The New Kadampa Tradition and the Continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in Transition

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ABSTRACT The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) recently attracted a lot of media attention by participating in a high-profile campaign against the Dalai Lama during his visit to England in the summer of 1996. The issue at stake was the protector-deity practice of rDo rje shugs Idan which the Dalai Lama has rejected on theological and political grounds, but which the NKT defines as its ‘essential’ practice. The significance of this dispute has been analysed in terms of its implications for the Tibetan political situation and the image of Buddhism in the West, but this article focuses on the implications for observers seeking to understand contemporary forms of Tibetan Buddhism in Western contexts. In particular, it is argued that an appreciation of Tibetan Buddhism in Britain requires the adoption of a cross-cultural approach, and so the historical divisions within the dGe lugs tradition and the development of the rDo rje shugs Idan controversy are examined as the appropriate contexts for understanding the emergence of the NKT. In the light of these considerations the NKT’s historical and ideological development is traced and, finally, the significance of the NKT’s participation in the recent dispute—in terms of its stability and self-identity—is discussed.

Introduction

Some recent accounts of contemporary Buddhism have criticised a perceived ‘theoretical bias’ pervading the scholarly treatment of Buddhism in Western societies. This term refers to the tendency of observers to focus narrowly on the Western-convert appropriation and experience of Buddhist traditions to the exclusion of certain historical and cross-cultural factors that must be considered, if the presence and development of Buddhism in the West is to be fully understood. Bell, for example, criticises how accounts which detail the reception of Buddhism by nineteenth century Britain emphasise its ‘re-construction’ by British Victorians ignoring how its arrival actually involved the “active collaboration between Britons and Asian Buddhists” (Bell, 1991: 11). Finney also maintains that sociological assessments of Zen in America, which treat it as a ‘deviant cult response’ to social discontinuities, are necessarily limited, because they overlook the “prolonged process of culture contact and diffusion”, which largely accounts for its presence there (Finney, 1991: 391).

Although Tibetan Buddhism in Britain remains a significantly neglected area, what has been written by observers so far indicates that this field of inquiry has often displayed a ‘western theoretical bias’. Furthermore, this bias is also rife in the perceptions of many Western Buddhist practitioners whose understanding of the traditions they espouse is often simplistic, idealistic and uninformed about
how broader historical and oriental contexts continue to exert a normative influence on their development in the Occident. 5

In this article I will attempt to present a theoretically balanced analysis of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a contemporary Tibetan Buddhist movement which follows dGe lugs teachings. Recently, this movement has generated a lot of media attention and public interest because of its leading role in a Western-based campaign mounted against the Dalai Lama last Summer concerning his opposition to the protector-deity practice of rDo rje shugs lhan among dGe lugs refugees in India. While the controversy surrounding this practice is rooted in Tibetan history and reflects deep-seated divisions within the dGe lugs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, this is the first time it has found expression in a Western context. This has caused concern in that the eruption of this hitherto “well-guarded Tibetan secret” (Batchelor, 1996: 119) may “damage the campaign for Tibetan independence as well as tarnish the image of Tibetan Buddhism in the West” (ibid). A more positive by-product may be the challenge that has been posed to scholars and practitioners of contemporary Buddhism alike to adopt a cross-cultural perspective for understanding Tibetan forms of Buddhism in the West.

Divisions within the dGe lugs Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism

The NKT cannot be fully understood by an examination that is restricted to its origins and development in Britain alone. Nor can it be appreciated by situating it within a simplified or idealised Tibetan Buddhist context. Rather, the historical and ideological development of the NKT can only be understood once the broader context of the dGe lugs tradition is considered, and the historical and contemporary divisions within it are recognised.

The dGe lugs tradition is one of the four main traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and was founded in the early fifteenth century by Tsong kha pa (1357–1419). It is believed that Tsong kha pa revived and continued the work of Atisa, the Indian acarya who founded the bKa’ gSal order in the eleventh century. The institution of the Dalai Lama emerged within the dGe lugs order, which became politically dominant in central Tibet in the seventeenth century.

It is important to understand that the dGe lugs tradition is not a homogenous entity in which the Dalai Lama’s authority goes unchallenged. Internal conflict and division has been a regular feature of dGe lugs history, and it has taken philosophical, political, regional, economic and institutional forms which have often interacted. My main concern here, however, is to focus on one particular historical and contemporary division which has arisen from conflicting interpretations of the position of the dGe lugs tradition in relation to other Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

The appropriate policy that the dGe lugs tradition should adopt in relation to other schools of Tibetan Buddhism has always been a bone of contention among dGe lugs Buddhists. As is the case with most religious traditions, there have been those who have interpreted their tradition ‘exclusively’, believing that their possession of the truth precludes the validity and pursuit of other paths. Others have adopted a more ‘inclusive’ approach believing that their dGe lugs affiliation in no way implies the superiority of the dGe lugs tradition over other traditions which are equally viable and constitute additional resources along the path to enlightenment.

The distinction Samuel makes between ‘clerical’ and ‘shamanic’ forms of Tibetan Buddhism, as represented by the fifteenth century dGe lugs formulation and the nineteenth century Rigs-med (non-sectarian) movement, underlines the contours of the exclusive/inclusive polarisation running throughout dGe lugs history (Samuel, 1993). The original dGe lugs formulation was clerical and purist in that Tsong kha pa, the ‘reformer’ of the monastic order, organised the ‘essential teachings’ into a single, structured and linear path which emphasised the gradual and philosophical understanding of the enlightened state within an academic and monastic context. Due to its clerical orientation, the dGe lugs tradition tended to be exclusive and intolerant of other systems, thereby encouraging sectarian distinction. The Rigs-med movement, by contrast, was shamanic. It lacked a definite doctrinal position and regarded different paths not as ‘exclusive alternatives’, but as possible options for lay or monastic practitioners. In maintaining the validity of all paths, this movement was inclusive, helping to break down sectarian divisions between different traditions.

