

## **A Meditation on Misconduct (B)**

In early August 2019, Jessica Bizub headed to the woods. She explained, “I go to nature when I have to make difficult decisions. ... I feel like nature helps me trust myself.”<sup>1</sup> Scott Lake Park, just off busy W. Loomis Avenue, isn’t far from downtown Milwaukee: once inside, Bizub followed paths around a lake and into wooded areas and hills. As she walked, with small stones crunching on the path beneath her feet, she thought, “I don’t know what to do here: I don’t know if it’s better for me to stay in this role and just try to work through it or if it’s better for me to resign.” She couldn’t think her way through it; it was too complicated for a list of pros and cons.

Since her trip in late March, Bizub hosted a series of community meetings and wrote two pointed letters to Shambhala leadership, but could see little positive change. As she walked through the woods, she recalled: “I just kind of prayed for a sign. And I really thought, maybe a bird would fly by, or [I’d see] a billboard or something.” Instead, the feeling arose from the ground beneath her: “‘You’ve got to go. ... It’s not in alignment with your values.’” She could no longer reconcile her role as a Center Director, which included bringing new students to Shambhala. She thought: “Can’t do it. Have to go.” Bizub resigned from the Shambhala Meditation Center of Milwaukee on August 7, 2019.

Bizub went to the woods looking for a sign; however, looking back, she realized there were signs almost from the very beginning. “I would hear things and tuck them in the back of my mind ... ‘That just didn’t feel right.’ ... ‘I need to think about that later.’” Things that once seemed “weird” to Bizub—like students referring to the Sakyong as “King” or “His Majesty”—now seemed like “huge red flags.” She reflected: “You know, when you feel like things are a little off, they probably are. ... If something feels not right, it’s probably not right. Or at least not right for you. So follow that. Don’t squish that little voice. Don’t ignore the little voice. It’s a sign.”

### **Community Conversations**

When Bizub returned from her trip to the farmhouse a few months earlier, her first task was to resolve the issue over the shrine photos. After the initial community meeting proved unsuccessful in bringing out diverse opinions, Bizub had an idea: acknowledge the divergent views in the community and split up by cohort. In Shambhala culture, she recognized, “there’s this deference to seniority, so newer people often feel like they just don’t know enough to say something, even if it’s about their own experience.” In small groups, it quickly emerged that the younger students and those who were not personal students of the Sakyong—who represented the majority of the community—were adamant about removing the images. Bizub had a meeting planned with the governing council in early April, but recognized the issue couldn’t wait any longer. Now, she was hearing community members say: “I can’t be in this shrine room with those photos there.” As a temporary solution, she put up screens in the main shrine room to block the images of the Sakyong and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

On April 2, she gathered together senior leadership, including the council, a senior practitioner, a teacher, and those on the Care and Conduct Committee, along with the Center’s *Desung* or “Harmony Protector.” She explained, “The Shambhala governance model is you try to find consensus. Now, consensus here doesn’t mean that everybody agrees, but that you’re taking into account everyone’s viewpoint with whatever decision is that you’re making.” If a consensus couldn’t be reached, the Center Director has the authority to make the decision.

Her own perspective was straightforward: “There are people in our community who have experienced sexual trauma. These photos trigger them. They should come down. I had no question in my mind: this is causing harm, but they’re just photos. Let’s remove them.”

