

**ABC Transcript of Interview of two ex-members of cults. The first one is a ex-member of the Twelve Tribes in Australia. The program is called "The spirit of things" and this interview was aired 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006**

**Rachael Kohn:** It's been said many times before, that one man's Cult is another man's Truth. Hello, welcome to The Spirit of Things on ABC Radio National. I'm Rachael Kohn.

Whatever you believe on the issue, there's a raft of groups today that claim to have the One True Divine Revelation, or the Spiritual Cure for whatever ails you.

What advice do you give to the hopeful seeker ready to embark on a spiritual journey? Apart from the consumer ethic of 'Buyer Beware' some cautionary tales can provide real insight. And voluntary groups like the Cult Information and Family Support, or CIFS, can also be helpful.

Today we hear from three young people, who full of trust and idealism, believed they found what they were looking for in the groups they joined. But their experiences finally led them to believe otherwise. Now as ex-members they've had to cope with the aftermath, which has been traumatic.

That isn't the story for everyone. And it's clear that all the groups mentioned today have their committed followers. Today we hear the other side of the story.

My first guest belonged to a group, founded in the mid-1970s by Elbert Eugene Spriggs, a former circus barker from Tennessee. Spriggs, who changed his name to Yoneq, believes he's the only true

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representative of God on earth. He and his followers believe they are the only true Christians, and all critics and ex-members are evil liars, who are condemned to Hell. Yoneq's understanding of the Bible is eccentric, to say the least, but that's because he believes that 'Christianity has mistranslated the scriptures'.

What was the group that you decided to join?

**Guest:** The group's known as the Twelve Tribes, or the Community, they're also known as. They're out near Picton, but they're quite common around several festivals in Sydney going under the name of The Common Ground Café.

**Rachael Kohn:** Is it an international group?

**Guest:** Yes, it's all around the world. It's currently located in about eight different countries.

**Rachael Kohn:** And is it a Christian group?

**Guest:** They kind of claim that they are Christians, but when you really get into their doctrine, they certainly are not Christians. In fact they believe that Christianity is led by Satan and that anyone who truly believes in Jesus or Yashua, as they call him, will leave Christianity and join the Twelve Tribes.

**Rachael Kohn:** Now the Twelve Tribes obviously refers to the 12 Tribes of Israel, so do they claim to be the original descendants of the 12 Tribes?

**Guest:** They don't claim to be the original descendants but they do claim that they are God's chosen people on earth, brought here to bring about

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the 12 Tribes, which is what God originally intended with the Jews.

**Rachael Kohn:** You were Christian, an active Christian. What attracted you to this group?

**Guest:** What attracted me to this group was the fact that they didn't appear to be hypocrites. They claimed that they loved one another and they showed this love by their life and the way they looked after and cared for each other, and I was really taken back by the amount of commitment that these people seemed to live their life by.

**Rachael Kohn:** You seem to be implying that you were disenchanted with Christianity or the church that you'd been going to.

**Guest:** Yes, the church I was going to, they said all the right things, but I felt there was very little outside of the church that made people who'd claimed to be Christian, any different to anyone else in the world. They were just like everyone else in society, they just put a label of 'We're forgiven because Jesus died for our sins' on top of their life.

**Rachael Kohn:** So what were the features of the group that you joined, the Twelve Tribes, that made you think this is the real thing?

**Guest:** The features that really drew me was the fact that they truly seemed to live the life they proclaimed. They truly seemed to love one another, they weren't hypocrites in what I saw before I joined.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did they share things communally? Live together, commune style?

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**Guest:** Everything was shared in common, everybody worked for the community, nobody had anything that they called their own. No-one got paid. When we went out and did jobs for the outside, it went into a communal fund, and unless you were part of the people who distributed the money, you never had money unless it was given to you. But everything was provided for you, your food, your clothing, the children's education, which was done at the farm out at Picton, cars, everything, medical expenses.

So although you didn't have money, you were provided for.

**Rachael Kohn:** You were there for what? Over two years? What prompted you to leave it?

**Guest:** What prompted me to leave in the end was the hypocrisy that I saw in Christianity was even more so in the Twelve Tribes, because although they would point at Christianity and say, 'Look at them, they are not loving one another', what I found within the community, once you really learnt what they were doing is there wasn't a whole lot of love there, there was a whole lot of fear and there were the people with the haves and the have-nots. And to quote *Animal Farm*, 'We are all equal, but some are ore equal than others', and that's exactly what I saw in the Twelve Tribes.

