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# Dalai Lama

# Dorje Shugden

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How a runaway Austrian gets to meet the Dalai Lama is a story most of us probably know from the wonderful account of "Seven Years in Tibet." But how a run-of-the-mill Austrian like myself got to meet the Dalai Lama is no doubt a tale of considerable less fascination. While I was studying electrical engineering at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich, I was introduced to a lady who had known Tibetan Lamas in India in the 1960's. She spoke of Lama Thubten Yeshe and Zopa Rinpoche time and again as well as of their teacher, Venerable Geshe Rabten, who was able to explain Buddhism with unequalled clarity and forcefulness and who really understood Westerners and their ideas.

After Geshe Rabten escaped from Tibet, the Dalai Lama chose him and Lati Rinpoche from among a select group of candidates to become one of his advisers on philosophical issues. Upon the Dalai Lama's express wish, Geshe came to Switzerland as Abbot of Rikon Monastery, near Winterthur. After I graduated from the Institute of Technology, I moved to Rikon to learn Tibetan and to study Buddhist philosophy, debate and meditation under Geshe's guidance. In 1978, Geshe Rabten was invited by a group of Geshe Zopa, a Tibetan who teaches at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and to my

great joy, I was allowed to accompany Geshe. At that conference there was another most impressive Lama from India, Zong Rinpoche, also giving teachings and initiations. It was from him I received, together with two other people, Dorje Shugden empowerment. I had never heard of Dorje Shugden before, even though I was studying Buddhism intensively and making good progress with my Tibetan. After the empowerment, Geshe gave us some words of advice. He said, *"This manifestation of the Buddha has no equal. If you are determined to tame your mind, then he will even give you his heart in order to help you."*

Geshe extended an invitation to His Holiness the Dalai Lama to come to Switzerland in the summer of 1979 to give teachings at his center in Mt. Pèlerin overlooking lake Geneva. We students helped prepare this event which about one thousand people attended. These were the first public teachings His Holiness gave to a large audience in the West.

It was also the first time that I was asked to be a relay interpreter from English to German for His Holiness. Scared by the importance of the task, I remembered Geshe's words after the empowerment in the U.S. and the lines of praise among the prayers to Dorje Shugden, *"by merely remembering you, all outer and inner obstacles are cleared..... I offer praise to you, guardian of the Buddha Dharma."* Receiving all the help I had wished for, I managed to convey the Dalai Lama's impressive address without too many distortions. In 1980, Lama Yeshe, a well known disciple of Geshe Rabten's extended further invitations to His Holiness, which caused to make the Dalai Lama more widely known in the West. In 1981, His Holiness was invited to Hamburg by Geshe Thubten Ngawang, also one of Geshe Rabten's disciples. It was the first time I interpreted directly from Tibetan into German.

During those years I frequently accompanied Geshe on his trips and had the opportunity to meet many important personages, among them Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Junior Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Trijang Rinpoche was in many ways one of the most important figures of his time. In the fifties he was the power behind His Holiness, a pillar of strength in the difficult and troubled times for the Tibetan people. This fact was well known to the Communist Chinese and so Trijang Lobsang Yeshe became their main enemy. It was also Trijang Rinpoche who taught His Holiness the Dalai Lama the concepts of Buddhism as well as the understanding of politics and mastering social skills. I also had the opportunity to meet Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, His Holiness' Senior Tutor, and served as his driver. These two Tutors of His Holiness were direct disciples of the great Pabongka Dechen Nyingbo. It is said that when Pabongka Rinpoche gave Dharma discourses many in the audience gained profound insights into the failings of our worldly concerns to develop the lasting determination to exchange the constant quest for honor, praise, well-being and gain with sincere aspiration, kindness and concern for others. This unusual ability to teach is not an integral part of Tibetan culture. It is rather at the heart of the living

transmission of the teachings of the historical Buddha from one great master to the next. It is, first and foremost, an oral transmission: the master teaches his gifted disciple continuously until the transmitted knowledge becomes the student's second nature.

This is the significance of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. When we speak of Sakya, Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma, we refer to four different lines of this kind of transmission of the Buddha Dharma. Such a school is considered "alive" when the knowledge is vast and there still exist masters who have fully realized such knowledge and are able to transmit it faultlessly, based on their own experience.

The great master Pabongka was in the first half of the twentieth century the pivotal or key lineage holder of the Oral Geden Tradition. Many other teachers before him mastered certain aspects of the tradition's teachings, but it was Pabongka Rinpoche's particular merit to locate and find all these partial transmissions, to learn and realize them, and bring them together once again to pass them on through a single person. In his lifetime there was hardly a significant figure of the Geden tradition who had not been Pabongka Rinpoche's disciple. Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche was the one capable of receiving and passing on the entirety of the Oral Geden Tradition once again. The Dorje Shugden practice is an integral part of that tradition.

