A psychological report on The New Kadampa Tradition

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

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This report can now be found online in several locations including on the International Cultic Studies Association website under ‘Buddhist Aberrations’.
Declaration of interest

I am a clinical psychologist who lived in the Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation Centre in Northamptonshire between November 2016 and June 2018. I have decided to write this report based on what I observed and experienced during this time, the conclusions I have drawn since leaving, and the testimonies of other ex-members of this group. Due to my profession, I am able to comment from a psychological perspective and to add relevant references. I am less concerned with the lineage and its politics, and more concerned with the psychological damage myself and many others believe is being caused and exacerbated. Due to the explosion of the mindfulness movement and the 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 psychological harm caused by involvement with this organisation. I also believe that ex-members, their families, friends and mental health care providers may benefit from having access to this information.

During the time period that I worked on this report I was struggling with complex post-traumatic stress symptoms of my own linked to involvement with the NKT. Despite this I stand by the evidence I have gathered and the relevance of the references I have used. Many ex-members have now read and endorsed this report (see appendices for messages of appreciation).

My Qualifications

- Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, University of Birmingham, 2014
- PhD, titled ‘Interpersonal functioning and eating disorder related psychopathology’, Loughborough University, 2011
- BSc (Hons) Psychology, Loughborough University, 2008

Further training

- Mindfulness Teacher Training. Midlands Mindfulness Centre, 2015
- Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) Parts 1, 2 and 3. EMDRWorks 2018
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Trauma (8 week online course with Dr Russ Harris) 2018

If you wish to discuss this report with me you can email me at thrivingafterthenkt@gmail.com. I am willing to speak to current NKT members however please note that any abuse or threats received via this email will be posted online.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to those who have committed suicide shortly after leaving The New Kadampa Tradition, and to their families and friends.
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Section 1: The classes and those who attend

1.1. Misleading and therefore unethical advertising

1.1.1. The suggestion that classes will improve mental health

It is my opinion that New Kadampa Tradition classes are described and sold to the general public as tools for worry, anxiety, anger, unhappiness and general dissatisfaction with life. Titles for their classes include ‘Dealing with stress and anxiety’, ‘Peaceful mind and happy life’. This means that they are likely to attract vulnerable people who are suffering with depression, anxiety ‘disorders’ and the effects of trauma. It also means that those who attend their courses might assume that the NKT have an understanding of such mental health difficulties in line with western understandings and guidelines, which is not the case.

Many believe that the advertising used by NKT education programme coordinators is misleading and therefore unethical. It usually includes images taken from other sources on the internet. Education programme coordinators do not have any mental health training and use advertising to suggest to people that they can achieve joy, contentment and good mental health by attending the courses. This can be seen below:

Commercial companies use marketing and public relations techniques to promote an idealised image of their product or service to potential customers, and cults do much the same (The Culture of Cults, online resource). The above picture suggests that a feeling of joy can be achieved through the practices that the NKT recommend.
1.1.2. **Selling people the idea that their goal should be to achieve happiness at all times**

According to Hayes et al (2011) the world’s 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, and to keep them in their concentration).

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 the mental health community has adopted this assumption as well. Distressing thoughts, feelings, memories or physical sensations came to be 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.

Myself and many others believe the NKT’s view of ‘happiness’ to be pathological and contradictory at times. 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.’ Many are told that if you completely devote yourself to Geshe-la, you will attain enlightenment in three years, three months, and three weeks.

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. The NKT offer a free ebook, called ‘How to transform your life’. Many believe this is to get the public to believe they are generous and have your best interests at heart, which encourages trust and gratitude. This is a tactic used by cults to hook people in according to The Cult Information Centre. This book, suggests that their 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 there is a problem that needs to be solved - and that only involvement with them can do it. The hero narcissist is the type of narcissist who is invested in being the savior, the good guy, the fixer, the problem solver. Unlike most narcissists, the hero narcissist doesn’t engage in overtly abusive behavior most of the time. They often appear concerned, compassionate and helpful. They may even covertly create problems just so they can “fix” them and remind everyone how much they are needed. The abuse from these people is subtle, and usually involves creating situations where people are forced to rely on them. Others may even believe that the hero narcissist really IS a hero. It takes careful observation sometimes to realize that their motivations are actually all about themselves, not the greater good or the well-being of others. Ironically, often the only time you will see overt abuse from these people is when they are not permitted to help. If they cannot be the savior, they are being denied their opportunity to shine.

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. It is suggested by the NKT that if you are not becoming happier through NKT practices and meditations, you are not practicing correctly, 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). This can lead to a feeling of inadequacy, and many survivors of the NKT and other similar groups have reported it ultimately leads to depression. This could trauma bond you to the organisation as you come to believe that only they have the answers and can assist you in your spiritual path.

1.1.3. The suggestion that feelings have no meaning

Underneath the above photo it says ‘anxiety and worry have no meaning’. This suggestion appears throughout NKT promotional materials and teachings. 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, complex post-traumatic stress disorder and low self-esteem. Continuing to ignore your body’s fight and flight warning system would be likely to lead to and exacerbate pre-existing health conditions such as chronic fatigue, other immune system disorders, and irritable bowel syndrome (see also section 1.7.7). 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.
According to Buddhist scholar John Welwood:

‘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.’ (Tricycle Magazine interview).

Studies have found it highly challenging to measure intuition as a phenomenon, however Lufityanto, Donkin & Pearson (2016) state that we can use unconscious information in our body or brain to help guide us through life, to enable better decisions, faster decisions, and be more confident in the decisions we make. 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.

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 care or worry about anything at all, we might not pay our bills or care about the consequences of our behaviour on others.

1.1.4. 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. 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 also need to practice grounding techniques, deep breathing, and self-soothing. 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 section 1.7. for more details on thought control through the application of ‘applying opponents’ to ‘delusions’.

1.1.5. Failure to acknowledge or warn people about any possible adverse effect 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. The NKT have no understanding of trauma, anxiety or
schizoaffective disorders and therefore they do not advise people, even those who are clearly acutely unwell that their practices may not be appropriate for them.

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 meditation and prayers, and several confided in me.

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

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. This could be considered similar to love-bombing and flattery employed by those with narcissistic personality traits. Survivors report pre-existing low self-esteem and the enjoyment of this flattery, however report that it impacted on their decision making. Neil Elliot’s teaching notes indicate that it is important to make new students feel good so that they come back. Students are repeatedly told that they are extremely fortunate through the teachings, which makes it appear that this version of the dharma and the organisation is therefore extremely precious and valuable ‘nectar’. As is common with all cult involvement, the initial sense of community can fill a hole for those who have been struggling with grief, abandonment and loneliness.
1.2. Spiritual neglect, lack of guidance and mentorship

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 working visitors who 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. Working visitors 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 any previous experience with Buddhism, meditation, their mental state, culture or language fluency.

1.3. A tendency to encourage psychological disturbance in the name of wisdom

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 told me that she told her sons teenage friend that their body doesn’t exist, and that it gave them anxiety, but she stated ‘you have to start them on the path early’. 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. However, 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’.

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 allows those with sadistic tendencies to abuse those with masochistic tendencies under the impression that everyone is practicing wisdom and compassion.

1.4. ‘Mind control’

I believe that the ten minute breathing meditation at the beginning of the class is mostly harmless on its own (if an individual is not suffering with acute trauma, psychosis or anxiety). Those suffering with acute anxiety, depression or trauma are not even recommended to practice mindfulness of the breath without first concentrating on relaxation and self-soothing techniques. 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. 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 and admiration for the teachings. The NKT describe this feeling as ‘receiving blessings’. According to the Cult Information Centre, hypnosis and trance states are the main method of mind control used by cults.

