

Branding a New Buddhist Movement: The New Kadampa Tradition’s Self-identification as “Modern Buddhism”

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This article examines the New Kadampa Tradition’s North American missionary deployment of the epithet “Modern Buddhism” in publicity, text, and teaching. I argue that while “Modern Buddhism” branding supports the NKT’s international growth by promoting its founder’s teachings as universally accessible and not Tibetan, those teachings are more continuous with traditional Geluk doctrine than with David McMahan’s (2008) portrayal of Buddhist modernism. Specifically, I find minimal evidence of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization in the NKT founder’s 2011 book *Modern Buddhism* and in public meditation instruction derived therefrom at a Canadian NKT center. My findings locate the NKT’s deployment of the “Modern Buddhism” brand within a graduated missionizing strategy that combines promotional modernism and pedagogical traditionalism to attract North American non-Buddhists by offering culturally desired, this-worldly benefits (e.g., stress reduction) followed by less familiar, other-worldly Buddhist goals (e.g., happiness in future lives).

Keywords: New Kadampa Tradition; Tibetan Buddhism; global Buddhism; modern Buddhism; Buddhist modernism; Buddhism in North America

The Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet has been modernizing for roughly half as long as Theravada and Zen traditions which began both resisting and appropriating Protestant or modernist religious and social forms of Western colonial powers in the late nineteenth century in South and East Asia. Despite this fact, the Dalai Lama has been described as Buddhism’s “quintessential modernizer” (McMahan 2008: 247) and the leading hits returned by Google searches for the term “Modern Buddhism” are all official websites of a single Tibetan-inspired Buddhist organization, the New Kadampa Tradition (henceforward, NKT).¹

¹ In August 2019, the first six of ten, and sixteen of twenty, results from a Vancouver Google search were NKT sites, compared with the first five of ten, and fifteen of twenty, from an Ottawa search. These numbers are comparable to results from Google searches for the same term conducted in January 2018 from Hawai’i and Ontario and in July 2020 from Los Angeles.

To improve our understanding of the relatively ambiguous state of Tibetan Buddhism's diasporic modernization (Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2014: 17), this article analyzes the NKT's construction of modern Buddhism as a missionizing strategy that combines promotional modernism with pedagogical traditionalism. I argue that while the NKT's self-identification as "Modern Buddhism" supports the movement's international growth by promoting its founder's teachings as universally accessible, those teachings are more continuous with traditional Geluk Tibetan Buddhist doctrine² than with David McMahan's (2008) portrayal of Buddhist modernism. Specifically, I find minimal evidence of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization in the NKT founder's 2011 book *Modern Buddhism: The Path of Compassion and Wisdom* and in public meditation instruction derived therefrom at a Canadian NKT center.

I intend to shed light on the ways in which a prominent and controversial diasporic Tibetan Buddhist lineage is rhetorically adapting Tibetan Buddhism for the consumption of non-Tibetan North American audiences. I also will highlight theoretical issues surrounding the scholarly imperative to in/authenticate religious mis/representations in the study of such adaptation. I conclude by considering some implications of this particular disparity between scholarly and religious conceptions of the modern for the academic study of contemporary Buddhism. I thus aim to contribute to a conversation about the ethics of representation which attended this paper's presentation at the "Buddhism in the Global Eye" conference at the University of British Columbia in 2016.

By charting the NKT's integration of the "Modern Buddhism" epithet into an existing culture of Geluk exclusivism as part of strategies for audience attraction and identity construction, I hope to demonstrate just how self-consciously the NKT understands itself to have globalized and modernized beyond Tibet and Tibetanness. While the NKT may valorize globalization and modernization as coterminous processes of religious renewal, this article aims to contribute to these categories' theoretical differentiation. I employ the term "global Buddhism" to designate Buddhist formations which attempt to "transcend the parochialism of local place and ethnic identity" (Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2014: 16) by embracing their "imbedded[ness] in global networks of shared information, persons, culture, and resources" (Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2014: 15), but which may or may not reflect characteristics typically characterized as modern (e.g., egalitarianism, activism, feminism).

New Kadampa Tradition

Non-Tibetan North Americans who encounter Tibetan Buddhism outside films and books are likely to do so at a meditation class or ritual event organized by one of a handful of transnational Vajrayana *sanghas* built around the authority of individual Tibetan lamas. The NKT is one such global community, founded by the Tibetan Gelukpa monk Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (born 1931) in Northwest

² As the present issue's editors point out in their introduction, the category of "traditional" is as contested as the category of "modern" in the study of Buddhism. At the risk of eliding real differences between Tibetan Buddhist authors at different places and times in the Geluk school's 600-year history, I derive my understanding of traditional Geluk doctrine primarily from stages of the path (*lamrim*) teachings of the school's fifteenth-century founder, Tsongkhapa, and the conservative nineteenth-century Gelukpa lama, Pabongka Rinpoche.

England in 1991. Today it claims 1200 centers and branches in forty countries (NKT n.d.a) from Argentina to Sweden to Taiwan. NKT branches typically consist of a handful of committed practitioners with a fluctuating number of curious visitors and Buddhist sympathizers. Approximately 250 physical NKT centers range from rural residential castles to urban commercial storefronts. In 2003, Daniel Cozort (2003: 231) described the NKT as one of the largest and fastest growing Tibetan Buddhist organizations in the world, and as “a Western order that draws primarily upon the teachings of the Gelukpa tradition but is not subordinate to Tibetan authorities other than Geshe Gyatso himself.” (See Kay 2004: 37–80, for a history of the NKT and its relationship to Geluk Tibetan Buddhism more generally.)

