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[E-Sangha and "sect bashing" \(continuation of the 'cult' smear history\)](#)

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The Rise of Sectarianism in Buddhist Discussion Forums

In the late 1990s, the cult smear against the NKT was spread mainly by the Tibetan government in exile and official Dalai Lama websites, on alt.religion newsgroup discussions, and by word of mouth in Tibetan Buddhist Centers loyal to the Dalai Lama. However, in the years that followed, during the 2000's, a fully-fledged Internet attack on Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and the NKT began to take place on certain Buddhist discussion boards such as E-Sangha, Buddhanet, Beliefnet, and Phayul by Tibetan and Western supporters of the Dalai Lama.

The normal pattern in such discussion forums was that a "newbie" would post a question along the lines of: "There's this Buddhist group near me called the NKT, I'm thinking of going to some of their classes, what do people think? Do you have any information about them?" This innocent question would result in a flood of negative posts, denouncing the NKT as a cult, claiming they weren't Buddhist but spirit-worshipping murderers, etc, and recommending the questioner try "a genuine Buddhist group".

These posters who were so vehemently opposed to the NKT were Tibetan Buddhists from various sects although, more recently, they were joined by a few disaffected ex-NKT members who jumped on the bandwagon with prolific posts.

E-Sangha

The most egregious of these discussion forums is E-Sangha, which has also recently been receiving a [slew of complaints from other Buddhist groups and individuals](#) for its intolerance and censorship. As it says on the [E-Sangha Watch website](#):

E-SANGHA WATCH has been created with the support, guidance and encouragement of concerned Buddhist clergy and lay-persons of several schools wishing to firmly yet constructively oppose, publicize, correct and explain to the unwary the current state of intra-Buddhist sectarian bias, misinformation, religious intolerance and 'sect bashing' which unfortunately exists under the

present policies and administration of the 'E-Sangha' Buddhism Portal website.

Many NKT practitioners and others have been shocked over the years to find that the New Kadampa Tradition is actually banned on this supposedly open Buddhist forum, the largest Buddhist chat group on the Internet! The board regulations state in black and white:

"These few "Buddhist" schools of thoughts are not recognized by E-sangha. No links to their websites, their books, or their followers' websites are allowed: New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) and all other proponents of Dolgyal/Shugden"

However, a reading of the background to this ban and who instigated and maintains it will hopefully reassure people that the reasons behind it were completely capricious and unjustified.

E-Sangha is a Buddhist forum that started in 2003. In September 2003, E-Sangha administrators conducted a poll of its members to decide if the NKT section that had been started on the board should be removed. This poll was requested by Global Moderator Henry Chia, also known as Ngawang Gelek, a Sakya practitioner from Singapore who had posted actively against the NKT on the alt.religion newsgroup discussions during the Dorje Shugden controversy in 1996/97.

Labeling the NKT as non-Buddhist for its reliance on Dorje Shugden, Henry cut and pasted every single negative article regarding the NKT and Dorje Shugden taken from the TGIE and Dalai Lama official websites and then advised the members "to make up their own minds". As one member pointed out: "Thanks to Henry, plenty of information is now available for folks to make an informed vote." There was no information, however, posted from the side of the NKT or any other Shugden practitioner.

There never was a vote. By the middle of September 2003, "Teyes", the E-Sangha founder, had decided:

"I have read through almost every word that Henry had written, clicking on almost every link. The messages are exhaustive and I tried hard to digest the vast amount of information. I am not an expert in Buddhism, although raised in a Buddhist family, thus all members help are required, especially in issues like this. I appreciate Henry's frankness in raising this point and I agreed with Henry that:

- 1) There will be no links to NKT website as from today.
- 2) There will be no separate listings of them as a unique group within our database.
- 3) All NKT's folks can participate in all our discussion.

Thanks everyone for their help, especially Henry. (So members, you can disregard the votes about NKT). Have a nice day!"

And he followed this with another posting later:

"Dear members,
I have considered all the pros and cons when NKT section was removed. After examining, I am rather worried that newbies in Buddhism might be misled. That's my main fear, especially E-Sangha has been growing steadily over the last 2 months, and is right now, the most active board on Buddhism. I hope that we will put this issue behind us. Thanks."

