The Pluralism Project
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

A Meditation on Misconduct (A)

At 26 years old, Jessica Bizub was newly married, with a research position she loved, yet she often found herself asking: "Is there something more?"[1] One evening, she picked up a small red book from her bookshelf: *Awakening Loving-Kindness*, by Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun. The book, from a one-credit college meditation class, resonated more strongly now: "I felt like she had something that I wanted to explore … She had this way of telling the truth about things in a warm-hearted way, which I thought was really unique." Bizub regularly drove past the Shambhala Meditation Center of Milwaukee on Oakland Avenue on the way to work at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and recognized the name Shambhala as the publisher of Pema Chödrön's book.[2] After months of driving by the low brick building with a deep blue awning, Bizub decided to attend an open house.

Tuesday open houses at the Shambhala Center included 45 minutes of meditation, a talk, and a tea social. With the broad vowels of a slight Wisconsin accent, Bizub is more inclined to serious conversation than small talk. She attended the open houses intermittently for two years before signing up for her first class. Once she did, her involvement "accelerated": before long, she was hosting the open house and facilitating retreats. Bizub coordinated a visit from a senior Acharya before she knew the title meant "teacher"; he became her mentor and guide. Soon, she was appointed *Rusung* of the Milwaukee Center, the "protector" of the teachings, the teachers, and the community; then, at 35 years old, Bizub was appointed to a three-year term as Center Director. Her appointment letter was signed by the spiritual and temporal leader of Shambhala, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche ("The Sakyong").

Through Shambhala, Bizub found peace and purpose. She believed in Shambhala's mission of training people in meditation and the study of wisdom and compassion. "It felt really aligned with my values and the kind of impact I was hoping to have on the world." As Center Director, she enjoyed providing care to the community, including a steady stream of new meditation students, some long-term members, and a group of advanced practitioners known as Vajrayana students. In her new role, Bizub had two priorities: fixing the roof and building a "sense of togetherness" in a community with varied levels of practice and training. Bizub began inviting each member, at every level of training and practice, to lunch or coffee; she wanted to hear their concerns and learn what they wanted to contribute to the community.

In February 2018—shortly before her appointment—Shambhala International's governing body sent an email to the community about sexual abuse. For Bizub, this email from the Kalapa Council seemed "out of the blue." It stated: "In our complex history there have been instances of sexual harm and inappropriate relations between members and between teachers and students. We are still emerging from a time in which such cases were not always addressed with care and skill. In particular, inappropriate or even abhorrent sexual behavior by some men in the community has caused some women to feel unsafe."[3] The email affirmed Shambhala's "Care and Conduct" policy and procedure for investigating complaints. Bizub recalled, "I kind of regarded it as a distraction." She reflected, "The tone of it was like, 'Oh, we've already handled all this. This is all in the past.'" She wasn't aware of anything happening at the Center. And, she thought, "We have a roof to fix."

As Bizub continued with fundraising for the roof and hosting meetings—in addition to her full-time job at the University—she noticed additional emails from Shambhala leadership on the topic of sexual misconduct. On June 21, 2018, the Kalapa Council announced the creation of a Sexual Harm Task Force. Shortly after, the Sakyong wrote a letter to the community, stating: "It is my wish for you to know that in my past there have been times when I have engaged in relationships with women in the Shambhala community. I have recently

learned that some of these women have shared experiences of feeling harmed as a result of these relationships. I am now making a public apology."[4] He continued, "Kindness can sometimes begin with acknowledging the ways we have harmed others, even if we did not intend to do so."[5] The Sakyong noted that, with the support of his wife, he would enter "a period of self-reflection and listening."[6] He added: "I have worked with, and at times struggled with, how to be a teacher and a human being."[7] Bizub was surprised to learn of the Sakyong's relationships with students, although she appreciated his apology and humility.

Then, on June 28, 2018, Buddhist Project Sunshine (BPS) released a report detailing allegations against the Sakyong, including sexual assault, alcohol abuse, and sexual relations with numerous female students; more so, it implicated the Sakyong's staff in facilitating misconduct.[8] Reading it, Bizub was in shock: "I was trying to come to terms with what I was reading about the Sakyong and square that with my image of him." When she met him, Bizub found him to be reserved and reflective; she regularly heard that the Sakyong was a family man and a disciplined athlete. She wondered, "Is this true? What does it mean if it is true?" Some in the community quickly dismissed the claims as exaggerated or blown out of proportion. But Bizub, who has short, pixie-style hair and the thoughtful, intentional manner of a long-time meditator, reflected on those accusing him: "[T]hey have a lot to lose by coming out on this. And I feel like people generally don't make this up."