Another, particularly impressive figure of old Tibet was the Dalai Lama's Chamberlain, Kungo Phala, whom you may vividly remember seeing in the movie Kundun. He was a guest in my home in Feldkirch on several occasions. It was he who in 1959 organized His Holiness' escape from the Norbulingka summer palace. He sometimes spoke to me about it, perhaps because he was pleased with the progress I was making in my Tibetan language studies. The preparations for the escape were made in absolute secrecy and strictly followed instructions received from Dorje Shugden. I asked him what thoughts were on his mind when he had to make his way through the crowds surrounding the Norbulingka with the Dalai Lama, disguised as a servant, just behind him. He said that everything happened exactly as the Dorje Shugden oracle from Panglung Monastery had predicted. (Panglung Rinpoche now lives in Munich.) In particularly dangerous situations, he felt he was moving within a protected space, his feet seemingly not even touching the ground. I later heard many more accounts about the escape from other people who were personally involved in it, like Trijang Rinpoche's attendants and monks of Pomra Khamtsen of Sera Mey Monastery, who had been chosen as the Dalai Lama's personal bodyguards.

Today, in the Dalai Lama's biography we read that Nechung, the State Oracle while in trance traced the entire escape route from the gates of the Norbulingka to the final destination in India. I heard from those who actually organized the flight that, at the time, the State Oracle's predictions were treated with greatest caution. The Nechung Oracle has a large entourage of monks and so it was feared that the oracle's predictions might reach Chinese ears. The only

predictions that were repeatedly mentioned were the State Oracle's calls for *"The Lord of the Land of Snow to stay in the land."* Among the officials who helped in the planning of the escape were some who wanted to bring only His Holiness to safety, leaving his family behind. It was thanks to the Chamberlain Phala's decisive intervention that the Dalai Lama's entire family made it into exile.

In 1983 His Holiness accepted yet another invitation from Geshe Rabten Rinpoche, this time to come to Feldkirch in Austria. His Holiness and his entourage stayed for three days in my parents' former summer residence and gave a profoundly moving presentation in the city's town hall. This time, the audience easily exceeded a thousand people.

The Austrian authorities had provided the Dalai Lama with a police escort that accompanied him during the duration of his stay. But once he crossed the border into Switzerland, the escort disappeared to the visible annoyance of His Holiness' entourage. He himself seemed delighted with his newly gained freedom of movement. Since I was driving his car, he asked me if I knew of any near-by inn. So I took the entire group to a café on the shores of Lake Constance where the Dalai Lama rested happily for one hour without further protocol and for once, without it all having been planned in advance.

In 1985, His Holiness gave the Kalachakra initiation in Rikon and I was asked to be his driver and interpreter. In 1986, His Holiness participated in a seminar on time and space held in Garmisch. It was here that the first private conversations with Professor Weizsäcker, the brother of Germany's President at that time, took place which, as a technician, I found particularly exciting to interpret. A trip to Vienna followed, only that this time the visit nearly did not take place. The Chamber of Industry had extended an invitation but His Holiness' representatives in Europe apparently considered it to be unimportant. Although it was pointed out to them several times that this was a weighty organization with close links to the government, the Office of Tibet remained hesitant. They were finally convinced when a determined lady from Munich traveled to Dharamsala, obtained an audience with the Dalai Lama and told him that his people were deceiving him. Finally, the visit took place and became a great success: receptions by Austrian President Kirchschräger and future Foreign Minister Mock, a talk at the Forum Schwarzenberg in the presence of Vienna's high society and with the attendance of future President Waldheim and last, but not least, a broadcast of the entire talk by Austria's Broadcasting Corporation that same evening. This occasion gave His Holiness the visibility and exposure that Tibetans always wished he had and which was so difficult for them to arrange.

In 1988, His Holiness addressed the Swiss parliament in Bern and gave several talks in Geneva. Once more, I was his designated driver and interpreter. While in Geneva, His Holiness stayed at the same hotel where Empress Sissi of Austria stayed at the time.

Drivers had been assigned cheaper lodgings and since I was listed as a driver, no reservation had been made for me at His Holiness' hotel. But a personal interpreter was expected to be available at any time and so I took a room there at my own expense. The Dalai Lama's Private Secretary became visibly angry when he found out about it. Obviously, a personal initiative of this kind, even one I had paid for myself, was not welcome.

During the presentations for His Holiness' next visit the following spring (1989) it became even more evident that someone was profoundly annoyed with me. The organizers of the visit had requested me repeatedly to interpret for them, not so the Office of Tibet. The official request from His Holiness' representative came only a few days before the beginning of the tour. I felt insecure and feared a reprimand of some sort. But His Holiness was cordial and during our last private audience at the end of the trip he embraced me for a long while, something he had never done before. Only later did I learn that on certain occasions, His Holiness had treated many Tibetan masters and monks as well as Westerners with similar special expressions of affection. It is easy to become deeply moved and emotional and at that moment willing to do anything for the Dalai Lama. In situations such as these, many promised the Dalai Lama to turn away from Dorje Shugden, a promise they often deeply regretted later on. In view of this incident, whenever I was asked in subsequent years to interpret for His Holiness, I tried to keep my distance. As the end of a tour approached and the program showed that my services were no longer needed, I would quietly slip away so as not to be present for a closing audience with His Holiness.