While the dGe lugs formulation and the Rigs-med movement can be contrasted theoretically in terms of the distinction between clerical and shamanic forms of religion, in practice the situation is more complicated. According to Samuel, the dGe lugs tradition and the Rigs-med movement are actually ‘synthetic positions’ which combine and reconcile both elements of Tibetan religious life: “… both contain shamanic and clerical elements, but the Rims approach is weighted towards the shamanic side, and the Gelugpa approach towards the clerical” (Samuel, 1993: 547). The dGe lugs tradition, then, actually offered a range of ‘possibilities’, both clerical and shamanic. In the same way, both exclusive and inclusive positions concerning inter-traditional relations have co-existed within the dGe lugs tradition and have characterised each stage of its history. We need only examine a few notable examples of this recurring tension here, to highlight the appropriate context for understanding the NKT.

The inclusive orientation has traditionally characterised the Dalai Lamas, particularly the Great Fifth (1617–1682) and Thirteenth (1876–1933) and the current Fourteenth Dalai Lama (1935–). These are all renowned for having received religious instruction from lamas of other Tibetan traditions, such as the Sa skya and the nRiRnying ma. The Great Fifth and Thirteenth were even identified as Ter-ron, or nRiRnying ma ‘Discoverers of Hidden Treasure’, and the current Dalai Lama has gone to great lengths to promote inter-faith activity considering it praiseworthy “when someone practises all the Sakya, Gelug, Kagyu and nRiRnying teachings according to his level of realisation.” The political policies of the Dalai Lamas have also been informed by this inclusive orientation. It can be discerned, for example, in the Great Fifth’s leniency and tolerance of opposing factions and traditions following the establishment of dGe lugs hegemony over Tibet in 1642; the Great Thirteenth’s modernist leaning reforms, which attempted to turn Tibet into a thoroughly modern state through its assimilation of foreign ideas and institutions; and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s promotion of egalitarian principles and his attempts to “maintain good relations among the various traditions of Tibetan religion in exile” (Samuel, 1993: 550).

The inclusive approach has, however, repeatedly met opposition from others within the dGe lugs tradition, whose orientation has been more exclusive. The
eclectic bent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, for example, was strongly opposed by the more conservative segment of the dGe lugs tradition which also endeavoured, successfully, to suppress those treatises composed by lamas who betrayed rNyung ma, or other non-dGe lugs, influences. Similarly, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama’s reforms were thwarted by the conservative element of the monastic segment, which feared that modernisation would erode its economic base and the religious basis of the state. His spiritually inclusive approach was also rejected by contemporaries such as Phabongka Rinpoche (1878–1943). As the dGe lugs agent of the Tibetan Government in Kham (Eastern Tibet), Phabongka Rinpoche employed repressive measures against non-dGe lugs sects. In particular, he destroyed religious artefacts associated with Padmasambhava—who is revered as a ‘second Buddha’ by rNyung ma practitioners—and attempted to forcibly convert rNyung ma monasteries to the dGe lugs position. A key element of Phabongka Rinpoche’s outlook was the cult of the protective deity rDo rje shugs ldan which he employed against other traditions and, thereby, wedded to the idea of dGe lugs exclusivism.6

As with his predecessors, the current Dalai Lama’s open-minded approach to religious practice and his policy of representing the interests of all Tibetans equally, irrespective of their particular sectarian affiliation, has been opposed by disgruntled dGe lugs adherents of a more exclusive orientation. This classical inclusive/exclusive division has largely been articulated within the exiled Tibetan Buddhist community through a dispute concerning the status and nature of the protective deity rDo rje shugs ldan. An outline of the main features of this controversy will facilitate our understanding of the NKT and its involvement in the latest round of the dispute.

The rDo rje shugs ldan Controversy

rDo rje shugs ldan belongs to the class of beings within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon known as Chos skyon (Skt. Dharmapala), ‘protectors of the religious law’ or ‘Dharma-protectors’. Dharma-protectors are deities who have vowed to serve and protect the Buddha’s teachings and its practitioners, and they have been an important feature of the religious lives of all Tibetan Buddhist traditions. While different traditions might give greater prominence to some protective deities over others, most deities are generally recognised by all and considered to be divided into two main branches: namely, the ‘jig rten las ’das pa’i srong ma, which refers to the supra-mundane deities who are manifestations of enlightened beings, or Buddhas, and the ‘jig rten pa’i srong ma, which refers to the mundane—or worldly—deities “who are still residing within the spheres inhabited by animated beings” (de NBesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 3).

Within the dGe lugs tradition, conflicting accounts about the protective deity rDo rje shugs ldan have developed and caused considerable intra-traditional conflict for many years. While there is a consensus that this protector practice originated in the seventeenth century, there is much disagreement about the nature and status of rDo rje shugs ldan, the events that led to his appearance onto the religious landscape of Tibet and the subsequent development of his cult. One view holds that rDo rje shugs ldan is a ‘jig rten las ’das pa’i srong ma (an enlightened being) and that, while not being bound by history, he assumed a series of human incarnations before manifesting as a Dharma-protector during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who eventually praised him as a Buddha. Proponents of this view maintain that the deity has been worshipped as a Buddha ever since, especially by members of the dGe lugs tradition towards the interests of whom rDo rje shugs ldan is particularly partial.6

The main proponent of this view in recent years has been Geshe Kelsang Gyatso who, like many other popular dGe lugs lamas,7 stands firmly within the lineage tradition of the highly influential Phabongka Rinpoche and his disciple Trijang Rinpoche. Opposing this, however, is a view which maintains that rDo rje shugs ldan is actually a ‘jig rten pa’i srong ma (a worldly protector), whose relatively short lifespan of only a few centuries and dubious circumstances of origin (i.e. from a situation of conflict between a prominent dGe lugs lama and the Fifth Dalai Lama) make him a highly inappropriate object of worship and refuge. Supporters of this view reject the pretensions made by devotees of rDo rje shugs ldan, with respect to his status and importance, as recent innovations probably originating during the time of Phabongka Rinpoche and reflecting his particularly exclusive sectarian agenda.8 The present Dalai Lama is the main proponent of this position, and he is widely supported by representatives of non-dGe lugs traditions.

