

Research Article

Buddhist Teachers’ Responses to Sexual Violence: Epistemological Violence in American Buddhism

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In 2018, popular North American Buddhist teacher, Noah Levine, was accused of sexual assault and misconduct. Several Buddhist teachers responded in Levine’s defense through a seemingly neutral posture of “waiting to find out” the truth. This paper examines these teachers’ responses, asking the question: “Which Buddhist concepts are mobilized in responding to alleged sexual violence?” I find that these teachers respond to allegations with the language of not-knowing, equanimity, and right speech. They ask their communities to “wait and see” whether these allegations are true, with the unspoken assumption that they are not. I assert these responses use Buddhist teachings to uphold cis-masculine innocence by using hegemonic logics and commitments to downplay and delegitimize the phenomenon of sexual violence. I argue that these responses uphold hegemonic control within Buddhist communities, and conclude that a feminist response to allegations of misconduct requires centering survivors of sexual assault.

Keywords: American Buddhism; Against the Stream; Noah Levine; #Metoo; Sexual Misconduct; Feminism; Gender and Sexuality; Anger

Sexual violence exists in American Buddhism. In 2020, several prominent American Buddhist teachers stand accused of sexual misconduct and assault. There are at least two central dynamics at play in addressing American Buddhism and sexual violence. First, there is the matter of sexual violence itself, which speaks to the violence Buddhist men have enacted against people in their lives. Second, there are discursive violences at work. What I mean by discursive here is that subtle forms of violence exist in moments when communities grapple with alleged Buddhist sexual violence. These violences occur when Buddhist teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, use the Buddhist teachings to create certain affective and regulating results within their communities. These Buddhist teachers’ offerings are discursively violent because they use Buddhist language to police individual reactions to alleged sexual violence and extend this judgment outward to create a

collective dismissal of harm within the broader community. While these two forms of violence are intimately connected, this paper will take up these latter discursive mechanisms.

Though many cases of alleged sexual violence exist, I analyze the case of Noah Levine. Levine is the founder of the meditation community, “Against the Stream Meditation Buddhist Society”; the for-profit treatment center in Los Angeles, “Refuge Recovery Treatment Centers”; and the non-profit, “Refuge Recovery.” In March 2018, Lion’s Roar and Against the Stream publicized an independent investigation into Levine’s behavior, examining allegations of “sexual misconduct” (Meade Sperry & Atwood, 2018). In this time, Levine was suspended from teaching at Against the Stream and the Los Angeles Police Department opened an investigation “involving multiple Victims” (Merlan, 2018b). Levine was ultimately accused of sexual assault and misconduct by six women (Merlan, 2018b).

This paper asks about the mobilization of Buddhist teachings in response to alleged Buddhist sexual violence. I ask: Which Buddhist concepts are most often mobilized in responding to alleged sexual violence? Why do teachers in American Buddhist communities respond to alleged sexual violence and misconduct with the language of “not-knowing”? In what ways do race and gender inform teacher responses to alleged sexual violence? Asking these questions, I paint a complex picture of how Buddhist philosophy and hegemony converge to impede grappings with alleged sexual violence in American Buddhism. I draw from Antonio Gramsci, who conceptualized cultural hegemony as the maintenance of social power not by physical control but through the enforcement of dominant thoughts and ideas (Lull, 1995). In this way, I examine how the reinforcement of masculine structures and commitments permeate Buddhist teachers’ responses, uplifting Levine and dismissing non-hegemonic epistemologies.

I begin with a brief overview of sexual abuse within American Buddhism, contextualizing the larger phenomenon of sexual violence enacted by prominent Buddhist teachers. Second, I situate my research within broader American Buddhist scholarship on sexual violence. Third, I analyze three Buddhist teachers’ responses to alleged sexual violence by Levine. In my analysis, I argue these Buddhist teachers respond most often by combining Buddhist concepts of not-knowing mind, non-duality, and right speech with secular concepts of anonymity, evolutionary psychology, and law and due process. I contend that a central function of Buddhist teachers’ responses is to reinforce hegemony within this American Buddhist community.

A Brief History of Sexual Abuse in American Buddhism

The communities outlined here are mostly white convert groups founded in the mid-1960s and 1970s. Scholars Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010), Chenxing Han (2019), and Ann Gleig (2019) demonstrate that American Buddhism tends to reinforce divides between “convert Buddhists” who practice meditation and “ethnic Buddhists” who practice ritualized forms of Asian Buddhism. In this way, a racialized, hierarchal, and false division is formed between Buddhism that is forward, convert, and real (white) and Buddhism that is backward, “ethnic,” and past (Asian). Demographically, the communities outlined below have been mostly composed of white, upper-middle-class members with a primary focus on meditation practice—what have been called meditation-based convert communities (Gleig, 2019).