In previous years I had occasionally heard something about the Dalai Lama's strange statements concerning Dorje Shugden, but they remained inexplicable to me and so I brushed them aside as false rumors. And I had good reasons to do so. Dorje Shugden had advised the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to renovate the eastern and western stupas. Following this advice, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama undertook major renovations of the Potala and the stupa of the great master Je Tsong Khapa at Ganden Monastery, as is mentioned in Purchog Jampa Rinpoche's biography of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. During his first escape from Lhasa in 1950/51, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, while in Yadrung (Tromo) received valuable advice from Dorje Shugden and was moved to write some beautiful praises to him. His Holiness was staying at Dungkar Monastery of the famous master Tomo Geshe Rinpoche who lives mostly in the U.S.A. today. This master's former incarnation was described by Lama Govinda in his book *The Way of the White Clouds*. Tomo Geshe Rinpoche is also one of the most prominent masters among those who revere Dorje Shugden. In 1957, Dorje Shugden recommended that the Tibetan guerrilla establish a military base to the south of Lhasa. By 1959, it turned out to be the only route that had not fallen to the Chinese. The Dalai Lama fled along this route. The Dalai Lama's presence in the free world today bears testimony to the success of this enterprise.

Geshe Rabten Rinpoche is the one person to whom I owe everything meaningful in my life. On many occasions I was witness to the high esteem His Holiness had for this master. During a meeting at Frankfurt airport in 1984, His Holiness told a representative of the Indian Embassy referring to Geshe Rabten, "*an excellent master, an excellent teacher, indeed.*" The members of Geshe's Dharma centers actively supported the goals of the exile government, not only by extending invitations to His Holiness but also by participating for many long days in political demonstrations in front of the Chinese headquarters in Geneva and Bern.

On "Ecumenical Day" (Kirchentag) in 1993 in Germany, His Holiness addressed an audience of close to ten thousand people. Shortly before the ceremony started, he called me to go over some of his talking-points with me. One of the subjects was north-south politics, the wealth of the countries of the north, the exploitation of the countries of the south. In earlier times, His Holiness used to draw exclusively on Buddhist material for his presentations; I was comfortable interpreting him and his listeners were always deeply impressed. When he began making statements on international politics, interpreting often became a stressful "high alert" situation in which I would frantically search for non-controversial expressions. So on that occasion I was not too happy about the north-south subject and in the hope that His holiness might consider dropping it, I countered that many of the countries in the south were by nature considerably wealthier in raw materials, multiple crops, and with a milder climate it was easier to survive without excessive work. In the north, the climate was harsh and one had to work in order to survive. The north-south issue was not even mentioned during the main event, but it did come up later in a smaller parallel meeting and, to my utter disbelief, in a version clearly influenced by the terms of my own counter-argument. Since then, I never again expressed my opinion in His Holiness' presence.

In 1995 I interpreted for His holiness during a series of events organized by the University for Peace in Berlin. When we said good-bye at the airport, he told me, "*I never worry when you are there as my interpreter.*" That was unusual. It was the last time I interpreted for him.

In the fall of that same year Kungo Palden, Trijang Rinpoche's life-long attendant and personal assistant passed away. Both His Holiness' Tutors had passed away already in the eighties, and so had Zong Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten, and the Chamberlain Phala. Trijang Rinpoche's attendant was the last of the great personalities of that era of Tibetan history and probably also the last one who might have been able to stop the events that were to follow.

In spring of 1996, new stories reached us from India: during the teachings on the occasion of the Tibetan new year, His Holiness apparently had expressed himself in the strongest terms against the veneration of Dorje Shugden. The official translation by the Office of Tibet read, "*The worship of Dolgyal does great harm to the cause of*

*Tibet and endangers the life of the Dalai Lama.*" Anyone familiar with the Tibetan way of thinking understands this to be a call to mobilize different groups of the population against each other because for most Tibetans nothing is more important than the Dalai Lama's life; so if one is labeled an enemy of the Dalai Lama, one is branded as a traitor and therewith "free-for-all" or an outlaw. To a common Tibetan, the words "the worship of Dolgyal..." etc., mean, in simple terms, "Dorje Shugden is an evil spirit who wants to do the Dalai Lama in and whose fault it is that Tibet is not yet free."

Dolgyal means "King of Döl" and is a common name for Dorje Shugden. Döl is a region in Tibet closely intertwined with the origins of Dorje Shugden. Since all other names, like Dorje Shugden, which means "the one with indestructible power" or Gyalchen, i.e. "great king," point to a very high status, it was easy to conclude that the use of the name "Dolgyal" was intended to coin a new insult. And that is what happened.

That someone of His Holiness' stature with his background in Buddhist philosophy could have expressed thoughts such as these was so unimaginable to me that for the longest time I refused to believe the stories we heard from India. I was convinced that some cunning politicians in the exile government had finally gone crazy. But no one had gone crazy, quite the contrary. It became clear that the move had been prepared over decades with very specific appointments to monastic and government positions and chronologically carefully orchestrated to coincide with the passing away of all the great figures capable of opposing this move.

In the months that followed, the parliament-in-exile held heated debates on legislative reforms that would marginalize and exclude the new enemies. Signature campaigns were launched to try and force each and every individual to publicly declare whether it was for or against the Dalai Lama. Whoever refused to sign was identified as a traitor. Many described their conflict of conscience in this situation as similar to having to choose between mother and father, because they did not want to give up neither the Dalai Lama nor Dorje Shugden.