Scholarly English language accounts of rDo rje shugs ldan reliance seem to corroborate the latter of the two positions emerging from within the Tibetan tradition, suggesting that the status and importance of rDo rje shugs ldan was gradually elevated from around the time of Phabongka Rinpoche. De NBesky-Wojkowitz presents rDo rje shugs ldan as a deity “of comparatively recent origin” (1956: 134), who is one of the main dGe lugs protective deities operating in the worldly spheres, and Mumford’s references (1989) indicate how modern-day dGe lugs and Sa skya Buddhists in Nepal still regard the deity as a popular ‘jig rten pa’i srong ma. rDo rje shugs ldan’s rise to prominence through the sectarian activities of Phabongka Rinpoche has already been mentioned. This appears to have preceded another important development whereby, during the 1930s and 1940s, Phabongka supporters began to proclaim the fulfilment of the tradition “that the guardian-deity rDo rje shugs ldan ... will succeed Pe har as the head of all ‘jig rten pa’i srong ma once the latter god advances into the rank of those guardian-deities who stand already outside the worldly spheres” (de NBesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 134) and maintain that the Tibetan government should turn its allegiance away from Pe har, the State protector, to rDo rje shugs ldan.9

It is unclear when belief in rDo rje shugs ldan as an enlightened being first developed; the likelihood is that it emerged gradually as the Dharma-protector grew in prominence. This belief seems to have been in place by the time the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama was introduced to the practice by Trijang Rinpoche prior to the exile of the Tibetan Buddhist community in 1959. After some years in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama became aware that his practice was in conflict firstly with the State protector Pe Har, and later with the main protective goddess of the dGe lugs tradition and Tibetan people Palden Lhamo who, as a ‘jig rten las ’das pa’i srong ma (an enlightened protector), objected strongly to rDo rje shugs ldan’s pretensions.10 He did not, however, voice his doubts about the merits of rDo rje shugs ldan reliance until 1978 following the publication of a sectarian text by the dGe lugs lama Zimey Rinpoche. In his text, The Oral Transmission of the Intelligent Father,11 Zimey Rinpoche attacks as corrupt those within his tradition who have ecletic tendencies, and asserts the pre-
eminence of the dGe lugs tradition which is symbolised and safeguarded by rDo rje shugs Idan. This publication provoked angry reactions from members of non-dGe lugs traditions setting in motion a bitter literary exchange.12

The Dalai Lama intervened in the dispute by rejecting Zimey Rinpoche’s ‘awful’ book as an “insidious act of carelessness” (cf. Russell et al., 1983: 13) which could only damage the common cause of the Tibetan people because of its sectarian divisiveness. In a series of talks he maintained that all the Tibetan traditions are “equally profound dharmas” (Russell, 1983: 14) and defended the unbiased and ecletic approach to Buddhist practice as exemplified by the Second, Third and Fifth Dalai Lamas. The dispute reinforced his suspicions that rDo rje shugs Idan reliance was in conflict with Pe Har and Palden Lhamo, the deities who represent the interests of Tibetans generally, and he imposed partial restrictions on rDo rje shugs Idan propitiation. Reliance on rDo rje shugs Idan in private was acceptable so long as he was not propitiated as “the Lord of the Dharma Protectors” (Russell, 1983: 42), but the practice was considered “improper for a member of staff who was working for me and the Tibetan Government” (Russell, 1983: 21) and was not to be promulgated “by the collective religious bodies, like the monasteries and their colleges” (Russell, 1983: 35).

The issue of relying on the protective deity rDo rje shugs Idan thus became a source of tension and division within the Tibetan Buddhist community in exile, and the dGe lugs tradition in particular. The Dalai Lama’s pronouncements were recibed by many individuals and groups, such as the re-established Ganen Shakti Monastery in Mundgod (South India), for whom rDo rje shugs Idan reliance was an important part of their spiritual lives.13 Many of these, of course, as sympathisers and apologists of the Phabongka tradition, were already critical of his inclusive sectarian orientation and unbaised religious policies.

In the Spring of 1996 this conflict of authority erupted publicly, when the Dalai Lama began to voice his opposition to rDo rje shugs Idan reliance with a greater sense of urgency.14 In response, rDo rje shugs Idan supporters in India created an organisation, the Dorje Shugden Devotees Charitable and Religious Society,15 to protest against his pronouncements and canvass international support for their campaign against the suppression of their spiritual traditions and human rights.16 The cause of rDo rje shugs Idan supporters in India and the reputation of devotees around the world were subsequently championed by a Western pressure group, called the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC), through a campaign which coincided with the Dalai Lama’s visit to Europe during the Summer of that year. This involved generating media attention through issuing news releases and ‘press packs’, which included documentary ‘evidence’ of the Dalai Lama’s undemocratic actions and human rights abuses, organising public demonstrations both before and during his visits to England and Switzerland,17 and participating in debates on various Internet discussion forums.18 The NKT played a leading role in this campaign, to the extent that Geshe Kelsang not only encouraged his disciples to participate in demonstrations, but also granted newspaper and BBC radio interviews himself.19 For these activities the NKT received harsh criticism and, although they claimed to be separate groups with overlapping interests, the SSC was presented by the media as a front for the NKT to pursue a ‘smear campaign’ aimed at sabotaging the Dalai Lama’s morally impeccable image in the West without implicating itself.20

The rDo rje shugs Idan dispute has both a doctrinal and a political dimension, although the two are closely related. The doctrinal issue concerns the question of whether rDo rje shugs Idan devotees are relying upon—or ‘taking refuge’ in—a worldly deity or a Buddha. The distinction, from the viewpoint of the practitioner’s spiritual welfare, is vital.21 The political dimension of the dispute stems from the connection of rDo rje shugs Idan with dGe lugs exclusivism, an orientation which the Dalai Lama has rejected on the grounds that it encourages disunity and thereby harms the Tibetan cause. More specifically, it has been suggested that the Dalai Lama, in rejecting rDo rje shugs Idan, is speaking out against a particular quasi-political faction within the dGe lugs tradition-in-exile, who are opposed to his modern, ecumenical and democratic political vision and who believe that the Tibetan government “should champion a fundamentalist version of Tibetan Buddhism as a state religion in which the dogmas of the Nyingmapa, Kargyupa [sic] and Sakyapa schools are heterodox and discredited” (Sparham, 1996: 12).