The Sakyong's presence was woven into the fabric of the community, from his framed image on the shrines to the portraits of his family on the walls; from his books that lined the bookshelves to the foundational teachings of his father, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The Sakyong was not just the leader of Shambhala, but the sole living "lineage holder," connecting the Shambhala community to Trungpa, the ancient teachers in Tibet, and to the Buddha. Confused and still processing the news, Bizub knew she needed to reach out to the Milwaukee community, but before doing so she paused and took a deep breath. She didn't know how she felt, or what to say.

The Shambhala Meditation Center of Milwaukee

Bizub felt a sense of pride in the Shambhala Meditation Center of Milwaukee: one of the first to be established in North America, by 2018 it was one of more than 170 Shambhala centers around the globe, with some 90 in the U.S.[9] The Milwaukee center began in the 1970s as a Dharma Study Group that met in David Shapiro and Jane Hawes's living room. With their embrace of Trungpa's teachings, the community quickly grew. The Shapiros rented a building and were later granted official status as the Milwaukee Dharmadhatu Center in 1982. With continued growth, the community purchased a former mechanic shop on Oakland Avenue: it became known as the Milwaukee Shambhala Meditation Center in 1995.[10]

The humble building exterior offers little clue to the colorful decorations, extensive meditation practices, and vital community inside: the heart of the Center is the large meditation room with an elaborate shrine, following established Shambhala form. At every Shambhala Center around the world, three images are displayed above the central public shrine: a Tibetan painting, the Primordial Rigden Tanghka, depicting an enlightened royal figure seated upon a throne; framed photographs of Trungpa and the Sakyong are placed on either side. When visitors and new students inquired about these representations of royalty and reverence, Bizub would explain that these images were reminders of spiritual awakening, not objects of worship. Similarly, she noted, the Rigden Thangka at the center of the shrine represented diverse Buddhist lineages and teachings, united through Shambhala; its royal depictions were not indicative of hierarchy, but symbolized the enlightened nature of all people.

While the Sakyong was the sole living lineage holder in Shambhala, his father's teachings—and remarkable story—still animated the Shambhala community. Trungpa fled Tibet at the age of 20, escaping Chinese communist rule on foot through treacherous Himalayan mountain passes, to India. With monastic education in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and training in the Nyingma tradition, Trungpa favored a non-sectarian approach. In India, he was appointed by the Dalai Lama as spiritual advisor to a school for young Lamas. In 1963, Trungpa moved to the U.K. for further studies; later, he established the first center of Tibetan Buddhist practice in the West in Scotland. Trungpa gave up his monastic vows, married, and came to the U.S. in 1970; he opened his first meditation center in Barnet, Vermont the same year.[11]

Trungpa quickly distinguished himself by his charismatic style and compelling way of adapting the Tibetan Buddhist teachings to the West, founding new meditation centers and the first Buddhist University in the U.S. A prolific writer, his 1973 book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, offered teachings about the joyous liberation that comes from letting go of the self. Touring and teaching at a time in which many Americans were embracing alternative spiritual paths and practices, Trungpa became one of the most important Buddhist teachers in America. Sometimes called "the bad boy of Buddhism,"[12] the venerated teacher was known for his drinking, smoking, and relationships with students, as well as for his idiosyncratic teaching style. He referred to this method and message as "crazy wisdom," an opportunity for true awakening through unconventional means.

In the mid-1970s, Trungpa began receiving new teachings, preserved as *Terma* or "treasure" texts for more advanced students; he also began developing a secular form of "Shambhala training" to bring meditation to a broader audience. By the early 1980s, his umbrella organization Vajradhatu included more than 100 meditation centers across the world. Trungpa died in 1987, and by 1990 his eldest son took on leadership; from that point forward, the community would be known as Shambhala. Like the legendary kingdom after which it was named, Shambhala sought to build an "enlightened society."

For Bizub, this vision of an enlightened society was enacted every day through the Milwaukee community's meditation study and practice. Before the allegations against the Sakyong, Bizub was thriving in the role of Center Director. She enjoyed a wide range of responsibilities, from chairing the governing council to implementing the vision and policies of Shambhala; more so, she was tasked with "leading by example" in the practice and study of the Shambhala dharma. As Bizub considered the seriousness of the allegations, and the Sakyong's intention to reflect and repair the damage he'd caused, she thought: "[In] Shambhala, warriorship is being willing to face the truth no matter how painful it is." For years, she learned about basic goodness and kindness in the service of an enlightened society. Bizub thought, "OK, we've trained for this. We know how to face things directly. We know how to have courage. We know how to have warm hearts and work with it." Resolved, Bizub sat down to draft an email to the Milwaukee community.

