Journal of Global Buddhism 2026, Vol.27 (1): 83–88
DOI: 10.26034/lu.jgb.2026.9915
www.globalbuddhism.org
ISSN: 1527-6457 (online)

Symposium: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

Survivors' Roundtable: Centering Survivor Voices

Moderator: Rachel Bernstein

Panelists: Catherine Pilfrey, Caroline DeVane, Linda Modaro, Rachel Montgomery, Nancy Floy

A key moment in the Heartwood/Northwestern Symposium was the "Survivors' Roundtable," in which five survivors of power abuse and/or sexual misconduct in Buddhism shared their testimony and analysis. Their discussion is structured around six questions, summarized as follows: How do you describe your own experiences? How have others responded to your experiences? How do power dynamics between teachers and students shape the experiences of harm in Buddhist communities? How have your Buddhist practices changed? What are the lasting impacts of the harm you experienced? Who is responsible for improving the safety of Buddhist communities?

Keywords: sexual abuse in Buddhism; survivorship; abuse of power; sexual misconduct; Buddhist practice; gurus; safeguarding

We are a group of survivors of power abuse and/or sexual misconduct in Buddhism, coming together to respond to a call for a structural analysis of reoccurring cases of abuse in our sanghas. Our experiences span different lineages, teachers, and sanghas in the United States, but the patterns of harm are alarmingly similar. Our accounts tell the story that the experiences of harm in Buddhism are not isolated. The questions below reflect the complexity of systemic, institutionalized abuse. Our basic message is simple: first, listen—because it is happening. And then ask what will be done to stop it.

Ironically, the recording of our panel at the symposium was lost. Rather than re-record, we chose to reconstruct our conversation from memory. This article is the result: a shared attempt to reflect on what was spoken and received that day.

It was rare and deeply affirming to feel heard.

Many of those who attended told us they were not only considering how to incorporate our experiences into their Buddhist Studies classrooms across the U.S. and internationally—they were ready to act. It seemed that a new understanding emerged as we shared our experiences of abuse; that Buddhism, like any system, needs a warning label. Abuse has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen.

Here are the voices of the panel:

Caroline DeVane practiced Zen Buddhism at the Chicago Zen Center in Evanston, Illinois, from 1999 to 2010. She was ordained as a priest in the Cloud-Water Sangha of the Kapleau Lineage in 2008. In 2010, she exposed her teacher's misconduct and left the sangha.

Catherine Pilfrey was a member of the Shambhala Buddhist community for over 25 years. She was one of multiple women who came forward in 2019 as part of the Buddhist Project Sunshine Report about her experience of sexual abuse by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche.

Linda Modaro separated from her former teacher and sangha in 2017. She founded Sati Sangha and teaches Buddhadharma from her roots in the Theravada/Vipassana tradition, along with the emerging fruits of Secular Buddhist Dharma.

Rachel Montgomery practiced as a young adult in a Vajrayana Buddhist community in Eugene, Oregon. She is a survivor of institutional sexual abuse and served as the lead plaintiff in Montgomery v. Dzogchen, a civil case addressing harm within her former community.[1]

Nancy Floy is the Founder and Director of the Heartwood Center for Body, Mind, Spirit, located in Evanston, Illinois. Four years ago, she co-founded the Heartwood International Program for Survivors of Guru & Teacher Abuse in Buddhism with Rachel Montgomery. Nancy is a lifelong Buddhist and experienced abuse from Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. Supporting worldwide survivors of Guru & Teacher abuse in Buddhism has become a part of her Buddhist path.

Rachel Bernstein moderated the panel. She is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Cult Specialist. She has a focus on cult intervention, cult recovery, and re-acclimation. Her main goal as a specialist is to be an open and encouraging ear to those who are looking for a space to talk about what they need.

Here is how we started:

Rachel B: If you had to describe your own experience of survivorship within Buddhism in a word, phrase, or image, what would it be?

Catherine: Transformative.

Linda: Mal debarquement—"sickness of disembarkation." That was the diagnosis I was given: a lingering sense of motion—swaying, rocking—even while still. I lost the dharma ground that had been holding me.

Caroline: As if the map opened up, and I fell into unknown territory.

Rachel M: A plant burr. One of those tiny spiky seed pods that cling to your clothes when you walk through tall grass.

Rachel B: Building on that, how would you describe how others have responded to your experience? How did you experience the response from your community/sangha?

