

## Certain Beliefs and Uncertain Evidence – the Case of Shugden<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

In 2015, 'False Dalai Lama – Stop Lying' became a mantra in the mouths of protesters against the Dalai Lama. These ideas contradict conventional wisdom about the Dalai Lama who is widely revered as a near saint and personification of compassion. This chapter analyses the narratives and arguments presented on both sides of the Shugden controversy between 1996 and early 2016. Both supporters and detractors of the Dalai Lama's position recapitulated beliefs with heartfelt certainty. However empirical evidence supporting either positions is much more uncertain. This chapter argues that the polarized commitment seen in these disputes took the focus off unsettling political and existential questions and located knowledge in the certainty of personal experience.

### Introduction

'Dalai Lama, Stop Lying' - 'False Dalai Lama' - 'Give Religious Freedom' – 'The World's Worst Dictator' - these blazing slogans attract the eye in the photograph below. The phrases became mantras in the mouths of protesters highlighting their grievances against the Dalai Lama outside his public talks throughout the Western world during 2015. The catchphrases contradict conventional wisdom about the Dalai Lama, widely revered as a near saint and a Nobel Prize winner; many Tibetan Buddhists believe the Dalai Lama is an emanation of the enlightened deity Avalokiteshvara, the personification of compassion.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank all those who have given me their trust and time to have extended conversations on this subject and specifically those who offered very valuable input on drafts of this chapter. This chapter is based upon an oral presentation that was entitled 'Innovation, Violence and Paralysis: How do Minority Religions Cope with Uncertainty?' during the Inform Seminar on Uncertainty and Minority Religions, held at the London School of Economics on 7 February 2015.



Protest organised by the International Shugden Community outside the Aldershot Football Stadium where the Dalai Lama was holding a public talk. Photo by the author. 29 June 2015.

If you venture beyond the catchy slogans, the issues involved can seem complex and off-putting to outsiders. The dispute focuses on aspects of an obscure and foreign religious practice which is outside of any direct experience for most of the general public. However, the protestors focused on issues of universal concern like 'human rights' and 'religious freedom'. In declaring the Dalai Lama a 'Liar', the protestors presented placards that courted public interest and invited involvement. Almost all of the protesters during these years were ethnically European, many with shaved heads and in some protests, wearing monastic robes, which can signify a convert to Tibetan Buddhism. There were active protests against the Dalai Lama by Shugden-supporter groups in 1996-1998, 2008, 2012, and during 2014-2015. This paper will primarily focus on the protests up to the first quarter of 2016; later developments lay outside the scope of this analysis.

During the first round of protests (1996-1998), the founder of the NKT, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (b. 1931) publicly organised the protests and gave a series of interviews outlining his opposition to the Dalai Lama's statements on Shugden (Brown 1996, Combe 1996, Gyatso 1997a and Lopez 1998). Since October 1998, spokespeople for the anti-Dalai Lama/pro-Shugden protest groups have emphasised that they have no organisation connection with the NKT (Gyatso 2002). However, the individuals legally responsible for the organisations which have convened the protests as well as the spokespeople for the media have consistently been those

who also hold administrative or leadership roles in the NKT.<sup>2</sup> A pro-Shugden journalist/blogger recently estimated that about 70% of those attending protests were NKT members ('IndyHack' 2015a).

Although drawn from largely western affiliates of the NKT, the protesters were motivated in their belief that they were supporting the interests of a wider community; in justifying the 1996-1998 protests, Gyatso emphasised that his decision to protest came only after 'many many requests' and reports of suffering from the exile community (Nilles 1998). In the 2014-2015 protests, there were also members of the Gyeden Tensung Society, the North American Gelugpa Buddhist Association ('IndyHack' 2015b) and a variety of individual Tibetan Shugden practitioners in the diaspora, probably connected to monasteries in Chinese-controlled territory that actively promote Shugden practices (Tibet House 2014). Many protesters considered that in their protests, they were giving voice to the complaints of a 'silenced' minority in the Tibetan diaspora (McBretney 2014 and personal conversations).

With one lens, the protests appeared to focus on an opaque doctrinal dispute within Tibetan Buddhism, i.e. whether or not the Dalai Lama has the authority to ask Tibetan Buddhists to abandon certain beliefs and practices relating to a non-embodied being called Shugden. Although some Buddhists believe Shugden is a fully-enlightened, indispensable protector of Buddhist dharma, the Dalai Lama has declared Shugden an unenlightened, dangerous spirit. The issue furthermore focuses on if Tibetan authorities have interpreted the Dalai Lama's spiritual instructions in such a way that caused discrimination and even human rights abuses towards those who continue to rely upon Shugden against the Dalai Lama's advice.

The Shugden conflict is filled with powerful rhetoric. Both groups made specific socio-political claims. Both sides recapitulated beliefs with heartfelt certainty, but the empirical evidence is often much more uncertain. This article will argue that both sides have used socio-political accusations partially as a distraction from existential uncertainty. Each group, the pro-Dalai Lama supporters and the pro-Shugden campaigners, has negated the other's understanding of reality in a powerful and challenging way. For both groups, their experience of Shugden and/or the Dalai Lama is central to their Buddhist faith and understanding of their place in the world.

