

An Interview With Thubten Jigme Norbu

The elder brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama discusses Dorje Shugden as a hungry ghost

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Lopez: *What is the role of “protector deities” in Tibetan Buddhism?*

Norbu: There are two kinds: transcendent protectors and worldly protectors. Among the transcendent protectors, you will have Mahakala and many others. These are considered fierce forms of enlightened beings who help remove obstacles in one’s practice of the dharma. On the other hand, you have worldly protectors, as distinct from transcendent protectors. These have their origin back in the great old days, when Buddhist leaders are said to have converted the local deities into protectors. In Tibet, we have come to associate figures from the Bonpo tradition, our indigenous tradition, with such stories. That’s how we have the worldly deities such as mountain gods, and the practice of ancestor worship. In Tibet, each village has so many things like that. These worldly protectors are categorized as beings of the six places of rebirth, as gods, demigods, humans, animals, ghosts, or hell beings. Most worldly protectors fall into the category of hungry ghosts. Some ancient, highly developed lamas subdued them, told them not to harm humans or other sentient beings, and to do something good for society. “You go here and there, you’re not going to harm this and that, then I will give you food.” When they agreed to this, they were told: You are the protector for this village.

Lopez: *So, the worldly protectors are in samsara, in any of the six places of rebirth. But you’re saying that most of these protectors are ghosts, or some kind of a spirit, and they have been subdued by a great lama to protect Buddhism, to protect a particular location, a monastery, a valley, a mountain. So one’s allegiance to a particular protector would depend on where you were born?*

Norbu: Yes. It depends on your birth deity and the lord of the region, who might be the local mountain god. Tibetans believe that wherever we are - indoors, outdoors, anywhere - we have some kind of spirit that must be there. Certain families from certain local areas will always have some kind

of spirit there.

Lopez: *And what would the usual practice be for the local protector? Do you make offerings? Do you pray to it? How does one worship the protector?*

Norbu: Of course you cannot see them, you cannot invite them to come in, to give them food or dinner. So that's why these highly developed lamas offered particular prayers for these local gods, or offered some kind of verses or rituals. Then they gave these rituals to the local people, and the local people practiced them. Put out the butter lamp, burn the incense, and offer the barley flour.

Lopez: *Do you ask for specific things sometimes?*

Norbu: You ask them to prevent bad things from coming, for protection from sickness and evil obstacles. You ask them for long life, prosperity, for lots of rain and sunshine, for crops to grow, and for the animals not to get sick. But we must make a distinction here. These local deities, you cannot take refuge in them. You can only regard them as local security men. You can tell the security man: You protect this area, you protect that area. But these are the only sorts of things you can say. You cannot say: For all my lives - this life, the next life - I want to be enlightened, please. You cannot do that - you cannot take refuge. Only in the Three Precious Jewels can you take refuge. If you have this kind of dealing with a worldly deity, then you're no longer a Buddhist.

Lopez: *What about a ceremony called sok-deh [lit., "life entrustment"]?*

Norbu: *Sok-deh* is to dedicate one's life to that deity. "Whatever happens, I will give my life to you. You own my life." That's almost like taking refuge, you know. So that's a terrible thing.

Lopez: *Do you have sok-deh with a transcendent deity? Or just a worldly deity?*

Norbu: You never have *sok-deh* to a transcendent deity. I've never heard of such a thing.

Lopez: *But you're saying that to do this with a worldly deity then you're not a Buddhist?*

Norbu: Yes. You're put in danger. Our Buddhism says: Only take refuge in

the Three Precious Jewels. The reason why? Because you yourself want to become like that, right? But if you give *sok-deh*, take refuge in a ghost, you want to become that ghost. That's a terrible thing! Nobody wants to become a ghost! That's why Je Rinpoche [Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa school] and all the great leaders never gave such a thing to a worldly god. Even Je Rinpoche had a mountain spirit. His mountain spirit was Machen Pomra. But he made Machen Pomra his cook, his servant. That's the difference.

Lopez: *This sok-deh ceremony, then, many people did do this, even though you say that they really shouldn't.*

Norbu: *Sok-deh* was quite common, yes. Particularly for those teachers who were doing it and would promote the practice among their followers. And that's why it's become more popular, to give *sok-deh*.