The leaders cushioned their nest, so to speak, and although they weren't rid in money or material goods, they had all the nice jobs. They had access to the cars,

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they could go visit their families, they got to go on business trips, whereas the less fortunate members of the group, they were the ones who just went out there and worked really, really hard, day after day.

**Rachael Kohn:** Were you discouraged from having contact with your family? You parents, for example?

**Guest:** I was certainly controlled with my contact, and I ended up being sent over to America to try and get away from my family's influence over me.

**Rachael Kohn:** So you felt they were controlling your life?

**Guest:** The Twelve Tribes were certainly controlling my life, in every aspect. I mean they were controlling my physical existence, they were controlling what I did day to day, they were controlling me financially, and in the end they were also controlling my wife and getting information out of her to help control me even more.

**Rachael Kohn:** But they didn't seem to control your mind, altogether, you were still able to discern things like hypocrisy and that kind of thing, that prompted you to leave.

**Guest:** Yes, I think I was fortunate in that I joined the Twelve Tribes for all the right reasons, because I wanted to be a committed Christian, and the longer I was there, the more hypocrisy I could see, and being a fairly strong character, I wasn't afraid of being cut off from the group. And I also knew that I had the love of my family outside the group, no matter what

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happened. I always had somewhere to go, I wasn't going to be left on the streets.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did your parents actually help you when you were starting to have doubts? Were they an important factor for you coming out?

**Guest:** The most important factor for me coming out with my parents, was firstly they went to a lot of trouble to understand cults, so when I did come out, they understood what I'd been through. They were working hard to try and get me out, but I managed to do that myself.

But the biggest thing was, I knew that I had unconditional love from them. Now the Twelve Tribes claim that they're the only ones who truly know how to love, but when I asked my parents for help, they were there. When I asked my brother for help, he came over and got me, and I knew I had that, I always had that to stand on.

So the Twelve Tribes couldn't scare me like that and make me capitulate to what they wanted me to do, because I knew that at the end of the day, I had my family support on the outside.

**Rachael Kohn:** What did they say would be the consequences for you if you left the group?

**Guest:** They didn't tell me anything directly, because the leaders weren't that good at making any arguments with me, because I'd call them on their bluffs. But there were plenty of stories going round about people who left who turned gay.

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There was a couple of boys who left who grew up in the cult, they had a car accident and their mother was actually told that that was God's mercy on the boys to kill them before they got into more sin. So it certainly wasn't encouraged for people to leave, and if you did leave, firstly you were going to Hell and secondly that you'd probably go there a lot quicker than everyone else. That God would punish you for leaving.

**Rachael Kohn:** You had a wife and children. What happened to them?

**Guest:** My 3-1/2 year old son came with me when we got kicked out, and that was over in Winnipeg.

**Rachael Kohn:** In Canada?

**Guest:** In Canada, Winnipeg in Canada. So we were a fair way from home, and the group who told me they would always look after me and care for me, kicked me out on the street with \$100, which doesn't get you too far when you're trying to get back to Australia.

So my wife and my other two children came back to Australia about two weeks after I got back here. I arranged to meet my wife to discuss why I'd left and to encourage her to leave with me because my family unit was very, very important to me, and she dropped the kids off to me, listened to me for half an hour, didn't say a word, and then left. And that was almost the last time we ever saw her.

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**Rachael Kohn:** How do you explain her staying there so long, giving up her husband and her three children?

**Guest:** I believe that she's been coerced into believing that if she leaves, then her children will go to Hell, and that if she truly loves her children, the only hope they have is if she stays, and God will reward her obedience and bring her children back to her. But if she leaves, then she's condemning her children to Hell. So she's scared to leave for her children's sake.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did she ever communicate that to you, or is that your surmise?

**Guest:** That's my surmise, based on things that I heard in the community. But I've tried to speak to her many times, but she couldn't open up to me. She was scared to talk to me, but I think she was scared to listen too much to me because I had so many good arguments as to why she shouldn't be there, that it may cause her to stumble and leave as well. So she felt it was better to cut off all contact rather than continue to contact me, in case she did end up leaving.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well you had the help of your parents and their concern. Did she have help from hers?

