

Potential harm to mental and physical health through exposure to The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT-IKBU)



(Image posted by Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation Centre on their Facebook page on 24.06.19)

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Dedication

This document is dedicated to those who have committed suicide shortly after leaving The New Kadampa Tradition, and to their families and friends.

Background

I am a clinical psychologist (but first and foremost, a human) who lived in Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation Centre in Northamptonshire, England, between November 2016 and June 2018. I now have serious concerns about the nature of this group and the potential threats to the mental and physical health of members and ex-members. I therefore decided to write this document based on what I observed and experienced, the conclusions I have drawn since leaving, testimonies of other ex-members of this group, psychological theory and research. I have read more cultic studies literature since the previous versions of my analysis, and relevant research on abuse and trauma in so-called Buddhist groups has since been published. I focus on all the potential harms because the primary aim of the analysis is to support those who wish to leave or have already left in identifying factors that may have contributed to their difficulties. There are no research studies yet with former NKT members as participants and the likelihood of recruiting a sufficient sample size to draw conclusions remains unlikely in my opinion. Therefore when I state 'many ex-members report....' this is based on information from testimonies and conversations I have had with ex-members who have shared their experiences with me (mostly via email or private messaging). Therefore, sometimes I cannot provide evidence regarding the statements I make.

I began sharing my concerns on social media in March 2019, not knowing what else to do. As a result of this and releasing version 1 of my analysis in June 2019, I have received extensive cyber-bullying, trolling, harassment via my workplace and through a defamation website by senior members of the NKT. I include my analysis of this here. Please see our recovery based website www.newkampatraditionreport.org to see all the comments from ex-members that I have permission to share or that were posted publicly, my testimony and all the cyber-bullying I have received to date.

Due to the explosion of the mindfulness movement and widespread positive views of Buddhism, I believe it to be particularly important that the general public and health professionals are made aware of the potential harm caused by involvement with this organisation. The self-help movement, the mindfulness movement and lack of awareness of cultic dynamics are leading vulnerable people to recruitment. Hidden and whitewashed histories of abuse, poor safeguarding and lack of trauma informed meditation are leading people to be harmed. The #metoo movement has now hit Buddhism, and previously under-reported adverse effects of meditation are now being acknowledged. This analysis may be relevant to survivors of other so-called Buddhist groups. I have had feedback from former members of Shambala and Rigpa that they have found my writing relevant. However I do not make generalisations here due to lack of direct experience of other groups and because I was overwhelmed trying to cope with the attacks I received as a result of writing about the NKT.

The use of the 'c word'

The word 'cult' is controversial and some believe it to be pejorative. Some prefer the term 'new religious movement', 'high demand group' or 'sect'. However, I have quoted literature that uses the words 'cult' and 'cultic', therefore I use this term at times. If you are a current member of the NKT or have only recently left, you may find reading this document highly triggering. I would only recommend reading if you wish to leave or have already left, and have appropriate social and emotional support at the present time.

This document has been publicly supported by:

- Tenzin Peljor, former ordained, survivor of NKT defamation attacks through propaganda
- Carol McQuire, former ordained, survivor of NKT defamation attacks through propaganda
- Andrea Ballance, former ordained survivor
- Geoffrey Bonn, former ordained survivor
- Mark Dow, former ordained survivor
- Eddie Nuttall, former resident survivor
- Andrew Cheadle, former resident survivor
- Linda Ciardiello, former resident survivor
- Carmelo Russo, former resident survivor
- Gabriel Monson, former resident survivor
- Reci Kepri, former attender who sadly died in January 2020, possible suicide but unconfirmed
- Gabriella Markgraf, former attender survivor
- Kieran Atkins, former attender and survivor of NKT defamation attacks through propaganda
- Matthew O'Connell, former resident and speaker at Imperfect Buddha podcast, survivor of legal threats
- Dr Alexandra Stein, social psychologist, former cult member and author of 'Love, Terror and Brainwashing'
- Dr Yuval Laor, evolutionary psychologist and expert on religious fervor
- Jon Atack, former Scientologist, author and speaker
- Christian Szurko, spiritual abuse recovery specialist
- Adrian Oertli, psychotherapist and former member of left extremist group
- David Suppan, writer on ethics in spiritual groups
- Sarah Lionheart, former cult member

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1. Recruitment

1.1. Misleading and therefore unethical advertising

1.1.1. Hidden name

In recent years the NKT have not included their name on their advertising, presumably because of their damaged reputation following the protests against the Dalai Lama. The hidden name means that people are less likely to find the testimonies of abuse and resulting trauma online. When I contacted Workaway to raise this concern they did not know which of their listings were NKT centres and I had to assist them in identifying them.

NKT advertises that recruit for class attenders and volunteers label themselves as 'Buddhist Centre' or 'Meditation Centre' only. Naming their centres 'Meditation Centre' is in my opinion misleading. The NKT practice a sectarian form of Buddhism and their contemplation meditation practices could be considered thought reform, emotional control and guided self-hypnosis.



1.1.2. Obscuring the sectarianism from newcomers

The NKT avoid using images of Kelsang Gyatso, the shrine rooms and Buddhist paraphernalia that people will actually encounter when they arrive in their advertising. Photos and statues of Kelsang Gyatso on shrines reveal the awe that the NKT wish their followers to develop towards him.

'Under the highly polished surface lies ingrained sectarianism and a disparaging view of all other forms of spirituality; an expansionist drive that uses the energy of new recruits to spread the message with no concern for their burnout; a cultish dependency on the word and approval of the leader and an abdication of critical thought that is actively encouraged..'
(Anonymous Testimony, 'Eighteen months after leaving The New Kadampa Tradition').



Neil Elliot's Notes on Teaching state *'We must internalize Gesh-la's books so that we can quote literally from them, word for word. This is our authority....We need nothing other than 'Gesh-la says'.* Kelsang Gyatso banned books by other authors from the bookshops. Some followers report that they have not explicitly been told that they should not read other books. Others report that it was suggested that only kadam dharma is pure, and encouraged to dispose of other books.


'Moving into the NKT center, I had some Dharma books, including a Dzogchen book and one from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. When the teacher saw me with these books she said, 'We only study pure Dharma books here'' looking displeasingly on my two non-NKT Dharma books. Shortly after this episode, she showed me Gesh-la's books, saying 'These are pure Dharma books!' Then I heard about the dangers of mixing 'pure Dharma' with 'impure Dharma', as Geshe Kelsang puts it' (Testimony by Tenzlin Peljor, 'How I got sucked into a cult').

'We were not allowed to 'mix traditions' as this would 'cause sectarianism'; we would be asked to stop teaching if we referred to texts other than Gyatso's books or if we weren't 'happy' teaching. 'Ordinary' society was based only on greed and selfishness; our 'Kadampa' society wasn't, but we had to be careful with newcomers; they could read other books and see other teachers, but if one of us went to see another teacher then this would 'destroy over function as NKT teachers'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

1.1.3. The suggestion that classes will improve mental health

It is important to examine the unsupported claims the NKT make in their advertising in order to sell their classes. Although there are several models for exploring cultic dynamics, all of them mention the use of deception. Anders (2019a) argues that expansion of so-called Buddhist groups meant that people who were uneducated about their positions were appointed. Undemocratic, authoritarian group structures were then established with hidden agendas, and promoted Buddhist concepts in order to serve these agendas. New Kadampa Tradition classes are currently described and sold to the general public as tools for worry, anxiety, anger, unhappiness and depression. The advertising therefore targets people with mental health difficulties. 'Education Programme Coordinators' do not have any mental health training and use advertising to suggest to people that they WILL achieve joy, contentment and good mental health by attending the courses:

<p>Overcoming Anxiety and Depression - Kadampa Meditation Center ...</p> <p>Jun. 23, 2017 · Overcoming Anxiety and Depression with Modern Buddhist nun Kelsang Namdrol. Even if you have ...</p>	<p>Conquering Depression and Discouragement - Kadampa ...</p> <p>Conquering Depression and Discouragement ... Kadampa Meditation Center Hollywood4953 Franklin Ave</p>
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Stop Worrying, Start Living

Stop Worrying, Start Living half day course with Richard Brown

Sat 30 March | 10am - 1pm | £15

- Worrying & anxiety have no meaning
- We will never solve our problems by worrying
- Take control of your thoughts & take control of your life

Those who attend their courses therefore assume that the NKT have an understanding of mental health in line with Western understandings and guidelines, which is not the case. The NKT believe in a 'mental continuum' that passes between rebirths. As a result they do not understand neuroscience, the fight/flight/freeze response, or the complex effects of trauma on the brain and body. Mental health professionals have not been involved or consulted in the development of classes or led meditation sessions. This polarization may in part be fed by the reluctance of many clergy and mental health professionals to work collaboratively (McMinn et al., 1998). The teachings


are kept very 'pure' in their original form, meaning that any influence from other people is considered impure and 'degenerate'.

The above picture suggests that a feeling of joy can be achieved through the practices that the NKT recommend. Cults use marketing and public relations techniques to promote an idealised image of their product or service to potential customers in the same way that commercial companies do. The NKT offer a free eBook, called 'How to Transform Your Life'. This freebie is likely to get the public to believe that Kelsang Gyatso is generous and has their best interests at heart, which encourages trust and gratitude. This book suggests that his version of the dharma has all the answers, thus hooking you in to pay for more classes and books, and suggesting that if you try hard enough, it will transform your life. This also reflects the personality and behaviour of a 'hero narcissist', whom insists you are damaged goods, and that you have problems that need to be solved (see also Kelsang Gyatso's book 'How to Solve Your Human Problems'). They then set themselves up as the only solution to your problems. Those who are drawn in are therefore likely to consider themselves as 'sick' and in need of help to overcome this.

'People do not seek to join a cult; they are recruited. And recruitment happens when you are especially vulnerable, when you are human and you have unresolved problems, when you are seeking a greater sense of purpose or meaning, and when you happen to encounter people who are recruiting.' (Shaw, 2014)


1.1.4. Selling people the idea that their goal should be to achieve happiness at all times

According to Hayes et al (2011) the worlds' great religions were some of the first organised attempts to solve the problem of human suffering, and they all have practices that are oriented towards this. Buddhism generally focuses on the costs of attachment and practice aims at reducing our grasping at particular things, people, and feeling states. (Although, this is not what the NKT teach in my opinion, as they teach people to grasp at 'virtuous' thoughts, images and feelings, Kelsang Gyatso, and to keep them in their concentration).



How to be Happy All the Time Saturday 13th June 2015

Happiness and suffering are states of mind and their main cause cannot be found outside the mind. The real cause of happiness is inner peace. If our mind is peaceful we shall be happy all the time regardless of external conditions. If our mind is disturbed or troubled in any way we shall never be happy no matter how good our external conditions are. Few people experience deep happiness and when they do it is short-lived. On this day course learn how to experience deep lasting happiness through meditation.



Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation Centre

14 Dec at 12:19 • 🌐

Is it possible to be positive all the time? Find out how on Saturday 21st December 10.00am and see how positive energy will transform your life. The best way to end your year.


There is always something we can take from every experience and situation to make us wiser and stronger, we just need to know how! Join us this Saturday morning to learn methods taught by Buddha that have a universal application, using meditation and contemplation to find the positive whatever our circumstances.

A half-day course with Robert Thomas.
10am to 12.45pm
<https://meditateinleicester.org/product/art-of-positive-thinking/>

Think Positive: Be free

Saturday, December 21st

10:00am - 12:45pm



Hayes et al (2011) state that *'Western civilization virtually worships freedom from physical or mental distress'*. Given the relative success of physical medicine, it is not surprising that mental health has come to be viewed and treated in the same way. Distressing thoughts, feelings, memories or physical sensations are viewed predominantly as 'symptoms'. Promising Western people freedom from distress is an effective tool for hooking them in to an addiction to a substance, practice or group of people that are believed to be a 'cure' for their distress, and offer a way out. NKT members are told that the only way out of suffering is to achieve enlightenment through destroying their self-cherishing 'mind'. Anders (2019a) states that *'longing for enlightenment, in the sense of quick relief from suffering rather than through a process of taking individual responsibility and of training, appears to contribute to denying one's own unconscious aspects, those of the master as well as the resulting group dynamics.'*

Myself and many others believe the NKT's view of 'happiness' to be pathological and contradictory. Members are constantly told that life is suffering, and that death will bring more suffering (which is rather depressing) but at the same time are told they should be aiming to be happy or positive at all times.

'So I often wondered, what was the point of doing anything if pretty much all human activity beyond basic survival was an exercise in dissatisfaction, of spinning your wheels with the end result of trading one set of problems for another? What was the point of getting out of bed if

95% of my activities were supposedly delusional and indirectly causing suffering somewhere in the world?’ (Anonymous testimony, ‘Why I no longer study Kadampa Buddhism’).

Some ex-members therefore refer to the NKT as a happiness cult. More recently they have started using cartoon, childlike smiley faces that in my opinion indicate this obsession with happiness.



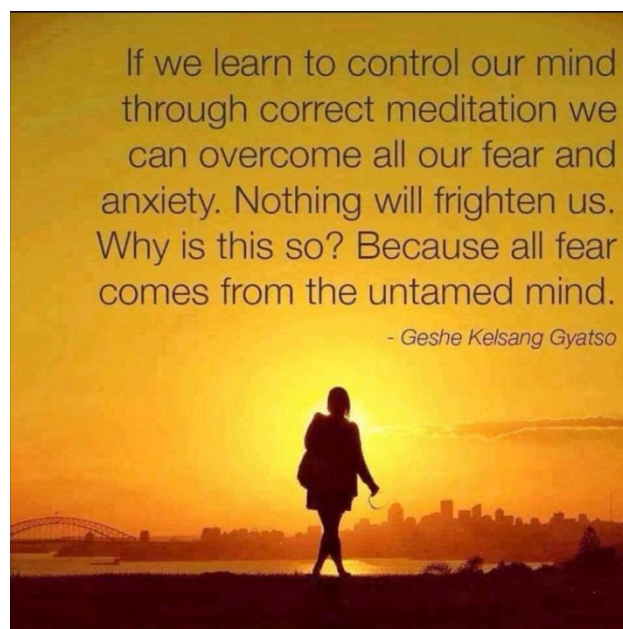
Believing that we’re supposed to be happy all the time actually makes us more miserable as we struggle more when we cannot ‘achieve’ this. Telling vulnerable people that they should be aiming to be happy all the time and then charging them for the tools they need to get there, under the name of Buddhism, many believe to be highly exploitative. Some members are told that if you completely devote yourself to Geshe-la, following ordination you will attain enlightenment in three years, three months, and three weeks. This is similar to how a narcissist would say you must devote all of yourself to them in order to avoid being discarded by them for someone better (a more devoted source of narcissistic supply). This could trauma bond you to the guru and organisation as you come to believe that only they have the answers and can assist you in your spiritual path. Ex-member Jamie Kostek states *‘Everyone looks so happy when you come in. You have no idea of all the suffering going on behind the scenes’*. She stated that she felt pressured to constantly convince herself she was happy, because unhappiness is a sign of spiritual failing. *‘And we truly felt fortunate to have these teachings, because we were constantly told that this is the only path that will lead to nirvana’* (The One Pure Dharma, Tricycle Magazine, 2018).

1.1.5. The suggestion that anxiety and worry have no meaning

Some NKT advertising it states ‘anxiety and worry have no meaning’ (see above). They do not understand the fight, flight or freeze response or the neuroscience behind anxiety or trauma. If we were to believe that anxiety and worry had no meaning, we would often stay in unsafe situations, ignoring our body’s wisdom and fight and flight response. For example, if you believed that anxiety had no meaning when you were being physically or emotionally abused, you might stay in an abusive relationship leading to learned helplessness, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms and contributing to low self-esteem.

'When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defence shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but by altering her state of consciousness. Analogous states are observed in animals, who sometimes 'freeze' when they are attacked.' (Herman, 2015, p. 42).

Continuing to ignore your body's fight and flight warning system would be likely to eventually lead to and exacerbate pre-existing health conditions such as chronic fatigue, other immune system disorders, and irritable bowel syndrome. The end result of this belief would therefore most likely be that you would be more traumatised and physically exhausted than joyful. One could argue that if you believed anxiety had no meaning at all you might get yourself killed, by stepping out into the road and getting run over, or failing to run away from someone trying to murder you. Newcomers are not told that the NKT don't believe in self-defence (acting to prevent yourself from being annihilated) or in self-compassion. The suggestion that 'we will never solve our problems by worrying' is also misleading in my opinion. Sometimes initial worry can lead to problem solving. If we did not worry about anything at all, we might not pay our bills and could end up in prison. In addition, if you did not feel any anxiety, you would likely be a sociopath, as you would not be concerned about the effects of your actions on others.



'From my perspective as an existential psychologist, feeling is a form of intelligence. It's the body's direct, holistic, intuitive way of knowing and responding. It is highly attuned and intelligent. And it takes account of many factors all at once, unlike our conceptual mind, which can only process one thing at a time. Unlike emotionality, which is a reactivity that is directed outward, feeling often helps you contact deep inner truths. Unfortunately,

traditional Buddhism doesn't make a clear distinction between feeling and emotion, so they tend to be lumped together as something samsaric to overcome.' (Welwood, 2011).

Studies have found it highly challenging to measure intuition as a phenomenon, however Lufityanto, Donkin and Pearson (2016) state that we can use unconscious information to help guide us through life, to enable better decisions, faster decisions, and be more confident in those decisions. Cults are known to encourage practices that interfere with people's ability to connect with their intuition so that it is harder for them to rebel or to leave. In my opinion, this is the hidden agenda behind the NKT's suggestion that anxiety has no meaning.

1.1.6. The suggestion that you should be able to 'take control' of your thoughts and therefore your emotions and your life

The suggestion that we should be able to 'take control of our thoughts and therefore our life' is also misleading. If a person had actually succeeded in disconnecting their emotional reactions from their environment completely, so that nothing could affect them emotionally, even severe abuse, they would have to be highly dissociated. Whilst there is evidence that practicing more 'positive' thinking can have a positive impact on mood, there are many other factors that influence our mental health that need consideration. For example if a person is having a panic attack or a trauma reaction, they cannot simply 'take control of their thoughts' using the methods that the NKT recommend. They might need to exit an unsafe situation where possible, practice grounding techniques, deep breathing, self-soothing and seek social support to avoid developing post-traumatic stress. NKT advertising suggests that thoughts alone influence our emotions, whereas common sense suggests that physiological factors such as hormones, physical health, and even environmental factors including the weather can also affect our emotional state directly without triggering negative thoughts. See page on 'applying opponents' to 'delusions' for more details.

Have a great day everyone ❤️🙏

**'PROBLEMS DO NOT
EXIST OUTSIDE OF
THE MIND –**



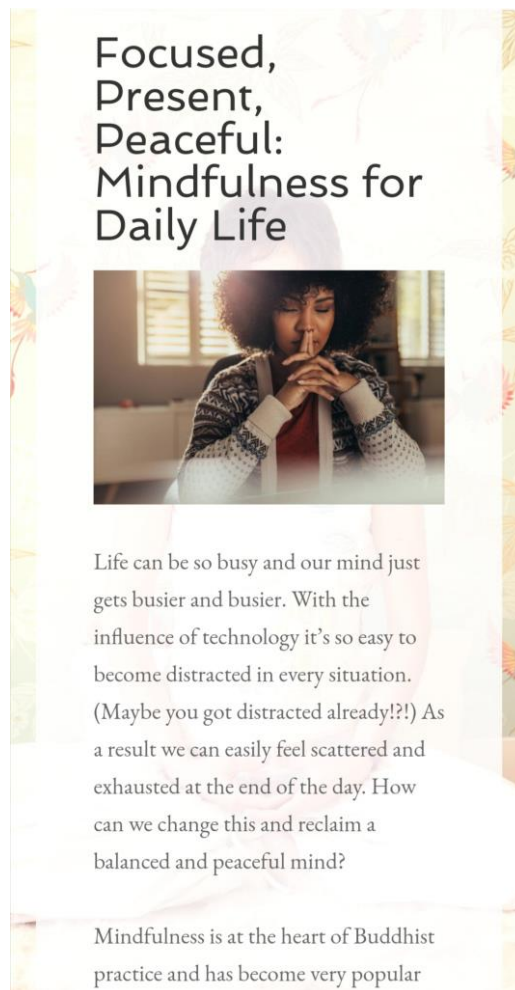
**IT IS OUR MENTAL
ATTITUDE THAT
TRANSFORMS A SITUATION**

**INTO EITHER A
PROBLEM OR AN
*opportunity***

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

1.1.7. The assertion that the NKT teach mindfulness meditation

The NKT advertise themselves as teachers of mindfulness:



However Neil Elliot's Notes on Teaching Skills state '*We do not just meditate on our breath, or on an empty mind.....Meditation is mixing our mind with dharma*'. The NKT do not teach mindfulness in line with Western definitions aside from a brief breathing meditation at the beginning of classes used to 'settle the mind' (induce a more relaxed and suggestible state prior to focusing on doctrine). In my opinion all of the NKT's practices are actually oppositional to mindfulness practices (according to Western definitions of mindfulness, which is what Westerners would expect). They practice visualization of 'holy beings', imaginary offerings, imagine themselves as Buddhas and are encouraged to visualise Buddha's until they begin hallucinating them. They do not practice mindfulness of the body at all as this is not part of the lineage, and in fact practice dissociation from the body and the sense of 'I'.

In addition, the breathing meditation led by the 'National Spiritual Director' was poorly guided in my opinion, as she began by stating 'stop thinking about your family, friends, jobs, ordinary activities'

which is in fact a prompt, which is likely to cause someone to start thinking about these things, only to be told they must then immediately stop. In my opinion this is led as a thought stopping and control exercise, not as mindfulness of the breath.

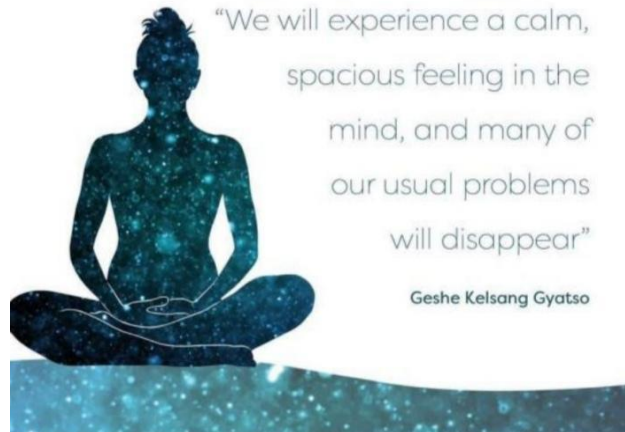
Myself and the other survivors I have spoken to believe that the NKT saw an opportunity to draw the general public in by riding on the wave of the mindfulness movement and the public's naivety about meditation and Buddhism. Some Westerners believe that Buddhism is not really a religion, but more like a science of the mind.

'I had been interested in the spiritual path for a long time, having found the ordinary pursuits of worldly life rather unsatisfying and meaningless. However, having been raised as a Catholic and then a Jehovah's witness, I was suspicious about organised religion generally, but thought naively that somehow Buddhism was different from Christianity because it did not require blind faith in the existence of God – they say it's more like a psychology of thought than a religion' (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello 'It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult').