Whoever still dared to raise his voice and counter the government-in-exile's justifications with historical facts, was chased by mobs from his house and home as happened, for example, with the family of the teacher Thubten.

The vehemence of the language chosen and the harshness of the methods used leads one to conclude that with this Blitz-attack the government-in-exile intended to eliminate its target group from the visible surface of society. It did not expect that many of the persons affected would prove so loyal to their teachers and probably underestimated the willingness of many to stand by the religious convictions of their fore-fathers to the point of enduring complete social ostracism. Thus the controversy became increasingly public and needed to be further justified. That, however, proved to be

awkward. The first contradictions arise already with regard to the most fundamental principles of Buddhism according to which all suffering is understood to be the exclusive result of one's own actions. Unless one creates negative causes, one does not experience suffering. In this controversy, however, an "evil spirit" gets blamed for the tragedy of Tibet as indicated by the words, "the worship of Dolgyal harms the cause of Tibet."

Furthermore, there are several hundred protector deities quite similar to Dorje Shugden. Thus in the great monastic universities, for example, each college has, for historical reasons, its own protector deity and Dorje Shugden is only one among many. Also, the images of these deities look often so much alike that not even the Dalai Lama can tell them apart at first glance. In an embarrassing incident at Sera Mey Monastery, His Holiness got quiet angry at the sight of an image of the protector Thaog, whom he erroneously mistook for Dorje Shugden.

The statement "the worship of Dolgyal endangers the life of the Dalai Lama," may well be the most incendiary means to get common Tibetans going, but in the West it is a poor reason to justify the exile government's questionable conduct. Consequently, that reason has hardly advanced in the West; here His Holiness insisted instead, "Buddhism is degenerating into spirit worship." Yet the number of oracles and their invocation has increased considerably in Dharamsala (under the auspices of the Tibetan exile government) these past years. A new temple was built for Nechung, the State Oracle, and His Holiness himself composed new prayers to this protective deity. The Dalai Lama's personal monastery Namgyal spends most its time performing the rituals of numerous other deities of this kind. Only one protector deity has an entire monastery dedicated to it: Nechung, not Dorje Shugden.

Actually, it is not unusual for great masters to have divergent opinions of guardian deities. Thus, early masters like Changchub Ö, Gö Lotsawa, and Sakya Pandita considered that certain deities, revered in the Nyingma tradition, were not authentic. Even the Kalachakra tantra was not accepted by certain Sakya masters. During his tenure as disciplinarian of the Lower Tantric College, Trichen Ngawang Chogden, one of the most famous eighteenth century Gelug Lamas, banned the protectress Palden Lhamo totally from that monastery after an incident in which monks of the monastery capsized in a ship. Palden Lhamo is one of the most important protectors of all Dalai Lamas and by extension of the Tibetan government, but to this day no prayers to this protector are recited in the Lower Tantric College. Since 1996 His Holiness has cited the names of Trichen Ngawang Chogden and Changya Rölpa'i Dorje as having proscribed Dorje Shugden. He cites a passage in Changya's biography composed by the master Thuken wherein Trichen Ngawang Chogden supposedly had an image of Dorje Shugden removed from Ganden Monastery. On closer scrutiny, however, it appears that in Changya's original rendering of the story about Trichen Ngawang Chogden, to which Thuken refers, Dorje



Shugden is not at all mentioned, while reference is made to a local spirit instead. Citing this supposed episode of removing a Dorje Shugden image is meant to justify his defamation, but the episode with Palden Lhamo does not even raise the slightest doubt about that deity. Thus, yes, there are historical precedents of protective deities having occasionally been banned from a particular monastery, but what is unusual in this debate over Dorje Shugden is that the personal opinion of just one master should become official state policy, thus splitting an entire society in times of greatest hardship.

When offering justifications for the controversy, His Holiness likes to appear as non-sectarian and a unifier of traditions. In making references to Guru Padmasambhava and the Nyingma tradition he discusses the Dorje Shugden side as the sectarian one. Dorje Shugden is originally a deity of the Sakya tradition. There is a belief that no ordinary being ever appears as throne holder of this tradition but rather that all Sakya Dagchens (Lords) are emanations of the eighty great Siddhas and the sixteen Arhats. The one before the last Sakya throne holder, Dragshül Trinley Rinchen, was the most prominent Sakya master of this century. He called his father a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of compassion, because before his father was born, his grandfather had received signs that Dorje Shugden himself would come as his son. The master proves the connection between Dorje Shugden and Avalokiteshvara by citing from the Nyingma tantra Rinchen Na-Dün, *rnying.rgud rin.chen sna.bdun*, "Dolgyal, Dolgyal he who is thus called is by nature undeceiving, because he is the Great Compassionate One himself."

The defamation of Dorje Shugden constitutes a grave offense to the Sakya tradition and surely the Dalai Lama is aware of it. Thus he mentioned to some people that in his dreams the four-faced deity Mahakala appears annoyed at the restrictions against Dorje Shugden. Four-faced Mahakala is one of the most important guardian deities of the Sakya tradition. But the government-in-exile can exert effective influence neither on the Sakya nor on the Kagyu or Nyingma traditions. Also remarkable is the fact that the government-in-exile directs its attacks exclusively against the Dorje Shugden worship in the Gelug tradition. This allows one to conclude that what is at stake here for the driving forces is not the deity but ultimately the destruction of something else.