**Guest:** Unfortunately her parents didn't go to the extent that my parents went to educate themselves about the group that we were in, and how cults actually work. So when we got out, they were quite



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happy that I'd left with the children, but saying that she's an adult, she's smart enough to think for herself, she seems very happy there, and as such, she's still there four years later.

**Rachael Kohn:** What do you think made you vulnerable to a group that exercised such control over your life?

**Guest:** I think what made me vulnerable was wanting to be a better Christian and not be a hypocrite, but I also had a lot of pressure from my wife, knowing that if I didn't join, she was going to leave me, and I wanted more than anything to keep our family together. So I was willing at that stage to give anything a go.

But having said that, I believe that everyone at some stage in their life is vulnerable to these sorts of groups, and they're not necessarily religious groups, they can be self-help or business groups, or meditation groups or whatever. It's we at one stage, we're all vulnerable to the right message.

**Rachael Kohn:** You've used the word 'cult' a few times. What do you think is the distinguishing factor that makes you use that term with respect to the 12 Tribes?

**Guest:** I use that term for the Twelve Tribes because they truly do try to control your emotions, they try to control your spirituality, they control you financially, they control you physically, and they certainly manipulate you into staying through fear and

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coercion, and so I'm quite comfortable calling the Twelve Tribes a cult. Also if you meet these people, they are really nice, they are really lovely and genuine because they do truly believe in what they are saying to you.

So I know many people who are listening to this will say, 'I've met the Twelve Tribes at their Common Ground Café at the Woodford Folk Festival, and they're not like that at all.' But until you live with them and leave and be able to analyse your experience, you're not in a position to be able to say 'These are just nice happy people'. It's taken me many years to be able to determine what this group was really about.

**Rachael Kohn:** Isn't it just the case that some people really like a tightly organised style of life, and others jack up against it?

**Guest:** No, it's not that simple. For example, take my ex-wife. Before she joined the group, she would do anything for her children. Now she's in the group, she hasn't seen them for over three years, because they have changed her mind into thinking that it is best that she doesn't see her children that she has nothing to do with them.

We had a fairly good marriage I believe before we joined, but she was willing to do on me. These groups will change your mind in the way you think, and they will change your value system, and they will exploit you for everything they can, and then when

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you've got nothing left to give, they'll spit you out on the streets, and say it's your fault.

**Rachael Kohn:** And do you reckon that's what happened to you?

**Guest:** Fortunately I do. I've done a lot of reading and study and been quite introspective, for a number of years. I'm still going through things of course, but I'm certainly well on my way to understanding my experience and being able to understand how these groups operate, and understand why other people get caught up in the same trap.

**Rachael Kohn:** Has CIFS, the Cult Information and Family Support group, been of help to you?

**Guest:** They were a great help to my family as a starting point, as to what's going on, why did my son just give up his business and leave and join this group without telling us much. And it gave them a starting point to get the information they needed to understand what I was going through so they knew what they needed to do to help me.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you have a sense now that you want to help others?

**Guest:** Yes, I do have that sense, and if anyone needs any help or even someone to talk to, I'm always open to doing that.

**Rachael Kohn:** It's been great talking to you.

**Guest:** Thank you.

**Rachael Kohn:** The name of my guest has been suppressed to ensure the anonymity of his children,

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but if you'd like to make contact with him, just go to our website [and send me an email].

My next guest belonged to a group that believes salvation comes in a bottle. The promise is simple: buy the energised waters and imbibe Infinity. The group was targeted by the New South Wales Fair Trading Commission in 2002 for marketing its products as miracle cures when they were nothing but distilled water with exotic names, like 'Heart Spider' and 'Puff the Magic Dragon'.

But there was more than selling going on. The group's leader, Gerald Attrill, who now calls himself Jessa O' My Heart, is described in its literature as 'one who has already gone to God', he is 'the hole in the universe and as a social being he does not exist.' Mysterious? Perhaps that was part of the attraction.

Nicola, what was the group that you first joined?

