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Challenges in the treatment of people psychologically abused in Buddhist groups

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- I) context and international buddhist organisations concerned
- II) open letters, youtube videos etc. leading to further investigations in several international buddhist organisations
- III) analysing structures of these groups (focus on Tibetan buddhism)
- IV) analysing decontextualised terms, concepts and neologisms
- V) psychological and health impact of the above concepts
- VI) mechanisms of damage and diagnostic range
- VII) challenges in treatment based on internalised concepts, patterns of dissociation, alteration of personality and chronification of disease



1. Internat. organisation Rigpa (former leader: Sogyal Lakar)
2. Internat. organisation Shambala (former leader: Sakyong Mipham)
3. OKC (Ogyen Kunzang Choling) (Belgium, France, earlier: also Spain)
(leader: L. Kunzang Dorje alias Spatz Robert)
4. Pathgate Institute of Buddhist Studies based in the UK (leader: L. Dondrup Dorje alias Peter Young)
5. FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition)
(its teacher: Dagri R., leader: L. Zopa)
6. Shenpen R. / Slovenia
7. Dharma Ocean (spiritual directors: Reginald A. Ray, Caroline Pfohl)
8. Pagode Phat Hue / Buddhas Weg (Thay Tu Tri)

(honorary titles of tibetan tradition abbreviated: R. = Rinpoche, L. = Lama, V.= Venerable, G.= Geshe)



by the means of open letters, youtube videos, legal actions leading to investigations in several international buddhist organisations



Groups from Tibetan Buddhism (*Vajrayāna*)

1. Organisation Rigpa: open letter in the organisation Rigpa July 2017 (withdrawal of Sogyal L. in August 2017)
2. Organisation Shambala: Sunshine report in 2018 (withdrawal of Sakyong Mipham in 2019)
3. Organisation OKC (Ogyen Kunzang Choling) high court appeal 2019: The trial started 4.1.2016, 14.3.2019 high Court appeal: “a New trial will take place in another court to be announced”
Twitter Information by *OKCinfo* at 14.3.2019 @OKCinfor)
4. Organisation FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition) (investigation at a court in India concerning: Dagri R.)



Timelines in these four groups derived from Tibetan Buddhism

1. *Rigpa international*

1.1 open letter by 8 members in July 2017

1.2 withdrawal of Sogyal Lakar

1.3 Lewis Silkin Report (Baxter, K.) in August 2018

2. *Shambala international*

2.1 Sunshine Report (three parts) in 2018

2.2 Wickwire Holm Report (investigation) 02.2019

2.3 Open letter by long-serving Kusung 02.2019

2.4. An Olive Branch report 03.2019

2.5. Open Letter to Acharyas and Interim Board 05.2019



3. OKC is a cult: conducted for about 40 years in France, Belgium and Spain and is still not closed (court case caused by former children)
4. *Foundation for the preservation of Mahayana tradition (FPMT)*
 - 4.1 molestation of a women in an Indian airplane by Dagri R. in May 2019
 - 4.2 Youtube Video: Dagri Rinpoche is indeed a serial molester, at 7.5.2019 (in five days more than 11000 views)
 - 4.3 Petition by nuns for investigation

<https://www.change.org/p/buddhist-followers-call-for-investigation-into-allegations-of-sexual-misconduct-by-dagri-rinpoche>



Research data also from:

1. Pathgate Institute of Buddhist Studies based in the UK (leader: L. Dondrup Dorje alias Peter Young)
2. Shenpen R./ Slovenia
3. Dharma Ocean (spiritual directors: Reginald A. Ray, Caroline Pfohl)
4. Pagode Phat Hue / Buddhas Weg (Thay Tu Tri)



typical structures in and organisation of such groups:

1. personality cult (esp. derived from the practise of guru yoga)
2. seminar and/ or retreat participants (rather little damage)
3. *inner circles*
 - 3.1 those directly damaged through abuse, violence etc.
 - 3.2 testimonies and position holders that contribute to secrecy and slander and who continue to teach, even after the withdrawal of the 'master' (Sogyal Lakar, Mipham)

Inner circles: people who were pulled in or who wanted to be close, special, near the teacher for whatever reasons



Background: *cultures of abuse* (based on feudal structures and the concept all others are less advanced and oneself has the right to do so for their own good) copied into centers in Europe, USA and Russia

1. strict hierarchical context (unreflectedly copied into Buddhist centers) combined with
2. feudal structures abusing and exploiting people (especially denigrating and abusing women)
3. unreflected copies of hierarchies, personality cult and conflicts between the different sects into the seminar and retreat centers and growing international organisations
4. concepts of expansion, power and influence which the 'students' and 'supporters' are supposed to support and merge with
5. intransparency in terms of money transfer and distribution