The debate went on longer than initially anticipated. The people of the Tibetan regions of Chatreng and surrounding areas remained loyal to Trijang Rinpoche and Dorje Shugden and the affected regional divisions in the great monasteries (kham.tsen) refused to stray from their tradition. When together they founded the Dorje Shugden Society in Delhi, many in the Tibetan exile community, who a few months earlier unconditionally would have done anything for the Dalai Lama, now started having second thoughts. Both sides of this newly drawn battle line tried to convince the press that they were right. But the field was far from level: the government-in-exile had been well organized for many years and could underpin its

statements with the Dalai Lama's singular fame and the general sympathy for Tibet. The other side had little more than a few monks, inexperienced in dealing with the press, trying to argue for religious freedom.

In the fight to obtain the favors of the press, the government-in-exile aimed at portraying a "Dorje-Shugden-sect", although the Tibetan language does not even have a word with which to clearly translate the word "sect." In the past I have often been upset with the distorted accounts of Tibetan history I saw in Chinese propaganda material. But the arbitrary way in which the Tibetan side in *this* controversy handled history was such that one must assume they believe we westerns are all fools. Is Namgyal Monastery a Nechung sect because they worship the protector Nechung? Is Ganden Shartse Monastery a Setrab sect because they worship the deity Setrab? Is Ganden Jangtse Monastery a Palden Lhamo sect because they worship Palden Lhamo? Hardly. By the same token, there is no Dorje Shugden sect. When furthermore some imaginative historians try to attribute to such a sect socio-political intentions, we can safely relegate it to the domain of fiction but certainly not to that of historical facts. There has been a focus on Pabongka Rinpoche as the most important figure in connection with Dorje Shugden during the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's time. It is historically proven that he was offered the regency and it is historically proven that he rejected it firmly.

When during an anti-Dorje Shugden information meeting in Switzerland the Dalai Lama's Private Secretary sketched the picture of three hundred years of trouble with these Dorje Shugden people, someone asked him to mention some of the incidents that had occurred during this time. He was unable to come up with even one. If these Dorje Shugden people really had made so much trouble for three hundred years, then our friend Michael v. Brück, (a participant in the conference presenting the other side) must have sensed at least some of it during his meeting with Düldzin Kuten, the central figure in the Dorje Shugden issue in Ganden Monastery. Instead, we read a heartfelt description which closes with the following words,

"...the great protector deities manifest thousandfold, simultaneously and everywhere in order to be of help to all living beings. They also may appear in other countries and to other people in guises different than in Tibet, yet they are all rooted in the one immeasurable ground of the mind, truly a universe full of grace."

About a year after the conflict broke out the newly constituted opposition had organized and began consolidating itself. This was contrary to everything the government-in-exile had expected. Then, in the spring of 1997 a horrifying triple murder in Dharamsala put a different spin on the controversy. The Director of the Dialectics School in Dharamsala and his two young translators were gruesomely murdered just a few days before the Tibetan new year. Apparently the three of them had been alone in their room only about 15 minutes and they were found stabbed without anyone

hearing screams or seeing killers. The Director of the Dialectics School was well known for his slanderous writings in which he would drag through the mud anything that veered even slightly from the course established by the government-in-exile: famous masters, the big monastic universities and even the Tibetan guerilla were his targets. In one of his last articles he wrote, "...these people will not cease to criticize the Dalai Lama until blood flows from their bodies...."

Given the character of the assassination and the humiliations the Tibetan guerilla movement had been subjected to in earlier years, one could have assumed that the search for the murderer would eventually also lead to them. But that obviously did not occur; already the next day, Dharamsala's local newspaper claimed that the murderer would certainly be found among the Dorje Shugden Society in Delhi. Aside from who committed the murders, this gruesome act was exploited to the hilt by the government-in-exile with only one aim in mind: Resorting to all possible means they tried to incriminate the Dorje Shugden Society in Delhi in order to put its leading monks behind Indian bars. For the benefit of the press, the image of a Dorje Shugden sect with bloodthirsty, cultish, terrorist and fundamentalist attributes was successfully established linking it effectively with the traditionally depicted wrathful appearance of the deity while cleverly neglecting to mention that many wrathful Buddhist deities are represented in considerably more terrifying ways.

For his part, Robert Thurman thought it appropriate to portray for Newsweek magazine a murderous Dorje Shugden cult describing it as "the Taliban of Buddhism." Yet Robert Thurman, presumably before he begot Uma, had been one of the first Western monks with Buddhist vows and had tried twice to obtain Dorje Shugden initiation from revered masters well before the controversy began. Both masters, however, had refused on grounds of his fickle character. Thurman should know quite well what Dorje Shugden actually is about.