Yet she also recognized the hurt of those who didn’t want the photos of their cherished teacher to be removed. One member said, “I absolutely cannot be involved in this.” Hearing a strong majority of support for the removal of both the Sakyong’s photo and that of Trungpa, Bizub called for a vote. “I realized it was important for this person to have on the record that she disagreed. So we took a vote.” Of the five votes, there was one dissenter. The photos would be removed from both public shrines. In Bizub’s April 10 letter to the community, she announced the Governing Council’s decision to remove photos of the Sakyong and Trungpa “in order to accommodate those who are deeply affected by personal trauma and vicarious trauma. This was decided after much discussion, challenging conversations, and consideration in a majority (though not unanimous) vote.”<sup>2</sup> She added: “The advanced practice room will stay as is... This is being done in order to adapt to our current conditions and offer an accessible place to study and practice dharma.”<sup>3</sup>

There was never any discussion about removing the images from the Vajrayana shrine. She acknowledged: “I actually think there would have been civil disobedience.” With the decision to remove the Sakyong’s photos, the images of Trungpa came down too. Bizub later explained that part of it was aesthetic, as the images balanced each other; also, leaving one empty space would only raise questions. “And, frankly, there are lots of reasons to—lots of people were upset with his father, still.”

Within a few days, Bizub took the photos down from both public shrines. A few members of the governing council were there to help and support. Together, they wrapped the images in *katas*, white ceremonial scarves, and put them in the closet of the advanced practice room. As she closed the door, Bizub thought: “You guys gotta go away and clean your stuff up, go away for a bit and fix yourself.”

## **A Letter**

One week after taking down the shrine photos, Bizub wrote a letter to the Shambhala board, teachers, and community. She also posted it in on her Facebook page. The April 22, 2019 letter outlined her concerns about Shambhala’s “culture of mutual self-deception.”<sup>4</sup> Emotionally, this letter was the hardest to write, as it was the first public acknowledgment of her serious misgivings. She recognized: “I was never going to be asked to be a senior teacher. I was never going to be asked to be in senior leadership. I was never going to be invited back to the court. I’m done, this is my Shambhala professional suicide.” Citing the “existential threat” to the Shambhala teachings given the troubling patterns of speech and behavior, she wrote:

For dharma practitioners, when the veil of ignorance is pulled back on suffering, the next steps as I understand them are to as fully and completely as possible acknowledge that pain—really see and get to know it, make appropriate amends, and uproot the seeds of misperception and self-deception that caused it. Now that we have seen in painful detail the suffering in our community, I think the central question is, “How much are we willing to see, name, and dismantle the layers of deception underlying the now exposed misconduct?”<sup>5</sup>

Her “non-exhaustive list” of deceptive practices included: using the teachings as cover; using dharma and Shambhala terms to assert dharmic or institutional authority; conflating trust in the teachings and practices with trust in individuals and organizations; reminding people that this is the “mishap lineage”; a culture of

institutional blindness, obfuscation, and disempowerment; lack of clarity regarding the recent financial relationship between Shambhala International and the Potrang (the Sakyong's organization); reluctance by leaders to suggest any way forward; continuing to put people's wellbeing at risk; encouraging people to have patience and perseverance to carry these precious/unique/magical teachings into the future; and asking the community to entrust its safety and wellbeing to people who have put their own emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing at risk in order to serve in abusive/unhealthy situations.<sup>6</sup>

She wrote:

[L]et's remember that the above dynamics are not new. Chögyam Trungpa's troubling behavior is institutionally presented as "crazy wisdom," even though it led to his early death and the appointment of a brilliant, but sociopathic, successor in the Regent. His behavior hurt people, though we don't often hear those accounts because, by and large, those who felt harmed left the community long ago (historical narratives are always controlled by the victors), and it occurred before the internet made first-person accounts available to anyone, anywhere, as it does now.<sup>7</sup>

For Bizub, this was not a letter of resignation, but a challenge. She noted: "I don't believe all is lost. Seeing confusion as confusion is the starting point of wisdom, as we are taught. ... [M]ay genuine bravery, uncompromising clarity, and unbiased compassion prevail in the Shambhala community and everywhere, now and at all times."<sup>8</sup> She included her refuge name, Sherap Ridak (Prajna Deer), hoping to invoke those qualities of wisdom and peacefulness.