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 hypnosis. Neil Elliot’s teacher training notes state ‘For us meditation is a creative constructive process of changing our thoughts, our feelings, our attitudes; and carrying these changes into our daily life’. During the contemplation meditation you are told to focus on an intention to think a certain thing and/or feel a certain way, which is argued will influence your behaviour. 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’. Hypnosis is, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood and controversial methods of psychological treatment. Hypnosis is a state of highly focused attention or concentration, often associated with relaxation, and heightened suggestibility. While under hypnosis (i.e., in a hypnotic trance), it seems many people are much more open to helpful suggestions than they usually are. The positive suggestions that people are given while hypnotized are referred to as ‘post hypnotic suggestions’ because they are intended to take effect after the person emerges from the trance and is no longer under hypnosis. The suggestions given to people under hypnosis appear to be an important part of the mechanism through which the procedure works. While many people won’t accept or respond to an up-front, direct suggestion, under hypnosis, suggestions seem to get into the mind—perhaps through the “back door” of consciousness where they often germinate and take root as important behavioral or psychological changes.

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 an ex-cult member ‘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’. (The Culture of Cults). The belief system of the cult is of course then used to assist in recruiting you as a volunteer, which is framed as a method for ‘gaining merit’ so that you can achieve enlightenment. It is suggested by teachers and long term members that you probably just aren’t ready to accept the more profound teachings yet, and you might be
ready later, thus suggesting that they are precious 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.

‘Cults do not gain influence over their members by overcoming their free will. They gain influence through promoting a belief system which undermines members’ confidence in their own judgement, or more specifically in the judgement of their unreformed old self, so that they lack the confidence to make decisions for themselves, independently of guidance from the groups teachers and preceptors.’ (The Culture of Cults).

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. 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. I came to believe that it was my duty to work for the centre in order to help it flourish, on top of my full time job in a highly challenging role as a psychologist for people with severe eating disorders. I did not realise, that I had developed a messiah/martyr complex and was heading for severe burnout. Many ex-members report this feeling of having been hypnotised into taking on these beliefs and acting in accordance.

Survivors of the NKT and other similar traditions and movements have reported that their attempts to explain the mind control elements to outsiders, researchers and mental health practitioners have failed, and they are met with disbelief (Mark Dunlop, ‘Why cults are so difficult to oppose’). Robert Jay Lifton, professor of psychiatry at Yale University Medical School, said that many in the psychological professions may not be aware of, or deny the existence of, clinical difficulties posed by cults. ‘There is a widespread misunderstanding of the phenomenon of persuasion that can bring about intense change in people,’ he said. ‘Consciously and manipulatively,’ said Dr. Singer, professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, ‘cult leaders and their trainers exert a systematic social influence that can produce great behavioral changes.’ Dr. Singer explained that such groups ‘have taken techniques from the human-potential movement, from the encounter, sensitivity training and humanistic-psychology movements, and combined them with cult ideology and persuasive sales methods - and packaged them in various combinations.’ Dr. Clark is one of the founders of the Boston Personal Development Institute, a nonprofit group that treats former cult members and advises their families. Dr. Clark said that the pattern of manipulated cult conversions may not appear especially radical to outsiders, since no one is beaten or otherwise physically harmed. ‘But hundreds of ex-cult members and their families have attested to the enticement practices of these groups,’ he said. ‘Under the force of the conversion experience, people disappeared from their families and changed, sometimes after only a few days.’
1.5. **Encouraging addiction and co-dependency**

Many ex-members have reported that they found the new belief system and teachings almost psychoactive and disorientating, like a drug, and found them addictive. The ‘blessings’ are likely to release dopamine and oxytocin in the brain. Many ex-members of the NKT and other similar groups report a predisposition towards addiction and co-dependency. Many report to have had previous experiences of ‘oneness’ and states of bliss when taking drugs, and then finding mundane life quite intolerable. They report that they experienced feelings of euphoria and ‘oneness’ during their meditation practices within the NKT, especially in the beginning whilst experiencing ‘love-bombing’ from the group. Teacher training notes state that giving people a good feeling during meditation keeps them wanting more and makes it more likely they will come back.

Several researchers believe that studies of cult members may revise current theories about the workings of the brain. Experiences described by cult members resemble personality changes regularly associated with disorders of the temporal lobe of the brain. ‘The symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy,’ said Dr. Clark, ‘are similar to those seen or reported as resulting from cult conversions: increased irritability, loss of libido or altered sexual interest; ritualism, compulsive attention to detail, mystical states, humorlessness and sobriety, heightened paranoia.’ Dr. Cath said: ‘Keeping devotees constantly fatigued, deprived of sensory input and suffering protein deprivation, working extremely long hours in street solicitation or in cult-owned businesses, engaging in monotonous chanting and rhythmical singing, may induce psychophysiological changes in the brain.’

Some current and ex-members reported to me that their involvement with the NKT initially helped them to detox from a substance, by giving them other ‘objects of refuge’. However, you are likely to be left with a new addiction to the group, and particular spiritual practices. They were led to believe that the dharma had cured them of their addiction and no one seemed able to recognise that they had exchanged a previous addiction for a new one. Some might argue that the new addiction was less harmful to the persons functioning than the old one, which could be true if the person remains within the NKT for life and this meets their needs. However, if they choose to and are able to leave, they are likely to suffer with serious withdrawal effects and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

1.6. ‘We completely understand the mind…..but not mental health’

Mental health professionals have not been involved or consulted in the development of dharma classes or led meditation sessions. Teachers do not have any relevant qualifications and do not know how to spot warning signs of people’s trauma or anxiety. The teachings are kept very ‘pure’ in their original form, meaning that any influence from other people is considered impure and ‘degenerate’. Neil Elliot’s (senior teacher) notes for teachers state ‘Our task is only to preserve the blessings of Gesh-la in this world, and to spread his pure doctrine to every country’.

Unfortunately, this polarization may in part be fed by the reluctance of many clergy and mental health professionals to work collaboratively (McMinn, Chaddock, Edwards, Lim, & Campbell, 1998). This means that they never will consult outsiders, meaning that their classes never will, in my opinion, be appropriate for people suffering with mental health difficulties, even though this is the main population they target through their current advertising methods. Inform, an independent charity that hold information about cults state that: ‘A number of complaints focus around the response of NKT leadership to questions and
criticism. In particular, former members have described any 'real questioning' on difficult issues being discouraged by a number of stock phrases and avoidance of conversation.

It is clear from the above that the NKT have no understanding of mental health despite the fact that they claim they understand the mind and offer classes as solutions to anxiety, depression and stress. They believe that anxiety, low mood, and trauma have no meaning. Survivors report that when their mental health deteriorated they were treated with indifference, and at times, spoken to as if they were inferior due to their mental health. I believe this is reflected here, in an ex-senior teachers’ reflections on a friends suicide.

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, i.e., 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.

Whilst it is common for people to view those who have committed suicide as acting selfishly on some level (not a view I agree with personally, but a common one), most would likely speak with more empathy for the person’s emotional pain. The NKT do not have any language with which to speak about trauma or the fight and flight response as meaningful or as requiring any kind of attention, for example through the practices of deep breathing, grounding techniques, self-soothing. This means that they perceive a person’s suicide as simply a result of an error in their perception which they could have prevented by focusing their mind on something more virtuous instead. The above clearly suggests suicide was due to the person’s self-cherishing mind and that he should have simply told himself he was a Bodhisattva that day instead. Mental health is much more complex than this and shame is an incredibly painful embodied experience which includes more than thoughts alone.

1.7. The practice of applying ‘antidotes/opponents’ for ‘delusions’ minds’ or emotions

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 wise ones. See an advert below for an example:
1.7.1. 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 wise 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 domain continues to depend on the preselection of participants who are already prone to thought suppression.

1.7.2. 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. There is an inherent paradox in attempting to avoid, suppress, or eliminate unwanted private experiences in that often such attempts lead 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.