In this section, I explore several cases of sexual violence committed by prominent teachers in contemporary meditation-based convert American Buddhism. A history of sexual misconduct exists in Shambhala International. Andrea Winn's Buddhist Project Sunshine report details accounts of rape and sexual assault by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche (Winn, 2018). Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche had "sexual relations with a number of his female disciples" (Bell, 2002: 233). Ösel Tendzin had sex with his students and spread HIV to young men in his order (Kane, 1994). In Tibetan Buddhist communities, Lama Norlha Rinpoche committed decades of sexual misconduct (Deveaux, 2017) and Sogyal Rinpoche was accused of serious physical, sexual, and psychological abuse by members of his community (Greenblatt, 2018).

Sexual abuse has also occurred in Zen Buddhism. Zen teacher Eido Shimano committed fifty years of emotional and sexual abuse against young women in New York (Oppenheimer, 2014). Bell (2002) outlines sexual abuse by San Francisco Zen teacher Robert Baker Roshi in the 1980s. Butler (1990) names abuse at the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1983 and abuse by Soen Sa Nim at the Kwan Um Zen School in Rhode Island.

The current case study analyzes alleged sexual violence by Insight Meditation teacher, Noah Levine. In this study, I will offer a distinct intersectional feminist analysis by considering how Buddhist teachings can be deployed to fortify masculine control. I examine Buddhist teachers' responses to alleged sexual violence articulated soon after public accusations against Levine. As a feminist and anti-racist scholar, I believe it is crucial to understand how Buddhist teachers first choose to respond to alleged sexual violence, for these initial accounts may signify particular epistemological positions. By analyzing these positions, I believe we can comprehend essential dynamics of power present in American Buddhist responses to alleged sexual violence.

Situating the Research

There have been several essential contributions to the field of sexual violence in American Buddhism. Butler (1990) examines Shambhala International and argues that there exist "Patterns of denial, shame[,] secrecy and invasiveness reminiscent of alcoholic and incestuous families." Butler notes that members who rejected the drinking and sexual culture were ostracized by the larger community. Butler argues silencing dissent within the community was crucial, explaining "a tendency[,] once scandals are uncovered, to either scapegoat the disgraced teachers or blindly deny that anything has changed" (Butler, 1990). Bell (2002: 233) notes that "inner circles" close to organizational leadership functioned to silence claims of sexual abuse. Ultimately, these scholars demonstrate a history of silencing and denial in American Buddhist grapplings with sexual violence.

In their current research project, Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg examine "how practitioners are responding to these cases [of sexual abuse] and the wider impact they are having on the tradition" (Gleig, 2020). They identify a number of interpretative frameworks advanced to interpret sexual abuse and misconduct in American Buddhism. Most relevant for my purposes here are what they call a "Buddhist defense' perspective in which abuse is denied, teachers are defended through canonical doctrines, and victims are dismissed as misunderstanding their actions" and a "feminist analysis that sees structural patriarchy and sexism as core to understanding the violations" (Gleig, 2020).

Building on this scholarship, I hope to provide a framework for understanding Buddhist responses to alleged sexual violence, particularly by illustrating how affects can be mobilized to uphold power. I place my inquiries largely in the footsteps of feminist theorist Sara Ahmed. Ahmed analyzes the ways universities respond to complaints of sexual harassment. She argues that, amidst complaints of sexual harassment, people in positions of power are protected from responsibility while the complaint is lodged against abused and often subjugated individuals (Ahmed, 2017). The complainant is made into the problem for bringing up a complaint, and the matter of the complaint itself is not addressed. In the case at hand, I conceptualize how Buddhist responses can function to dismiss claims of sexual violence and turn critiques against those bodies making claims of, or beliefs in, injury.

I am interested in the Buddhist teachings as “objects.” Ahmed (2018) explains that while an object may have one intended use, this is not its only application. For example, a door may exist in order to let people in and out freely, but it could also be used to hold someone in or keep someone out by keeping them from leaving or entering through force; in this context, after complaining of violence, one is retaliated against and never let back in (to study or teach) (Ahmed, 2018). Simply, “intentions do not exhaust possibilities” (Ahmed, 2018). In the case of Levine, I am probing how the Buddhist teachings can function like a door, shutting certain practitioners out and inviting hegemonic discourses in, using the teachings to uphold patriarchal power.¹

Buddhist Teachers’ Responses to Alleged Sexual Violence in the Case of Noah Levine

Across the Against the Stream community, there were a number of different responses to the allegations made against Noah Levine. One common response by Buddhist teachers was to encourage practitioners to maintain a “don’t-know mind.” This Buddhist use of “don’t-know mind” has the effect of creating a “right” or “wrong” practice of Buddhism, a discourse that serves the ultimate purpose of protecting Levine’s innocence and dismissing non-hegemonic positions.