Catherine: Devastating. For the most part, there was a deafening silence. There was a lot of negativity towards the survivors in the Buddhist Facebook groups. Beyond that, very few sangha members reached out. When one close friend finally spoke to me months after our stories had been made public, she said, "I am so angry with you for coming forward." She asked, "Did you even think about what the repercussions would be?" It was crushing to finally share our stories with the sangha and the public and not receive much support. A couple of wonderful people stepped forward to volunteer to lead a support group, which was enormously helpful. I think there is an assumption that the Shambhala Board and community offered counseling support, but in fact, that was limited to $350 USD, after you went through an evaluation interview to prove the veracity of your claim. This is a drop in the bucket to work with trauma from years of abusive behavior.

[1] For coverage of Rachel Montgomery's case see April Ehrlich, "Buddhist center in Eugene sued over rape accusation against master guru" *Oregon Public Broadcasting* April 20, 2023. https://www.klcc.org/crime-law-justice/2023-04-20/buddhist-center-in-eugene-sued-over-rape-accusation-against-master-guru. We received the following update from Montgomery's lawyer, "The parties have reached a resolution of the case, the terms of which are confidential. We are putting this process behind us and moving forward." Carol Merchasin, personal correspondence with authors, October 27, 2025.

Caroline: I think there is a lot at stake for other people in hearing that religious leaders, especially Buddhist teachers, can act in unskillful and violent ways. It shakes peoples' foundational beliefs in the legitimacy of the religion. I've found others are reluctant to admit that the harm I experienced had anything to do with the structure of Buddhist practice, the teachings, or the sangha, and to explain away the harm with the "bad apple" theory of abuse—that I just had a wayward teacher. Alternatively, I've found people will see my story as a justification for why Buddhism was never a valid religion to begin with, or to say that the Buddhism I practiced wasn't authentic or valid. In other words, it has seemed to me that people rarely have a schema into which to fit my story, and so they must deny either the validity of my experience or the context I was in. I relate to this psychic difficulty, because in order to leave my abusive teacher, I had to be willing to admit the religious system I had devoted myself to, the iteration of the dharma I'd become a priest to serve, and the people I'd put my trust in, were not living up to the claims I believed were true. I think this is unfortunately shared across religious contexts. Therefore, I've found since leaving the Zen Center that I must be judicious about sharing sketches of my experience or insights I've gained from it.

When I initially left the Zen Center, I had a crash course in confronting what was at stake for others in my story at the same moment that I was surfacing from the abuse and finding the words to name what had happened to me. As a priest, I had been available to sangha members for some degree of pastoral care, for support, or for validation. After I disclosed the abuse to select members of the community, the lineage leadership announced a twisted version of it. (Please note I was not permitted to speak for myself publicly, even though my abuser was.) Sangha members came to me with their anger and disappointment. In their eyes, my abuse couldn't have been the fault of their teacher; it had to be because there was something wrong with me. I truly became the scapegoat for the failure of the teacher to wield power wisely, for the sangha to allow his grooming of me, and for them to move on. When I left, the fellow priests whom I'd considered friends and confidants told me the sangha was healthy in my absence.

Rachel B: In what ways do you think power dynamics between teachers and students shape the experiences of harm in Buddhist communities? Is the guru-student relationship inherently flawed?

Catherine: There was almost a rock star status that my teacher had within the community. Many people considered it a great honor to be in his company, in his presence, and a feeling that, of course, you would do whatever was requested of you without question. He had the pick of the women in the community, from young and single to older and married. One woman was always being passed over for another. I knew that I was being treated badly, but when I mentioned it to others, they diminished me, saying that nothing had ever happened to them. I felt that something was wrong with me, that it was a teaching, that it was part of my path that I had to work through. The common framework for guru/student relationships in America is inherently problematic because it creates a situation for students to be abused, belittled, and exploited all in the name of teachings, with little questioning or oversight.

Caroline: In Zen, we literally have to bow with our foreheads to the floor to our teacher in the one-on-one encounter of dokusan, which is a sort of spiritual interview. This practiced humility during an already vulnerable moment is one of many ways that we bring into our bodies the belief that the teacher is wiser than we are. So when the teacher feels this power from an entire sangha, I think it is a rare person who does not begin to internalize the idea that they do know best, and that to be challenged is a repudiation of that status.

Rachel B: Since your experience, how has your Buddhist practice changed? Are you still practicing? Have you found alternative ways to connect with the teachings?