**Nicola:** It was a group called Infinity Forms of Yellow Remember. But it's now called Hermes Far Eastern Shining.

**Rachael Kohn:** Both those names are very difficult to understand; what did the first one mean?

**Nicola:** OK. Jessa O' My Heart is the leader of the group, and he believed that we live on what he called a Red Realm world, which basically, this world we live in, is a hell world, that he has been enlightened to the Yellow Realm, which is kind of a lot higher than

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that, and we're to kind of remember that we are from the Yellow Realm, not the Red Realm.

**Rachael Kohn:** And what did that entail? What were the sort of things that you had to do to remain on the Yellow Realm or to get on the Yellow Realm?

**Nicola:** Well he is the alchemist, and he has created a whole company that sells discs that empower water that you drink, and the water then is alchemically empowered by the leader. So it's a healing energy which will bring you more and more to the Yellow Realm and become more enlightened and more like him.

**Rachael Kohn:** Were you encouraged to buy this water or these discs?

**Nicola:** Definitely so, and the more you bought the more you would become more enlightened and more healed.

**Rachael Kohn:** How much did you buy?

**Nicola:** I began to become involved in this group in 1998 and I bought a threshold pack, which consists of 100 vials and that cost \$5,000. I left four years ago and since then, they've brought out another four different threshold packs that are all the same amount of money and all those energies are supposed to have different healing properties. So you're encouraged to buy more and more of these threshold packs that cost that amount of money, yes.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did you feel good about the group, I mean when you first joined? You obviously laid out quite a bit of money.

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**Nicola:** Well at the beginning I didn't necessarily believe that he was God, but more and more you just believe that these waters and these vials actually work, and that you're becoming more healed and then you become more and more involved in the group and then I began to live in the group.

I changed my name to a name called Soon Gathers Delight in Grace and everyone gets different names, and so then, slowly but surely, the belief system kind of comes more and more into your mind that you believe Jessa O' My Heart is God himself, and so anything that he says you have to do, because that's God's purpose for you.

**Rachael Kohn:** Was it a pretty demanding lifestyle?

**Nicola:** Yes, it was, you know you would be up very early in the morning, and you would be in bed very late. Sometimes after 12 o'clock at night. But he would recommend six hours of sleep as an average, and if you got more than that, you were pretty lucky. And it was pretty - well it wasn't too strenuous work, but you were focused continuously on your process and transformation. So you were constantly working on yourself the whole time.

**Rachael Kohn:** And you were in Australia, this was in Australia, wasn't it?

**Nicola:** I began in Australia, they had centres in Sydney and Maroochydore and centres in New Zealand and America. They had a centre in Wisconsin, and I worked in all of those. But now

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primarily, I think they've closed down all of those centres except for the one in New Zealand, and all of the centres have kind of conglomerated to the Murwillumbah area and Tyalgum area.

So they all live around that area and they've opened clothing shops now, and they sell empowered clothes and they actually have a coffee shop, two coffee shops, one in Tyalgum and one in Murwillumbah, and they sell empowered coffees.

They don't actually say that they're empowered now because when they were originally Infinity, the Fair Trading took them to court, and they were no longer allowed to say things were empowered. So everything's got a disclaimer on it now. But that's how they get money now, they just work in cafes, and work in clothing shops, but they still sell these waters and vials, but in a shop that is invitation only to get into those shops.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well how long were you a member and when did you start to have some doubts?

**Nicola:** I became a member in 1998 and I didn't come out till 2001, and even though I physically was asked to leave, and I still don't really understand why I was asked to leave, they wanted me to still be part of the cult and still use the waters and everything but not actually live on the community. So I'd still be mentally and emotionally locked up with the cult for another 3-1/2 years and it wasn't till last year that I

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finally saw through all of the mental programming that was involved in the cult.

**Rachael Kohn:** Is that why you call them a cult? I mean some people don't use that term; what do you mean when you refer to it?

**Nicola:** I refer to it as a cult because I've learnt a lot just over the last year of how these particular groups use mind control, and in a very systematic way, and these particular groups that control your lifestyle and prevent you from having any interaction with families, only believing in one set of ideologies which has come from the leader. All these groups are out there, and they work in exactly the same way as our group did. So I kind of group those groups together in the word 'cult', that's what I've come to believe that they are.