1.1.8. Failure to acknowledge or warn people about any possible adverse effects of their practices

According to Lindahl et al (2017) the limited focus on the benefits of meditation for physical and psychological health and well-being is a modern and largely Western creation that neither represents the diversity of meditation practices nor the range of possible effects of those practices. In many Buddhist traditions it is accepted that people experience a wide range of meditation experiences – from bliss and visions to intense body pain, physiological disorders, paranoia, sadness, anger and fear, which can be a source of challenge or difficulty for the meditation practitioner (Lindahl et al., 2017). However newcomers to the NKT are not warned about this possibility or advised to seek appropriate support for pre-existing mental health conditions at the beginning of classes or through their books. Instead they are told that destroying their 'self-cherishing mind' through NKT practices is the only path to 'happiness'. Through their advertising, as clearly seen above, they simply state that *'we will experience a calm spacious feeling in the mind, and many of our usual problems will disappear'*.

The Benefits of Meditation



"We will experience a calm,
spacious feeling in the
mind, and many of
our usual problems
will disappear"

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive review of potential adverse effects of meditation here. The majority (>75%) of meditation studies do not actively assess adverse effects (Goyal et al., 2014; Jonsson et al., 2011) instead, they rely solely on people to spontaneously report any difficulties to the researchers or teachers. However, participants are unlikely to volunteer information about negative reactions to meditation without being directly asked due to the influence of authority structures and demand characteristics (Fowler, 1998; Turner et al., 1992; Weissman et al., 2008). A recent study found 25% of meditators reported adverse effects (Schlosser et al., 2019). In previous studies some meditators reported exacerbation of psychological problems, including anxiety and depression, troubling experiences of self, and reality being challenged, which included out of-body experiences (dissociation) and in one case resulted in patient hospitalization for psychosis (Lomas et al., 2014). I personally witnessed several people experiencing dissociation and anxiety following attempting NKT practices and prayers, and several confided in me.

Anyone can attend a teaching on 'emptiness' and these usually start by exploring the emptiness of the body. 'Empowerment' days can be attended by anyone and include visualisation of dissolving ones usual existence into 'emptiness' and then visualising oneself as a Buddha. There is no discussion about potential adverse effects such as dissociation or psychosis. No one checks the students prior experience with mindfulness, meditation, visualisation, no one checks their understanding of this practice or their current mental state. Other Buddhist traditions are known to establish a personal relationship with the student and to ensure they are of sound mental health and have established a mindfulness practice and compassion-based meditation practice for several years before introducing emptiness teachings or self-generation as a deity.

In my opinion this is particularly dangerous for those with schizo-affective 'disorders'. Volunteers from abroad do not have access to mental health care in the UK, often have English as a second language, are far away from family and friends, and often have limited transport. Volunteers who have only just arrived can be encouraged to go to teachings which in my opinion could be potentially psychologically damaging and frightening for them. When I spoke up about this to the management I was told that 'it's just their karma'. I therefore believe that the NKT refuse to take responsibility for considering which teachings are appropriate for people considering their lack of previous experience with Buddhism, meditation, their mental state, or language fluency.

1.2. The suggestion that you have fortunate karma to have discovered kadam dharma (flattery and love-bombing)

There are many factors which mean that involvement with the NKT can feel good and be very reinforcing, especially in the beginning. The love-bombing (extra interest in newcomers, flattery through stating you are very fortunate or have good karma) strokes a person's ego. Many survivors report in their testimonies that when they first attended an NKT centre they were told that they must have 'imprints' from a previous life or 'fortunate' karma to have discovered their version of the dharma, and therefore are special. Survivors report pre-existing low self-esteem and the enjoyment of this flattery, however report that it impacted on their decision making. These teachings on your good fortune are heavily emotionally loaded which is likely to produce feelings of love, awe, fervor and gratitude (which the NKT call 'blessings'). This could be considered similar to love-bombing and flattery employed by those with narcissistic personality traits. The love-bombing along with the suggestion that the NKT is your family and the centre your spiritual 'home' can be a powerful hook, especially for those who have been struggling with grief, abandonment, emotional neglect and loneliness.

'I think it is safe to say that most people join cults at a point of vulnerability, and that most who join tend to be somewhat idealistic. Many may have had disappointments in their family situations; many may be seeking positive ways of feeling more connected, more in control of their lives, more purposeful' (Shaw, 2014).

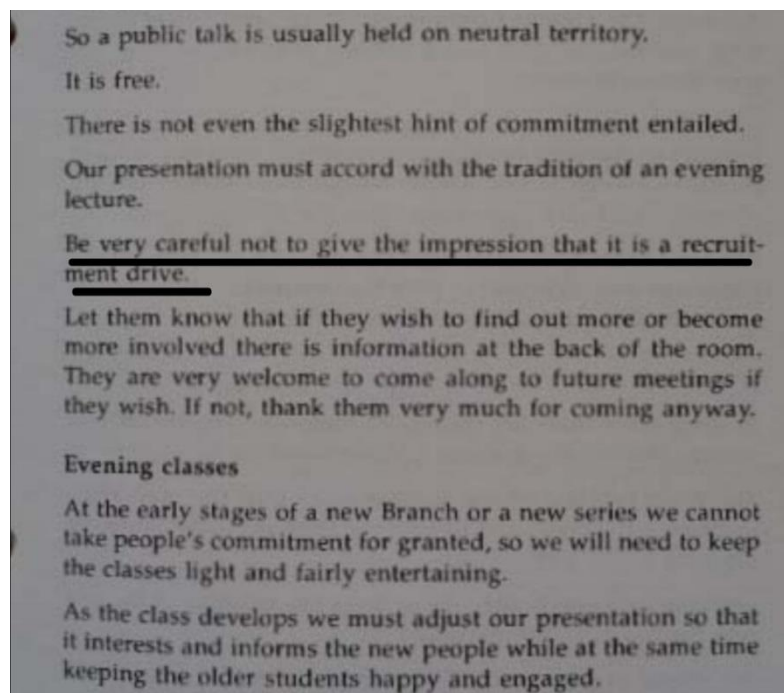
The giving of jobs that are said to be special make the person feel like they hold an important role within a virtuous organisation.

'One of the things you will find is that if you give people a job they will keep coming back. There are lots of jobs. Give everybody a little job to do – someone can fill the water bowls, others can bring the flowers, and so forth.'(Neil Elliot's Notes on Teaching Skills).

Feeling protected from harm by a guru, group and ideology may provide feelings of safety and security that a traumatised person may be lacking. *'Many people are very lonely and alienated. It is difficult for some people to have really meaningful contact with others. Maybe their lives are in a horrible mess'* (Neil Elliot's guide for teachers). Involvement with the NKT could initially provide conditions required to stabilize a person with acute or complex PTSD. For those with attachment difficulties, they may experience feelings of bliss, love, and acceptance when they first encounter the NKT that they have never experienced before. As people are told that suffering brings people to the dharma, this could also help a person to find meaning in their trauma (e.g. *'it wasn't all for nothing because it brought me to the dharma'*). Physical attractiveness is complimented as a sign that the person was virtuous in a previous life, leading to a fortunate rebirth (and nothing to do with genes).

1.3. 'Be very careful not to give the impression that it is a recruitment drive'

Neil Elliot's Notes for Teaching Skills state *'Be very careful not to give the impression that it is a recruitment drive. Let them know that if they wish to find out more or become more involved there is information at the back of the room. They are welcome to come along to future meetings if they wish. If not, thank them very much for coming anyway.'*



At first, ex-members reported that they felt welcome and unconditionally accepted. Neil Elliot's Notes on Teaching Skills state that new attenders *'find it helpful to be with a group of people who have no angles on them, and who are just generally happy and supportive'*. In addition, evidence shows that compassion based meditations, where people imagine a compassionate figure or source of unconditional love flowing towards them, do have initial soothing effects, particularly in those

high in shame and self-criticism (see Leaviss & Uttley, 2015, for a review). However, Neil Elliot's also reveals the agenda of the NKT teacher, which is actually not to have 'no angle' or to be supportive, but instead to *'try to drive the meaning of the text into the hearts of the disciples'*. He states *'Our task is only to preserve the blessings of Gesh-la in this world, and to spread his pure doctrine to every country'*. In my opinion this indicates their primary goal is expansion rather than compassion. According to Anders (2019a) *'quality of care has vanished at the expense of the quantity of centers considered as status symbols'*.

'Little was in order, the priority was receiving the money, increasing attendance at classes and sending teachers all over our area in England, creating new branches, then new centres under ours as the 'mother' centre'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

1.4. Rejection of 'worldly' happiness and ordinary life

According to Anders (2019) oversimplified and decontextualized Buddhist concepts have been used with hidden agendas in Western groups that call themselves Buddhist. An example is below, where a monk writes that worldly happiness leaves us with 'nothing to show'.



This is an oversimplification of a complex teaching on renunciation. In my opinion it is a contradiction with renunciation teachings to suggest that we should have something to 'show' for everything we have done. Activities such as spending time with loved ones, relaxation, play and work can be very meaningful, bring joy to ourselves and benefit others. In my opinion this teaching is used by the NKT with the hidden agenda to suggest that outsiders are mundane, ordinary, deluded and everything they do is pointless, thus serving to reinforce group grandiosity and narcissism within the NKT. This also motivates people to give their money to the NKT instead of to spend it on enjoying their lives. Many members have suffered with attachment trauma, disillusionment and resulting

depression. Thus this teaching can twist depression symptoms to appear virtuous, as part of the spiritual path helping you to exit samsara.

Survivors report that they found the teachings disorientating but also like ‘coming home’ at first. Teachers give real life examples and try to make jokes about how ridiculous it is to be human and stuck in cycles of grasping at objects and experiences that only disappoint us or don’t last long. Neil Elliot’s guide for teachers states that it’s important to make people laugh. Most people can relate to this and it can be convincing.

‘It seemed perfect. So I went in at the deep end, falling head over heels in love with the Kadam Dharma’. (Anonymous Testimony, ‘Eighteen months since leaving the New Kadampa Tradition’).

‘The first talk I attended was a free Public Talk in the spring of 1992 – it sounded like an innocuous and useful subject: The Art of Positive Thinking. During the persuasive and amusing talk given by Thubten Gyatso (Neil Elliot) I felt a sense of ‘coming home’, that at last someone was talking sense to me: that happiness could not be found in external conditions, but rather in discovering it within my own mind, rather like the sunshine that’s always there but sometimes gets obscured by clouds. I liked that analogy a lot’. (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello, ‘It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult’).

However these stories are oversimplified and told with a hidden agenda – to convince the person that there is no happiness that can be related to anything outside the mind and no meaning in ‘worldly’ happiness at all. The NKT convince people through thought reform and guided self-hypnosis that the only meaningful activity for humans is to train their minds to achieve ‘enlightenment’ (thought control and emotional control).

One of the characteristics of cults according to Steven Hassan is that they keep people trapped through fear that there can be no happiness and peace outside the group. Members are indoctrinated to believe that leaving will result in a more mundane and less meaningful life. Lalich and Langone (2006) state that *‘The most loyal members (the “true believers”)* feel there can be no life outside the context of the group. They believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave (or even consider leaving) the group.’

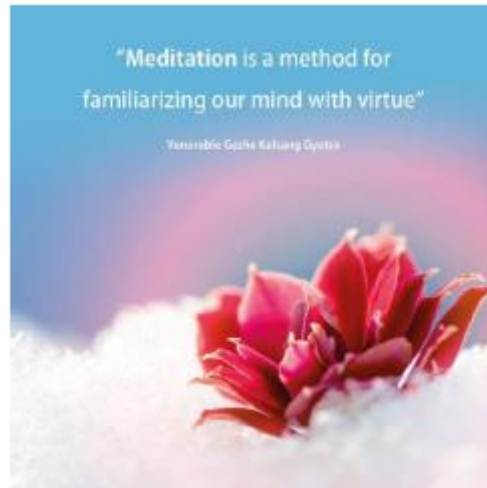
2. The practices and potential harm

2.1. Mind control, thought reform and emotion control (indoctrination)

I believe that the ten minute breathing meditation at the beginning of the class would be *mostly* harmless on its own (if an individual is not suffering with acute trauma, psychosis or anxiety). However, what makes the mindfulness of breath practice dangerous in this context, in my opinion, is that it is used to 'settle the mind' before the contemplation to make the person's mind more susceptible to the teachings. Putting people into a more relaxed state makes them more easy to influence. Whilst the purpose of a mindfulness of breath practice is not relaxation this is often a side effect. For those who find the prayer beautiful and experience a blissful feeling in the shrine room, they can enter a trance state, where they may also be experiencing a feeling of awe. The NKT describe this feeling as 'receiving blessings'.

During the contemplation meditation you are told to concentrate on an aspect of Kelsang Gyatso's teachings (which are considered 'virtuous'). You are encouraged to reduce this intellectual process into a 'feeling' and to concentrate on that, and not allow your attention to wander away from this 'object of your concentration'. Although the NKT are certain that they are practicing and teaching meditation, it could be argued that their contemplation meditation practices could be more accurately defined as guided self-hypnosis. Neil Elliot's Notes for Teaching Skills states *'For us meditation is a creative constructive process of changing our thoughts, our feelings, our attitudes; and carrying these changes into our daily life'*. According to Lazarus (2013) hypnosis is *'a state of highly focused attention or concentration, often associated with relaxation, and heightened suggestibility'* p. 3). According to the Cult Information Centre website, hypnosis and trance states are the main method of mind control used by cults. Chanting (prayers) and feelings of awe can induce a hypnotic trance state, which is similar to a dissociative state. A hypnotic trance state and a dissociative state share features of surrender of voluntary action, impair critical thinking skills and can cause depersonalisation (Herman, 2015, p. 43; Jenkinson, 2019; Galanter, 1989, p. 65). This means that the person is therefore more susceptible to social influence. Jenkinson (2019) refers to this altered state of consciousness as the 'confluent trance', which may make it psychologically difficult to leave.

'Meditation in general and chanting can have a big effect on the mind, no matter what tradition or religion you're in. In my mind, everything I was being told was true, because the practice felt really good'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Ordained too early').



The most effective way of controlling people is to convince them that they are in fact, choosing to be in control over their own minds. According to a former member of Triratna/FWBO *‘A cult promotes its cultish belief system, and then believers control their own minds, as they train their minds and reform their personalities, in accordance with the tenets of their cultish new belief system’* (Dunlop, 2018). The belief system undermines the person’s confidence in their own perception and intuition, which impairs their decision making. The belief system is then used to recruit you as a volunteer, which in the NKT is framed as a method for ‘gaining merit’ so that you can achieve enlightenment. The thoughts of the member are controlled through instilling black and white loaded group language.

Lifton’s (1961) eight components of thought reform as developed from Andres and Lane (1988) can be applied to The New Kadampa Tradition. These criteria are displayed below with my own opinion on how they apply to the NKT. However, even when involved in the same group, people can have a very different experience, and therefore it is important not to assume that the ex-member has experienced the NKT in this way. If you are reading this document as an ex-member it may be more helpful to consider your own thoughts on how each criteria applies from your own experience before you read my thoughts on this.

Criteria of thought reform	Application to The New Kadampa Tradition
Milieu control The limitation of all forms of communication with the outside world. Members are discouraged from thinking ‘incorrect’ thoughts.	Outsiders are seen as having ‘ordinary minds’. The teaching on ‘guarding the gates of the senses’ can be used to encourage members to avoid contact with people, activities and objects that increase their ‘desirous attachment’ or destroy their faith. Members are encouraged to only think positive/virtuous thoughts through the practice of mind

	control and emotional control.
Mystical manipulation Teaching that the group has a special purpose, and that the member has been chosen to play a special role in fulfilling this purpose.	The special purpose of the group is seen as helping all living beings achieve enlightenment (exit samsara and cycles of suffering and rebirth) and to have a centre 'in every city of the world' in order to achieve this. It is suggested that the member has fortunate 'karma' to have discovered the dharma.
Demand for purity Convincing the subject of his/her former impurity (before joining the group) and the necessity of becoming pure or perfect as defined by the group.	The teachings are described as pure and the 'only' method for achieving permanent happiness. Teachings state that a 'pure imagination' practiced with 'pure intention' will lead to a 'pure world'. Purification of negative minds is a central practice.
Cult of confession Members are encouraged to confess past 'sins' as defined by the ideology.	Confession practice is part of the purification of negative minds, but this is not usually shared with other members. Authenticity and the sharing of hopes and fears is not that common in The New Kadampa Tradition.
Sacred science Convincing the member that the group's beliefs are the only logical system of beliefs and therefore must be accepted and obeyed.	I was told 'Gesh-la says it so it must be true' by Chris Heyes. The NKT believe that Kelsang Gyatso holds the ultimate truth and those who do not believe simply have unfortunate karma. Turning away from your teacher is taught to result in the development of negative karma and therefore a more unfortunate rebirth.
Loading the language Creating a new vocabulary with special meanings understood only by members of the group.	The New Kadampa Tradition are widely known as having their own phrases and for repeating these even when not requested. For example speaking categorically about 'inner winds', gaining 'merit' and 'rejoicing' in others happiness.
Doctrine over person Convincing the member that the group and its doctrine take precedence over any individual in the group or any other teaching from outside it.	Neil Elliot's Notes for Teaching Skills state that the NKT's only mission is to spread Kelsang Gyatso's dharma throughout the world. This means that each individual's physical and mental wellbeing are not seen as important. This is exacerbated by the teachings that suggest all of your basic needs and emotions are simply a 'hallucination' created by your 'self-cherishing mind'. Teachings from other Buddhist teachers are often seen as inferior and impure, although many NKT members have never read anything other than Kelsang Gyatso's books as they were banned from the bookshops.
Dispensing of existence Teaching the member that all those	Those who do not follow the teachings are seen as doomed

who disagree with the philosophy of the group are doomed.	to live all their life and future lives suffering in samsara.
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According to Shaw (2014) *'The follower's deficiencies are grouped under the umbrella of 'the ego', or a similar idea using different words, which is regarded as a harmful appendage or blockage of the true self, and which must therefore be purified by the leader for the follower to reach her potential'*. In the NKT the 'self-cherishing mind' is considered a part of the mind which can be permanently destroyed through contemplation meditation, gaining 'blessings', 'merit' and purifying negative karma.

Herman (1992) argues that captivity conditions in cults can be like those in slave camps or concentration camps. Even though no one is physically held captive, they are kept captive through information control, thought control, emotional control, and behaviour control (see Steven Hassan's BITE model). The pressure to conform can be conveyed through nonverbal as well as verbal communication. Secretive, manipulative behaviours and experiences can be reframed using words such as 'virtue' and 'purity' which leads to cognitive dissonance (confusion). The member may accept the verbal appraisal of the situation or behaviour whilst still picking up on hostile nonverbal cues. The cyber-bullying I receive is framed by the perpetrator as well wishes and concern, whilst my intuition tells me it's a passive aggressive attack. Remaining in the NKT however would make questioning the contradictions between verbal and nonverbal information difficult as they are repeatedly labelled as pure and your own doubt is labelled as a fault in your own perception or mental 'clarity' (gaslighting).

Inform state that *'Former members have reported that as their commitment to the group deepened, encouragement to practice 'pure' Kadampa dharma dampened their critical thinking about the attitudes and behaviours they experienced within the group and later re-assessed.* Despite being a psychologist, and an atheist, and working full time outside of the centre, I am now shocked at the extent that I came to believe some of the teachings and to act accordingly. It is now clear to me that through the combination of attending the teachings and spending time with those who were practicing, I had in fact taken on more of the belief system than I originally intended. After attending a festival and focusing intensely on my intention to benefit all living beings, I signed up to several training courses which I could not then follow through. It is clear to me now that I was actually experiencing euphoria, mania, and the effects of hypnotism, however I believed I was acting in accordance with wisdom and compassion. A period of mania and fervor such as this is reframed by the teachings as 'having a blessed mind' whilst you remain in the group. I did not realise that I had developed a martyr complex and was heading for severe burnout. Many ex-members report this

feeling of having been hypnotised or 'brainwashed' into taking on these beliefs and acting in accordance. Cultic studies researchers and ex-members mostly now prefer to use the term 'indoctrination' rather than 'brainwashing'. These terms do not adequately capture the lived experience of the follower, which is often highly emotional, profound and meaningful.

'I had fallen in love with Dharma; this ethical and compassionate philosophy of Buddhism seemed both complex and coherent. Through the Dharma I loved the monk; he brought community and focus into my fragile life and gave me an active role in my own future; hauled in by the attractions of tantric teachings and spiritual friendship, practising the moral discipline he taught calmed my mind. I had needed this'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

The member may feel as if the practise are 'working' for them due to indoctrination, fervor (infatuation and awe), emotional contagion, group narcissism, sense of belonging to a group, and love-bombing through the suggestion that they are all developing positive karma or 'merit'. The idea that enlightenment 'is coming' could help combat feelings of meaninglessness or lack of purpose in life. Spiritual bypassing and dissociation from emotional pain also serves to protect the member from suffering. It is suggested by teachers and long term members that you aren't ready to accept the more profound teachings yet, and you might be ready later, thus suggesting that they are precious, correct and you are still holding an incorrect view. Therefore although no one directly forces you to attend more advanced teachings or to accept their views, you are heavily influenced to do so. Quotes from Gyatso's books are written in large font placed around the buildings, meaning that people who frequently attend and live in the centres are also being influenced by these messages.

Jenkinson (2018) argues that thought reform and cultic practices can lead to the development of a cult 'pseudo-personality' which overlays the authentic personality.

'Five months of intense retreat in a quiet house in a Surrey village during 1998 convinced me that the methods of meditation that Gesh-la taught were invaluable and extraordinary; my personality had changed profoundly and irrevocably'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in a New Kadampa Tradition community').

'After ordination I was living, motivated to the best of my ability, a REAL life. A life dedicated to compassion and growth. A life that really had the power to benefit and influence the world, starting with the people around me. I was an object of trust and unconditional love for people, albeit aspirational. I could be useful to people who like me, may have had dark times and needed just one human to project 'good' on to so that they could choose to keep going. The slow cracking and poisoning of this well meant life choice practically nearly killed me'. (Testimony by Andrea Ballance, 'A story of an NKT nun disrobing').

2.2. Mystical manipulation, awe and fervor towards Kelsang Gyatso

According to Lifton (2014) mystical manipulation can be a powerful tool in thought reform. It relies on the feeling of awe –an overwhelming feeling of powerful admiration created by an extraordinary event or person. Awe can be produced many ways: through amazement at beauty, a deep connection with the vastness of the universe, or even the high experienced through release of endorphins or taking drugs. Any time we have a 'peak experience' which is unique, we feel awe. Laor (2013) argues that religious fervor is a kind of love that can lead to a religious conversion, and mystical experiences. He defines fervor as a state similar to the state of being in love, directed toward a doctrine and/or tradition, an authority structure, and often one or more deities.