The Emergence of the NKT
In October, 1991, Full Moon magazine celebrated a “wonderful new development in the history of the Buddha dharma”, namely, the establishment of the ‘New Kadampa Tradition’ by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso.22 The NKT was founded to unite the many centres already under Geshe Kelsang’s spiritual direction towards a common endeavour: to preserve and promote “the pure tradition of Mahayana Buddhism deriving from the Tibetan Buddhist meditator and scholar Je Tsongkhapa”,23 which Geshe Kelsang had introduced to the West. By the close of 1992 the NKT was established both ideologically, structurally and legally, and united by the ‘deep spiritual affinity’ of “a shared devotion to our precious Founder, Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche” (Full Moon, Winter 1992: 46).

Although the 1991 declaration certainly marked a ‘new development in the history of the Buddha dharma’, the historical and institutional roots of the NKT in Britain run deep and require some consideration, before the NKT can be located within its broader historical and cross-cultural context. The emergence of the NKT on to the British Buddhist landscape will now be outlined and contextualised revealing how it represents the manifestation, in a Western context, of classical and contemporary divisions within the dGe lugs tradition with regard to policies about inter-traditional relations and the related issue of rDo rje shugs Idan reliance.

The roots of the NKT in Britain should be traced back as far as the earliest encounters between small numbers of Westerners and the Tibetan dGe lugs lamas, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, in a monastery they founded in 1969 near Kathmandu, Nepal. From their Western following, a network of Buddhist centres emerged and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) was founded in 1975 by Lama Yeshe to co-ordinate and unite them in the cause of “preserving the principles and teachings of Mahayana Buddhism” (Mackenzie, 1988: 56).

In 1976 the Manjushri Institute was founded at Conisholme Priory as a British branch of the FPMT and developed a structure and vision akin to other FPMT centres.24 However, a situation of conflict soon developed between the Resident
Teacher Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and Lama Yeshe, when Geshe Kelsang decided to open up a Buddhist centre in 1979 under his own spiritual direction rather than under the auspices of the FPMT. Lama Yeshe felt that Geshe Kelsang was splitting the energies that he should have channelled into Manjushri Institute and he asked him to resign so that a more suitable Geshe, one committed totally to FPMT objectives, could take over as Resident Teacher. This prompted Geshe Kelsang's disciples to petition him to stay and teach them and, on this basis, he refused to leave the Institute.

From this point onwards, the relationship between the Institute and the FPMT administration deteriorated rapidly. Geshe Kelsang and his students became increasingly dissatisfied with Lama Yeshe's organisation which, by governing the Institute's development centrally, seemed to disregard the interests of the Institute on a more local level. In 1983 these antagonisms came to a head and there was an open conflict of authority between the Institute's students and the FPMT administration. To resolve the dispute, a meeting between both 'sides' was prompted by representatives of the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the result was an agreement to 'resolve the dispute and improve communication'. This dispute, however, was never resolved. Although talks continued for many years, in reality, the FPMT administration quickly lost interest in what became seen, in the wake of Lama Yeshe's death in March 1984, as a fruitless case. Consequently, although it remained nominally connected to the FPMT for a number of years, Manjushri Institute began to develop, along with his other centres, under Geshe Kelsang's spiritual direction alone.

The dispute between Geshe Kelsang and Lama Yeshe can be seen as an example of how tensions often arise in international Buddhist organisations when local 'Dharma-communities' are centrally governed. Our understanding would, however, be incomplete, if the conflicting visions of these lamas, who represented very different positions in terms of the classical dGe lugs exclusive/inclusive polarisation, were not taken into account. Lama Yeshe's orientation was more 'shamanic' than 'clerical' in that he never completed his Geshe degree, favoured non-traditional and un-conventional methods of presenting teachings which were often frowned upon by his more conservative peers, and he promoted a vision of dGe lugs Buddhism in the West that was global and ecumenical. By contrast Geshe Kelsang was more clerical in orientation, favouring traditional and academic styles of behaviour and presentation. His early rejection of Lama Yeshe's inclusive vision was revealed through founding the Madhyamaka Centre independently of the FPMT framework in 1979, and by emphasising a strictly localised and insular view of Manjushri Institute.

Following the break from the FPMT, the centres under Geshe Kelsang's spiritual direction were encouraged to adopt a more exclusive developmental model. Although they continued to receive visiting Buddhist teachers, mainly from the dGe lugs tradition, they became increasingly focused on Geshe Kelsang's authority. The establishment of Tharpa Publications in 1985 "specifically to publish Geshe Kelsang's books" (Full Moon: 5, Summer 1992: 9) was indicative of this process and facilitated it. The rift with the FPMT had inevitably involved a break from its publishing arm, Wisdom Publications, which, unlike Tharpa, developed a radically inclusive agenda by publishing and distributing books representing all Buddhist schools. The expansion and consolidation of Madhyamaka Centre in York, culminating in its 1986 move to Kilnwick Percy Hall, was also central to the later development of the NKT in that a number of distinguishing NKT features were originally introduced there. One of these features, namely the allegiance to the Dharma-protector rDo rje shugs ldan, became the source of a serious dispute during 1986.

In early 1986, the Madhyamaka Centre advertised that Geshe Kelsang would be giving Summer teachings on the protector practice of rDo rje shugs ldan. The Office of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, when it heard of the intended courses, wrote to advise Geshe Kelsang of the Dalai Lama's position with regard to this practice, and sent copies of the talks he had given in India throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s for distribution amongst those students intending to receive the teachings. Geshe Kelsang, however, did not heed the advice and delivered his teachings to students who had not received copies of the Dalai Lama's talks. The teachings he gave were strongly representative of the Phabongka tradition inasmuch as they included a warning that the rDo rje shugs ldan practice should not seriously be entered upon by anyone who could not promise to stay entirely within the dGe lugs tradition. Reliance on rDo rje shugs ldan subsequently became a central practice and Venerable Choyang Duldzin Kuten Lama, the Oracle of the protector deity from Ganden Shartse Monastery in India, visited England to perform special rituals for the success of Geshe Kelsang's centres.