Within an American Buddhist context, “don’t-know mind” draws from the Soto Zen teaching of beginner’s, or *bodhi*, mind. Beginner’s mind is often associated with the teachings of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who translated the Japanese term *Shoshin* as beginner’s mind and instructed students to maintain an open and pure mind unburdened by dualities (Suzuki, 1970). Eun-hwa Jang (2014) points to the influence of the Korean Soen Zen master Seung Sahn, who argued don’t-know mind requires cutting off all discursive thoughts and maintaining awareness of the present moment. Quoting Sahn, “[D]on’t know mind is no thinking and no thinking means empty mind. Empty mind is before thinking” (Jang, 2014: 32). Don’t-know mind thus stems from the invitation to have an open and clear mind—a mind without thought and thereby without delusion.

Zen teacher Domyo Burk (2017) believes not-knowing mind is not meant to deny harm or to encourage someone to remain in a state of ignorance; rather, it is a “tool or medicine we apply when

¹ Ahmed utilizes an intersectional approach that explores how both gender and race dynamics function in sexual harassment cases. However, not knowing the racial identities of the women allegedly assaulted by Levine makes it more difficult to theorize the functioning of race in these cases. For readers interested in intersections of gender and race see the work on misogynoir by Bailey 2018.

we're getting attached to our own opinions, caught in judgment or hatred, stressed, or overwhelmed." Burk warns that "Don't-know mind can be easily twisted into a near-enemy—refusing to take a stand even when the situation calls for it" (Burk, 2017). Within some American Buddhist circles, the use of don't-know mind can create a situation where communities can deny the existence of violence and justify that as openness of mind. As Bee Scherer explains, this application of not-knowing mind "in the face of abuse constitutes a particular perfidious form of spiritual bypassing."² Coined by John Welwood (2002), "spiritual bypassing" means to use "spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional 'unfinished business,' to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks" (Welwood, 2002). In this way, don't-know mind can be invoked in order to overlook or deny certain realities, using the Buddhist teachings to support truncated processes and, in my argument, hegemonic logics.

Josh Korda became a close friend of Levine after meeting him in 2001 and took over his position as guiding teacher at Dharma Punx NYC (Gleig, 2016). In April 2018, just weeks after accusations against Levine were made public, Korda delivered a dharma talk to practitioners, titled "I Just Don't Know What to Make of it and That's OK" (Korda, 2018). Korda conceptualized this lecture as "an opportunity to give a helpful talk about how do we stay with the not known, not jump to conclusions, and keep an open mind" (Abrahams, 2018). Though Korda tries to operate from a neutral place of "not-knowing," I argue Korda's response is grounded not in an open and inconclusive mind but one informed by certain knowing, gendered, and hegemonic commitments.

By the time of Korda's talk, Levine admitted to being accused of "non-consensual" behavior (Meade Sperry & Atwood, 2018). According to *Against the Stream*, Levine was accused of multiple "reports" of sexual misconduct (Meade Sperry & Atwood, 2018). Even with this limited though substantive knowledge, Korda believes there is nothing solid to be known. He states, "There's no information to interpret yet. None. The only thing there is a vague report about third-party allegations and that's all anybody knows" (Korda, 2018). Here, Korda equates limited knowledge with nothingness ("No information" and "none") and third-party accusations with that which is limited and thereby partly empty, the former characteristic encapsulating "something that is nonexistent" ([dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) n.d., nothingness entry) and the latter signifying that which "contain[s] nothing" ([dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) n.d., emptiness entry). Rather than "no information to interpret yet. None" signifying a factual truth about these accusations, this articulation reveals an epistemological foreclosure toward gendered harm and a privileging of dominant, masculine epistemologies.

Korda effectively silences those members of his meditation community who believe Levine committed acts of alleged sexual misconduct. Korda characterizes practitioners who maintain a sense of judgment against Levine as "extremist." He states,

[T]he same day that the charges were made public I went onto various social media sites and there were already a predominance of extremist takes. Some people were essentially, 'Well, he must be guilty.' And then there were others who said, 'Well, this is some kind of witch hunt.' And I think both of those views are needless right now. A

² Personal Correspondence email dated February 23, 2020.

much smarter view is to in no way condemn without any information [from] either parties at all. And just to try to withhold any judgment (Korda, 2018).

This Buddhist response contrasts calm and non-judgment against a more deeply charged affective response and decisive centering of alleged sexual violence. Korda here marks “knowing” positions as incorrectly judgmental and certain. Korda, however, fails to account for his own position, which views accusations as “nothing” and beliefs in alleged sexual violence as “needless” and empty of knowledge. In this position of authority, Korda’s “neutral” account, which “withhold[s] any judgment” (Korda, 2018), exists as the right and properly “not-knowing” Buddhist response. This position is said to “withhold any judgment” while it itself is possibly infused with judgment. That Korda characterizes accusations as empty of content is meaningful amidst a terrain of alleged misconduct. Korda’s own “non-judgmental” position, not accounted for, becomes both invisible, normalized, privileged, and right. We must ask why the view that Levine “must be guilty” is labeled “extreme” and understand which Buddhist and otherwise hegemonic logics inform this position.

