



Background Information on “Shugden Devotees” Demonstrations

A conflict between the Dalai Lama and a group of Buddhists aligned with a fundamentalist group of Tibetan Buddhists has been smouldering for years. In 2014, demonstrations in opposition to the Dalai Lama took place in the USA and Europe, also during the visit of the Dalai Lama in Frankfurt, Germany in May.

In the 1990s, the Dalai Lama expressly requested his students to discontinue the „Dorje Shugden cult”, which essentially worships a protective spirit that only exists in Tibetan Buddhism. The following reasons provide insight into the Dalai Lama’s request:

1. He sees the danger of Buddhism being reduced to merely worshipping spirits like this cult’s one while in contrast the essence of Buddhism is wisdom and compassion.
2. The Dalai Lama perceives the Shugden worshipers to be sectarian. Due to the sects’ dogmatism, the Dalai Lama sees the harmony within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition destroyed. He furthermore sees the sect as being opposed to a modern, open Buddhism for which he himself stands.
3. The conflict dates back to 17th century and has a political dimension: In ancient Tibet, a particularly conservative faction of the politically influential Gelug school used the Shugden cult to expand its power over other traditions. Although important teachers of the Dalai Lama belonged to the Gelug School, the Dalai Lama perceives his institution as one spanning all traditions, and continues to oppose the dominance of the Gelugs.

Who is backing the protests?

For the most part the protestors are members of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). To organize the protests, the NKT repeatedly has founded new front organizations disguising the provenance of the protestors. The International Shugden Community (ISC) is already the third one of its kind. The Shugden website does not feature an imprint, it is operated anonymously („domains by proxy”), and does not name anyone responsible according to the press law.

On the demonstrators’ three main claims:

Claim: „The Dalai Lama is lying“.

Response: The demonstrators have not conclusively explained the origin of any of the supposed lies. The claim appears to be related to the Dalai Lama’s statement that Shug-

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den is a destructive entity, while the protestors worship Shugden like a Buddha. The Dalai Lama holds a different opinion than the Shugden devotees.

Claim: „The Dalai Lama is false“.

Response: All authorities on Tibetan Buddhism and the vast majority of Tibetans acknowledge Tenzin Gyatso as the official Dalai Lama. The opposing faction continuously claims publicly that the Dalai Lama is false, without, however, providing any kind of reasoning.

Claim: „The Dalai Lama suppresses religious freedom“.

Response: The Dalai Lama has recommended to discontinue this cult practice. As a consequence this means that he does not accept those who continue practicing Shugden as his students. Since the Shugden devotees do not acknowledge the Dalai Lama as an authority, they could simply ignore his advice. The devotees can, however, continue practicing Shugden privately or in Shugden temples, as is done for example in monasteries in India and in NKT communities in the West.

Claim: „The Dalai Lama has forbidden the Shugden practice.“

Response: In his role as a spiritual teacher the Dalai Lama, is not in a position to forbid practices. In a general sense the practice of Shugden is not prohibited in Tibetan communities in exile, but restrictions do apply. However, there are Gelug monasteries that, based on democratic majority decisions and their monastic rules, have decided against this practice. Hence, exercising this practice is not permitted in those monasteries.

More information on the issue:

The Dorje Shugden Conflict – An Interview with Tibetologist Thierry Dodin: http://info-buddhism.com/Dorje_Shugden_Conflict_Dalai_Lama_protests_Thierry_Dodin.html

A quick note on Dorje Shugden (rDo rje shugs ldan) by Prof. Paul Williams: http://info-buddhism.com/dorje_shugden_note_Paul_Williams.html

Statement of the Deutsche Buddhistische Ordensgemeinschaft (DBO, German Buddhist Monastic Association) 2014: http://buddhistische-ordensgemeinschaft.de/dbo_statement-shugden-protests-Dalai-Lama.htm

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Contact: Tibetisches Zentrum Event gGmbH, Hermann-Balk-Straße 106, 22147 Hamburg, E-Mail: info@dalailama-hamburg.de