Nancy: I was born and raised in the Buddhist tradition, and my grandmother is my root teacher. After she died, I began searching for another teacher and found the Tibetan Buddhist teachings to be closest to my family

practices and study. In my upbringing with my grandmother, it never occurred to me that a Buddhist teacher could be abusive, and so when I encountered the abuse with two of my Tibetan Buddhist teachers, it was shocking and devastating. My whole world revolved around my guru and my sangha, and I was full in and gave my whole heart, mind, and body, as well as most of my finances. I believed that the guru was an enlightened being and would always act in my best interest. I trusted both of my gurus wholly and completely.

I experienced sexual, psychological, financial, and work abuses and believed that it was all the command of the guru that I must follow. In my upbringing, my grandmother always acted with care and never harmed me and instilled in me the trust of the teacher. But in the case of my gurus, I did not understand that I was entering into a student-teacher relationship that was not going to further my path of awakening. After leaving my second guru and being excommunicated from her and the sangha, I had a complete emotional breakdown that has taken me four years to recover from. I went from a close connection with my guru and regular sadhana practices, and receiving regular teachings to nothing. No teacher, no sangha, no teachings. I was bereft. I tried to reach out to other teachers and gurus, but my trust was decimated. My devotion was gone, and my body was sick.

Slowly, I began to practice foundational and Mahayana practices as a solitary practitioner. Sometimes it was just finding my breath and staying in the present moment. My refuge tree was empty, and so I took refuge with the tree and raised bodhicitta with the sky. I began to practice outside and sat on Mother Earth. I supplicated the land spirits and the *dakinis*. I stayed with all of my physical and emotional trauma and just sat through it all with as much compassion as possible. And slowly, my devotion began to fill my heart again.

I just completed a 100-day retreat, where I practiced outside every morning and studied online with several different Tibetan Buddhist teachers. I am finding Buddha within and taking time to practice all of the teachings I have received over my lifetime. I am grateful to all of my teachers for all that they have taught me, and I understand now that some of the gurus were acting out of their own unresolved trauma. I do not excuse their abuse at all, ever, and they need to truly wake up and stop harming beings in the name of the dharma. I have come to understand that the abusive teachers are wounded and need help. I see all of those experiences now as karma that arose, manifested, and dissolved. Today, the dharma sustains me, and my practice and study are strong again. Different, but strong. My lineage tree is full again with buddhas and bodhisattvas, and so much more space. When I get triggered and the karmic imprints of the guru abuse rise up in my mind and body, I sit with Mother Earth, I swim in the salty sea, I breathe the clean air, feel the sun on my face and listen to the wind in the trees. My solid permanent sense of self dissolves, and there is only sky, compassionate sky.

Linda: I survived threats of lawsuits from my former teacher—copyright infringement and defamation—when I tried to hold him accountable after another student reported his ethical breaches. At the time, I was a board member, employee, and teacher in that sangha. He still believes he was the victim, and some other students validate him in thinking that.

Claiming spiritual authority—being "the expert"—is a powerful lure in all religions, including Buddhism. It can become a condition for abuse. I broke away and founded Sati Sangha, and then during the pandemic teamed up with Nelly Kaufer, who had founded Pine Street Sangha. We are two female dharma teachers committed to equalizing power, finding a middle way between being an expert and a peer.

With a grant from Hemera for Healthy Buddhist Sanghas, I created a course, which I call Ethical Reflecting, and offer it on an as-needed basis. Nelly created multiple courses using Reflective Meditation as a basis for ethics in mental health professions. In 2020, we were invited to write a book for Secular Dharma, so more women's voices are available. The result, *Reflective Meditation: Cultivating Kindness and Curiosity in the Buddha's Company*, integrates Reflective Meditation practice with attention to power dynamics, feminist principles, and dharma.

Written in a conversational style, the book poured out of us. It came from the deep friendship of surviving the split of our dearly held former sangha.

We see our work as a safeguard against the idealism and projections that often accompany Buddhist practice. Our experience-based approach emphasizes self-care, discernment, and the value of friendly critique. Be aware—and beware. Buddhism and meditation may have side effects.

Caroline: Meditation and *sesshin*, the weeklong intensive retreats, were transformative practices for me. I've tried to return to various Zen Centers in other lineages to reclaim these practices of curiosity and connection, but I find now that I have an allergy to the trappings of Zen, and to Buddhism in general. I find too many aspects of the practice contestable, and I've found it difficult to talk with others about reform. Over the last fourteen years, I've gradually challenged the cherished beliefs that I didn't even see as beliefs from my eleven years in Zen. It's now fourteen years later, and I find I can finally return to meditation without a bad taste in my mouth. However, I can't say that my contemplative practice is a Buddhist practice.