Buddhist invocations of “extremes” are directly related to the Buddhist concept of *non-duality*. Grounded in Mahayana Buddhism, non-duality ultimately represents the empty and interconnected nature of all phenomena. Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna developed the central concept *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), which captures the idea that phenomena do not hold a solid core, both existing and not in the relational and absolute spheres (Westerhoff, 2019). Non-duality thus connects to the fundamental idea that phenomena are “not two” (existing as fundamentally separate) and “not one” (existing as the same solid unit) but that all phenomena are both empty and interconnected in their existence (Suzuki, 1975).

Korda uses non-duality to subjugate non-hegemonic forms of knowing. To a group of practitioners in the aftermath of Levine’s suspension, Korda states, “Seeking certainties of views and opinions...is almost invariably unskillful” (Korda, 2018). He adds, “We interpret and fill in the blanks with very simple ‘yes’ ‘no’ ideas—‘guilty’ ‘innocent’— ‘good’ ‘bad’... The need to encapsulate—to be able to have a view that’s a very quick soundbite is also very much wired in” (Korda, 2018). Relying on human psychology and the mechanisms of our left hemisphere to make these claims, Korda then turns to the Buddha’s insights: “The Buddha said...to his son Rahula that it was one of the most important practices from the very beginning of one’s spiritual life to not constantly try to reduce other people or experiences into ‘good or bad,’ ‘right or wrong,’ ‘likeable or unlikable’—to be willing to hold off the snap judgments, as it were” (Korda, 2018). Korda is making a claim: the enlightened, skillful, Buddhist response to counter the natural workings of the brain is to refrain from dualities. Within a context of gendered misconducts, this non-dual, non-judgmental, non-gendered, and neutral approach to alleged sexual violence takes attention away from alleged gendered misconducts and toward an apolitical and de-gendered Buddhism. This apolitical, non-gendered response reinforces power and undermines allegations of sexual violence. Korda’s framework functions to uplift not-knowing claims and dismiss knowing determinations of alleged sexual violence. This Buddhist approach provides little space for practitioners to strongly articulate beliefs in alleged sexual violence.

We should question Buddhist approaches to alleged sexual violence that fail to believe accusations from the start. First, on a basic yet profound level, we must understand the commonness of sexual violence. In the United States, approximately one in five cisgender women are raped at some point in their life (Smith et al., 2018). 47% of transgender people have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime (James et al., 2019). 734,630 people were raped in 2018 (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). While self-reports of rape increased from 2017–2018, only 25% of these rapes were reported to police (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). According to RAINN, “That means about 3 out of 4 go unreported” (RAINN). While sexual assault allegations are commonly believed to be false, this is untrue. Psychologists David Lisak et al. (2010) found that only two to ten percent of sexual violence cases were false allegations. Lastly, an idea persists that sexual violence only occurs when determined by the courts. Courts, however, actively belittle rape survivors. V.L. Seek (2018) explains that each legal question lodged against a survivor is meant to dismiss her claim of legitimacy. Buddhist refusals to actively believe allegations of sexual assault and their reliance on the criminal justice system are meaningful amidst a clear landscape of sexual violence in this country.

Buddhist teachers' responses that privilege neutrality and non-judgment exist in opposition to practitioners who declare “knowing” and firm beliefs in alleged sexual violence. As Korda states, “People took an extreme opposite, which was that Noah was wrong to even deny the allegations, that even that was unskillful in taking away a woman’s voice. But the vast majority was somewhere in between; they were very calm and basically just saying this really hurts” (Abrahams, 2018). Considering which affects mark the middle and which epistemologies undergird this so-called extreme is central here. This middle response is marked by the presumption of neutrality, describing a calm yet hurt response that lacks charge, anger, or strong feeling. According to this logic, the Buddhist practitioner should aim for the proper “middle.” As such, the person charged in their emotions is missing the correct affective target. Practitioners who exist on one side of the “extreme,” believing Levine committed alleged sexual misconduct, are wrongly and prematurely presuming guilt, charged in their emotions, and disembodied from their pain.

Korda’s language of “calm,” “staying in the middle,” and “refraining from extremes” connects with the canonical Buddhist concept, *equanimity*. *Equanimity* is one of the “four divine abodes,” or the “Brahmavihāras.” Drawn from the Pali canon and central to Theravadan Buddhism, equanimity exists in relationship with the three other abodes, which includes “sympathetic joy” (*mudita*), “compassion” (*karuna*), and “loving-kindness” (*metta*). Gil Fronsdal offers two Pali translations of equanimity. The first is *Upekkha*, which Fronsdal translates as “to look over” and which involves “the power of observation—the ability to see without being caught by what we see” (Fronsdal, 2005). *Tatramajjhata*, the second translation, means “to stand in the middle of this,” and refers to a sense of being centered (Fronsdal, 2005). Fronsdal warns that although equanimity can allow for balance, it can also feed “indifference, aloofness, rigidity, or complacency” (Fronsdal, 2005). In the case of Levine, I believe Buddhist teachers equate “calm” with “the middle.” This equivalency uplifts calm as the correct affective response and otherizes affects that may also see clearly, and perhaps with greater precision, dynamics of alleged gender injustice.