**Rachael Kohn:** So do you think they did exercise control over you in every way?

**Nicola:** Definitely, there's no doubt about that. I would have done anything for this man, Jessa O' My Heart, because I believed that he was Jesus Christ incarnate. He never said it himself, but all the disciples of him definitely spoke about it regularly, that he was Jesus Christ and it was always wondered who we were in the time of Jesus Christ, like that we were all reincarnated and we were all there, and this was just the same life playing out again. And so Jesus Christ, this is playing out his life again.

So I definitely would have done anything for this man who I really believed was Jesus Christ, and anything



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meaning anything, I would have done anything. If I had any idea that I was going to be asked to do these things before the cult, before this group, I definitely wouldn't have done them, if I knew that they were going to ask me to do these things, such as I had sexual relations with Jessa O' My Heart, because he asked me to, and I know that that does happen regularly in the group, but it's never talked about.

And once there was a new recruit and we were all talking, being very open in revealing our secrets and I thought it was a good opportunity to tell everybody about my wonderful experience with Jessa in the bedroom, and it came down from Show Me Showers Heaven's Bliss who is the second-in-charge, Jessa's 'wife' in a sense, that you do not talk about that, and you keep that to yourself and you mustn't ever reveal that to anybody. And so in that sense, you are asked to be truthful and honest, but only about particular things. Not about the things that involved Jessa and your experiences with him.

**Rachael Kohn:** How did you decide to leave a group that you were so committed to?

**Nicola:** Well even the fact that I was out for another three or four years before I actually realised how much mind control this man still had on me. It wasn't until I got to the point where I realised I wanted to go back again, this was this time last year, and I have two beautiful children, one's almost four and one's two, and I was willing to give up those two children to

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go back to this man, and that's how much I was still committed to going back to him.

And I was willing to give up all fears of telling my family how I still wanted to live with this man, but I said that I would be willing to talk to anybody they wanted me to talk to before I left, because I wanted to be making the right decision, because I did really want to follow God. And so they had me talk to a pastor, and he put on a whiteboard who Jesus Christ really is, and actually documented it with the Bible, and had me say everything that Jessa O' My Heart did and it was like a side-to-side thing, who Jesus Christ is and who Jessa O' My Heart is.

And it was very obvious to me at that point that he wasn't Jesus Christ, and that just shattered everything for me, because I was really in search of Jesus Christ, and I really believed that if God wanted us to believe something, he would give us a book like the Bible, and it would be spread to all ends of the earth because he is that powerful. But he wouldn't just have this special leader that had this one book that maybe 100 people only read, and I knew God to be a lot more powerful than that.

And it's just that kind of comparison did a lot for me, and the pastor had me ask Jesus Christ into my heart, and it was like this curse had been finally broken on me. And I was like dancing for joy for weeks, and just the amount of unravelling of the mind, it is still happening for me, and every day I feel more free

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because of that unravelling process, and it's amazing how indoctrinated I was mentally. It just controlled every aspect.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you feel that what the pastor gave you was a freedom of choice, or did he just replace one belief with another?

**Nicola:** It was definitely freedom of choice because he was just stating the facts from the Bible, and he just had me put up there that Jesus Christ was walking through the streets and literally healing people, and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that these were miracles, people were being raised from the dead, the blind could see. And with Jessa O' My Heart, it's all very elusive and very mystical and mysterious because he's locked himself away in his house, and when you see him, you might feel amazing, you might feel like you're with God himself, but there's no real healing, there's no real change other than if you're in his presence, and really, when you look at it, this man is built up to be God himself. No wonder you think you're having a godly experience because you know, you really think you're with God, and you're almost hyperventilating at the sight of him. Whereas with Jesus Christ there wasn't any doubt, it was obvious things that Jesus Christ did that were actual miracles. And also, I don't exactly where in Revelation, but he actually referred to a time when Jesus Christ will come on the clouds, and it will be undeniable that everybody will know that God has

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come a second time, and that also really made me think that why is there only a special select few that have discovered that Jesus Christ is actually here? That is the alluring nature of it, because we felt like the special ones, we know who Jesus Christ is on this earth, and all the rest of the world are just, you know, they have no idea about this special man.

**Rachael Kohn:** What are the challenges for you now that you are out, back into society, back with the crowd, as it were, not the special mystical group?

**Nicola:** I find I guess it is an extremely large grieving process every day because of the alluring nature of being in this beautiful community, where you think you're doing beautiful things every day, loving people, and you're changing the world, to go back to a life where you're creating a relationship with your partner, in a real sense. You're doing the nitty gritty things every day.