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

1.7.3. The danger of valuing absolute truth over relative truth

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. NKTE 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 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. It might be that we are jealous because we see someone happy in a romantic relationship, and we are in a toxic one. Remaining in unsafe situations, codependent 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 John 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, Tricycle interview). 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).
1.7.4. 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).

1.7.5. 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.

1.7.6. The denial of anger

Purifying your mind of anger is considered an essential practice in most Buddhist traditions, but particularly the NKT. Patience is considered the antidote to anger, with no mention of
righteous anger or anger being an appropriate response to having your boundaries or sense of self violated. In Buddhism, there is no such thing as “righteous” or “justifiable” anger according to O’Brien (2019). ‘All anger is a fetter to realization. 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. However, these are difficult, esoteric disciplines that are not where most of us practice.’

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 unskilful and unhealthy to feel angry are particularly dangerous 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 practiced more tools for channelling and working with this emotion.

1.7.7. The potential damage to your physical health

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, Abeloff, & 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 antiemotional 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.

1.7.8. 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:

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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.

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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.
The above indicates how believing that you know the answers to peoples emotional problems can have a detrimental effect on your ability to understand, validate and accept their emotions. You are at risk of invalidating them, speaking as if you know the answer, which is likely to irritate people and lead them to view you as more narcissistic. Sadly, the practitioner who posted the above believes that the answer is to refine his practice whilst staying in the NKT, even though applying opponents for ‘minds’ or ‘delusions’ is one of the central premises of the teachings.

1.8. **More spiritual bypassing**

The potential for spiritually bypassing painful emotional states by applying ‘opponents’ has been mentioned above. It could also be argued that the practices of ‘contemplation’ meditation and self-generation as a deity are simply spiritual bypassing. Contemplation ‘meditation’ practiced within the NKT, which invites the person to focus on an aspect of the teachings e.g. how living beings have no faults, could be argued is likely to repress the individuals emotional pain and unresolved psychological difficulties further. 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. 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 to experiencing psychosis or delusions of grandiosity, this is likely to lead to acute symptoms of psychosis e.g. hallucinations. I myself witnessed one person who was clearly struggling with this, genuinely believing he was physically turning into a Buddha. Christian Szurko, Spiritual Abuse Recovery Specialist and founder of DialogueCentre UK told me that his ex-clients that had left the NKT had suffered with severe hallucinations and paranoia. An inner tension can also be set up, between the ‘positive’ imaginary self and the ‘negative’ 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.

Welwood states that meditation in any form is frequently used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations. For those in denial about their wounds, meditation practice can reinforce a tendency toward coldness, disengagement, or interpersonal distance. They are at a loss when it comes to relating directly to their feelings or to expressing themselves. Therefore without skilled guidance on when and how to best use meditation, even mindfulness meditation can be used unskillfully to avoid emotional pain.

1.9. **The NKT do not teach mindfulness (in line with Western definitions) and are not qualified to do so**

Myself and the other survivors believe that the NKT saw an opportunity to draw the general public in by riding on the wave of the mindfulness movement and the publics naivety about Buddhism. The NKT advertise themselves as teachers of mindfulness. However, they do not teach mindfulness in line with Western definitions other than the brief mindfulness of breath exercise at the beginning of their classes, which is designed to settle the mind to prepare it for focusing on their doctrine. In my opinion, the mindfulness of breath led by the national spiritual director was poorly guided, 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.

It could be argued as mentioned above that through practicing NKT teachings which encourage applying opponents you may become less mindful. 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. Vulnerable people who have heard that mindfulness is good for you may be likely to believe that they will become more mindful through involvement with this group.

**It is my strong opinion and that of many others that it is not safe for mental health services to recommend or host meditation or ‘mindfulness’ classes run by the NKT.**

1.10 **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 your 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 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, derealization, 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). Downstream, however, as an individual attempts to resume normal functioning in the aftermath of trauma, chronic dissociation can have devastating consequences for all aspects of life (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 from their repressed emotional pain.

1.11. **Nihilism and emptiness teachings available for beginners**

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’, 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. Myself and many 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, this could lead to an exacerbation of these tendencies. 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.

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.

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 both frightening, unpleasant and sometimes pleasant. Studies mainly report distress (Mauricio, 2009; Simeon et al., 2003).

Dr. Elena Bezzubova, a Russian psychoanalyst who treats people with depersonalisiation in California, calls it a painful absence of feeling. These numbing effects mean that it's commonly conceived as a defense mechanism triggered in times of stress. For those who came to the NKT with trauma, this is likely to result in an exacerbation of these trauma symptoms. Studies which investigate this are required however. 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. Henri Frédéric Amiel, the 19th century Swiss philosopher and writer’s journal is thought to include the first reference to depersonalization. “All is strange to me; I am, as it were, outside my own body and individuality; I am depersonalized, detached, cut adrift. Is this madness?,” In such cases depersonalisation can be considered both a burden and a strange blessing. One sufferer has stated in an interview that whilst she doesn’t exactly equate depersonalisation with enlightenment, she sees it as a halfway, formless state. “I believe I am on the path to enlightenment,” she says.

Irrespective of whether the individual considers their depersonalization as 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. You might become less empathetic or your pain threshold might increase. 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.

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 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 a socially acceptable manner if they were to hold the idea that nothing exists in their mind at all times.

1.12. Fanaticism and magical thinking

According to Daniel Shaw there are 6 methods cult leaders use to maintain their illusion of superiority and control:

- Purification of followers ego or mind
- Only perfection is good enough
- Inner deviance must be eradicated
- Incessant urgency – for your time, dedication, money
- Violation of boundaries becomes the norm in order to please the leader
- Defend the leader no matter what

Followers are encouraged to keep their guru in their heart all the time, and to follow only their spiritual guide’s wisdom. Those who attend foundation programme classes are required to memorise Kelsang Gyatso’s texts and to take exams where they simply repeat the content word for word. It is widely known that NKT members often start sentences with the phrase ‘Gesh-la says…..’ In this way they often come across like clones, repeating stock phrases, a phenomena that has led many ex-members of the NKT to refer to current members as
‘KelsangBots’. In the Greek story of Narcissus and Echo, Echo is so entranced with Narcissus that she repeats the last few words of his every sentence. It could be argued that in the same way, codependent NKT members repeat the sentences of Kelsang Gyatso in order to rely solely on his teachings as their guide for how to live their lives. They are encouraged to visualise him, and deities on which they rely, as part of their mind and at their heart.

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.

‘Mystical manipulation is the creation of awe for the purpose of undue influence, and happens when someone else has manufactured, manipulated, or otherwise rigged the circumstances to force the experience of awe, in order to connect the ‘high’ feeling to something they – and only they – can provide’ (Open Minds Foundation).

Despite the fact that Kelsang Gyatso has not been seen in public for several years, and is thought by many to have died or possibly to be struggling with dementia, senior NKT members do not allow other members to know what has happened to him. The mystery surrounding his whereabouts appeared to have elevated him to an even more magical and omniscient position in followers minds. Some, although not all NKT members come to believe that their guru is the living Buddha and therefore is 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.

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, could read their minds, and could predict the future. According to Stephen Batchelor, author of ‘Buddhism without Beliefs’, many Tibetan lamas also see these visualized figures not just as mere symbols or archetypes. Despite being ‘empty of inherent existence’, they are regarded as possessing both an agency that was 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. For a full list of Lifton’s eight criteria of thought reform see Appendix A.

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. 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). 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 and submit to the leader. This is not just an emotional dependence but the wish to experience the other as ones whole world, just as the family is for a young child. According to Becker (1974), our urge to deify others comes from this transference. ‘The more they have, the more rubs off on us’.
1.13. **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-awareness and unbinding’. According to Charles Carreon (online resource, 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.