6. concepts of exaltation of the master and oneself (in identification with the master and the group)
- e.g. the 'master' (guru) would be above the law of the respective countries



Main challenges:

1. the damage is embedded in a complex of decontextualized termini and concepts
2. the abuse of trust along with misuse of termini technici
e.g. concept of '*karma-purification*': people who thought their negative karma would get purified by enduring violence and sexual abuse etc.
3. identification with teachers and group hindering individual responsibility
4. and *double bind* inducing the inability to act
5. chronification of disease, because of staying inside for years or even decades



For treatment it is important to understand the ways of damage
and the internalised concepts and its effects in people's psyche



Vajrayāna Buddhism:

‘crazy wisdom’ (neologism since Trungpa R.)

‘karma-purification’

decontextualised techniques of Vajrayāna Buddhism:

‘pure view’

‘guru yoga’: training in *merging with the master*

seeing the master as buddha and oneself as buddha

decontextualised concepts of Vajrayāna Buddhism:

‘relative and absolute reality’ which is forcing into *double bind*,

‘positive thinking’ and reframing of experience and views



abuse of trust and misuse of termini technici

- 1) method of '*pure view*' interpreted to be positive thinking by all means and used for reframing any experience
- 2) stereotypical behavior patterns e.g. seemingly compassionate counteract inner process despite training
- 3) training of merging with the perpetrators wants and demands
- 4) training of dissociation (thinking this would be advanced meditation)



1. psychological effects of *double bind* by means of the (decontextualized) concept of relative and absolute reality
2. increasing uncertainty in one's own perception
3. processes of developing dependency
4. change of personality
5. exclusion and slander (as methods to get rid of rivals and people who dare to question or critique)



patterns in manipulation (from the questionnaire)

1. manipulating people by demonstratively ignoring some and privileging others
2. subtle opposing of the group members against each other by the group leadership
3. creating a culture of competition and mistrust in the group (of followers)
4. confusing people by some strange use of hinting to supposedly be able to read their mind
5. playing people against each other
6. ignoring people and issues instead of clearing and resolving conflicts



reframing the individuals experience

1. to be somehow mistaken in discrediting the person or trying to announce he/ she would have psychological problems
2. to not be the 'real' truth (ultimate truth) and therefore untrue
3. e.g. in „Rigpa therapy“



double bind:

ignoring facts of individual and group reality with the employment of thought and speech patterns disguising the truth

effects:

- 1) mental and emotional confusion
- 2) mental and emotional stress
- 3) inability to take action and make decisions
- 4) effects in chronification of disease



neologistic concepts and perspectives

- 1) '*karma-purification*' allowing for harm without any restrictions
- 2) '*crazy wisdom*' rationalizing any unacceptable behavior



dangers in identification

1) with any (uneducated/ unrealized) meditation master through methods like *guru yoga and the implicit hierarchical structures in messages*

2) and collective goals through naive obedience in passing orders and working for hidden agendas



additionally :

1. psychological and physical abuse (sexual abuse)
2. exploitation
3. physical harm like beating or lack of sleep (overworking)
4. slander and discreditation
5. coercive control



Diagnostic range:

- *reactions to severe stress*
- *post-traumatic stress disorder*
- *depression*
- *anxiety disorder*
- *dissociative disorders*
- *change of personality*



Example: „Rigpa therapy“

“As more students verged close to emotional breakdowns because of your ‘trainings’, you introduced ‘Rigpa Therapy’ for your closest students. Trained, practising therapists (who are also your students) were given the task of dealing with the pain that was being stirred up in the minds of those who you were abusing physically, emotionally and psychologically. During one-to-one sessions, the therapist heard from the student of your “crazy wisdom” methods and the trauma that it caused the individual. One such “Rigpa Therapy” method for processing the trauma was to negate the validity of seeing you, the teacher *and* instigator, as the source of the trauma. Instead, we were instructed to see old family relationship histories as the issue. In effect, our very tangible and clear discernment of seeing you as an abuser was blocked and instead we were blamed and made to feel inadequate. On the occasions when the ‘therapy’ did not result in a student changing their view of you, you shamed the therapist into feeling that they weren’t doing their job properly and were not skilled.”

in “Open Letter” to Sogyal Lakar July 14, 2017. <https://www.lionsroar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Letter-to-Sogyal-Lakar-14-06-2017-.pdf>



examples organisation *Rigpa*:

