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Symposium: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

Editors' Introduction: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

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The "Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium on Sexual Violence in Buddhism: Centering Survivor Voices," held at Northwestern University in October 2024, was the first ever academic conference on Buddhism and sexual abuse. The outcome of collaborations between Buddhist Studies scholars and survivors of sexual violence in Buddhist communities, it brought academia and advocacy together in a respectful and open conversation. Given that Buddhist abuse is a global problem and must be understood within local socio-cultural contexts, the organizers prioritized the inclusion of international voices as well as those of survivors. Sexual abuse has devastating consequences for its victims, with collateral damage to its communities. For the most part, Buddhist Studies has failed to acknowledge it as a structural problem, an aspect of Buddhist history, institutions, and even doctrines, and one that is deserving of scholarly attention. We offer this special focus section primarily as documentation of the historic Heartwood/Northwestern event and secondarily, as a model for a more engaged, survivor-centered Buddhist Studies.

Keywords: sexual abuse and Buddhism; survivors of sexual violence; Buddhist Studies; survivor-centered approaches; Northwestern University; Heartwood Center

On the morning of October 25, 2024, a spacious light-filled event room overlooking Lake Michigan was buzzing and full to capacity. A hush fell and all eyes turned forward as Sarah Jacoby of Northwestern University and Nancy Floy of the Chicago-based Heartwood Center, a hub for holistic health services, opened the event and introduced Choela Karma Tashi Choedon and Choela Tenzin Dadon. Dignified in their monastic robes, these two Vajrayāna scholar-practitioners, from Malaysia and Bhutan, respectively, were the first to present on the issue of sexual abuse in Buddhism that day. They were just two of several international participants in the event. Gathered in the audience were scholars and advocates, journalists and lawyers, Buddhist practitioners and teachers including ordained women and men, former Buddhist practitioners, former Buddhist monastics, and, importantly, multiple survivors of sexual abuse in Buddhist communities. As organizers, we worried about the possibility of disruptions and disconnections given the sensitivity of the topic and the diversity of the audience, but the room came together in a communal act of respectful and compassionate listening.

Later in the afternoon, when five women offered raw testimony and astute commentary on their experiences as survivors, a Buddhist Studies scholar turned around and passed us a note referencing a famous ancient Buddhist collection of women's enlightenment songs. She had penciled, "I feel like I'm listening to a living *Therīgāthā*."

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In aligning survivors' words with the *Therīgāthā*, part of the Pali Canon and one of the oldest collections of women's writings in the world, this scholar was acknowledging them as authoritative and wise. Like the voices of the female elders represented in the *Therīgāthā*, the survivors' testimony conveyed a critical perspective on their gendered experiences, one marked by what its translator Charles Hallisey (2015) calls "social suffering." Given that the *Therīgāthā* is acknowledged as one of very few female-authored works in the Buddhist corpus, this scholar also seemed to be highlighting how rare and therefore remarkable such testimony has been in Buddhist contexts.

This event, the first ever academic conference on Buddhism and sexual abuse, was called the "Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium on Sexual Violence in Buddhism: Centering Survivor Voices." The event was an outcome of collaborations between Buddhist Studies scholars and survivors of sexual violence in Buddhist communities, one that brought academia and advocacy together in a respectful and open conversation. The core of this collaboration revolved around four individuals who together embody this range of scholarship and survivorship: Nancy Floy, founder of Heartwood Center for Body, Mind, Spirit in Evanston, Illinois; Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern professor working in Tibetan Buddhist Studies with a research focus on gender and sexuality; Ann Gleig, a specialist in Buddhism in North America; and Amy Langenberg, a specialist in South Asian Buddhism also working on gender and sexuality. The event could not have come together without this four-way collaboration. Nancy Floy brought her advocacy experience co-leading (along with Rachel Montgomery) a support group called "Connecting Survivors of Guru and Teacher Abuse," founded in 2021 and currently one of the only such support group for survivors of abuse coming out of Buddhist communities.[1] Nancy secured generous funding from the Hemera Foundation to support our symposium and also to fund ongoing counseling services for survivors of guru and teacher abuse. Sarah brought Heartwood and Northwestern together by hosting the symposium at Northwestern University on the shores of Lake Michigan. Ann and Amy brought critical insights to the symposium garnered from their forthcoming co-authored book on sexual abuse in North American and transnational Buddhist sanghas. The extensive research and the community building work Amy and Ann have facilitated over the past few years was a key factor in bringing people together and establishing the necessary trust that made the Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium possible (2025).