'After I returned home from a working visit, I meditated on my own and felt my heart chakra lit up for the first time in a special way, which I felt was the presence of Buddha at the time. This experience confirmed to me that everything was true and good. (I think this is one of the main ways we get hooked into traditions. We have spiritual experiences, and this leads us to adopt the associated beliefs with less questioning'. (Anonymous Testimony, 'Eighteen months after leaving The New Kadampa Tradition').

2.2.1. *Magical thinking*

Ex-members report that they heard many instances of magical thinking for example the idea that Buddhas had the power to intervene directly in people's lives or could read their minds. Many Tibetan lamas also see deities not just as symbols or archetypes. Despite being 'empty of inherent existence', they are often regarded as possessing both an agency that is independent of the practitioner and the power to intervene in human affairs by granting blessings and answering prayers. In other words, they functioned as gods. NKT members believe that enlightened beings exist in the ordinary world and can see past, present and future simultaneously. The doctrine states that

enlightened beings cannot be seen by 'ordinary' minds and therefore we must practice kadam dharma in order to be able to perceive them.

2.2.2. *Fervor, blind spots and hyper-sensitivity to criticism*

Believers are often extremely protective of their movement and deeply angered when it is questioned or insulted. Increased anxiety in attachment relationships is thought to increase hostility towards out-groups (Weingarten & Chisholm, 2009, p. 767), suggesting that manipulation of representations of the deity can influence the levels of hostility towards non-members (Laor, 2013). This could explain why NKT members become hostile towards those who state that they believe Kelsang Gyatso or the NKT has faults or that Shugden practice could be harmful. To see my analysis of the insults I have received personally since whistleblowing see section 7.

Kelsang Gyatso did not complete his Geshe exams and was expelled from his monastery. There are testimonies that report controlling and manipulative behaviours by Kelsang Gyatso when taking over the original FPMT centre and in banning books by other authors.

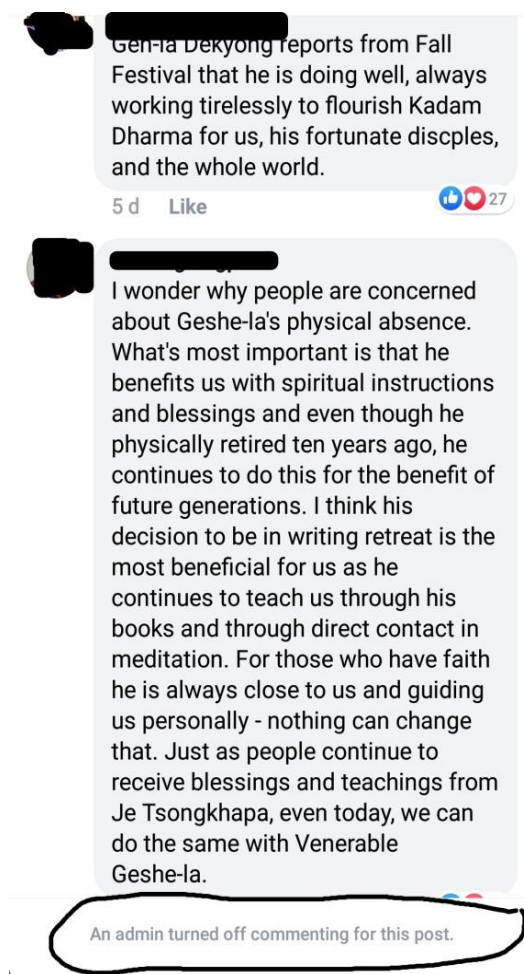
'I used to admire Geshe Kelsang. At one stage of my life I thought he was a role model for many Buddhist practitioners. Unfortunately, he turns out to be one of the worst Buddhist fundamentalists the Buddhist world has seen in many years. He has completely forgotten the life of Lama Tsongkapa who studied under the great masters of other schools. My teacher, Gen Lobsang Gyatso, was completely right when he said to me in 1986, "It is ironic that when you meet Kelsang Gyatso for the first time, he appears to be a gentle, soft, and simple monk. He gives you the impression of someone who is on the verge of attaining Buddhahood in two or three days, but, he is rotten from inside in real life'. (Testimony by Tenzing Wangdak, 'A Tibetan translators testimony').

'I had to prepare to see the guru now. I think I had met him briefly a couple of times but he didn't know me. In fact, the first time I ever met him was as he was walking around the centre with his entourage. A boy called Chris really wanted Geshe-la to meet me and kept pointing at me and saying my name. Eventually Kelsang Gyatso looked over at me and instead of saying, "Hello", he said, "This one is trouble." (Testimony by Andrea Ballance, 'I am not your teacher').

Despite this senior NKT convinced members that he is a qualified spiritual guide and enlightened being. Kelsang Gyatso has not been seen in public since 2013, and is thought by many ex-members to have died or to be struggling with a degenerative disease. Senior NKT state he is on writing retreat

and has retired from teaching but continues to write books for the benefit of all living beings. However, many ex-members believe that the book *Mirror of Dharma* released in 2018 was ghost-written by senior NKT. Followers are encouraged to believe that Kelsang Gyatso is the third living Buddha and therefore must be an enlightened being. This would explain why, were he to have developed a degenerative disease in his old age, he could not be seen in public, as enlightened beings are not supposed to develop degenerative diseases. The mystery surrounding his whereabouts appears to have elevated him to an even more magical and omniscient position in followers' minds. Fervor includes a strong and irrational commitment to the doctrine and an absolute certainty regarding their truth. One of the side effects of fervor is blind spots – an inability to see inconsistencies in the doctrine or the behaviours of the leader or teacher (Laor, 2013).

The following screenshots are from the opening of the temple in Arizona in September 2019, when members started asking more questions about why Kelsang Gyatso did not make an appearance. These questions are dismissed by NKT teachers and commenting is disabled in order to prevent further questioning.



Someone with a childhood history of narcissistic abuse already knows themselves as an object to be subjugated, thus making them more vulnerable to a cult with a narcissistic leader (Shaw, 2014). A replica of this dynamic can be found in the cult and the person can regress back to re-enacting this dynamic. This is defined as ‘spiritual transference’, where we direct emotions felt towards the parent in the past and project them onto someone in the present (for example a teacher or guru). Spiritual communities can become like a surrogate family, with the teacher being regarded as the good parent while the students strive to be good girls and boys (Welwood, 2000). Followers objectify themselves by allowing the leader to see them as a subject, who needs to train according to their doctrine. Though followers typically believe they are voluntarily embracing the leader’s vision, the reality is that they have been coercively manipulated to abandon their own subjectivity. According to Becker (1974), our urge to deify others comes from this transference.

I witnessed members having Kelsang Gyatso as their screensaver on their phone, and in photoframes next to or above their bed. Followers are encouraged to have conversations with Kelsang Gyatso in their head when they are struggling with decision making, a phenomenon that was reported in Roger Chabot’s PhD thesis (2019). Attachment to a deity can lead members of the group to feel less fearful, more confident and optimistic (Bowlby, 1973, p.32; Kirkpatrick, 2005, p.32). This is not just an emotional dependence but the wish to experience the other as one’s whole world, just as the family is for a young child (Becker, 1974).

‘I ordained at the age of 21, having only lived in the dharma centre for 1 year. I was entranced with the robes. I guess inside I wanted to be ‘special’ like that, like I was getting into some kind of secret society. I really don’t feel like I was mature enough at the time to make that decision’. (Anonymous testimony, ‘Ordained too early’).

2.2.3. Self-sacrifice

Laor (2013) states that in some groups believers relate to a deity as a kind of father figure, yet the connection to the group is closer to the relationship of a parent to a child. A sense of responsibility for the group and the ‘mission’ can develop, leading the member to sacrifice themselves in a similar way that a parent would do for their child. Many ex-members report that they were encouraged to sacrifice themselves for their guru. Attachment to a deity can lead to blind obedience to that deity. This attachment and resulting obedience can enhance conformity to social norms, enhancing social cohesion and cooperation (Weingarten & Chisholm, 2009, p. 766). Whilst working as security at festivals followers were told to wear bullet proof vests. In the anonymous YouTube series ‘Surviving

The New Kadampa Tradition' this ex-monk states that he was told that he should 'take a bullet' for his guru. The NKT management have never reported any bomb or death threats to the police, however security staff were told to protect Kelsang Gyatso due to risk of assassination. In my opinion, this is an example of the way in which Kelsang Gyatso and the senior members have indoctrinated members to believe he is at risk in order to create fear of the outside world, non-believers and other Buddhist sects, which could keep people from leaving through fear. The religious persecution complex serves to keeping cult members in a state of hyperarousal which creates fear of leaving and also strengthens group cohesion. Followers are still told that Kelsang Gyatso does not attend events because they cannot secure the perimeter sufficiently to ensure his safety, which in the opinion of many ex-members is also used to justify his absence.

2.2.4. Encouraging teachers to be inauthentic

Kelsang Gyatso and Neil Elliot have instructed teachers to be inauthentic. *'Like an actor, coming from emptiness, we should adjust our presentation according to what is needed.'* (Notes on Teaching Skills). NKT teachers are taught to smile and make jokes even when they do not feel happy. *'One of Gesh-la's favourite mottos is 'show a lot of teeth'* (Notes on Teaching Skills). Teachers have previously told Kelsang Gyatso that they felt they were not being honest. He replied during Spring Festival in 2000 *'If you allow your students to see you unhappy they will lose trust, faith and confidence in you'*. Kay (2004, p. 94) found that the role of the NKT teacher is to be like 'a talking book'.

'I felt like a complete fraud as I sat there holding forth about 'happiness from a different source' to a bunch of earnest seekers, when I still didn't really have a clue about that type of happiness at all. I was faking it. We were indeed encouraged to fake it, until you make it' (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello, 'It slowly dawned on me that I had actually been sucked into a cult').

2.3. Applying antidotes to negative 'minds'

A 'delusion' according to the NKT is a state of mind that is not in line with Gyatso's teachings. The NKT recommend 'holding virtuous objects (thoughts or images) in your mind' until this becomes more of an automatic habit through practice. NKT classes aim to teach people how to control their attention so that negative thoughts (delusions) cannot enter their experience, or are 'transformed' immediately into more positive or virtuous ones. The eventual aim is to destroy your 'self-cherishing mind' which is thought to lead to a permanent state of enlightenment.

2.3.1. *Is it even possible to suppress or transform negative minds?*

Findings suggest that the task of suppressing a thought is itself difficult, leading people to hold the thought in consciousness repeatedly even as they try to eliminate it. This means that whilst the NKT teachings suggest that it is possible to *immediately* transform negative ‘minds’ or ‘delusions’ into more positive or virtuous states of mind so that the person does not experience suffering, there is no evidence that this is actually possible. A thought-stopping therapy technique suggested by Wolpe and Lazarus (1966) for obsessional disorders was found to be no more successful than no intervention at all (Reed, 1985). It is difficult to study this phenomenon however and research in this area continues to depend on the preselection of participants who are already prone to thought suppression.

2.3.2. *Potential psychological damage*

Even if there was evidence that it is actually possible to immediately transform negative minds into ‘virtuous’ ones, there is abundant evidence that this could cause serious harm in the long run psychologically. Attempting to avoid, suppress, or eliminate unwanted private experiences often leads to an upsurge in the frequency and intensity of the experience the person wishes to avoid (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000; Carter & White, 1987; Janis, 1958; 1983; Lazarus, 1983; Horowitz, 1975). Therefore even if it is possible, the thought is likely to come back stronger than ever later, accompanied by any related unwanted urges, increasing the likelihood of the development of an obsessional disorder. Psychological inflexibility or rigidity is a result of fusion with thoughts and language that interfere with the person’s ability to adapt to the environment. The wish to avoid painful feeling (experiential avoidance) by cognitive fusion with NKT teachings can lead to further psychological inflexibility (indoctrination).

It is likely that a person who attempts to avoid painful emotion by ‘transforming’ it is practicing dissociation, which is a symptom of trauma.

‘Sometimes situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage and pain dissolve. Events continue to register in awareness, but it is as though these events have been disconnected from their ordinary meanings.’ (Herman, 2015, p. 43).

There is evidence that practicing more ‘balanced’ thinking can help to challenge black and white negative thoughts for *some* people *some* of the time. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) teaches the practice of spotting your negative thoughts and practicing more balanced alternatives. Negation

of the self and invalidation of your emotions is not more balanced thinking however. For example, if a person is thinking 'I'm stupid' it can be helpful for them to look for evidence of their strengths, to give them a more balanced view. If a person has a catastrophic thought such as 'I'm going to get stuck in the lift and die' it can be helpful to practice less catastrophic thinking in order to help calm themselves down. However, the person may also need to practice a body-related coping strategy such as deep breathing or grounding themselves in the present moment using their senses. Many people report that when their fight and flight response is triggered, they cannot control their thoughts until they have practiced deep breathing or removed themselves from the triggering situation. This is due to the role that adrenalin and cortisol play in affecting our thinking, memory and bodily reactions.

Many of the assumptions about the advantages of emotional expression are based on the well-documented inverse relation between emotional expression and autonomic reactivity (Buck, 1984; Hokanson & Burgess, 1962; Hokanson & Shetler, 1961; Jones, 1935). Typically, the inhibition of emotional expression has been associated with an increase in autonomic activity (Pennebaker, 1985). Chronic autonomic arousal, in turn, is associated with development of psychosomatic disease. 'Bottled up' emotions have been blamed by many for symptomatology, both psychological and physical (e.g. Freud 1917/1977; Fridlund, Newman, & Gibson, 1984; Pelletier, 1985). Styles of emotional expression have been brought up in relation to several physical illnesses, including cancer (Cox & McCay, 1982; Derogatis, Abelloff, & Melisaratos, 1979; Greer & Morris, 1975; Jensen, 1987), coronary heart disease (Friedman & Booth-Kewley, 1987; Friedman, Hall, & Harris, 1985; Gentry, 1985; Goldstein, Edelberg, Meier, & Davis, 1988), and other diseases (Beutler, Engle, Oro-Beutler, Daldrup, & Meredith, 1986; Pelletier, 1985; Udelman & Udelman, 1981). Cox and McCay (1982) concluded that the strongest psychosocial predictor of cancer is an anti-emotional attitude, particularly an inability to express negative emotion. Studies have also supported the idea that unexpressed hostility is associated with coronary heart disease (Gildea, 1949, and Cady et al, 1961, cited in Friedman, Harris, & Hall, 1984).

However it is not possible to state that emotional expression is always healthier than repression, and so researchers have studied a construct called 'ambivalence' towards emotional expression, to assist them in discriminating between those who are relaxed quiet people and those who are repressed, tense inhibitors. Pennebaker (1985) suggests that lack of expression per se may not be pathogenic. Rather, according to Pennebaker, lack of emotional expression coupled with the desire to express emotion is the damaging combination. There is evidence that thought suppression and thought control exacerbates trauma symptoms. Studies by Pennebaker (Pennebaker & Hoover, 1986;

Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987) have found that individuals who inhibit their desire to confide in others about traumatic life events are at an increased risk for the development of later health problems.

2.3.3. *The danger of valuing absolute truth over relative truth (spiritual bypassing)*

Unlike the thought challenging methods encouraged within cognitive behavioural therapy, the practice of applying 'opponents' for 'delusions' in a Buddhist context many would not consider to be more balanced thinking. Focusing on concepts that negate the existence of the self, the value of the self and the emotions of the self could be considered severe emotional invalidation. NKT teachings encourage people to concentrate on absolute truths without considering why they might be triggered to feel a certain way, and without practicing any self-soothing or grounding techniques. According to Welwood (2011) it is common in Buddhist communities that *'Absolute truth is favored over relative truth, the impersonal over the personal, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and detachment over feeling.'* For example, the NKT teach that it is wise to concentrate on rejoicing in someone else's happiness when you feel jealous, which is based on the principle that your happiness is no more important than others. Jealousy is a normal human experience that comes from our survival instincts to compete for resources. In addition our feeling of jealousy may be giving us an important insight into our needs and when these are not being met. Remaining in unsafe situations, co-dependent and abusive relationships is known to contribute to stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and learned helplessness, all of which negatively affect our physical health too.

Spiritual bypassing is a term coined by Welwood to describe a process he saw happening in the Buddhist community he was in, and in himself. He noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks. It has also been described as 'premature transcendence' (Elliot, 1997; Harris, 1994; Sovatsky, 1998). For example, we might feel jealous because we have a desire for more emotional and physical intimacy, but we might bypass this feeling using absolute truth because we are holding too much fear of intimacy or of trusting another. *'One might, for example, try to practice nonattachment by dismissing one's need for love, but this only drives the need underground, so that it often becomes unconsciously acted out in covert and possibly harmful ways instead.'* (Welwood, 2011). Spiritual bypassing commonly occurs when people come to believe that 'human' issues are not important, and spiritual practice is of a higher realm, with psychological work as a lower realm. According to Kornfield (1993) this is problematic because spirituality is not meant to help a person avoid life problems and dilemmas, and instead should assist the person in living an

ordinary life complete with the inevitable suffering (West, 2000). Without skilled guidance on when and how to best use meditation, even mindfulness meditation can be used unskillfully to avoid emotional pain. Welwood (2011) states that meditation in any form is frequently used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations.

2.3.4. *The stress of self-monitoring and control*

Hayes et al (2011) state that 'the internal drone caused by the clients self-monitoring of emotional causes and effects becomes so chronic that it becomes almost impossible for the client to engage in any activity without almost immediately destroying his or her sense of being 'present', or spontaneous.' When a person follows a rule that there is a 'right' way to be happy they are in a constant struggle. To maintain control the person must be vigilant in recognising early signs that undesirable reactions are occurring. The solution to the struggle for feeling and thinking 'right' seemingly lies in more vigilance, more scanning of the internal and external environment, and more control. *'The clients self-imposed cycle of self-monitoring, evaluation, emotional response, control efforts and further self-monitoring is not a solution to these disorders; rather it is these disorders'* (Hayes et al., 2011). Trying to avoid painful emotional states *'is equally destructive to our sense of our life's direction and to our goal-oriented behaviour. Our behaviour comes to be more under 'aversive control' rather than 'appetitive control' – more dominated by avoidance and escape than natural attraction. People lose their compass headings altogether because they are too busy monitoring the risk level of each event, interaction, or situation.'* (Hayes et al., 2011). If a painful thought, feeling, memory or sensation does not seem to be functioning as a barrier to helpful actions or goals, there is no reason to see fusion with this thought as an issue. For example, if a victim of domestic violence is fused with the thought 'I'm not safe' or 'this person is dangerous' and this assists them in taking steps to leave the situation, this is not a thought you would want them to try to transform. You would not want the person to consider absolute truths in this moment when they are physically or emotionally in danger.

Many people find it unhelpful to get into a cognitive debate with their thoughts, and some therapies suggest that letting thoughts come and go, without identifying with them as facts can be more helpful. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) teaches people skills in being better able to dis-identify with their painful thoughts and feelings, without attempting to get into a struggle with them (defusion). The aim of defusion is not to feel better, nor to get rid of unwanted thoughts however, but to: 1.) reduce influence of unhelpful cognitive processes upon behaviour; 2.) to facilitate being psychologically present & engaged in experience; 3.) to facilitate awareness of language processes, in order to enhance psychological flexibility (Harris, 2007). There are not enough well-controlled

studies to conclude that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is generally more effective than other active treatments across the range of problems examined, but so far the data are promising (Hayes et al., 2006).

2.3.5. *Losing your mindfulness skills*

Keeping your attention on virtuous objects or 'minds', is not mindfulness according to widely used definitions. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, '*Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally*'. This means that there is no effort made to replace undesirable thoughts or emotions with more desirable ones. The NKT advertise themselves as teachers of mindfulness, however beyond the brief breathing meditation at the beginning of the class, they do not teach mindfulness, and it could be argued that their practices interfere with your ability to be mindful.

2.3.6. *The denial of anger*

Purifying your mind of anger is considered an essential practice in most Buddhist traditions. Patient acceptance of all phenomena is considered the antidote to anger. NKT teachers state that there is no such thing as righteous anger.

'I asked a nun in training at temple for her thoughts on a book passage I'd read regarding Buddhist 'sacred anger'. The idea was that it's noble to be angry at things that are harming other beings, and to work towards lessening the source of harm. This woman literally laughed in my face. Mouth wide open, all her teeth showing, throwing her head back, shrieking and cackling with laughter for several minutes while I stood there like a moron. When she caught her breath, she told me that any form of anger is a delusion that clouds our mind and will always lead to faulty decisions and poor outcomes. The right way is to always act out of love, with a peaceful and focused mind'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Why I no longer study Kadampa Buddhism')

Gyatso states that it is possible to transform anger before it even develops in the mind, by focusing on absolute truths. I would argue that it is not possible to apply an antidote to something before it has developed. How would you know to take an antibiotic before you had noticed you had developed an infection?

NKT teachers have been observed to display what they believe is righteous anger against the Dalai Lama despite stating there is no such thing. Occasionally NKT practitioners state that they have been

told to practice 'wrathful' compassion. According to their own teachings however, any harm that has in fact been caused to Shugden practitioners would be as a result of their own collective karma. Members of high-demand groups however do not often spot these contradictions due to the influences of awe, fervor and authority.

'The leaflets we were given during the time of the protests were quite shocking, and caused many doubts amongst practitioners. The issue was that our propaganda brochures appeared to be written by an angry baby. The wording was very immature. We wondered 'had Geshe-la written this himself? And if not, surely he has at least approved the brochure'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Ordained too early').



Senior NKT members produced propaganda about the Dalai Lama.



According to O'Brien (2018) *'The one exception to seeing anger as a hindrance to realization is found in the extreme mystical branches of Tantric Buddhism, where anger and other passions are used as energy to fuel enlightenment; or in Dzogchen or Mahamudra practice, where all such passions are seen as empty manifestations of the mind's luminosity'.*

Shields has commented that 'as a culture we are ambivalent about emotion' (1987, p. 231). This cultural ambivalence is reflected in many common expressions that subtly denigrate emotion and emotional display. Researchers (Murray, 1985; Tavris, 1984) have pointed out that the expression of negative emotions such as aggression, anger, and hostility present special problems for individuals because the expression of these emotions may hold important ramifications for the social group. English people in particular, known for valuing politeness, often hold repressed anger and fear of conflict. I believe Buddhist teachings which suggest it is unskillful and unhealthy to feel angry are particularly damaging for English people. Many report that they witnessed higher than average levels of passive aggression, sarcasm, and many outbursts of rage that eventually were triggered. Survivors report invalidating their own anger, and then experiencing guilt and shame due to eventual outbursts. Such outbursts of rage could have been prevented if they had more tools for channelling and working with this emotion.

2.3.7. The damage done to relationships with outsiders

Not only does applying opponents affect the individual's relationship with their emotions, but has also been observed to have a serious impact on their ability to understand and validate the emotions of their family and friends outside of the NKT. This is indicated in the post below, by a practitioner who believes he understands how his daughter 'should' be thinking:

My daughter has recently helped me realize how my non-acceptance has hijacked my Dharma understanding to turn me into an unwitting emotional tyrant.

