

DEITY OR DEMON?

The Controversy over Tibet's Dorje Shugden

TIBETAN BUDDHISTS OF THE GELUGPA LINEAGE *have been battling over a protector god named Dorje Shugden –and whether this spirit is a benevolent deity or an agent of evil. The conflict remained largely unknown to Westerners until 1996, when disciples of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso of the New Kadampa Tradition in England picketed the Dalai Lama (who had asked his followers not to worship Shugden), accusing him of restricting their religious freedom. In 1998, Geshe Lobsang Gyatso, a prominent Gelugpa monk, and two of his disciples were murdered in Dharamsala. Some Gelugpas, the Indian police, and consequently the international press, have ascribed the killings to Shugden worshippers.*

*This special section explores the cultural, religious, and political sources of an issue that, for Tibetan Buddhists, is integral to the path to enlightenment. **Stephen Batchelor** reveals the origins of the dispute and its role in doctrinal debates waged within Tibetan buddhocracy. **Donald S. Lopez, Jr.**, limns the tangled trajectory of Shugden worship with two interviews: **Geshe Kelsang Gyatso** speaks to Lopez about Shugden as a Buddha; for **Thubten Jigme Norbu**, brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Shugden is a malevolent ghost.*

PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

In the Dorje Shugden Debate



FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA

(b. 1935): For many years, the current Dalai Lama included prayers to Shugden in his daily practice. In 1976, he began publicly to discourage Shugden practice. In recent years, reportedly on the advice of the **Nechung Oracle**, he has attempted to ban Shugden worship on the grounds that it is dangerous to practitioners, to Buddhism, and to Tibet.



DORJE SHUGDEN

The eye of the storm. Some Gelugpas view him as a dharmapala, or protector god, while others view him as a murderous demon who punishes Gelugpa monks who engage in Nyingmapa teachings.



GESHE KELSANG GYATSO

(B. 1932): Founder of the Britain-based New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a Gelugpa sect devoted to the teachings of Tsongkhapa. A strong proponent of Dorje Shugden worship; his disciples picketed the Dalai Lama when the Tibetan leader visited London in 1996, arguing his attempted ban on Shugden worship was a violation of religious freedom.

FOUR MAIN SCHOOLS



PADMASAMBHAVA/NYINGMA SCHOOL

(8th century C.E.): Historical founder of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as Guru Rinpoche. Originator of the Nyingma (lit. “old”) school of Tibetan Buddhism, which considers **Dzogchen**, or Great Perfection, teachings of its supreme doctrine. Dzogchen holds “original mind” to be the foundation of all consciousness.

SAKYA SCHOOL

The fourth of the principal lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Founded in the eleventh century, the school had a strong influence on the thinking of Tsongkhapa and subsequently on Gelugpa teachings, as well as on the now-extinct Jonangpa school.

KAGYU SCHOOL

One of the four principal schools of Tibetan Buddhism along with Gelugpa, Nyingmapa, and Sakyapa. Kagyupa, founded in the eleventh century, is based on the teachings of Marpa, who arrived in Tibet from India in the eleventh century. The school, whose name means “oral transmission lineage”, places particular emphasis on the direct transmission of teachings from teacher to student.



JE TSONGKHAPA/GELUG SCHOOL

(1357–1419): Renowned Tibetan scholar and reformer who founded the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, Gelugpa (lit., “school of the virtuous”) teachings placed particular emphasis on adherence to monastic rules (vinaya).

IN THE BEGINNING



FIFTH DALAI LAMA

(1617–1682): Became temporal leader of Tibet in 1642, important lama of the Gelugpa sect, he engaged in Nyingmapa teachings.

TULKU DRAKPA GYALTSEN

(1619–1655): Prominent Gelugpa monk who had been a candidate for selection as the Fifth Dalai Lama. According to legend, he defeated the Fifth Dalai Lama in debate and was later found dead. Some Gelugpa practitioners believe he was reincarnated as Dorje Shugden.

THE 20TH CENTURY



THIRTEENTH DALAI LAMA

(1876–1933): Assumed power in 1895. Ordered Pabongka Rinpoche to stop practicing and teaching Dorje Shugden worship on the grounds that it was damaging Buddhism.



PABONGKA RINPOCHE

(1878–1943): Influential Gelugpa lama who revived Shugden worship after a period of decline. Ordered by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to stop promoting worship of the deity, which he did. Later changed his mind and passed on Shugden practice to his disciples.



GESHE LOBSANG GYATSO

(1926–1997): Head of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala and a strong supporter of the Dalai Lama's position against Shugden worship. He was found murdered in February 1997 along with two of his disciples. Many believe the killings were related to the dispute over Shugden worship.



ZIMEY RINPOCHE

(1927–1996): Senior Gelugpa lama and disciple of Trijang Rinpoche. In 1973, he published an account of Dorje Shugden that he had received orally from Trijang, detailing calamities that had befallen Gelugpa monks and laymen who displeased the deity. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama condemned the publication.



TRIJANG RINPOCHE

(1901–1981): Disciple of Pabongka Rinpoche and one of the most important Gelugpa monks in the refugee community following China's invasion of Tibet. Was junior tutor of the current Dalai Lama and strong proponent of Shugden worship.