Mixed in with existential uncertainty are concerns about unknown futures. What will be the fate of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism under Chinese occupation? What does the future hold for the Tibetan exile community? Will there be another (almost)

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is made by looking at past and current directors of the Western Shugden Society (UK Company no. 06631434) which organised protests between 2008-2012 and the International Shugden Community which organised protests in early 2014 (registered as a company in Norway, No. NO913401964) and the International Shugden Community registered as a non-profit organisation in California, USA (C3660365) which organised protests from March 2014-August 2015. The 1996-1998 protests were organised by the Shugden Supporters Community which was openly affiliated with the NKT and Kelsang Gyatso.

universally-accepted single individual in the position of Dalai Lama?<sup>3</sup> Will there ever again be an autonomous Tibet? Can the continuity of a 'pure' Buddhist lineage be maintained?

I will suggest that these rhetorical claims and counter claims – with only superficial interest in finding verifying evidence – are, at least in part, a distraction from existential uncertainty. In conclusion, I will borrow from Jean Paul Sartre's 1944 play *Huis Clos (No Exit)*, arguing that each side is trapped in a kind of 'hell' by the rhetorical gaze of the other side. This chapter will argue that this powerful and provocative socio-political rhetoric is (at least partially) a response to the existential uncertainty created when deeply held beliefs have been publically challenged by a polar-opposite understanding.

Other ways of analysing this clash might bring political, intra-group dynamics, theological or historical considerations to the foreground. These perspectives would also add important context in understanding the dispute, particularly as the Tibetan groups are primarily concerned with the political situation in China and possible Chinese support for any campaign to undermine the authority and charisma of the Dalai Lama; conversely, the Western members of the protest groups are primarily interested in promoting what they see as perhaps the only remaining 'pure' expression of Buddhism. However, my focus for this chapter is to suggest that the polarized commitment seen in these disputes took the focus off unsettling political and existential questions and located knowledge in the certainty of personal experience.

## Method

This article will examine the dynamics of the anti-Dalai Lama/pro-Shugden protest movement and official responses to it from the perspective of a sociologist of religion working at Inform. Since 2001, I have been actively following the activities of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), its dynamics with former members, and the rhetorical debates around Shugden. I have focused on media reports, literature produced by the various groups organising the protests, by the office of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), and the Dalai Lama's official statements. In 2014, networking and promotion of various views occurred in public spaces on the internet, including Twitter, Facebook and the blogs of private individuals. Also active in this milieu has been a network of former members of the NKT, who since 2008, have taken a pro-active role in providing information that might 'warn' the general public about problems they experienced within this group, as well as opposing the protest activities against the Dalai Lama (e.g. Former Members, 2014). I have analysed the discourse and content of all the information I could find in the public domain, seeking to assess the substance of the issues in much the same way as a member of the general public would be able to do upon hearing about this debate.

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<sup>3</sup> Occasionally multiple claims to the same reincarnated lama exist simultaneously, as is currently the case for the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa (Karma Kagyüpas) where two claimants, Ugyen Trinley and Thaye Dorje both continue to separate groups of supporters (Reynolds 2000 and Samuel 2004)

There are, of course, issues of translation on a topic that is intimately related to the nuances of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. However, my lack of knowledge of the Tibetan language puts me in the same position as most of those protesting against the Dalai Lama. By relying on the English-language information, I have the same basis for drawing my conclusions as do most of those involved with the protests.

An additional resource available to me has been the confidential archives at Inform. As of 26 May 2015, Inform had had approximately 124 enquires that directly related to Shugden<sup>4</sup> and 336 enquires relating to the NKT as a group.<sup>5</sup> The majority of these enquires were requests for further information, but others had specific experiences or information to relate. Additionally, I attended a public panel discussion on the subject held at SOAS in August 2014, participated in a series of three introductory NKT meditation sessions in London during the autumn of 2014 and visited the protests against the Dalai Lama held in Aldershot, UK, on 29 June 2015, speaking with some of the protesters.

While not a controlled sample, data from enquiries and limited fieldwork does yield information that is both productive and useful to understanding the situation, from both sides of the debate. Most constructively, it has highlighted the diversity of opinion on both sides: neither Shugden practitioners nor those opposed to the demonstrations speak with one united voice. Informants are often able to offer criticism about the activities of others sharing their general position. This enquiry-based information has also revealed the deeply personal experience that often motivates those involved in this situation, a theme which will be expanded upon in some depth below.

There are a number of issues regarding the reliability of all the data relating to Shugden. Almost all the public-domain material promotes a specific ideological agenda. Former members of the NKT usually focus on negative aspects of their experiences of Shugden and the group in general. The material provided by the Dalai Lama and the CTA seeks to justify and defend its own position, while protest-group literature focuses on discrediting the Dalai Lama.