The NKT has become almost synonymous for scholars and practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism with the “anti-Dalai Lama” group for its high-profile involvement in the most religiously divisive Tibetan diasporic conflict to date, a debate between propitiators of Dorje Shugden, a sectarian Geluk protector deity, and the Dalai Lama, who banned Shugden practice in all Central Tibetan Administration institutions in 1996. The NKT subsequently spearheaded sister activist organizations based in London which led to intermittent but impassioned protest campaigns against the Shugden ban at the Dalai Lama’s public appearances outside Asia. These protests have garnered baffled media attention that has at times portrayed the NKT as fanatical—a negative public image which has been a major constraint on the NKT’s globalist missionary efforts.

Clerical laicization has been a key factor in the growth of Gyatso’s global mission. “By giving lay members educational power to teach the dharma, NKT is able to spread the NKT interpretation of Dharma more quickly and to wider audiences” (Silver, Ross, and Francis 2012: 1057). As the movement’s first ethnographer observed, just six years after its founding, the NKT has also enthusiastically embraced self-promotion:

The NKT is very good at marketing its product. Members produce leaflets advertising the centre’s activities and these are distributed widely around the towns in which they teach... Marketing of the NKT is assisted by the prominent place played by Geshe Kelsang’s books... They are distributed widely and may be seen on the shelves of popular booksellers as well as in university libraries. (Waterhouse 1997: 142–143)

This article considers each element of NKT missionizing: publicity, teaching, and books. More specifically, I examine the roles of other-worldly doctrine and this-worldly publicity in NKT missionizing, beginning with the latter.

Waterhouse’s observation that the “NKT is very good at marketing its product” (1997: 142) provides a basic theoretical distinction between promotional brand and pedagogical product which frames this microstudy. To chart the relationship between constructions of modern Buddhism in NKT promotion and pedagogy (and to determine what the group is using this designation to distribute), I use textual analysis to examine “Modern Buddhism” branding in NKT websites, brochures, and advertising, followed by a combination of textual and ethnographic forms of analysis to examine the NKT’s actual Buddhist product in book and meditation class instruction.

The Modernist Brand

In the nine years since Gyatso's publication and free online distribution of *Modern Buddhism*, his movement has worked to brand itself as "Modern Buddhism" through websites, publications, and advertising, surveyed below. The NKT's self-branding as "Modern Buddhism" has been an important component of its mission to globalize Gyatso's interpretation of Geluk doctrine by promoting his Dharma as universally practical and justifying his split with Tibetan culture.

1) *modern Buddhism: universally practical*

A large colour photograph on a Kadampa Meditation Center Hollywood website titled "What is Modern Buddhism?" depicts a white businesswoman talking on a cell phone on a city sidewalk as she looks through a shop window displaying copies of Gyatso's book *Modern Buddhism*. Beside the image is an explanation:

Modern Buddhism is the application of the Buddhist paths of compassion and wisdom to modern daily life. It is an international movement without affiliations to any specific country or culture founded by the contemporary Buddhist master Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. Modern Buddhism brings the ancient wisdom of Buddha into the modern world free from any cultural trappings and shows how to integrate Buddhist meditation and other practices into our busy lives. You do not have to be Buddhist to attend modern Buddhism events or to benefit from them. (NKT n.d.b)

Gyatso's "modern Buddhism" is promoted here as a global self-improvement movement offering ancient but practical Buddhist instructions to busy non-Buddhists. The universal applicability of modern Buddhism's private psychological benefits is claimed through an explicit assertion of the movement's post-ethnic globalism and supported by an alignment with empirical science. "The instructions given at our classes are scientific methods for improving our inner qualities and reaching our highest potential through developing the enormous capacity of our mind" (NKT n.d.b).

Cast in the language of problems and happiness, similar themes of universalism and pragmatism appear in a section of the NKT's official 2016 brochure titled "Modern Buddhism: Venerable Geshe-la's gift to all living beings":

Modern Buddhism, or Kadam Dharma, is a special presentation of Buddha's teachings for the modern world that offers practical advice on how to solve daily problems and maintain a peaceful and happy mind all the time. It can be practiced by anyone regardless of culture, gender, or age. (NKT 2016a)

Following this self-definition is a small image of the book *Modern Buddhism* with the caption: "Modern Buddhism—free ebook—download in several languages from *emodernbuddhism.com*." This URL tops the hits returned by Google searches for "modern Buddhism." Beside the brochure's book image are four photos of modern Kadampa Buddhism in action: laypeople listening to a monk teaching at Kadampa Meditation Center (henceforward, KMC) Barcelona, patrons perusing Gyatso's books outside a public talk in London, students discussing a particular book in a study program at KMC

Singapore, and bicyclists chatting casually on the sidewalk outside KMC Madrid. These photos convey a Buddhism that is at home in the world, cosmopolitan, accessible, and relevant—values imparted on a page titled “Modern Buddhism” in the 2016 brochure for “KMC New York: International Center for Modern Buddhism”:

Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s practical presentation of Buddha’s 84,000 teachings has made the path to enlightenment accessible to people of the modern world. In providing three systematic study programs, qualified teachers, and Buddhist meditation centers and temples open to everyone, anyone can learn to train in wisdom and compassion and thus unify Buddha’s teachings and daily life. (NKT 2016b)

The goal of modern Buddhism’s program of study and meditation is here identified not as an escape from “the cycle of impure life,” which is how Gyatso defines samsara in *Modern Buddhism* (2011: 6, 8), but as the spiritualization of “daily life” through its unification with the Buddha’s teachings. This is reflected in titles of drop-in meditation classes offered at NKT centers like KMC New York: “Advice for Life,” “The Happiness Toolkit,” “Awakening the Heart,” “Mindfulness for Modern Living,” “New Year, New You,” “Overcoming Stress and Anxiety,” “Heal Yourself Through Meditation,” and “Stop Worrying, Start Living” (NKT 2016b).