"Community Chaos"

On June 29, 2018, Bizub wrote an email to the broader Milwaukee Shambhala community on behalf of the governing council. She offered guidance on the importance of self-care and emphasized that there wasn't one "right way" to respond: "[W]hatever you are feeling and experiencing now is okay—it is natural, understandable, and human in the most positive sense of the word."[13] She continued, "I personally find myself cycling through many emotions, including heartbreak, disbelief, anger, confusion, and worry."[14] The letter detailed the resources available within the community and beyond—including phone numbers for mental health and sexual abuse hotlines. Bizub's message concluded: "[P]lease know I am holding our community in

my heart with deep conviction in basic goodness and the profound, immediate potential of humans to manifest enlightened society in every moment."[15]

Shortly after, on July 3, she sent a second email to a group of more active members in the Milwaukee community, offered as a personal reflection: "I have been wondering what all of my time in Shambhala has been truly valuable to me, if the Sakyong is not the person I imagined him to be. Turns out—a lot. I feel that my experiences of my own and others' basic goodness are undeniable. I know in my heart that the practices and teachings have benefitted me. I have tasted a sense of fundamental healthiness and wholeness that changed my life."[16] She also called upon the leadership of Shambhala to confront the truth: "If those in the highest leadership positions in Shambhala do not fully examine all aspects of what happened and how it happened, I feel that Shambhala will be severely damaged for at least a generation. In our cultural context, any attempt to gloss over events, explain them away, neatly put them in the past, or deny their impact will cause deep distrust among existing and potential community members."[17] Underscoring her sense of resolve, she noted: "This is an opportunity to clean up our past karma, make necessary changes, and demonstrate our principles." She explained: "I do know that right now, I feel steadfast in my conviction in basic goodness and in the vision of enlightened society. …[N]o matter what, it will be a rocky journey. I hope the journey will be worthwhile."[18]

Three days later, on July 6, all nine members of the Kalapa Council, the international governing board of Shambhala, resigned under pressure. The same day, the Sakyong's office announced he was "stepping back"[19] from teaching. In the wake of the report from Buddhist Project Sunshine, it became clear that the highest levels of governance were aware of the Sakyong's misconduct—as well as misconduct by some Acharyas, Center Directors, and other leadership. Bizub noted, "It was incredible community chaos." Before resigning, the Kalapa Council identified a "Transition Task Force" to identify a new board. They also hired an independent investigator, Wickwire Holm, to document the allegations and engaged the services of An Olive Branch, a Buddhist conflict resolution organization, to help promote justice and healing in the community.

While many in the global Shambhala community were in shock over the loss of the leadership, Bizub thought: "It's appropriate." She reflected, "[W]ith the Kalapa Council, these are the people who have been enabling and covering up. They can't fix the mess." As for the Sakyong, she thought, he had much work to do: "In my opinion, he should take responsibility for his actions, not how someone 'received' them." She felt there should be reparations to the survivors. The "misconduct" was like an open wound: "When you're wounded, you don't just go on with your day. You attend to your wound, because it's hurt. … You take care of the hurting part." She looked forward to more guidance from the Interim Board about the next steps, but felt encouraged. She thought: "OK. Now all of our training is going to come to bear. And we're going to deal with this." At the same time, she wondered quietly to herself: "But what if we don't?"

Jessica's Path

When Bizub first visited the Milwaukee Center, she was "looking for Buddhism." A researcher by profession as well as personality, one of her first questions was about the relationship of Shambhala to Buddhism. On Shambhala's website, she read:

> Shambhala vision is rooted in the contemplative teachings of Buddhism, yet is a fresh expression of the spiritual journey for our time; it is available to practitioners of any tradition. Our lineage draws on the wisdom of the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism as inherited by founder of Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa and his son and spiritual heir, Sakyong Mipham.[20]

Although the terminology of Shambhala and the use of Tibetan and Sanskrit words could be opaque at first, the core teachings about compassion, kindness, and building an enlightened society were clear. As she observed when hosting open houses, many were drawn to Shambhala for the secular, accessible starting point of the teachings. Trungpa regularly taught that people of all faiths could practice Shambhala meditation.