With no knowledge of the NKT other than what he had heard from Henry, and despite the fact that the NKT had hundreds of Centers and thousands of students all over the world who were happily and sincerely practicing Mahayana Buddhism, the owner of E-Sangha condemned the NKT as dangerous for "newbies", a

theme that was continued in all subsequent discussions.

Another E-Sangha global moderator called [Namdrol](#) (Malcolm Smith) joined in the discussion and over a period of many months provided E-Sangha members with a huge amount of astounding and sometimes laughable misinformation. For example:

[“Gyalpos also cause strife and cattle diseases. The outbreak of Mad Cow disease in Northern England a couple of years ago has been attributed to the strong presence of Shugden practitioners in Northern England.”](#)

Most recently, Namdrol incited forum members to more intolerance (on the occasion of the Dalai Lama's being admitted to hospital for kidney stones):

[“We can all thank the Shugden people for HHDL's present state of ill health.”](#)

However, because he is an “old-timer” and a global moderator, his words astonishingly enough have carried weight and adversely influenced many people. For example:

[“Namdrol's point's should be well taken, he really knows his stuff when it comes to Tibetan Buddhism. He has practiced for a long time and personally knows many very high lama's, and Rinpoche's”.](#)

Namdrol has devoted many postings to slandering the Gelugpa tradition in general that was passed down through Je Phabongkhapa, Trijang Rinpoche and their disciples, even casting aspersions on Lama Zopa and the FPMT (who have the Dalai Lama as their patron). Not once has another moderator asked him to stop his divisive, intolerant and sectarian speech.

Here is an example of the intolerance toward the NKT on E-Sangha that was enshrined as policy in 2003 and continues to this day, from a recent thread concerning the opening of an NKT World Peace Cafe:

[“The NKT is not a legitimate Buddhist organization in my opinion. For this reason, I would certainly avoid the cafe. I would also spend an hour or two emailing leads to local media about the controversy surrounding the cult.”](#)

[“the NKT is dangerous and the spirit they worship is too. how can they propose to open a world peace cafe when the biggest part of their organization is the worship of a malicious spirit?”](#)

[“As we all know, this cult have done and still doing so much damaging to the public”](#)

[“To them Dharma is a business opportunity to fund the growth of their sect and kelsang gyatso's empire.”](#)

[“You could always be an infiltrator, share some other views. Would be interesting to go in there and say you know, a lot of people consider the NKT to be a cult.”](#)

(For the smear that Geshe Kelsang has profited from the growth of the NKT, see [Smear: Geshe Kelsang has millions of pounds that have come from his disciples.](#))

It is clear that some E-Sangha members are sufficiently militant to take action against the NKT by contacting venues where classes are being held to get them cancelled, defacing publicity, and vandalizing Geshe Kelsang's books in bookstores so that they won't sell. Some members have openly boasted about engaging in such activities, and the existence and effects of these behaviors are one [reason the New](#)

[Kadampa Truth website was compiled.](#)

E-Sangha's mission statement reads: "E-Sangha's intent is to keep the tradition alive and flourishing, and to help bring peace, harmony and happiness into everyone's lives." Yet they have been the source of destroying peace, harmony and happiness between Buddhist groups and practitioners since they began in 2003. The clique of moderators have frequently broken their own detailed board guidelines on adhering to right intention, right speech, and right action.

Any reference to the 'NKT' on a web forum or discussion board these days will almost inevitably draw a barrage of 'cult' allegations as surely as a magnet attracts iron.


Sadly, we can see that the Dalai Lama's unjustified condemnations have been effective in associating 'NKT' and 'cult' in the minds of his followers and many other Tibetan Buddhists.

Possibly related posts: (automatically generated)

- [Bodhisattva Refutations](#)
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This entry was posted on Thursday, March 5th, 2009 at 5:48 pm and is filed under [Dalai Lama](#), [E-Sangha](#), [Smear: NKT is a cult, dorje shugden](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

17 Responses to "E-Sangha and "sect bashing" (continuation of the 'cult' smear history)"

1.  *Bill Esterhaus* Says:
[March 5, 2009 at 7:23 pm](#)

This is totally shocking. I'm amazed that a 'Buddhist' chat forum would behave in such a way, passing judgement on what they think is and is not Buddhism.