Comparable attempts to accentuate this-worldly benefits and de-emphasize other-worldly renunciation—which Prebish and Baumann call “the integration of Buddhism” (2002: 3)—have always been a part of Buddhism’s creative adaptation to changing cultural markets. In his discussion of “practical benefits in Buddhist history,” Jeff Wilson points out that such processes of cultural integration engender processes of religious reconfiguration: “when moving out of northern India into a large number of culturally distinct Asian regions, Buddhism was aided in its penetration of new societies by long-term processes of creative adaptation... that allowed Buddhism to provide concrete benefits that each new culture desired” (2014: 4).

2) *modern Buddhism: not Tibetan*

The primary referent conveyed by the NKT’s “Modern Buddhism” brand is the universal practicality of Gyatso’s presentation of Geluk dharma. A related secondary function of the assumed epithet has been to identify the NKT as not Tibetan. Already implicit in the above accounts of Gyatso’s dharma as having been freed from cultural trappings, the desired disassociation from Tibet and Tibetanness is justified in an official informational pamphlet titled “Modern Kadampa Buddhism: An Introduction”:

Although the lineage Gurus of the NKT from Je Tsongkhapa up to Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso are Tibetan Lamas, the NKT is not Tibetan Buddhism. When the NKT became the International Kadampa Buddhist Union, which is legally registered under English law, it became a legally independent Buddhist tradition. The main reason why NKT-IKBU has chosen to become legally registered as an independent Buddhist tradition is that it was recognized that there are many political problems within Tibetan Buddhism. These problems are due to the mixing of Dharma and politics, with

higher Lamas using the holy Dharma of Buddha's teachings for political aims. The NKT wants the holy Dharma to be free from these political problems. (NKT 2015a: 5)

The group's desired disassociation from Tibetan political aims and political problems is explicitly focused on the Dalai Lama in a half-page NKT advertisement published in the summer 2015 issue of the popular American Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*. Small text under a plain photo of an NKT temple aims less at audience attraction than identity construction:

To prevent confusion between Tibetan Buddhism and Modern Kadampa Buddhism we would like to offer the following information: Since 1992 Modern Kadampa Buddhism, the New Kadampa Tradition has been a registered charity in the UK constituted as an independent Western Buddhist tradition... There is no connection whatsoever between this spiritual tradition and the Dalai Lama. According to its constitution, because the NKT is an independent tradition it cannot follow any other tradition. This clearly shows that the NKT is not Tibetan Buddhism but Western Buddhism. (NKT 2015b)

The NKT's self-identification as "not Tibetan Buddhism" is constructed in opposition to the Dalai Lama, particularly in reference to the Shugden controversy, and reflects Gyatso's mission to remove his tradition from the spiritually compromised arena of Tibetan nationalism. But I have argued above that the movement's self-conscious disassociation from Tibet can also be understood in light of the NKT's globalist conception of Modern Kadampa Buddhism as not grounded in a particular culture.³

According to Harding, Hori, and Soucy, "Global Buddhism... attempts to transcend the parochialism of local place and ethnic identity" (2014: 16). The attempt to transcend the parochialism of Tibet and Tibetan politico-ethnic identity is high-priority for the NKT. Considered in the context of the movement's global missionary efforts, the NKT is clearly a form of global Buddhism. Harding, Hori, and Soucy are careful also to point out, however, that, "Global Buddhism is not necessarily the same as 'modern Buddhism'... Buddhism with modern characteristics can... be used parochially... there are forms of Buddhism that are traditional and conservative in their characteristics yet global in intention" (2014: 16). Where does New Kadampa Buddhism lie on this spectrum?

The Traditionalist Book

McMahan defines Buddhist modernism as a "hybrid tradition" (2008: 5) that reinterprets traditional Asian Buddhist ideas and practices along the lines of scientific rationalism and romanticism via the modernizing processes of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization. Detraditionalization entails shifts from external to internal religious authority, from transcendence to immanence, from negative to positive evaluations of human nature, and from a concern with the

³ Alternative rationales for the NKT's promotional self-identification as "not Tibetan Buddhism" may relate to possible legal action against the group (of which I have found no direct evidence), or to efforts to position the group as a politically safe form of Tibetan-inspired Buddhism for promotion within Chinese borders. See Bruno (2018: 81–82) for a concise overview of speculation about China's financial support of NKT-led anti-Dalai Lama protests and general operations.

future to living life in the now (2008: 42–4). Demythologization leads to a reconstruction of Buddhist elements deemed nonliteral myth to align with modern worldviews, and to an internalization of traditionally ontological realities such as deities, spirits, and rebirth realms (2008: 45–7). Finally, psychologization commonly manifests as an interpretation of Buddhism as a science of mind, increasingly justifying a psychotherapeutic separation of meditation from Buddhist goals and values (2008: 52–7).