Lopez: *Within this context that you've described, who is Dorje Shugden?*

Norbu: You know, I was brought up in the Kumbum monastery [in Amdo, built at Tsongkhapa's birthplace]. Until I was seventeen or eighteen, when I came to Lhasa, I never heard about Dorje Shugden. In Lhasa, people talked about Shugden this and that. But I never paid any attention. Then, ever since His Holiness tried to tell people not to worship - or not to take refuge in - Shugden, I tried to learn a little.

Lopez: *Did you know Pabongka Rinpoche at all in Tibet?*

Norbu: Of course. Pabongka Rinpoche is one of the most popular teachers of our century. But he propagated so much about this Shugden. Recently, I heard that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had asked him to stop this promoting of Shugden. So then he slowed down a little, but after His Holiness, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, passed away, then he tried to do all that all over again. I never met him personally. But he's one of the learned teachers of the lamas, one of the important ones.

Lopez: *And Pabongka Rinpoche would give the sok-deh ceremony for Dorje Shugden?*

Norbu: He must have done lots, yes. That's why the Thirteenth Dalai Lama stopped him.

Lopez: *So, is Dorje Shugden a transcendent protector or a worldly protector?*

Norbu: He's definitely a worldly god. I put him in the hungry ghost category. You know that in Buddhism, when you die and you take rebirth, the rebirth must be in one of these six places. He's not a god, he's not a demigod, he's not a human being. Okay - then what three are left? Animals, ghosts, and hell beings. Shugden came back born as a ghost. He was so hungry that he went to the Sakya monastery asking for food. One of the great Sakya lamas said to him: Do no harm to sentient beings, and in return, I will give you a little food. Then he made a little offering and a ceremony, and they went into the temple and they gave him the food. So that means Shugden is a hungry ghost.

Lopez: *His Holiness the Dalai Lama has asked Tibetans not to worship Dorje Shugden.*

Norbu: That's right, yes.

Lopez: *Why?*

Norbu: All Buddhists should look for something to take refuge in and to regard as a protector. You take refuge in the Three Precious Jewels. You cannot have more than that; that's the only thing - the three principles. Then for the protectors, there are Mahakala, Belden Lhamo, and Tamchen Chogyal. These are there already. So now if you try to come to this Shugden, who is a ghost, then what you're doing is not very good. Particularly for the monks. Monks have a vow. If you have such a vow, you cannot take refuge in this kind of thing.

Lopez: *And then there are also stories that Dorje Shugden has punished people in the past who have mixed Gelugpa and Nyingma.*

Norbu: This happened just a few years back, I think. There was a gentleman from Ganden monastery.

Lopez: *Zemey Rinpoche.*

Norbu: Yes. He tried to say that if any Gelugpa man or Gelugpa lama tried to join or practice the Nyingmapa tradition, then Shugden will take his life. But I'll tell you something simple. If you are really authentic, if you are a genuine Gelugpa - or a genuine Nyingmapa - you don't need to worry about all this. All the lamas and protectors can take care of you, you know, so the ghost will not come near you, not near your house even. That's what I believe.

Lopez: *Worshippers of Shugden claim that His Holiness is limiting their religious freedom by telling them not to worship Shugden.*

Norbu: No, no, this worship of Shugden is not a religion at all. If I open my big mouth, I can say this is a cult. So I think His Holiness should be limiting it, because he is the leader of the Tibetan people. And all these different sects, you know, Nyingmapa, Gelugpa, Sakyapa, Kagyupa - he has authority over all of these because he's the leader of the country, the leader of the people. He's correct to think and to do as he does about this. This has nothing to do with politics. Nothing to do with religion. He never said, "Don't try to take refuge in the Three Precious Jewels." He just tried to say, "Don't go for refuge to the worldly gods." That's it.

Lopez: *Do you think that the worship of Dorje Shugden is harmful to the cause of Tibetan independence?*

Norbu: It seems to be. When I read what was said by Mrs. Yuthok [a Tibetan noblewoman], in which she mentioned that this Shugden killed her little child, I thought that was probably true, because recently I read something that said that Pabongka himself was killed by Shugden even though he worshiped Shugden. He went someplace to give a Lamrim teaching. And he was coming back and got sick on the road, and they say this was caused by Shugden. I saw something like that, but I don't know if that's the way it was, really. Lots of gossip, you know, lots of gossip.