The visits of Venerable Kuten Lama are significant for two main reasons. First, the connection with Ganden Shartse Monastery through the Oracle indicates how Geshe Kelsang's teachings represented the continuation, in a Western context, of the resistance found within the exile dGe lugs community in India to the Dalai Lama's pronouncements on rDo rje shugs ldan reliance. Secondly, the Oracle also happens to be Geshe Kelsang's uncle. This familial connection underlines the main theme of this article: namely, that an understanding of the presence of Tibetan Buddhism in Western societies requires a theoretically balanced approach. An understanding of the centrality of rDo rje shugs ldan reliance in the NKT would be incomplete if, alongside exclusively-orientated interpretations of dGe lugs Buddhism, the importance attached to 'continuity' in Tibetan kinship systems was not also acknowledged as an important determining factor.

In early 1987 Geshe Kelsang entered a 3-year meditative retreat in Dumfrieds, Scotland, and continued the work of transforming his teachings into publishable texts. Although this work had always been a feature of his life in Britain, it intensified with the separation from the FPMT and became particularly important from now on, because it was during his retreat that he introduced the new Teacher Training Programme, based solely upon his books, at Manjushri Institute. The implementation of study structures based upon Geshe Kelsang's books became the primary method of concentrating legitimate spiritual authority in him. During this period, therefore, Manjushri Institute gave away its extensive library of books by other teachers and devotion to the Dalai Lama was actively discouraged. This was a relatively unstable period in the NKT's development, because some students found these developments unacceptable and renounced their discipleship.

Shortly after Geshe Kelsang returned from his retreat, he invited the centres following his spiritual direction to become members of the newly-founded 'New Kadampa Tradition'. Centres wishing to affiliate had to agree to certain condi-
tions, including the acceptance of him as their principal Spiritual Guide, the acceptance of a succession of spiritual guides named by him, and the implementation of a three-tier study structure he had devised and based entirely on his books. Most of the centres accepted these terms and the subsequent history of the NKT witnessed its rapid expansion, not just in Britain, but also around the world. This expansion has been prioritised by Geshe Kelsang whose publishing campaign, since 1991, has intensified along with his status.

The creation of the NKT in 1991, which was the culmination of a line of development that can be traced back to the early 1980s, represented an extreme expression of *dge* lugs exclusivism. It was a schismatic event prompted by Geshe Kelsang’s belief that he could protect the purity of the teachings of *tsong kha pa* only by severing all connections between his centres and other Buddhist traditions, particularly the broader *dge* lugs tradition. The mobilisation of the title ‘New Kadampa Tradition’ indicates how, for him, the *dge* lugs tradition itself has degenerated and become a source of contamination. Traditionally, this title has functioned as a synonym for *dge* lugs, but Geshe Kelsang employs the term to evoke only the discipline and purity of the early Tibetan *kha gdays* masters and, therefore, in contrast to the contemporary, and by implication corrupt, *dge* lugs tradition. The nature of the perceived *dge* lugs degeneration concerns the absence of authentic study joined with spiritual practice, considered to be a hallmark of the NKT, and the ‘mixing of other traditions with *tsong kha pa’s* “pure Dharma”.

In composing his books and creating the NKT, Geshe Kelsang is believed by his followers to have re-established, ensured the future preservation of, the pure tradition of *tsong kha pa* in the West. NKT disciples are encouraged to adopt an exclusive understanding of their tradition, eschewing eclecticism, which in this context means relying on Geshe Kelsang as their sole source of spiritual authority. While this is accepted by NKT students as ‘skilful’ advice ensuring the maintenance of the purity of their lineage-tradition, an important practical upshot has been their willful isolation from other Buddhists.

Following the dispute with the Office of the Dalai Lama in 1986, the protector practice of *rDo rje shugs ldam* became central in Geshe Kelsang’s centres. As a symbol of *dge* lugs exclusivism, Geshe Kelsang continued its historical usage by Phabongka and exclusively-orientated adherents of the *dge* lugs tradition. In creating the NKT, however, Geshe Kelsang introduced new elements to *dge* lugs exclusivism and *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance. Since 1991, the NKT has declared its total independence from the ‘degenerate’ religio-political world of Tibetan *dge* lugs Buddhism, and proclaimed itself to be an autonomous, modern and ‘Western’ tradition. According to Geshe Kelsang the NKT has ‘re-established Kadampa Buddhism’ in the West and it has done this “through the power of Duldzin Dorje Shugden” who has “for specific reasons... changed the place where Kadampa Dharma will flourish.” While the related ideas of *dge* lugs exclusivism and *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance are firmly rooted in Tibetan tradition, the extremes to which they have been taken in the NKT can be seen as an innovation or departure from tradition.

Concluding Comments: The Significance of the Recent Dispute

The recent eruption of the *rDo rje shugs ldam* controversy is the first time this dispute, along with the deep-seated divisions it exposes, has been expressed publicly and in a Western context. The significance of this has been analysed by commentators mainly in political terms, in that images of conflict, discord and suspicions raised about the Dalai Lama’s moral character harm the Tibetan cause and play into the hands of the Chinese. It is also seen as significant in terms of its detrimental impact both on the ‘peace-loving’ image of Buddhism in the West and on the Western Buddhist community itself which generally holds the authority of the Dalai Lama in the highest esteem. However, I want to conclude this article with some comments about the significance of the NKT’s involvement in this dispute in terms of the organisation’s stability and self-identity.

On one level the NKT’s participation in this campaign can be seen as a pragmatic response to counteract the potentially negative effect of the Dalai Lama’s pronouncements on its stability and future growth. The controversy surrounding *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance has been a potential threat to the NKT’s stability since the practice was popularised during the mid-1980s. Since that time the organisation has adopted a policy of silence with respect to the contentious dimensions of the practice, withholding information and discouraging any discussion of it. The importance attached within the NKT to remaining within the boundaries of one’s spiritual tradition has also effectively insulated many members from hearing about the controversy from external sources. Consequently, the public manifestation of the dispute in the Spring of 1996 was the first time the majority of NKT members—many of whom have practised *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance daily—became aware of its controversial nature. The public expression of this dispute thus demanded that the NKT adjust its policy and publicly defend its ‘essential practice’ and reputation.

