

# The difference between NKT and Gelug Dharma Teachers

The NKT provides Dharma teachers to schools, colleges, universities, health and prison services and the general public. It is important therefore to consider the appropriateness of the training and qualifications of their teachers.

Here we consider two approaches. The NKT's system and the Gelug system. We are indebted to Miranda Adams' contribution on the Gelug system which can be found here: <http://www.treasuryoflives.org/foundations/view/12>. The Gelug is where Kelsang Gyatso, Spiritual Director and guru of the NKT, studied Buddhism. It must be noted that he did not complete his studies by taking all of the geshe examinations or attending tantric college. Later he was to be expelled from his own monastery by a unanimous decision.

## In the New Kadampa Tradition

**In a nutshell students only study commentaries of Buddhist texts written by Kelsang Gyatso. Teachers do not have to have completed the study program before they commence teaching. Students do not have to have passed any memorisation examinations before they teach. Teachers leave before students have received full oral transmissions. Students are taught by teachers who have been through this same regime.**

*So why do students teach before being fully qualified? Could it be anything to do with the rapid expansion of NKT centres worldwide? Can the NKT not keep up with the supply of fully qualified teachers? How often do you read that an NKT teacher is 'fully qualified' on their website? How often do they advertise that a teacher is partially or hardly qualified?*

Students are taught by teachers who typically learnt Buddhism through the NKT system. The NKT prides itself on staying loyal to its own system and not mixing with other Buddhist traditions.

There are three study programmes: General Programme (GP), Foundation Programme (FP) and Teacher Training Programme (TTP). In recent years a Special Teacher Training Programme (STTP) has been established (see below). Previously all teacher training was carried out on a less formal basis by the resident branch teachers.

*Students embark on their training to be teachers, but there is no requirement to actually pass the memorisation exams before beginning to teach. It is only necessary to be 'studying'. So many students teach other students, some even becoming 'Resident Teachers', within a few years of joining an NKT study programme. Many 'branch' teachers, who teach the General Programmes, only study at Foundation Programme level.*

The opportunity and 'good fortune' of being asked to teach soon after joining is regarded as the result of 'imprints of previous practice' in other lives or of the 'pure faith' of the student. Gyatso himself has mentioned how difficult teaching can be for his students after so little training. In 2000 he stated, 'Some of you come to me and say, 'Geshe-la, I am not being honest with my students, I am just pretending to be a

## In the Gelug Tradition

**In a nutshell students are taught by highly qualified teachers who benefit from exposure to several traditions of Buddhism. Within traditional Buddhist groups, very few westerners teach, and this only with the permission of particular Masters after long term training in specific practices. Tibetan Geshe training takes 20 years or more and even then, only some Geshe are selected to teach.**

**As a consequence of this rigor it is not surprising that there are fewer fully qualified teachers in the Gelug tradition than in the NKT. It follows that they have fewer dharma centres than the NKT.**

Studies include:

- Pramana (tsad ma) – the study of logic and reason, based on Dharmakirti's Commentary on Valid Cognition (Skt: Pramanavartika, Tib: tsad ma rnam 'grel).
- Prajnaparamita (phar phyin) – the study of the grounds and paths of the mental continuum as it progresses toward enlightenment, based on Maitreya's Ornament of Realization (Skt: Abhisamayalamkara, Tib: mngon rtogs rgyan).
- Madhyamaka (dbu ma) – the study of the view of emptiness according to the philosophical system of the Middle Way, based on Chandrakirti's A Supplement to Treatise on the Middle Way (Skt: Madhyamakavatara, Tib: dbu ma la 'jug pa).
- Vinaya ('dul ba) – rules of discipline for monastics, based on Gunaprabha's The Vinaya Sutra, (Skt: Vinayasutra, Tib: 'dul ba'i mdo).
- Abhidharma (mdzod) – special topics, including cosmology and so forth, based on Vasubhandu's Treasury of Knowledge (Skt: Abhidharmakosha, Tib: mgon par chos kyi mdzod)

This curriculum is supplemented by occasional commentaries and teachings on complementary subject matter, and by regular teachings on lamrim, the practical application of the stages of the path to enlightenment.