At the opening of the "Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium on Sexual Violence in Buddhism: Centering Survivor Voices," Sarah invoked the following words of womanist ethics scholar Emilie Townes: "One of the temptations we must avoid ... is believing that engaging in this task with intellectual rigor means that we check our hearts at the door." Townes adds that "intellect with no heart is about as useful as a heart with no intellect" (Townes 2006: 160). These words set the stage for what this symposium sought to embody. To encourage this, we established four guidelines for our discussion:

1) The first pertained to confidentiality and privacy. We asked for no photography or social media posts with identifying information of individuals without their explicit permission.

2) The second was a clarification of what we mean by the subtitle of our symposium: "centering survivors' voices."[2] We elaborated that "this means that we will be seeking to center the voices and experiences of those most directly impacted by sexual violence in Buddhist communities. We will listen with care and openness to each other, weighing the impact of our words, and giving each other the benefit of the doubt even when others express viewpoints that may not be aligned with our own understandings of the world."

[1] For more information on "Connecting Survivors of Guru and Teacher Abuse" support group, see https://www.heartwoodcenter.com/meditation/survivors-program.

[2] All quotations from this numbered list reflect what Sarah said at the beginning of the symposium; the text was written collectively by the symposium organizers.

3) The third was the importance of an intersectional approach. In our words, "This means acknowledging the roles of race and other vectors of oppression, particularly colonial occupation and complex postcolonial power relations that can make critiquing Buddhist institutions and leaders fraught. In our effort to address sexual abuse, we aim not to reproduce racial and other harms."

4) The fourth was simultaneity, or the acknowledgment that multiple conflicting truths can exist at the same time. We reminded audience members and speakers that "We don't have to live in a binary world of either/or, but rather both/and. What this means is that we and others around us may experience forms of privilege in one context and victimization in others. Expressing difference in viewpoint is at the heart of productive dialogue. We are aiming to broaden our perspective through conversation, not necessarily win the debate!"

These guidelines established a container that set the symposium space apart from business as usual in the university setting, allowing for modes of expression that were endowed with both intellect and heart. The symposium included the following talks, published here for the first time. One powerful talk not included in written form in this conference proceedings was given by Lama Willa Baker. The recording of her talk, titled "Coming Forward: The Treacherous and Empowering Path of Breaking Silence," is available on Heartwood's website (Baker 2024).

The remainder of the talks are presented in the order in which they were given during the conference, appearing here as short written pieces summarizing the main points of what each speaker presented. Piece #2, "Sacred Spaces, Silent Suffering: Sexual Abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist Contexts" is a pioneering examination of the problem of sexual abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhism from within the tradition, written by two Vajrayāna Buddhist monastics, Choela Karma Tashi Choedon and Choela Tenzin Dadon. The essay names doctrinal factors that have enabled sexual abuse in Vajrayāna contexts, such as the tendency for "pure perception" to silence critical judgment, and the hierarchical nature of Vajrayāna Buddhism, in which stark power imbalances can force disciples to comply with even unreasonable demands from gurus. The authors articulate one of the main reasons why the problem of sex abuse in Buddhism remains so intractable: "Survivors frequently find themselves torn between their loyalty to their community and their own quest for justice, which only deepens the silence surrounding this critical issue." By clearly naming this tension between community loyalty and individual agency, these authors crack open a little more space for future Vajrayāna practitioners to find a way to break this silence and thereby contribute to a less harmful future. The essay bravely cites numerous pieces of evidence of sexual abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist contexts in Bhutan and Malaysia at the same time as it turns to Vajrayāna tradition for solutions, including pathways to healing and prevention. The authors note that "non-harm and respect for all beings" lie at the heart of Buddhism, and call on readers to implement reform, for the sake of "the very survival and credibility of Vajrayāna Buddhism."

