



Symposium: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

Sacred Spaces, Silent Suffering: Sexual Abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist Contexts

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This piece analyzes factors that have contributed to the problem of sexual abuse in Vajrayāna contexts, including the doctrinal injunction to maintain pure perception, which can be used to silence critical judgment, and the hierarchical nature of Vajrayāna guru-disciple relationships. Written from the insider perspective of two Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns, this essay names the harm of sexual abuse while also acknowledging the tension many survivors of sexual abuse in Buddhist communities feel between loyalty to their spiritual community and their own quest for personal justice. At the same time as this piece addresses the problem of sexual abuse clearly, bolstered by ample evidence of such abuse in Malaysia and Bhutan, the authors suggest resources within Vajrayāna Buddhism that can break the silence around this issue. Ultimately, the piece argues that the Buddhist injunction to pursue non-harm and respect for all beings can be marshalled to build a brighter future for all beings.

Keywords: Vajrayāna Buddhism; Bhutan; Malaysia; sexual abuse; silence; doctrinal factors; healing and prevention

Sexual abuse is defined by the United Nations as “the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions (United Nations 2003). Sexual abuse within religious contexts has garnered significant attention in recent years, and Vajrayāna Buddhism is no exception. Despite the spiritual and ethical teachings of Buddhism, instances of sexual misconduct by Buddhist teachers have surfaced, raising concerns about the protection of vulnerable individuals within these communities. Historical accounts reveal that sexual misconduct is not a new phenomenon. For example, Sarah Jacoby highlights instances of sexual exploitation by religious men in the autobiography of Sera Khandro Dewé Dorjé (1892–1940), demonstrating that such issues have persisted over time (Jacoby 2014, 2024).

Understanding sexual abuse in the Vajrayāna Buddhist context necessitates an examination of the sociocultural framework in which these acts occur. Cultural norms, deeply rooted in spiritual traditions, often venerate monastic figures, creating a power imbalance that can facilitate abuse. The authority bestowed upon *lamas* and monks can lead to manipulation, whereby the sanctity of spiritual leadership obscures the recognition of abusive behaviours, creating an environment in which victims may feel disempowered and silenced. This article examines the prevalence and impact of sexual abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist contexts with a specific focus on Malaysia and Bhutan, where notable cases have emerged.



Vajrayāna Buddhism: Foundational Principles

Vajrayāna Buddhism is renowned for its long history and detailed practices, with deep spiritual teachings that many people admire. A key part of this practice involves meditation, rituals, and the meaningful relationship between a teacher, or guru, and their disciple (Phuntsho 2023).

A central idea in Vajrayana Buddhism is “pure perception,” i.e. seeing all things as perfectly pure. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1999: 18) describes this practice as a series of steps. First, students are taught to view their guru as an embodiment of Buddha. Known as the fabrication stage, this step emphasizes respect and reverence for the guru. The next step encourages students to perceive all experiences, whether good or bad, as lessons from the guru. This mindset promotes learning from every aspect of life. As students advance, they begin to realize that their own mind mirrors the Buddha they imagined their guru to be, which strengthens their spiritual journey. The final step involves merging one's mind with the guru's mind, helping students transcend ordinary habits and fears and achieve a profound sense of unity and enlightenment (Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche 1999). Yet, “pure perception” can become dangerous when it silences critical judgment, allowing abuse—such as sexual misconduct by teachers—to go unchecked.

Sacred Spaces and Power Dynamics in Guru-Disciple Relationships

Temples and monasteries, the epicentres of Vajrayāna Buddhism, are perceived as sacred sites that foster spiritual growth and community cohesion. However, this reverence introduces a paradox wherein the sanctity of these spaces may cloak instances of abuse. The dual nature of these environments as both sites of sanctity and at times abuse complicates the community's response to allegations of misconduct. When abuse occurs within these hallowed walls, it not only violates the victim but also shatters the trust within the community, leading to a culture of silence and complicity. The fear of undermining the institution's sanctity often prevents individuals from speaking out, thereby perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

The hierarchical setup in Vajrayāna Buddhism often puts teachers in powerful positions, which can make it difficult for victims to come forward. Cultural norms that stress respect and reverence for religious figures can also create a culture of silence around issues of sexual misconduct. The power dynamics in the guru-disciple relationship can lead to serious imbalances. Disciples frequently see their gurus as infallible, which can foster an environment where the abuse of power is more likely to happen. For instance, the expectation that disciples should follow their guru unquestioningly can mean that inappropriate behaviour goes unchallenged (Choedron and Dadon 2019). Moreover, the cultural norm of reverence for religious figures and monastic precepts can further discourage victims from speaking out.