You're actually building your children's life to being one of love and trust in a real sense; no real psychic kind of 'We're giving you lots of loving energy', you're really doing the hard stuff when these kids are having a ratbag day, and you respond to them in a loving way. That's the hard stuff, and just remembering that that's actually what God wants from us is the simple stuff. Nothing grandiose or nothing where you're changing the world, I think just getting back to the simple stuff is what God really wants from us.

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That's why I've just got to keep on bringing myself back to everyday is the simple things, yes.

**Rachael Kohn:** How much has outside support helped you, that is groups like CIFS and others, your family for example?

**Nicola:** Enormously. I really don't think I could have done it without my partner, and for me because he struggled so much in his own life, he had a drug addiction of sorts, and I kind of paralleled with him and realised that my group was like an addiction in itself. So it's been a process of relating with him of how he goes NA every night, you know, to get out of his addiction.

It's very much a support, him going through that is like I'm coming out of my - I can't stop saying cult, that's how I refer to it - as my cult experience. It was like an addiction, and my family have been wonderful, and just meeting other people that have come out of cults, how similar the experiences are. And like it's amazing, I've had a year-and-a-half with a psychologist, and they did more work in actually making me grow up and be a mature individual in life, and more functional than the cult ever did with all these energies that you had to buy for like three years or more. So that was a real big clincher too, that it actually didn't do anything.

**Rachael Kohn:** It's been great talking to you, thank you so much.

**Nicola:** Thank you.

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**Rachael Kohn:** That was Nicola, a former member of Infinity Forms of Yellow Remember. In its promotion literature, it says 'These vials and waters are literally the Radiant Vibratory Current of Jessa O' My Heart's Recognition and Radiance of his own awakening as Only God.' !!!

You're listening to True Stories on The Spirit of Things here on ABC Radio National, about people who take a leap of faith into a totally lifestyle and beliefs, and eventually find that it's brought them more problems than they expected.

There are people in all these groups who are committed followers and satisfied customers, but today's program hears the other side of the story.

Tibetan Buddhism is popular in the West, and that's due largely to the Dalai Lama's reputation for being a wise teacher, open to democratic ideas, and warmly engaging with other faiths in dialogue.

But a rival movement, known as the New Kadampa Tradition or NKT, has a very different reputation. They believe they are the guardians of true Tibetan Buddhism. Denounced by the Dalai Lama, the NKT has been called extremist and exclusive, with followers encouraged only to read the words of their leader, Kelsang Gyatso.

The NKT have centres world-wide and offer meditation classes to the public, which undoubtedly have been enjoyed by many. But among those who've

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become full time members, there are also stories of disappointment and shattered ideals. And that was the case with Gregory.

Greg, what drew you to become a member of a Buddhist group, the Maha Siddha Centre.

**Gregory:** I guess I was kind of drawn to the ideology; they seemed to profess kindness and generosity, gentleness I guess, but that's not what I got.

**Rachael Kohn:** What prompted you at that point in your life? I mean why become a member of a particular group as opposed to just reading up about its beliefs?

**Gregory:** Yes it's good question, I guess at that time in my life I was looking for a new direction.

**Rachael Kohn:** A new direction? What were you doing at the time?

**Gregory:** Well I'd struggled with illness for a number of years, and I felt that meditation, relaxation, might offer a chance to give my body some rest and relaxation that it needed. And yes, they were offering meditations and so I was drawn to that.

**Rachael Kohn:** Can I ask you what sort of illness?

**Gregory:** I'd struggled with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome for a number of years. You know, it was affecting my life, but it was OK, and in actual fact I was quite content at that time in my life, so I guess I just felt the meditations just might add to that quality of life and improve it just a little bit.

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**Rachael Kohn:** Why did you think meditation would help?

**Gregory:** I'd recently read an article about meditation, and relaxation and how that was helping some people improve their quality of life. So I guess I was adding to that and investigating it myself, to see what effect it would have, and I guess the meditations did have a relaxing effect on my life, and I felt that it was worth pursuing.

