

A monk sent these thoughts about fundamentalism in Buddhism to the Editor staff of [New Statesman](#):

The scourge of fundamentalism is not merely a problem in the monotheistic faiths based on the god of Abraham. As with other world faiths, Buddhism has had in its fold members who believe unequivocally that they hold the ultimate truth, and that their detractors are dangerously mistaken and must be corrected. **It is out of the energy of such fundamentalism that Dorje Shugden was promoted from Dolgyal, the spirit of Dol - a minor regional guardian; to a fully enlightened Buddha-protector by the conservative establishment within the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.**

The Gelugpa tradition's beginnings are the teachings of Lama Tzongkhapa, the ultimate non-sectarian lama, who based his writings on a combination of Indian treatises, Mahayana Sutras, and teachings he received from masters of the Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyu traditions. His approach was essentially non-sectarian and firmly rooted in a close adherence to the Indian texts.

How strange then, that those who claim they are "protecting the purity" of Tsongkhapa's teachings from the non-sectarian approach of the Dalai Lama, have taken up as the banner of their cause, Dorje Shugden, a deity of dubious origins. Not found in any of the classical Indian texts which Tzongkhapa taught his followers should be the ultimate authority, or in any of the extensive writings of Tsongkhapa himself, Shugden in fact is a worldly deity who has become the banner of the fundamentalists.

Phabongkha Rinpoche, the root guru of Trijang Rinpoche and founding lama of the Shugden movement, never gave clear reasons why he felt Shugden was a Buddha. The 13th Dalai Lama questioned his reliance on such a mundane protector, and **in a letter responding to the**

Dalai Lama asking that he stop Shugden worship, Phabongkha promised to do so, and said that his reason for Shugden propitiation was because "my mother told me that Shugden is the deity of my maternal lineage."

Despite this promise, after the death of the 13th Dalai Lama, Phabongkha once again began the transmission of Shugden practice to his students. Without scriptural references or historical precedents, his students believed Shugden to be a Buddha based on their faith in Phabongkha alone. Georges Dreyfus, noted Buddhist scholar, says: Pa-bong-ka suggests that he (Shugden) is the protector of the Ge-luk tradition, replacing the protectors appointed by Tzongkhapa (Gelug's founder) himself.

In modern times, Shugden became the enforcer of the purity of Gelugpa doctrine. Zemey Tulku released a document called the "Yellow Book". This book outlines stories of misfortunes that befall Gelug Shugden devotees who read and practice the texts of the other Tibetan lineages, especially the Nyingma tradition. Those who "mix" traditions are seen as enemies of the lineage, as can be seen from this excerpt from a propitiation ritual included in Zemey's book:

Praise to you, violent god of the Yellow Hat teachings, Who reduces to particles of dust Great beings, high officials and ordinary people Who pollute and corrupt the Geluk doctrine.

Thus, Shugden's purpose is clear and well-known in both Gelug and non-Gelug circles. It is for this reason that high Kagyu Lamas such as Tai Situpa Rinpoche say they "utter Shugden's name with fear" and the late head of the Nyingma tradition, Minling Trichen Rinpoche, referred to Shugden as a "ghost". The head of the Sakya tradition, His Holiness Sakya Trizin, says that while some in his lineage made offerings to Shugden, he was always regarded as a mundane protector on the lowest level of the pantheon.

Due to this widespread fear and the sectarian flavour it gave modern Gelug practice, the Dalai Lama began speaking about the dangers of

Shugden at his teaching events, eventually requesting Shugden devotees not to take teachings and initiations from him. The majority of Gelugpas understood and followed his reasoning, because it was after all based on the teachings of the fountainhead of the Gelugpa tradition, Lama Tzongkhapa.

Those most loyal to Phabongkha's lineage, however, resisted, stepping up Shugden worship in monasteries, commissioning new statues, and printing Shugden texts that were dutifully thrust into the laps of monks in their houses who had doubts about the practice. Then, **Lobsang Gyatso, head of the dialectics institute in Dharamsala, an opponent of Shugden who had written voluminously on the subject along with two attendants, was murdered in his home. Interpol eventually released arrest warrants for two chief suspects in his murder, confirmed by Indian police to be Shugden activists who subsequently fled to Chinese controlled Tibet. The suspects were never apprehended, and so never went to trial.**

It was after this murder that HH Dalai Lama began to speak more actively against Shugden, including in a meeting with the abbots of all the major Gelug monasteries. As promotion of the deity continued, in 2007, the Dalai Lama recommended the matter be put to a vote. In all three Gelug monastic universities; Sera; Drepung and Ganden, the Shugden opponents won by a landslide. In the tradition of the original spirit of monastic law, vote sticks were drawn. In the spirit of the majority (on which monastic law is based, according to the Vinaya scriptures of early Buddhism), it was decided those who practiced Shugden could no longer participate in the monastic rituals. This was all done according to Buddhist law, with many precedents including votes held during schisms for various reasons in many other Buddhist countries such as Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

The Shugden activists refused to leave, so all monks were asked to take an oath to abandon Shugden and all those who refused were

turned away from public pujas and debates. In effect, they were banished from monastery functions for not following monastic principles- rule of majority and abiding by vote results, common procedures in all Buddhist monastic communities. Rather than being banished from monastery grounds, however, Shugden worshipers were allowed to keep all their residential buildings and temples, essentially becoming a separate community within the monastery.

Without an understanding of the basics of monastic law and the Tibetan history of Shugden practice, it is easy to misunderstand this controversy. However, when one digs a little deeper, the picture becomes far more complex, and far less incriminating than Shugden activists would have us believe.

Sincerely, [...], Buddhist Monk (The name of the monk is kept private due to threats he received. His teacher was threatened with death many times.)