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 Buddhist reported the greatest fear of death despite believing there is no consistent self. This is in stark 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 clearly indicated in the below image which displays a troller 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’.
NKT practitioners usually believe that a belief in hell realms motivates people to engage in more virtuous behaviours. However findings suggest that 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, and to engage in child abuse (Campbell & Vollhardt, 2013, Swan, online resource, Webster & Saucier, 2015).

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 even more re-traumatising. For those with a learning disability and those on the autistic spectrum with very literal thinking this could be terrifying.

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. 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 report that the fears that they developed during the time they were involved with the NKT took them many years to work through.

1.14. Confusing doctrine

According to the Cult Information Centre, confusing doctrine is one of the characteristics of a cult. As the person’s involvement with the group deepens and their confusion does not lift, they are left believing that they must have misunderstood or are spiritually inadequate. It is clear from NKT advertising alone that a person is told that they should be aiming to feel happy all the time, is then taught techniques which are likely to cause anxiety and dissociation but are told they are fortunate for this experience and should practice gratitude. They 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. They are encouraged to develop more faith in order to cope with their confusion. They do not even have access to their guru or any form of official mentor in order to ask questions or to clarify their confusion. They may feel trapped within the organisation which continues to promise them mental clarity through its practices ‘one day’.

1.15. The martyr and messiah complex

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 person will develop a ‘martyr’ or ‘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. This means that the person can believe that drawing recruits in 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. For those with a tendency towards self-neglect and self-abandonment, the martyr/messiah complex is likely to lead to burnout and further trauma through the accepting of abusive behaviours.

1.16. Why does it feel good, especially at first?

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. 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). The giving of jobs that are said to be special make the person feel like they hold an important role within a virtuous organisation. Trance states and the feeling of ‘blessings’ induced during prayers and meditation are likely to be similar to drug induced states of bliss at times.

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). 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.

For those who are orphaned, estranged from or have difficult relationships with their family, the groups insistence that you are part of the family may serve as a powerful antidote to attachment trauma in the beginning. A sense of belonging in a group that considers its practices more virtuous and wise than the way outsiders live their lives makes the individual feel superior.

Whilst the teachings make people believe that they are becoming wiser and kinder, it is likely that to an outsider they would appear to be becoming increasingly narrow-minded and narcissistic. Shared language strengthens group cohesion, leading to increased group narcissism over time. For those with strong narcissistic tendencies who are given teaching positions, the admiration received is likely to be very reinforcing. Those with sadistic tendencies will often find that their behaviour is enabled and accepted with patience whilst the person they have abused is told to practice more diligently.

1.17. The naivety of mental health services

Mental health services are at risk of accidentally recommending these classes for people without realising that Buddhism is not the same as mindfulness. This is particularly likely to happen with the NKT as they advertise themselves as teachers of mindfulness. The mindfulness of breath at the beginning of classes is only a precursor to the contemplation meditations which are part of a path which aims to ‘destroy your self-cherishing’ and achieve ‘Buddhahood’. The meditation practices that the NKT teach do not include mindfulness of the body and are likely to lead to dissociation if practiced long term.

It is also apparent that most westerners hold a positive view towards Buddhism, meaning that they do not expect there to be Buddhist cults that deceive or abuse people. Carreon (2019) asserts that:

‘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’.

I knew of at least one inpatient ward which was hosting meditation classes run by the NKT centre I lived in. It has recently been seen on social media that Mind are hosting their classes, and Twitter revealed that classes are being hosted in a psychiatric ward in South Africa. It is extremely important that health services remain impartial and do not provide or recommend meditation classes run by any particular religious group in any case. Those with trauma through involvement with this group need safe spaces to access support where the religious group cannot be providing meditation classes.

If vulnerable people attend the classes and become involved with the community, they are at high risk of being exploited by this organisation, which uses the teachings to convince people they should volunteer their time and give their money in order to keep the centre running, so that ‘all living beings’ can benefit.
Section 2 – Living and/or volunteering in an NKT dharma centre

The following information is most relevant to those who spend significant amounts of time living or volunteering with the NKT, although may still be relevant to those who attend teachings and take them very seriously, applying them on a daily basis in their ‘regular’ life.

According to Kay (1997), dharma 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’. The primary metaphor that is used within the organisation for describing the NKT is that of the family. However, given the practices encourage people to practice invalidation of their own and others emotions, to ignore any trauma and to ‘transform’ (repress) anger, and enable abusive behaviours, this is likely to lead to toxic ‘family’ dynamics, further trauma and dissociation. Given those who are drawn to the NKT are likely to be extra vulnerable and to already have experienced trauma and neglect, this is likely to contribute to the development of complex post-traumatic stress. 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. This isolation is exaggerated when anxiety about being ostracized causes people to refrain from challenging the behaviour of others. To do so can feel like betraying the idealized notions of Sangha and spiritual friendship that attracted the person to the group in the first place.

2.1. Serious neglect of residents and working visitors mental and physical health

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 physical and mental 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 resolving obvious mental health difficulties
- The encouragement and ‘rejoicing’ in the spiritual bypassing of painful emotions
- 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 tradition
- 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 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 tradition
• Discouragement of play and fun for relaxation

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

• The denial of the existence of the body other than 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

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 understood ‘the mind’. There is no one living 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 difficulties living in NKT dharma centres. I myself witnessed several clearly mentally unwell people being encouraged to follow the Buddhist 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. This is made clear in the texts which state that total reliance on the spiritual guide alone is paramount, and that outside influences are ‘degenerate’. As they are so convinced that they understand the mind, and that their practices are a path to enlightenment, a vulnerable person is at risk of abandoning any western mental health care they may already have been receiving. They are highly unlikely to have psychological therapy and may have to keep this quiet especially if they are ordained.

Due to the NKT’s teachings on enduring suffering, and not only that but also taking on the suffering of all other living beings, they do not view self-care as important. In fact, you are actively encouraged to suffer more to help ‘destroy your self-cherishing’, and not only that, but be grateful for your suffering and any abusers because it is teaching you. This means that you are encouraged to view your abuser as your teacher, and to be grateful. This means that when you inevitably experience deterioration in your mental health, you cannot turn to anyone in teaching or management positions for grounded, validating, normal advice. I myself was told following a panic attack that I should be working harder at feeling nothing, by meditating on how everything arises from my mind, and people do not exist inherently from their own side. I was told that I had an impure mind and that is why I had an impure view. I was told 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 immediately. However a person who is more vulnerable and lacks knowledge of mental health is likely to berate themselves for being so ineffective and to strain even harder at a time of distress or during a trauma reaction. It is my opinion that they may be likely to experience dissociation and derealisation. I myself did experience this due to hearing that ‘life is just a dream’ during a time of confusion and distress.

2.2.     High level of burnout

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. 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 reason why 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. As joy experienced through ‘worldy’ 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. Trying to ‘overcome’ their emotions and ignoring their intuition is also likely to contribute. 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’.

Whilst it is the individual’s responsibility to engage in self-care, this appears to become very difficult due to 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.

Many ex-members have reported that they were bed-bound or catatonic when they became burnt-out due to their involvement. I myself had three months signed off work sick after leaving and at one point found it very difficult to speak.

‘Spiritually I was fried, and that’s what the job did for me. I just got burnt out. And I recognize now a couple of things: One is that I was still doing the job with my sort of ordinary motivation, or ordinary way that I do things, just full on. But also I think it was also a real intense spiritual ripening; all this shit just came out, like I couldn’t even speak sometimes. I couldn’t sleep … I was really not in good shape. [One teacher] actually wrote me a little note telling me to take a good long rest for about a year. … I was just totally exhausted. And I found out later, you know, it’s burnout.’ (Michael, an interviewee from Emery-Moore’s thesis).
According to Emory-Moore (2019):

‘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’.

