

IT'S DALAI LAMA vs SHUGDEN

The ongoing temporal struggle between the Dalai Lama as head of the Gelugpa sect and the Britain-based Shugden community is part of a tradition that goes back to power plays between spiritual leaders in old Tibet. This time, Western followers of various forms of Tibetan Buddhism are adding fuel to the flames

by *Deepak Thapa*



In late spring 1996, the world-wide Tibetan community received a rude jolt when a hitherto-unknown London-based group called the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC) sent out press releases and staged demonstrations outside the Office of Tibet in London protesting the “religious persecution by the Dalai Lama”. The SSC contended that since the Dalai Lama’s injunction earlier this year against the worship of the deity known as Dorje Shugden, propitiators of that god have systematically been eased out of Tibetan government-in-exile jobs and schools and have been denied humanitarian assistance.

The SSC has gone much further than charge the Dalai Lama of “suppressing the individual right to make religious choices”. The religious as well as temporal head of the Tibetans, otherwise enjoying unquestioned popularity for his personal likeability and the Tibetan cause he represents, has been called an “oppressor” and a “ruthless dictator”.

Tenzin Gyatso, which is the Dalai Lama's name, has also been condemned as having plans to return to Tibet as a Chinese puppet. The SSC press statement says that “Over the years in power he (the Dalai Lama) has manipulated the Tibetan people, using both emotional and spiritual blackmail into adopting the political and religious systems that he himself favours and abandoning those that he does not.” Even the Dalai Lama’s geniality was not spared. During the London demonstrations some placards read, “Your smiles charm, your actions harm”.

If it was publicity the SSC were after, they got more than their share of it. While the British press initially received their activities coolly, after the BBC World Service covered one of their demonstrations, newspapers in Britain *and* India promptly picked up the news, creating a flutter among Tibetan Buddhists (who now consist of both Tibetans and Westerners) everywhere. Within the next few days, practically all the major Indian papers had carried news reports on the Dalai Lama’s “religious persecution”. It was not at all comfortable to have such accounts appear in the host country’s press, and the Dalai Lama’s administration in Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh found itself on the defensive. Statements were issued, and denials made but the damage, to whatever extent, had been done.

There might have been no story if the advice the Dalai Lama did give regarding non- worship of Shugden had not been taken up too zealously by some Tibetans. Taking the cue from the Dalai Lama’s statement that those who worship Shugden should best dissociate from him, some enthusiastic followers including those in the Tibetan Youth Congress are said to have gone around monasteries in India demanding that monks pledge loyalty to the Dalai Lama. That provided the spice—of the Dalai Lama as villain—which was just too good to be passed up by the press. It is an altogether different matter that behind the Dalai Lama’s stance and the opposition to him lies the complex nature of Tibet’s political legacy from which religion was, and

still is, inseparable.

Power Struggles

Buddhism in Tibet is a continuous history of power struggles. It was fostered mainly by the evolution of the religion into different schools of teachings with each claiming superiority over the others. Religious differences inevitably led to a struggle for political leadership, to the extent that the ascendance of the sects became entirely dependent on their standing on the temporal plane.

The power struggle ended after the Gelugpa sect (to which the Dalai Lama belongs) established unchallenged authority over Tibet around AD 1640. But the bad blood between the sects had already taken strong root, and bitterness against the Gelugpa grew as they consolidated their hold over the country.

Different sects had pockets of influence spread out over the country, spatially and spiritually far removed from Lhasa. The Gelugpa centre continually strove for total control over these areas and in doing so tried to undermine the three other major sects, the Kargyupa, the Nyingmapa and the Sakyapa. Pillaging other monasteries and turning them into Gelugpa was a common practice.