I will now use *Modern Buddhism* to examine how McMahan’s modernizing processes of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization map onto Gyatso’s teachings. *Modern Buddhism* is the doctrinal product behind the NKT’s “Modern Buddhism” brand, and the book’s publication launched the movement’s broader re-branding. The following close reading of *Modern Buddhism*’s first chapter, “Preliminary Explanation” (2011: 3–23), suggests that the Geluk teachings presented therein have been minimally reinterpreted.

1) *detraditionalization*

Instead of shifting from an emphasis on external religious authority to internal religious authority, Gyatso strongly upholds the authority of the Buddha and Buddhism. The book’s first chapter begins by defining Buddhism not as a humanistic way of life based on natural virtues, but as a specific instructional training regime rooted in tradition (2011: 3), the effectiveness of which depends entirely on faith: “For Buddhists, faith in Buddha Shakyamuni is their spiritual life; it is the root of all Dharma realizations” (2011: 7). Further, it is not only Buddhists who should rely on the Buddha, but anyone who wants to solve their problems: “We need to practise Buddha’s teachings because there is no other real method to solve human problems” (2011: 4).

Gyatso’s insistence on the need for faith in the Buddha stems from his orthodox Buddhist view of humanity’s pitiful samsaric situation: “Although we want to be happy all the time we do not know how to do this, and we are always destroying our own happiness by developing anger, negative views and negative intentions” (2011: 4). Any shift from negative to positive evaluations of human nature—identified by McMahan as a hallmark of Buddhist modernism—seems dismissed by Gyatso’s account of living beings’ total dependence on the Buddha: “By themselves living beings are unable to cultivate a peaceful mind; it is only through receiving Buddha’s blessings upon their mental continuum that living beings, including even animals, can experience peace of mind... Buddha is therefore the source of all happiness” (2011: 10). While far from humanistic, Gyatso’s description of the Buddha’s pervasive accessibility does render the Buddha more immanent than transcendent. This may be less a modernist reform, however, than an interpretation of the Mahayana-Vajrayana tenet of the Buddha’s three bodies (*trikāya*), particularly the all-pervasive “truth body” (*dharmakāya*).

Parallel to the modernist refocusing on the Buddha’s immanence in the world, McMahan describes a typically modernist shift from a concern with future well-being to enjoying life in the present. Compare the modernist Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s description of mindfulness, “Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment” (1991: 5), to Gyatso’s warning not to be deceived by the peace of the present moment:

At the moment we may be free from physical suffering and mental pain, but this is only temporary. Later in this life and in our countless future lives we shall have to experience unbearable physical suffering and mental pain, again and again without end... Through contemplating this we shall realize that just experiencing a temporary liberation from particular sufferings is not good enough; we definitely need to attain permanent liberation from the sufferings of this life and all our countless future lives. (2011: 8)

The future-oriented call to abandon samsara and accomplish nirvana is a conservative prioritization of the cardinal Buddhist doctrine of renunciation, a point affirmed by the influential Gelukpa cleric Pabongka Rinpoche: “As long as we have not developed even a contrived form of renunciation, any virtue we create will usually only turn samsara’s wheel” (1991, 507). Gyatso’s words find direct support in the antagonistic stance toward momentary joys articulated by the Geluk founder Tsongkhapa, that

with respect to whatever worldly happiness is seen, heard of, or remembered, you must, as the Kadampa (bKa’-gdams-pa) teachers have said, generate the same feeling, thinking, “This is the world,” “This also is the world,” “Everything is suffering,” and “I want nothing to do with it.” (2000: 334)

Nowhere in the book does Gyatso encourage the development of present-moment awareness as a virtue in and of itself.

2) demythologization

McMahan describes the modernist adaptive strategy of demythologization as a process of reconstructing ancient Buddhist teachings through an internalization or psychologization of traditionally ontological realities. He cites as an example the modernist Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa’s interpretation of samsara’s six realms as symbols of various states of mind rather than as realms of possible rebirth (2008: 45–6). Gyatso, on the contrary, does not discuss samsara’s realms or their residents outside the classical Buddhist cosmological framework of cyclic rebirth. In reference to Helen Waterhouse’s observation that NKT practitioners in Bath are taught to develop “a fear of hell realms and thereby encourage practice to ensure a good rebirth” (1997: 173), Robert Bluck found that “Although familiar in Tibetan Buddhism, this is rarely mentioned in Britain outside the NKT” (2006: 144).

McMahan also points to the demythologization-via-psychologization of deities as a hallmark of Buddhist modernism. He identifies the psychoanalytic transmutation of Tibetan Buddhism begun by Carl Jung in the mid-twentieth century as having “served the essential function of neutralizing the vast pantheon of Mahayana-Vajrayana deities by rendering them facets of the mind” (2008: 53). In the first paragraph of *Modern Buddhism*’s first chapter, Gyatso matter-of-factly introduces the Vedic gods Indra and Brahma as historical agents who requested the Buddha to expound his first teachings. After depicting the Buddha himself as a living deity, one of whose “main functions is to bestow mental

peace upon each and every living being by giving blessings” (2011: 10), Gyatso opens a section titled “Who are the Kadampas?” with a literalist introduction to four particular buddhas:

Kadampas sincerely rely upon Buddha Shakyamuni because Buddha is the source of Kadam Lamrim; they sincerely rely upon Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, and upon the Wisdom Dharma Protector, indicating that their main practice is compassion and wisdom; and they sincerely rely upon Arya Tara because she promised Atisha that she would take special care of Kadampa practitioners in the future. (2011: 10–11)

In a detailed hagiography of the Bengali founder of the Kadam School, Atisha Dipamkara (982–1054), which occupies half of the first chapter, Gyatso recounts four particular interactions between Atisha and the female Buddha Arya Tara (see Pabongka 1991: 47, 65, 67–68). McMahan points to the passionate Geluk denunciations and defenses of Dorje Shugden, Gyatso’s “Wisdom Dharma Protector,” as evidence that the Himalayan Buddhist world is “alive not only with awakened beings but also countless ghosts, spirits, demons, and protector deities” (2008: 55). Gyatso’s active promotion of Shugden devotion to his non-Tibetan convert disciples confirms that the psychologization of Tibetan Buddhism’s pantheon is far from complete in the NKT.