When I spoke to the admin director about these concerns 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.

2.3. Misplaced loyalty and feeling beholden to the NKT (fear and guilt)

Due to the repeated trance states and feelings of bliss people can often experience during teachings and meditation, they often become convinced that these feelings are a result of their involvement with the NKT and its dharma, and therefore they can become bonded to this organisation. Due to the NKT being sectarian and the active discouragement of reading other texts or trying out other Buddhist groups, members are unlikely to believe that they could find another source of these blessings. Many members report being estranged from their families, and a history of childhood abuse and emotional neglect. This means that they may be more likely to struggle with attachment disorders, and may experience intense fears of abandonment, making it even more difficult for them to leave.

Members are encouraged to repeatedly focus on how fortunate they are to have discovered their spiritual guide and the dharma, thus generating a feeling of gratitude which can lead to misplaced loyalty. Children who are ignored or neglected can create a misplaced loyalty towards their parent as a buffer against letting in the reality of the parent’s abuse or emotional absence. The child overcompensates by manufacturing an imaginary closeness with the unavailable parent. The child learns how to be in relationship with an idealised version of the parent. Thus you could argue that those who experienced childhood emotional neglect might be more likely to idolise their guru and his teachings.

Misplaced loyalty makes it harder for people to perceive and acknowledge abusive behaviours, and to leave abusive situations. They are encouraged to see any perceived faults in the organisation as evidence that they still have an ‘impure mind’, and that they should work harder at viewing their teacher and the NKT in general as faultless. For those who take their teachings and vows very seriously, a person may develop a fear of an unfortunate rebirth due to their leaving the organisation and ‘turning their back on’ their spiritual guide. According to Christian Szurko, spiritual abuse recovery expert, it is often very challenging for victims of spiritual abuse within Buddhist traditions to disclose abuse for these reasons, over and above other religious groups and cults (stated during phone call with myself).
2.4. The enabling and minimising of abuse

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 stand up for themselves when being abused. Ex-members report that when they attempted to speak up about abuse they were told:

- ‘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)

The below is a Facebook 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. He clearly also suggests here that on some level, this woman, deserves to be verbally and emotionally abused based on her previous actions. Myself and many other e-members believe this reflects the NKT’s general attitude towards abusive behaviour: that the fault is with the victim, not the abuser, and the victim’s job is to keep a ‘happy mind’ throughout the abuse.

Your reaction to the abuse (e.g. anxiety and trauma) is therefore your fault as it is created by your mind, and not the fault of the abuser. According to Be Schofield, cult expert, in a current podcast series called ‘Toxic Spirituality’ this kind of belief system is ‘a narcissists dream’.

One anonymous ex-member states ‘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’.

The NKT does not have any safeguarding policies or procedures. When I attempted to raise safeguarding concerns I was told ‘it’s all just karma’ and ‘we cannot get involved in relationships’. Speaking to other ex-members has confirmed that this is the general attitude towards abusive behaviour throughout the NKT internationally. It has allowed alleged sexual abusers to continue holding senior positions within the organisation.
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 reassessed. 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’.

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 (Remski, 2019). In addition, some people have narcissistic and sociopathic personality traits, meaning that they may not be making mistakes at all, they may be intentionally causing harm. 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’. 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. It is therefore likely that many ex-members will have suffered serious abuse and could have complex post-traumatic stress symptoms following this, especially due to the extent of the gaslighting of your perception of senior members as other than perfect.

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.

2.5. Trauma bonds

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, 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 is the most damaging trauma bond imaginable. This is a dangerous combination due to the feelings of ‘bliss’ they have repeatedly generated in association with him. 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. Combining the neuroscience behind trauma bonding with the teachings on seeing your guru as faultless could be an extremely toxic and traumatising combination.

Traditionally in Buddhism, the teacher claims their spiritual legitimacy as the representative of an unbroken lineage that can be traced back through a sequence of distinguished names to a saintly founder, or even to the Buddha himself. The teacher’s person and conduct are
thereby 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.

However, it is crucial to ensure that a compassionate figure or source of feelings of unconditional love cannot exploit, betray, mislead or mistreat you. For people who have attachment difficulties, giving their trust over to a figure whose organisation then treats them in an abusive way is extremely damaging and likely to lead to severe attachment trauma, on top of the trauma that the person already suffered with. 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 the disturbing revelations about their leader are faced with a dilemma: either their teacher wasn’t that enlightened after all, in which case they have been conned, or enlightenment isn’t what they thought, which can be even more distressing.

2.6. 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 myself experienced this to some extent despite working full time outside the centre and still having a car, and friendships outside the NKT. The teachings encourage people to give up their regular life, by suggesting that ‘samsaric’ happiness is meaningless, and that only activities that are virtuous (usually for the NKT) are meaningful. Many members of the NKT have become isolated from previous friends and family, as is common with cult involvement.

I would argue that due to the vulnerability of those who get drawn into the NKT, plus the ‘mind control’ factors and guru devotion they may experience, 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, guru devotion and group mentality, is likely to be an ‘impairment on the mind’ as defined in the Mental Capacity Act. At Nagarjuna Kadampa Meditation Centre, I witnessed many people being very easily influenced by an idea, taking it on as their own after a mere suggestion by someone else in the group.

2.7. Drawing in non-Buddhists in order to pay the bills

Advertisements for rooms available at NKT dharma centres give people an idealised image of what it might be like to live there. One advert states ‘Becoming a resident - rooms available to rent at Thornby Hall. Become a part of the community and live in this special,
peaceful environment.' Of course there is no indication in the advert that most people living there struggle with severe and enduring mental health problems, that there are no background checks on residents or teachers and no safeguarding policies or procedures. Whilst the grounds may be beautiful, it is the opinion of myself and many other ex-members that the communities themselves are traumatised, fanatical and unstable. There is also no indication that you must attend teachings that include doctrine at least once per week in the adverts. 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.

2.8. Financial abuse

Many ex-members report financial abuse, for example lending items and money to the NKT and later being told that it will not be returned. They report that they were gaslighted, being told that their memory was incorrect, and that they had promised to donate these items or money when they clearly remember that it was a loan that was agreed. Ex-members have reported that they were encouraged to give large amounts of money even when claiming benefits in order to work full time for the organisation. There are no discounts for disabled members to attend teachings or festivals.

2.9. Severe gaslighting of the mental ‘clarity’ of those who perceive faults in the organisation

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’. This means that when trying to raise concerns about abusive behaviour to management or other residents, they are often told statements such as ‘impure mind, impure world’, and encouraged to strive even harder to ‘purify’ their view. Due to the NKT’s views on abuse, many report that their attempts to report abuse were dismissed or blamed on their karma. They are often told that they have misunderstood the teachings, which subtly suggests that they are inadequate and that the NKT hold all the answers.

The admin director 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. Many survivors report that management blame the persons pre-existing mental health condition or their karma for any deterioration without acknowledging any possibility that 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 the deterioration of peoples health, or for safeguarding.

It may not be that current members are aware that they do this. In fact due to the mind control and ‘parroting’ of the teachings, it could be argued that they cannot help but do this. 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. The criticism of former members also reinforces 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 remaining group cohesion and belief that they are collectively stronger.
2.10. **Eviction, abandonment and neglect of those in mental health crisis**

I witnessed one resident being asked to leave suddenly due to poor mental health. He had been living at the centre for many years and would likely need significant rehabilitation and perhaps even residential care. However there is no care like this in place for former residents due to lack of communication between the NKT and mental health services. It is therefore likely that residents switch between NKT centres. Another resident reported to me that she believed she was being bullied so that she would have to leave, without being directly asked to leave. 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. 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. 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.

