounced the worship of Dorje Shugden.*

**GKG:** He has to follow the Dalai Lama's view, otherwise there is danger. He has no choice, no power. Even my uncle, who is the medium for the dharmapala Dorje Shugden, has to follow the Dalai Lama, otherwise there is danger. They cannot remain within Tibetan society.

**Lopez:** *And the Dalai Lama is not Gelugpa because he rejects Dorje Shugden?*

**GKG:** You can ask him whether he is Gelugpa or not. I don't know but I believe he is not. It looks as if he humiliates the Gelugpas, as if he destroys the dharma of the Gelugpas. It's not only about Dorje Shugden. If Dorje Shugden is bad, then all those Gelugpa lamas who engaged in the practice of Dorje Shugden are impure. Then, without doubt the Gelugpa dharma is impure. He publicly destroys the Gelugpa dharma, so how can he say that he is a Gelugpa lama?

**Lopez:** *What is the role of the Dalai Lama?*

**GKG:** He is the political leader of the Tibetans.

**Lopez:** *Let me ask you about the name of your organization, "New*

*Kadampa Tradition.” We know that Tsongkhapa first called his group Kadam Sarpa (New Kadam). So you have taken that name. I am wondering: what is the relationship between the New Kadampa Tradition and the Gelugpa tradition?*

**GKG:**We are pure Gelugpas. The name Gelugpa doesn't matter, but we believe we are following the pure tradition of Je Tsongkhapa. We are studying and practicing Lama Tsongkhapa's teachings and taking as our example what the ancient Kadampa lamas and geshe did. All the books that I have written are commentaries on Lama Tsongkhapa's teachings. We try our best to follow the example of the ancient Kadampa Tradition, and use the name Kadampa to remind people to practice purely.

**Lopez:** *Are the New Kadampa Tradition and Gelugpa tradition synonymous?*

**GKG:**Because the New Kadampa Tradition is in Western countries, most of the followers of this tradition are Westerners, so their way of studying and practicing is different.

**Lopez:** *So it is a Western organization. Gelugpa monks in Tibet and India are not members of the New Kadampa Tradition?*

**GKG:**They never use the title New Kadampa Tradition at Sera, Ganden, and Drepung. 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. 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.

**Lopez:** *Was Dorje Shugden consulted in the decision to found the New Kadampa Tradition?*

**GKG:**No, that was my decision. I wanted to encourage people to practice purely. Just having a lot of dharma knowledge, studying a lot intellectually but not practicing, is a serious problem. This was my experience in Tibet. Intellectual knowledge alone does not give peace.

**Lopez:** *Last summer [1996], you organized demonstrations in London*

*against the Dalai Lama. The British press was very supportive of the Dalai Lama and the New Kadampa was painted in quite negative terms. Do you regret the formation of the Shugden Supporters Community in retrospect? Could you perhaps have done it differently?*

**GKG:**We had hoped that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would change and give freedom to Tibetan people. That was our aim. Our demonstration was telling him: You made a mistake so you should change. After the demonstration we requested him to please sign a declaration to give complete freedom to Dorje Shugden worship, and he refused. Then when he returned to India he was stronger than before.

**Lopez:** *Do you think that in retrospect the demonstrations were not a good idea?*

**GKG:**Demonstrating was telling him that he made a mistake. Demonstrating should have been a teacher for him. Demonstrating was loving him, not disrespecting him, not harming him. But he never changed.

**Lopez:** *In the West, demonstrating is not perceived as an act of love.*

**GKG:**But from our point of view we were hoping to make him realize that he made a mistake so that he could correct it.

**Lopez:** *For the New Kadampa Tradition it was something of a public relations disaster with all the negative press that was created. I was wondering whether you would have done things differently.*

**GKG:**The New Kadampa Tradition suffered, our reputation was destroyed, and we lost many things. Yes, of course we are suffering, because people believe what the Dalai Lama says. Also many other groups and centers who practice worship of Dorje Shugden including those in Europe and America are also experiencing suffering. Many people are saying Dorje Shugden practitioners are bad, they are a cult or sectarian - they are using bad names because of what His Holiness the Dalai Lama says. In reality, we haven't done anything wrong.