When teachers invoke the other Brahnavihāras, including offering loving-kindness to Levine (Savage, 2018), this opens a window to understand how the Brahnavihāras can serve hegemonic aims. The purpose of these equanimous Buddhist rhetorics is clear: “I don’t think that we should allow ourselves again to jump to the worst conclusion” (Korda, 2018). In my reading, “the worst conclusion” means Levine allegedly raped or sexually assaulted a person. There are two interconnected reasons practitioners are told not to presume the worst. First, “the worst conclusion” is invoked as part of a theological response that asks practitioners to refrain from dualities. Korda equates “the worst conclusion” with an “extreme” conclusion, framing those existing on the extremes as actively wanting to be “in the know” (Korda, 2018). This Buddhist response is not only doctrinal but also political and hegemonic. This response to alleged sexual violence, while grounded in a non-dualistic Buddhist framework, silences dissenting, marginalized voices and represents a troubling epistemology vis-a-vis alleged sexual assault. Korda’s declaration that one does not “have anything to add to a conversation” (Korda, 2018) keeps a person from adding to the conversation. This position swallows dissent and voice, rather than proliferating it. It equates Buddhist practice with silence and equates knowing with wrongness. Under this framework, there is limited space for a practitioner to believe accusations of sexual violence against Levine and have this position fall within a wise and so-called appropriately Buddhist response.

While Korda’s response represents calm and neutrality, responses with strong affects and firm belief in guilt are deemed outside of and counter to the “correct” Buddhist framework. This Buddhist invocation gaslights the community by covertly marking practitioners who assume violence by Levine as wrong. I use “gaslight” to mean the psychological and social manipulation of subjects. Gaslighting can be a way of exerting power over and against a marginalized individual, especially when those logics disrupt hegemonic and non-dominant positions (Sweet, 2019). I argue the Buddhist teachings can be deployed to covertly manipulate and silence non-dominant Buddhist positions.

The stigmatizing and shaming of anger and affects could be the intended effect of a theological response. Rather than anger and judgment existing as a force of truth and confrontation of injustice, it is often read as trouble necessitating annihilation. As Alice A. Keefe (2019: 68) writes, “This definition of anger can create considerable stigma and shame around the experience of anger, with the consequence that anger is feared, avoided, and repressed. Further, this exclusive focus dampens and derails the passion required for engagement with the problems of injustice and violence found in the larger arenas of our social and political lives.” By stigmatizing anger and other strong affects, organizations leave no place for claims of angry injustice. As Ahmed (2010) argues, organizational spaces are not often neutral but are instead charged with tension and closure towards racialized and gendered claims of violence. Keefe (2019) argues spiritual teachings can be used to demonize people and their anger rather than to create space for the anger to exist. This affective approach can fill an individual with shame and create a structure without a space to have claims of violence heard, acknowledged, and tended to. An over-reliance on restraining anger is a form of making that anger invisible and eradicating it from an interpersonal or structural space. Such discursive, doctrinal, and affective dismissal is central to the current case study.

In tandem with Buddhist regulations of affect, rhetorics of evolutionary psychology and right speech function to dissuade practitioners from believing accounts of alleged sexual assault against Levine. Ultimately, these “neutral” rhetorics support the uplifting and protection of Levine and demean individuals who believe accusations of sexual violence against him. Korda invokes the psychological concepts of “cognitive dread,” “rumor,” and “catastrophizing” to explain practitioner responses to allegations of sexual misconduct. In explicating “cognitive dread,” Korda introduces the work of Dr. Giles Story. He states, “Waiting for information [is] more painful than getting bad news... expecting an emotional event is an emotional event in and of itself” (Korda, 2018). In other words, the act of waiting for bad news can be as painful and taxing as the event itself.

Korda claims catastrophizing is an evolutionary, general human response whereby “in the absence of information many of us will fill in the blanks with the worse case scenario...It’s something like this: it’s always safer to assume the worst” (Korda, 2018). What this reading does not account for is that many individuals assume the worst because the worst has already happened. The worst was their reality. In my reading, Korda’s statements reveal his own white masculine positionality, where readings of violence are viewed as products of the mind rather than a close, embodied experience. As opposed to Korda’s generalized “human” reading, for survivors, catastrophizing is often not built out of a generalized “negativity bias” but out of the real-life experiences of sexual violence that have forged a person’s present moment (Brotto, 2018). Korda’s statement signifies a lack of conceptualization of survivors and a de-gendering of Levine’s alleged violence. He offers his dharmic response within a discourse of a generalized human phenomenon rather than accounting for or naming women and non-binary people as groups most intimately affected by, and most aware of, the forms of alleged violence at stake. Naming someone as “catastrophizing” or engaging in “cognitive dread” solidifies dynamics of power, covertly dismissing complaints of and beliefs in alleged sexual violence.