I often see clearly how delusions seize my kids and family and how they and I suffer as a result. I know the opponents and how they should be thinking instead. My non-acceptance that they need to work through things themselves, my non-acceptance of their suffering, my non-acceptance of the drain on me associated with having to bear the brunt of their delusions or to have to spend the time to help them work through their delusions has all combined together into an implicit expectation on my part that everyone around me be emotionally perfect; and if they are not, I am judging them, becoming frustrated by them, and expecting them to already be free from their delusions.

This in turn makes the people around me feel like an emotional failure, makes them hate themselves and beat themselves up for not already being perfect. Because they are trying to live up to my expectations of emotional perfection, they then begin to repress all of their delusions, pretending they don't have delusions, which then causes things to fester and build up underneath the surface. Inner stress and tension then builds up in them into chronic anxiety and self-hatred, which then triggers more delusions in them in a vicious spiral.

I see now how I have been doing this to my eldest daughter, with my son, with my other daughter, with my mildly autistic son, with my other son who has no particular problems so I expect him to be even more perfect. I have been doing this to my wife for 25 years. I do this with my father, with my brother, and even to this day, I do this with my long dead mother.

Of course, I haven't been doing this on purpose, and wasn't even aware it was happening. It's all very subtle and sub-conscious in all those involved; but when brought to the surface, I now see it quite clearly.

This behavior in me manifests most strongly when I am very pressed for time and feel as if I have no capacity to deal with one extra burden of some emotional meltdown or problem by those around me. I have felt I don't have time to deal with others' delusions, which then becomes a non-acceptance of others who still have delusions, which then turns into them not accepting themselves still having delusions, leading to repression, anxiety, and self-hatred in them in a vicious spiral. As my daughter so aptly pointed out, the truth is accepting others as they are is actually more time efficient in the long run because non-acceptance leads to even more problems. I actually don't have time to not accept others.

Becoming aware of how I do this is one of the greatest gifts I have ever received in my spiritual life, and I'm extremely grateful to my daughter and to Dorje Shugden for helping me see this. Old habits die hard, and it will take a long time before I'm able to change, but whole new vistas of potential spiritual growth now appear before me.

Due to the teachings and prayers which repeatedly reinforce the idea that the NKT member has discovered the cure or medicine for mental suffering, and that one should be aiming to benefit all living beings by sharing this 'cure' or 'medicine', it is likely the member will develop a 'messiah' complex. Common in religious groups, this leads to urges to teach people their version of the dharma even when it is not requested or welcomed. For a person who has narcissistic traits already, this would likely lead them to act like a preacher who holds the answers to other people's problems. The person can believe that sharing the teachings with people will genuinely benefit them and therefore they do not perceive this as manipulation, but as spreading the medicine. In this way they themselves become a hero narcissist, replicating the controlling behaviours of the leader.

2.4. Lack of mindfulness of the body, denial of the existence of the body and risk of dissociation

The NKT do not encourage practicing mindfulness of the body as it is not part of the lineage. They encourage only working on the mind, and believe that the body is simply created by the mind. The

end result of this could therefore be that you may slowly lose touch with your body sensations the more time you spend engaging with their practices. Teaching people to focus on the ‘emptiness’ of their body when they do not feel connected to it in the first place, is likely to lead to dissociation and further repression of their emotions.

‘The fixed false smiles and the glassy-eyed expressions began to make me feel like I was in a kind of psychiatric hospital with nice grounds’. (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello, ‘It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult’).

The importance of a strong, supple body, the ability to breathe deeply, and cope with bodily tension is never mentioned in any of the teachings, despite the effect these factors are known to have on our mental state. Yoga is not encouraged as it is viewed as Hindu. Research indicates that many people are often already disconnected from their felt bodily experience, but particularly those with a trauma history. Janet (1901) identified ‘dissociation’ of traumatic material from consciousness as a central defence against overwhelming experience. Here, dissociation provides a critical psychological escape from emotional and physical distress associated with overwhelming traumatic experience, including childhood maltreatment, war trauma, and torture, from which no actual physical escape is possible (Kluft, 1985; Nijenhuis, Vanderlinden, & Spinhoven, 1998; Putnam, 1996; Spiegel, 1984; Vermetten, Doherty, & Spiegel, 2007; Carlson, Yates, & Sroufe, 2009; Liotti, 2009; Schore, 2009). This type of escape can involve compartmentalization where “aspects of psychobiological functioning that should be associated, coordinated, and/or linked are not” (Spiegel, 2012; Spiegel et al., 2011, p. E19; also see Van der Hart, Nijenhuis & Steele, 2006) and detachment, including depersonalization, derealisation, and emotional numbing (Allen, 2001; Brown, 2006; Holmes et al., 2005; Spiegel & Cardena, 1991; Steele, Dorahy, Van der Hart, & Nijenhuis, 2009; Van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Later in life, however, as an individual attempts to resume normal functioning, chronic dissociation can have devastating consequences (Brand et al., 2009; Jepsen, Langeland, & Heir, 2013). Given that the NKT do not screen people for trauma, and are likely to actively recruit them through their advertising, it is likely that they are teaching people who are already dissociated to dissociate further.

2.5. The tendency to encourage psychological disturbance in the name of wisdom (sadomasochism)

Not only are people not warned about the potential side effects of meditation by the NKT, but at times myself and others have witnessed them being actively encouraged to feel anxiety for example when meditating on ‘the emptiness of the body’. The admin director of the centre I lived in told me that she told her sons teenage friend that their body parts don’t exist, and that it gave them anxiety, but she stated ‘you have to start them on the path early’. (She also laughed in delight at his distress

in a way that I found sadistic). I believe this is a sign that some longstanding members of the NKT believe it is acceptable to cause people psychological disturbance in the name of sharing the teachings on emptiness.

Due to the teachings on enduring suffering, those who are vulnerable may believe they should endure this kind of treatment in order to destroy their 'self-cherishing mind'. In my opinion, the teachings allow those with sadistic tendencies to abuse those with masochistic tendencies under the impression that everyone is practicing wisdom and compassion. As a result, in my opinion it is likely that those who stay in the NKT for many years and continue to feel fulfilled may have sadistic or masochistic tendencies.

'Once the follower is successfully recruited or has become a convert, the seductive excitement of the honeymoon phase soon gives way to the sadomasochism of the traumatizing narcissist's relational system' (Shaw, 2014).

2.6. The martyr complex

Teachings state that you should be able to take on the suffering of all living beings whilst completely ignoring your own suffering and needs, viewing these as simply hallucinations created by your 'self-cherishing mind'. In addition, you are encouraged to suffer more, as 'transforming suffering' is considered to lead to progress towards enlightenment. Students are also encouraged to practice gratitude for their suffering, as it is teaching them and helping them to develop patience for their abuser. They are therefore encouraged to view abusers as teachers and to keep a 'happy' mind throughout abuse. For those with a pre-existing tendency towards self-harm, self-abandoning and neglect, this could become masochistic. This is likely to lead to burnout and further trauma through the 'patient acceptance' of abusive behaviours (this is what happened in my case).

'So there I was in Florida, reading Buddhist literature on the beach all afternoon, delivering pizza by night, and wondering if I should become a vegetarian nun in a religion that said if I happily let go of my ego and devoted all my time and energy to loving kindness, I'd upgrade my angry, frustrated human brain to a peaceful, Buddha like brain. If I refrained from fighting for change, disagreeing with others, hustling for money or titles, desiring or expecting particular outcomes, or planning exciting things for my own selfish amusement, I would move towards enlightenment and eventually grow into a wise old sage. I diligently filtered every thought through that perspective for about 5-6 months, believing I would be wiser and happier for it. What happened however, is that eventually my energy, inspiration,

motivation, and will to live drained to flatline zero' (Anonymous testimony 'Why I no longer study Kadampa Buddhism'.

2.7. Confusing doctrine and spiritual neglect

The NKT follower is told that they should be aiming to feel happy all the time, is then taught techniques which could cause anxiety, depression and dissociation but are told they are fortunate to have this experience and should practice gratitude. Obviously, for those who come to believe in a permanent and irreversible state of enlightenment, and believe that being wiser also would make them happier, this leads to disappointment and despondency when this does not occur (Anders, 2019a). This can lead to a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority, and many survivors of the NKT and other similar groups have reported it ultimately leads to depression. Welwood (2000) argues that the 'spiritual superego', a harsh inner critic causes spiritual practitioners to judge themselves for their practice never being enough. This means that practice becomes more judgemental rather than about acceptance. *'So they strive to be "dharmically correct", attempting to be more detached, compassionate, or devoted than they really are, while secretly hating themselves for failing to do so, thus rendering their spirituality cold and solemn'* (Welwood, 2000).

It is suggested by the NKT that if you are not becoming happier through NKT practices and meditations, you are not practicing correctly, have unfortunate karma, or have lost patience, and should try harder and keep going. *'Then, when you're still not enlightened, you're convinced you did something wrong and did not dedicate enough of yourself to Geshe-la'* (Jamie Kostek, 'One Pure Dharma', Tricycle, 2018).

'I began to see my practice as this big, complex struggle, that I had to go through every day. It all seems so complicated, when the whole point was supposed to be inner peace. It just didn't seem right. I began to sit out in the garden at night, and just sit and do nothing at all, and my mind would go quiet and I'd feel at ease'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Ordained too early').

'I was exhausted – I hadn't had much time to sleep for years – but I began waking up many times each night with anxiety, unable to cope with the contradictions between what I was trying to do and what I was 'allowed' to do, between what I saw and what I was 'supposed' to see'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

Followers do not have access to their guru or any form of official mentor in order to ask questions or to clarify their confusion.

‘Even though we were ordained and he was considered our only ‘Root Guru’, we were not generally given access to Gesh-la for ‘spiritual advice’ – in 12 years I never talked to him personally – and he would only give public teachings a few days each year. He told us that his books would ‘function as a spiritual guide’ instead; we had to rely on our Resident Teacher, the NKT study programmes he or she gave, and our practice’. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, ‘Realising the Guru’s intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community’)

Followers are told that any anxiety they feel has no meaning and that the teachings are perfect therefore any confusion simply arises from their own mind. Members are often told that they have misunderstood the teachings, which suggests that they are spiritually inadequate or stupid, and that the NKT still holds all the answers.

‘As someone who’s struggled with unshakable self-loathing for decades, the daily practice of turning the other cheek and joyfully being the world’s punching bag (i.e. never standing up for myself) was not making me happier at all. It just compelled me to sleep a lot and feel sad and no nothing. ‘You’re doing it wrong’, my three Buddhist chums told me. ‘This is the way toward happiness, and if you’re feeling unhappy, then you’re misunderstanding it’, one said. (Anonymous Testimony, ‘Why I no longer study Kadampa Buddhism’).

2.8. The ‘emptiness’ of trauma

The NKT believe in a ‘mental continuum’ that passes between rebirths, and believe that the mind is located at the heart, with consciousness having nothing to do with the brain. Therefore they do not understand the fight/flight/freeze response or the complex neuroscience behind trauma. The NKT believe that people should be working towards being happy all the time without addressing their trauma. Anxiety and other emotions are considered meaningless. The NKT view pain, whether emotional or physical, as a ‘hallucination’ that is a direct and simple result of ‘self-grasping’ or ‘self-cherishing’. Anders (2019b) argues that Buddhist ideas have been used in so-called Buddhist groups to conceal and silence trauma, especially in women. If you have trauma, constantly dissociate from it and invalidate it, you are likely to suffer with depression, low self-esteem, digestive issues and eventually an immune system disorder (see section on applying antidotes to negative ‘minds’ for more information on the potential damage to mental and physical health). Many people suffer with complex relational trauma without knowing or having received support. Childhood emotional

neglect in particular is difficult to recognise as it can result in the belief that your emotions and needs do not matter. The NKT believe that further suffering should assist people in developing a stronger determination to practice renunciation (to reduce grasping at 'desirous' objects).

Instead of being taught to recognise their trauma, their triggers, to reconnect with their body's wisdom and their intuition, NKT practitioners are taught to ignore their trauma altogether. Rather than focusing on psychoeducation on trauma and anxiety, emotional regulation, grounding techniques and coping strategies, NKT practitioners are being taught to overcome suffering by straining to control their mind to focus on 'virtuous' objects in order to 'purify' negative karma. They are taught to label their body, emotional and physical pain, urges and desires as 'empty' of both existence and meaning. This means that large numbers of traumatised people are spending time together with little or no understanding of their trauma. They are likely to praise each other in ignoring their trauma, their basic needs and in denying anger as this is considered progress on the spiritual path towards enlightenment. They are also encouraged to take on the suffering of all living beings, and to martyr themselves in the process.

This means that on top of the abusive experience experienced within the group, the wider community is likely to abandon you or emotionally neglect/invalidate you at a time of distress. Social support is known to be a significant predictor of recovery from traumatic events. If traumatic experiences are minimised or the victim is blamed, this is a further trauma which survivors often report they experienced as more traumatic than the initial traumatic event itself. Research has suggested that social rejection is similar to the experience of physical pain. The network of brain regions that are involved in physical pain and social rejection are the same (Eisenberger, 2008; Macdonald & Leary, 2005). This is likely to lead to further complex trauma on top of the trauma which made the person vulnerable to the group in the first place.

Survivors report that when they sought advice on how to improve their concentration when they were suffering with rumination due to trauma, they were met with remarks that suggested they were spiritually inadequate e.g. *'you need to develop more faith in Gesh-la, practice more heart-jewel (prayers) or accumulate more merit (work harder).'* This is likely to impact negatively on members' self-esteem. Those with trauma already tend to struggle with shame and feelings of inadequacy, and this is likely to exacerbate these struggles. Survivors report that admin directors and teachers in particular, known for having controlling and cold personalities, had no compassion for their trauma. For a relevant cartoon by Andrea Ballance please see her video 'Emptiness and suffering'.

In a 'sickness' model, the cause of illness is considered to be safely contained within the individual, their faulty genes, biochemical dysregulation, 'negative' thoughts or being somehow 'bad'. In an 'injury' model, whilst the individual brings some features with them, something outside of them is considered to have injured the person. This connects genes, biochemistry, and beliefs with the person's environment. The sickness model implies there is a magical cure, administered or taught by a mental health professional (or spiritual teacher). In my opinion the NKT teaches people to believe in a 'sickness' model, and furthermore, teaches them to believe that they are responsible for other people's 'sickness' (delusions). The NKT have no understanding that injury can occur through psychological abuse or even obvious traumas such as sexual abuse or war. I believe this is reflected in the below trolling. This person believes that if I don't practice kadam dharma I will require psychiatric medication.



2.9. Lack of understanding of suicidality and suicide

As trauma is silenced by the teachings, suicidal thoughts or completed suicide are seen as a result of a mistake in 'imputation' by the sufferer. The below screenshot shows a long term NKT member and ex-teacher sharing her thoughts on the suicide of her friend. There is no acknowledgement of potential abuse or trauma, emotional pain or unmet needs for social support. It is considered that the person should have been practicing harder, or differently, in attempting to destroy their 'self-cherishing mind' and imagine themselves as a Bodhisattva. Whilst it is a common belief that committing suicide is selfish (not a belief I hold, but a common one), most people would usually speak with a little more empathy than this for someone who was a close friend. Shame for example is a complex and painful embodied emotion that may require significant self-soothing and social support to cope with.

It seems to me that H must have had an abysmally out of whack self-image if he hated himself enough to blow his own head off. The demon self-cherishing – exaggerated disappointment at my wishes not being fulfilled, seeing them as the most important thing in the world – contributed to that sad, needless tragedy. Certainly it was not love or wisdom. Self-grasping ignorance and attachment caused him to create and believe a mental fiction about who he was, ie, a failure, someone whose life was not worth living. Yet all his friends knew that he was a lovely sweet engaging man and had everything to live for – he could have been a Bodhisattva if that was the story he had told himself instead on that day in February. There was a lesson in this for all of us who knew him. We have to be wise about who we believe we are and what we need, or, one way or another, slowly or quickly, we will self-destruct.

When my own mental health deteriorated, I made the mistake of disclosing this to a ‘General Programme Teacher’ at Nagarjuna KMC and I received the below response. Note the use of triangulation, suggestions that I am spiritually inadequate, and the abuse of the metaphor of ‘family’.

I'm sorry that the timing of me and [REDACTED] getting together happened when you were most unstable. I'm sorry that you found out about us through someone else... I was just so scared about your mental state after you telling me you were suicidal... I didn't want to jeopardise anything else. I hope you understand that.

I want you to know that [REDACTED] is not just some fling - I wouldn't be so dumb and inconsiderate to do that to you or myself. She's taught me a lot about letting myself be vulnerable and how showed me the ways in which I'm insecure, and has really helped to show me how to heal myself. It's just bad timing that I've met someone that I think is right for me, given all that's happened. And I'm sorry if that last sentence hurts... but I hope that your love for me overrides your delusions in this case, and I hope to have your blessings someday. I really do think she's good for me, and I hope that's ultimately what you want for me.

When I'm with [REDACTED], I talk about you way more than would normally be acceptable for a new relationship. We're both massively trying to be compassionate about your state and your happiness. [REDACTED] is hugely concerned with your welfare; in fact it's making her anxious that you're unhappy. She wants the same thing that I do.

That being said, I also don't want to up and leave the centre altogether, or end things with [REDACTED] because of your current wishes. I think that with some professional help, and space and time, you'll be good - maybe even better than before.

You're on my mind all the time. I'm so sorry you're feeling this way. It's upsetting to me how you've been recently - I can't bare the thought of you being in this state.

It's also so strange that you just emailed. I was really, literally just reading the birthday note you wrote me, and I was writing a diary entry as to how kind it was, despite how much you were suffering, even then... And now I think that maybe tapping into your outer compassion and focussing on my happiness (or maybe not me... maybe just other people's!) could be a good way to bring yourself around? It seemed to work when you wrote me that note, and also your other emails too.

I'm awake now if you wanted to break the rules and chat... I won't tell.

I love you, and I'll be here for you. I miss you. You're family to me, even if you hate me right now. And I'll try and accommodate your wishes as best I can.

x

I suspect that the suicide of ex-members is used to confirm the idea that turning away from kadam dharma leads to a strengthening of ‘delusions’ and mental ‘sickness’. This would serve to reinforce the beliefs of those who remain.

2.10. 'Emptiness', nihilism and risk of dissociation, derealisation and depersonalisation

Ex-members, including myself, report that the NKT teachings reinforce perspectives on 'emptiness' that suggest that nothing exists at all. This can be seen repeatedly in Youtube videos of teachings. I myself heard many people stating that 'nothing matters' and that 'nothing exists'. Occasionally it is stated correctly by adding the ending 'in the way that it appears to me' however mostly you hear that phenomena do not exist at all.

General Programme courses do not generally include emptiness teachings however Foundation Programme and Empowerment days do. Anyone can attend these teachings and no consideration is made regarding their suitability or the length of time they have been studying or practicing Buddhism. Other traditions of Buddhism consider it important that the student practice mindfulness and basic compassion-based meditations for several years before contemplating emptiness. In addition, their own teachings state that you should only 'show the secret to the one who has achieved firmness', which means you should not teach emptiness to beginners or people who have not requested teachings. Despite this the NKT share emptiness teachings on social media.



In the above Facebook post an NKT teacher quotes a self-negating teaching by Bryon Katie. Bryon Katie's teachings have also recently been exposed as dangerous, abuse denying and victim blaming in an article by Be Scofield, cult journalist (October 2019).

It is argued that contemplating the 'dreamlike nature of reality' is a powerful tool to assist in the reduction of grasping, at the self, at the body, at objects and people. In *Oral Instructions of Mahamudra* Kelsang Gyatso states:

*'All my appearances in dreams teach me
That all my appearances when awake do not exist*

*Thus for me all my dream appearances
Are the supreme instructions of my Guru.'*

Many people report experiencing feelings of dissociation, derealisation and depersonalisation when contemplating these instructions. It could be argued that this is the intention of this practice. The core symptoms of depersonalization-derealization disorder are the experience of 'unreality in one's self', or detachment from one's surroundings (Radovic, 2002). People who are diagnosed with depersonalization also experience an urge to question and think critically about the nature of reality and existence. Reports of peoples' experiences of derealisation and depersonalization are frightening, unpleasant and sometimes pleasant. Studies mainly report distress (Mauricio, 2009; Simeon et al., 2003). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) notes that depersonalisation must cause the person distress and have an impact on their daily functioning for it to be classified as clinically significant. Due to prolonged exposure to unskilful and unrequested emptiness teachings (used to dismiss my needs and to enable irresponsible behaviour in others) I experienced episodes of dissociation and depersonalisation for nine months after moving out.

Irrespective of whether the individual considers their depersonalization distressing or not, it would most likely lead the person to struggle with their daily activities and to relate to others, especially those outside of the NKT.

2.11. Emptiness, lack of empathy, warmth and friendship

The above image in my opinion suggests that contemplating the emptiness of all phenomena is guaranteed to cure mental health problems if a person were to believe that this is what is meant by 'mental sicknesses'. However according to Anders (2019b) indoctrination in Buddhist groups can prevent people from displaying the empathy that they would usually display outside the group. It could be argued that it would be more likely that a person would be experiencing severe dissociation and would be incapable of engaging with others in an empathetic and socially acceptable manner if they were to hold the idea that nothing exists in their mind at all times. For those in denial about their wounds, meditation practice can reinforce a tendency toward coldness, disengagement, or interpersonal distance (Welwood, 2011). To have empathy for others suffering we must be able to feel our own emotions, be connected to our body, and to connect with another person's felt emotion. If we are cognitively straining to remember that this person in front of us does not exist, and that their feelings are empty, we are unlikely to be able to respond to their suffering with warmth. When I disclosed emotional and spiritual abuse by an NKT teacher to the admin director she responded by telling me that '*nothing matters, that's what (the*

national spiritual director) says'. Many survivors report witnessing people displaying disturbing behaviours which they believe indicated less empathy than in the general public.

'Research suggests that areas of the brain that are key to emotional and physical sensations, such as the amygdala and the insula, appear to be less responsive in chronic depersonalisation sufferers. You might become less empathetic, your pain threshold might increase' (Lofthouse, 2014).

Many survivors have reported that their friends who were not NKT members had more empathy and were more friendly than their NKT friends.

'This is when my 'faith', if you want to call it that, really started to crack – when I noticed that the non-Buddhists in my social circle were consistently kinder and more pleasant than the Buddhists. Not to say all Kadampa practitioners are pretentious jerks, but I really started to wonder about the long term effects on personality and mental states these practices might have' (Anonymous testimony, 'Why I no longer practice Kadampa Buddhism').

'The further you travel to the heart of the NKT, the more you are twisted – in the name of enlightened principles – into the very opposite of what it is supposed to be about. And you don't even realise it's happening. Until it's too late. (Anonymous Testimony, 'Eighteen months after leaving The New Kadampa Tradition').

2.12. Emptiness and lack of personal responsibility

Myself and several others believe they saw people acting in a way that suggested they believed that their actions no longer had consequences due to this belief. For those with narcissistic tendencies, who already struggle to take responsibility for their actions, emptiness beliefs could lead to an exacerbation of these tendencies. Welwood (2000) argues that spiritual practice is challenging for people with narcissistic traits because they use it to make themselves feel special and important while they imagine that they are working to destroy their ego.