3) psychologization

The interpretation of Buddhism as a “science of mind” (McMahan 2008: 52) is the modernist tendency most conspicuously on display in Gyatso’s *Modern Buddhism*. The author makes this claim for the book itself in its very first sentence: “The instructions given in this book are scientific methods for improving our human nature and qualities through developing the capacity of our mind” (2011: ix). By way of concluding his first chapter’s opening section, “What is Buddhism?,” he makes the same claim for Buddha truths more broadly: “Buddha’s teachings are scientific methods to solve the problems of all living beings permanently” (2011: 7). Interpretation of Gyatso’s Geluk instructions as scientific methods for becoming happy is a key part of the NKT’s claim to being modern (connoting universally practical) in both “Modern Buddhism” publicity and *Modern Buddhism* teaching.

McMahan mentions Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program as the most successful of a variety of new experimental psychotherapies that are functioning to detraditionalize Buddhism via psychologization, “allowing meditation to operate in non-Buddhist therapeutic settings, often for non-Buddhist goals and without requiring commitment to explicitly Buddhist values” (2008: 57). Meditation gets far less attention in the first chapter of Gyatso’s *Modern Buddhism* than dharma, the Buddha’s teachings. In fact, the chapter’s only usage of the word “meditation” occurs in a section titled “Buddhist Faith” where the practice of meditation is introduced as a means to “transform our mind into faith in Buddha and maintain it single-pointedly for as long as possible” (2011: 9). It is difficult to imagine a less modernist, more traditionalist introduction to meditation.

The two biggest additions to Gyatso’s first chapter in *Modern Buddhism*’s second edition (2013) illustrate well Gyatso’s conservative theological orientation. A new section titled “What is the mind?” identifies the most pressing implication of the Buddha’s teachings on the nature and function of the

mind as the fact that future lives are more important than this one (2013: 12; see Pabongka 1991: 25–30, 363). A new section on meditation insists that the practice should not be separated from Buddhist goals and values:

The objects of our meditation should be those that are meaningful objects (these will be explained extensively below), so that through training in meditation we can free ourself [sic] permanently from all the sufferings of this life and our countless future lives, and we can attain the supreme happiness of enlightenment, as Buddha showed. This is the best example for us. However, at the beginning we can use our breathing as the object of our meditation and practise breathing meditation, which is quite simple. (2013: 26)

In what could be read as a slender concession to seekers of de-Buddhified meditation instruction, the subsequent paragraph outlines the bare bones of a breathing meditation. The rest of the book focuses on the “meaningful objects... explained extensively below” (2013: 26) under a traditional Geluk rubric of broad sections on sutra, divided into the three aspirational scopes of *lamrim* (initial, middling, great; see Jinpa 2019: 200–201), and tantra, divided into the two meditative stages of highest yoga tantra (generation and completion; see Jinpa 2019: 265–266).

This textual evidence situates Gyatso’s *Modern Buddhism* at the traditionalist end of McMahan’s widely variegated continuum of tradition and modernism. This is an unsurprising finding in light of David Kay’s description of the author as a Gelukpa conservative “for whom the faithful transmission and continuation of the tradition as it was taught to him has been much more important than adapting the teachings or innovating new ones for westerners” (Kay 2004: 57).

How does Gyatso himself understand *Modern Buddhism* to be modern? A brief passage early in the first chapter describes his reforms as more formal than substantive, but stops short of identifying what those reforms are or how they were decided upon:

Although the instructions presented here come from Buddha Shakyamuni, and Buddhist masters such as Atisha, Je Tsongkhapa and our present Teachers, this book is called *Modern Buddhism* because its presentation of Dharma is designed especially for the people of the modern world. (2011: 4)

In a second account of Kadam Dharma’s modernism late in the chapter (2011: 22), Gyatso expresses a somewhat surprising confidence that traditional *lamrim* teachings on the rarity and preciousness of human life (2011: 25–29), the immanence and implications of death (2011: 30–32), the dangers of lower rebirth (2011, 32–34), refuge in the three jewels (2011: 35–38), the law of karma, the sufferings of future lives (2011: 41–56), love (2011: 66–78), compassion (2011: 79–80), *bodhichitta* (2011: 80–95), and the emptiness of phenomena (2011: 97–139) dovetail with the everyday experiences of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Nonetheless, the possibility of these principles’ seamless fusion with the ordinary daily activities of lay life is a constitutive ideal of Gyatso’s vision of modern Buddhism.

Despite Gyatso’s universalist confidence in the accessibility and efficacy of Kadam Dharma, the NKT’s modern Buddhism is not a clear-cut or typical example of Buddhist modernism. Indications of

the detraditionalization and demythologization of traditional Geluk Buddhist ideas are all but absent from Gyatso's *Modern Buddhism*, while evidence of psychologization is minimal.