To some extent, I have suffered from the problem that Steve Mutch articulated, in that it can be 'difficult for any individual scholar to attempt successfully to gain

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<sup>4</sup> Eleven of the enquires relating to Shugden groups focused on the teachings and practices of Tsem Tulku and his Malaysian-based Kechara organisation. Tsem Tulku 'came out' openly as Shugden practitioner in December 2014 although there was speculation before this point. In the database 12 individuals self-described as current Shugden practitioners (not just members of a group known to promote Shugden) and 18 individuals discussed former practices relating to Shugden.

<sup>5</sup> The NKT has been one of the groups receiving most enquiries since 2007, when a network of former members began to register their stories with Inform and ask for information on various related issues. Between 1992-May 2015 when the statistics were compiled, Inform has received a total of 336 enquiries related to the NKT, 125 enquirers identifying as former members of the group (consisting of 53 unique individuals as many individuals enquired more than once), and 40 current members of the group. In 1994, members of Inform staff spoke with the then Deputy Spiritual Director of the NKT and attended meditation sessions; I have read the notes from these visits and of the enquiries to Inform before I began my work with the organisation. Inform has also had periodic correspondence with the leadership of the NKT from 1994 to the present.

access to a controversial NRM and at the same time study the accounts of leavers' (Mutch in Barker 2013, p. 49). Because I have taken into account the narratives of former NKT-members and have been quoted in several media articles, I have lost credibility with some members of the NKT (IndyHack 2015a and 2015b). However, other enquiries to Inform suggest that, more informally, there is a diversity of opinion within the NKT about Inform's position within the 'cult scene'.

Mindful of the limitations of the various sources of information and my own social position in studying this subject, I have tried to triangulate, verifying one piece of information with others, always seeking to identify how various discursive positions may ask very different questions and systematically avoid disconfirming evidence (Barker 1995). While my research aims towards high professional standards of balance and objectivity, I recognize that, like all research, it is subject to my own limitations in understanding, and I am open to correction with new information.

### **Who is Shugden and why is he controversial?**

Narratives about the origin and motives of Shugden appear from polarised positions, often dictated by affiliation, loyalty, and personal experience.<sup>6</sup> Most accounts associate the origin of Shugden to the untimely and contentious death of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen (1619–1655), who was considered a likely candidate for the position of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Until relatively recently, ethnographic evidence has emphasised Shugden's position as a minor deity (in both Sakya and Gelug traditions) who is channelled by oracles, rather than being understood by practitioners as a fully-realised Buddha (e.g. Dreyfus 1998 and Mills 2009).<sup>7</sup> There is some evidence that Shugden was considered to be an emanation of Mañjuśrī as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although this is likely to be a minority position.<sup>8</sup>

There are specific historical narratives promoted by both sides of this dispute. When exactly Dolgyel, Drakpa Gyeltsen (1619-1656), and Dorjé Shukden/Shugden become conflated remains unclear. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), have described Shugden as an 'evil spirit', preferring to use the title of Dolgyal to identify the spirit. Thus the Dalai Lama and CTA emphasise the narratives of Shugden's origin as a spirit identified in the Dol area of (now) Chinese-controlled Tibet around 1657.<sup>9</sup> However, some of the opposing groups insist that Shugden is a fully enlightened emanation of the Buddha Mañjuśrī.

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<sup>6</sup> Chandler (2015) also provides a good introductory overview of some of the issues involved in this contemporary dispute.

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of oracular deities in Tibetan Buddhism more generally, see Bell (2013), Mumford (1989), Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956), and Samuel (1993).

<sup>8</sup> For a historical narrative of a Shugden-as-enlightened deity perspective, see Chang (1967, pp. 5-12) and Gyatso (1997). Christopher Bell has pointed out that both sides engage in the 'rhetorical reconstruction of history' as well as techniques for 'silencing' disconfirming evidence (see Bell 2009 and Trouillot 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The normative version for supporters of the Dalai Lama's position is most accessibly presented by Dreyfus (1998) and Office of Tibet (1999), but see also Bultrini (2013) and the Dolgyal Shugden Research Society (2014); these narratives are disputed by those who promote Shugden practices.

## The Experience of Shugden

For many, the status of Shugden as a worldly deity or the embodiment of compassion is based on their experience as practitioners. Both the proponents and the antagonists have strong personal experiences upon which to draw. A central aspect of this situation is the 'direct' experience that each side has of Shugden – and an existential uncertainty that comes from someone else having a diametrically opposed understanding of the same being.