In piece #3, titled "Sexual Abuse in the Buddhist Monastery: A Burden on Sri Lankan Children," Namal Rathnayake draws on his recently completed doctoral research and his lived experience as a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka to examine the devastating yet rarely discussed issue of child sexual abuse in Buddhist monasteries. Contextualizing the historic and social role of Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka, Rathnayake identifies the political co-dependency between the state and the monastery as a particularly significant factor in sexual abuse in Buddhist monasteries. He highlights the particular vulnerability of novices from low-income rural families, who face significant social pressure to remain in the monastery despite any abuse they experience. Through interviews with four survivors of monastic sexual abuse, three current senior monastics, and three child protection officers, Rathnayake identifies the structural factors that enable the normalization of abuse in Buddhist monasteries and its lifelong impacts of shame, grief, and trauma. As he explains, however, despite his own status as cultural insider, Rathnayake faced significant barriers in conducting his research. His

groundbreaking study is an intervention into breaking the institutional, cultural, and academic silence around abuse in Buddhist settings.

Piece #4, The "Survivors' Roundtable: Centering Survivor's Voices," is one of the most unique aspects of this conference proceedings and was a compelling and impactful experience for all who witnessed it during our symposium. Academic conferences are often opportunities for scholars to pontificate about rarified topics of expertise and almost never spaces in which speakers express vulnerability and knowledge based on first-person experience. This roundtable broke this barrier between talking about sexual abuse—its causes, exacerbating conditions, and preventions—and listening to those who know the most about sexual abuse within Buddhist communities. In so doing, it demonstrated the value of bringing these ways of knowing together. Centering five female survivors, the roundtable included Catherine Pilfrey, Caroline DeVane, Linda Modaro, Rachel Montgomery, and Nancy Floy and was moderated by Rachel Bernstein, a marriage and family therapist and a cult specialist.[3] The stories these survivors share not only expose the devastating harm they suffered in abusive guru-disciple relationships but also the rejection and abandonment they experienced from their wider Buddhist communities after their abuse came to light, amounting to multiple layers of loss. However, these survivors' stories are more than just devastating tales of suffering; they also chart myriad pathways to repair and renewal. One key insight these survivors bring to the broader field of Buddhist studies is the raw and honest conclusion that "Buddhism, like any system, needs a warning label: abuse has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen." As the voices in this roundtable emphasize, it is our ethical duty to listen and take survivors' testimonies seriously, which is that much more possible thanks to the courage and candor of the survivors who wrote this piece on "Centering Survivors' Voices."

Piece #5 titled "Deconstructing Demoness: Tsepongza, Misogyny, and the Structural Implications of Telling Stories of Sexual Violence," written by doctoral candidate in Buddhist Studies Somtsobum Khyung, is an example of survivor-centered Buddhist Studies scholarship rooted in Tibetan literary studies. This essay traces different versions of the story of Queen Tsepongza. In the earliest Tibetan records, the author traces her representation as a demoness who feigns to be a victim of rape in order to tarnish the reputation of a bodhisattva she had fallen in love with, a narrative arc that mirrors more contemporary paradigms of disbelieving women in Buddhist contexts (she lied about what really happened; she later denied it but she actually did want sex; and the real victim of the situation was actually the innocent celibate Buddhist monk). Drawing on Kate Manne's theorization of "himpathy," the author connects this representation of Queen Tsepongza to a larger category of women deemed demonesses in Tibetan literature. She demonstrates ways that contemporary Tibetan women writers are questioning this older demonization of female sexuality. For instance, Jamyang Kyi portrays Queen Tsepongza not as a demoness but as a heroine, a woman seeking to preserve Tibet's Indigenous cultural practices and political sovereignty. The essay concludes on a note of critical importance for the conference and for future survivor-centered Buddhist Studies scholarship. Drawing on the figure of Queen Tsepongza's changing significance, Somtsobum Khyung reminds us that "as conversations about sexual violence start to take place in academic settings ... it is also essential to address the historical specificities of power and difference that shape narratives of violence."

Piece #6, titled "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Can the Legal System Bring Justice to Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Spiritual Communities?" lawyer Carol Merchasin unpacks the value and limits of civil law cases in bringing justice to survivors. While the Buddhist Studies scholars at the conference sought to think through abuse from different perspectives within the Buddhist tradition, it is important to remember that sexual abuse is not only a Buddhist ethical issue but also a secular legal matter. Merchasin has represented a number of abuse survivors

[3] While the term cult has been heavily critiqued in religious studies scholarship, survivors of abuse in Buddhist contexts commonly draw on cultic studies to interpret their experience. (See Gleig 2026).

from Buddhist and yoga communities. She identifies the specific barriers to justice within the law system itself—issues such as structural racism and sexism—and she describes the healing it can bring to survivors, including regaining their agency and having their testimonies heard. Merchasin's account of how sexual abuse cases actually play out on the ground—–institutional resistance, the silencing effect of non-disparagement agreements (NDAs)—shatter idealistic views of the tradition. As Merchasin soberly concludes "corporate America is doing better dealing with sexual misconduct in its midst than Buddhist America."