In some instances, the guru's authority is bolstered by teachings that highlight the guru's spiritual superiority. This can create a situation in which disciples feel they must comply with the guru's demands, even when those demands are inappropriate or harmful. The hierarchical nature of Vajrayāna Buddhism only intensifies these power imbalances, placing gurus in positions of significant influence and control over their disciples. The guru-disciple relationship is crucial, as disciples place immense trust in their gurus, who are seen as spiritual guides. Milarepa (1040–1123), one of Tibet's most revered yogi-saints advises, “Try to see your guru in his actual aspect of dharmakaya. If you can, you will receive all blessings and inspiration effortlessly” (Dhargyey 1975). Similarly, Gampopa (1998: 74) cites the *Mother of the Victorious One Perfection of Wisdom*—a Prajñāpāramitā sūtra—as scriptural authority when discussing devotion to the spiritual master in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*: “You should persistently, repeatedly, and constantly revere spiritual masters. Be very generous with them and cherish them. Furthermore, one should avoid wrong view toward the skilful actions of spiritual masters. Instead, one should respect them highly” (Gampopa 1998: 74). This relationship, while foundational, can create power imbalances that may be exploited.

Fortunately, there are existing safeguards within Vajrayāna Buddhism that clearly warn students not to trust their gurus blindly. The irony is that these texts are not given prominence by all schools of Vajrayāna Buddhism, and hence the warnings are not widely disseminated. Verse 11 of Aśvaghoṣa's *The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* states, "Therefore, before accepting someone as your guru, and before a guru accepts someone as a disciple, both should examine each other carefully. Once the relationship is established, it should be honored and maintained" (Dhargyey 1975). A Tibetan proverb warns, "To not examine a Guru is like drinking poison, not examining a student is like falling into an abyss." Lama Zopa Rinpoche, citing Panchen Losang Chökyi Gyaltsen in *Heart of the Path*, advises: "If you cherish yourself, don't follow just anyone you happen to meet, like a dog seeking food in the street. Examine well the lama who reveals the holy Dharma, then follow him with respect" (Lama Zopa Rinpoche 2009: 26). These texts demonstrate that, if one cares to look, there are already existing safeguards that admonish students to be very careful when entering guru-disciple relationships.

Ethical and Doctrinal Implications in Vajrayāna Buddhism

In Buddhism, kindness and non-harm towards all beings are fundamental principles. These guide Buddhists towards ethical behaviour (Harvey 2013). However, as discussed above, the hierarchical structure of Vajrayāna Buddhism and the high regard for gurus can sometimes obscure these principles, allowing wrongdoing to remain unchecked. Deep respect and trust in spiritual leaders might cause unethical behaviour to be overlooked, contradicting Buddhism's core teachings.

There are instances where Buddhist teachings are misinterpreted or misused to hide or justify misconduct. The concept of "crazy wisdom"¹ coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche is sometimes exploited in this way (Trungpa 2001). This term refers to unconventional actions by enlightened beings designed to offer deeper spiritual insights. But when misused, this idea can rationalize harmful actions.²

These misunderstandings of doctrine really underscore the need for more clarity and accountability within Buddhist communities. It is crucial to uphold ethical teachings and tackle any misuse of doctrine that might justify misconduct. By reinforcing the values of non-harm and respect for all beings, and by taking a hard look at the hierarchical structures that could enable abuse, Vajrayāna Buddhism can strive for a more ethical and just practice that genuinely reflects its core teachings.