After the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959, the tussle was carried on in exile in India and Nepal, although the world at large was generally unaware of the sectarian rifts, focussed as its attention was only on the Dalai Lama and his cause. Strong accusations have been made, particularly by the Karmapa (a branch of the Kargyupa), against Dharamshala regarding partiality towards Gelugpa in disbursement of internationally received humanitarian assistance. Equally resented has been the Gelugpa proselytising that has gone hand-in-hand with aid distribution. There have also been reports of dissidents being assassinated. And, if anything, the large amounts of income involved in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the fertile ground of the West seems to have only increased the potential for confrontation.

The present Shugden controversy is a legacy of this history of sectarian confrontation within and outside Tibet.

Demons and Oracles

One of the distinctive characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism is the existence of a large number of demons and oracles among its pantheon of divinities. Most of these deities have their origins in the shamanistic Bon religion that held sway in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism, and their incorporation into the Buddhist pantheon was but a ploy used by the clever Indian tantric-sage, Padmasambhava, in the 8th century, to keep the Buddhist flag flying in Tibet.

Besides his contribution in regenerating the new faith that had been introduced just a hundred years before he arrived in Tibet, Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche (Precious Teacher) for Tibetans, also introduced shamanism into Tibetan Buddhism. Since his time, many more gods have been included into the Buddhist fold in Tibet following the same shamanistic tradition. One such deity is Dorje Shugden, which entered the pantheon in the seventeenth century as a Gelugpa god.

Shugden is one of the gods known as the *dabla* (enemy-defeating gods). The dabla are known to be very

scrupulous in protecting their followers against enemies and very generous in bestowing wealth on their devotees. Among the dabra, Shugden is considered to be very quick in acceding to requests—one reason which explains its popularity.

But even though Shugden worship may be more rewarding, it is said to be very difficult to follow because it involves praying and meditating every day for the rest of one's life. And while Shugden is quick to respond to supplications, so is it in punishing those who deviate from its path.

Tibetans of all orders, in general, are afraid of Shugden's anger and shy away even from taking its name. The Dalai Lama himself is most careful when talking about Shugden. "...I specifically mentioned Dolgyal (Shugden) by name and an incantation was made to ward him off", is what he said in one of his addresses. While urging that the god not be worshipped he also reassures his followers that they need not fear "that they will be harmed if they stop propitiating Dolgyal. Nothing will happen and I will face the challenge. As Gelugpas, recite the *midtse ma* prayer, it will be enough if you also recite the *Choegyäl Gyī Poepa Kyangkumma*. No harm will befall you."

Fundamentalists

The Dalai Lama's stance over Shugden can be traced to the origins of his order. When in the fourteenth century the monk Tsongkhapa founded Gelugpa, it was also a reaction against the many shamanistic rituals that had crept into the other sects. Tsongkhapa advocated a purer form of Buddhism, but custom could not be easily ignored and many different deities became part and parcel of the Gelugpa tradition too. The present Dalai Lama (he is the fourteenth) is also considered to be a purist in a fashion after Tsongkhapa and it is in keeping with his general view that he has been discouraging the propitiation of all spirits, Shugden included.

The Dalai Lamas, in their position as leaders of all of Tibet, are initiated into various lineages of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism and have been known to be of generally liberal outlook. The present Dalai Lama is known to be even more broad-minded, with a world vision that few of his predecessors had. During his early days in Lhasa, he was introduced to Western thought by the British residents of the time as well as by Heinrich Harrer (author of *Seven Years in Tibet*) and was influenced by what he learnt then. What cannot also be discounted is his life in exile where his dealings have been with secular world leaders of the 20th century. It was he who even included the ancient Bon religion, despite its initial antagonism to Buddhism, into the Buddhist fold in the eighties.

However, at the same time, it is not just theological liberalism on the Dalai Lama's part that he has come out so strongly against a deity that is very much part of his own school of Tibetan Buddhism. He is also making a political statement. In the Tibet of old, Shugden was often invoked in the Gelugpa's conflict against the Nyingmapa. (The Kargyupa and the Sakyapa, having accepted Shugden as their own, are spared its wrath.) This practice might not have seemed unacceptable in Tibet's long and fractious history. But, when Gelugpa fundamentalists employ the method even today to make their own kind of Buddhism strong vis-a-vis the others, the danger of a rift among the Tibetan people becomes all too real.