2.11. **Lack of aftercare**

I would argue from my own personal experience and what I witnessed that the ‘mind control’ elements mixed with severe gaslighting and trauma bonding are highly dangerous and likely to lead to mental health crises. Many survivors report suicidality and mental health ‘breakdowns’ after leaving. I believe this can manifest as a combination of loss and grief, the possible withdrawal effects of leaving a cult, severe narcissistic abuse syndrome, complex post-traumatic stress and severe social isolation.

2.11.1. **The possible withdrawal effects of leaving a cult**

According to the Cult Information Centre, for those who are fortunate enough to leave a cult there often begins a difficult rehabilitation period which typically takes a year or more. During this time the ex-member experiences a variety of symptoms of withdrawal. These symptoms as shown in ‘Information Disease’, Science Digest (1982) include:

- Emotional outbursts
- Insomnia
- Fear of the group
- Hallucinations
- Delusions
- Menstrual and sexual dysfunction
- Amnesia
- Guilt

Among the common negative characteristics exhibited by the former cult members studied, said Dr. Clark, are depression, guilt, fear, paranoia, slow speech, rigidity of facial expression and body posture, indifference to physical appearance, passivity and memory impairment.

Stanley Cath, a psychoanalyst and associate professor of psychiatry at the Tufts University
School of Medicine has treated and studied 60 former cult members over the last decade. He states that many mental health professionals are ‘ignorant of this ‘disease,’ and don't know how to treat it.’ Although these researchers said it is possible for those who have left cults to integrate their experience into their lives in healthy ways, many are unable to.

2.11.2. Narcissistic abuse syndrome

It is my opinion that the NKT as a system has the characteristics of a hero narcissist and treats people in the way a narcissist would, thus often resulting in narcissistic abuse syndrome in survivors. The traits of someone with narcissistic personality disorder include:

- Believing they are superior to everyone else, despite the fact they have no special talent or haven’t accomplished anything noteworthy
- An exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Putting you down or criticizing you to make themselves feel good or superior
- Isolating you from others, such as your friends and family
- 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
- Telling you everything is your fault

Narcissistic abuse refers to any abuse by a narcissist, particularly emotional abuse in parent-child and adult-to-adult relationships. The term was 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. Currently, there is minimal literature on narcissistic abuse syndrome, and sufferers report a lack of understanding in mental health professionals. Feelings of betrayal by a religious organisation that claims to be compassionate is particularly confusing and likely to lead to severe cognitive dissonance.

Due to the potential combination of severe narcissistic abuse syndrome and withdrawal effects of leaving a cult, I believe those who leave to be at high risk of mental health crises that will be difficult for outsiders to understand. Given that lots of people who become involved with the organisation are likely to have attachment disorders, previous addictions and other complex mental health difficulties, I believe the risk of suicide upon leaving the NKT to be high. Survivors have told me that they have known of people who commit suicide soon after leaving. It is likely that someone who has spent several years living in a centre, and does not move immediately into another one, would be at risk of needing an inpatient admission. Those who have become ordained and/or given up their careers and homes are likely to have limited access to funds and are at risk of homelessness. However no one from the management checks that people are ok or that they have assistance with moving, or accessing appropriate care. It is my opinion that after leaving the NKT your welfare will only be checked if you happen to have made some loyal friends who do not have serious mental health difficulties that impair their ability to care about your welfare. 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’. 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’. For
those with pre-existing attachment trauma leaving is likely to trigger abandonment and rejection wounds.

For those who may have held positions of power within the NKT but who do not have a career or position of power outside of the NKT, leaving is likely to result in grief, loss of identity and to impact on self-esteem. For those with narcissistic traits, re-adjustment into the regular world which has more consequences for abusive behaviour could be challenging.

2.11.3. Complex post-traumatic stress disorder

Possible symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder are extensive and have been arranged into categories. Judith 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.

Survivors report 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 deskill at understanding and coping with their emotions. They are likely to feel unable to turn to meditation or 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.

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. 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.

Over the years there has been considerable research investigating the controversial issues of cult recruitment, “mind control” and post-group difficulties of ex-members from a variety of religious groups. 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). 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.

2.10.4. 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. Recovering from this is likely to take considerable time and be highly challenging. Rediscovering their likes and dislikes is likely to be challenging and a slow process due to the teachings focusing on ‘self-cherishing’. Conversation and social skills are likely to be stunted due to the shared language used within the NKT that is not easily understood by the general public. 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.

2.10.5. Difficulty and shame in explaining your experience to outsiders

Due to the complex, confusing and potentially debilitating effects described above it can be extremely challenging for ex-members to articulate their experience to others. Even if you know how to articulate it, explaining what you did, and what happened in a cultic group or relationship, to people who find it incomprehensible, can be a deeply shaming experience.

Daniel Shaw states that when he works with people who have only recently left a cult, they are often obsessed with guilt and shame: about what they did in the group, about having "let themselves" be abused, about the pre-cult relationships they had abandoned. Often, they feel ashamed of the way they left; or perhaps they left only to get into yet another cult-like group or relationship.

The Cult Information Centre states that mental health professionals should have more training regarding cults and how to support ex-members. As the severe psychological disturbance caused by involvement with this organisation is unusual and difficult for outsiders to understand, I believe it to be important that mental health professionals have access to information and an advisor. It has been suggested that researchers and academics tend to downplay the 'mind control' and brainwashing elements of cult involvement (Mark Dunlop 'Why cults are so difficult to oppose'). Inpatient unit staff may benefit from training on the needs of people who may have left a cult and need inpatient treatment, rehabilitation, and may be suffering with severe dissociation, complex trauma and loss.

2.10.6. The risks involved in speaking up about the NKT

Several survivors report being asked to sign non-disclosure agreements regarding their experience with the NKT. Survivors who have written testimonies and tried to speak up in other ways about their abuse report gaslighting, stalking, death threats, online trolling, character assassination, and even sabotage of access to mental health services.

2.10.6.1. Gaslighting

Current NKT members are known to attempt to make critics question their mental clarity and sanity. In the below screenshot ‘Empty Bliss’ attempts to do this and then suggests I am paranoid for thinking that they are not being genuine.
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. Of course this could be easy to achieve as an ex-member is indeed likely to be struggling with some symptoms of post-traumatic stress. It is often difficult for the current member to recognise that they themselves are likely to have a mental health and attachment difficulty too which made them vulnerable to becoming involved with the group. Whilst within the group, if their needs are being met, they may believe that they are on the path to enlightenment when in reality they are simply becoming more dissociated or narcissistic.

It is common for members of authoritarian sects to tell critics to ‘move on’ and ‘let go’ in an attempt to suggest that they are mentally unwell due to obsession. This is likely due to the current member feeling threatened, and wishing the critic to stop speaking up so that the current member’s security within the group is safe.
Ex-members who have come to realise just how psychologically damaging the group is can 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-cult 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.

The NKT are known to refer to critical ex-members as ‘disgruntled’ former members and ‘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. Due to the group narcissism, there is a pervasive view that those outside the NKT are not on the correct spiritual path (and are therefore on some level, inferior). It is therefore likely that they will attack critics through comments that come across as patronising and superior. For those who are still in the ‘love bombing and flattery’ early stages of involvement with the group, and who experience relief due to the spiritual bypassing, it may be difficult for them to understand why people would become critical of the NKT and its practices.

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.
2.11.6.2. Threats and defamation

A character who identifies himself as ‘Indyhack’ (who may or may not be the same person as ‘Empty Bliss’) has been known to attack survivors who speak up. The below is an email received by an anonymous survivor.

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 been 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.