Specific Cases in Malaysia and Bhutan in the Context of Vajrayāna Buddhism

Vajrayāna Buddhism was introduced to Malaysia only in the late 1960s, but incidences of teacher misconduct—such as the recent controversy involving a Vajrayāna Buddhist master who was accused of sexual abuse—has garnered significant public attention. That teacher has been accused by multiple disciples of sexual abuse, including coercion and manipulation disguised as spiritual guidance (The Buddhist Channel 2023). These claims have sparked worries about an emerging culture of silence and intimidation within Malaysian Buddhist communities. Despite these serious accusations, victims have found it incredibly challenging to pursue justice due to legal hurdles and societal pressures. These allegations have ignited a wider conversation about the power dynamics in religious environments and the vulnerability of disciples who place immense trust in their spiritual leaders (Lam 2023). The Buddhist community in Malaysia and around the world is

¹ Trungpa, Chögyam Trungpa, *Crazy Wisdom* (Shambhala Publications 2001). The book leans heavily on the life and teachings of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) to show how unconventional, bold, and sometimes shocking approaches can help students awaken on the Vajrayāna path.

² Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987), although influential in introducing Tibetan Buddhism to Western contexts, has been the subject of well-documented allegations of serious misconduct. Publicly accessible sources report that Trungpa engaged in heavy alcohol use, sexual predation, and at least one incident involving the coerced stripping and humiliation of students under his authority. Further investigative journalism has compiled additional testimonies of psychological, physical, and sexual harm connected to his leadership and the wider Shambhala community established during his tenure.

wrestling with these troubling revelations, prompting calls for increased transparency and accountability within religious institutions.

In Bhutan, the world's last remaining Vajrayāna Buddhist kingdom, reports of sexual abuse amongst monastics have steadily emerged in recent decades. Sonam Wangmo's (2017) doctoral dissertation revealed sexual abuses in nunneries in Western and Eastern Bhutan which demonstrates that both monks and nuns face pervasive sexual abuse in Bhutan. These incidents have brought to light the urgent need for better oversight and protection for vulnerable individuals within monastic communities.³

Survivor Narratives: Personal Stories and Their Significance

For many victims of sexual abuse within Vajrayāna Buddhism, the weight of their experiences often leads to a deep, silent suffering. The stories shared by survivors paint a vivid picture of emotional and psychological scars caused by abuse, and the trauma survivors endure can have lasting effects, such as anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of isolation. Significant barriers prevent individuals from reporting these incidents. For example, cultural stigmas surrounding sexual abuse, along with the fear of retaliation or not being believed, often prevent them from seeking the help they desperately need. 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. Many victims wrestle with feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation, all made worse by the betrayal of trust from those they looked up to as spiritual guides. Personal accounts underscore the urgent need for support systems and the importance of amplifying survivors' voices. These survivor narratives are thus essential for grasping the true impact of abuse.

In Malaysia, one survivor recounted, "I didn't report the incident right away for my own self-interest, but the situation became more serious when I learned that he had over one hundred victims. I must stand up for them. I hope and plead for these victims to come forward. This way, the man will be subjected to the law and deported. I hope he will never be able to hurt anyone in the name of Buddhism ever again." She also shared how the trauma still haunts her, even after more than five years. Many victims sought help from the monk during difficult times in their lives. Another survivor remarked, "He had used religion against his victims and tried to manipulate them." The monk even threatened to "curse" them, warning that they would be condemned to hell if they dared to expose him and tarnish the temple's reputation.⁴ These powerful narratives highlight the incredible resilience and bravery of survivors who choose to speak out.

Wikan (1996) shares the heartbreaking story of a former nun in Bhutan who had to leave her monastic life after being raped by a monk, which led to her becoming pregnant. This situation underscores the vulnerability of nuns to abuse, even from those who have taken vows of celibacy, and the harsh realities they face as victims. In another case, two young whistleblowers in Punakha found the courage to speak out after enduring abuse, sharing their stories with journalists for the first time. Eleven-year-old Thinley recounted to *The Raven*, Bhutan's monthly news magazine, that older monks had sexually assaulted him multiple times at the monastery in Punakha.⁵ Thinley mentioned that he and his twelve-year-old friend, Penjore, were both forced to sleep with the senior monk. He is quoted in *The Raven* as stating, "Every time I tried to scream or fight back, he would pin me down, cover my mouth with his hand, and hold it tightly." It was also reported that two other young boys, Tshering, eleven, and nine-year-old Dorji, were forced to perform sexual acts for a 60-year-old monk

³ She now publishes under her monastic name, Tenzin Dadon.

⁴ The survivor accounts summarized here were drawn from publicly circulating testimonies shared within Malaysian Buddhist community networks and social-media spaces; they are not based on interviews conducted by the authors.