Raised a Catholic, Bizub found comfort in her own tradition, but reflected, "It never felt like home to me." After two years in Shambhala, she formally became a Buddhist. Bizub took a refuge name, Sherap Ridak (Prajna Deer), with origins in the Sanskrit word *prajna*, wisdom, and *ridak*, the Tibetan word for deer. Like many in the Shambhala community, she and her husband set up a small shrine for home practice, including images of Trungpa and the Sakyong and the same Rigden Tanghka that appeared above every Shambhala Center shrine. The Rigden Tanghka, with an image of an enlightened being seated upon a throne, was said to be a reflection of human potential; Bizub explained, "It's like looking into a mirror and you could see yourself as an enlightened being."

As Center Director, Bizub offered visitors and new students the same message she heard during the first open houses: although the Shambhala path includes five levels of training, each with increasing complexity and intensity of practice, they are entirely optional. It was regularly said among the Shambhala Acharyas that the most important teachings happen at level one. You don't have to become a monk, or even a Buddhist. Beyond the five-level path, advanced students could apply to participate in special retreats and assemblies, at which new teachings were introduced; some became dedicated Vajrayana students, many taking a special vow of *samaya* with the Sakyong. In many Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, *samaya* is understood as an unbreakable spiritual contract between teacher and student. Today in Shambhala, this contract, and the highest levels of teaching, are exclusive to one teacher, the Sakyong. At the Milwaukee Center, like many Shambhala Centers, the Vajrayana students had a separate shrine area for their advanced practices of study and meditation.

Bizub enthusiastically pursued the five-step path and attended retreats and assemblies, but stopped short of the most advanced steps: attending the Sacred World Assembly, becoming a personal student of the Sakyong, and taking the vow of *samaya*. "I never really felt compelled to," she recalled. With a full-time job, it could be difficult to take time off work, and the programs were expensive. Also, with the introduction of the *Terma*, or revealed teachings, she noticed a subtle shift in emphasis: for example, the notion of king and queen became more prominent, and more literal. Bizub felt confident in her chosen path, but was aware that, even as a Center Director, there would be Shambhala programs she would not be welcome to attend and texts she would not be permitted to read.

The Milwaukee community often divided itself along lines of training and practice: as a practical matter, it was not permitted for advanced practitioners to conduct their practices or discuss them with those not authorized. This divide deepened after the allegations against the Sakyong and other senior leaders in the community. As the months passed, waiting for results from the independent investigation and guidance from An Olive Branch, some members drifted away from community. Worldwide, Shambhala membership was shrinking. The regular stream of new meditation students into the Milwaukee Center was now barely a trickle, and those who came often asked questions that were difficult to answer. One of those questions, which went unspoken by members at the center, was about the shrine photos: "So, that leader who is accused of abuse is still on the shrine?"

At other centers, the shrine photos were a source of division and debate: on her regular phone calls with other Center Directors, Bizub learned of painful community meetings between those who couldn't tolerate the presence of the Sakyong's photo on the shrine and those who wouldn't tolerate its absence. At Karmê Chöling in Vermont, the first Shambhala Center in the U.S., shrine photos of both the Sakyong and Trungpa were

covered up—and later removed—after many difficult and divisive meetings. Bizub wondered why the issue hadn't come up in Milwaukee: Was it because the investigations were under way? Was it an expression of "Midwest Nice," in which direct conflict was actively avoided? She hoped the Interim Board would offer guidance to centers on the matter of shrine photos to avoid the "self-cannibalizing" that was happening in other communities.

One evening, on the way into the center, Bizub was greeted by a photograph of the Sakyong just inside the front door. She walked by it many times, but that night she stopped to look at the image and think about all of the pain the community was experiencing. She thought to herself: "I don't really need that to be the first thing I see when I come to work. It's a little bit much." She removed the photo from the wall, wrapping it in white silky scarves, *katas*, which are ceremoniously offered to teachers. Then, she gently placed the photo in a closet.

A Letter from the Kusung and a Letter from the Center Director

On February 3, 2019, the independent investigators, Wickwire Holm, verified the claims of abuse victims: for decades, senior teachers, center directors, and the Sakyong, were engaged in misconduct and abuses of power.[21] Still reeling from the news, two weeks later, Bizub and the Shambhala community received an email from a group of former *Kusung* ("body protectors" or guards) who served the Sakyong directly, 24 hours a day, across a 20-year period. They wanted to add to, rather than recant, the reports of abuse. The email referred to the Sakyong without his ceremonial title, as simply "Mr. Mukpo":