One of the discourses that arises in response to allegations of sexual violence against Levine is “right speech,” grounded in the invitation to refrain from gossip. Right speech is part of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is intimately connected with the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. The third component of the Eightfold Path, right speech, is often associated with practicing gentle and truthful speech. Abstaining from slanderous speech “can also be referred to as communication of false statements which is injurious to a person’s reputation” (Sharda, 2019: 34). Often, notions of right speech include knowing what is true, refraining from harming a person’s character, and abstaining from speech that knows that which cannot be known. In this way, right speech and not-knowing mind intersect. In the case of Levine, practitioners who believe accusations of sexual violence are judged for doing so and are demeaned using Buddhist philosophies based in abstaining from false speech, slanderous speech, and idle chatter.

Sallie B. King (2017) troubles normative understandings of right speech. King notes that while the Buddha often encourages kind and gentle speech, speech that is “always pleasant and not unpleasant,” the Buddha “does not always or uniformly encourage this normative gentle and pleasant speech” (King, 2017: 350). When a situation warrants it, one can and should receive “dispraise” (King, 2017: 351). Gentle speech can matter less than maintaining truth and safety. As

King writes, “If a principle such as truth telling comes in conflict with the principle of preventing harm, the latter prevails. Similarly, if the principle of gentle speech comes in conflict with preventing harm, the latter prevails” (King, 2017: 354). Overall, right speech may not be a uniform rule or code of conduct but a discerning process of speaking out against forms of harm. When Buddhist teachers turn to discourses of gossip and right speech, it must be understood that what is slanderous speech to one in a position of power may be truthful speech to one in a marginalized position. What may be gossip to a hegemonic actor may be the awareness of and belief in gendered suffering by a surviving body.

Korda’s generalized readings of the human body and responses to alleged sexual violence are expressed through the invocation of rumor and gossip. Korda articulates that “All of human speech and socializing...is grounded on gossip. Gossip was the first form of human speech” (Korda, 2018). Korda provides an example of this phenomenon, creating a fictional conversation between two people who discuss an accusation of sexual misconduct. The first person states, “Well, I sort of kind of felt something uncomfortable about that guy.” In response, “Yeah! Yeah! Let me jump in here!” He finishes with his own thought: “Very often...we don’t feel in the middle...and it’s much easier to start developing opinions and views” (Korda, 2018). Gossip assumes speech which is unskillfully exerted and spreads falsehoods. Gossip assumes speaking of matters unconfirmed and likely untrue. From this Buddhist reading, these individuals are not practicing right speech, but idle chatter. Korda’s invocation of gossip amidst allegations of sexual misconduct is telling, for it positions speech addressing possible violations by Levine as unskillful and likely false—speech, ultimately, that a Buddhist should not articulate.

Korda’s conceptualization of cognitive dread and catastrophizing presents a patriarchal reading. Catastrophizing, assuming the worst, and cognitive dread can be re-conceptualized as tools of discernment. Assuming the worst—as in, to assume Levine committed alleged sexual assault or rape—is not an unskillful assumption when sexual violence is a norm and not an aberration. I contend epistemology and power undergird these Buddhist conceptualizations of alleged sexual violence.

Finally, Korda claims Noah Levine asked for a Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD] investigation into his own alleged conduct. Importantly, we do not know if this assertion that Levine requested an investigation is true, but I would still like to examine the implications of Korda’s statement. In an online comment in response to a *Tricycle* article, Korda writes, “That you’ve jumped to the conclusion that Noah is a ‘perp’—which is police state lingo for ‘the perpetrator of a crime’—indicates you have no interest in due process. Furthermore, when the facts emerge you may well find out that Noah requested the police to investigate to establish whether or not any ‘crime’ happened...Any form of neutral inquiry wouldn’t be of interest” (Korda, 2018). Although Korda’s comment meant to illustrate Levine’s integrity and innocence, it instead demonstrates the white masculine hegemonic workings of the law and the uplift and innocence of the white male subject. Korda is angry that this anonymous poster blankly names Levine as a perpetrator of alleged sexual violence. He invokes the language of due process in order to demonstrate that this anonymous poster has no interest in justice, patience, or non-judgment. Importantly, Korda places both the words “perp” and “crime” in quotation marks, minimizing their importance and signifying the seeming

emptiness of any so-called charges. This likely serves to reinforce Levine's good nature. Why would Levine ask for an investigation if he had anything to hide? Overall, Korda's declaration that Levine wished for an LAPD investigation in order "to establish whether or not any 'crime' happened" (Korda, 2018), whether true or not, may not be an illustration of good will or openness but instead could be read as a recognition of the truth of the US legal system, specifically the ways it serves to uplift and protect the white masculine subject. Korda's invocation of "don't-know mind" and his reliance on the "neutral inquiry" of the US legal system demonstrates the important coalition of Buddhist thought with hegemonic control.