It has been reported that the Dalai Lama's decision to encourage his followers to abandon the practice in 1996 was at least partly based on advice given by oracles in trance, and partially from his own experiences of Shugden (Dalai Lama 2015). There are reports that the Dalai Lama was told by other oracles around 1996 that Shugden had sided with Communist China, and there are reports of Chinese governmental officials attending a session with a Shugden oracle who channelled the deity in their presence (Dolgyal Shugden Research Society, 2014, Loc. 1228 and 2691).<sup>10</sup>

The justification for the Dalai Lama's decisions for his personal abandonment of Shugden practices and requests for those under his direction to change their practice largely relate to interpretation of portentous dreams re-confirmed via traditional forms of divination and oracle consultation (Dalai Lama 2015). This kind of justification is perhaps less than convincing for western Buddhist practitioners, but emphasises how Shugden and other oracles are viewed as independent disembodied spirits with independent agency and personality by Tibetans. The role of divination and oracles in the official decision-making process is sometimes ridiculed by anti-Dalai Lama protesters to undermine the Dalai Lama's authority. However, those sympathetic to the Dalai Lama point towards a more complex and systematic method of decision making described by Brück as involving the evaluation of historical evidence and considering the effects of various policies on the current political situation as well as considering any direct spiritual insight (Brück 2001).

Some Shugden supporters describe Shugden as the 'Great King of Dharma Protector whose time has come' (Dorjeshugden.com, 2009a). He is believed to be a uniquely powerful and effective deity who can be called upon to support the practitioner in a time where there is a general degeneration of dharma. Some of these aims are rather magical in nature, asserting that Shugden practice will have the power to alleviate 'financial difficulties and health problems', grant 'wealth and all the resources you need for a successful life and spiritual practice', protection 'from dangerous or life-threatening situations' as well as from 'negative interferences such as spirit disturbances, negative energies or black magic' (Dorjeshugden.com 2014a). Specific requests of this nature appear more explicitly in South Asian presentations of Shugden, such as those from the Malaysian-based Kechara House led by Tsem Tulku (e.g. VajraSecrets.com 2015). The power attributed to Shugden is indeed

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<sup>10</sup> This is a publication of the CTA office in New York. Mills (2003) points out that the organisation of the Tibetan government in exile is not parallel to normal ideas of a 'State', but describes it as characterized both by local autonomy and a strong loyalty to the Dalai Lama.

impressive – and many practitioners will have personal experience that will assure them of the veracity of Shugden as a benevolent, enlightened protector.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, founder of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), unequivocally presents Shugden as a fully-realised Buddha.<sup>11</sup> Gyatso emphasises that Shugden may not provide health or wealth, but he will always provide situations to aid in spiritual development. In the *Heart Jewel*, Gyatso is emphatic that Shugden ‘does not help only Gelugpas’ but helps ‘all living beings, including non-Buddhists’ (1997b, 92). Facebook posts often emphasize Shugden practitioners’ reliance on this figure as an important element of their faith and sense of strength (e.g. Kelsang Khyenrab 2014). For those who see him as fully-enlightened, Shugden’s ultimate purpose is not to work minor miracles, but to lead individuals to the ultimate liberation of Buddhist enlightenment.

However, there is a darker side to descriptions of Shugden coming from both supporters and detractors of Shugden. Shugden is also widely believed to intervene maliciously in the lives of both those who abandon their commitments to him and those undermining the purity of the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Traditionally, there are four main ‘schools’ or ‘sects’ within Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug) and the relationship between these groups can vary from amicable to acrimonious.<sup>12</sup> Zemey Rinpoche’s *Yellow Book* (1974) warns that Shugden will act to cause illness and death in Gelug practitioners who mix with Nyingma teachings. The publication of this book is associated with the Dalai Lama’s first public moves to distance himself from this practice; identifying Shugden as divisive and sectarian (Dalai Lama 1997 and Popham 2015). The Dalai Lama (part of the Gelug tradition) has supported the non-sectarian Rimé movement which encourages individuals the freedom to receive other schools’ teachings, a move which is seen by some as eroding the unique ability of each lineage to lead its students to enlightenment.

Stories of Shugden interventions relate to living people, not just distant legends. For example, one story circulating on the internet reported on a critic of Shugden and the NKT who abandoned an attempt to publish a book on these topics after his wife (who the author claims knew nothing of Shugden legends) suffered serious internal bleeding and dreams of being strangled by a bearded demonic figure and being clawed by its long nails. The critic identified these images as paralleling descriptions of dreams the Dalai Lama has attributed to Shugden (Beesley 2010 and Dalai Lama 1997).

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<sup>11</sup> Gyatso does note that some see Shugden as ‘an emanation of Mañjuśrī who shows the aspect of a worldly being, but this is incorrect’ (1997, 91). For more context of the NKT’s position within the history of Shugden see Kay (2004, 37-52) which largely relies on Dreyfus (1998), an account which is seen as apologetics for the Dalai Lama’s position by those who believe Shugden is an emanation of Mañjuśrī.

<sup>12</sup> While these four are the standard divisions (Powers 2007), this categorization is also contested; some lists include the Jonang, Khadampa, and Bön as distinct traditions.