On a Swiss TV program discussing the subject of the murders I then had the opportunity to admire my old friend, the government-in-exile minister Tashi Wangdu, exhibiting evidence in front of the camera. According to the commentator it was a death threat sent by Dorje Shugden followers to the murder victim. I could not resist stopping the video to copy the Tibetan text and translate it. It contained no death threat at all, simply an impertinent letter containing a challenge to debate the issue so as to settle the difference.

By now I was convinced that something foul was going on. Otherwise, why would Tashi Wangdu go to such lengths as to show a fake death threat on TV? I wanted to find out whether in Tibet's political history there had been other instances of similar behavior. I did not have to look very far to realize that this was a way customarily used in old Tibet to neutralize an opponent. In the recent past in exile alone, one can find several incidents in which

people accused of criticizing the Dalai Lama had to leave India after being socially ostracized or nearly beaten to death by a mob. There are parallels in old Tibet.

After the Thirteenth Dalai Lama passed away, Lungshar tried to establish a constitutional monarchy in Tibet. He was charged with involvement in a Bolshevik conspiracy and to be executed while his sons were to have their hands cut off. Pabongka Rinpoche interceded and then he was pardoned. Nonetheless, some time later, Lungshar's eyes were gouged out. Demo Rinpoche, the regent during the days of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's youth and his friend Nyagtul, a Nyingma master, were accused of resorting to black magic against the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Demo Rinpoche died in a prison cell so small, one could not lie down in it. Nyagtul had the skin torn from his chest, the chest ripped open while still alive, and tied to a post on the circular path for circumambulating Lhasa, he was left there exposed to people's mockery and to die a slow excruciating death. Close to the end, Nyagtul is said to have uttered, "This government has killed me although I am free from guilt. I shall take my revenge on it, just wait and see!" Thus arose the belief that occasionally, during the invocations of the State Oracle, Nyagtul's spirit enters the oracle's body instead of the deity Nechung to give the government disastrous advice. The story is still very much alive today. There are important people nowadays among Tibetans who associate the State Oracle's repeated fateful pronouncements also at the origin of the Dorje Shugden defamation with Nyagtul's tragic assassination.

In spite of it all, I still have difficulties believing the events of these past three years. How such things can happen in connection with such an outstanding figure as the Dalai Lama remains a mystery. But then, one does not want to leave it at that. A closer look at His Holiness' lifestyle might provide some answers.

His Holiness never travels alone and never incognito. Wherever he goes, someone will have been there before him to prepare his arrival. For almost all of his information he depends on the press and those who surround him. The international press seldom reports on events concerning the Tibetan exile community and the Tibetan exile community has no free press of its own. Their publications take their cue from the official positions or opinions of the government-in-exile. The Dalai Lama can only draw on information provided by his immediate entourage or outside visitors to get a sense of what is going on among his people. Now, someone who succeeds in controlling the Dalai Lama's entourage will also control the Dalai Lama in more far-reaching ways. During the years I interpreted for His Holiness, I was time and again surprised to see how the strong personalities in his entourage became fewer with each passing year and were replaced by less impressive characters. It also is common knowledge that members of the Dalai Lama's family have great influence on the composition of his entourage.

After the controversy erupted in the spring of 1996 as a result of His Holiness' statements, the representatives of the people of Chatreng sent him petitions on two separate occasions. When these remained unanswered and the abbots of the main monasteries became concerned with the turn of recent events they requested an audience. When in the Dalai Lama's ante-room they were asked what they intended to submit. When they presented their petitions, they were told not to show the letters to His Holiness. The Dorje Shugden Society in Delhi was formed after similar petitions remained without response.

Considering who would benefit most from this unfortunate controversy, the obvious answer is Communist China. It would be difficult to see how they could have influenced events so close to the Dalai Lama were it not for the suspicion of possibly working through fake oracles. As a matter of fact, there are in Dharamsala two new oracles who recently arrived from Tibet whose background could give rise to such thoughts. However, closer at hand, the traditional Tibetan State Oracle has been consumed by jealousy against Dorje Shugden for generations. It would have been the State Oracle's duty to offer the Dalai Lama help during the critical events of 1959. According to all trustworthy eye-witnesses I know and consulted, the State Oracle did not provide any help on that occasion. After the Dalai Lama and his retinue had fled, the State Oracle only found out the following day that he had been left behind. His own escape was later organized by monks from Drepung Monastery. Once in exile, his role lost prominence until the early 1970's, when that oracle started to quietly persuade the Dalai Lama that he should take his distance from Dorje Shugden. In other words, the origin of Dorje Shugden's current level of defamation is not the Dalai Lama's own idea but rather the State Oracle's, who in his prophecies over the following twenty-five years made Dorje Shugden responsible for all the tragedies that befell Tibet and the Tibetans.

Another crucial question to ask is what is directly attacked and destroyed by this conflict. In Buddhism, a living transmission depends on the existence of great masters able to pass on this knowledge on the basis of their own experience. Like highway bridges, the masters Pabongka and Trijang Rinpoches carried these experiences of the Gelug tradition from the past into the present in perfected form. Next to these two large bridges are only some narrow hanging bridges which pass on aspects or parts of this experience to this day. Dorje Shugden was the protector of these two great masters who also composed significant meditations on Dorje Shugden just as the masters Trichen Tenpa Rabgye, Tagri Gyatso Thaye, Serkong Dorje Chang, Dagpo Kelsang Khedrup and many others had done before them. Were we to accept that Dorje Shugden is not an authentic deity but a Chinese ghost, as we keep hearing from the State Oracle, then a Buddhist practitioner must conclude that none of the masters of this transmission lineage is authentic. All these great bridges thanks to which the meditations of the Gelug tradition were passed on to this day would thereby be

destroyed. All that remained would be the academic studies in the monastic universities and many of the important transmissions for the actual practice would be lost. The Gelug tradition would be gutted.

