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TEACHING ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE IN BUDDHISM IN AUSTRALIA

Anna Halafoff

While Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have received negative media coverage in recent years in Australia due to their association with violence, by contrast Buddhism has generally generated less controversy.[1] Australians tend to view Buddhism more positively than other minority religions.[2] However, structural violence within Buddhism, particularly related to gender and sexuality inequality, is widespread; this is being increasingly acknowledged and addressed by Buddhist scholars and activists.[3] Recently, public revelations of sexual abuse in Buddhist institutions have become the subject of ongoing academic research.[4]

I am a sociologist of religion with a background in peace studies. I recently developed a new curriculum focused on sexual abuse, and abuse more generally, within religious and state institutions. I teach this class to third-year students within a larger unit on religion, rights, and governance that is informed by critical theory and pedagogy and a feminist "ethics of care," which encourage students to examine issues of power and authority and principles of justice, non-harm, and freedom from oppression.[5]

[1] Enqi Weng and Anna Halafoff, "Media Representations of Religion, Spirituality and Non-Religion in Australia," *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 332–47.

[2] Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys 2019* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2019).

[3] Emma Tomalin, Caroline Starkey, and Anna Halafoff, "Cyber Sisters: Buddhist Women's Online Activism and Practice," in *Religion and Internet*, ed. Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larrson, and Enzo Pace, Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion Series, vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 11–33.

[4] Lilly Greenblatt, "Buddhist Scholars Receive Grant to Document Sexual Abuse in American Buddhism," *Lion's Roar*, July 26, 2019, https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhist-scholars-receive-grant-to-document-sexual-abuse-in-american-buddhism; and "Inform Seminar: Sexual Abuse Framed by Faith or Belief," July 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5itTMZadhOc&feature=youtu.be.

[5] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Carol Gilligan,

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This unit now includes a case study focused on survivors of abuse perpetrated by Sogyal Rinpoche, a world-renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher, founder of the Buddhist international organization Rigpa, and author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. I am positioning the discussion according to McPhillips's three-point method of identifying the issue, analyzing it from multiple perspectives, and then examining social justice outcomes. I also use a variety of sources, including scholarly publications, enquiry reports, survivor testimonies, videos, and media reportage for students examining this topic, following McPhillips's example.

Students read the 2017 letter, written by eight of Sogyal Rinpoche's former long-serving students, which contained allegations of his severe emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.[6] One of the authors, Damcho Dyson (Michelle Tonkin), is an Australian and former Buddhist nun who was one of Sogyal's close attendants and is a survivor of his physical abuse. Students also examine reporting of the case in the popular U.S. Buddhist magazine *Lion's Roar* and in the Australian newspaper, *Sydney Morning Herald*.[7] They then study a conference paper, titled "Personal Reflections on Rigpa and the Aftershocks of the Fall of Sogyal Rinpoche," delivered by Dyson, Tahlia Newland, and Jacki Wicks at the sixteenth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Australia in June 2019.[8] Students then read excerpts from a 2018 independent legal inquiry that substantiates the claims of abuse made by Rinpoche's students.[9] In class, we watch a YouTube video of Tonkin's (Dyson's) presentation in the 2020 Inform Seminar called Sexual Abuse Framed by Faith or Belief, based on a forthcoming INFORM publication book chapter, that will become a set reading for my unit in 2022, once it has been published.[10]

In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[6] Mark Standlee, Sangye, Damcho, Matteo Pistono, Joanne Standlee, Graham Price, Michael Condon, Gary Goldman, "Letter to Sogyal," July 14, 2017, https://www.lionsroar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Letter-to-Sogyal-Lakar-14-06-2017-.pdf.

[7] Rod Meade Sperry and Sam Littlefair, "Letter to Sogyal Rinpoche from Current and Ex-Rigpa Members Details Abuse Allegations," *Lion's Roar*, July 20, 2017, https://www.lionsroar.com/letter-to-sogyal-rinpoche-from-current-and-ex-rigpa-members-details-abuse-allegations/; and David Leser, "Sogyal Rinpoche and the Abuse Accusations Rocking the Buddhist World," *Sydney Morning Herald*, last updated December 1, 2017, https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/sogyal-rinpoche-and-the-abuse-accusations-rocking-the-buddhist-world-20171115-gzm7ra.html.

[8] Damcho Dyson, Tahlia Newland, and Jacki Wicks, "Personal Reflections on Rigpa and the Aftershocks of the Fall of Sogyal Rinpoche" (paper delivered at the New Horizons in Buddhism: Sixteenth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, Blue Mountains, Australia, June 2019).

[9] Karen Baxter, Lewis Silkin LLP, "Report to the Boards of Trustees of: Rigpa Fellowship UK, and Rigpa Fellowship US," August 22, 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580dbe87e6f2e16700cb79fe/t/5b8f7c1e1ae6cfb38491e668/1536130081917/Lewis+Silkin+report.pdf.

[10] "Sexual Abuse Framed by Faith or Belief—Exploring Boundaries and Contexts," Inform Seminar, YouTube, July 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5itTMZadhOc.

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Given the sensitivity of the topic, and again following McPhillips's trauma-informed method, students are provided with a trauma-informed protocol based on advice from the Australian Blue Knot Foundation, the National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma to help guide our discussions.[11] Students will receive prior notice of the subject matter and participation in this week's tutorial discussion is not compulsory. I also provide phone numbers of Australian telephone sexual assault and domestic violence, crisis support, and suicide-prevention help-services 1800 Respect and Lifeline to all students.[12] Our class protocol is also informed by my peace studies training, with skills needed for facilitating and participating in difficult conversations, so they can be conducted carefully and critically.

Anna Halafoff *teaches in sociology and religious studies at Deakin University, Australia. Her research interests include religious diversity; religion, violence, and peacebuilding; worldviews education; Buddhism and gender; and Buddhism in Australia.*

[11] Cathy Kezelman and Pam Stavropoulos, *Talking about Trauma: Guide to Everyday Conversations for the General Public* (Milsons Point, NSW: Blue Knot Foundation, 2017), https://www.blueknot.org.au/Resources/Publications/Talking-about-trauma/Talking_About_Trauma_Public.

[12] 1800 Respect, website, accessed January 27, 2021, https://www.1800respect.org.au; and Lifeline, website, accessed January 27, 2021, https://www.lifeline.org.au.

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