After committing to Shugden practices, there is often a fear that ‘abandoning’ commitments will encourage the wrathful intervention of the neglected deity. Some former members of the NKT have reported what sound like sincere beliefs that Shugden has intervened in their lives after abandoning his practice, causing accidents, bad luck and illnesses, both physical and mental. While these narratives are sometimes dismissed as those of ‘mentally unstable ex-members’, the experience of a persecuting Shugden is real for those concerned.

From the side of those who see Shugden as an evil spirit, there are narratives of Shugden stealing power and energy from those who propagate him. This is typical of Tibetan-language narratives, some of which are available in translation. For example, Lama Zopa (2012), a supporter of the Dalai Lama, has many incidents in the introduction to a book for Tibetan-speaking Mongolians. The introduction details how ‘those who strongly practice Dolgyal eventually end up dying in the most dangerous manner’ (Zopa 2012, 2).<sup>13</sup> Additionally, many Tibetan Buddhists, who view Shugden as malevolent, avoid using the name as a way of avoiding the negative attention of the spirit (Chandler 2009, 199 and Rigumi 2010).

There remains a level of uncertainty in all belief, but this is perhaps highlighted especially in the case of a deity whose nature is as highly contested as Shugden. For an outsider, there is no empirical evidence which can determine the nature of Shugden (following Barker 1995). However, for an individual with a powerful personal experience of Shugden, little ‘outside’ evidence can contradict intense personal experience. For those whose lived experience contradicts the other side, rational argument is less compelling than what is ‘known’ in the body. For practitioners who have no intimate personal experience of Shugden, it may be rational to take a ‘Pascal’s Wager’ and live as if the Shugden described by their own trusted dharma teachers is real.

### **Circles of Uncertainty**

The strength and intensity of the protest rests partially on ‘facts’ which are disputed on either side of the debate. The conflict starts with the lack of any common agreement about what is the case – is there or is there not a ban against Shugden practitioners? Is there or is there not discrimination?

A focus for those supporting the Dalai Lama is the dominant narrative around the murder of three Tibetans in exile, Lobsang Gyatso (1928–1997) and two of his students. Lobsang Gyatso had founded the School of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, was a close associate of the Dalai Lama, and was very vocal against Shugden practices. It was widely reported that the Indian police had been working

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<sup>13</sup> Lama Zopa is the current leader of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FMPT), the group which originally invited Geshe Kelsang Gyatso to the UK (see Kay 2004, pp. 53-80) As well as providing the Tibetan text on its website, the FMPT has translated the introduction for its students to read in English and French and asks all those affiliated with its centres neither to practice Shugden nor attend teachings by those known to maintain Shugden practices.

on the assumption that these murders were committed by two Chinese citizens then associated with Shugden supporters based in New Delhi (e.g. see Dalailama.com 2015, di Giovanni 1998, Newsweek Staff 1997, and Macartney 2007). As of 2017 Indian police were still seeking the extradition of these two Chinese citizens in relation to the murders, through Interpol Red Notices to face charges of criminal conspiracy, murder, and trespass with intent to assault and cause harm (and Interpol 2017 [2005] and Macartney 2007). Shugden-supporters point out that there has never been any trial to prove the guilt of the assumed assailants. The incident remains in the narrative of both sides as a reminder of potentially lethal violence; with both sides expressing anxiety for possible assassination attempts from the other side (see also International Shugden Community 2013, 155-157).

Meanwhile there is a popular association between the murderers and Shugden-supporters; the Tibetan government lists some fifteen documented incidences of violence it believes were perpetrated by pro-Shugden groups within the exile community (Tibet House 2014 and Sangay 2014) and has posted names and photos of known anti-Dalai Lama/pro-Shugden Tibetan protestors, perhaps believing they may pose a security risk (Tibetnet.com 2014a and 2014b). The Shugden-supporters cite this list as evidence of persecution and discrimination.

### *Is There a Ban?*

The CTA affirms that there is no 'ban' and that there are no legal restrictions on Shugden supporters entering parliament or holding government posts (Tibet House 2014). The official position is that the Dalai Lama has requested that those who wish to take formal Buddhist teaching from him do not have any relationship with Shugden. Therefore, they argue that there is no discrimination against Shugden practitioners on an official level (Dalailamaprotesters.info 2014a). Shugden supporters and their organisations are legal in China, India, the Americas and Europe, where most of these conflicts are played out.

This account is countered by the Shugden practitioners who maintain that there is a *de facto* 'ban', that the Dalai Lama is a 'liar' and that there are serious ongoing human rights abuses against Shugden practitioners in the exile community. These claims are made in the provocatively entitled book *False Dalai Lama*, whose very title distracts from evidence for or against specific claims (International Shugden Community 2013, 113-128).

Between 1996-1999, there is some evidence that Shugden supporters were asked to resign some positions in support of the Dalai Lama's proclamations (Bernis 2000, p. 23-35). There was a statement by the Tibetan Youth Congress to expel those who insisted on maintaining a Shugden practice against the Dalai Lama's advice (Dalailama.com 1997). The Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies' Resolutions, also issued a strongly worded resolution that encouraged all Tibetans to follow the Dalai Lama's advice and cease any practices relating to Shugden (Dalailama.com 1996 and 1997).