"Three days later the story broke in several west coast newspapers, following a report by an agency journalist, Don Lattin, which included comment by Victoria Barlow: 'I went to an apartment to see a highly esteemed lama to discuss religion', she said, "he opened the door without a shirt on and with a can of beer in his hand." Once they were on the sofa, Barlow continued, "Sogyal lunged at me with sloppy kisses and groping. I thought I should take it as a compliment so I surrendered to him – but it had a horrible effect on me and caused a lot of depression.' "

in <https://behindthethangkas.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/10-the-lawsuit/> date of retrieval: 14.1.2019



"Often when we sit down to meditate and practice, we feel polluted with trauma from our experience with you"

in Standlee, M., Sangye, Damcho, Pistono, M., Standlee, J., Price, G., Condon, M., Goldman, G. (2017).
Open letter to Sogyal Lakar.



responsibility of those in positions:

"Some of us, who have held positions of responsibility within Rigpa, struggle with our own part in having covered for you and ‘explained’ away your behavior, while not caring for those with traumatic experiences."

in Standlee, M., Sangye, Damcho, Pistono, M., Standlee, J., Price, G., Condon, M., Goldman, G. (2017). Open letter to Sogyal Lakar.



"I heard evidence of an individual being knocked unconscious, several people were left with bleeding wounds and one received a concussion which lasted for days."

in Baxter, K. (Lewis Silkin LLP). (2018). *Report to the boards of trustees of: Rigpa fellowship UK, and Rigpa fellowship US.* at 22.8.2018;

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580dbe87e6f2e16700cb79fe/t/5b8f7c1e1ae6cfb38491e668/1536130081917/Lewis+Silkin+report.pdf>



Organisation *Rigpa*

“Failure of ethics and publicly presenting individuals as ‘psychologically peculiar’: ‘My person [...] was ridiculed accordingly, portrayed as psychologically ‘strange’. Generally, this happened with most ‘dissidents’, this was one of the reasons to leave, any form of ethics was missing completely. True was what was in the master's mind or what was considered so. One could call it a ‘general refusal to dialogue’.”



by the example of the organization Rigpa Germany:

"Typical public methods at Rigpa: public humiliation, abuse, exposure, exaggerated false praise, promoting or degrading people in the 'Rigpa Ranking'. Promoting and exploiting intrigues, power games and denunciation among students. Encouraging a sense of value within the collective and for the individual by cleverly presenting the Lama and his organisation as unique, exceptional, significant, superior to others, more advanced, etc. and then reducing the pupils to pocket size by public speech. I have called this attracting and domestizing. Secrecy as a measure to create unofficial, subtle, non-formal structures within the so-called 'sangha'. Ideologically, this is justified by the selective use of specific parts of texts from the canon of Tibetan Buddhist texts, partly in a quite subtle and manipulative ways. Encouraging unhealthy ambitiousness and worldly interest by publicly displaying students' diligence, dedication, working enthusiasm, readiness to donate, etc. by setting up a gold standard in devotion. Great 'devotion' = greater progress on the path, thus also greater appreciation by the collective, thus higher ranking. The longing for alternatives for family and social belonging is being exploited to a very great extent."

"Very often utterly incompetent individuals were employed, I got the impression the permanent chaos associated with that allows for better manipulation."



Structuring damage: in An Olive Branch Report (organisation Shambala):

„• Sexual Misconduct by Shambala Teachers and Staff • Child Abuse • Physical Violence • Emotional Abuse • Racial Harm • Abuse of Power • Rumors/Slander”

in An Olive Branch. 2019. Report on the Shambhala Listening Post. Online:
https://www.dropbox.com/s/111arue9y4gtk73/AOB_ListeningPostReport_March2019_final.pdf?dl=0 (date of retrieval: March 20, 2019).



in *An Olive Branch Report* (organisation Shambala):

"in total, 62 people contacted the Listening Post. Of these contacts, 55 produced information that is contained in this report. [...] These 55 comprise the "reporters of harm" whose experiences are summarized in this report. Twenty-eight of these submitted written reports of harm, 16 participated in an interview only, and 11 did both. Of the 55 total reports, 39 were self-reports and 16 were reported by bystanders. Bystanders include people who witnessed the incident or its aftermath or were directly told about it by the person who was harmed. [...] Information about a total of 67 incidents of harm is presented in the report"

An Olive Branch. 2019. Report on the Shambhala Listening Post. Online:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/111arue9y4gtk73/AOB_ListeningPostReport_March2019_final.pdf?dl=0 (date of retrieval: March 20, 2019).



