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COLLABORATION AS CARE

Teaching Sexual Abuse in American Buddhism

Ann Gleig and Amy Paris Langenberg

In 2018, Andrea Winn, a former community member of the international Buddhist organization, Shambhala, published Buddhist Project Sunshine (BPS), three reports on the internet that revealed an intergenerational history of sexualized violence in Shambhala Buddhism.[1] In the wake of BPS, Sakyong Mipham, the spiritual leader of Shambhala, was forced to take a leave of absence, and a number of senior teachers resigned. In November 2019, a group of students from Chapman University, a private institution in Orange, California, visited Shambhala Mountain Center in Colorado for a university course. Afterward, they produced a news video exposing the sexualized and racist behavior of a Shambhala facilitator.[2] As a result, Shambhala released a public apology that announced the center's facilitator had been fired.[3]

In BPS and the Chapman University news video, the labor of analyzing abuse in Shambhala had fallen to survivors and undergraduate students. As two religious studies scholars collaborating on a book project about sexual abuse in American Buddhism, we take the emic perspective and knowledge production of both groups seriously. In both our ethnography and pedagogy, we approach survivors, community members, and undergraduate students horizontally as collaborators that we learn *from* and *with*. Here, we share how the principles of care and collaboration guide our interlinked feminist methodologies and pedagogies.

[1] Buddhist Project Sunshine, website, accessed January 27, 2021, https://andreamwinn.com/offerings/bps-welcome-page/.

[2] Chapman News, "Special Report: Secrets of Shambhala," December 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAyO0detH5k.

[3] Lilly Greenblatt, "Chapman University Suspends Travel Course to Shambhala Mountain Center, *Lion's Roar*, January 10, 2020, https://www.lionsroar.com/chapman-university-suspends-travel-course-to-shambhala-mountain-center/.

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We have been inspired by Emma Louise Backe's call for an "ethnography of care" to be enacted toward oneself and one's interlocutors when conducting research with sexual abuse survivors.[4] When interviewing survivors, we treat them as embodied subjects and co-knowledge constructors. This involves both having transparency with our interlocutors and giving them control over how they share their stories. For us, embarking on this book project as a collaboration in which we share analytic and affective labors is another expression of such care.

Just as feminist methodologies call for principles of collaboration and care so do feminist pedagogies. As Alison Jaggar explains, feminist pedagogies reject the goal of a transcendent "dispassionate investigator" and accept affective lived experience as a valuable component of knowledge.[5] In the classroom, we recognize undergraduate students as full subjects with their own lived experiences around issues of sexual violence. In fact, we have found that the ethical complexities surrounding consent and power inequity in cases of sexual violation are particularly alive for undergraduate students, who often possess a rich if vernacular language for describing sexual violence.

We have both taught the Buddhist sexual abuse cases in undergraduate religious studies classes at our respective institutions: Amy in a course titled Buddhism and Sexuality at Eckerd College (a small liberal arts college), and Ann as part of an online course on Asian Religions in America at the University of Central Florida (a large public state university). As an expression of care, we inform students in advance that the material we will encounter might bring up difficult emotions. For instance, Ann included the following statement in her online course: "Module Three will tackle the painful issue of sexual misconduct and abuse in American Buddhist and Hindu communities. The material might be upsetting or disturbing to some of you so I wanted to alert you in advance. If you have been subject to sexual violence and have any concerns, please reach out to me and we can talk through possible solutions."

Like our ethnography, our classroom pedagogy centers collaborative knowledge production. For instance, in Amy's course, students analyzed the video, "Tea and Consent," which explains sexual consent in terms of offering a friend a cup of tea and is often screened for incoming students at American colleges.[6] Students embraced the usefulness of affirmative consent ("Yes, I would like some tea!") as a rough standard for sorting ethical from unethical sex, while also acknowledging how easily the consent principle founders in real life. Drawing on their own experiences, they wrestled with what exactly constitutes an act of consent, the

[4] Emma Louise Backe, "Engagements with Ethnographic Care," *Anthropology News*, February 17, 2017, https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/AN.324.

[5] Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 3rd ed., ed. Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 486–501, quotation on 498.

[6] "Tea and Consent," November 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZwvrxVavnQ.

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impact of a variety of relationship contexts, and the social benefits of performing a casual attitude toward "hooking up." As we have learned, "grey rape" scenarios and boundary violations in dating are known territory to our students.

We have found these student perspectives invaluable in thinking through some of the primary material we adopt in our classrooms. For instance, we consider first-person accounts published on the internet like Rebecca Jamieson's description of her troubling sexual encounter with the ex-Shambhala Buddhist teacher, Lodro Rinzler.[7] Rinzler has publicly denied any misconduct, but Jamieson describes first resisting and then giving in to Rinzler's pressure to have sex so as to end the interaction quickly and without conflict.

While our students' explorations derive from personal experiences that generally have nothing to do with Buddhism, their insights are partially transferable to traditional Buddhist settings, where hierarchy, heteronormativity, and misogyny all play a role in sexual ethics. For instance, while our students honored differences in historical and cultural context, they intuitively read sections on sexual transgression in monastic disciplinary texts (*vinaya*) from a survivor-centered perspective. Illuminating the links between different groups in this way supports a feminist, postcolonial approach that seeks to avoid regarding the subject of study as wholly Other.

While collaboration and care are guiding principles, they do not preclude disagreement or discomfort. Our students will experience our classrooms as contested spaces in which they encounter material that is difficult to reconcile with apologetic views of religion. Productive disagreement and tension are easier to tolerate if students feel their voices are central to the learning that is taking place, and if they trust that the classroom community will hold a space for their full experiences. Through respecting our students as embodied subjects and knowledge co-constructors we create a horizontal and hospitable classroom culture in which students feel able to explore a variety of perspectives and do not fear disagreeing with the professor or one another.

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Amy Paris Langenberg *is associate professor of religious studies at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. She is the author of* Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom *(2017) and is currently working on a collaborative book project on Buddhism and sexual abuse with Ann Gleig.*

[7] Rebecca Jamieson, "Woven: Leaving Shambhala," *Entropy*, June 10, 2020, https://entropymag.org/woven-leaving-shambhala/.

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