The Dalai Lama has consistently tried to take all the branches along in his struggle for Tibetan independence. "The Dalai Lama is very good at papering cracks," says Keith Dowman, Nyingmapa scholar and author of *Power Places of Tibet*. "And he naturally is upset when his hard work is set to be undone."

The Dalai Lama said in one of his recent talks: “I have conducted a number of prayers for the well-being of our nation and religion. It has become fairly clear that Dolgyal (Shugden) is a spirit of the dark forces....When the protector concerned is disloyal to its commitments, the person concerned becomes disloyal in turn....(The restriction on Shugden) is in the interest of the Tibetan nation and its religion.”

Although the Dalai Lama made a break from Shugden almost two decades ago, it is only this year that his exile administration issued a prohibition on the worship of the spirit. A circular was sent from his Private Office which said, among other things, “...it is unforgivable of anyone to engage in undermining the harmony of Tibetan society...” Following his ban, the Chamber of Tibetan People’s Deputies also passed a resolution stating “...the departments, their branches and subsidiaries, monasteries and their branches that are functioning under the administrative control of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile should be strictly instructed in accordance with the rules and regulations not to indulge in the propitiation of Dolgyal (Shugden).”

Fastest-Growing Sect

It was this ban that led to the formation of the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC) in England. The SSC is associated with the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a sect founded by a Tibetan Buddhist monk named Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. The Geshe (a title equivalent to a doctorate in Tibetan Buddhism) came to England in 1977 from India and after having earned a name as a writer and teacher of Buddhism, established the NKT in 1991. It is now the fastest-growing Buddhist sect in England.

The NKT centres are conspicuous by their being devoid of any portrait of the Dalai Lama, otherwise a ubiquitous fixture in Tibetan establishments all over. (The Chinese authorities have recently started to rid all Tibet of the portraits.) These centres are not under the control of the Tibetan administration in Dharamshala and neither do they have to follow the Dalai Lama’s instructions, on Shugden or anything else. This is why the NKT/SSC's taking issue with the Dalai Lama over his ban is all the more inexplicable.

But Geshe Kelsang has his reasons. “The practice of Shugden came from generation to generation,” he told *The Independent* of London. “There is so much joy in the daily practice; and the Dalai Lama suddenly says this is bad, this is harmful. The Dalai Lama is not an ordinary being, and when he said this, everybody shocked. They experienced mental pain. If Dalai Lama is right, then up to now, this practice we have done for 20 years, everything wasted: time lost, money lost, everything lost. That is the big issue.”

The Dalai Lama and Geshe Kelsang have come a long way since the time they studied under the same teacher, Trijang Rinpoche, in their younger days. Nowadays, even expressing admiration for the Dalai Lama is enough to be thrown out of the NKT. But the mutual regard they once shared is obvious from the fact that the Dalai Lama used to write forewords to Geshe Kelsang’s books and in one of which he noted: “...Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has attempted to present the basic teachings of Lord Buddha in a manner that people can relate to and put them into practice in their daily lives.”

While criticising the Dalai Lama’s actions, the NKT says it was Trijang Rinpoche who widely propagated the worship of Shugden and emphasised its importance. The Dalai Lama does not deny following the worship earlier, but he says his tutor, who died in 1981, had acknowledged and approved his findings that propitiating Shugden could only harm the Tibetan nation.

Tantric Rituals

The New Kadampa Tradition, takes its name from the Kadampa order, considered to be the precursor to the Gelugpa. It is ironic that although the Kadampa tradition was founded as a move away from tantric rituals towards a more serious study of religion, its modern namesake emphasises the worship of Shugden, a divine manifestation, but nevertheless of tantric origin. The NKT holds that Shugden is a Buddha (having achieved nirvana), a belief that is not shared by others, including the Dalai Lama.