She added two footnotes. The first acknowledged: "I have contributed to portraying a sanitized version of our community, and for that I feel deep remorse, and I am sorry for any confusion this has caused others."<sup>9</sup> The second underscored the risk she was taking: "I may get kicked out of the Club of Shambhala by offering this letter, though in my heart I know I've never been separate from the project of building enlightened society, even long before I walked into my local Shambhala Center some 10 years ago yearning to connect with clarity and warm-heartedness."<sup>10</sup>

### **Independence Day**

Bizub wanted her letter to prompt a discussion and deeper reflection, but she received little response—other than a few supportive messages from members of the Shambhala community she'd never met. She recalled that one senior leader sent her a pointed message along the lines of: "Hey, Jessica... You really sound angry." Yet she wasn't angry, nor was her letter; Bizub thought the message was an attempt to silence her call for accountability.

In conversation with a few trusted leaders, she learned that the board and the process team were struggling; there was a lack of support and communication. Board communications regularly indicated steady progress and a coordinated effort, but she now knew otherwise. "And that began to make me feel really queasy: 'Well, if you're misrepresenting on this, what else are you misrepresenting?' ... So that didn't give me much hope." She recognized: "Structurally, things aren't going to change. There is no pressure on the Sakyong to do what he needs to do. There is no holding his feet to the fire."

On July 4, 2019, after minimal response, Bizub wrote a second letter directed to the Shambhala Board and Regional Director. In it, she stated that she was considering resigning and outlined four major points: "1. The

Shambhala community has a habit of overprotecting those who cause egregious harm, which only puts others at risk. 2. Finances are obscured and unhealthily out of balance. 3. The balance of power within the Shambhala community seems to lie with its most fundamentalist faction and 4. There is an unhealthy dynamic of codependency in Shambhala between the current Sakyong and his direct students.”<sup>11</sup>

She continued: “At this point, it seems that we are doubling-down on the above dysfunctional dynamics, rather than cleaning them up. I cannot silently stand by and watch it happen, nor can I remain in my role if it continues.”<sup>12</sup> Bizub wrote, “It’s like we’re in big a cocoon, numbly sleepwalking under the spell of Shambhala-the-Collective-Concept, rather than exerting ourselves to wake up from our illusions, no matter how romantic they may be. So far, our community and leaders have chosen being asleep over being awake, and it shows in how degraded things were and continue to be.”<sup>13</sup>

Her July 4th letter, sent more than two months after the April 22 letter openly communicating her misgivings, did not include her refuge name, nor did it include a sense of hope. That night, as she watched the Independence Day fireworks light up the sky over Lake Michigan, she wondered if this might, in fact, be her own declaration of independence from Shambhala. She thought to herself: “I stand behind all that I have said and written. And come what may.”

### **After the Resignation**

What came next was a series of losses. Already in the process of ending her marriage, resigning from the center meant the loss not just of a position, but a calling, a community, and a belief system. Nearly a year later, when speaking warmly about the members of the Milwaukee Shambhala community, her chin quivered as she fought back tears. She noted, “There are people who are still in leadership positions or in the community who really don’t like what’s going on. But because of familial ties or social ties, or just feeling like ‘I’ve already invested so much time—and frankly, money—into this, I’m going to stick with it.’ There are people who had a lot more to lose than me.” Others, she acknowledged, didn’t see the problem as structural, or didn’t believe there was really a problem at all.

After she resigned, Bizub wrote the senior Acharya about the joke he made at her expense. She still had deep respect for him, and considered him a friend and teacher. Bizub gently asked him to consider how such comments were part of a larger cultural problem in Shambhala. She explained, “The point I was trying to make with him is ‘If we focus all our energy on the Sakyong, we’re kind of missing a key part of our culture.’ It’s not uncommon for older men to make comments to and about younger women. It’s so ubiquitous and it was so accepted.” She recalled his response as: “‘I don’t remember the incident. I’m sure I didn’t mean to hurt you. Why didn’t you say something sooner? Different women respond differently, and I don’t really know how to gauge that.’” She was surprised and disappointed remembering his words: “‘I didn’t realize you were so traumatized that you wouldn’t be able to speak up for yourself.’”