**Lopez:** *It is often written that Dorje Shugden is someone who punishes people who mix Gelugpa and Nyingma teachings, and many Nyingma reject Dorje Shugden. I was wondering if you could comment on that. If Dorje Shugden is a protector of the Gelugpa and of the pure tradition of Je Tsongkhapa as you say, what is his relationship to people who are not*

*Gelugpas?*

**GKG:**He is just neutral, nothing good or bad. We are eating our own food and they are eating their own food. There is nothing wrong. Also, they have their own dharma protectors. We are never saying that their dharma protectors harm us. If we think that Nyingma dharma protectors are harming us then this is stupid. There is also no meaning in Nyingmapas thinking Dorje Shugden is harming them. But in reality their believing this is not their fault, because this idea originally came from the Fifth Dalai Lama. From that time the Nyingmapas developed doubts, but in reality they need to clarify whether there is any truth to these rumors that Dorje Shugden is against Nyingma. Up to now it has just remained a superstition.

**Lopez:** *What about a Gelugpa who practices Nyingma? Does Dorje Shugden care about that? Does he disapprove of people who mixes Gelug and Nyingma?*

**GKG:**Some people believe that if Gelugpa practitioners practice Nyingma teachings, Dorje Shugden will harm them, but this is completely wrong. We never believe this. Impossible. Besides Dorje Shugden, there are many Tibetan stories of other dharmapalas killing people. There is even a lama called Ra Lotsawa who killed thirteen tantric masters including Tarma Dode, Marpa's son. This is not just superstition. Many monasteries, maybe including Namgyal Dratsang (His Holiness the Dalai Lama's private monastery), engage in the practice of Yamantaka that comes from Ra Lotsawa's instructions. So shouldn't they stop this practice because Lama Ra Lotsawa was a murderer? This would be meaningless. It is similar with Dorje Shugden, but there is no evidence of Dorje Shugden harming anyone. It is just superstition. For example, if a Gelugpa lama who practices Nyingma teachings has an accident, then some people think, "Oh, this is Dorje Shugden's fault." This is stupid. Then they write a book about these things, but this is not real evidence. However, Ra Lotsawa himself admitted that he killed other lamas who were tantric masters, but his teachings on Yamantaka are still being practiced in many monasteries.

**Lopez:** *I want to ask you about the terrible events of February 4 [1997], when Geshe Losang Gyatso was murdered in Dharamsala. Do you have anything to say about that, or any idea why he was murdered?*

**GKG:**Of course, people suspect Shugden followers because this problem has arisen. Killing such a geshe and monks is very bad, it is horrible. How can Mahayana Buddhists who are always talking about compassion kill

people? Impossible. There are many different possible explanations [for the murders]. There are many Shugden practitioners throughout the world and each of them is responsible for his own actions. But definitely, we can say that these murders are very bad.

**Lopez:** *Given your devotion to Dorje Shugden and your founding of the the New Kadampa Tradition, do you feel that Je Tsongkhapa's view, meditation, and practice is the most complete in all Tibetan Buddhism? Is it only through Je Tsongkhapa's teachings that one can attain enlightenment? Or is it also possible through Nyingma or Kagyu?*

**GKG:** Of course! Of course we believe that every Nyingmapa and Kagyupa have their complete path. Not only Gelugpa. I believe that Nyingmapas have a complete path. Of course, Kagyupas are very special. We very much appreciate the example of Marpa and Milarepa [in the Kagyu lineage]. Milarepa showed the best example of guru devotion. Of course the Kagyupas as well as the Nyingmapas and the Sakyapas, have a complete path to enlightenment. Many Nyingmapas and Kagyupas practice very sincerely and are not just studying intellectually. I think that some Gelugpa practitioners need to follow their practical example. But we don't need to mix our traditions. Each tradition has its own uncommon good qualities, and it is important not to lose these. We should concentrate on our own tradition and maintain the good qualities of our tradition, but we should always keep good relations with each other and never argue or criticize each other. What I would like to request is that we should improve our own traditions while maintaining good relations with each other.