However, when viewed in the context of the politics within the Gelugpa itself, Shugden is nothing more than a peripheral issue, which provided a plank for attacking the Dalai Lama. Tenzin Gyatso and his ecumenical views are not popular with certain sections among the Gelugpa, who believe that the purity of the Gelugpa teachings is being destroyed by the other sects and they would want to stop at nothing to preserve what they believe is a superior tradition. That is one reason why the name Geshe Kelsang chose for his school is particularly significant. By calling it the New Kadampa Tradition, he is seeking to revert to a “purer” form of the Gelugpa, going back to a time even before the Dalai Lama lineage was established.

It seems that these conservatives of the NKT mold are concerned solely with their dominance over other sects and are not at all keen about the Dalai Lama’s all-embracing ideals. In fact, an NKT spokesman is on record as having said that hatred for the Nyingmapa is taught at NKT, for the school firmly believes that there is a Nyingmapa conspiracy to corrupt Gelugpa teachings. It neither helps the Dalai Lama in his efforts to unite the Tibetans that counterparts of such conservatives are to be found among other sects too.

Until this year, before the ban was issued, the Dalai Lama’s statements against Shugden worship were construed by most to apply only to public practice and many Gelugpa monks continued propitiating the god in private. This was made an issue of by the Dalai Lama’s critics who pointed out that his pronouncements were only meant to be a sop to Nyingmapas and that he secretly encouraged worship of Shugden in private.

These critics have been effectively silenced by the resolute stand he has taken now, but in doing so, the Dalai Lama is putting a lot at stake. He is likely to alienate many among his own fold and split the Gelugpa between the modernists and the traditionalists. However, two developments that took place recently should strengthen his position considerably. Ganden Lama, the head of the Gelugpa (the Dalai Lama does not hold an official post within its hierarchy) has issued a statement that worship of Shugden should be stopped. At the same time, the college of Sera monastery which Geshe Kelsang belonged to has publicly expelled him from its membership.

Foot Soldiers

For the moment, Geshe Kelsang is not likely to be bothered by these developments in the Indian and Tibetan worlds he has left behind. He has created a space of his own in the West, where he is supreme. He is known to tell his followers that he believes Buddhism in Tibet is dead because of the Chinese occupation and that it has already died in the exile community in India. He makes it known that it is the West where the future of Buddhism lies and that it is going to be no other than Geshe Kelsang himself who is going to herald that future. It is no wonder that NKT claims Geshe Kelsang to be the first teacher to adapt Buddhism to Westerners’ needs.

The fascination of NKT members is complete. “He is absolutely amazing. He’s our spiritual guide. I’ve

never met anyone who works so hard to spread Buddhist teaching in the West and to help overcome everyday Western problems. His whole life is dedicated to helping other people,” gushed one to *The Guardian* of London.

Blinkered as they are by their veneration of their teacher, some of their extremist arguments border on the ludicrous. For instance, the SSC says that the Dalai Lama’s stricture has affected four million Shugden worshippers. The entire Tibetan population in the world is around six million. Gelugpas number less than half of this and even among the Gelugpas only a tiny minority is initiated into Shugden worship. At most, according to experts, there are 100,000 people practising Shugden worship.

The SSC’s refusal to appreciate the Dalai Lama’s position in relation to the larger question of religious goodwill is in some ways understandable. The SSC is composed almost entirely of British Buddhists and they bring into their religion of choice a flavour of their religion of birth and upbringing. Explains Robbie Barnett of Tibet Information Network in London: “The inability of Western students to assess the significance or proportionality of this issue, or of any issue, is closely linked to a tradition of extreme literalism that is fostered by some forms of Protestant culture, as for example among fundamentalist evangelicals. These Westerners in the NKT take their teacher literally as a Buddha and apparently have absolute obedience to his beliefs. So the particular problem here is that a Tibetan ultra-traditionalist has found a number of like-minded Westerners, with a literalist view of religion almost certainly learnt from the Protestant tradition.”