For those who wish to speak up about abusive behaviour and safeguarding concerns, they are likely to be met with nihilistic responses and many survivors report that this was the case. I was told that 'nothing matters' by the admin director which I believe indicated that she did not think that the way she treated people mattered, despite insisting that she had achieved the spiritual realisation of 'exchanging self with others'.

2.13. Visualisation and self-generation as a deity

Visualisation of the guru and/or deities at the crown of the head, entering the mind and travelling down to the heart is a common practice that is used to develop a feeling of bliss through the receiving of 'blessings'. An experience of hallucinating a Buddha would be considered virtuous and would be labelled as 'wonderful' by a fellow member. However, if the person were to leave the NKT this would likely be reframed by outsiders as a symptom of mental illness. Christian Szurko, Spiritual Abuse Recovery Specialist told me that some of his ex-clients that had left the NKT had suffered with severe hallucinations and paranoia. Imagining yourself as a deity and making offerings of beautiful flowers or reciting mantras in your mind will not improve your mindfulness skills, and it could be argued, interferes with your ability to be in touch with reality.

Visualising oneself as an enlightened being is described as 'bringing the end result into the path', and is considered to assist the practitioner in embodying the qualities of a Buddha. However an inner tension can also be set up, between the 'pure' imaginary self and the 'impure' ordinary self, and in effect a split personality can be created, with pride for the new self and shame and guilt for the old self.

Unless a person is very mentally stable, deeply connected to their felt bodily experience, and free of a wish to escape their pain of being human, this could be seriously psychologically damaging. For those with a vulnerability towards experiencing psychosis or delusions of grandiosity, this is likely to lead to acute symptoms of psychosis e.g. hallucinations and delusions. I witnessed one person who was clearly struggling with this, genuinely believing he was physically turning into a Buddha. There is no screening of members' mental health prior to attending and no individual relationship built with the student.

2.14. Fear of rebirth/reincarnation in a hell realm, and resulting obsessive-compulsive behaviours

Tibetan Buddhism claims to resolve the conflict between the Buddhist belief in 'no-self' and the necessity for some 'karmic DNA' to drive the reincarnation process. Tibetan Buddhists believe that very high lamas have gained control over the 'rebirth process', and are reincarnating not from karmic compulsion, but rather from the pure motivation to aid living beings to reach enlightenment. In Buddha's early sermons he apparently refused to answer questions about the afterlife, and advised students to seek 'direct knowledge' that leads to 'self-awakening and unbinding'. According to Carreon (2019), *'interesting as it is to scholars and persons posing as Tibetan Buddhists in the 21st Century, the entire Tibetan vision of the afterlife would have been regarded as superstitious rubbish*

by the original founder of Buddhism'. It states on the New Kadampa Tradition website under the heading reincarnation:

'..our body and mind are separate entities, and so even though the body disintegrates at death, the continuum of the mind remains unbroken. Instead of ceasing, the mind simply leaves the present body and goes to the next life. For ordinary beings, therefore, rather than releasing us from suffering, death only brings new sufferings.'

It can be seen from this paragraph that a person is likely to feel anxious and low in mood after reading that their death brings more sufferings. The teachings are written with absolute certainty, as if the NKT hold all the answers and there is no possibility that they could be incorrect. This fear of rebirth within 'samsara' is supposed to motivate the person to practice diligently in order to achieve enlightenment within this lifetime. In my opinion the advertising of the NKT is misleading in that it does not reflect the reality of the anxiety a practitioner could develop, as it uses images of peace and 'happiness'.

'The concept of 'vajra hell' is not for Buddhist beginners who are just getting seduced into 'mindfulness practice' through the barrage of glossy magazine covers flanking the register line at Whole Foods. Shambhala Publishing's Buddhist magazines -- Lion's Roar, Buddhadharma, and Shambhala Sun -- push little more than stress-relief and comfy yoga-wear to the masses, who aren't ready for graphic depictions of quasi-eternal torment'. (Carreon, 2019).

It is argued by the NKT that studying the teachings and meditating on death according to their methods will prepare a person better for their death. It is argued that if a person dies with a peaceful mind they will have a more fortunate rebirth. When I attended a teaching on this it was obvious that people were experiencing anxiety in the room through asking questions like 'What if I get dementia and I can't control my mind?' or 'What if I die suddenly in a car accident?'. People reported to me that they felt depressed and anxious after attending a teaching on the wheel of life. Whilst there have not been any studies on fear of death or rebirth in NKT members, a study has found that Tibetan Buddhists report more fear of their own personal death than other religious and non-religious groups, not less. Nichols et al (2018) found that monastic Buddhists reported the greatest fear of death despite believing there is no consistent self. This is in contrast to the response indicated by Tibetan Buddhist scholars that good Buddhists should be especially unafraid of self-annihilation.

According to Carreon (2019) *'Buddhists have been notably aggressive about systematizing, concretizing, and inculcating the belief in hell in their followers'*. This is indicated in the below image which displays a troll on one of my YouTube videos, who attempts to frighten me by stating that I will pass onto the next life with a bitter, revenge and obsession on my 'mental continuum'.



Jason Wolf • 1 day ago

Thriving after leaving the New Kadampa Tradition i agree- your blaming the teachings; your blaming Buddha and that's absurd! You'll never find a path then. So your views could be said for any Buddhist path, not just the NKT. But no, all your videos go back to blame and criticise the NKT, but in-fact the problem is coming from within. You seem totally absorbed into the NKT. What are your aims? What are your goals? Move on with your life or you will pass into the next life with this bitter, revenge and obsession on your mental continuum! Thats sad.

NKT practitioners usually believe that a belief in hell realms motivates people to engage in more virtuous behaviours. However findings suggest that a (Christian) belief in hell predisposes believers to express confidence in violent solutions and reject peaceful solutions to relationship problems, to apply corporal punishment to their children (Swan, n.d.), and to engage in child abuse (Campbell & Vollhardt, 2013, Webster & Saucier, 2015).

2.15. Purification rituals

Whilst I am not a Buddhist scholar, it is thought that Buddha advised against reliance on 'observances and rituals' as the basis for a spiritual life, on the grounds that they do not in fact produce the promised results, and called them 'the basis for fruitless efforts'. He is thought to have rejected the notion that purification comes through a ritual, and described this as 'rules-and-vows clinging' (Carreon, 2019). It is likely that following the teachings of Kelsang Gyatso could exacerbate existing obsessive compulsive urges and cause new ones. I observed many obsessive compulsive behaviours surrounding ritual during the time I was involved with the NKT. Beliefs about the purification of negative karma in particular can cause people psychological disturbance. When a person tries to administer this type of karmic accounting system, in which the person tries to burn up past evil through actions in the present, they do not know how much non-virtue they have accumulated, or how much this non-virtue is purified by their practice, so they do not know when

the purification will be supposedly accomplished (Carreon, 2019). By relying on the mystical powers of rituals, mantras and making offerings, Tibetan Buddhists could be viewed as engaging strongly with the forces of superstition. According to Carreon (2019) relying on such irrational methods for decision-making undermines the self-confidence that lies at the root of genuine Buddhist practice. Whatever a person's beliefs about what constitutes 'genuine' Buddhist practice, it is likely that following the teachings of the NKT diligently would lead to the development of many fears and resulting obsessive-compulsive behaviours. I once observed someone terrified due to having accidentally placed their book on the floor. Survivors have reported (to myself) that the fears that they developed during the time they were involved with the NKT took them many years to work through.

2.16. Trauma bonds

Traditionally in Buddhism, the teacher claims their legitimacy as the representative of a lineage that can be traced back to a saintly founder, or even to the Buddha himself. The teacher is therefore regarded as an embodiment of the moral and spiritual dimensions of Buddhist teachings. It is this ideal that underlies the role of teacher as exemplar and shapes the asymmetrical charismatic relationship between a teacher and his students (Bell, 2002). Such idealisation often leads a student to experience strong emotional attachment, with feelings that parallel those associated in Western culture with romantic love. This can lead to self-abandonment and glorification of the other.

It is stated in Kelsang Gyatso's books that turning away from your teacher is cause for a rebirth in a hell realm for 'a thousand aeons'. For those who take this literally of course this is likely to cause anxiety and a trauma bond with the guru. No matter how people are treated within the NKT they may stay due to this fear. For those with a Christian upbringing who believe in heaven and hell this could be re-traumatising. For those with a learning disability this could be terrifying.

'Those who disrobed had to stay away for a year and could never teach in the NKT again. Leaving was seen as shameful and a person who left would rarely be mentioned. It was said that disrobing would make our 'bad karma' ripen as 'hellish' experiences'. We were told we were following a 'special, new' ordination that 'nobody has done before' but even though our ordination was different, we looked like Tibetan monks and nuns'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

It is possible to develop trauma bonds to an emotionally neglectful and abusive person or group of people. Obviously, for those who have taken vows or ordination, they have promised to devote their

lives entirely to their guru, and even their *future* lives, no matter how they are treated by this guru or his disciples. This could be a dangerous trauma bond due to the feelings of ‘bliss’ they have repeatedly generated in association with Kelsang Gyatso. Combining the neuroscience behind trauma bonding, fervor and cult involvement with the teachings on seeing your guru as faultless could lead to severe trauma bonds and blind spots. This could be considered a form of Stockholm syndrome, where a person becomes so trauma bonded to their abuser that they cannot see the abusive behaviour clearly, and defends the abuser, perhaps even idolising them.


‘Soon Gesh-la speaks of keeping our ordination through to future lives. I glance around; no-one moves, no-one looks upset. Are they all such realised beings that they know this already? Have they been told? I suddenly feel alone. I am prepared for no killing, stealing, lying, sexual conduct or intoxication. I am prepared to commit to my training, to refuge and to promoting the tradition, but only for this life. Not for them all! The vows expand indefinitely; my mind follows and I fall into a space where I am terrified of breaking my promises, even before I have taken them. I am not prepared for this....My ordination master continues and insists that if we have powerful realisations we can carry our ordination into future lives...’
(Testimony by Carol McQuire, ‘Realising the Guru’s intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in a New Kadampa Tradition community’).

Given the likelihood that the NKT have lied to members about the death or health status of Kelsang Gyatso, there is a high risk of many people suffering with severe betrayal trauma in the future. Many ex-members believe that the book ‘Mirror of Dharma’ was ghost written by senior NKT. When members trust a figure whose organisation then deceives them or treats them in an abusive way this can lead to severe betrayal trauma. Encountering abuse within an organisation that frames itself as a compassionate one is likely to create extreme cognitive dissonance where the victim is left feeling highly confused. Those who accept disturbing revelations about their leader are faced with a dilemma: either their teacher wasn’t enlightened, in which case they have been conned, or enlightenment isn’t what they thought, which can be even more distressing (Carreon, 2019).

2.17. The metaphor of family

According to Kay (1997), NKT students have reported that living in a dharma centre is crucial during a time ‘*when traditional concepts of community and society seem to be breaking down, when relationships are becoming increasingly disharmonious*’. Another claimed that ‘*Living in a community fulfils social needs I think all of us have and which are almost impossible to fulfil in an increasingly fragmented and individualistic society*’. Adverts for residents suggest that the centres are ‘supportive

spiritual communities’ and there is no mention that you must attend at least one class per week that contains doctrine.

**Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation
Centre Thornby**1 Jul at 12:35 • 🌐

Change your life: come and live in a Kadampa spiritual community

Work/life balance

Come for a short or long-term stay and enjoy having the cafe, spiritual programme and gardens in your own home! Continue with your career but live in a peaceful place, close to Northampton and Rugby for job opportunities

Spiritual growth

Many opportunities to meditate and study, including general classes and Teacher Training Programme with Kadam Bridget Heyes, and the chance to learn Buddhist art with Kadam Chris Heyes.

Community living

Live in a supportive and harmonious community, where you can volunteer in gardening projects and learn new skills while helping in the cafe, on reception, or at meditation courses.

Many ex-members are non-Buddhists who moved into centres following a relationship breakdown or experience of homelessness, believing that they would find peace there, only to later find themselves further exploited and traumatised. Testimonies reveal that many people do not find the communities supportive, and they found that they lacked a sense of community at all. The primary metaphor that is used within the organisation for describing the NKT is that of the family. According to Bell (2002), there is no doubt that despite the rhetoric around the notion of community (sangha) people can feel isolated within Buddhist groups.

‘Life in Bardsea was horribly lonely. The village is small, most people drive off to work all day, and those that are left are the elderly, who don’t go out much. I had hoped that going to Manjushri centre would be enough, but it turned out to be the icing on the cake of great loneliness.’ (Anonymous testimony ‘A day in the life of The New Kadampa Tradition’).

‘The sense of community was almost non-existent and the atmosphere was cold and indifferent. Worse still, there were many instances I observed of careless, ego-driven behaviour that got me wondering if any of this so-called spiritual practice was actually

authentic at all' (Linda Ciardiello, 'It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult').

Given the practices encourage people to practice invalidation of their own and others' emotions, to ignore any trauma, spiritually bypass anger, and enable abusive behaviours, this is likely to lead to toxic dynamics and further trauma. Stein (2017) asserts that contrary to public perception, the key experience of belonging to a totalist group is isolation, not of community or comradeship. The experience is usually of isolation from the outside world, isolation from an authentic relationship to others within the group due to the groupspeak and rigid rules, and isolation from their true self due to the dissociation that is created. Whilst the loaded language, group chanting and trance states give the impression of loving unity, the follower is isolated in many ways.

2.18. Sexuality

I cannot comment personally on Highest Yoga Tantra as I was not a practitioner and it's quite difficult to talk to people who were about their practice. The New Kadampa Tradition website states:

'In Action Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by looking at a visualised goddess, and then transforms that bliss into the path. In Performance Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by exchanging smiles with the goddess, and in Yoga Tantra, by holding hands with her and so forth. In Highest Yoga Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by imagining sexual embrace with a consort and at advanced stages, by engaging in actual embrace; and then transforms that bliss into the spiritual path. It should be noted however that it is very difficult to use great bliss as a method for attaining enlightenment, and if we are able to do so we have indeed attained a formidable accomplishment. As the great Mahasiddha Saraha said 'Everyone is excited by copulation, but very few can transform that bliss into the spiritual path'.

In hindsight I believe I was objectified more than usual living at Nagarjuna KMC, by both male and female practitioners, who sometimes referred to me as a 'sexy Dakini'. A monk posted the below image on his Facebook page, as an example of how NKT practitioners objectify women as 'Dakinis'.



In order to cope with sexual urges some members imagine the object of their desire as sacks of flesh, pus, bile and bones. One member told me that they imagined the object of their desire as roadkill in order to suppress their sexual desires. Many NKT members still date each other, whilst attempting to imagine each other as ‘empty of inherent existence’.

A testimony reveals that a monk was told that all the ordained sangha masturbate after breaking his vows in this way to try and get himself expelled.

‘So there is no celibacy in the NKT ordained community – and this is when my mind became so entrenched in absolute terror – but terror of remaining there – as I was assigned another monk to ‘help me’ in my celibacy – and this turned out to be that if I did not masturbate myself – it was okay, the expectation was to ‘help each other’ – not a comfortable concept – he now (K Cho) runs and manages a prominent centre in Rome, so my mind was made up! (Testimony by Peter Graham Dryburgh, ‘When its more than abuse’).

3. The use of coercive control to encourage live-in members and volunteers to self-neglect

There are many factors which I believe contribute to the neglect of current resident’s mental and physical health, and many overlap. The factors I believe that contribute to the neglect of residents’ mental health include:

- Lack of understanding in management, inability to spot warning signs of deterioration
- Insistence that kadam dharma holds all the answers to all mental and physical health problems

- Lack of consideration for which teachings are suitable for whom at what times
- The encouragement to focus on understanding emptiness before mastering basic mindfulness skills or treating obvious mental health difficulties
- The encouragement to bypass emotional pain and to 'rejoice' in the spiritual bypassing of painful emotions in the group
- The use of fear, guilt and misplaced loyalty through the teachings to overwork people
- The lack of compassion or support for people who become burnt out or mentally unwell as a direct result of the stress of being involved with the NKT
- Living in close quarters with many people who have mental health difficulties, trauma, and who are repressing their emotions
- The risk of vulnerable people being exploited by those with narcissistic or sociopathic personality traits, who have easy access to them
- The potential misuse of teachings on destroying self-cherishing, perceiving no faults and having gratitude for being abused
- The encouragement to attend as many empowerments and teachings as possible in order to support the tradition or the teacher
- The pressure to attend Highest Yoga Tantra teachings, which include vows to remain loyal to Kelsang Gyatso for life (and future lives)
- The use of fear, guilt and flattery to prevent people from leaving the NKT
- Discouragement of play and fun for relaxation

The admin director at the centre where I lived admitted to me that she did not understand mental health at all and yet she was convinced that she completely understood 'the mind'. There is no one in the centres that is responsible for safeguarding or highlighting potential risks or a deterioration in peoples' mental health. I believe this to be neglectful given there are many people with severe mental health and learning difficulties living in NKT dharma centres. I witnessed several clearly mentally unwell people being encouraged to follow 'the path' as the answer to their problems with no questions asked regarding whether they were seeking appropriate treatment. Whilst it is the individuals' responsibility to seek appropriate mental health support for their pre-existing conditions, I do believe that the NKT actively discourage trusting anyone outside of the organisation as they are considered to have more 'ordinary' minds. Kelsang Gyatso's books state that total reliance on the spiritual guide alone is necessary, and that outside influences are 'degenerate'. A person who takes these teachings literally could be at risk of abandoning any western mental health care they may already have been receiving. They are unlikely to seek psychological therapy and may have to keep this quiet if they are ordained.

'Any mention of the role of psychotherapy in helping people was always met with scorn – 'just abandon self-cherishing and cherish others instead and all will be well – Gesh-la's Dharma is all you need'. But it isn't'. (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello, 'It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult').

Due to the NKT's teachings on enduring suffering, and taking on the suffering of all other living beings, they do not usually view self-care as important. You are actively encouraged to suffer more to help destroy your 'self-cherishing mind', as it is considered possible to transform suffering into the spiritual path. This means that when you inevitably experience a deterioration in your mental health, you cannot turn to anyone in teaching or management positions for grounded, validating advice. I was told following a panic attack that I should be working harder at feeling nothing, by meditating on how everything arises from my own mind. I was told by a general programme teacher that I had an impure mind and that I must have done something abusive in a previous life to be experiencing abuse in the present. Luckily, due to my mental health background I knew this was inappropriate and I left. However a person who is more vulnerable, who is indoctrinated and does not understand mental health is likely to berate themselves for being so spiritually ineffective and to strain even harder at a time of distress or during a trauma reaction.

The factors that I believe contribute to the neglect of residents' physical health include:

- The denial of the existence of the body other than as simply an imputation of the mind
- Absence of mindfulness of the body practices within their teachings
- Lack of physical exercise facilities
- Banning staff from attending yoga
- Encouraging people to believe that body sensations such as worry or anxiety have no meaning
- The long term effects of spiritual bypassing and emotional repression on physical health
- Lack of understanding of burnout and what is required to recover from this
- The use of fear, guilt and misplaced loyalty through the teachings to overwork people in order to 'cherish' the centre over their health
- The ongoing effect of emotional and spiritual abuse on the body
- Discouragement of play and fun for relaxation

Survivors frequently report a high level of stress and burnout and I also witnessed and experienced this. Those that live within the centres report severe burnout due to the combination of the teachings with overworking, lack of physical health care and exercise, rest and relaxation.

'My' admin office (we weren't encouraged to call anything our own) was in the basement where I could relax from the public side of the 'mission'; Gesh-la would hold up the example of Christian missionaries. I felt on call 24/7, my Admin, teaching, and centre retreat and study schedule was relentless..' (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

'I always felt a lot of guilt in my practice, that I was never doing enough. Every time I saw Geshe-la speak, he would give us a new practice and tell us to do it every day. And I really tried. I had all the hours of the day mapped out, and my daily practice had become intense. Combined with the stress of TTP and teaching my GP class, I became like a time-bomb. I was doing too much and pushing myself too much. But I didn't feel like there was any other way. I was frightened of entering the lower realms, dieing before my time. And I'd made all sorts of commitments to different practices, and I didn't want to break them. I felt trapped'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Ordained too early').

According to Laor (2013) a state of fervor can lead to overworking and self-neglect due to the sense of responsibility for the group and the 'mission'. Due to their responsibilities and inability to get away from the place in which they volunteer, residents do not have a work life balance. They often reported to me that they had hardly any time to even meditate, which was the main reason they had moved in. Due to the pressure from the admin directors to work for the centre, and teachings which encourage 'cherishing' the centre more than yourself, those who already struggle with assertiveness and self-care are likely to overwork and neglect themselves severely. According to Inform *'Some former members have said that they felt pressured to devote the majority of their time to teaching and supporting the centre and were not given enough time to pursue their own spiritual development, relationships with friends and family or earn a living, while still being expected to pay for accommodation and teachings'*. As joy experienced through 'worldly' activities is discouraged, residents often experience a lack of play and fun activities for relaxation. Admin directors are known to actively discourage residents and volunteers from engaging in fun activities in case it interferes with their dedication to their centre duties.

'The NKT's renunciatory work regime has also given rise to institutional effects that are far less clearly advantageous for a movement so intent on expansion – namely, the rendering of the movement's consecrated missionary life unfeasible or unsustainable for many adherents who may otherwise get and stay on board. In this sense, I believe the NKT's missionary monasticism is closely related to some of the group's more visible internal fault lines: labour

shortage, burnout, and disgruntled ex-members'. (Please note that this PhD student was raised within the NKT and dedicates his thesis to Kelsang Gyatso. I believe this is why he refers to ex-members as 'disgruntled' rather than a more empathetic world such as 'traumatised' (Emory-Moore, 2019).

Whilst it is the individual's responsibility to engage in self-care, this appears to become very difficult due to indoctrination, lack of resources, encouragement, and active discouragement of physical activities such as yoga. I was told that the Education Programme Coordinator was banned from going to yoga due to its roots in Hinduism. She told me that her flexibility and strength had significantly deteriorated during her time in this role due to this ban which was placed on her by the admin director. Many long standing NKT practitioners believe that their body is simply manifested by their mind. I witnessed many people obviously neglect their physical health, which I believe was linked to this belief. Trying to 'overcome' their emotions and ignoring their intuition is also likely to contribute to burnout.

When I spoke to the admin director about my concerns regarding burnout I was told '*Geshla says it's a meaningful tired*' and other black and white comments such as '*being here makes you happy*'. Ex-members report that flattery and guilt is used within the organisation to dump responsibilities on volunteers and residents. Due to the teachings suggesting that working '*for the benefit of all living beings*' is the meaning of a Buddhist life, it is my opinion that it is very easy to manipulate people in this way using their misplaced loyalty and trauma bonds to the organisation.

Several ex-members have reported to myself that they were bed-bound or catatonic when they became burnt-out due to their involvement.