Several Tibetan scholars have pointed out that the Dalai Lama is not a traditional head of state; his power is more symbolic than political, therefore it is not in his power to create or lift a 'ban' on a particular religious practice (Dodin 2014 and Hill in Sandelson 2014). However, it is also the case that the Dalai Lama enjoys a huge symbolic significance in the minds of the majority of Tibetan Buddhists, and loyalty rather than rational consideration might guide reactions to accusations that he is 'False' or the 'Worst Dictator of the Modern World' (International Shugden Community 2014). The protesting groups purport to be protesting specific policies the Dalai Lama introduced regarding Shugden, but simultaneously deny any legitimacy of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as a spiritual or political leader. This contradictory position ignites the anger of Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama and distracts attention away from any rational examination of any discrimination against Shugden supporters within the exile community.

### *Homeless Monks?*

During the 2014-2015 protests, there were claims that Shugden practitioners in India have been expelled from their monasteries and made destitute (International Shugden Community 2014b); if this was initially true for some, the situation now does not support such claims. In 2008, three major centres for Gelug monastics in India held referendums on the practice of Shugden (namely the Sera Mey, Gaden Shartse and Drepung Loseling monasteries in exile). The official position is that increasing violence and tension in the community necessitated votes, which were held in accordance with traditional rules (*vinaya*) (Dalailamaprotesters.info 2014b). Some Shugden-practitioners argue that the votes were not held in accordance with the *vinaya* and voting was only conducted because of pressure from the Dalai Lama and CTA officials (Shugden Society 2014, Dorjeshugden.com 2010a, and Bultrini pp. 321-324). In each case there was a clear majority decision that the monks who refused to abandon Shugden were to leave their monasteries.

However soon after this decision, funds were raised and land found to support new monasteries for these monks. In the Tibetan community in exile there are now two independent monasteries in the South Indian state of Karnataka, which have disassociated with the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader and promote Shugden practices, namely the Shar Garden (<http://shargadenpa.org/>) which opened in October 2009 and the Serpom Thoesam Norling which opened in April 2009 (<http://www.serpommonastery.org/aboutus.html>). One pro-Shugden forum post reported in detail a division of property from Gaden Shartse Monastery to the breakaway Dokhang Khangtsen section of the monastery which reformed under the name Shar Garden (Dorjeshugden.com 2008). Additionally, there are many monasteries in areas of Chinese-controlled Tibet as well and in Buddhist centres in Europe, the Americas, South Africa and Southeast Asia which make Shugden practices central to their community.

Therefore the 2014 claims in protest leaflets that the Dalai Lama has made 'over 900 Shugden practitioners homeless' and the ISC demand that monks be allowed to return to their monasteries seems hard to accept at face value (International

Shugden Community 2014b). Even pro-Shugden websites report positively the continued successes of these monasteries, their operation of an income-generating guest house in Delhi (DorjeShugden.com 2009) and their recent issuing of their first official Geshe degrees (DorjeShugden.com 2015). There is no public statement that Shar Garden and the Serpom Thoesam Norling monasteries, which house close to 1,500 Tibetan monastics-in-exile, are seeking re-integration to the monasteries from which they split. However, reports suggest that these monasteries do experience general isolation from the rest of the Tibetan community in exile and have trouble enticing new monastics to join because of discrimination against the families of known Shugden practitioners amongst Tibetans in exile.

### *Human Rights Abuses?*

In 1998, an application submitted to Amnesty International asking them to investigate human rights abuses against Shugden practitioners in India was rejected, with the organisation stating that there was no evidence of 'torture, use of the death penalty, extra-judicial executions, arbitrary detention and unfair trials' in the Tibetan exile community as a result of the Dorje Shugden conflict (Amnesty International 1998). However, Bernis notes that the Dalai Lama's involvement with some Amnesty International media campaigns could have influenced the official statement, and this reasoning allows Amnesty's opinion to be disregarded by Shugden campaigners as offering an independent assessment (Bernis 2000, 13 fn. 44). However, it is hard to believe that the criteria Amnesty International lists could have been happening without any evidence or media reporting. Discrimination and harm could be occurring at a lower threshold of evidence.

Officially Tibetans-in-exile can appeal to the Tibetan Supreme Justice Commission and if not satisfied they can appeal to an Indian court. Shugden supporters filed a petition to National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India in 2007, but the Commission closed the case because of a lack of substantial and specific allegations (NHRC 2007). Then in 2008, the Shugden Devotees' Charitable and Religious Society filed a petition against the Central Tibetan Administration and the Dalai Lama in the High Court of Delhi citing harassment and ill treatment. This petition was dismissed in April 2010 on the grounds that the allegations of harassment and violence were too vague, with no specific instances of any such attacks cited (Tibetnet.com 2010).