The raised awareness about this controversy is unlikely to cause great fragmentation within the NKT’s membership. As we have seen, the NKT is centred around the ideas of relying faithfully upon the Spiritual Guide—Geshe Kelsang—and his pure lineage of teachings, which includes *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance. NKT members are receptive to the main criticisms of the Dalai Lama by the SSC campaign (namely, that his pronouncements on *rDo rje shugs ldam* reject his Spiritual Guide Trijang Rinpoche and abandon his spiritual lineage), because they resonate with the NKT’s main articles of belief. Criticisms of the Dalai Lama’s eclecticism and “mixing of politics with Dharma” are equally well assimilated by students who consider that Geshe Kelsang alone has revealed the Buddha’s path “completely unmixed with other paths” (*Full Moon*, Spring 1994: 9). Nevertheless, the resignation and disrobing in 1996 of Geshe Kelsang’s spiritual successor, British born Gen. Thubten Gyatso (Neil Elliott), may be indicative of tensions and instabilities on a higher, organisational level. Furthermore, the British press has been highly critical of the NKT and this may adversely affect its future growth in spite of the adage that ‘there is no such thing as bad press’.

According to Geshe Kelsang’s students, the main reason for the NKT’s participation in the campaign was to put pressure on the Dalai Lama to lift his ban on *rDo rje shugs ldam* reliance and re-establish religious freedom in the exiled *dge* lugs community in India. NKT members were encouraged to join the campaign out of a sense of ‘spiritual solidarity’ with *rDo rje shugs ldam* devotees in India. When rationalised in this way the NKT’s activity seems to represent a reversal of its self-proclaimed separation and independence from the religio-
political world of Tibetan Buddhism. Geshe Kelsang's students, however, are quite adamant that the NKT's participation in the campaign in no way indicates a substantive change in its self-identity emphasising that once the Dalai Lama lifted the ban, the temporary alliances established with rDo rje slugs ldan supporters in India and around the world will terminate and the NKT will 'get back to normal'. These claims notwithstanding, the NKT's participation in the campaign indicates a relationship with dGe legs Buddhism that is more complicated than the ideas of discontinuity and separation suggest, and again the importance of adopting a cross-cultural—or theoretically balanced—approach to understanding Tibetan forms of Buddhism in the West is underlined.

The NKT's activity throws into relief the ideological continuities that exist between the NKT world-view and the perspective of rDo rje slugs ldan worshippers in India, continuities that have been observed throughout this article. It also betrays the actual links between the NKT and the exiled dGe legs community which at that time endured through the figure of Venerable Kuten Lama. As the Oracle of rDo rje slugs ldan Venerable Kuten Lama indirectly linked the NKT with dGe legs Buddhists in India, because he served both groups. This connection to the exiled dGe legs community must be acknowledged as an important impetus behind the NKT's participation in the campaign. The visit of Venerable Kuten Lama to England during 1996 illustrates this. While this visit happened to coincide with events in India resulting from the Dalai Lama's pronouncements on rDo rje slugs ldan, it was extended as a consequence of these pronouncements. The presence of the Oracle thus became seen as an 'exile' by some making the campaign more relevant to NKT students whose real responsibility to rDo rje slugs ldan devotees in India was made apparent.

As Geshe Kelsang's uncle and "the Oracle of the Dharma Protector of Kadampa Buddhism, Dorje Shugden", Venerable Kuten Lama has been an important figure in the NKT. While oracular divination has never been a regular feature of the NKT's activities, his occasional visits from Ganden Shartse Monastery in India were always big events and he attracted large gatherings of NKT disciples wherever he went. Consequently, Venerable Kuten Lama's decision, upon returning to India towards the end of 1996, to sever his connection with the NKT and affirm his support for the Dalai Lama, was met by Geshe Kelsang's students with shock and sadness. In the light of Venerable Kuten Lama's popularity within the NKT, this development must be seen, like the resignation and disrobing of Gen. Thubten Gyatso earlier in the year, as a significant blow to the organisation. However, on another level this development has partially resolved the ambiguity in the NKT's self-identity caused by its complicated relationship with the dGe legs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In separating himself from the NKT, the Oracle has simultaneously severed the organisation's links to the exiled dGe legs community, thereby bringing the NKT's self-proclaimed separation and independence from dGe legs Buddhism to completion in all but an ideological sense.

In addition to this, there is also a perception within the NKT that this development has actually resolved a further doctrinal ambiguity concerning the NKT's central practice of rDo rje slugs ldan reliance. Although NKT students have been shocked by Venerable Kuten Lama's renunciation of their organisation, they have also rationalised the separation philosophically. NKT disciples, as we have seen, consider rDo rje slugs ldan to be an enlightened being or Buddha, and their opinions on this issue have revealed an awareness that "according to Tibetan religious teachings none of these high-ranking guardians of religion would condone to interfere with more or less mundane affairs by speaking through the mouth of a medium" (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 409). The marginal position of Venerable Kuten Lama within the context of the NKT's spiritual activities, in spite of his personal popularity during his occasional visits, might make it easier for students to relativise his importance within the framework of the organisation. Indeed, it was even suggested to me before the 1996 controversy erupted that Venerable Kuten Lama would probably be the final Oracle of rDo rje slugs ldan. We noted earlier that scholarly accounts of rDo rje slugs ldan indicate that his status has been undergoing a gradual process of decline from the time of Phabongkha Rinpoche (1878-1943). It may well be the case that the gradual apotheosis of rDo rje slugs ldan has finally come to fruition within the NKT.