> Given Mr. Mukpo's position as sole authority of Shambhala, we feel a moral obligation to alert others in order to avoid further harm and provide direct unfiltered feedback to Mr. Mukpo. … Mr. Mukpo has a long-standing history of questionable behavior towards his students, ranging from crude harmful speech to physical and psychological abuse. This has occurred both while he was drinking heavily and in the absence of alcohol. He has also consistently propagated misuse of organizational funds. In our opinion, his abuse of power goes far beyond the limited scope of the Wickwire Holm investigation. … Most of us have been subjected to his abuse. At times we have also been inadvertent enablers of Mr. Mukpo's behavior. … The more we ignored our own intuition, the more people were harmed, and the more damage was propagated.[22]

The letter sought to validate those who spoke out and recognized that many were facing "gaslighting or minimization."[23] It continued:

> Often there is a theme of imploring us to believe that Mr. Mukpo's behavior is beyond our understanding. We are asked to regard such activity as the guru's method of waking us up. But, looking around the world, there's nothing so prosaic as a leader using his power and position to take advantage of people under his care. By endorsing this letter we are both affirming these words and standing in support of those who've been exploited or harmed. … It has taken this long for us to come forward because the journey was replete with self-doubt, shame, and grief.[24]

After reading the letter, and six detailed accounts from respected ex-guards, Bizub put down her laptop and laid down on the floor of her apartment. "I needed to feel the ground beneath me." The information was almost too much to take in.

In the days that followed, there was more correspondence from Sakyong, the Interim Board, and the Acharyas. On February 26, Bizub reached out to the Milwaukee community. After apologizing for writing yet another

letter, she noted, "[E]ven during this storm of speech we can still strengthen our practice and relationships with each other."[25] She emphasized the importance of respecting others in this difficult time, and of self-care. She continued:

> This is also a tremendously powerful time for each of us to discern what has been truly valuable on our path and what can be discarded. Personally, my life has been made richer and more meaningful because of the Shambhala teachings, practices, and community, all of which inspire me to be a more gentle and courageous person. … For my part, I choose anew to be here, at this time, in this role, and I give myself full permission to change course, should that seem better for my path."[26]

In the letter, she encouraged the community to "take the time to reflect, and then trust your own wisdom and heart about what is right for you."[27] Bizub recognized that this was a message she needed to hear as well. For the past few months, she was often reacting to the latest update or responding to community needs; it seemed there was little time for quiet reflection. Stress was causing health issues and weight loss. But, for now, she would keep her focus on her community, many of whom were confused and traumatized. As a first step, she would begin planning a series of community conversations to chart a path forward together.

An Olive Branch

Before the Kalapa Council resigned in July 2018, they engaged the services of An Olive Branch. A project of the Zen Center of Pittsburgh, AOB was developed in 2011 "to help spiritual communities as they react to the suffering, chaos, and breakdown that results from ethical misconduct. We provide processes for healing and restoring harmony."[28] Together, they identified Shambhala's "most urgent needs" as the development of a new ethics policy and grievance procedure and to provide a safe way for individuals to report harm. An Olive Branch released its final report on March 19, 2019, after six months of work. It included the results of "the Listening Post," a phone line for victims of abuse in Shambhala to report harm and seek support. They documented 51 accounts of sexual abuse, seven accounts of child abuse, ten accounts of physical abuse, and twelve accounts of psychological abuse. The Sakyong and Trungpa were among those accused, in addition to Center Directors and senior teachers in Shambhala.[29]

The report offered recommendations based on their experience working with other "Buddhist/religious organizations that have encountered allegations of misconduct by their cherished leaders."[30] AOB detailed common patterns:

> [W]e have witnessed the organizational culture dynamics that inevitably occur when organizations concentrate spiritual and operational/secular and fiscal power in one person with no checks and balances. Too often cultures of silence arise that enable the misconduct to continue unchallenged and doubly traumatize those who have been harmed if they try to speak up. These cultures often employ subtle shaming tactics that reinforce members' desire for inclusion at the expense of honesty. But these dynamics generally lead to a climate of mistrust.
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> When confronted with ethical misconduct and abuse of power on the part of a spiritual leader(s), organizations have a choice. Do they circle the wagons, do everything they can to protect the organization, and make the complaints go away? Or do they respond quickly, appropriately, and compassionately to those who are harmed while, at the same time, dispensing justice to perpetrators of harm?[31]

Bizub felt deep admiration for community members who were speaking up about harm in a culture that was just beginning to confront their destructive patterns. She knew how hard it was to speak up when something didn't feel right. Earlier in her tenure, while traveling with a senior teacher, he made a comment about her to a group of students she didn't know, joking: "'Oh, Jessica and I are going home together tonight.'" She felt the color rising to her cheeks, embarrassed: they were simply staying at the same residence; their only relationship was that of a student and a teacher. "I just felt very disrespected." Yet she didn't say anything; she didn't want to make the senior teacher uncomfortable, change their relationship, damage her own reputation, or alienate others in the community. He was a source of spiritual guidance, and as a senior teacher, there was a "power differential": he was in a position to recommend her for advanced programs and leadership roles. This would not be the only time a senior male teacher would make inappropriate comments to her as a young, female student. Bizub didn't suffer the kind of harm others were reporting, yet she knew what it meant to feel silenced and diminished by a spiritual teacher.