In whose interest would it be to weaken the Gelug tradition? Here too, there are old rivalries and also people known to have such ambitions in close proximity to the Dalai Lama. If we add to all of this the Dalai Lama's open and unsuspecting nature, it is easy to see how His Holiness constitutes a unique instrument for some individuals to realize their cheap, personal goals at the expense of an entire society.

These thoughts may have provided answers to only some of the questions. I do hope that your own analyses will shed more light on this whole affair. It is after all your reporting which keeps a Western democracy on track and I think you can render the same service to the Tibetan people.

When you meet His Holiness, let him know that we do not wish for a controversial politician man from Asia, but that we love the wise monk from the Himalayas who so effectively inspires his people to uphold the exemplary attitude for which Tibetans are so much cherished the world over. And try to assess how much he knows about controversial publications concerning Tibet. That will allow you to determine how reliably his assistants actually inform him.

It is my sincere hope that Tibetans will soon be free and able to live in harmony in their own land and continue to be our cherished friends.

*helmut gassner*

*March 1999*

# An Open Letter to Mr. Kelsang Gyaltzen

## Secretary of H.H. Dalai Lama

Dear Kelsang Gyaltzen,

Please excuse me for writing this open letter. In your recent written response to the president of the Rabten Choeling association you mentioned my name in connection with ***"various TV and Radio programmes and press conference in Germany, Switzerland, United States and Austria which were designed to discredit His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government-in-exile, to disrupt the Tibetan community and to undermine the Tibetan cause. There is no denying of this fact,"*** and that ***there are people, who strongly believe that I am "one of the driving forces behind these programmes"***.

Dear Kelsang, you have not forgotten that on many gracious visits of His Holiness to Germany, Austria and Switzerland we have worked together as friends? Have you forgotten that since 1979 I have made every effort to put His Holiness' message on universal responsibility and harmony into befitting German words, deeply wishing for the audience to feel the same love and unity that always grasped my heart when hearing these words of H.H. Dalai Lama?

Do you really think that I could make *any* effort to *discredit His Holiness the Dalai Lama* or *to disrupt the Tibetan community*, after I have devoted my complete heritage and income to sustain Buddhist studies and practice in India and Europe? In all the years we worked together, you could have noticed that my thoughts and efforts always remained the same from year to year, and I can assure you, my gratitude to the Tibetan people and its great Buddhist masters has only increased during the past twenty years.

Through several of my friends I got to understand that you may consider myself as the very driving force behind the Swiss TV's report on the Dorje Shugden issue. If you really think so, then you have never had any direct and open conversation with Mr. Regli, the author of this report. As you certainly remember, I have repeatedly translated spoken Tibetan for the Swiss TV during the past twenty years. Besides other engagements for H.H. Dalai Lama, I translated for a chronicle about Ven. Trijang Choktrul Rinpoche in 1996. This chronicle was done by Mr. Regli, who is one of the most experienced journalists of DRS and has a very good knowledge of the various inclinations as well as political habits of Asian people. During the

work for the chronicle he seemed impressed by the young Trijang Rinpoche and also mentioned his esteem for H.H. Dalai Lama.

In April 1997, a Newsweek article on the dreadful murder of Ven. Lobsang Gyatso brought the Dorje Shugden issue to an international public. In the months to follow I repeatedly received calls from journalists, who knew me as 'interpreter of H.H. Dalai Lama', requesting my opinion. What could I answer? After His Holiness' statements of 1996, where he declared Dorje Shugden to be a danger to his life and the cause of Tibet, my friends, teachers, and masters, who had all supported His Holiness with all their effort throughout their life, were now badly splitting into two heavily opposing groups. It seemed that the kind words of His Holiness were now replaced by words of segregation. I did not believe it, refused to watch any recordings and was convinced that some mischief in the exile government, unknown to myself, was at the root. I was sure that words I saw in various reports as 'statements of His Holiness' could not be His statements. As perplexed as I was myself there was little I could do to bring clarity to the perplexed questions of journalists.

In June 1997, the Indian press reported on the fate of Mr. Thubten's family, who was chased out of their house and village after Mr. Thubten had made public statements on events of recent Tibetan history, which were seen as a contradiction to statements of the Tibetan exile government. These reports in the Indian press aroused Mr. Regli's interest. He pursued investigations for several months and travelled to India in November to get on-site information.

After his return he requested me to verify the translations of the interviews, which amounted to some 16 hours of prime video material. Some of the statements by Dorje Shugden adherents were saddening, but the appearance and the statements of His Holiness were just devastating for myself. *"Fanatic...., fundamentalist...., this is very clear"* (was not shown on TV) are now the words of His Holiness for those who venerate Dorje Shugden, which includes his own tutor, the philosophical assistants he chose himself, the chamberlain who arranged his safe escape from Tibet, many of the Khampa guerillas who gave their life for him to escape, many monasteries and whole regions of his own people, who have always been faithful to him.

