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Did an obscure Tibetan sect murder three monks close to the Dalai Lama?

BY TONY CLIFTON

This murder mystery seems earthly to be set in the monastic palace of the God King of Tibet. Yet the facts are inescapable. Three members of the Dalai Lama's inner circle were brutally slain on the night of Feb 4 in a bedroom just a few hundred yards from His Holiness's exile residence in the northern Indian city of Dharamsala. The next morning monks found the Dalai Lama's close friend and confidant 70-year-old Lobsang Gyatso, dead on his bed. Two young monks, Nagawang Lodoe and the Dalai Lama's Chinese-language interpreter, Lobsang Nagwang, died within hours of the attack. Each victim had been stabbed 15 to 20 times, leaving the walls of the small monk's chamber splattered with blood. Police believe it was the work of five to eight attackers. But who, exactly? Cash and gilded Buddhist statues were left at the scene, ruling out robbers. And what kind of criminal would commit such carnage in this famed sanctuary of the gentlest religion?



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The savagery of the attack immediately steered police to search for fanatics of some kind. So did the death threats that followed against 14 more members of the Dalai Lama's entourage. Now Indian police believe the murders were committed by an obscure Buddhist sect that takes its name and inspiration from a minor but ferocious Tibetan deity: the Dorje Shugden.

The Shugdengs consider themselves guardians of Tibetan Buddhism, and particularly their branch of the faith, known as Gelugs, or the Yellow Hats, for their ceremonial headdress. They can be harshly doctrinaire, and have branded the Dalai Lama a traitor to the Yellow

Hats for befriending other branches of Buddhism. In the last year the Dalai Lama has retaliated, denouncing one Shugden order in particular as a hostile and crass, commercial cult - and providing what police suspect maybe the motive for brutal retaliation against His Holiness's inner circle. Indian police have formally questioned at least five Shugden followers, and were canvassing Tibetan-refugee neighbourhoods in New Delhi last week, seeking clues to what they describe as a well organized murder plot. *"I think there's no doubt that Shugden was behind the killings,"* says Robert Thurman, America's foremost



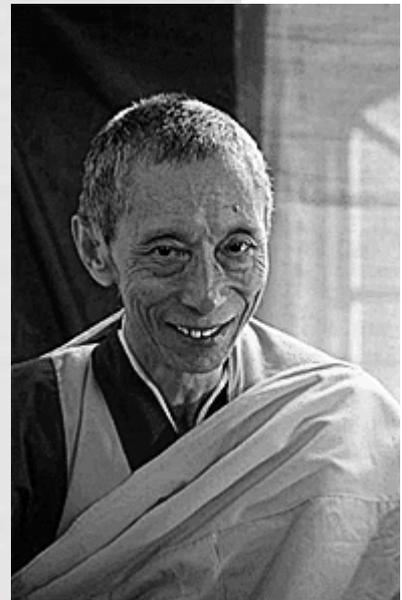


Buddhist scholar and an old friend of the Dalai Lama's. *"The three were stabbed repeatedly and cut up in a way that was like an exorcism."*

The Shugdengs worship a god who is often depicted wearing necklaces of human heads - symbols of conquered vices and transgressions. He is a sword-wielding warrior figure, riding a snow lion through a sea of boiling blood. As one of the minor **Dharmapala**, or protectors of the faith, Dorje Shugden has had an underground following among Tibetans obsessed with doctrinal purity for centuries. *"It would not be unfair to call Shugdengs the Taliban of Tibetan Buddhism,"* says Thurman, referring to the Muslim extremists of Afghanistan, who believe in swift and brutal justice. As early as the 1600s, the Dalai Lamas were trying to curb worship of Dorje Shugden. About 15 years ago, the current Dalai Lama began to voice concern that the sect was gaining strength, sowing discord.

Then, in 1991, a senior monk named Kelsang Gyatso established a new Dorje Shugden order based in England and called the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). The NKT soon flourished by promising spiritual rewards for cash-an unholy sales pitch that helped trigger confrontation with the Dalai Lama's circle. Through a spokesman, Kelsang insisted to NEWSWEEK that his followers had nothing to do with the grisly murders in Dharamsala and that their idol's "wrathful aspect" is only symbolic: *"Even if my best friend did the murders, I would condemn it,"* he said.

Nonetheless, the followers of the NKT have painted a hostile portrait of the Dalai Lama that is unrecognizable to mainstream Buddhists - indeed, to millions around the world who revere the Nobel Peace Prize winner and champion of Tibet. The NKT accuse him of selling out Tibet by promoting its "autonomy" within China rather than outright "independence." In fact, the Dalai Lama's global campaigning on behalf of Tibet may have made him an obvious target, like any other world leader. Since the Dharamsala murders, security has been tightened around the Dalai Lama, who was travelling last week in France and Spain under the careful watch of bodyguards.



The dispute with Dorje Shugden is rooted mainly in ancient struggles within Buddhism. Above all, the Shugdengs are angry that the Dalai Lama is promoting dialogue between the Yellow Hats and another major branch of Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingma, or the Red Hats. The Shugdengs consider it a sin even to talk to Red Hats, or to touch Nyingma religious works. [see article on Lama Kuten] The police believe that one of the reasons the men were killed was that the old sage, Lobsang Gyatso, was a particularly active intermediary between the Dalai Lama and the Red Hats. His obituary describes him as an outspoken critic of Yellow Hat conservatives. And in an interview with NEWSWEEK earlier this month, the Dalai Lama expressed his worries about the Dorje Shugden. *"That cult is actually destroying the freedom of religious thought,"* he said.