Bizub hoped that Shambhala was on the right path now, with clear recommendations and an updated code of ethics from An Olive Branch. Change was possible, she thought, given the interim board's unequivocal statement that accompanied the report: "The Shambhala community can no longer deny or ignore sexual violence, harassment, and other forms of structural violence. At this critical time, we ask the entire sangha to reflect on what needs to change, and what we wish to preserve."[32]

After the report, Bizub began hearing calls for change from some of the younger members of the Milwaukee community, including one question that had gone unspoken for months: "Can we talk about the shrine photos?" Without guidance from Shambhala leadership, she felt any decision about shrine photos of the Sakyong should take into consideration all of the views of the community.

"No Right, No Wrong"

When Bizub started her role as Center Director, she wanted to mend the roof and the lack of cohesion in the community. One year later, the roof project was underway, but there was now a deepening rift in the community. Many advanced students regularly defended the Sakyong, expressing concern that the allegations were untrue or exaggerated; worse, Bizub thought, some justified his actions by citing Buddhist teachings. Some distributed "No Right, No Wrong," a 1993 interview of Pema Chödrön from the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*. The interviewer noted the "paradox" that a celibate Buddhist nun is a leader in a community based on the teachings of Trungpa Rinpoche, who was known to drink heavily and have sex with his students, and asked a pointed question: "Today, even some students who were once devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche have had a change of heart. Behavior that they may have formerly considered enlightened they now consider wrong. Has there been a shift in your own outlook?"[33]

Chödrön responded:

> My undying devotion to Trungpa Rinpoche comes from his teaching me in every way he could that you can never make things right or wrong. I consider it my good fortune that somehow I was thrown into a way of understanding Buddhism which in the Zen tradition is called "don't know mind": Don't know. Don't know right. Don't know wrong. As far as I'm concerned, if you're going to make things right and wrong you can never even talk about fulfilling your bodhisattva vows…. My sense of what it means to be a bodhisattva on the path, a student-warrior-bodhisattva, is that you are constantly caught with "don't know." Can't say yes, can't say no. Can't say right, can't say wrong. Trungpa Rinpoche was a provocative person. In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* he says that the job of

> the spiritual friend is to insult the student, and that's the kind of guy he was. If things got too smooth, he'd create chaos. All I can say is that I needed that. … It showed me how I was stuck in habitual patterns.

When asked about reports of sexual misconduct by teachers, Chödrön replied:

> When women come to me with these complaints, I never say, "Oh, there's no harm being done, this is just your trip." I ask, "Do you really want things to heal? Or do you just want to make someone wrong? Do you just want to get revenge on someone who hurt you or do you want things to heal?" … It is not dharma to make the teacher that you feel is doing harm your enemy. You have to find a way to relate to the feelings that that teacher brings up in you and to communicate from the heart with that teacher. If another person is not healed, then you are not healed, and if you aren't, they aren't. The habitual human pattern is to try to get rid of our own suffering by blaming it on someone else, or by blaming it on oneself. In either case you make somebody wrong. The dharma's about stepping into the groundlessness of neither right nor wrong.

Bizub recognized that Chödrön's statements came from a time before the Sakyong was in a leadership role, and long before the #MeToo movement, yet she found the message deeply troubling. In addition, she thought: "Not being able to discern positive from negative actions is totally antithetical to my understanding of Buddhism. …This is not my understanding of dharma. This is not my understanding of what it means to be a person with integrity or caring for others—of not causing harm, trying to be a benefit." In a Buddhist Project Sunshine report, Chödrön was among those accused of mishandling concerns about abuse; she later met with one of the victims and apologized, acknowledging that she had not been skillful in her response. Re-reading the interview, Bizub felt a rising sense of dissonance.

Bizub recognized that, despite the reports and recommendations in recent months, she was hearing little formal response from Shambhala International. She reflected, "There's no information coming… And I can't get responses to questions, to very direct questions about what's happening. And this is when my anxiety is going up." She had little patience for victim-blaming and minimization, and even less for dharmasplaining: "That is a misapplication of the teachings, and it's actually harmful to do that." She thought to herself, "This place might not be what I thought it was. Or they don't understand these things the way I do, anyways."