This indicates a larger dilemma for the Tibetans involved in propagating the faith: the financial and political support provided by Western supporters is important to the Tibetan cause, but at the same time it takes the religion beyond the control of the Tibetans themselves. If left on their own, there was a chance that the Tibetans could have resolved the Shugden dispute using their own traditional forms of conflict resolution which may not necessarily be the fairest of means. But, since some Tibetan Buddhist Westerners are in the front ranks of the controversy, it is being given the Western treatment which includes involvement of the press. “The transferring of this debate to the mass media has made the issue more extreme, sensational, confrontational and intractable,” says Mr Barnett.

Confrontational is indeed what the ongoing internet war over Shugden has been. While some Shugden supporters are known to be using Tibetan pseudonyms to give the impression of having Tibetan support, the anonymity of nom de plumes is also being used to make malicious personal attacks. The same anonymity is leading to all sorts of officious-sounding postings being put up in the internet under names like, of all things, Sammy Padmasambhava.

In the computerised war of words, those supporting the Dalai Lama try to place the debate within Tibet’s history of religious antagonism, while their opponents go on about the old tradition of Shugden culture in the Gelugpa, the Dalai Lama’s earlier practice of Shugden, the Nyingmapa threat and, of course, the issue of individual freedom.

Perhaps what the Shugden supporters in the SSC or the NKT refuse to realise is that they have become very handy pawns in the Gelugpa conflict. The stature of the Dalai Lama is such that an all-out frontal attack on his benevolence towards other sects would most likely backfire. Hence, the use of Western foot soldiers bearing the standard of human rights. The disgruntled fundamentalists within the Gelugpa may have made their point but differences that are essentially religious have weakened the Dalai Lama politically.

Leave It to Tibetans

The Dalai Lama sees it as his responsibility to prepare all Tibetans for the modern world, which implies unity under a nation-state or some form of acceptable autonomy. He also realises that his personality alone cannot carry his people through, especially given his belief that he is probably the last Dalai Lama. “The Dalai Lama is trying to modernise the Tibetans’ political vision and trying to undermine the factionalism. He has the dilemma of the liberal—do you tolerate the intolerant?” This is how Paul Williams, Reader in Indo-Tibetan Studies at Bristol University, summed up the problem for the Dalai Lama ever since he first spoke publicly against Shugden in 1978.

The Shugden controversy has also been an eye-opener for non-Tibetan Buddhists. While Tibetan Buddhism with its whole new philosophical view of the world, and no doubt its exotic pristineness, was generally perceived by many to be the answer to the “spiritual bankruptcy” of the West, the spotlight it has been put under has eroded some of the sheen. “Finally, it seems that Tibetans, monks and all, will also be taken to be what they are. Ordinary human beings, with their ordinary quarrels over the standard issues of political power,” says a Western adherent of Tibetan Buddhism.

This is not the first time, and nor is it likely to be the last, that Western believers, with far too little understanding of the religion than their clout demands, have created disputes where none existed or have blown matters out of proportion. A fresh memory is of the controversial demands made by Western devotees in 1992 for more "openness" during the selection of the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Kargyupa.

A sentiment Tibetans in exile have begun to express has been put very well by Karma Gyaltsen, president of the Capital Area Tibetan Association, Washington DC, when he pleaded with the SSC: “We are pleased that you are concerned about the future of Tibet. But, as Tibetans, we would like to state categorically, leave it to the Tibetan people to decide what sort of future we want. You do not have to impose your views on us. The Tibetan people need international support. What we do not need is action of people like yourselves who try to think that they know more about Tibet than us the Tibetan people.”

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