They're a bit superstitious, no? The idea that mad cow disease could be caused by Shugden practice is laughable! It's not the kind of thing that Buddhists would say if they want to be taken seriously.

I've subsequently learned that E-Sangha is a very popular site, but based on this evidence, I can't see why. I can only hope that they clean their act up and start acting a bit more responsibly and stop being so sectarian.

2.  *Al Billings* Says:
[March 5, 2009 at 7:46 pm](#)

You do realize that almost no other Buddhist organization considers NKT to be more than some kind of cult by its founder? You aren't going to get a lot of support from people, even other Buddhists.

From New Kadampa Truth Blog

Thanks Al. I am not sure whether you believe this yourself or are just reporting what you have heard. But this opinion of the NKT held by other Buddhist organizations (and E-Sangha moderators) is the reason we wrote this recent series of articles giving the history of the cult smear against the New Kadampa Tradition. I hope you have time to read these articles, which indicate that there is no basis in fact for saying that the NKT is "some kind of cult by its founder".

The NKT is a genuine Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Its founder, Geshe Kelsang, is faithfully following and passing on the tradition passed on to him in turn by Trijang Rinpoche and the other great Gelug masters since the time of Lama Tsongkhapa.

There are also in fact plenty of Buddhist organizations that are happy with the NKT and never criticize it. It is only the Tibetan Buddhist organizations under the influence of the Dalai Lama's wrong views who go along with this mis-characterization and politicization of the NKT. And Tibetan Buddhist groups in actual fact comprise a minority of Buddhist practitioners worldwide.

3.  Jimmy Says:

[March 5, 2009 at 9:18 pm](#)

I just found quite an amusing yet apt summary of the moderator situation on that website you mention, E-Sangha watch:

"The way speech is controlled in online forums would be impossible in person without a Gestapo and duct tape. On internet forums it can be done with the click of a button."

The intolerance shown toward my tradition, the New Kadampa Tradition, and my fellow practitioners from the mid-nineties onward by various Tibetan Buddhists first astounded me (now I am used to it!) Some Tibetan Buddhists, including the E-Sangha moderators, really do seem to have embraced far too much of the old Tibetan feudalistic, superstitious, and sectarian power struggles and not enough of the Buddhist teachings on love, compassion and tolerance. In bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the West they have thrown out the baby rather than the bathwater. In my opinion, Geshe Kelsang has had the wisdom and foresight to do the opposite, so over time people will be able to practice Buddhadharma unmixed with irrelevant Tibetan politics.

4.  Al Billings Says:

[March 5, 2009 at 9:57 pm](#)

Remind me again of Dorje Shugden's position on Nyingma as a lineage and on its practices? The last I checked, the thought promulgated was that non-Gelugpa practitioners, especially Nyingma, were going to some Dharma hell and should be destroyed.

From New Kadampa Truth

Dorje Shugden is a Buddha and as such has love and compassion for everyone, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. As for the second rumor, it is nonsense to say that Gelugpa practitioners of Dorje Shugden state that Nyingmapas are going to hell, let alone that they should be destroyed. Geshe Kelsang has often said that all four Tibetan schools possess a valid path to enlightenment. He has addressed the rumor you mention on a number of occasions, including in a letter to the editor of *Newsweek* magazine in May 1997:

“HH the Dalai Lama says: “That cult is actually destroying the freedom of religious thought. Say I want to practise Nyingma. They say this Protector will harm me.” This is also completely untrue. We would like to ask HH the Dalai Lama: who are these Shugden practitioners saying these meaningless things? His words are causing disharmony between Shugden practitioners and Nyingma practitioners. Why is HH the Dalai Lama creating this new problem?”

Until now there have been no problems between Gelugpas and Nyingmapas, and there has been no arguing or criticism. Some scholars debate with each other, such as the well-known Gelugpa scholar Yonten Gyatso and Dongthog Tulku, a scholar from another tradition, who conducted a debate by letter over a number of years. They have written many books replying to each other’s assertions, but this does not mean they are criticising each other. They are simply clarifying the doctrines of their own traditions, with good motivation. There is nothing wrong with this.