The method of study in the monasteries is a combination of logical analysis and debate (mtshan nyid), combined with regular sessions of prayer and recitation, which is considered an essential condition to ripen the positive results of intellectual pursuits.

qualified teacher.' Gyatso continued, 'you might think like this because you are an educated westerner [...] I do appreciate that when some teachers get discouraged, that in reality they are being honest, but that is foolish.'

Students only study Gyatso's books there is no historical or sociological background in Buddhist studies. Teachings on the basic texts are often repeated when new students join TTP or when senior teachers leave. Therefore few 'oral transmissions' of the more 'advanced' study books are completed. There is no discussion of ethical considerations such as confidentiality or dealing with vulnerable people.

In 2014 the NKT announced Kadam Neil Elliott as the teacher for the STTP. As well as having been a disciple of Venerable Geshe-la for over 35 years and the principal editor for many of his books, Elliott is notorious for having to disrobe as Gen Thubten Gyatso following allegations of sexual misconduct. It is comforting to know that "*He is renowned for his ability to present the many deep meanings contained within Venerable Geshe-la's books and to show how to integrate these meanings into daily life.*"

To enter the NKT's special teacher training programme the student needs to have been a practitioner of Kadampa Buddhism for at least two years; to have the wish to become a qualified Kadampa Buddhist Teacher; to be free to become a full time Kadampa Buddhist Resident Teacher after completing the course and to be fluent in English.

The Special Teacher Training Programme can be completed in person by attending the classes at the centre or by by correspondence. Classes are for a total of six hours per week and meditation sessions of four and a half hours per week.

Trainee teachers commit to completing the entire programme, which will take approximately three years; to complete every study and meditation class either at the centre or by correspondence; to memorize the condensed meaning of each text and to prepare for and to take examinations.

The Teacher Training Programme studies commentaries of sutra and tantra texts by Kelsang Gyatso.

- How to Understand the Mind: The Nature and Power of the Mind
- Modern Buddhism: The Path of Compassion and Wisdom
- The New Heart of Wisdom: An Explanation of the Heart Sutra
- Tantric Grounds and Paths: How to Enter, Progress on, and Complete the Vajrayana Path
- Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life and its commentary Meaningful to Behold
- Ocean of Nectar: The True Nature of All things

Although the root of the philosophical systems that are studied, practiced, and debated in the Gelug monastic institutions stem from the teachings of the great Nalanda masters such as Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, as well as the teachings of Gelug tradition founder Je Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa and his main disciples Gyaltsab and Khedrupje, many of the actual textbooks that are used as a basis of study in the monasteries are themselves commentaries on these works. These commentaries take the form of compositions called yigcha (yig cha), which take a unique form modeled around the Tibetan debate format.

Each of the three great monasteries, and some of the schools within them, follow yigcha written by different authors, who agree on the major points of the philosophy but debate extensively on the interpretation of the finer points.

Ganden Jangtsey and Sera Je follow the yigcha written by Jetsunpa Chokyi Gyalsten. Sera Me uses textbooks written by Jetsunpa's disciple Kedrub Tendarwa. Ganden Shartse and Drepung Loseling Monasteries follow the texts written by Panchen Sonam Drakpa. Finally, Drepung Gomang follows the texts written by Kunkyen Jamyang Shepa Ngawang Tsondu. Labrang Monastery also follows Jamyang Shepa's yigcha.

Upon successful completion of this curriculum, and depending on the level of detail engaged in, the monk may attain the degree of geshe (dge shes).

In the 17th century the tradition underwent a reformation during the time of the 13th Dalai Lama, who returned from a visit to Mongolia impressed by the scholars there and determined to elevate the academic standards in the educational institutions of Tibet. Prior to this time, the geshe degree was not necessarily awarded on the basis of academic merit. The 13th Dalai Lama also established other reforms in relation to the geshe degree, including requiring those who graduated with highest honors to proceed to Tantric College to complete their educations.

Today, the geshe degree is awarded at the completion of the course of study in the monastic institutions. At Ganden, Drepung, and Sera Monasteries, there are four levels of Geshe degree: Lharampa, Tsograpma, Rigrampa, and Lingse. The highest level geshe degree is called Geshe Lharampa, and is awarded to the most superior scholars.

Once a monk has completed the geshe degree, they may become teachers in the monasteries, training the next generation of students, or return to their home areas and give teachings and so forth for the local communities. Others choose to continue their educations with further study of the tantras or the sutras, or to pursue solitary retreat.