I have not been able to find any incidences of physical assaults or other articles about persecution of Shugden-devotees within the English-language Indian press between 2000-2015.<sup>14</sup> However supporters claim that those concerned are too afraid to identify themselves publically and become a target for more abuse (McBretney 2014). Thus, the fact there are no reports of human rights abuses reinforces both sides' assumptions – that the victims are too afraid to report their experience to the Indian police, or that there are no experiences to report. Martin Mills has offered an intelligent analysis on how the Shugden practitioners' appeal to

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<sup>14</sup> Using Nexis online search, as well as searching in the individual online archives of *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Human Rights abuses highlights 'a battleground of views on what is meant by religious and cultural freedom' (Mills 2003).

*But Is There Discrimination?*

Pro-Shugden protests groups have stated that those who venerate Shugden within the exile community are discriminated against, systematically denied medical services, find it impossible to buy vegetables (International Shugden Community 2014b), and perhaps even killed (International Shugden Community 2014a, 136-7); the Western Shugden supporters claim that the Central Tibetan Administration issued death warrants (SF1 1998a).

While dramatic claims of human rights abuses against Shugden practitioners appear to lack a substantial evidence base, reports of informal shunning, intimidation and discrimination amongst the community between Dalai Lama supporters and Shugden-practitioners seem likely to have credence. Research and media reports from the period of 1996-99 suggest that there were instances of threats and discrimination (Bernis 2000, SF1 1998a and DorjeShugden.com 2010b). There are some interviews with Tibetans in exile which suggest that many wish to disassociate with any known (or alleged) Shugden-supporters, and that in the exile community there have been some instances of harassment involving stone-throwing and threats against those who disregard the Dalai Lama's advice to emigrate abroad (e.g. SF1 1998a). It is worth noting that follow-up modifications and corrections made by Swiss public television after the initial broadcast are generally not considered in the highly-polarized presentation of evidence (see SF1 1998b and Peljor 2014).

There are reports about those suspected to be Shugden-practitioners' businesses being boycotted and 'no Shugden practitioner' signs on other shop fronts have been photographed (Dorjeshugden.com 2014b). However pro-Dalai Lama supporters emphasize deceptions, such as lack of date and place identifiers for photographs, in the International Shugden Community's presentation of this 'evidence' (dalailamaprotesters.info 2014c). The scarcity of evidence is seen as proof of persecution by Shugden practitioners (as those affected are intimidated and won't report abuse) and as genuine lack of evidence of persecution by those who promote loyalty towards the Dalai Lama.

In 2015, the elected head of the CTA, Lobsang Sangay, admitted that 'there might be some reservations' against Shugden practitioners at an individual level (Stone Fish 2015). Likewise, Tibetologist Robert Barnett commented to Public Radio International that the CTA administration 'hasn't dealt with that [issues of discrimination] very well' but that 'claims that the Shugden issue is a major human rights concern are overblown' (Bell 2014). Notably, there have been no public statements from the CTA or other non-Shugden organisations condemning discrimination against Shugden practitioners.

Two anthropologists, Martin Mills and Ben Joffe, have independently described the situation in terms of a vicious circle of deviance amplification where the protestors

create and re-confirm negative ideas about Shugden-practitioners which perpetuate discrimination against such practitioners within the Tibetan exile communities (Joffe 2015 and Mills 2014). But even these educated opinions are largely based on inference and a paucity of evidence. It is very unlikely in the current climate that systematic research into the treatment of Tibetan Shugden-practitioners would be given research permission by either the government of India or the CTA.

## Conclusions

What are we to make of these claims and counter claims? These rhetorical arguments demonstrate a fixation on black and white issues of 'truth'. The rhetoric of huge generalisation largely serves a cycle of deviance amplification. Dismissing any need to look at the same empirical evidence, one participant at a recent debate on Shugden summarised the situation as: 'We have our sources. You have your sources. Why not just let us believe and practice what we want?' (Rabten 2014, 1:29.50-1:30 also see Nyema 2015)

The Tibetan Administration denies institutional discrimination while not making any public statements to discourage informal discrimination. Meanwhile Shugden supporters often use non-specific and out-of-date information to back up their claims, which may have some degree of truth, accompanied by striking images and slogans which provoke a reaction. Therefore, supporters of Shugden and supporters of the Dalai Lama rarely engage with each other's arguments.

The passionate views of both sides give no definitive empirical answer to the veracity of the claims or the ultimate status of Dorje Shugden. It is more satisfying to those involved to have an answer, to pick a side of the fence, than to sit with indecision and uncertainty. Many of the questions involved in the Shugden debate – a debate which is ancient and modern, Western and Tibetan – will never have an objective, evidence-based resolution that can satisfy both sides. Although scepticism can be a philosophy of life, as far as we know, it never led to salvation – or even the peace of mind which most human beings crave.