NOTES
1. Accounts of Tibetan Buddhism in Britain have tended to concentrate on the motivation and participation of Westerners (e.g. Tucker, 1983; Connelly, 1985; Cushman, 1990). Also those who examine the Tibetan traditions themselves have focused only on their histories in the West, ignoring the continuing importance of their broader historical and cross-cultural contexts (e.g. Oliver, 1979; Somers, 1994; Snelling, 1997). Recent research, however (e.g. Waterhouse, 1995; Samuel, 1995), has endeavoured to adopt a more balanced, cross-cultural perspective suggesting that this situation may be changing.
2. Many Western Buddhists who are critical of the NKT have referred to it as a 'cult movement' led by a 'fanatical leader' or 'rogue Geshe' who has departed from acceptable standards of dGe legs Buddhism and erroneously imply that no reference to the broader dGe legs context is required in order to understand the NKT.
3. Kapstein (1989), for example, discusses how disagreements between dGe legs adherents can be affected by regional and political factors.
5. There are actually conflicting views concerning the extent of Phabongkha's exclusivism. The image presented here is gleaned from Beyer (1978) and Samuel (1992) and personal discussions with dGe legs Buddhists. It is important, however, to acknowledge that a different picture is painted by others who maintain that Phabongkha was not as actively sectarian and is widely claimed. This notwithstanding, it is clear that Phabongkha's views of the dGe legs tradition were narrow and that it was primarily through him that this exclusivism became particularly aligned with the cult of rDo rje slugs ldan.
6. These proponents also maintain that the Sa skya tradition also recognises rDo rje slugs ldan as a Buddha, although this is widely refuted by Sa skya lamas themselves.
7. For example, Geshe Rabten, Goshar Rinpoche, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Despite their associations with Phabongkha, many Tibetan lamas (e.g. Lamas Thubten Yeshe and Zopa Rinpoche) have, since coming to the West, played down reliance on rDo rje slugs ldan and promoted a more inclusive approach to Buddhist practice.
8. The Dalai Lama, for example, said that the difficulties experienced by Phibsoglingka towards the end of his life and the misfortunes befalling his line of reincarnations in India were "a punishment from the Black and Red protectors (Nechung and Palden Lhamo) for regarding ro je thugs iden as being equal to, or higher than, them" (cf. Russell, 1983: 28).

9. Since the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, Pe Phur has served as the Dalai Lama-appointed Dharmaraja protector of the Tibetan State. Pe Phur has been, and continues to be, consulted by the Dalai Lama and his government on affairs of State through the protector’s chief medium who is known as the Nechung (gnas bcud) Oracle. The importance of oracle-priests in the processes of political decision-making may provide a context for understanding the claim that ro je thugs iden should replace Pe Phur as the State protector. According to the ex-monk and popular Buddhist author Stephen Batchelor, such a shift in Dharamraja-protector allegiance would have given supporters of ro je thugs iden a degree of political influence (interview with Stephen Batchelor, June 1994).

10. Cf. Russell et al. (1983: 9 and 16). Palden Lhamo is seen not only as the chief guardian goddess of the dge legs tradition, but also as the patron-deity of Tibet who is "very much connected with the cause of Tibetan independence and the protection of Tibet from foreign invaders" (Schwartz, 1994: 131).

11. This text, which was published in the early 1970s, claims to represent the 'secret' teachings of Phibsoglingka which were discovered many years after his death.

12. Bibliographical details of this dispute can be gleaned from Kapa (1989).

13. Gaden (dga’ pa) Monastery was founded by Trong kila pa near Lhasa (Central Tibet) in 1409 and became one of the three great monasteries of the dge legs tradition, alongside Sera (Se ra) and Drigung (Bras spungs). Gaden has two main colleges, Jangtse (Yang rie) and Sharste (Shar rie), both of which have been associated with Sera. In Tibet, ro je thugs iden was also a popular title among general government employees and dge legs monasteries.

14. According to the second press pack released by the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC) on July 10th, 1996, this organisation was formally registered in Delhi on May 23rd.

15. The organisation certainly succeeded in raising international awareness. Their campaign received press coverage both in India and, through the activities of the SSC, in the West. During the Dalai Lama’s visit to England, for example: there were leading articles on the campaign in The Guardian (July 6th and 13th), The Independent (July 15th) and The Daily Telegraph (July 17th) besides BBC television and radio coverage.

16. Demonstrations were held in London on June 7th at the Office of Tibet and on July 16th at the Buddhist Society, in Switzerland on July 14th and in Kathmandu and Delhi on July 7th.

17. These debates took place on discussion groups (‘newsgroups’) within an area of the Internet called Usenet. The main newsgroups used were alt.religion.buddhism.tibetan and talk.politics.tibet. However, as these newsgroups were swamped with contributions, a new newsgroup, alt.religion.buddhism.nkt, was created. This led to further debate, because supporters of the campaign felt their cause was being trivialised and wrongly labelled as an NKT-based campaign.

18. Geshe Kelsang was interviewed for The Independent (July 15th) and for the 'Sunday' programme on BBC Radio 4 (July 14th).

19. The NKT rejected claims that the SSC was a front organisation by maintaining that the weekly attendance of 3000 people at its activities made the NKT a tiny contingency of the SSC which was "the union of many groups and individuals who worship Dorje Shugden throughout the world (4 million people altogether)" (22 Points of Clarification released at alt.religion.buddhism.tibetan on July 23rd). In support of the NKT, the SSC’s directory of supporters (listed in the second press pack released on July 10th) did include monasteries in India and other non-NKT Western-based centres, such as those associated with Gompa Rinpoche, Geshe Gyalten, and Lama Gangchen (the ‘Healing Buddha’). The listing of Western-based groups may, however, be misleading, contact details were not provided and it is not clear that all the groups consented to being represented. For example, a British disciple of Lama Gangchen told me that the Lama had not expressed his support for the campaign and was shocked to hear he was listed as a supporter.

20. In a talk given to a gathering of Tibetan and Western disciples, the Dalai Lama explained that if people were not properly protected and, in particular, if ro je thugs iden and his teachers ranked the ranks of the merit field, “there is the danger of losing one’s refuge” (Russell et al., 1986: 3).


23. As with other FPMT centres, Lama Yeshe installed a Tibetan Geche as Resident Teacher in 1977. Also, in 1979, Wisdom Publications was moved from Delhi to the Institute and over the next four years both by Lama Yeshe and Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso emerged from the Cumbrian base.

24. In this context, a Geche (ge bkses) is someone who has studied for, and has been awarded, the academic degree of the same name.

25. A copy of an open letter by Geshe Kelsang entitled ‘Graduating Wrong Views’ (dated 27th October 1992), written in response to an FPMT report concerning the deteriorating situation at Manjushri Institute, details the dissatisfaction felt by him and his students (known as the ‘People Group’) with the parent organisation. In particular the FPMT’s wish to use Comenius Priory as an asset to provide funds for projects elsewhere within the FPMT network, and the legal liability Manjushri Institute had for Wisdom Publications, were considered to be unreasonable strains which threatened the Institute’s existence.