The Traditional as Modern

Kay captures something of the NKT's ambivalent relationship to modernism when he describes the NKT as "a contemporary Buddhist movement that is rooted firmly within traditional Geluk exclusivism but which simultaneously reflects and reacts against the conditions of modernity" (2004: 81). Analysis of *Modern Buddhism* indicates that, theologically, the NKT appears to react against the conditions of modernity more than reflect them. The book's first chapter alone distinctly repudiates modernist valuations of human autonomy and goodness, living in the now, philosophical naturalism, and therapeutic meditation.

Analysis of the NKT's "Modern Buddhism" brand, on the other hand, as fashioned primarily in websites and brochures, indicates that, promotionally, the NKT appears to reflect the conditions of modernity more than react against them. In KMC New York's aforementioned class titles, for example, the NKT comfortably deals in the very modernist principles that Gyatso repudiates in *Modern Buddhism*: human autonomy ("New Year, New You"), human goodness ("Awakening the Heart"), living in the now ("Stop Worrying, Start Living"), philosophical naturalism ("The Happiness Toolkit"), and therapeutic meditation ("Heal Yourself Through Meditation").

Scholars and patrons alike might wonder if NKT media is misleading because the dharma behind the group's "Modern Buddhism" brand is not modernist. In reference to the "clericalism, literalism and conservatism" of Gyatso's books, Kay suggests as much: "some of the statements emerging from within the organization concerning the 'modernised' and 'Westernised' nature of his presentation—such as the claim that his books address the pace of life on the streets of New York City—seem somewhat exaggerated" (2004: 99). Rather than Gyatso deliberately producing misleading marketing, I would suggest that he and his NKT disciples are convinced that a simplified form of conservative Geluk dharma is entirely modern: pragmatic, universal, and globally applicable and accessible. This conviction seems to underlie Gyatso's rather swift movement through *Modern Buddhism*'s first chapter from an assertion of Buddhism's practical remedies for daily problems to the salvific demands of future lives, renunciation, faith, and Buddhist exclusivism, a logic distilled in the following passage:

There is not a single problem experienced by living beings that does not come from their attachment... The method for controlling our attachment and other delusions is the practice of Buddha's teachings. By practising Buddha's teachings on renunciation we can solve our daily problems that arise from attachment. (2011: 5)

Gyatso's view that the *traditional* Buddhist practice of renunciation, "the strong wish to abandon the root of suffering—attachment and self-grasping ignorance" (2011: 6–7), is the most effective method for solving *modern* daily problems is the theological tissue that legitimizes teaching future lives and renunciation under the banner of "Modern Buddhism."

Promotional Modernism and Pedagogical Traditionalism

Besides Gyatso's books, the primary interface between the NKT's Buddhist product and prospective non-Buddhist audiences is every NKT center's General Program (henceforward, GP) of drop-in meditation classes. GP classes are KMCs' main missionizing opportunity and the preeminent site of Buddhism's modernist adaptation in the NKT. The counterintuitive relationship between the NKT's "Modern Buddhism" brand and book was affirmed in my ethnographic experience at GP classes offered by a Canadian center which I will pseudonymously refer to as KMC North. Geluk Buddhism was reinterpreted along modernist lines (e.g., demythologized) less in the doctrinal content of class instruction than in the descriptive content of class publicity. In other words, the local needs of North American spiritual seekers—especially psychotherapeutic relief from psychological ailments such as stress, anger, and depression—were more explicitly addressed (and implicitly validated) in KMC GP publicity than in its pedagogy.

For example, the first major event of 2016, designed as a year-opening showcase for KMC North, was a free public talk titled "Stop Worrying, Start Living." The promotional handbill displayed the talk's title in sky-blue above the silhouette of a cross-legged meditator whose body contained nothing but clear sky with floating clouds. On the back of the card, a paragraph and photo introduced KMC North's resident teacher, Kelsang Palden,⁴ followed by this description of the event:

There are many uncertainties in our life in the modern world. When we respond with worry, our mind becomes tight and uncomfortable and it can be difficult to think clearly or enjoy anything. During this Public Talk, we will learn to replace worry with positive, constructive attitudes so that we can enjoy life with confidence. Discover the benefits of meditation and Buddhist wisdom. This will be an inspiring and wonderful evening not to be missed. (Palden 2016)

The result of concerted handbill and poster distribution in local cafes, shops, and outdoor community boards, combined with ramped up internet promotion in the weeks leading up to the talk, was a capacity attendance of about 200 persons. Before guiding a fifteen minute "black and white breathing" meditation, Palden outlined the dharma teaching that would follow:

I'll explain four things tonight: (1) why we need to learn correct meditation, (2) why we need to meditate on Dharma, Buddha's teachings, (3) why we need to be concerned about our future lives, (4) why we need permanent freedom from suffering. (Palden 2016)

While the teaching's publicity, title, and the first of Palden's four points were presented in modernist, de-Buddhified, and psychotherapeutic terms; his final three points were traditionalist, Buddhological, and soteriological. Palden's teaching was a three-step rhetorical effort, first, to recast the duration of the audience's problems from this life's problems (especially worry) to future life problems, and finally to *the* problem of cyclic existence. Second, to prescribe the progressively more effective antidotes to those problems: from meditation on the breath for finding happiness in this

⁴ As with the name of the center, this name is a pseudonym.

life, to meditation on the wish to karmically prepare the happiness of future lives, to meditation on renunciation: the wish to accomplish permanent happiness by realizing ultimate truth, emptiness.⁵

The conservative content of Palden's public talk is fairly representative of NKT GP classes, whose teachers are encouraged not to veer too far from the content of Gyatso's books: "Although General Programme sessions are taught at an introductory level there seems to be no attempt to conceal any element of the NKT's philosophy or structure" (Waterhouse 1997: 164). The structure of this class at KMC North resembled that of *Modern Buddhism's* first chapter, and for good reason: that book was the text on Palden's throne-side table from which he occasionally read aloud. His concluding advice was plain: "My suggestion to you is buy or download *Modern Buddhism*. Follow the instructions, and learn to meditate. This book contains all of Buddhism. It is written for modern people."