'I remember waking up one morning in the centre and my body felt almost paralysed. It took a huge effort of will just to lift my arms or open my mouth to speak. Another resident who had become my friend called the doctor who came straight away- seemed she was concerned that I had had a stroke' (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello, 'It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult').

I had three months signed off work sick after leaving and another three months after the defamation attacks on me by senior NKT. At one point I found it very difficult to speak. I believe my burnout was due to the combination of overworking, some spiritual bypassing, psychological abuse from other members, grief, trauma bonds to a few members of the group, and the defamation attacks.

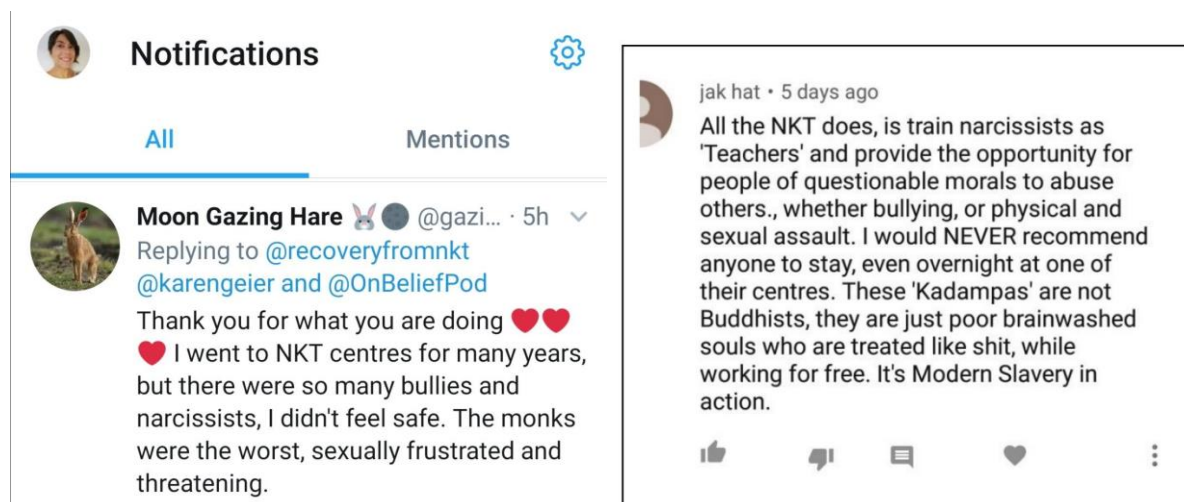
4. Abuse

4.1. Abuse enabling, minimising and victim blaming

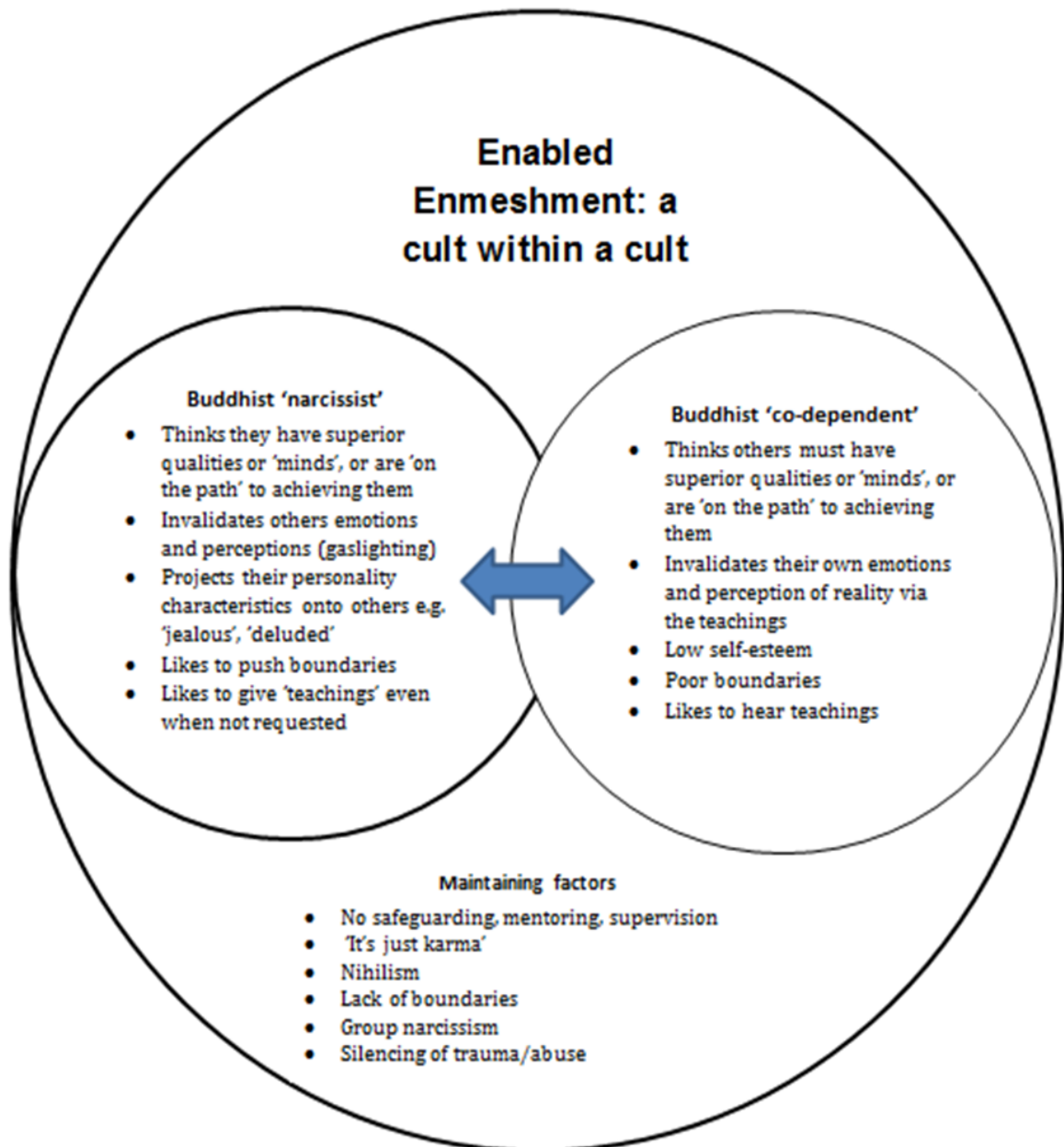
According to Welwood (2000) those with co-dependent traits can often mistake a co-dependent kind of self-negation with true selflessness, whilst a narcissistic person could hide behind narcissistic defences whilst believing they are destroying their ego.

'Kadampa Buddhism is probably great skills training for narcissists and people on power trips. But I don't think it's helpful to women like me who are struggling to find their voice and establish personal boundaries' (Anonymous Testimony, 'Why I no longer study Kadampa Buddhism').

Many ex-members report feeling bullied and patronised by NKT teachers:



Narcissistic abuse was a term coined in 1999 by Sam Vaknin as the name of his support group for victims of narcissists. Reported symptoms include depression, anxiety, hyper-vigilance, stress, insomnia, post-traumatic stress symptoms and exhaustion. A diagram which displays how NKT practices and the cultic environment could lead those with co-dependent traits to become enmeshed with those with narcissistic traits is below.



Spiritual organisations often rely on their own teachings to address abuse, and assume that if everyone continues practicing diligently that it will eventually stop (e.g. 'we all still have delusions.....but one day if we all keep practicing we will all be free of delusions and therefore bad behaviour'). However the group's ideology itself may be hiding and even rationalising abuse. NKT members are encouraged to view their spiritual guide and his disciples as perfect, and to believe that they only perceive faults in others because they have an 'impure mind'.

'Gesh-la told us that whether a teacher 'is a real Buddha or not depends upon the student's faith and view, not on the actual qualifications of the teacher' and this applied to any NKT teacher, including Resident Teachers, and whether we were listening or teaching. Students would 'meet Gesh-la through us'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's

intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community’).

Due to the encouragement to view all human beings as faultless, including your abuser, and your own feelings as ‘empty of inherent existence’, it is very difficult for people to label abuse as abuse. The Atisha’s cook story is used to suggest that an abusive person could be an enlightened being manifesting as a difficult person in order to teach the practitioner by causing them more suffering.

Anger is viewed by the NKT as a delusion that must be ‘eradicated’ and ‘purified’, rather than as a healthy reaction to having your boundaries crossed, or as a healthy phase in recovering from an abusive experience. On top of this, if you are abused or experience a traumatic event, this is considered a direct result of your previous negative actions (your karma). Your reaction to the abuse (e.g. anxiety and trauma) is therefore your fault as it is created by you (your karma and your current mind), and not the fault of the abuser.



Geshe Kelsang Gyatso @G... · 25 Oct ✓

It makes no sense to be patient when someone else is abused, but impatient when we are the object of abuse. All abuse arises from mistaken conceptions and therefore there is no reason to respond to it with anger.

According to Be Scofield, cult reporter, in her podcast series called ‘Toxic Spirituality’ this kind of belief system is ‘a narcissists dream’. In addition, developing a ‘negative mind’ towards your abuser would be viewed as an action that would accumulate negative karma, which could cause anxiety. According to Anders (2019a) it is often very challenging for victims of spiritual abuse within Buddhist groups to disclose abuse for these reasons. Misplaced loyalty also makes it harder for people to perceive and acknowledge abusive behaviours, and to leave abusive situations.

Ex-members report that when they attempted to speak up about abuse they were told variations of:

- ‘We have to let people make mistakes’
- ‘We all still have delusions’
- ‘If we expected teachers to hold moral discipline all the time we would have no teachers’
- ‘Everything is empty’
- ‘You must have done something similar in a previous life/it’s your karma’
- ‘Practice compassion’ (for your abuser)

This could be considered a severe form of gaslighting.

'Soon, needing to talk to someone I trusted, I 'disturbed the harmony of the community' by raising serious concerns about my centre with a senior monk in the NKT. No longer deserving of the Guru's kindness', I was told to stop teaching and admin work immediately, not to talk to anyone and to leave the centre as soon as possible. However I should 'continue teaching on the Teacher Training Programme' and could 'perhaps teach again' if I 'behaved properly'. I was later told by that same Resident Teacher that I had 'needed the shock' of becoming homeless to destroy my pride.' (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

When I reported the spiritual abuse and misogynistic behaviour from an NKT teacher towards myself and a volunteer who attended his teachings to my 'National Spiritual Director' I was told that 'enduring suffering was my practice' and that if I wanted to teach I would need to practice this. I believe she suggested I was weak for leaving when she stated that *'some women have to live with their ex partners due to finances and children'*. I believe she wished me to stay and to teach as the NKT wish to attract more young people.

Due to the NKT's views on abuse, many report that their attempts to report abuse were dismissed or blamed on their karma. The below is a Facebook post by a senior monk and teacher within the NKT, sharing his view on how to cope with abusive behaviour. He suggests that controlling your thoughts by blaming your karma will allow you to avoid suffering from this abusive experience. In my opinion, he also suggests here that on some level, this woman, deserves to be emotionally abused and threatened based on her previous actions.




NKT members have recently begun to speak up about how they experience this teaching (as dismissive and lacking in empathy):


There are teachers who know they are hurting students and do it on purpose. I recently heard a teacher say that he likes to find and "push people's buttons" so he can "help" them see their delusions. It's emotionally manipulative and deliberately hurtful. He went on to say that he had consulted with other teachers, some of whom held the same view. He also tried to excuse it by saying that Geshe-la does it, as if he has the same wisdom as Geshe-la. This kind of thinking has to stop. It's not excusable. A dharma teacher should at least have the same basic consideration as any normal person walking down the street.



Teachers have been observed to defend this position however, by insisting that it is not dismissive or unkind, but instead a statement of fact:


 **Kelsang Pagpa** 
I don't think that saying 'it's their karma' in any way implies that they deserve their suffering. It is simply a statement of truth and it doesn't imply that the speaker is uncaring or unsympathetic, although it's often seen that way.

1d Like  5

 /
If it's seen or felt that way, why do it? Saying "it's their karma" is dismissive of a person's suffering. You're defending it because you're one of the people who says it and you don't want to be wrong.

1d Like  2

 **Kelsang Pagpa** 
I'm not defending anything; it's simply a fact that such a statement is not dismissive and does not imply that the person deserves their suffering - that's all projection on the part of other people. There's no benefit to assigning negative motives to people's statements.

1d Like  2

Kelsang Pagpa when your intention is negative, it should be assigned as such. You know what I mean, you're just pretending you don't. P.S. bravo for not deleting this comment.

The bystander effect, which becomes stronger in larger groups, reduces individual members' sense of personal responsibility and accountability to help the victim (Hortensius & Gelder, 2014). Herman (2015, p.7) argues that it is tempting to take the side of the perpetrator, as all the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. The victim on the other hand battles against our desire to see, hear and speak no evil, and asks us to share their pain. Followers have learnt to use the teachings in order to attempt to regulate their emotions, so they use the teachings when they are in pain due to experiencing doubts, shame or guilt.

According to Bell (2002) the isolation felt in the 'sangha' is exaggerated when anxiety about being ostracized causes people to refrain from challenging the behaviour of others. To speak up can feel like betraying the idealized notions of sangha and spiritual friendship that attracted the person to the group in the first place. I have been told that resident teachers are asked to sign non-disclosure agreements regarding their experience with the NKT, which would also be designed to instil fear in the victim. According to Shaw (2014) *'Although we can compare the betrayal and violation that occurs in cults to some aspects of rape and incest, what truly corresponds is the lack of empathetic witnessing many former cultists experience with friends, family, and therapists as they make their way through postcult recovery'*. The bystander effect is strengthened further by the teachings, inhibiting some people from displaying empathetic responses they would usually display. Social support is one of the biggest predictors of recovery from trauma, and so victims are denied being heard and validated by group members, making it more likely they will develop long lasting PTSD (Anders 2019b).

It is my opinion that the NKT as a system has the characteristics of a hero narcissist. The traits of someone with narcissistic personality disorder include:

- Believing they are superior to everyone else, despite the fact they have no special talent
- An exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Putting you down or criticizing you to make themselves feel superior
- Telling you everything is your fault
- Getting angry if you disagree with them
- Lacking empathy for others, intolerance of other people's needs and feelings
- Being envious of others or believing that other people are jealous of them
- Taking advantage of others and exploiting people for their own gain
- Isolating you from others, such as your friends and family

4.2. Financial abuse

Ex-members have reported that they were encouraged to give large amounts of money to pay rent and to fund other followers to attend teachings prior to their own.

‘My NKT teacher, who was the NKT representative in my country, convinced me to move into the NKT center and to pay rent – about three times as much for a small room as I had paid for a whole apartment. When I complained, she said, ‘You should think about how much you value following this path.’ (Testimony by Tenzin Peljor, ‘How I got sucked into a cult’)

‘After my centre rooms rent went up, the rate set by the Resident Teacher, I was so poor that I once had to cook the rice from my mandalakit, picking out all the precious stones before I could boil it for my daughter’ (Testimony by Carol McQuire, ‘Realising the Guru’s intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New Kadampa Tradition community’).

‘As time went on, my responsibilities matched my financial contribution, on times where I could afford to take out loans from my own bank, my responsibilities were great, and the respect I appeared to be shown matched this; on months where I had to pay back more to the bank than I could to the ‘centre’. I was almost shunned and kept to the side – but I did so willingly as it meant I was balancing the negative karma from both this life and past lives, and who would not wish for this, especially in the road to enlightenment – which after the HYT empowerment would only take 3 years, 3 months and 3 days – yet I never gained this empowerment as I always paid for others to do so, generating the karma for myself to do so one day.’ (Testimony by Peter Graham Dryburgh)

Ex-members report being encouraged to commit benefit fraud in order to pay their rent.

‘Pretty much all of the residents were on the fringes of society: drug-addicts, the severely mentally ill, alcoholics, those from broken homes or marriages and they were being used by cold, smug and arguably cluster B personality leaders for free labour and their dole money. Hardly anyone was stable in terms of income which makes you dependent on the centre. In fact, there was an implicit culture of benefit fiddling’. (Anonymous testimony ‘My NKT Hell’).

Some ex-members report financial abuse, for example lending items and money to the NKT and later being told that it will not be returned. This is more commonly reported in German centres.

‘The next step for me was that I was asked to lend my computer to the NKT office. When I asked for it back (to do my final university exams), I was told that I had donated the

computer and I must be confused about what I had said. My NKT teacher explained to me, 'Sometimes we do not remember what we say, you know...' It was explained to me that this academic study is worldly and unnecessary, a distraction from pure Dharma'. (Testimony by Tenzin Peljor, 'The story of a New Kadampa Tradition monk or How I got sucked into a cult')

'I was asked to give a loan. I gave them all my savings and later when I asked for it back they said I should be patient. They made me feel that I was addicted to my money and that it was inappropriate to ask for it back'. (Testimony by Tenzin Peljor, 'The story of a New Kadampa Tradition monk or How I got sucked into a cult').

'Luckily for me we could not afford to buy a centre, otherwise I would have sunk my savings into it and lost them, as has unfortunately happened to many others. However, I did give up my career path to work full time for the growth of the centre, and with my teacher's blessings began to sign on the dole instead' (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello 'It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult').

4.3. Alleged sexual abuse and violation of internal rules

The NKT have no safeguarding policies and procedures despite being registered as a charity. Whilst I have been informed that at times the NKT has expelled people, senior NKT members have been allowed to teach again after alleged sexual abuse, which violates their own internal rules about teachers not being allowed to teach again after breaking their vows. It has been alleged that tantric sex ideas have been used to justify senior monks and teachers having sex with nuns and lay people. I believe the potential risk of exploitation is indicated in a YouTube video by survivor Andrea Balance titled 'You do not have to have sex with your teacher'.

'After it became known that the then current, ordained Deputy Spiritual Director of the NKT had allegedly engaged in sexual misconduct with nuns I had my last conversation with an NKT nun who was a resident teacher and a friend. She told me that unlike ourselves, Gesh-la's disciples who had sex with their students wouldn't go to hell'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

'Scandal had fallen once more on the NKT – Gen-la Samden, a monk and very high teacher, had been having sexual relations with nuns and lay women in the name of tantric practice. My resident teacher was one of those nuns. I found out at this point that what Samden did

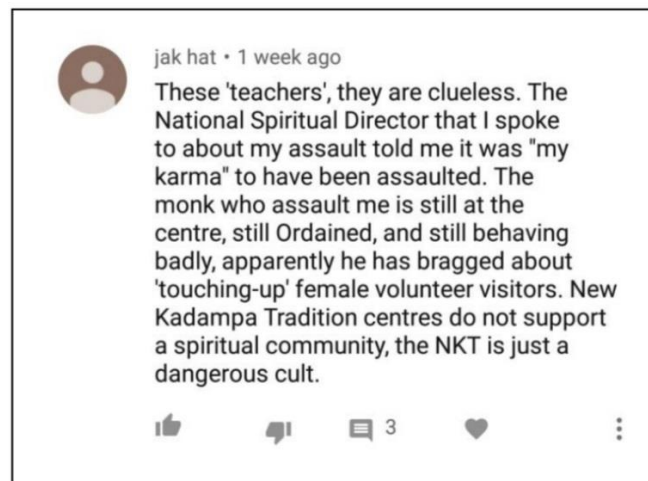
was exactly the same as what Neil Elliot, also serving as Gen-la, had done some years previously.’ (Anonymous testimony, ‘A day in the life of The New Kadampa Tradition’).

‘The last time I visited Madhyamaka centre the news had just broken that Gen Thubten (Gen-la) had been forced to disrobe, under threat from one of the ‘in-crowd’ elite group, that if he did not, she would go to the press and reveal that he had been breaking his vows of chastity with impunity, having ‘tantric’ sex with basically anyone he fancied. Seems he had tried it on with her, despite the fact that she was actually married too. Worse still, it was said that Gesh-la knew about it, but because Thubten Gyatso was considered ‘special’, his actions would not accrue bad karma.’ (Testimony by Linda Ciardiello ‘ It slowly dawned on me that I had been sucked into a cult’).

Despite asking new residents to sign a written agreement regarding sexual misconduct, there does not appear to be a rule about residents and teachers not having sexual relations with vulnerable working visitors, or with those who attend their teachings. Many other Buddhist groups discourage teachers from having sexual relations with those who attend their teachings due to power imbalances. No background checks are done on teachers, meaning they could have a history of criminal behaviour and have access to vulnerable people attending their teachings and looking for solutions to their distress.

I believe that the NKT do not believe safeguarding is important because it contradicts their teachings on emptiness. To implement rules to protect vulnerable people from being abused by those with power over them would be to acknowledge that abusers have stable personality characteristics and display patterns of abusive behaviour which are not ‘empty of inherent existence’ or a reflection of their Buddha nature. Implementing safeguarding would also acknowledge that abuse has caused and could continue to cause long term damage and trauma that does not in fact assist the victim in achieving enlightenment. Inform have acknowledged that former members have reported this.

‘Some former-members have expressed concern at feeling encouraged to develop a practice of treating Kelsang Gyatso and his authorised teachers as fully enlightened and to consider what they later determined to be ‘unethical behaviour’ as faults of their own perception. In particular, some former-members have expressed distress on how allegations of sexual activity by influential ordained members have been dealt with by the organisation’ (Inform).



5. Institutionalisation and lack of capacity

It is my opinion that those who live in NKT dharma centres for periods of more than a few months are likely to start becoming institutionalised, meaning that their skills for functioning in the outside world decrease. I would argue that due to the vulnerability of those who get drawn into the NKT, plus the 'mind control' factors and guru devotion, that they may lack capacity to make decisions about their own welfare at times. The Mental Capacity Act sets out a 2-stage test of capacity: 1) Does the person have an impairment of their mind or brain, whether as a result of an illness, or external factors such as alcohol or drug use? 2) Does the impairment mean the person is unable to make a specific decision when they need to? I would argue that a combination of pre-existing attachment trauma and other mental health difficulties, plus the spiritual practices, doctrine, fervor and group mentality, is likely to be an 'impairment on the mind' as defined in the Mental Capacity Act.

6. Centre-hopping, 'cult-hopping' and lack of economic resources

Inform state that they received a number of reports from individuals who were asked to leave NKT accommodation at short notice, and they would encourage those thinking of living residentially to think about possible implications and to seek an understanding of their legal rights as tenants. Leah (another interviewee from Emery-Moore's thesis), a former NKT worker whose sponsorship did not end well, described her experience as being '*dropped as a dirty rag*' when her labour became dispensable. It is my opinion and that of many survivors that as soon as you are not able to volunteer effectively you are considered a burden, and are bullied until you leave or asked directly to leave with little warning. There is no recognition from the NKT that their maltreatment and neglect of you may have played any role in your mental or physical health deterioration, and there is no

compensation. Rather than leaving the NKT completely, some switch between centres when their relationships at a particular centre have broken down.

Several long term residents told me that due to their practice and the rate at which people come and go *'I forget about someone very shortly after they leave'*. Considering the use of the metaphor of the family a person is likely to feel abandoned. A healthy family would not forget you exist after you leave the family home. The teachings which mention affectionate love can suggest unconditional love, however renunciation and non-attachment teachings are used to encourage forgetting about those who leave. Ex-member Carmelo Russo reports in his video testimony that he was told he should not talk to or about previous members as it might *'create the causes for him to be disrobed in a future life'*.