"Say I want to practice Nyingma. They say this Protector will harm me. Now, that's an obstacle to religious freedom. I am trying to promote the tradition of coexistence, but





the Shugdengs say you should not even touch a Red Hat document. That teaching totally contradicts my efforts."

The split grew angry early last year. The Dalai Lama issued a call to all Tibetan Buddhists to avoid the Shugdengs. He warned against the cult's extremism and against public worship of their idol. Soon after, the NKT in London claimed that the Dalai Lama's remarks had inspired Tibetans to harass Shugdeng followers in Dharamsala. It claimed that mainstream Tibetan groups were searching homes and temples for Shugdeng devotees and burning images of the Dorje Shugdeng. The NKT began protesting on the streets of London last May, accusing the Dalai Lama of suppressing their religion.

They carried a picture of His Holiness over the slogan YOUR SMILES CHARM, YOUR ACTIONS HARM. Then the threats began. A letter to the Tibetan Women's Association in Dharamsala warned, *"If there comes a division among prominent persons in the [Yellow Hat] sect, there will be bloodshed in the monasteries and settlements [across India]."*

The threats were among the clues that set police on the trail of the Shugdengs soon after the murders. On Feb. 8 the five Shugdeng followers were questioned in New Delhi and ordered to be available again on May 3; police said the five are not suspects but suspected witnesses of a well-organized murder plot. The leader of the Dorje Shugdeng devotees, Geshe Dragpa Gyaltsan, said police are intensely questioning innocent Shugdeng followers.

"We are supposed to have a hit list of 14 men," he said. "We don't have a hit list, and it would be completely against the advice and guidance of Dorje Shugdeng if we did." He described the Dalai Lama as a good man led astray by his advisers and the Tibetan exile government in Dharamsala, which he accused of banning Shugdeng followers from official posts and higher education. At this rate, he suggested, Shugdengs *"will end up being the Jews of Tibetan Buddhism."* Then he offered a peace plan: the Dalai Lama could speak *"face to face"* with Dorje Shugdeng himself through one of the sect's *"three or four"* mediums. *"I have spoken to Dorje Shugdeng many times this way,"* said Geshe, *"and we could easily arrange for him to talk to the Dalai Lama."*

The religious conflict at the heart of this mystery goes back to the early 15th century, when a reformer named Tsongkhapa founded the Yellow Hats. The nephew of Tsongkhapa became the first Dalai Lama, establishing an unbroken line of God Kings. Each was believed to be a reincarnation of his predecessor, and ruled supreme over older orders, including the modest and scholarly Red Hats. The Yellow Hats were far more grand than the austere Red Hats in their clothes and magnificent palaces, but the Dorje Shugdeng sect would become grander still. They were always among the most fervent defenders of Yellow Hat supremacy, and in London today they celebrate Kelsang as their *"peerless"* spiritual guide.



Shugdeng followers always believed their god could grant earthly favours, and NKT has richly exploited this belief. Though barely known in the East, the NKT has slickly and





successfully promoted Dorje Shugden in Europe. It's the fastest growing Buddhist sect in Britain, where it now has about 3,000 members, a thriving publishing business in London and mansions that double as "Dharma Centres" all over the country. It has also been denounced by the London press and the Dalai Lama as a cult that fleeces its own followers. *"Nobody would pray to Buddha for better business, but they go to Shugden for such favours - and this is where it has become like spirit worship,"* the Dalai Lama told NEWSWEEK. *"This is a great pity - a tragedy." [sorry - wrong! People do pray to Buddha for better business...]*

NKT founder Kelsang has publicly retreated from his confrontation with the Dalai Lama. Through his spokesman he told NEWSWEEK that the NKT had abandoned its demonstrations last July after realizing they were less and less appropriate. Elsewhere he has denied allegations that he is a fraud of a monk who never went on a religious retreat and who has made a personal fortune in the *"millions of pounds."* He insists that any profits go to his Dharma Centres and that he lives modestly on a 3250 stipend each month. Yet there is no denying the crude mix of spiritual and commercial themes pitched on the sect's Internet Web site. A current bulletin explains that *"accumulating merit"* is vital to *"become an enlightened being"* and that helping the Dharma Centers *"flourish"* is a great way to accumulate merit.

"So," the bulletin offers, *"if you are in the market for some merit (and who isn't) here is a perfect opportunity."* There follows a price list: 23,000 (\$4,800) for an NKT shrine cabinet, 22,000 for an NKT Buddha statue, 230 for *"a teacup and saucer for Geshe-La"* (Kelsang's honorific title).

"Shugden appeals to crazies by offering instant gratification," says Thurman [who wanted to be initiated but didn't get it "on grounds of his fickle character"] *"Once you get involved, you're told you have to devote your lives to the cult, because the god gets very angry if you don't attend to him every day. It's really bad stuff, the way they're draining money out of people."*

The suspicion now is that the savvy these Shugdengs apply to business could have been put to more nefarious ends in Dharamsala. But Kelsang insists his idol and his order are peaceful. No one saw the attackers slip in and out of the monastery chamber on the frosty night of Feb. 4. There are no real suspects in hand, only suspicions, potential witnesses and the suggestive tale of an angry split in Tibetan Buddhism. As much as anything, the Shugdengs are suspect because **no alternative theory** has emerged to explain this unholy crime. But the mystery of the Dharamsala murders is far from solved.

With SUZANNE MILLER in London