Institutional Modernism and Identity Traditionalism

In addition to being promotionally modernist and theologically traditionalist, the NKT is quite reformist at an institutional level. Reincarnate lamas (*tulkus*), the foremost religious actors in the Geluk tradition, have no leadership role in the NKT. A prohibition of the traditional divinatory means of *tulku*-selection in the *NKT Internal Rules* (NKT 2010: 16§2) echoes the group's concerns about "the mixing of Dharma and politics" (NKT 2015a: 5). In a recent open letter (NKT 2017), Gyatso stated his belief in the illegitimacy of the *tulku* presently identified as the reincarnation of his own root guru. In lieu of divinatory *tulku* recognition, the NKT has adopted a democratic system of succession in which the movement's top leadership positions of General Spiritual Director (Gyatso's former position) and Deputy Spiritual Director are elected to eight-year terms of office (NKT 2010: 5§7) by the global assembly of NKT resident teachers (2010: 1§4, 5§10, 5§12).

Most NKT resident teachers are monks and nuns ordained under Gyatso's highly contracted (from 253 vows to ten vows) adaptation of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (NKT n.d.c). Laity and women are two demographics with no religious authority in the Geluk school's traditional monastic hierarchy. NKT differs almost entirely. "Except at the very highest levels of the [NKT], positions of responsibility, teaching and leadership are as likely to be filled by lay practitioners as they are by monks or nuns" (Kay 2004: 85), and these positions are as likely to be filled by women as by men. The organization's current General Spiritual Director is an Irish nun, while the UK's National Spiritual Director is a British laywoman and mother. Abolishment of *tulku* recognition, establishment of electoral succession, reformation of ordination, and increased authority of laity and women are all aspects of democratization reflecting the NKT's openness to institutional reform.

Thus, the NKT's particular form, or brand, of modern Buddhism appears to be one that is theologically conservative while promotionally and institutionally reformist—a modernization modality that resembles religious fundamentalism. However, beyond the obvious problem of its

⁵ These three steps in Palden's diagnostic and prescriptive progression reflect Melford Spiro's (1982) *apotropaic/kammic/nibbanic* typology of Buddhist religious activity, revised and particularized to Tibetan Buddhism by Geoffrey Samuel (1993) as *pragmatic/karmic/bodhi*. Palden's second and third steps also reflect the first and second of the Geluk *lamrim's* three successive goals of higher rebirth, liberation, or enlightenment (Jinpa 2019: 200–201).

pejorative character in contemporary popular usage, the utility and shortcomings of “fundamentalism” as a heuristic tool for understanding the NKT are evident in fundamentalism’s broader definition as “a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviours” (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003: 17).

Given the word’s association with social or political combativeness, “militance” is not a good descriptor of the NKT. Unlike more typical Islamic and Protestant Christian forms of fundamentalism, New Kadampa Buddhism has been more quietist than activist in its first twenty-five years, with little to say in support or critique of particular social or political causes. The obvious exception has been the movement’s loud demonstrations on behalf of Dorje Shugden worshippers at the Dalai Lama’s teaching events, a social cause which the NKT evidently sees as part of its own critique of the Geluk religio-political tradition of *tulku*-led buddhocracy (NKT 2015a; NKT 2015b; NKT 2010). Other than in opening the Kadampa Primary School Derbyshire in England in 2012, which later closed its doors (Burton Mail 2016), the NKT has shown little interest in creating alternatives to secular institutions.

The group does, however, exhibit a pattern of religiosity by which “self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, [and] fortify the borders of the religious community” (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003: 17). In a personal blog titled “New Kadampa View, Meditation and Action: Preserving and Promoting the Ganden Oral Lineage of Wisdom Buddha Je Tsongkhapa,” a senior NKT teacher expresses his gratitude for the opportunity to participate in “a modern global revival of pure Kadampa Buddhism spearheaded by Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso in a new historical and geographical context” (Khyenrab 2014).

McMahan points out that “The term ‘pure,’ in fact, comes up often in contemporary Tibetan teachings, no doubt in acknowledgment of the degree to which Buddhist teachings around the world have been hybridized and, in the traditionalist view, compromised” (2008: 247). According to Waterhouse, that which is pre-eminently perceived to be pure within the NKT is the guru’s embodied lineage: “Fundamental to the NKT’s self-identity is the notion that Geshe Kelsang holds, and has passed on, a pure lineage which has not been mixed and has therefore neither been diluted nor corrupted” (Waterhouse 1997: 152).