I would like to ask: what is the problem between the Nyingma and Gelug traditions? There is none. The majority of people from both traditions naturally live in harmony, so why is HH the Dalai Lama destroying this harmony by saying things like “Shugdendens say you should not even touch a Nyingma document”? Although we concentrate on our own tradition we respect all other Buddhist traditions, including the Nyingma, and we rejoice very much in their sincere practice.”


5.  *Lamrimpa* Says:
[March 5, 2009 at 10:34 pm](#)

Thank you for this excellent series of articles on the origins of the ‘cult’ smear. Please would you consider putting them on the main New Kadampa Truth website? So many people have been adversely affected by the negative speech of these few individuals, without realizing their hidden agendas, the history behind the situation, or the fact that there was ever a time when this smear didn’t exist. Since it is so easy to assume there is some truth in a lie if you keep hearing it, it is very helpful to realize this smear has been created out of thin air, and that it is not always true that ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’, which your articles clearly show. It would be great if they were as easy as possible to find.

Please keep up the excellent work. People encountering these smears for the first time are able to access a much more balanced picture thanks to the efforts of yourselves and others like you.

From New Kadampa Truth Blog

Thank you Lamrimpa for the support and suggestion — we will add links to these articles from the website.

6.  *dharmaprotector* Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 2:06 pm](#)

Another source for the C word is Georges Dreyfus. Actually, I read a while back that there is no Tibetan word for ‘cult’ (hence, no such thing as a “Shugden cult”).

7.  *Webgoji* Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 5:52 pm](#)

I used to be a member of various Buddhist message boards such as E-Sangha, BuddhaChat and others. Each user on a message board is person doing the best to deal with Samsara with the delusions they have, myself included.

Some are more angry or negatively motivated than others, but I found those people to be very kind teachers helping me learn patience while the others were excellent at helping me with my understanding of the scriptures. I found that having a positive, non-aggressive presence on the boards sometimes confused new members as they would sometimes comment how they thought I would be mean and sectarian, but were pleasantly surprised to find an NKT member that was kind and friendly. Maybe I made a positive impact in their lives which is all I can ever hope to do.

As time went on though, it became increasingly more difficult to have meaningful conversations with anyone. Those members who wished to post thoughtful comments, both positive and negative, found themselves drowned out by random name-calling and other foolishness designed not to provoke any thought, but merely to overwhelm readers with a torrent of nonsense. It seems apparent that many people who disagree with the NKT can't always come up with a good argument on the boards so they collapse into childish tantrums.

Noting that Buddhist message boards were increasingly becoming nothing but a breeding ground for competitions of "Who can make up the silliest derogatory name", I left for the sports forums where the intelligence of the conversations remains at a much higher level.



8. [Al Billings](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 5:56 pm](#)

Please add your own comments if you wish to respond to me instead of editing my comments to make it look like I wrote things that I didn't.



9. [Al Billings](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 5:59 pm](#)

Your response ignores the historical realities of Tibet, where lineages conducted wars against each other and destroyed their monasteries. Nyingma were often a target of the followers of Dorje Shugden. This cannot be papered over and is one of the primary reasons why HHDL has said that the practice is harmful. The fact that your cult founder broke with the leaders of his own tradition and his own nation in order to continue this practice puts him outside of acceptable behavior, not others.

I predict that when he inevitability passes away, NKT will pass as well.



10. [newkadampatruth](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:31 pm](#)

Hello Al,
Sorry, I wasn't trying to make it look that you wrote anything you didn't, which is why it said "From New Kadampa Truth".

As for your comments here, I have heard them before but there is in actual fact no proof for any of these allegations against Je Phabongkhapa (who is the only person all these rumors started by the Dalai Lama trace back to, even though he was the root Guru of the Dalai Lama's own Guru — that's politics for you). There are many Lamas who defend this reputation unfairly ascribed to him, such as Trijang Rinpoche, Lama Zopa, Zong Rinpoche, and any number of realized Gelug Lamas. The historical realities of Tibet also show that many Shugden Lamas get on extremely well with practitioners from other traditions. Please see an excellent new website <http://www.dorjeshugdenhistory.org> to get a better picture of previous Dorje Shugden practitioners in Tibet.