Rachel M: No. I stopped practicing completely after what happened. At first, I told myself it was temporary—but years later, I still haven't gone back. I didn't keep the mantras, the meditations, the teachings—none of it. And I don't think I will.

But that doesn't mean I left the questions behind. The questions that brought me to Buddhism in the first place—about how to live, how to hold suffering, how to be a better person for myself and for others, how to make meaning of life—they're still with me. I just hold them differently now. More slowly. With more skepticism. But maybe also with more care.

Rachel B: Reflecting on how your life has been changed, what have been the lasting impacts of the harm you experienced—physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, and socially?

Caroline: Immediately after I left my sangha, I struggled with how to find a new home and career. I'd moved into the Zen Center out of college and lived there for seven years. Priesthood had become my central commitment and life purpose. One iteration of my teacher's abusive behavior was to separate me from my family and friends and from maintaining close relationships with sangha members. When I finally drove away from Chicago, I felt liberated but terribly alone in my project to build a new life from scratch. I applied to Harvard Divinity School with the hope of further bridging Zen scholarship and practitioner communities. As I began to recognize what happened to me as abuse, often through intrusive nightmares, and that it was justified in the name of the religion that had been precious and vital to me, my sense of feeling oriented in the universe evaporated. I fell into a deep depression and suffered with PTSD, especially as mundane events from my life at the Zen Center were revealed through therapy as the stuff of nightmares and exploitation. Luckily, I was surrounded by caring people who helped me find my way through.

Academic study allowed me to bring my intellect back online after a decade of practicing a very anti-intellectual version of Zen. As my attachment to Zen forms and teachings lessened, I found solace in investigating our human motivation to seek religion and the beliefs and rituals we use to structure our existence. Therapy and coursework helped me make meaning out of my experiences and understand the many facets of the abuse and how it happened. It took a while, but I began to feel safe in relationships again, and to find trust and beauty in the world. In the end, I am grateful that the heinous things I lived through have made me reflective, offered me nuanced insights about religion and structural violence, and allowed me a fuller life in the world.

Rachel B: Harm occurs in Buddhism, and we acknowledge this. Where does the onus lie—and where does it not—when it comes to improving the safety and health in Buddhist communities, who is responsible?

Linda: Like many survivors, I initially believed I was to blame, and I took on that blame easily. When people in power are confronted, their instinct is often to deflect, defend, and shift the blame. That's something we all recognized. That blame kept me from feeling empowered to take some of the actions that were needed.

Many of us were shocked by the teacher's behavior, but we couldn't stand up to him at the time. He was so revered: he had "rock star status," as Catherine put it. I still carry regret that our sangha couldn't do more. We had no systems in place to protect the community or support the teachers. That was due in part to a lack of knowledge and initiative, but I now see it also as a lack of care.

As a dharma teacher today, I don't want to teach without clear systems—basic agreements and safeguards—for addressing the problems that may arise. I had to learn this the hard way, and I don't want others to go through the same.

In the past eight years, I've seen more acknowledgement of survivors and some movement toward change, though it's been slow and often met with resistance from some well-known, authoritative teachers.

Rachel M: The onus is on survivors. *(pause, laughter from the room)*

No, but seriously—in practice, it often is. We're the ones raising concerns, asking uncomfortable questions, doing the emotional labor of warning others, organizing support, and sometimes even writing the internal policies and procedures ourselves.

Safety shouldn't depend on whether a survivor speaks up—or how palatable their story is. The responsibility for creating healthy, accountable communities lies with leadership, teachers, boards, and sanghas. Survivors have done enough to meet Buddhist communities halfway.

In conclusion:

Linda: What we've shared here is not just personal—it's structural, cultural, and systemic. We speak not only for ourselves but for many who cannot yet speak, or who have spoken and been silenced. Our hope is that these conversations—however uncomfortable—continue, and that Buddhist communities step into the difficult, necessary work of transforming their own structures of power.

Survivors are not the problem. Survivors are the warning system, the truth-tellers, the ones who have already paid a high price. Listening to us is not an act of generosity; it is an ethical obligation.

To those in positions of authority: take responsibility, not just for individual actions, but for the cultures that enable them. To teachers: don't teach without accountability structures in place. To sanghas: ask yourselves what you are willing to lose in order to protect the most vulnerable.

Healing is not linear, nor is justice always possible. But solidarity is. We sat at this roundtable not because we are broken, but because we are alive and committed to shaping a dharma that does not replicate harm but offers refuge, repair, and renewal.

We end, then, not with closure but with a call.