An email was received by my supervisor the day after version 1 of my psychological report went viral claiming I am too mentally unstable for my job. This is thought by ex-members to be from a senior NKT member using a fake name and credentials, but this cannot be proven. In my opinion the email had a similar ‘fake concern’ style as the character ‘Empty Bliss’ who trolls my YouTube videos. It is my opinion that releasing my report triggered ‘narcissistic rage’ in senior NKT, resulting in them wishing to punish me in any way they can immediately after releasing the report in writing. However, I cannot prove this. According to Inform, the NKT management has responded to cases of public criticism or independent publications from those previously associated with the movement with threats of legal action although none of these instances have ever reached court.
2.12. Summary

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 are not qualified to teach mindfulness (in line with Western definitions of mindfulness), but still attempt to benefit financially and to draw people in through the ‘mindfulness movement’. They do not teach mindfulness aside from a brief mindfulness of the breath practice at the beginning of classes which is designed to settle the mind prior to focusing on the doctrine. It is very important that health services and the general public understand this.

Myself and many other survivors believe the NKT to be a highly psychologically damaging and exploitative organisation that attracts people through their attachment trauma, depression and dissatisfaction with life. All of their 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 sense of belonging, ‘love-bombing’ and flattery, trance states, group narcissism, and the short term benefits of spiritual bypassing in avoiding emotional pain.

Potential psychological damage whilst within the group includes:

- the increasing inability to trust one’s own perception and intuition
- dissociation from the body, derealisation and depersonalisation
- further repression of emotion and trauma through spiritual bypassing, thought-stopping and thought-control
- anxiety linked to fear of rebirth in a hell realm
- 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
- stress and burnout
- severe cognitive dissonance due to the gaslighting
- misplaced loyalty and trauma bonding to the guru and the group
- hallucinations due to the visualisation practices
- paranoia due to the magical thinking

In particular, this is likely to be highly damaging for those who came to the group with pre-existing acute trauma or complex attachment related 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 members of the NKT who came to the group with mental health difficulties or learning disabilities could lack capacity to be able to make decisions regarding their own welfare.

The difficulties involved in leaving and recovering from the experience of being involved with this organisation are extensive. These could include symptoms of:

- Grief
- The withdrawal effects of leaving a cult
- Narcissistic abuse syndrome
• Complex post-traumatic stress disorder
• Hallucinations and paranoia
• Severe social isolation

For those who try to speak up, risk of further abuse and resulting trauma is high. Recovery is likely to take many years for those who have been deeply involved in the group. Re-adjustment and rehabilitation is likely to be very challenging, and survivors may need intensive psychological support. Survivors would benefit from support from those with specialist knowledge and experience of both cult involvement, and the way in which this particular group operates. There is not currently enough training on cult involvement for mental health professionals.

Research is required to better understand the psychological damage and needs of survivors of this particular group, however the participation rate in any proposed study is likely to be low due to complex post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and fear of consequences.
References


Tao The Ching, Chapter 74, http://www.egreenway.com/taoism/ttciz74.htm


Appendices

Appendix A: Lifton’s criteria of thought reform:

1.) Milieu Control:

“We control what you experience, and how you experience it.”

Many totalist groups will censor what their members read, watch and listen to, controlling not only the information available, but also how that information is processed. Similarly, a controlling partner will limit access to visits from family and friends, as well as restricting phone and internet use. But it isn’t just information and thoughts being controlled – with such techniques as adjusting the lighting and the temperature of the space, along with other sensory intrusions such as over-potent incense or graphic representations of scriptural violence (martyrdom scenes and the like), even groups and entities not traditionally thought of as abusive can sway our feelings to their benefit, simply by adjusting the atmosphere.

2.) Loading the Language:

“Our own special language helps you to think the way we want you to think.”

All groups have their own unique slang, and every discipline and even spiritual practice has some jargon, but an abusive group will use its language to separate its people so that you can’t understand them – keeping the new recruit in a constant state of confusion, having to learn a new whole vocabulary just to progress. Also, creating a vocabulary creates a pattern of thought, and messages can be slipped in with ease – any group labeling itself “The Truth” subconsciously tells its members, every time they say the name of their organization: “this is the truth,” making anything the leadership says that much harder to question – in the mind of the inculcated member, the organization is the truth.

3.) Mystical Manipulation:

“We’ll make sure our system works for you – even if we have to fake it.”

Not everyone has the ingenuity of the popular charlatan who had the kneeler in front of his throne mildly electrified so that supplicants would “feel” his energy, but effect is the easiest thing for a true showman to create. From exploiting lesser-known physiological responses and interpreting them as paranormal phenomena, to doing careful background research on a “mark” and presenting the results as a psychic “message,” manipulative groups and individuals plan miraculous events to happen “spontaneously.”

4.) Sacred Science

“It’s true because we say it’s the Truth.”

When it’s a matter of faith, the “facts” become unquestionable. How do we know that this holy book is the word of God? Sacred science happens when the scientific method is being misrepresented or even shunted aside to “prove” such faith-based belief systems such as creationism, the afterlife, dowsing, or even the claims of fallacious health gurus. Whenever a request for clinical proof is rebuffed with “you have to believe to make it work,” or “it’s beyond our scientific knowledge, but it’s true,” you’re being manipulated.

5.) Demand for Purity
“Only those good enough can ‘get it.’”

Call it original sin, evil intent, entheata, negative energy, whatever – you’re going to have to get rid of what the group tells you isn’t right for you: only then can you reach your goals. From the ‘wrong’ foods to your favorite hobbies, from ‘satanic’ music to your family: when someone else is telling you what you have to give up, whatever you do give up shall never be enough.

6.) Confession

“We promise we won’t use your past against you… really…”

Before you found your group, you had plenty wrong with your life. The group will make sure you – and the rest of your fellow members – knows exactly what it was that was wrong with you before they helped you get better. Anything good that’s happened to you shall now be by the leader’s grace – even if it happened before you met (that’s them leading you safely to them), and anything bad that happens to you is the fault of your “wicked” past.

7.) Doctrine Over Person

“When your facts don’t match our Truth, your facts are wrong.”

In case of a discrepancy between what you observe and what the scripture says is correct, the group will insist that you must have observed the incident incorrectly. After all, how could you, a mere mortal, know better than the Word of God? For groups with a non-religious focus, the authority of the group will take the place of scripture, but the thinking will be just as rigid: your own observations are incorrect, or colored by your imperfect perceptions; only the leadership has the right information.

8.) Dispensing of Existence

“The Truth is worth more than life, especially an outsider’s life.”

You are mortal, just one person. And, compared to the Ultimate Truth, the Will of God, the Course of History, the One True Path, or whatever it is a totalist group is claiming as the only worthwhile cause, the life of just one person doesn’t matter much. And, since they reckon anyone who’s not with them is against them, then, if you’re not one of the gang, your life isn’t worth the charge on your cellphone battery.
Appendix B: Messages of appreciation from ex-members

Hi Michelle, thanks for being friends with me. I first went to Manjush Institute as it was then in 1977 and last went there in 1992 when the NKT was founded. I never lived there just some residential courses. Used to know all of the main players Neil Roy and Jim. I have been following their progress over the years and it makes me very sad what passes for Buddhist teaching these days. Love your videos seem to be helping lots of people. Please take care of yourself lots of love xx

Michelle, your energy, resilience and tenacity in undertaking and pursuing this project has been an inspiration to many survivors who, like you, reach out from their own experience to support those damaged in so many ways by the NKT. Thank you Michelle.