Community Conversations

While Bizub welcomed community discussion about the shrine photos, she knew it would be difficult. Many of the tensions were unspoken: at the center, she would regularly find photos of the Sakyong and his family face down, or placed on the ground. Now, they would be coming together for community conversations. She recalled: "Imagine being in a room with people, some of whom regard the Sakyong as their personal teacher who's going to help them achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, and other people who are like, 'Oh no, I never really felt any way about him; I kind of think he's an asshole.'" Nervous but optimistic, Bizub hosted the first conversation in mid-March. Sitting together in the large meditation room, the atmosphere was tense. Bizub opened the floor for discussion. The community was familiar with the Shambhala emphasis on conversation as a means to come to consensus. She began by emphasizing that there was room for all opinions: "There are as many opinions in the room as there are people and we need to respect that."

Bizub recalled, "The first person to talk was a Vajrayana student who said, 'When I hear people say bad things about the Sakyong, I get really upset because it's like you're saying bad things about my father or my

brother.'" After that, the room was quiet: the voices of dissent were silenced. Bizub felt blindsided: she assumed the senior students would have the "patience" to hear other opinions. "I figured everybody would be chill and relaxed and let people speak and have their space." Bizub felt it was important for community members to hear each other, but the words of the senior student had "a huge chilling effect." She thought, "Oh, shoot, I really screwed up as the facilitator. I don't know how to come back from this."

As she considered her next steps, she reflected upon another dark chapter of Shambhala history. In the mid-1970s, Trungpa appointed Osel Tendzin (Tom Rich), to lead Shambhala as the "Vajra Regent." The first Westerner to be recognized as a lineage holder in the Kagyu tradition, the Regent was known as a gifted teacher—and known to prey on young men in the community. After his death, it was revealed that he knowingly infected at least one student with AIDS. Some disillusioned members left the community; of those who stayed, Bizub observed, most never spoke of it again. The Center Director at the time took a different approach, Bizub noted: "He had a real strong reaction." He wrote a scathing letter, unilaterally took down photos of the Regent, and removed the teacher's chair. The Regent's photos were gone from the Milwaukee center, but his misdeeds—and the opportunities for learning they presented—were largely scrubbed from community memory. And if they considered taking down the photos of the Sakyong, what about the images of their founding teacher, Trungpa?

In her own home, the photos of the Sakyong and Trungpa, and the Rigden Thangka, had already come down. While Bizub understood that the images were emblematic, they were not her key concern: Shambhala was in crisis, people had been hurt, and the changes that needed to be made wouldn't be solved by the mere removal of framed images above a shrine. She entertained another, more radical, idea: perhaps the Milwaukee Center should disaffiliate from Shambhala International altogether? A few other centers had taken this path after the reports of misconduct; why not Milwaukee? Yet she realized that the building, the heart of the community, and its assets, would be retained by Shambhala. It seemed that the Sakyong, directly or indirectly, owned much of Shambhala. Bizub recognized that most of the advanced Vajrayana students would stay with Shambhala, so if they broke away, there would still be a Shambhala Center in Milwaukee; however, the majority of the community would have to find another place to meditate and study. Also, she wondered, what would they study in place of the Shambhala curriculum?

After a year as Center Director, Bizub was drained. Naturally slender and slight of frame, by March 2019 she had lost 20 pounds. Until the discussion about the shrine photos, she felt proud of how she was handling the difficult circumstances. Working with a community she loved, leaving her role as Center Director didn't seem like a viable option: "I took this oath. I'm committed for three years. My community generally thinks I'm doing a good job." But the pressure and stress were beginning to take a toll. With her marriage breaking up at the same time, she felt overwhelmed by a sense of overall pressure and fatigue. "Just really fatigued." She booked an Airbnb at an old farmhouse outside of Madison for a couple of nights, just to get away.

At the farmhouse, nestled into a hillside next to a horse ranch, she found herself in conversation with another guest over dinner. She described some of the events of the past year: the allegations, the increasing feelings of dissonance, and the struggle to find a path forward. Like the best spiritual teachers, this stranger cut through her confusion with a simple statement: "Jessica, there's more to you than Shambhala." Her husband, her teachers, her meditation practice, her leadership role, and most of her social life, were all within Shambhala. Until then, she saw her future as becoming more and more deeply involved. Yet somehow, the stranger's comment "broke the spell." It also opened up new possibilities. As she drove back to Milwaukee, through the rolling hills, she considered her options: "At that point, I could have talked myself into anything: I could've talked myself into staying, I could've talked myself into going, I could've talked myself into trying to find a

different governance model, or any—there were good reasons to do all of it." But first, she'd need to address the shrine photos.