Overall, Korda positions himself and the dharma as non-judgmental, neutral, and not knowing in a way that elevates his position to skillful, fair, and unbiased. As I argue here, while Korda's position is framed as open and non-judgmental, it can be read as covertly hegemonic, judgmental, and biased. These Buddhist invocations are hegemonic because they name the believing of survivors, without reservation, as an extremist and judgmental take that is, essentially, unenlightened and anti-dharmic. The use of don't-know mind and refraining from judgment serves a patriarchal function that denigrates non-hegemonic epistemologies and marginalized positions. As Korda states at the end of a Buddhist publication: "There has to be some way . . . that we do not in any way doubt the people who have the courage to come out and express their experience, and at the same time, not immediately rush to judgement" (Abrahams, 2018). One must ask, however, how one can truly honor the courage of a person coming forward with experiences of misconduct and at the same time state that we should not immediately rush to judgment. Can these two phenomena co-exist? Ultimately, I argue they cannot because the call to "not immediately rush to judgment" is grounded in a patriarchal framework preceding the reading of said accusations. Meaning, an accusation cannot be read openly, without judgment, and with full belief, if the framework was always already one wishing to withhold judgment for the life, career, and friendship of Levine. Overall, this "neutral" and "unbiased" dharma upholds hegemonic power.

Following Korda, a second Buddhist response warrants analysis. Connected to Korda's invocation of law and due process are remarks from Buddhist teacher, Rachael Savage. Savage, co-founder of "Rebel Saints Meditation Society Seattle," relies on the criminal justice system to defend Levine's innocence. While other meditation centers like Spirit Rock Meditation Center suspended Levine from teaching, Savage openly welcomed him. In her piece, "Why I still stand with Noah Levine!" (2018), Savage equates Buddhist practice with "due process." Savage notes that when she stands with Levine, "I am saying I stand for the principals of due process for all. I am also saying I stand by the principles of my Buddhist practice. I believe they are one and the same" (Savage, 2018). Due process is understood as Buddhist practice through the embodiment of non-reactivity, impartiality, and restraint. In essence, we "wait and see" what the justice system concludes and, until then, practice non-judgment. Savage writes, "In fairness, we wait. Not rushing to judgement or punishment, but treating the accused as innocent until proven guilty — treating those accused in the same way we did in our personal and business relationships the day before the allegations were made" (Savage, 2018). While Savage encourages people to wait for legal determination before applying judgment of guilt, she articulates her own "knowing" position, namely that allegations of

sexual assault alone cannot be believed. This not-knowingness presumes “neutrality” and lack of judgment.

How do we know Savage’s comments demonstrate foreclosure toward accusations of sexual violence? Savage’s comments come well after public and detailed reports of alleged sexual assault and rape committed by Levine (Merlan, 2018b). Still, she labels beliefs in violence “character assassination[s]” and a “witch hunt” that ruined Levine’s life (Savage, 2018). As she explains, “Online mobbing, vigilantism, blacklisting, character assassination, gossip, rumor, and speculation fuel witch hunts that ruin lives and livelihood based on accusations alone” (Savage, 2018). This mobilization of Buddhist thought reinforces white masculine hegemony, returning us to the question of epistemology by considering whose voices, and through which processes, survivors are believed. The investigation commissioned by Against the Stream allowed Levine to respond while also centering women and witnesses who knew both parties (Merlan, 2018b). Savage reads this process as biased and unBuddhist. She explains, “Instead of leading the Sangha with wise Buddhist practices and encouraging the observation of due process, they reacted...They made the worst of it. They hired a private investigator instead of relying on the independent justice system” (Savage, 2018). If a teacher does not want their sangha to assume Levine’s guilt, they will use the Buddhist teachings to fight processes that speak other epistemological truths, making it dharmically unacceptable—scripturally wrong and unawakened—to proclaim alleged gendered injustices.

A final response comes from popular white Zen Buddhist teacher Brad Warner, who often articulates a seemingly apolitical and race- and gender-blind hermeneutics of Buddhism.³ In a Facebook comment in response to allegations against Levine, Warner writes, “It’s hard to have sympathy for anonymous people with stories that have no detail at all. If someone were to tell me their direct experience, I’d be sympathetic.” Warner reiterates this point months later, in September 2018, stating “I keep getting accused of being unsympathetic to the folks harmed by Noah Levine. But it’s hard to be sympathetic to anonymous people and to stories that are so vague they could be just about anything. I can’t find much in there to be sympathetic to” (Warner, 2018). Meaningfully, by August, there were already several public accounts of Levine’s alleged misconduct, including a detailed allegation of sexual assault (Merlan, 2018a). In my reading, Warner’s narrative reflects an active desire to not believe. When an accusation of sexual assault exists, it is not named or interpreted as assault. Rather, an account, whether vague or specific, is named as “so vague they could be just about anything” (Warner, 2018). Information about alleged sexual misconduct and assault existed from early days, but the interpretation from Warner was always already one of not believing—always already one of naming anonymity as a reason to not believe.