In 1944, Jean Paul Sartre produced a one-act play called *No Exit*. In this work, three dead people find themselves guided to a hotel room, which all the characters assume to be hell. There are no mirrors in the room, but each character finds their existence mirrored in the judgement and eternal gaze of their fellow 'residents' of the room. The lights never go out; there is never privacy for two; neither is there the privacy for any character to self-create a fantasy identity. Near the conclusion, one of the characters makes the famous utterance, '*L'enfer, c'est les autres*' or 'Hell is other people'. Shortly before the end of *No Exit*, the hotel room door inexplicably opens – but none of the characters choose to leave.

There is much debate about the meaning of Sartre's metaphorical scene, but I think there is something in this idea of hell and what is happening with Shugden. Each side of the Shugden controversy is trapped with the undermining and unflinching gaze of the 'other' – neither the Dalai Lama's supporters, nor Shugden's supporters seem to

be able to escape the other's view of themselves – a view undermines important aspects of their identity. Both sides fear assassination attempts of senior lamas from the other side. This is a world full of uncertainty and threats of violence.

From 1997, despite pauses for several years at a time, the dynamics and claims between supporters and detractors of Shugden have remained largely unchanged, the stories repeated, the passion on both sides intense and even escalating. All sides appear defensive and entrenched in their positions. Is dialogue possible? What would it take for the characters to leave the room?

Much of the dynamics during 2014-2015 focused on attempts to forcibly push the other party out of the metaphorical hotel room. The combination of the Aldershot protesters chanting and drumming and poor audio at the Football Club venue managed to make the Dalai Lama almost inaudible to his paying supporters at the public talk in June 2015. Later that year, partially in response to what was seen as malicious and gratuitous noise of the protesters as well as online memes comparing the Dalai Lama to Hitler and superimposing a pig's face upon that of the Dalai Lama, former members of the NKT and members of the Tibetan Community joined together to stage protests against a number of NKT centres, distributing leaflets about the NKT being a 'dangerous extremist cult' to the local communities, which generated some local press attention (e.g. Clensy 2016).

**Atishas Cook**  
February 18 at 12:02pm ·

He's smiling because  
he's full of it!

**Genuine  
False Dalai Lama  
PORK PIES**  
*"Feeding you a load since 1996"*

**100% Bull**

Share

8 people like this.

2 shares

View 24 more comments

**Tracy Wade** He will always have followers whether you like it or not  
February 19 at 4:40pm · 1

**Kelsang Gyaltsen** Gen Samten recently said that we will soon come to a good solution for all, it's not meant to destroy the Dalai Lama but to help him change to the better, and to achieve this it seems his reputation must be destroyed.  
February 19 at 4:50pm · 2

**Atishas Cook** it's the False Dalai Lama's faithful disciples I feel sorriest for. those are the people he has really deceived and harmed the worst. i have friends who follow the FDL - it breaks my heart to think how they are going to feel when he falls, as I believe he soon will.  
February 19 at 4:53pm · 2

**Kelsang Pagchen** I think that's true Atisha's Cook. During the demos in Basel we could see all the Tibetan DL followers facing to us while chanting "False Dalai Lama, Stop Lying". After a while I begun to think: "In reality with this chant I am also protecting this people from FDL's lies. I am chanting also for them".  
February 19 at 4:59pm · Edited · 3

Screen Shot from public Facebook page of Atishas Cook saved on 24 February 2015.

Between 2014 and 2015 there were some attempts at dialogue between the Dalai Lama and protesting groups. But by 2016, it appeared that any attempt at discussion between the parties had been abandoned. In March 2016, the International Shugden Community removed its website and officially disbanded (e.g. International Shugden Community 2016 and Monlam 2016). However, it is likely that the epistemic isolation (Levy 2007) about the nature and extent of the disputes on Shugden on both sides will continue. Although the ISC has gone quiet, the script remains unchanged.

For dialogue to be effective, the discussion must be moved away from issues of 'truth' to issues of practical reduction of suffering. Practical discussions encouraging empirical agnosticism – collecting statistics relating to discrimination, allowing independent research in the Indian exile communities, would provide some verifiable information on the extent and effects of informal discrimination within Tibetan exile communities. However agnosticism is a difficult position where oracles, malicious spirits and Bodhisattvas are understood as actively intervening in both personal and state affairs.

For an observer, the enlightenment of any individual – real or potential – is uncertain. The fate of Tibet and its unique culture is unknown. The reincarnation of any future Dalai Lamas is uncertain. When the current Dalai Lama dies, China is likely to find its own ‘authorized’ reincarnation; meanwhile the Dalai Lama has suggested that he may choose not to reincarnate. Whatever happens, it is clear that the legitimacy and authority of whoever claims the title of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is likely to be contested (The Economist 2015).

With such uncertainty, it is not surprising that many want to rely with confidence on their dharma protector, on the wisdom and compassion of the current Dalai Lama, and/or the belief that personal Enlightenment is truly possible. To abandon one’s position on Shugden risks unsettling all of these anchors of how to understand the world. Changing position on Shugden has the potential of losing the support of a community and rendering meaningless rituals and beliefs that have structured lives and institutions for many years. It is not surprising actors on both sides of this conflict feel trapped.

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