**Rachael Kohn:** So when you entered the group, was it more of a good thing, more meditation?

**Gregory:** Well, no. At first before I actually started to live with them, I did get some benefit, the relaxation was beneficial and the meditation was beneficial, but once I actually moved in with the group, I found it quite harsh. I felt persecuted and harassed all the time. I don't know, I always kind of felt out of place.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you think your expectations were too high? Were you hoping that it would cure you?

**Gregory:** Well it's funny that you should say that, but over time, through their teachings, that's what they suggested.

They suggested that they could cure me really, and that by following their instructions, by following what the teacher said, that my health would improve, and that I would eventually get over my illness. And I guess that's what kind of kept me there really. The teacher kept saying how they knew what was best for



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us at all times, and that by following the teacher we'd purify our minds and we'd reach enlightenment perhaps. And so I stayed there and battled on with it.

**Rachael Kohn:** How long were you there?

**Gregory:** I got involved with the group about 18 months before I lived with them, and then I lived with them for about 8 months. So yes, it was an 8-month stay really.

**Rachael Kohn:** Were there other people like you who had recently joined?

**Gregory:** There were. This group came to Australia I think in 2000, and I had been involved them from Day 1 actually. They'd put out pamphlets and I'd been interested, a friend had got me interested, so there were a lot of people who had just got involved, and I guess it was basically a new group with lots of new people. Some people had come from England, which is where the group originated, and they were basically there to set the group up. So mostly it was new people.

**Rachael Kohn:** You said that you felt persecuted. What do you mean by that?

**Gregory:** I felt as if I was given a really hard time beyond that of other people, and it just seemed as if I was singled out for some reason, and I don't really know why so I guess that's what I mean when I say I was persecuted.

**Rachael Kohn:** What was your day like?

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**Gregory:** Well I generally had a quiet day. They wanted me to work for them part of the day, and I guess for some of the rest of the day I would do my meditation or have my breakfast or do some relaxation or whatever, but I guess the demands of the group became greater and greater, until basically it was suggested that I should limit my outside activities and focus entirely on their needs really. So I guess towards the end, it was focused on their needs, that's what my day was revolving around.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did you have other outside activities? Were you a student? Did you have a job?

**Gregory:** For some time I'd been a student, and I was doing that part-time. Part-time I would do a TAFE course, and part-time I would help them. Once my TAFE course finished though, they became more demanding, or I felt they became more demanding anyway, again suggesting that I should limit my outside activities and work for them. I guess the only other thing I was doing was once a week I was spending a couple of hours with my grandmother. I'd cook her some lunch and she'd wash some clothes and that was sort of how it worked. So that was all I really did.

**Rachael Kohn:** When they made demands on you and you felt that they were unfair, did you voice your concern? Did you protest?

**Gregory:** I guess I did protest. I know on various occasions I'd sort of said to them that it was too much, that I couldn't do everything that they were

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asking me to do, and I kept being told, Well we'll never push you beyond your limits.

The teacher knows what's best for you, was suggested and so I guess I just grinned and bore it really, and I did the best that I could, but I did protest, and quite often I protested reasonably loudly anyway, but it didn't seem to get me anywhere, and I always ended up being manipulated back into what I was doing anyway, or at least I felt I was being manipulated back into what I was doing, and I didn't seem to have a choice but to do what I was told.

**Rachael Kohn:** It sounds like the leader had quite a bit of authority in the group; do you think that it was too much authority?

**Gregory:** The leader certainly did have a lot of authority. It was a very top-down organisation; in other words, the leader had complete control, as far as I could see anyway. All decisions that were made seemed to come from the leader of the group.

**Rachael Kohn:** The centre that you belonged to is part of the NKT, the New Kadampa Tradition which the Dalai Lama has proscribed; he has been very critical of the leader of that tradition. Were you aware of the controversy between the kind of establishment Tibetan Buddhism and the NKT?

**Gregory:** Well that's interesting, because I remember during one teaching session, a student came in with the newspaper article that suggested that NKT was a cult, and immediately the student

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walked in with that, it was whisked away so that none of us could see it, and we were told the reason for that was, that it might affect our faith in the teachings. At the time, that seemed like a reasonable explanation, but we didn't really discuss what the controversy was, and why this article had been written. So no, I wasn't really aware of it until now really, until much later.

**Rachael Kohn:** Dorje Shugden is the deity of the NKT. Did the deity Dorje Shugden figure in your life, in your daily activities in any way?