Lopez: *Now, those who are devotees and supporters of Dorje Shugden would point out that Pabongka, a very famous Gelugpa lama, and also Trijang Rinpoche, His Holiness's junior tutor, were worshippers of Shugden and promoted the worship of Shugden. So, we have them on one side. Then we have His Holiness on the other side. Some people say Dorje Shugden is a buddha, some say he's a ghost. How do we decide who's correct?*

Norbu: [*laughter*] I think it would be very sad if Buddha had become this Shugden in order to try to take somebody's life, people's lives. That's very sad. We are very lucky to have such great people as Pabongka and Trijang Rinpoche and all the rest. But great people sometimes make mistakes, too.

Lopez: *You know that people picketed His Holiness in London about this situation, and that Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's group, the New Kadampa Tradition, has spoken out against His Holiness. What's your feeling about*

this?

Norbu: We have no country. Our country is run by the Chinese and their ruthless government. All that His Holiness is trying to do is on behalf of all Tibetans. And now this little-bitty thing: everybody fighting over this ghost. I think it's very pitiful. I think it's terrible.

Lopez: *What's your own thought about why Geshe Lobsang Gyatso was murdered? Do you think that was connected to Dorje Shugden?*

Norbu: I don't know exactly what happened. It looks as if monks came to kill the monks there. They wore the robe; they had taken the vow not to harm living beings. Monks killing monks. Terrible.

Lopez: *Many Westerners are very confused about this whole Shugden affair. What advice would you give them?*

Norbu: If somebody who doesn't know anything comes to you and says, I'm great and this is good, this is wonderful, and so on - if he says that, and because of his saying it and because you trust him, you then try to do it - this is not your fault, you know.

Lopez: *So you feel that they've been sort of taken in by people, and they really don't understand, don't know enough about it to make their own decision?*

Norbu: I think it is very sad what has happened to the Buddhist precepts of renunciation, bodhicitta, and the correct view. You must know all these three to practice, to become enlightened, right? I mean, this is a real responsibility for those geshe and lamas who come to say such things. Westerners, they are so honest, they are so faithful. And those lamas that came to say: This is copper - they told them it was gold, you know. And the Westerners took this "gold." You have to check, you know - just as with gold, you must check, analyze for purity. This is not only for the Western disciples, but for Tibetans also. When you make a teacher-disciple relationship, then you need to check to see if the person has the characteristics or qualities of a true lama. And the quality of the disciple is also important. You must check both of these. Lama will check the disciple, disciple will check the lama. Without such checking, to take this and that indiscriminately - that, I think, is pretty dangerous. Also: now, our geshe, our lamas, have come to be dependent on their disciples just for their own stomachs, you know. Yes, for their own stomach, their own piece of bread

- that's why they are saying all these things. I think this is true of humans in general. We can see this happening now in our Buddhism. But you also have this in Christianity: "God called me, you must send me two million dollars." You know the sort of thing.

Lopez: *That exists in Buddhism also?*

Norbu: Of course. Now, the important thing is, Tibetans are human beings, you know. Don't think everything is just so good, just like what you've read, you know. When you read the dharma books, everything is so good, so nice. But in a basketful of apples, you always find a rotten apple somewhere. To check is very important.

Lopez: *So your advice to Westerners on this Shugden affair is to investigate for themselves to see what's true and what's false.*

Norbu: First, think about Buddhism. Then think about the six places of rebirth. I think that's very important. So you know what Shugden is.

Lopez: *There are a number of Westerners who are Buddhists, and they are disciples of lamas who worship Dorje Shugden, and they've been told: Dorje Shugden is your protector. So they have that as part of their practice. On the other hand, they feel great devotion and loyalty to the Dalai Lama, and they feel torn apart by this controversy.*

Norbu: If you really practice, then the Three Precious Jewels are your protector. You don't need more than that. You follow what are the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha's words, what the sangha says, what the community is teaching, what it is doing. You follow that. That is your protector more than if you pay millions of dollars to hire security. I heard His Holiness in Los Angeles say, "Your protector is the Buddha. Nothing more than Buddha protects you."

Lopez: *Is there anything else you'd like to add?*

Norbu: I'm sorry about this whole crisis. But there is one thing I'm very happy about. There are worshipers of Shugden who try to give some good teachings about Buddhism. And people will learn something about Buddhism. The sad thing is, they try to tell people to worship this ghost - that's very sad. But, too, you know, the good and the bad - which one is it? If worldly power is with you, you always have duality.