⁵ The Raven. (2016, July). *The Raven Magazine*. Cited in T. Ralph, July 30, 2016, *Children report sexual abuse cases by Bhutan's Buddhist monks*. The World.

<https://theworld.org/stories/2016/07/30/children-report-sexual-abuse-cases-bhutans-buddhist-monks>

known as Agay⁶ (Ralph 2016). These harrowing accounts underscore the pressing need for better protection for vulnerable individuals within monastic communities around the world.

Reforming Policies to Address Sexual Abuse in Buddhist Organizations

Buddhist organizations often struggle to provide the necessary protection for victims or a clear path to justice when it comes to addressing sexual abuse. Many of these institutions do not have transparent ways for people to report abuse, and even those that do can create an atmosphere that feels intimidating, making it hard for individuals to come forward. The intricate nature of these religious organizations—marked by hierarchical structures, deep-rooted traditions, and close-knit communities—can make it even tougher for victims to seek justice or support.

To tackle these ongoing issues, it is crucial for Buddhist organizations to undergo reform, focusing on creating safe spaces for survivors and putting in place strong policies that prioritize the well-being of victims over the preservation of the institution. By recognizing and addressing the complexities surrounding sexual abuse in Vajrayāna Buddhist contexts, we can cultivate a more compassionate and just system, breaking the long-standing silence that has overshadowed this sacred tradition.

Some positive developments have occurred. For instance, after allegations against Sogyal Rinpoche, the Rigpa Organization in France made significant reforms, including setting up an independent investigation committee and establishing a code of conduct (Rigpa 2021). Similarly, Shambhala International in the United States responded to allegations against Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche by creating a Care and Conduct Panel and mandating training on preventing sexual misconduct (Shambhala n.d.). These initiatives underscore the vital role of institutional reform in fostering safe and supportive environments for survivors, ensuring their voices are heard and justice is achieved.

By putting the well-being of victims first and promoting transparency, Buddhist organizations can work towards a more ethical and accountable framework, ultimately aiding in the healing and empowerment of those affected by abuse. The Central Monastic Body of Bhutan and the Vajrayana Buddhist Council of Malaysia—both umbrella organizations for Vajrayāna Buddhism in their respective countries—have yet to unveil a code of conduct or initiate serious investigations into allegations of sexual abuse. Given the importance of institutional accountability, the development of such frameworks would be a vital step toward safeguarding practitioners and ensuring ethical integrity within these communities.

Pathways to Healing and Prevention in Addressing Sexual Abuse

Creating strong support systems for survivors of sexual abuse is vital for their healing and empowerment. These systems should offer confidential and easy-to-access counselling and legal help. By providing these resources, survivors can find the assistance they need to heal and take back control of their lives. Preventative measures are just as crucial in tackling and stopping future abuse. It is essential to set up clear guidelines and protocols for handling allegations of sexual misconduct. These guidelines should clearly outline the steps to follow when an allegation arises, ensuring that the process is both transparent and fair. Training and education programs are vital to raise awareness about sexual abuse and encourage individuals to report misconduct. Regular training sessions can help community members spot signs of abuse and understand why reporting it is so important. Educational programs can also inform survivors about their rights and the resources available to them.

⁶ Literally means Grandpa or Old Man in Dzongkha.

Independent oversight bodies are another important piece in preventing future abuse. These organizations should be created to investigate allegations and ensure accountability within institutions. With an independent entity overseeing the process, the chances of bias or cover-ups are minimized, giving survivors more confidence in the system. By putting these pathways to healing and prevention into action, communities can foster safer environments for everyone. Making sure that support systems are established, preventative measures are taken, and independent oversight is in place will help break the cycle of abuse and promote a culture of accountability and compassion.

Conclusion

Addressing sexual abuse within Vajrayāna Buddhist contexts is an intricate issue that calls for a thoughtful and comprehensive approach. By recognizing both the historical and current instances of abuse, and by putting effective strategies in place for prevention, accountability, and healing, the Vajrayāna Buddhist community can strive to foster a safer and more nurturing environment for everyone involved. Ultimately, the very survival and credibility of Vajrayāna Buddhism may depend on the willingness of its institutions to confront these issues transparently and implement meaningful reform.

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