In a section of his study of the NKT titled “A Rejection of Modernity?,” David Kay helpfully connects such emphasis on sectarian lineage identity with the NKT’s doctrinal conservatism, and identifies both as reactionary products of modernism:

This movement... emerged from a perception that the ‘pure tradition’ was degenerating and dying out in the modern world. The perceived cause of this was, at least in part, precisely the kind of protean inclusivism and pluralism that modern fundamentalist groups stand in opposition against. Geshe Kelsang is believed to have re-established the pure tradition through his English-language commentarial texts and the NKT study programmes. These books present a narrow, simplified and literalised reading of the Tibetan Gelug tradition and are, in turn, relied upon literally

and exclusively by many devotees out of a concern to preserve the pure lineage. (2004: 110)

This reaffirms Waterhouse's description of NKT books as "mostly condensed versions of Tibetan texts with commentary by Geshe Kelsang" (1997: 142). Gyatso's *Modern Buddhism* is similar to his other books in this regard. Consolidating a revivalist valuation of its founder's pure lineage with our existing portrait of the movement's particular brand of modern Buddhism, we can characterize the NKT as conservative in doctrine and identity; reformist in organization and promotion.⁶

Conclusion

The fact that the most popular construction of "modern Buddhism" (according to internet searches) promotes a dharma that appears to be more fundamentalist than modernist vividly demonstrates that the NKT's "Modern Buddhism" is a value-laden category (e.g., a brand) and not a neutral descriptor. As a floating signifier with no prescribed content, the term itself is up for grabs. The NKT has been grabbing it since 2011 and has cornered much of the popular online discourse in that time.

Following this paper's presentation in 2016, a fellow scholar of modern Buddhism voiced some concern about the integrity of our field's online representation in light of the popular promotional reach and veiled sectarian character of the NKT's "Modern Buddhism" brand. We reflected together on the question of whether scholars of modern Buddhism have a responsibility to publicly promote a more value-neutral representation. Identifying the category of modernity as a "deeply colored" *narrative* form, Natalie Quli and Scott Mitchell (2015: 212) remind us that scholars of Buddhism and Buddhists alike are telling stories about modernity and modernization. Awareness of this fact should keep us alert to another one: that it is not our job to determine which Buddhisms and Buddhists are modern and which are not.⁷

In addition to the term's contested emptiness, and the more general point that there "are no value-neutral scholarly representations" (Tweed 2009: 455), I see at least two reasons for accepting the NKT's "Modern Buddhism" brand as a legitimate (i.e., not inauthentic or misleading) narrative, despite the fact that its purveyed pedagogical product may be more aptly described as fundamentalist than modernist. First, modern Kadampa Buddhism is an entirely modern phenomenon, as *au courant* as those commonly identified by the prevailing scholarly narrative of Buddhist modernism. Second, the assumption of the scholarly right and responsibility to measure a particular religious formation's fit with modernity risks falling into theoretical problems similar to those associated with the assumption of the scholarly duty to measure authenticity of religious affiliation. In lieu of an essentialist approach to differentiating Buddhist adherents and non-adherents by normative criteria

⁶ While the group cannot, therefore, be accurately described as strictly fundamentalist, this strategic combination of detraditionalization and neo-traditionalization might be characterized as a form of "hybrid fundamentalism."

⁷ Elsewhere (Emory-Moore 2020) I attempt to take up Quli and Mitchell's call (2015: 213) to abandon modernism as an analytical tool in the study of North American Buddhism by employing the less coloured term "adaptationism" (Hutchison 1992: 6) subdivided into the categories of "enthusiastic" and "measured" to chart patterns of detraditionalization in Tibetan-inspired, English-language children's meditation manuals published by the NKT and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.

measuring the authenticity of their lineage, tenets, or practices, Thomas Tweed recommends self-identification as “the most useful standard for defining religious identity” (1999: 82): “Buddhists, in my view, are those who say they are” (1999, 79). Modern Buddhists are thus, in my view, those who say they are.

Not only is the NKT’s fundamentalist form of modern Buddhism equally as modern (in the sense of contemporary) as the more typically detraditionalized, demythologized, and psychologized Buddhist modernisms of teachers like Chogyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama; it is a product of the latter. Discussing retraditionalization as one of a variety of trends in “the postmodern condition of Buddhism,” McMahan reminds us that, in fact, “we see across the globe a number of movements attempting to reappropriate tradition, to cast off some of the staples of Buddhist modernism, and to reassert more conventional views of the dharma. Such ‘returns’ are themselves products of modernity” (McMahan 2008: 246). Thus the NKT’s fundamentalist retraditionalizations of doctrine and identity are not unique. In British Columbia, for example, Sitavana Birken Forest Monastery (part of the global Thai Forest Tradition) harkens back to a very conservative form of early Theravada Buddhist practice (Placzek 2014), while Thrangu Monastery advertises itself as a site of “traditional” Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Richmond (Larm 2014). One thing that sets the NKT apart from such Buddhist retraditionalizing is the character and promotional reach of its public self-identification as modern.

Quli and Mitchell reflect on the creative play of such identity production: “Narratives of modernity have been appropriated by individuals, groups, and institutions in a variety of creative ways and integrated into the already-existing cultures underlying them, producing unique forms with their own logics and histories” (2015: 203). The NKT is one such group that has creatively appropriated and integrated the narrative of modern Buddhism into its already-existing culture of “traditional Gelug exclusivism” (Kay 2004: 81). It has done so partly as a strategy for boundary demarcation: pronouncing “This Buddhism is not Tibetan,” but chiefly as a strategy for audience attraction: pronouncing “This Buddhism is universally practical.” Neither strategy bears much relation to the regnant scholarly narrative of Buddhist modernism having been created through detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization.

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