**Gregory:** Well actually we did quite regular prayer to Dorje Shugden, and I believe now, one of the controversies was involving Dorje Shugden and Dorje Shugden suggested as being a demon or a devil or something like that, and that we were actually demon worshipping. They did discuss this very briefly after one of the teachings, but we were convinced that it was OK, so it seemed that no matter what controversy appeared or arose, that there was some explanation for it. And I guess it seemed OK at the time.

**Rachael Kohn:** Indeed that is what the Dalai Lama alleges, that it's demon worship. What were the circumstances of your departure from the group? When did you decide enough is too much, I'm going.

**Gregory:** Well I actually got kicked out of the group, or I certainly felt as if I was being kicked out. Towards the end, it felt as if they were making my life as hard as possible to get rid of me.

I know at one point in time they were suggesting that I'd have to move into a more expensive room, a room

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that I couldn't afford, and I got very upset and quite distressed that they were putting this pressure on me. At the time, my health had deteriorated and I just wasn't able to work any more for them, and I went to stay with my parents. At that point in time, I got a phone call suggesting that if I didn't sign a contract to work 20 hours for them, then I'd have to leave, and I was really devastated by this, and managed come back and try and discuss it with them, but there was no arrangement they were prepared to make to allow me to do less hours, or come to some sort of a compromise, and basically I was told either I sign a contract or leave.

And of course I was really devastated at that point in time, so that was really what happened with me, I didn't have a choice.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you think you were a bit idealistic? It sounds like they were operating as business as usual.

**Gregory:** Well at the time it didn't seem like that. I guess I was idealistic looking back, yes, it's hard to sort of go back and say, Well I had these ideas, but it just seemed like a good thing to be doing at the time. I didn't realise that I was going to experience the ruthlessness that I did. I guess I expected kindness and compassion, and that's not something that I received.

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**Rachael Kohn:** I can sense that you certainly felt wounded; did you feel a bit wounded in your pride as well?

**Gregory:** Looking back, I guess I was devastated actually. I remember towards the end, I felt mentally and physically broken, and I was just shattered that a group that I trusted so completely could be so harsh. Now I guess I just feel ashamed that I allowed these things to happen, or I feel as though I allowed these things to happen.

**Rachael Kohn:** What has been the aftermath for you, how have you coped with all these feelings?

**Gregory:** Well it's been three years since I was involved with them, and I guess I'm still putting the pieces back, still trying to put the pieces back together again. As a result of what I experienced, I guess I suffered post traumatic stress disorder, and developed an anxiety disorder.

I guess I'm still trying to work through these things to try and function again normally. I don't seem to be able to function the way I used to, I'm not the same person I used to be, and it's very difficult to I guess work through these things and slowly start to function again.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you think they should have steered you in the direction of getting more conventional help with your chronic condition?

**Gregory:** I guess I expected a little bit more understanding and compassion. It seems to be with

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them that I don't know, they believe they have the answers for everything, and I guess at the time, I felt that they knew what they were talking about, and the only thing I can say is that I just would have expected more understanding and more compassion, and I don't know, that wasn't forthcoming.

**Rachael Kohn:** Can I ask you what's it done to your faith or attitude to meditation, or Buddhism generally?

**Gregory:** I have to say that I'm very fearful of it now, having experienced what I've experienced. I find it very difficult to be able to look at anything like meditation or relaxation therapy, whatever, in the same light. I guess I feel a lot of fear towards religion in general, and anything that may put me in a vulnerable position I guess.

**Rachael Kohn:** Thanks, Greg.

**Gregory:** Thank you.

**Rachael Kohn:** Choose carefully, or you may lose your faith altogether! Greg's story is not necessarily the experience of others in the group, but it's a reminder that the choice to become part of a community 24/7 can have dire consequences. If you're having concerns about the group you or someone else is in, you can find help on the Cult Information and Family Support website, that's [cifs.org.au](http://cifs.org.au)

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That's the program for this week. It was produced by me and Geoff Wood with technical production by Philip Ullman.

Next week, what's funny about your religion? Is your God too precious to have a good laugh? We hear from a Christian, a Buddhist and a Muslim, and that's no joke.

That's next week on The Spirit of Things with me, Rachael Kohn.