Endnotes

[1] All quotes from Jessica Bizub, unless otherwise noted, interview by author, via Zoom, May 29 and June 3, 2020.

[2] While Shambhala Publications publishes titles by Shambhala teachers and the founder of Shambhala International, its website (Shambhala.com) notes: "Since our start in 1969, Shambhala Publications has been an independent, family-owned company, and we are not affiliated with the organization Shambhala International and its network of Shambhala centers."

[3] Shambhala, "Shambhala Community Letter Addressing Harm (from Kalapa Council)," Feb 12, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/Shambhala.org/posts/1999897840264640, accessed May 2020.

[4] "A Message from Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche," June 25, 2018, communication from Kalapa Council online, https://mailchi.mp/1cedc6001e4a/kalapa-council-quarterly-update-767203?e=c0b519322c, accessed May 2020.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Andrea Winn/ Buddhist Project Sunshine "Buddhist Project Sunshine Phase 2 Final Report," (PDF file) downloaded from Buddhist Project Sunshine archive on Andrea Winn Web site, https://andreamwinn.com/project_sunshine/Buddhist_Project_Sunshine_Phase_2_Final_Report.pdf, accessed May 2020. (For more information on Buddhist Project Sunshine, established Andrea Winn, a 2nd generation Shambhala Buddhist, please see: https://andreamwinn.com/offerings/bps-welcome-page/)

[9] Shambhala, "Centers: Shambhala Worldwide," (via Wayback Machine for April 2010) https://web.archive.org/web/20100403090741/http://www.shambhala.org/centers, accessed June 2020.

[10] Gathering Places: Religion & Community in Milwaukee Web site, "Shambhala Meditation Center: The Dharma Study Group," https://liblamp.uwm.edu/omeka/gatheringplaces/neatline/fullscreen/smcmke#records/154, accessed May 2020.

[11] Shambhala, "Chögyam Trungpa," https://shambhala.org/teachers/chogyam-trungpa/, accessed June 2020.

[12] Crazy Wisdom The Movie, "Synopsis," https://crazywisdomthemovie.com/synopsis/, accessed June 2020.

[13] Jessica Bizub email to Milwaukee Shambhala Community mailing list regarding Buddhist Project Sunshine 2, June 29, 2018, from Jessica Bizub.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Jessica Bizub email to Milwaukee Shambhala Community members with personal reflections on Buddhist Project Sunshine 2, July 3, 2018, from Jessica Bizub.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Untitled letter from The Office of the Sakyong, July 6, 2018, online at https://mailchi.mp/8d682456ff22/kalapa-council-quarterly-update-767297?e=ac21d78f31, accessed June 2020.

[20] Shambhala, "About Shambhala," via Wayback Machine for April 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100401175238/http://www.shambhala.org/about_shambhala.php, accessed June 2020.

[21] "Report to the Community on the Wickwire Holm Claims Investigation into Allegations of Sexual Misconduct," February 3, 2019, posted online at: https://communitycare.shambhala.org/ with full report: https://shambhala.org/files/2019/02/2-3-19-WH-Report-Final-Package.pdf, accessed June 2020.

[22] "An Open Letter to the Shambhala Community from Long-Serving Kusung," February 16, 2019, PDF published on the Tricycle website, https://tricycle.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/An-Open-Letter-Statements-16-Feb-2019.pdf, accessed June 2020.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Jessica Bizub email to the Milwaukee Shambhala Community responding to the Kusung letter, February 26, 2019, from Jessica Bizub.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] An Olive Branch, "Home: An Olive Branch," https://www.an-olive-branch.org/, accessed June 2020.

[29] "An Olive Branch: Shambhala Final Project Report," March 14, 2019, posted online at: https://communitycare.shambhala.org/, accessed June 2020. Listening Post Report posted at: https://www.dropbox.com/s/111arue9y4gtk73/AOB_ListeningPostReport_March2019_final.pdf?dl=0 Final Report posted at: https://www.dropbox.com/s/eloezy0vc0nhgro/AOB_FinalReport_March2019_final.pdf?dl=0.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] "No Right, No Wrong," Fall 1993, Tricycle Magazine, https://tricycle.org/magazine/no-right-no-wrong/, accessed May 2020.