Due to pre-existing financial difficulties and further financial exploitation within the group, those who are deeply involved are likely to stay due to lack of financial resources. I have now received several emails from current residents of NKT centres who wish to leave however do not have enough resources to pay for deposits and rent. A fundraising campaign for those economically abused and exploited by so-called Buddhist groups on Dr Miriam Ander's website indicates the extent of this issue.

'The Job Centre were coming down hard on me for not getting any interviews and with the looming threat of a benefit freeze, I was facing homelessness. When I started seriously planning hanging myself I realised I had to get the hell out of that nuthouse. I hit the road one morning and have been trying to rebuild my sanity ever since.' (Anonymous survivor testimony 'My NKT Hell').

Many ex-members go back after a break, even after promising themselves they would not return. They report intense loneliness and difficulties with independent living skills when they attempt to leave which leads them to return. Many survivors 'cult-hop' to other Buddhist organisations, looking for another less abusive group, set of teachings or answers. Ex-members may still be indoctrinated and could be vulnerable to further cultic environments and controlling relationships.

7. Gaslighting and character assassination of former members and whistleblowers

Those who leave, even if they do not raise concerns or disclose how they developed PTSD, tend to be character assassinated by those who remain. An 'Ad Hominem attack' is an attack on someone's character or mental stability as a way of discrediting them in order to avoid engaging with their argument. The admin director at Nagarjuna KMC told me that people leave because they 'lack

patience in their spiritual path' or have 'developed an angry mind and are blaming the centre' or are mentally ill. The criticism of former members serves to reinforce members' views that they are on the right path, and that their version of dharma remains faultless. Thus when members leave and are perceived as weak in some way, it can serve to strengthen the group cohesion and belief that they are collectively stronger, more 'fortunate' and more pure. For those who live in the centres, they also may unconsciously defend the centre because their security is linked to ensuring that it carries on running. Sometimes the more the current member sees what is happening, the harder they work to reframe it in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance. According to Remski (2019, location 1232), *'in the most severe cases, this can lead to statements that sound internally split to the point of schizophrenia'*. I believe this is reflected in the trolling that I receive. These statements usually contradict the teachings and have inconsistencies within them.

According to Remski (2019, location 1219) what the members of high-demand groups do in order to maintain the integrity of the group's narrative harmonizes with the ideology and awe for the leader which is used to encourage the victim to suppress their truth. Remski (2019, location 1063) asserts that if we really listen to an abuse survivor we may feel doubt, shame and guilt. Some victims might welcome this suppression for a while, if it protects them from the knowledge that they have been abused. Part of them is conditioned by dissociation, shame and group pressure to deny that abuse has occurred, however another part of them may be acutely aware that it was abuse. The follower usually pushes the teachings on to the survivor, which is likely to gaslight and trigger the survivor. Both the survivor and the follower are traumatised, and engaging in conversation tends to be futile and distressing for both parties.

7.1. Character assassinated as mentally unstable

Many survivors report that management blame the person's pre-existing mental health condition or their karma for any deterioration without acknowledging any possibility that people at the centre exploited, neglected or abused them. In my opinion it is possible to blame people's minds so that the centre does not have to take responsibility for safeguarding. This could be easy to achieve as an ex-member is indeed likely to have been recruited when they were vulnerable and to be struggling with some symptoms of post-traumatic stress when they leave.



Gerhard Reichmann • 3 hours ago (edited)

Meditation and Dharma is not good at all for people with obvious mental problems like you. I find your presentation pathetic and ego driven...

Sorry but I don't think that this helps anybody.

But of course one point is totally correct: Dharma centers are filled with unstable people with mental issues. Professional help would be much more appropriate than Meditation in this case.



empty bliss • 10 minutes ago

Thriving after leaving the New Kadampa Tradition I wish you freedom from your paranoia that I am putting you down. I hope you can find some mental clarity.



empty bliss • 1 hour ago

Just take care of your mental health, you seem to be heading towards a nervous breakdown.

7.2. Character assassinated as obsessed

Ex-members who have come to realise just how psychologically damaging the group is often develop a passion for speaking up about the harm being done, which can appear as if they have developed an obsession. Due to this, they risk appearing like an anti-NKT fanatic. It could be argued that due to the fanatical nature of the group, and its tendency to dominate the internet with its advertising, ex-members are forced to become anti-NKT fanatics in order to stand a chance of warning people that there are potential risks associated with involvement with this group. This desire to warn people about the NKT is likely to be more intense for those who experienced severe abuse and trauma within the group themselves. Current members and outsiders who have never been involved in the group are likely to view the concerned ex-member as obsessed and mentally unstable, thus adding to social isolation and to feelings of shame. As a result current members tend to tell ex-members to 'move on' or 'let go' without making a testimony or speaking publicly about potential risks.

Enough now. You're only hurting yourself. Please get some help and move on with your life.



empty bliss • 8 hours ago

Just let go, or you'll end up like all the other survivors, trapped in the past, unable to move on. It is not a support group, it is a hate group encouraging prejudice on the basis of religion.



1



5





Alex Black • 53 minutes ago

@Recovery from The New Kadampa

Tradition I'm not "triggered" dear. I'm wholly disappointed is all. If Buddhist theory and practice doesn't connect with you, just walk away from it - or are you saying you're just using this 'survivor' angle/NKT smearing for clout online? cos' that's what it looks like. Keep it cute, or put it on mute.



Jason Wolf • 1 day ago

Thriving after leaving the New Kadampa Tradition i agree- your blaming the teachings; your blaming Buddha and that's absurd! You'll never find a path then. So your views could be said for any Buddhist path, not just the NKT. But no, all your videos go back to blame and criticise the NKT, but in-fact the problem is coming from within. You seem totally absorbed into the NKT. What are your aims? What are your goals? Move on with your life or you will pass into the next life with this bitter, revenge and obsession on your mental continuum! Thats sad.

Remski (2019, location 921) argues that allowing a space for survivor voices to be heard begins to carve a space for the trauma of collective silence to be healed. The more voices that were previously silenced come forward, the more the presumptuous, victim-blaming and misogynistic voices reluctantly retreat. Anders (2019a) argues that so-called Buddhist groups suppress and deny feminine qualities, and particularly silence the voices of women and children. (Note the phrase 'Keep it cute or put in on mute' above. This is misogynistic).

7.3. Character assassinated as spiritually inadequate

The NKT describe those who experienced abuse within the NKT and whom are unhappy about it as 'disgruntled', a word which suggests they are spiritually inadequate, ungrateful and bitter. This reflects their teachings that suffering is empty of existence and at the same time should be viewed as something that can be transformed into the spiritual path. They tend to use the word 'survivors' in inverted commas which suggests that survivors impute (label) themselves as 'survivors'. This of course is true, but suggests that current members believe survivors are exaggerating the extent to which they have suffered as a result of involvement with the NKT. Teachers and ordained members have suggested that they don't believe there is anything that could have traumatised ex-members, or anything that they could possibly need to recover from. When survivors have spoken out online about their PTSD, NKT members quickly comment to suggest that the survivor is avoiding taking responsibility and blaming others when they link their PTSD to their involvement with the NKT.



lunakev • Aug 12, 2018

It makes me sad that Andrea felt so traumatised by her experiences, but Buddhism is about taking responsibility for your own mind and actions, not blaming others.



Jason Wolf • 2 days ago

If you suffer from all that you have mentioned, no wonder you feel that dharma didn't go your way..?! What did you expect? The way you approached this tradition is no different from other organisations. Stop blaming others!!!!!! 🤔

Reporting abuse or stopping to consider whether the spiritual community that you love has a history of abuse is not scaremongering, it is a mature way of discriminating between beliefs, marketing and data. Sometimes denial can be overpowered by empathy for an abuse survivor, which might be more likely if the whistleblower is someone the current member was fond of. Looking for the shadows in what has been idealised by the group can assist members that remain to recognise if they have been caught in unconscious dynamics, however cognitive dissonance and fear of betraying Kelsang Gyatso may mean that the current member betrays the survivor instead. I have received passive aggressive trolling that I believe is from people I lived with using fake identities, suggesting I am inadequate, and that they are disappointed in me. I am now considered a traitor and a spiritual failure.

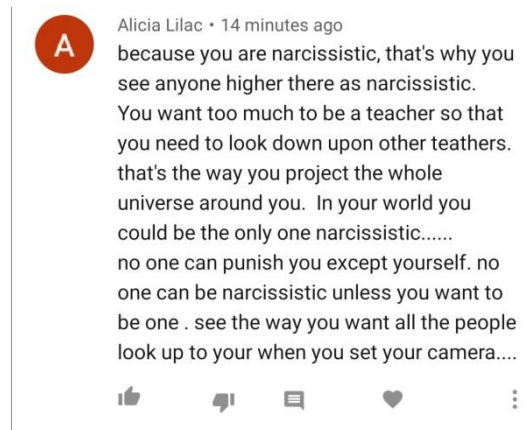
7.4. Character assassinated as a bad Buddhist (and therefore a bad person)

As NKT members tend to believe that outsiders are more 'deluded', the thought of an ex-member abandoning their practice altogether tends to make them think that the ex-member is going to lack become less moral. NKT members therefore suggest that former members are not good Buddhists anymore (suggesting that they are no longer good people).



7.5. Character assassinated as narcissistic

Several NKT members have trolled me stating that the only reason I see narcissism in the NKT is because of my own narcissism ('it's all in your mind'). This comes from their urge to defend the NKT and Kelsang Gyatso plus the teaching that all the qualities you perceive in others are just a conception within your own mind. This argument is used to gaslight people when they point out abusive behaviours and malignant narcissism in others. Cult members do not spot the contradictions in their own arguments. In the below trolling an NKT member states that she perceives me as narcissistic because I filmed myself, which contradicts her own logic that we only perceive narcissism in others because of our own narcissism.



7.6. Character assassinated as fake or false

The NKT have produced propaganda stating that other Buddhist teachers are 'fake'. In my opinion this is because Kelsang Gyatso did not complete his Geshe exams and NKT teachers are taught to 'fake it til you make it', they accuse other people of being fake in order to defend against their shame.



As a result of this I was expecting to be called fake on my website, which began occurring after the defamation website www.dr-michelle-haslam.com used a journalistic style to state I had faked my report. Note the use of fake identities and childish remarks similar to the previously circulated propaganda by Kelsang Pagpa.

Dr Sigmund Freud
August 2, 2019 at 12:20 pm Edit



Dr Robert Harris lays the smackdown on Dr Michele Haslam's fake 'psychological report': <https://dr-michelle-haslam.com>

★ Like

Dr Carl Jung
August 2, 2019 at 2:19 pm Edit



The only thing that is stupid is your fake 'psychological report'. Get yourself a sense of humour!

★ Like

7.7. Gaslighted as having misunderstood Buddhism

Current members tend to believe that any disagreement with the teachings is due to lack of proper understanding (without acknowledging spiritual neglect and lack of mentorship). In the below screenshot, an NKT member pretends to be a follower of the Dalai Lama in order to shame me and suggest I have misunderstood (their other comments reveal they are in fact NKT member, not a follower of the Dalai Lama).

S Shunyata Sukha • 1 week ago
Recovery from The New Kadampa Tradition
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama would never allow this type of abuse to take place. What are your opinions on the rest of Tibetan Buddhism? Every tradition has the same guru devotion teachings on viewing the lama as an emanation of Buddha (this only applies at an annutara yoga tantra level).

S Shunyata Sukha • 5 days ago
Recovery from The New Kadampa Tradition
why is mixing your mind with the lama's mind harmful? When I mix my with the Dalai Lama's mind I experience bliss and voidness. How can the experience of bliss and wisdom be harmful? Did you receive correct instructions on how to do this?

7.8. 'Why didn't you leave sooner?' (character assassinated as stupid)

Several NKT members have trolled me asking me why I did not leave sooner if I was experiencing psychological abuse, stating that they would have known better. This is victim blaming which does not acknowledge power imbalances, the effects of coercive control, the misuse of teachings or the fear of leaving that can develop. Remski (2019, location 1667) states that questions that suggest the victim should have known better 'express rape culture in action'.

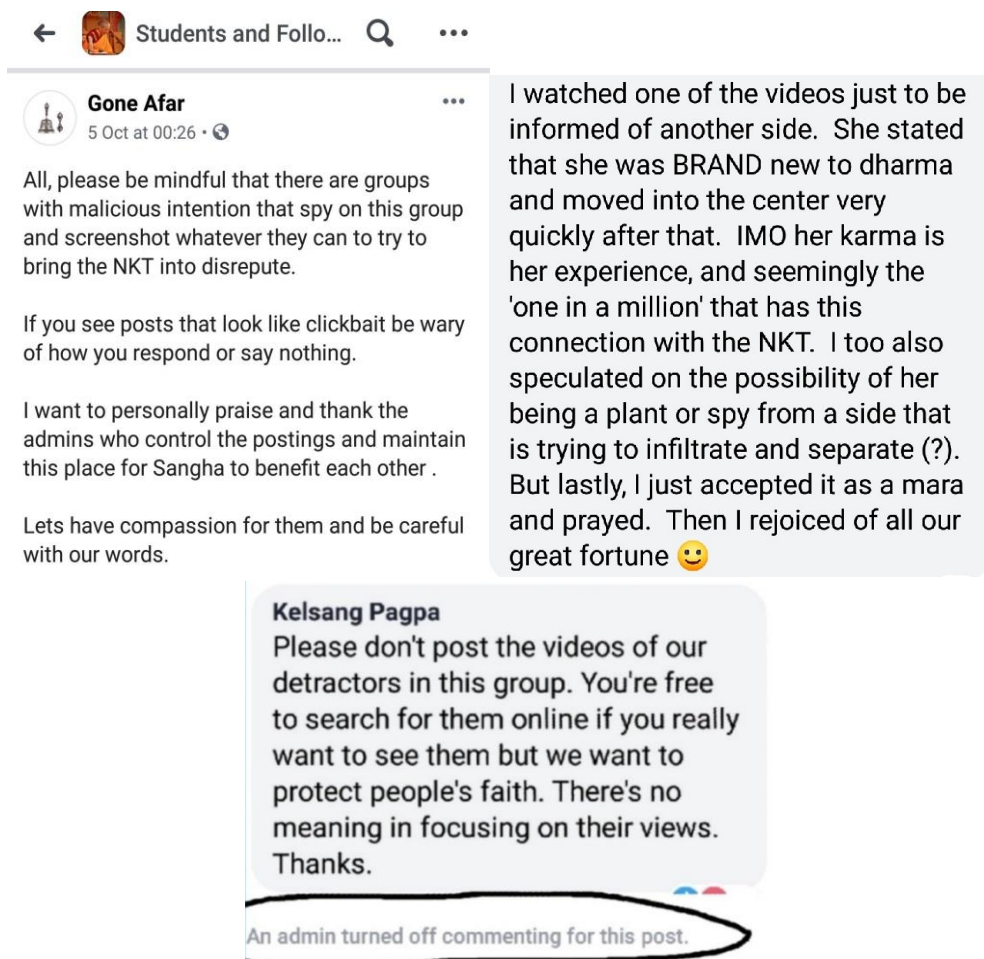


Shunyata Sukha • 2 weeks ago

It sounds like the people you lived with were cold hearted and evil towards you. The only question is why did you stay there for so long? I would have been out of the door the moment somebody tried to show me their version of kindness. We have to be careful before we move into Buddhist communities, Buddhism does contain all of the teachings you mentioned, especially Tibetan groups. It is better to research what Tibetan Buddhism is before we move in with them as they may not meet our expectations.

7.9. Character assassinated as a mara/spy

Kadam dharma can be used to view any obstructions or 'detractors' as maras which must be pacified using the teachings and prayers. Since I released my analysis, senior members have been warning people not to look at posts by former members and to be careful what they say to those who believe they have been traumatised. In my opinion this is purely to protect the reputation of the NKT.



8. Threats to life, health, reputation and livelihood ('Fair Game') from senior NKT

Former members have reported to myself:

- Death threats (e.g. their parents receiving funeral brochures with their names on)
- Being stalked in person by current members and followed
- Legal threats (e.g. Gary Beesley, Oxford University Press, Ashgate, Inform, my workplace)
- Threats to ruin their reputation by 'Indy Hack' for the purpose of ruining their livelihood and discrediting their testimony
- Propaganda created about them by 'Indy Hack' on his website and Twitter account (Tenzin Peljor, Carol McQuire, Kieran Atkins)
- Hacking of their survivor based Twitter accounts and attempts to ban survivor's tweets
- Sabotage of access to mental health services

Many current members are not aware of the attacks on testimony writers. They are not easy to find unless a person does an in-depth online search. Current members often hold a belief that ex-members are affiliates of the Dalai Lama and have a vested interest in defaming the NKT due to this. They therefore may not engage with the content of what ex-members say based on this view. Many also do not look in case it damages their faith.

The ex-member's clarity regarding their abusive experience threatens the group narrative. 'All-good' stories are a sign that the group holds financial gain and expansion as its priority (Remski, 2019, location 1336). According to Inform, the NKT management has responded to cases of public criticism or independent publications from those previously associated with the NKT with threats of legal action although none of these instances have ever reached court. To see these legal threats please visit Tenzin Peljor's website.

A threat received by an ex-member is below:

You have a mortgage, a young family, and a business to support. Carol and Tenzin have none of these burdens yet they allowed you to expose yourself to great risk in order to promote their own agenda for the CTA. Being self-employed means that you depend on your name and reputation for work from clients and sub-contracts from other design agencies. Should the information I have be passed on to the NKT you may face legal action which would be financially damaging to your present situation. In addition, should that information also be passed on to the various pro-Shugden activists on Twitter you may also face a very public backlash and online expose.

As you are aware the name Rxxxx is very unique, and if there was a public backlash or expose it would undoubtedly rank highly on Google searches for your business name both now and long into the future.

Vancouver also has a limited number of design agencies and their clients may not wish to be associated with someone who is drawing online protests for involvement in a campaign of religious hatred. I'm sure you're aware of how sensitive brands can be to these issues and will appreciate how they would not want to risk being tainted or targeted by association.

Propaganda written by 'Indy Hack' who claimed to be an independent journalist is below:



Meet Kieran

As well as playing with puppets Kieran has a history of fantasism and using false names. When 18 he changed his own name by deed poll

He recently pretended to be Bonny Fider, Kevin Mason, and currently pretends to be Clive Bullison on Twitter.

In late 2017 he split up with his partner Sophie He began a campaign of online harassment, making false claims about her and stalking her.

In February 2018 he told her he was suicidal and had tried to take his own life. When she contacted his friends out of concern for him he became more abusive towards her.

Kieran has a lifelong history of mental health problems, he is currently on prescription medication and receiving mental health care.

www.AreBuddhistsRacist.com

A smear campaign by a powerful perpetrator may function to control the narrative sufficiently so that followers believe the smears and continue to bully the victim even without instruction. The day after version 1 of my psychological report went viral, my superiors received an email stating that I am too mentally unstable for my job, and that I was undergoing 'a psychological event due to a breakdown of a sexual relationship within a religious organisation'. This is thought by ex-members to be from a senior NKT member using the fake name and credentials 'Dr Robert Harrison', but this cannot be proven (yet). I believe they knew they could not use 'Indy Hack' as I had already written about this in version 1 of my analysis. In my opinion the email had a similar 'fake concern' style as the character 'Empty Bliss' who trolls my YouTube videos. It was particularly obvious that this was senior NKT to me because the videos they selected to send my superiors were satirical ones where I sat on the toilet pretending to be an NKT teacher. This would only appear as a sign of mental instability (and disrespect) to a longstanding member of the NKT, not to an outsider. In my opinion the email threatened both myself and my supervisor's reputations, and that of the organisation. This would be designed to cause anxiety and splitting between us. After I shared the email on social media they then sent my workplace legal threats, threatening that they would sue due to my sharing it. I never saw these emails but I was told that they were relentless, in the same way that previous survivors and staff at Inform have experienced, and continued for several weeks. They then tried to get Twitter to ban the tweets where the email was shared by survivors, and the email address of 'Dr Robert Harrison' had to be obscured in order to stop Twitter from banning it due to their complaints.

A few weeks later I googled my own name and found the defamation website www.dr-michelle-haslam.com. Here 'Dr Robert Harrison' claims he is a disinterested third party as an experimental psychologist who was concerned for my wellbeing (who then attempts to diagnose me with a borderline personality disorder online in order to discredit and humiliate me). He claims I was fired for gross misconduct in order to harm my reputation and credibility. 'Dr Robert Harrison' claims my pre-existing trauma means any damage caused by my involvement with the NKT must be minimal, by claiming it was all due to the death of my father and a relationship breakdown. He suggests that I am not aware of the impact of my own fathers' illness and death and that I do not take responsibility for this.

Dr Haslam also admitted that she was, and still is, battling with a mental health disorder and that she is in the process of recovery and rehabilitation.

Had the situation been handled in a more professional manner the outcome may have been very different.

“Dr Michelle Haslam’s contract was terminated due to gross misconduct.”

Dr Haslam’s ‘Psychological Report’

Unbeknown to me the precursor for Dr Haslam’s paranoia was the release of a document she refers to as a ‘psychological report’ on the New Kadampa Tradition. I use speech marks as the document falls far short of being a psychological report and I will explain in more depth later my rationale and reasoning to support this point of view.

Did Dr Haslam Have an Earlier Trauma?

This may seem an unfair question yet if we are to validate her claim that the New Kadampa Tradition was the cause of her PTSD we need to establish she had no prior significant trauma. Due to the structure of her fieldwork, namely that her own experiences form a primary data set her own mental health background is a valid consideration.

In 2002 Dr Haslam's father Jeffrey Haslam died from cancer aged just 49. This may have been a short illness or a protracted illness, no details are given. Of relevance is the fact that Dr Haslam was just 14 years old at the time. There is a significant body of work that shows this age is particularly formative for females in terms of a wide variety of psychiatric disorders such as body dysmorphism, eating disorders such as anorexia, and PTSD.

In fact Dr Haslam's own doctoral thesis is entitled 'Interpersonal functioning and eating-related psychopathology' and her thesis for her doctorate in clinical psychology is entitled 'Emotional expression and psychological wellbeing in cancer survivors'.

I find it difficult to believe that Dr Haslam is unaware as to the effect of the trauma of losing her father at such an early age may have had on her given the areas of her previous research. The effects of such a loss can be a cause of PTSD as explored by Liz Hall in her article for the University of Texas '[Overcoming PTSD after losing my mom to melanoma](#)', and [Nadine M. Melhem, Ph.D., of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine](#).

It is clear to outsiders that this person is very interested in my character assassination and has studied my analysis in minute detail, including with plagiarism software. They read my PhD theses titles and some of the content in order to find the dedication to my dead father, which revealed the date and cause of his death. 'Dr Robert Harrison' implies that he is hurt that I accuse him of not caring about my welfare and that is why he set up www.dr-michelle-haslam.com in order to clear his name. In my opinion this is an example of DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender). This is a reaction perpetrators display to avoid taking responsibility for their abuse. The journalistic style reveals the identity of 'Dr Robert Harrison' to be the same person or group of persons as 'Indy Hack'.