26. Wisdom, No. 2, 1984: 49. Wisdom was the magazine of the FPMT.

27. Following the agreement arising from the meeting of February 14th, 1984, the talks continued until 1991, when the assets of the Institute fell under the sole control of Manjushri Institute representatives. In July, 1992, a new constitution for the Institute—which was renamed Manjushri Mahayana Buddhist Centre—embodied NKT objectives was implemented.

28. The dispute with Manjushri Institute prompted the FPMT to ‘amplify the dynamics of a world-wide dharma organisation, inter-personal relationships and long and short-range com-munication‘ (Wisdom, No. 2, 1984: 49). Samuel noted how international Buddhist networks “are not necessarily very stable structures, and are liable to fragmentation and break-up” (Samuel, 1995: 13). The observation that this might occur, because they are total entities “composed of sub-units of markedly different type and structure” (ibid) is borne out by the ensuing discussion of the differing exclusive/inclusive orientations of Geshe Kelsang and Lama Yeshe.

29. The Madhyamaka Centre was opened in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, in January 1979, but soon moved to York.

30. This is recalled by NKT members as an important stage of development whereby the Institute’s ‘satellite’ centres became more serious about their Buddhist practice. However, these developments, while pleasing some, alienated others who preferred a more open approach that drew from various—although not necessarily Buddhist—sources of inspiration and authority.

31. The break with Wisdom Publications also involved a degree of acrimony, since Geshe Kelsang took the rights of his early texts Meaningful to Behold (1980) and Clear Light of Bliss (1982) with him to Tharpa.

32. A discussion of the importance of ‘continuity’ as a structural principle of Tibetan societies can be found in Samuel (1993).

33. The Teacher Training Programme followed innovations made at Madhyamaka Centre by the Resident Teacher Neil Elliott (who later became Gen. Thubten Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang’s spiritual successor) who introduced systematic programmes of study based on Geshe Kelsang’s sutra and tantra teachings.

34. The NKT’s ‘Three Study Programmes’ refer to the General Programme (GP), Foundation Programme (FP) and Teacher Training Programme (TTP). The FP and TTP are courses designed to “enable students to deepen their knowledge and experience of Buddhism and to train as qualified Buddhist Teachers” (Manjushri Mahayana Buddhist Centre, charity registration no. 1012747; Memorandum of Association, 1992, Schedule A). They involve attending classes for the study of Geshe Kelsang’s texts, meditation, examinations and meditational retreats. The GP refers to teachings that occur outside the FP and TTP. According to NKT literature, these programmes exist for “the systematic study and practice of Buddhism” and they “distinguish the NKT from other Buddhist traditions” (Buddhism: The NKT, undated pamphlet).
36. According to figures published in the 'NKT Directory' of Full Moon (Winter 1995, 48-50), by the end of 1995, there were approximately 14 residential centres and 20 non-residential branches represented in Britain and 17 other countries as compared with 13 residential centres and 23 non-residential branches represented in Britain and five other countries in 1991.

37. Of the 15 books Geshe Kelsang has, to date, published, eight have appeared since 1991.

38. Gen Thubten Gyatso even went so far as to describe Geshe Kelsang as "the third Buddha" (Full Moon, Spring 1994: 30).


40. The NKT's absence from the various pan-Buddhist initiatives, such as the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO), is conspicuous. NKT students emphasise the dangers such ventures pose for becoming distracted from the practice of Dharma and the inevitability of different traditions being mixed together and destroyed at such 'ecumenical' gatherings.

41. An explanation of this practice can be found in Geshe Kelsang's Heart Jewel (1991).

42. Geshe Kelsang teaching at the NKT Spring Festival, May 1995.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Interestingly, this dispute did appear on the Internet (Usenet) between May and June 1995, when Western representatives of various Tibetan Buddhist traditions criticised members of the NKT for discussing the Dro rje shugs lden teachings and emperorships granted by Geshe Kelsang at the NKT Spring Festival.

46. For example, one of the first things the participating organisations of the NBO did following its creation in 1994 was to invite the Dalai Lama to give teachings in the UK in 1996.

47. Geshe Kelsang told The Independent (July 15th): "If [the Dalai Lama] is right, then up to now, this practice we have done for 20 years, everything is wasted: time lost, money lost, everything lost, that is the big issue." The NKT's response to Madeline Bunting's allegations which formed the basis of her article in The Guardian (July 6th) also affirms support for the SSC campaign because the Dalai Lama's pronouncements 'blacken' the tradition of Dro rje shugs lden devotion.

48. I have not been able to discover the reasons behind Gen Thubten Gyatso's resignation from the NKT. The important role he played in the growth and development of the NKT, and the affection and respect he had among NKT students, make his departure a very important event in the history of the organisation.

49. The British press was generally dismissive of the claims being made against the Dalai Lama by the SSC, focusing more on their effect on the Tibetan cause. I have noted how, in spite of their claims to the contrary, the SSC was identified as a front for the NKT which was pursuing a purposeful 'mear campaign' aimed at undermining the respect for the Dalai Lama in the West. Much discussion and criticism focused on the NKT itself, particularly with respect to the "serious devotion" accorded to Geshe Kelsang (The Independent, July 15th) and the use of state support "in funding the NKT's rapid expansion" (The Guardian, July 6th).

50. Thus, a letter from the NKT Secretary to The Guardian (July 11th) affirms its support for the SSC campaign against the Dalai Lama's government which "is denying its own people within the Tibetan community in India the fundamental right of religious freedom".

51. The SSC maintained that it was staging protests in the West on behalf of Tibetan worshipers of Dro rje shugs lden who are "our spiritual brothers and sisters" (22 Points of Clarification' released on all-religion.buddhism.tibetan on July 23rd). NKT students have rationalised their participation in the campaign using similar terms.

52. Invocation Ceremonies With Ven. Kuten Lama, undated NKT flyer advertising the Oracle's presence at the Spring Festival, 1996.

References