Hi Michelle. Just wanted to say, thank you for your courage and honesty in exposing the NKT for what it really is. I spent about 12 years associated with it, it wasn't particularly pleasant, but now I'm getting closure, and watching your videos is a great help. The video with Christian is fantastic, I've watched it 3 times already. Keep going, don't let the NKT trolls win. Peace

As someone who has a loved one currently caught up in the nkt and suffering because of it I found myself stumbling around the internet attempting to self-educate by piecing together random information. By chance I discovered Michelle's story through YouTube and I subsequently read her psychological report after she graciously made herself available to speak with me. Her unique ability to present her personal experience through the lens of her professional experience combined with her willingness to put her own face to the subject matter makes for a compelling look into the reality of this cult. For me personally her story and report proved immediately to be an invaluable resource, not only validating every concern I had but also bringing to light other aspects I hadn't yet considered. Michelle was also helpful because most importantly she helped me understand the strong community of people that identify as survivors and support each other. For me it felt like a lonely endeavor just trying to identify reliable information online, I can't imagine what it would feel like to be in the position of a member wanting to leave the nkt. I can only speak from my own perspective as a person on the outside looking to help someone they care about but from my vantage point her report and videos are all "must see" content for anyone that either directly or indirectly finds themselves effected by the nkt.

it is. Honestly until I saw your videos I just felt really inadequate that I just was never able to extract peace/love/serenity from it like there was something wrong with me! Thanks for helping me see the intricate ways that it functions to fuck you up! I'm feeling freer by the day! Each time a thought comes into my head I just reject it and it feels so liberating!
As a victim of New Kadampa Tradition institutional abuse: mental torture, and physical assault, I just want to thank you for giving a voice to all survivors of the NKT. I would also like to thank Christian Szurko, I’m sending this video to my family and friends as an explanation of just how badly my time in the NKT has affected me, so they will understand the enormous feeling of worthlessness I still wrestle with each day. I would urge anyone reading this, please stay away from the NKT, it’s not Buddhist, it’s a dangerous cult.

yogalinda • 1 month ago (edited)
Thank you so much Michelle for having the courage to stand up and speak out, to refuse to be silenced. It’s amazing how you can articulate so much of the process you are going through so well. It’s brilliant and so helpful to so many of us how you can put into words all of this complex internal process that so many have been through who have left the NKT and so many will go through in the future. Also, I think it will help some to avoid getting embroiled in the cult in the first place. Very well done! Thank you.

Gerald Post • 1 month ago (edited)
You hold valuable insights and it’s very helpful for anyone who suffered from abusive relationships, not just the NKT. To have a sympathetic and compassionate professional makes a big difference, especially when compared to people without these experiences 🙏

That’s just a quick interjection, I’m going to listen to the rest of your video now, love and respect 😊

Comments on ‘Reflecting on recent intensity, rebalancing & self-care after …

Highlighted comment
jak hat • 2 hours ago
Hope you are having a lovely, well-deserved holiday. You should be proud of what you have achieved on YouTube, and on writing the Report. You have given a voice to the hundreds of victims of NKT abuse, like myself. The senior managers and Teachers of the NKT should be utterly ashamed of their behaviour, and need to do the right thing and resign. Thank you so much again.
From what I’ve gathered, the fanaticism and cult-like behavior of the NKT must be much worse than in other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but I just wanted to point out that the underlying belief system is the same in all of them. It matters a lot how you teach it, how you interpret it, how you practice it... but the basic teachings are the same. If you have problems, it’s because of your self cherishing. If something horrible happens to you, it’s because you have acted with a self cherishing mind in the past and now you reap the fruit of your negative karma. So everything is basically your own fault. It’s not a teaching specific to the NKT, it’s in all the traditional Tibetan texts, like The Wheel of Sharp Weapons.
Dear Michelle, thank you so much! I am ex nkt, and I recently read your psychological report. Wow. So accurate. So describing my experiences. So helpful for the process of understanding and integrating an incredibly confusing period of my life. Thank you, thank you, thank you so much! 🙏❤️

Samantha Beaumont • 1 month ago
I can't imagine this video was easy for you Michelle but it was worth the whole 22:38 of my time. Thank you

Bernd Zander • 1 week ago (edited)
Due to the role model of the Dalai Lama* many people tend to equate Tibetan Buddhism in general with values like compassion and inner peace. Therefore I regard it as crucial being aware that not all Dharma centres / organisation are a healthy environment at all. Therefore I am very grateful for testimonies of survivors of buddhist cultlike groups like this one.

Especially since Michelle can look at it from the broader perspective of a clinical psychologist, her observations are very helpful, revealing and precious. Though I was never a member of the NKT, I can say from 1st hand experiences, that many aspects Michelle describes here are ringing true for at least some other tibetan buddhist groups here in the West as well.

* Perhaps it is worth noting that the Dalai Lama isn’t accepted as an authority by the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT).

Tommy Hunt • 1 day ago
Bravo, well said. I support you 100% in your position regarding the NKT. New to the term ‘gaslighting’ - love it, quite appropriate.

jak hat • 5 days ago
All the NKT does, is train narcissists as 'Teachers' and provide the opportunity for people of questionable morals to abuse others., whether bullying, or physical and sexual assault. I would NEVER recommend anyone to stay, even overnight at one of their centres. These 'Kadampas' are not Buddhists, they are just poor brainwashed souls who are treated like shit, while working for free. It's Modern Slavery in action.

jak hat • 1 week ago
These 'teachers', they are clueless. The National Spiritual Director that I spoke to about my assault told me it was "my karma" to have been assaulted. The monk who assault me is still at the centre, still Ordained, and still behaving badly, apparently he has bragged about 'touching-up' female volunteer visitors. New Kadampa Tradition centres do not support a spiritual community, the NKT is just a dangerous cult.
mt28 • 3 weeks ago

Same thing happened to me with fmpt, everyone washes their hands and there is no one you can speak to that will take any responsibility. I spoke to Tenzin Palmo, who is not in fmpt but has a lot of followers there, and she also implied the same things, that I should just move on, be grateful and that it’s such a ‘shame’ this happened to me (??). I have no idea why the mainstrem buddhists speak and warn about the nkt. They have the same methods, so they should be good friends in fact. Right? Quite odd if you ask me.

Nearby users:

Andrea Ballance • 1 month ago

The whole thing is heartbreak, it’s that heartbreak that motivates people to speak up. We get accused of waging a hate campaign or ‘not moving on’ but really we are heartbroken people trying to let people who leave or who might get mixed up in it, know they are not alone. We have the experience what to watch out for and how to heal. I have spent many a lonely traumatised triggered day wishing I hadn’t written something or put out a video or cartoon. Heartbreak won out every time though and warning people was so important to me.

Nearby users:

Sangye Ngawang • 3 weeks ago (edited)

Exposing people so they stop harming others, and if you believe in karma, harming themselves is compassion in action. Psychologically they are just going to push deeper through boundaries until they are raping, stealing and traumatizing ... we see it now again and again. Getting involved is courage - a great spiritual value - including involvement by leaving and publicly airing what is suppressed. Its a cult ... i know that and I think cults just go on and on but still you are doing the right thing and it does and will continue to benefit others as compassion and wisdom. Buddhist compassion - meh, its too vague, human compassion is what we call compassion - meditation is what we decide is ... its not even that different from not meditating in the final analysis. Its all so weak and twisting teachings is pure manipulation which is antithesis of truth seeking.

Nearby users:

mt28 • 2 weeks ago

Beautiful! Thank you so much! I think what you said about conditional and unconditional love is so important. All these groups practice conditional love, while we came for the unconditional love, and that is a destructive trick they do. And I also truly believe what you said, that you do not need to have any prior mental or emotional issues to be destroyed by this. They work so hard to make it seem that you were already ‘crazy’, that you start doubting your sanity. Now that I have recovered somewhat I can remember who I was before and I see clearly that many things that triggered me in this time are the kind of things that before would just make me laugh or just shrug and certainly not be such a threat as they are with ptsd.

Nearby users:

nuanceandinTEGRATION • 2 weeks ago

I LOVE your emphasis on how your body feels, this is so important. I feel like you have directed me in a better direction by emphasising this. I have been uncomfortable with and distancing myself from the same centre as you were in more and more but don’t have the knowledge and understanding / eloquence to express it. Thank you so much.