Geshe Kelsang is for one thing not a cult founder since the NKT is not a cult, as these articles make clear. And while I agree with you that he broke away from his own nation, particularly its politics, he has not broken with the leaders of his own tradition, namely Lama Tsongkhapa and the great lineage Gurus of the Gelugpa tradition to the time of Trijang Dorjechang, but follows them faithfully and with great humility.

I find your prediction to be overly pessimistic 😊 I predict that the NKT will become stronger and stronger as the years go by, partly because the Kadampa teachings are so beautiful and people love them and partly because of the skillful forward-thinking way in which the organization of the NKT-IKBU has been set up to keep religion and politics separate (with, for example, the advent of the Internal Rules and democratic succession).



11. [Al Billings](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:40 pm](#)

Well, have a good time and don't wind up in a hell-realm then.

As for me, my Vajrayana vows are largely with Nyingma teachers. That means I cannot go near an entity like Dorje Shugden. He certainly isn't the Buddha nor a Bodhisattva so he has nothing to do with my own practice.



12. [dougal](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:41 pm](#)

Al -

your comments weren't edited to make it look like you wrote things you didn't - they were replied to by the blog author.

and your points are completely wrong. when did these anti-Nyingma pogroms take place? Geshe Kelsang did not break with the leaders of his own tradition - the DL and TGIE broke with the tradition of their own Root Gurus, notably HH Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche.

and when Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso steps down as General Spiritual Director of the NKT-IKBU in August of this year, the duly-elected Deputy Spiritual Director will take his place and a new Deputy Spiritual Director will be elected, who will in turn become the General Spiritual Director, and so on, into the future. Venerable Geshe Kelsang has spent the last several years working, in

conjunction with senior students, administrators and lawyers, on a binding set of documents, the Articles of Memorandum and Internal Rules of the NKT-IKBU, in order to hand over the effective leadership and day-to-day running of the religious institution he founded in a reasonable, democratic and harmonious manner, and creating a stable and water-tight organisational infrastructure to ensure the purity, good health and longevity of his tradition - thereby neatly, legally and completely disassembling what might be perceived as his own power base.

not much of a cult leader.

not much of a cult.



13. [Al Billings](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:46 pm](#)

Spoken like a loyal cult follower... The next thing you know, someone will be attacking my website or protesting outside of a local Dharma center that I go to...

I'm here because this post linked back to my own blog and NKT people have consistently tried to take over the E-Sangha conversation on my blog to use as a bully pulpit about how persecuted they are because 95%+ of Vajrayana wants nothing to do with them or its leader.

You can say that your founder is true to his lineage except he *was* a Gelug monk and he is not following the instructions of his seniors in his own tradition, forcing him to go to the West and found an organization composed mainly of non-Tibetans to carry on his protests.

While you might think it is a cult, the rest of us pretty much do.



14. [dougal](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:46 pm](#)

"he has nothing to do with my own practice"

so you comment on him - why, exactly?



15. [Al Billings](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:47 pm](#)

Dougal, don't link to my blog posts and don't mention my blog here and I'll have no reason to comment.



16. [newkadampatruth](#) Says:
[March 6, 2009 at 10:51 pm](#)

Okay, I appreciate the dialogue we have had, and Al's contributions may have been helpful for readers to get a glimpse of the wrong views we are up against; but I think this conversation could end up going nowhere (it usually does), so I suggest we now leave it be. Answers to all your allegations

can be found on the New Kadampa Truth website: <http://www.newkadampatruth.org>. Al, you are welcome to your belief that we are a cult, but there is no need to keep saying this here as people can already find this kind of comment in other places on the Internet such as E-Sangha and Phayul, and we have countered this allegation on this blog. I will remove that link to your website so that you are not inundated any more by "NKT people". Thanks.



17. *dougal* Says:

[March 6, 2009 at 10:55 pm](#)

sorry, Al -

i hadn't seen the link to your site (and it looks like i won't get the opportunity to now, either, if it's being removed).

go in peace.

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