I would argue that the NKT practice 'Fair Game' in a similar way to Scientology. Jon Atack, ex-scientologist, author and speaker on authoritarian groups shares his concerns regarding NKT attacks with myself in a video on his YouTube channel dated 24.12.19. It is now being recognised by academics that so-called Buddhist groups employ these strategies to silence critics. Anders (2019a) argues that this tactic used by 'Buddhist' groups is designed to induce fear in those who remain, and

to destroy the social and economic resources of the whistleblower. This means that whistleblowers have accumulated even more trauma through their attempts at whistleblowing in order to try to protect others from harm. For this reason I am no longer accepting video testimonies on my YouTube channel, but anonymous audio testimonies and written testimonies are welcome. I would only recommend that a person shares a testimony if they are not currently suffering with acute PTSD and they have adequate social support. I began speaking up early because I believe that part of my recovery had to involve integrating my experience with my identity as both a survivor and a psychologist. I don't regret it but it has come at a great cost to my health.

'In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line in defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail'. (Herman, 2015, p.8).

9. Psychological suffering after leaving

9.1. Post-traumatic stress

The following information is based on the findings of research studies on former members of cultic groups including so-called Buddhist groups, the experience of other former members of the NKT (some shared in public testimonies, some in private to myself), my own experience and my clinical judgement following distance from the situation.

According to the Cult Information Centre website, for those who are fortunate enough to leave a cult there often then begins a difficult rehabilitation period which typically takes a year or more. During this time the ex-member could experience a variety of symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms, labelled by Conway and Siegelman (1982) as 'Information disease' include emotional outbursts, insomnia, fear of the group, hallucinations, delusions, menstrual and sexual dysfunction, amnesia, and guilt. Remski (2019, location 1351) states that *'the beginning stage of leaving a high-demand group can feel like waking up from a feverish dream'*. He argues that as this dream is private, internal

and impossible to share fully to an outsider, it is isolating in a way that mirrors the isolating features of the cultic dynamics.

Possible symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder are extensive and have been arranged into categories. Herman (1992) arranged 27 symptoms into seven categories: Dysregulation of (a) affect and impulses, (b) attention or consciousness, (c) self- perception, (d) perception of the perpetrator, (e) relations with others; (f) somatization, and (g) systems of meaning. Aspects that distinguish post-cult PTSD intrusion according to Healy (2017) are: the range of triggers, a phobic avoidance of triggers, and nature of nightmares. Lalich and Tobias (2006) list common post-cult sensory triggers as:

- Sights: special colors, flags, pictures of the leader, facial expressions, hand signals, group symbols, items used in group activities rituals, certain buildings or locations
- Physical sensations: hunger, fatigue, certain touches
- Sounds: songs, certain music, slogans, mantras, certain prayers, key words and phrases, a certain rhythm or tone of voice, yelling
- Smells: incense, perfume, certain food aromas, room odors, body odors
- Tastes: certain foods or liquids, herbs or spices

Rosen (2014) has highlighted that former cult members have higher rates of PTSD than post-deployment military personnel, with a Spanish sample of former members reporting 27.9% (males) to 43.6% (females). *'Cult-induced PTSD is a unique form of Complex PTSD. A key contributor to this outcome is the highly structured practice by cult leaders of maintaining cult members in extensive states of hyper- and hypoarousal'* (Healy, 2017). Rosen (2014) argues that due to overwhelming interpersonal abuse, manipulation and immobilization through internalized fears and trauma bonds, cult involvement has the potential to be one of the most highly traumatizing of human experiences. Cardena & Spiegel (1993) suggest that people who go into a dissociative state at the time of the trauma are those most likely to develop enduring PTSD. Cult members are likely to dissociate due to extensive periods of hypoarousal (meditation, chanting, hypnotic guided sessions, fatigue). Therefore former members have an increased likelihood of developing long-lasting PTSD (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The nightmares of former cult members contain themes of 'death, dying, violence and/or loss, helplessness' (Whitsett, 2010).

'The whole experience leaving the Dharma centre and choosing to go it alone was so traumatic. I cannot even remember how it all came about. When had I contacted my family? I cannot remember emptying my room. Where we went... How we got wherever we ended

up. All that part of my memory is a blank, a void. Same with the following months, they are missing completely from my memory. I remember nothing until I remember that I was living back with my family'. (Testimony by Andrea Ballance, 'A story of an NKT nun disrobing').

According to Anders' (2019a) initial qualitative data, former members of so-called Buddhist groups report severe post-traumatic stress, acute stress, anxiety and dissociative disorders. From my own personal experience, I would argue that the severe gaslighting of your mental 'clarity' and trauma bonds could be highly psychologically damaging and likely to lead to mental health crises. Many survivors of the NKT have now publicly reported suicidality, complex post-traumatic stress and mental health 'breakdowns' after leaving in their written and video testimonies. I have been informed that some ex-members have committed suicide shortly after leaving however the number is not known.

Survivors report that their 'internal compass' or intuition was disturbed and therefore they did not know how to trust themselves, their perceptions, or who to trust anymore. Practitioners often learn to ignore their own needs and boundaries, coming to view these as simply self-cherishing. Spiritual teachings on 'equanimity' override people's intuition and sense of who is safe for them and who is not. Cult involvement also tends to destroy your boundaries.

Conway and Siegelman (1982) argued that the number of hours spent practicing cultic rituals predicts symptoms. However, Lewis & Bromley (1987) argue that development of such an 'information disease' depends on the exit mode of the individual. Kirkpatrick (1988) reanalysed Conway and Siegelman's data, and supported their claims. Other factors that could influence whether the person goes on to develop PTSD are the extent to which they were abused within the group, and the social support available to them upon leaving. Due to the fact that not many mental health professionals understand cult involvement, it is likely that many ex-members did not get the support that they needed from services, and could have been retraumatised by their involvement with the mental health system.

One particular challenge for ex-members of abusive 'Buddhist' groups is trying to explain to outsiders that Buddhist teachings and paraphernalia trigger them. It is common for people to have statues and paintings of Buddha when they do not identify as a Buddhist. Memes and quotes are all over social media and people do not often understand that a 'Buddhist' group could possibly be abusive. Due to the expansion of the NKT and its prolific use of internet advertising, ex-members may struggle to feel safe from triggers.

9.2. Grief

There could be many losses associated with leaving the NKT. According to Healy (2011) those who leave New Religious Movements will have varying levels of loss, whether they have totally lost their faith or whether they sustain elements of the belief system. The previous importance placed on the belief system and the 'mission' which can now be seen as profane, may lead to strong feelings of meaninglessness. Some will have held positions of power and been given special treatment within the NKT that they will not receive on the outside. Teachers in particular are revered and frequently given gifts.

'For a long, long time nothing has 'enough' meaning. Nothing really motivates you. Nothing makes you feel happy naturally as a by-product of it just being there. It is grim, exhausting, lonely and relentless. You become a bedfellow with suicidal thoughts and the arguments for not ending it all. You revisit your guilt and pathetic-ness, each time fighting their gravity because the only thing left in you is the belief that negativity is a bad thing. Of course you know what negativity is, you have a degree in that. An intimate knowledge that can be called upon for varying levels of self-abuse your cult no longer needs to provide people for because you have taken on their job for them. You do survive however. You do become endowed with a creeping feeling of meaning in your life and you do go on to achieve awesome things and be an awesome person. It just might take ten years or more before you can get it together enough. For your memory to stay strong enough to be useful. And, as in my case, you might find you are no longer motivated by love and kindness just a desperation to be free of being remembered as 'that person who brought it upon themselves, because they willingly joined a cult'. (Testimony by Andrea Balance, 'A story of an NKT nun disrobing').

Dubrow-Marshall and Dubrow-Marshall (2017) argue that former members of new religious movements can go on a psychological journey from ecstasy to agony and from addiction to withdrawal, which can lead to depression, dissociation and anxiety. Some ex-members view their time as a waste, one that interfered with their authentic goals and interests, while others report that they developed helpful skills and have some happy memories that they still cherish. Many ex-members report that they had to stop speaking to current members after understanding the nature of the NKT, leading to grief.

'I formed deep and significant friendships and had a strong underlying sense that my life had acquired a greater meaning. Because of this, it is difficult sometimes for me to reconcile these memories with the fact that I have left it all behind, and not only that, I have become very

critical of NKT. It is even more difficult to explain my reasons for leaving to someone who is still in love with the tradition'. (Anonymous testimony, 'Eighteen months since leaving The New Kadampa Tradition').

9.3. Risk of severe social isolation

Ex-members of the NKT and other similar groups who have left at the same time as friends have told me that they believe this helped them to cope with the grief of losing the group. Due to likely social isolation after leaving grief can be severe, as it can take a long time to build a new social network. Conversation and social skills are likely to be stunted due to the indoctrination using the shared language used within the NKT that is not easily understood by the general public. Recovering from this is likely to take considerable time and be highly challenging.

'If I had been isolated as a member of the NKT it was nothing to the isolation I experienced here. The confusion and darkness that filled my life was unbearable. I couldn't talk about the pain I was in with anyone. How could they possibly understand? No one to turn to that could understand that my mind felt like it was being held in acid, burning all day and all night with no relief. The only relief was dreamless sleep. I tried to sleep all the time. I was a shell. No Sangha, no Dharma teachings, no deep conversations. Alone, exhausted, stripped bare. No practice, no prayers and eroding faith. Guilt for letting everyone down and not making it as a nun. Pathetic, untouchable, unlovable, rightly abandoned and ignored. Ignored even by my guru'. (Testimony by Andrea Balance, 'A story of an NKT nun disrobing').

In addition, the former member may be rejoining a society that thrives on the isolation of its consumers (Remski, 2017, location 1377). The social network that the ex-member may wish to develop outside the group is further threatened by slander by current group members, in person and online. Those who have developed betrayal trauma may struggle to form new friendships due to difficulties with trust. Those involved in the NKT for a long time who have lived in their centres often lose touch with current affairs and may feel disorientated on their return to the outside world. This could be similar to the experience of culture shock in one's own country.

'We can view all former cult members as invisible immigrants. They may continue to live in the same country and speak the same language, but their experience of dislocation, loss, and confusion can be as strong as that of an émigré from a third-world country' (Rosen, 2014).

'I couldn't talk about the things that interested, healed and motivated me. I felt like I had been dropped into another country and I didn't know the language or the customs. It felt to me like I was a character in a dark comedy horror film – a film where I was the main character, a ghost of some drowned, grey, dripping, cold, uncomfortable to be around ex Buddhist nun. Forced, for a plot twist, to live in a normal warm blooded family. I was a bald-headed woman, wearing funny clothes, in a world that doesn't recognize a desire to be a pure Buddhist'. (Testimony by Andrea Ballance, 'A story of an NKT nun disrobing').

9.4. Personality changes and loss of identity

Those who have spent several years within the NKT are likely to have lost their previous hobbies and interests, sense of individuality, and to some extent their personality. Those who were ordained even gave up their previous name and sense of identity as someone outside the NKT. They have physically changed their appearance e.g. shaving their hair and wearing only robes. This could affect their body image and how they are received by others if they return to lay life. *'After I left I had to keep telling myself 'I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a human' (Carol McQuire, stated to myself in private messaging)*

Former cult members frequently float between their precult, in-cult, and postcult identities/personalities (Jenkinson, 2018; Goldberg, 2006; Singer, 2003; Lifton, 2000; Herman, 1997; Curtis & Curtis, 1993; West, 1992; Winnicott, 1965). Cult pseudo-personality is thought to be a dissociated personality by some (Langone, 1993; Hassan, 2000). Others believe that it is an introjected personality, overlaying the pre-cult personality (Jenkinson, 2008). The Cult Information Centre lists *'reduced sense of irony, vocabulary, use of abstractions and metaphor, and diminished overall intellectual ability'* as potential harm through involvement. Rediscovering their authentic likes and dislikes is likely to be a slow process due to the teachings focusing on destroying 'self-cherishing', 'renunciation' and 'equanimity'.

'I stopped every spiritual practice so that his influence would wane but his name mantra still 'said itself' and I could 'hear' NKT teachings continuously'. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, 'Realising the Guru's intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community').

9.5. Religious trauma syndrome/betrayal trauma

There has been considerable research investigating cult recruitment, “mind control” and post-group difficulties. However, the less-well-defined phenomenon of “spiritual abuse” is still under-researched. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of six people who left five religious groups that were Judeo-Christian concluded that *‘spiritual abuse is a multi-faceted and multi-layered experience that is both process and event, affecting the bio/psycho/social and spiritual domains of an individual’* (Ward, 2011). A very high level of trust is often placed in spiritual leaders. When such trust is violated the wound can be very deep, sometimes so deep that the wounded person cannot trust even a legitimate spiritual authority again.

‘It’s deeply confusing – there is so much potential good in the beautiful teachings of Buddha, but the organisation warps them, bending them to maximise its financial profits and minimise its responsibilities to its members. Therefore when a person sees the light and leaves the NKT it is hard to trust again, hard to find the spiritual direction and fulfilment that we need, and that led us there in the first place’. (Anonymous testimony ‘A life in the day of the New Kadampa Tradition’).

‘In 2008 I emailed ‘kadampa.org’ with my decision to disrobe. I received no answer except the confirmation receipt I had asked for. I symbolically drank alcohol but it still did not feel as if I had broken the hold of my promises to Gyatso. My ‘Buddha nature’ felt lost as if it only had Gyatso’s name on it’. (Testimony by Carol McQuire, ‘Realising the Guru’s intention: Hungry humans and awkward animals in the New kadampa Tradition community’).

Given the likelihood that the NKT management have lied about the health status of Kelsang Gyatso and produced materials that were not written by him, I believe many of the followers who were ‘true believers’ will suffer severe betrayal trauma in the future. Anger is also deeply felt in those who have suffered any kind of abuse, but particularly spiritual abuse. This anger may be further repressed if the person is still holding the belief that anger is a delusion that they must purify.

9.6. Shame and feelings of spiritual inadequacy

The impact of feelings of spiritual inadequacy, or being seen by the group as a spiritual failure can be crippling when the person previously considered themselves and was considered a *‘good Buddhist’* (Anders, 2019a). Many ex-members of the NKT have reported to myself in private messages that they continued to feel spiritually inadequate and worthless long after leaving. According to Shaw

(2014) ex-cult members often feel ashamed that they were drawn into the group, ashamed of things they did and said whilst within the group, and ashamed of their struggles after leaving.

9.7. Whistleblowing trauma

According to Remski (2019, location 1364) an abuse victim within a high-demand group member faces extra challenges in reaching out for help due to the internal isolation mechanisms of guilt and shame. Many survivors experience intense urges to warn people about the nature of the NKT due to its expansion, the naivety of the general public and the small number of testimonies to date. I have observed several survivor based Twitter accounts appear and disappear frequently in the last year. Many people comment on my videos stating that they feel traumatised but then delete these comments shortly afterwards, I suspect because they are fearful of being identified and made a target of further abuse. Several former members have told me in private messaging that they are waiting for certain senior members to die before they feel safe enough to come forward with their testimonies of the more severe abuse.

For those who try to speak up, risk of further trauma is high. Unfortunately one side effect of the Exposing the New Kadampa Tradition Facebook group has been that there is a focus online on exposing the NKT over and above recovery and self-protection. Some survivors have reported that they felt under pressure to write a testimony when they had not yet recovered sufficiently. In addition, this Facebook group is heavily monitored by the NKT and is not a safe private space. It was suggested to me by members of this group that there was nothing to be afraid of, and that the NKT could not hurt me in any way, but I was later told by academics and cultic studies experts that this is not the case. After being stalked and harassed via my workplace and then finding www.dr-michelle-haslam.com I experienced the following in roughly this order:

- Uncontrollable laughter
- Restricted breathing
- Physical immobilisation and slow speech
- Paranoia (although they actually are trying to silence/defame you, it's not all in your mind)
- Insomnia
- Poor concentration
- Anxiety
- Fear of serious harm coming to group members who remain
- A strong feeling of responsibility to warn people
- Shame
- Suicidal ideation and urges

- Substance misuse
- Intense feelings of betrayal
- Rage and emotional outbursts

One aspect that is difficult to explain is the feeling of being under ‘psychic attack’. I never engaged in any magical thinking and don’t believe in voodoo, however, I felt as if I could *feel* that hundreds of dangerous people wished me harm.

9.8. Disorganised attachment

According to Stein (2017, location 801) the cult must rewire attachment behaviour and reconfigure it in order to gain control over them.

‘The dissociated follower comes to accept the group as the safe haven and this forms a trauma bond. This moment of submission, of giving up the struggle, can be experienced as a moment of great relief, and even happiness, or a spiritual awakening’ (Stein, 2017).

Ex-members of all kinds of cultic groups report disorganised attachment styles. When the person or group that you turn to for safety is also psychologically abusive, it can create a feeling of paralysis and lead to trauma bonds. This can result in severe betrayal trauma and difficulties with trust that persist long after leaving. Those who came to the group with an attachment difficulty are more likely to suffer further attachment trauma. Studies which investigate attachment styles pre and post cult do not exist however. Buddhist groups in particular which teach renunciation, non-attachment and dissociation are likely to disrupt secure attachment styles. Mark Dunlop writes about the effect of his practice within Triratna/FWBO on his attachment style on www.ex-cult.org.

9.9. Lack of psychological resources

Some ex-members ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’, whilst others sustain elements of the belief system. Survivors who have developed betrayal trauma are likely to feel unable to turn to self-help, meditation or any Buddhism related coping strategies due to the triggers associated with the group and therefore they are likely to feel very confused regarding how best to cope. As a result survivors may have lost their old coping strategies for bypassing emotional pain before they have developed any new ones. In my opinion this puts them at risk of substance misuse and other self-harming behaviours and several ex-members have reported to me in private messages that this was the case.

Some survivors of the NKT have reported to myself that they did not feeling safe in their own body following leaving the NKT due to the complex nature of their trauma. They are vulnerable to substance misuse and other methods of numbing emotional pain, especially as they have most likely become deskilled at understanding and coping with their emotions. If they feel betrayed by the group they are likely to feel unable to turn to any Buddhism related coping strategies due to the triggers associated with the NKT and therefore they are likely to feel very confused regarding how best to cope.

The ex-members indoctrination may mean that they have fixed, simplistic views on how the mind works that would make psychoeducation around trauma that draws upon neuroscience challenging. If they are struggling with burnout they may not be able to engage in therapy or to even read about other ways of coping. Some report that they could not read self-help type books as they reminded them of Kelsang Gyatso's books. Furthermore, ex-members are likely to believe they are spiritually inadequate, and it is unlikely that they will understand they are actually suffering with post-traumatic stress. Relational trauma is likely to be more traumatising than physical trauma however (Briere, Hodges, & Godbout, 2010; Butaney, Pelcovitz, & Kaplan, 2011; Freyd, 1998).

Most ex-members of cultic groups that I know personally report self-sabotaging behaviours. Ex-members report feeling driven by trauma, the abuse cycle, and righteous anger at times, making self-care a challenge. I didn't feel able prioritise taking care of myself after I discovered the true nature of the NKT after seeing attacks on survivors. Mania is also common in ex-members of various different groups, exacerbated by the states of hypo and hyper arousal caused by trance states, meditation practices and fear. The removal of a stressor can also result in hypomania. This happened to me not immediately after I left the NKT, but after I stopped interacting with Western Buddhists altogether and began connecting with survivors.

10. Summary

Myself and many other survivors believe the NKT to be a highly deceptive, exploitative and psychologically harmful organisation that attracts people through their mental health difficulties, attachment trauma, and depression through their marketing. According to Stein (2017) a cult exploits the common human tendency to form bonds through trauma. However, anyone can be recruited during a transition period for example, so not all followers come to the group with trauma. All of the NKT's practices could be potentially severely damaging to both mental and eventually to physical health, as well as to people's relationships with outsiders. Despite this, involvement with this group can feel good in the short term, due to the potential sense of belonging, 'love-bombing'

and flattery, trance states, fervor, group narcissism, and the short term benefits of spiritual bypassing in avoiding emotional pain.

It is clear that the NKT have no understanding of mental health, but strongly believe that they are qualified to offer courses on overcoming anxiety, depression and stress. They believe that they completely understand the mind, which makes them a particularly dangerous group. The NKT do not teach mindfulness (in line with Western definitions of mindfulness), but still attempt to draw people in through the 'mindfulness movement'. The brief mindfulness of the breath practice at the beginning of classes is taught like a thought stopping activity which is designed to 'settle the mind' and induce relaxation prior to focusing on the doctrine. The 'contemplation meditation' practices could be considered guided self-hypnosis.

Potential psychological, social and economic damage whilst within the group and after leaving includes but is not limited to:

- the increasing inability to trust one's own perception and intuition
- reduced psychological flexibility (indoctrination)
- severe cognitive dissonance
- dissociation from the body, derealisation and depersonalisation
- further repression of emotion and trauma through spiritual bypassing, thought-stopping and thought-control
- anxiety linked to negative karma or fear of rebirth in a hell realm
- depression due to feelings of spiritual inadequacy and the focus on suffering
- obsessive compulsive urges linked to 'purification' of negative minds
- further trauma due to experiences of abuse within the group which is enabled by the teachings and lack of safeguarding
- financial abuse and exploitation
- stress and burnout
- misplaced loyalty and trauma bonding to the guru and the group
- hallucinations due to the visualisation practices
- loss of identity and personal boundaries
- repression of sexuality
- paranoia due to the magical thinking and the attacks on survivors
- beliefs that outsiders are 'ordinary', mundane or more 'deluded' (group narcissism)
- fear of leaving due to lack of social and economic resources
- severe betrayal trauma and shame

In particular, this is likely to be highly damaging for women, children, and those who came to the group with pre-existing trauma. For those with a mild to moderate learning disability who take the teachings very literally, following these teachings could lead to a severe anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder and trauma bonding. I would argue that longstanding live-in members of the

NKT who came to the group with mental health difficulties or learning disabilities could at times lack capacity to be able to make decisions regarding their own welfare.

For those who speak up publicly using their name, risk of further abuse and resulting whistleblowing trauma is high. Due to the attacks on survivors, most do not share their story publicly due to fear of consequences. This means that vulnerable people continue to be recruited as they are unaware of the extent of the abuse. Unfortunately the attacks on myself have served to induce more fear.

Some people walk away from cults unharmed. Recovery could take many years for some people who have been deeply involved in the group and who were 'true believers'. Live-in survivors may need immediate and intensive psychological support upon leaving to reduce the risk of suicide. Given the likelihood that the NKT management have lied about the health status of Kelsang Gyatso and produced materials that were not written by him, I believe many of the followers who were 'true believers' will suffer severe betrayal trauma in the future. There is not currently enough training on cult involvement for mental health professionals and in my opinion it is unlikely that survivors will get the support they need through the mental health system, which could be retraumatising. Please see www.newkadampatraditionreport.org for up to date recovery focused materials, links to other relevant sources and information about support groups.

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