In Piece #7, "What Can Buddhist Studies Offer Survivors?" five Buddhist Studies scholars—Kali Nyima Cape, Damchö Diana Finnegan, Ann Gleig, Sarah Jacoby, and Amy Paris Langenberg—respond to a series of questions regarding Buddhist Studies and the issue of sexual abuse. These are: 1) How has Buddhist Studies responded to sexual violence and survivors? 2) What are the barriers and challenges that prevent Buddhist Studies from offering support to survivors? 3) What can Buddhist Studies offer survivors, and how can we support and encourage scholarship and pedagogy in this area? 4) What would survivor-centered research in Buddhist Studies look like? What might we learn about Buddhism that current approaches obscure? And 5) What is and should be the relationship between scholarship and advocacy? Each scholar draws from their respective research specialization and methodological training to illuminate both limits and resources within Buddhism and the academic study of Buddhism in attending to sexual violence. Reflecting on the history and future of the field, this roundtable discussion unpacks the research and pedagogical potential of taking survivors of abuse as legitimate and valuable Buddhist epistemological and ethical sources.

As a collection, these pieces not only clearly identify and analyze the problem of abuse in Buddhist context but offer explicit solutions for both Buddhist communities and Buddhist studies.

Just as the Northwestern event could only have been collaborative, international, and multidisciplinary, this special focus section must and does include a range of approaches, perspectives and abilities, not all of them purely academic in nature. Because sexual abuse is an issue that impacts global Buddhist communities, and must be understood within local socio-cultural contexts, we also felt it vitally important to include voices beyond North America. Several entries fall outside of the norms of formal academic writing in that some are multi-authored and dialogical in format. While confronting the issue of sexual abuse *in Buddhist communities* is a primary aim, this special issue also expands the boundaries of accepted disciplinary formations *in Buddhist Studies* by demonstrating the benefits of a substantially expanded methodological toolbox and a greater openness to engaged approaches.

Some might object that this special focus section freely mixes advocacy and scholarship. In her contribution to the Buddhist Studies scholars' panel write-up included in this issue, Damchö Diana Finnegan contests the notion that scholarship and advocacy are at odds with one another, or even distinct activities. She states, "scholars do not simply observe and analyze their area of study; they also represent it to others. Representation is not a neutral activity." As Finnegan also points out, avoiding the topic of Buddhist abuse is not a neutral scholarly choice; rather, it constitutes a silence—deafening to survivors and their advocates—that enables ongoing abuses of power in Buddhism. This perspective is aligned with scholars working on the issue of sexual abuse in other subdisciplines. Reflecting on child sexual abuse in Catholicism, American religions scholar Kathryn Lofton also argues that the scholarly ideal of neutrality is not only impossible; it is also an evasion of responsibility. Lofton (2018) acknowledges the limits of "typical scholarly tools" to examine and interpret abuse in religious contexts and the need for interdisciplinary approaches that draw on multiple areas of expertise. Reflecting the same approach, the Abuse in Religious Settings project, based in the U.K., was structured from the beginning as a survivor-centered and collaborative project. Running from 2019–2024, this project brought together a team of academic researchers with other professionals including a lawyer specializing in child and vulnerable adult

abuse, a director of a Christian safeguarding charity and an advocate for sexual abuse victim-survivors in order to understand abuse across a wide range of religious traditions and contexts ("Abuse in Religious Settings").

Abuse in Buddhist contexts has devastating consequences for its victims, almost always causing collateral damage to its communities. Buddhist Studies has failed to acknowledge it as a structural problem, an aspect of Buddhist history, institutions, and even doctrines, and one that is deserving of scholarly attention. We feel this is an ethical as well as intellectual failure in our field and in our classrooms, a failure we are committed to rectifying through survivor-centered scholarship and pedagogy. We offer this special focus section primarily as documentation of the historic "Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium on Sexual Violence in Buddhism: Centering Survivor Voices." Secondarily, we offer it as a model for a more engaged, survivor-centered Buddhist Studies, one that brings the discipline into conversation with the examination of sexual abuse in other subfields ("Abuse in Religious Settings"; Clites 2020; Choudhury and Hammer 2024).

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