"I sob, shake, something like a muffled scream wants to come out. Or I simply freeze. I am told that is the nature of trauma. Although I have been actively engaged in trauma resolution and integration [...], when I hear the word trauma, I still believe that must be about someone else."

in Morman, C., Leslie, L., Fitch, L., Ellerton, D., Canepa, A. (2019). An Open Letter to the Shambhala Community from Long-Serving Kusung at 16.2.2019, pg. 26 from Long-Serving Kusung at 16.2.2019, pg. 23, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W3fN12nEY-l0U2yejz3O4vcqaCMfusla/view?fbclid=IwAR0Qo3zbWkJ3E5wjPUhLoVwOJnKwZee_AAzA79kvgj9K6DcOfh5uU7p5pM0



“After my tour I fell into a serious crisis that lasted around two years. Hardly anyone from Shambhala talked to me during that period.”

in Morman, C., Leslie, L., Fitch, L., Ellerton, D., Canepa, A. (2019). *An Open Letter to the Shambhala Community from Long-Serving Kusung* at 16.2.2019, pg. 14

<https://doc-00-8k->

docs.googleusercontent.com/docs/securesc/ha0ro937gcuc7l7deffksulhg5h7mbp1/p3ia045hnomvntcp90aabakc7tgmeCAD/1550383200000/11467718404102075310/*/1W3fN12nEY-lOU2yejz3O4vcqaCMfusla?e=download



“In that moment something inside me died – my fight and my anger. Now, all I felt was sadness.”

in Morman, C., Leslie, L., Fitch, L., Ellerton, D., Canepa, A. (2019). *An Open Letter to the Shambhala Community from Long-Serving Kusung* at 16.2.2019, pg. 2.

https://doc-00-8k-docs.googleusercontent.com/docs/securesc/ha0ro937gcuc7l7deffksulhg5h7mbp1/p3ia045hnomvntcp90aabakc7tgmeCAD/1550383200000/11467718404102075310/*/1W3fN12nEY-lOU2yejz3O4vcqaCMfusla?e=download



"The joke is that a man who claims to be the ultimate protector abuses a woman under his protection."

in Morman, C., Leslie, L., Fitch, L., Ellerton, D., Canepa, A. (2019). *An Open Letter to the Shambhala Community from Long-Serving Kusung* at 16.2.2019, pg. 23

<https://doc-00-8k->

docs.googleusercontent.com/docs/securesc/ha0ro937gcuc7l7deffksulhg5h7mbp1/p3ia045hnomvntcp90aabakc7tgme cad/1550383200000/11467718404102075310/*/1W3fN12nEY-lOU2yejz3O4vcqaCMfusla?e=download



recent developments:

speaking the truth in hoping for cure:

"While we cannot undo the damage, hopefully we can speak to the truth of how his behavior has hurt many of his students. We seek to further validate those who have bravely named this pattern and who likely were subjected to gaslighting or minimization. We hope our personal statements will encourage others to speak and keep speaking."

in Morman, C., Leslie, L., Fitch, L., Ellerton, D., Canepa, A. (2019). *An Open Letter to the Shambala Community from Long-Serving Kusung* at 16.2.2019, pg. 2.

<https://doc-00-8k->

docs.googleusercontent.com/docs/securesc/ha0ro937gcuc7l7deffksulhg5h7mbp1/p3ia045hnomvntcp90aabakc7tgmeCAD/1550383200000/11467718404102075310/*/1W3fN12nEY-lOU2yejz3O4vcqaCMfusla?e=download



"Students who leave the sangha are often psychologically and emotionally traumatised and some have sought psychiatric treatment."

in <https://pathgatesurvivors.com/2018/12/18/uncovering-the-truth-about-pathgate-and-lama-dondrup-dorje/> date of retrieval: 15.1.2019

"We have observed at least two students who had lost their sanity during their time with Pathgate."

in <https://pathgatesurvivors.com/2018/12/18/uncovering-the-truth-about-pathgate-and-lama-dondrup-dorje/> date of retrieval: 15.1.2019

VI) mechanisms of damage and diagnostic range
case story



Case Story in the research data:



“I separated from my first guru (from the now-defunct Ratna-Shri Drikung Kagyu center in Berkeley, California) because he sexually violated my best friend. The lama chose her because she was mentally ill and had a history of abuse. He told her he could heal her trauma through sexual acts” [#1]



“I separated from another center and lama (Dzogchen/Nyingma) in Oregon because students were being worked to exhaustion, financially exploited, and discarded. They were told if their minds were pure, they would not need much sleep and their bodies would not get injured from backbreaking labor. People were told the world was ending and they should use their credit cards and savings to make donations because the merit they would get would be incalculable. This place was run like a cult. The teacher also was very controlling and made homophobic comments. I left as a result of the above problems [...] One of the students worked so much, she had a nervous breakdown and ended up in an institution. No one from the sangha visited her and they banned her from the center”
[#1]