Warner goes further than to name accusations of sexual misconduct as not believable. He claims these accounts exist, instead, for “titillation” (Warner, 2019a). In his blog published January 2019, Warner writes, “The lurid tales I’ve seen about Noah on the Interwebs sound like Victorian pornography to me. They supposedly detail the horrid misdeeds of a most wicked man. Yet I wonder

³ See Warner’s blog posts, “Is American Buddhism Really ‘Too White?’” (2019b) and “What You Don’t Speak Out Against You Co-Sign?” (2019c)

how much of their appeal is pure titillation” (Warner, 2019a). Instead of approaching these women’s accounts as evidence of Levine’s alleged sexual misconduct, these accounts are read as pornographic and, per the definition of “lurid,” arousing. In Warner’s formulation, Levine is not a wicked man because he has allegedly done wicked things. He is a wicked man because he is *made into* a wicked man through unjust, unfair, political processes. Warner’s comments illustrate the ways Buddhist teachers respond to accusations of sexual violence with the clear desire to avoid believing them. This response ultimately serves to dismiss and demean gendered complaints of alleged sexual violence.

Overall, the invocation of not-knowing mind, non-duality, equanimity, right speech, due process, and anonymity reinforce dynamics of power. They limit the space to believe without guilt that alleged sexual violence and harm took place. These discourses place the naming of alleged gendered injustices as antithetical to Buddhist practice and as a failure of the awakened mind. They are framed, in essence, as unwise, unskillful, and judgmental. The voices, embodiments, and perspectives of non-hegemonic actors are doubted, foreclosed, and demeaned. They are demeaned as such because these dharmic readings serve the purpose, whether intentional or not, of protecting a man’s innocence. Stated neutrally, these Buddhist teachings are not neutral. These teachings are gendered for the ways they maintain masculine control and place doubt, uncertainty, and failure onto the voices and positions of less powerful others. Based in a dominant epistemology that serves to uplift hegemonic actors, these Buddhist teachers’ responses ultimately limit Buddhist declarations of guilt against Levine.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue don’t-know mind, right speech, non-duality, equanimity, law and due process, and evolutionary psychology foreground Buddhist teachers’ responses to alleged sexual violence. Affects are central to these Buddhist mobilizations of the Buddhist teachings. “Knowing” positions, particularly those grounded in anger or upset, are deemed less skillful and enlightened than practitioner responses based in a sense of calm and not knowing. Through these responses, Levine’s position is uplifted and centered while firm beliefs in alleged sexual violence are dismissed.

In this analysis, I outline three Buddhist teachers’ responses to alleged sexual violence. These responses offer important overlaps and departures. While Korda and Savage’s comments depend on the Buddhist teachings to respond to accusations of sexual violence against Levine, Warner offers a more overtly gendered response not grounded in the language of Buddhism. While Savage and Warner articulate a starker dismissal of accusations of sexual violence against Levine, Korda positions himself as neutral and not-knowing. Savage and Warner seem less interested in appearing neutral, and more interested in defending Levine and demeaning survivor positions. While these accounts differ, both in tone and substance, I believe they overwhelmingly overlap in their otherizing of non-hegemonic epistemologies. I believe each response, while different, is delivered with a similar epistemology which views complaints of alleged sexual violence as not believable on their own and through a hegemonic lens that privileges the masculine subject.

In reflecting on these responses, one might ask “Are these teachers intentionally mobilizing and weaponizing Buddhist concepts to protect Levine? Or are the concepts themselves intrinsically

limited in responding to alleged sexual violence?” The answer is complex. On the one hand, I do believe there is an intentional use of dharma to respond to cases of alleged sexual violence. While teachers might be genuine in invoking such concepts as “don’t-know mind,” I find the use of dharma corresponds with certain hegemonic aims. Buddhist teachings are always articulated in specific historic and sociocultural contexts which are marked by gendered and racialized power dynamics. What I argue here is that in the context of alleged gendered violence and widespread alleged sexual abuse these teachings are invoked in violent ways. They are invoked in ways that reinforce hegemonic control and dismiss claims of gendered violence. This goal to protect Levine’s innocence and dismiss complaints of and beliefs in alleged sexual violence drives forth Buddhist invocations of the dharma, thus reinforcing dynamics of power.

Overall, this paper raises continued questions for American Buddhist communities. At a time when lineage holders across the United States are accused of rape and sexual violence, Buddhist scholars may ask the following questions: Do Buddhist teachers believe survivors from the beginning or do they encourage a “wait and see” approach? Do any of the teachers who encourage a “wait and see” approach know about these accusations prior to public knowledge? How do institutions facilitate sexual violence? What are the specific experiences of sexual violence faced by trans, queer, and practitioners and teachers of color? In relation to this question, do the methods of dismissal offered in this paper echo responses to trans and racial exclusions in American Buddhist communities? (Hase, Meadows, & Budge, 2019). And finally, how do the Buddhist teachings continue to be invoked in response to cases of American Buddhist sexual violence?

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