Mr. Regli had left Switzerland full of esteem for His Holiness, hoping to meet the famous person full of radiance and kindness, but what he met was an irritable Dalai Lama, who insistently negates pinpointing questions of the journalist. With the impression of likeness to other strong men of Asia, Mr. Regli searched the recent Tibetan history under the rule of the Dalai Lamas and regents. When he asked me to review one of the reports in order to verify the correctness of the translations, I saw pictures of a prisoner punished by having his eyes destroyed. This was so saddening for me that I asked him to remove them. As he had good reason to include the



sequence, he refused. My insistence led to a bad dispute with Mr. Regli, which finally caused him to revise his report, but solely due to his reconciling character, not due to any valid arguments from my side.

The historical event behind the disputed pictures was the mutilation of Lungshar, an influential Tibetan aristocrat close to the 13th Dalai Lama. The Tibetan Minister Trimön sought capital punishment for Lungshar and punishment of his sons by chopping off their hands. The effective intervention of Pabongka Rinpoche prevented these punishments from being executed. Trimön nevertheless succeeded in having Lungshar's eyes destroyed. Officially, Lungshar was charged for creating a communist party in Tibet, while other transmissions of the events say that he was making efforts to establish a constitutional monarchy in Tibet, a form of *democratic rule* he apparently got to appreciate during his stay in Great Britain.

If there is any truth in the various reports on the exile government's handling of the Dorje Shugden issue, then the ruling style of today's Tibetan government still has not overcome all facets of Lungshar's time. Dear Kelsang, did you ever verify the historical accuracy of your government's statements? Did you ever talk to living witnesses of recent Tibetan history? You grew up in the vicinity of the great Chamberlain Phala, the key organizer of His Holiness' historical escape from Tibet, but did you ever speak to him? May I guess that you didn't, because you were just about making effort to gain more fluency in the Tibetan language and to move from a Swiss banking career to Tibetan exile politics when Mr. Phala passed away. At that time I already had translated for His Holiness during several years and frequently met Mr. Phala, who was kind enough to honor my interest in Tibetan history with many amazing details of the escape. What am I to think, when today's official version from Dharamsala is quite different from the account of many witnesses I have met? When asked by journalists, do you expect me to ignore my first hand sources and blindly follow the statements of your government?

**In your letter you mention that *"it is totally baseless and malicious to assert that 'the most precious life of Kyabje Trijang Chogtrul Rinpoche was in great peril.'"***

Do you really think that the letter shown on Swiss TV is a fake? In fact, the threat-letter shown is the very copy received by Zong Labrang by mail and the relevant lines translate into: *"Anyone who goes against the policy of the government must be singled out one-pointedly, opposed and given the death penalty..... As for the reincarnations of Trijang and Zong Rinpoche, if they do not stop practicing Dholgyal and continue to contradict with the word of H.H. the Dalai Lama, ..... their life and activities will suffer destruction. This is our primary warning."*

Twelve monks of Ganden Jangtse, who participated in a demonstration of several hundred monks of Ganden Shartse requesting

religious freedom were expelled from their monastery. I have met several of these monks: Young boys, who left Chatring in Tibet, overcame the many obstacles to reach India and to enter the great monasteries, fully decided to study the Buddha's teachings and to tame their minds. Now ousted and displaced, one of the boys was constantly worrying that his weak-hearted mother in Tibet might get to know his predicament and die of sorrow. When I asked why they didn't join one of the other great monasteries, they replied that many people would get pressured and suffer if they joined another monastic university and it became known. Dear Kelsang, who on earth could possibly pressure any monastic university to such an extent, except the outer, inner, and secret setups of the exile government?

I am quite aware that some of my questions may not comply with your government's ideas. I am also aware of the fate of Tsultrim from Clementown, Alo Chodzä, Guru Deva Rinpoche, Dawa Norbu, Jamyang Norbu, Mr. Thubten and many others, who publicly showed thoughts not in line with the exile government and got chased, beaten, stabbed, and even killed. I never had any hopes for personal gain when translating for His Holiness, and my only hope with these lines is that the Tibetan people may find the happiness they seek. But this will not be achieved by blindly following a leader, even if he is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding persons of our time.

When His Holiness was giving precious religious advice to subdue self-cherishing and intolerance, did your government ever make efforts to ensure that every Tibetan will comply with these great words of the Dalai Lama? Were there ever signature campaigns for Tibetans to confirm their abandonment of egoism? Were there ever any houses searched to make sure no stubborn egoists are left? Why is your government so active *this time*, trying to ensure that everyone will follow the semblant meaning of his statements?

Authorities who divide their people, are seeking to dominate them. Authorities who seek to serve their people, will make effort to unite them in harmony.

But anyway, if it is the case, as it seems, that you have the truth, the power and the fame all on your side, then why do you even consider to mention the name of a person as insignificant as myself?

9.19.1998

*Helmut Gassner*