“I withdrew slowly at first, then cut off all contact abruptly after several people came to me for help with the financial pressure they were under. they were being asked to get into debt they couldn't afford and I told them to take care of themselves and their families rather than give all their money away to the lama. word spread that I was sympathetic and I think my status as an ordained monastic helped people break away and also pissed off the lama, so I cut ties with all the true believers and I legally changed my name, moved, changed my phone number, etc. These people also threaten you with curses/bad karma, etc. and I didn't want them to scare my child” [#1]



“I practiced on my own [monk] for years after this until December of 2017 after I discovered that my best friend's child had been raped by the lama/tulku Shenpen Rinpoche, in addition to other children. I had been struggling with my faith for years prior to this and had repeatedly contacted the Dalai Lama's and other leaders to ask them what they were doing to prevent the rampant abuse of children in monasteries, but never received any reply. It's just like the Catholic Church. I could no longer represent an organization or faith that did this as a monk. I lost my faith in Buddhism completely after seeing that the historical Buddha subjected rape victims to interrogation and expulsion if their mindfulness during an assault was deemed insufficient” [#1]



“Some of these people are dangerous. The lama Shenpen who raped my friend's kid is connected to bad people. He sent thugs to harass a nun he screwed out of a lot of money.” [#1]

“I've notified [...] in France about Lama Shenpen Rinpoche's child abuse. He fled Slovenia to avoid charges there. The victim is going to make another formal complaint after he was pressured by the Lama's sangha to recant. This lama has abused many children, including a terminally ill child.” [#1]



“The Lama Shenpen my best friend was told to give her child to raise (because they were supposedly both tulkus) raped the kids he encountered for 'healing' sessions or otherwise abused them. I think it is wrong for someone in a position of spiritual or temporal power to fuck their students. Even 'consensual' sex is problematic in this context due to disparities of power, but a lot of the sexual contact is downright abusive and coercive. a lot is rape.” [#1]



Missing friendships due to subtle playing off group members against each other:

"[...] that no real friendships were possible there, always mistrust, competition - [...] played us all off against each other, very subtly."
"The action always originated from the Master [...], who could very subtly drop comments or force a wedge between people. One doesn't actually notice it because it often happens in the context of a relationship or a process / work with another person - I have reconstructed this afterwards."



levels of manipulation:

"Unfortunately, I often didn't know the truth. For example, when I wrote the speech to remove his robes and the entire presentation on the outside, I was called to Frankfurt to write everything, and nobody, not even anyone from the Sangha, who had been friends and had visited me [...] privately, told me that the reason Thay had given me (I want to take a new spiritual direction, adapted to Western society) [was incorrect]. For the actual reason, as I understood 1.5 years later, was that a legal investigation had been initiated against him."

from research data cited at <https://www.transtibmed.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/zeitzeugenberichte/index.html> 1.3



challenges in treatment based on

- 1) internalised concepts,
- 2) patterns of dissociation
- 3) alteration of personality and
- 4) chronification of disease



1. *myth Tibet* and personality change (adapting to stereotypes)
2. idealisation and resulting *double bind*
3. training the identification with the method of *guru yoga*
4. rationalising with *karma-purification*
5. introjects
6. dissociation
7. loosing trust in ones own perception (reframing ones own feelings and emotions by the group or master)
8. internalised elevation of individuals (perpetrators), even abusers of others, to the level of all-knowing masters
9. identification with the abuser
10. methods of systematic denigration and exploitation of women



complex situations even after leaving the group:

- lack of resources, because of having given all money and belongings to the group
- loss of friendships outside the group
- dynamics of being stalked, slandered and threatened after leaving
- some people change names to escape threats



from a psychological and psychotherapeutic perspective

- 1) loss of trust in others and in ones own perception
- 2) patterns of sterotyping (I am a Buddha, I am compassionate, the teacher is allknowing etc.)
- 3) habits of training dissociation (thinking it to be advanced meditation)
- 4) having trained for long to idealise the masters opinions and views
- 5) introjects of the perpetrator
- 6) having adoped to follow all demands of the perpetrator based on the concept of him purifying '*bad karma*'



challenges during psychotherapy:

1. loss of trust in one's own perception
2. loss of trust in others
3. possible personality distortion through identification processes
4. stereotyping and
5. introjects
6. internalised superelevation of the offender (from '*guru yoga*')



Thank you for your attention.