A few months later, the same senior Acharya came to Milwaukee for an event and Bizub went to meet him. She wondered: “Is there a friendship salvageable out of all of this?” When she walked into the room, she recalled, “The feeling was like walking into an icebox.” They briefly exchanged pleasantries, and as they awkwardly parted, he said, “‘Well, I’ll miss you.’” Bizub was startled: “‘Apparently, this is goodbye now.’” As hurt as she was, she thought this illustrated some of the dynamics between male teachers and female students: “‘This is what happens when you say something. Basically, ‘Well, there’s the door.’” She added: “‘This is not

about a woman's response; this is about your behavior. You have control over that." She noted: "I don't know what the future looks like for Shambhala. That is the culture and the status quo."

## **Shambhala Today**

Today, Bizub is the moderator of an online discussion group of former Shambhala students, including many survivors of abuse. Since March 2018, many Shambhala Centers are struggling to attract and retain members; these departures happen in waves, often following new information about misconduct. The most recent wave of departures, Bizub explained, came after the news that Ani Pema Chödrön was "stepping back" from her role at Shambhala in January 2020. Her action, nearly two years after the misconduct was first reported, was in part due to Shambhala International supporting the Sakyong's return to teaching. In a letter to the Board and Acharyas, Chödrön wrote: "It feels unkind, unskillful and unwise for the Sakyong to just go forward as if nothing had happened without relating compassionately to all of those who have been hurt and without doing some deep inner work on himself. ... I feel that as a community committed to creating an enlightened society, we deserve something better than business as usual."<sup>14</sup>

This announcement resulted in more debate in, and more departures from, the Shambhala community. Official Shambhala statements acknowledged the diversity of opinions in the community and affirmed ongoing progress regarding "Care and Conduct." But not long after, in mid-May, an unofficial letter from students of the Sakyong seemed to underscore that, in many ways, little had changed. The letter asserted that "many of the allegations reported about the Sakyong were exaggerated or completely false. If someone felt hurt or confused by their relationship with him, he has done his best to address their concerns personally."<sup>15</sup> The letter continued:

The Sakyong is aware that some members of the Shambhala community may not wish for him to resume his duties as a teacher or leader, or are unclear about Shambhala's identity and the place of the lineage within the organization. ... In fact, the centrality of lineage to Shambhala is the defining characteristic of Shambhala's purpose as a non-profit organization. This ... is also reflected in Shambhala's articles of incorporation, which state that the purpose of the organization is to support and facilitate the teachings of the Sakyong lineage of Shambhala under the leadership of the Sakyong.

From the perspective of our history, the teaching of both Sakyongs, and Buddhism in general, Shambhala has always been a lineage-based rather than a community-led organization. It is this distinction that needs to be clarified. ... It is this lineage of transmission that the Sakyong has vowed to protect, propagate, and pass on to future generations of family lineage holders and devoted practitioners.<sup>16</sup>

The letter continued with a clear message about the Sakyong's role in Shambhala: "As fellow students of the Sakyong, we feel that the Sakyong lineage is central to all aspects of Shambhala. There is no Shambhala without the Sakyong."<sup>17</sup>

On the discussion boards, many current and former Shambhala students expressed surprise, but not Bizub: "I know it surprised other people. But by that point, I was like, 'The writing's on the wall. If you really can look and see what's happening with clear eyes and not rose-colored glasses, it's pretty clear. There's no chance he's

not going to come back and teach and take the reins. That's where this is headed, which is why I had to resign.” Bizub noted: “Frankly, I’ve come to believe it’s a cult. So, you have this outward, very unobjectionable, even helpful, metaphor about warriorship and ruling your world with wisdom and compassion, ruling your life like a king or queen. And then over time that begins to be externalized until there are real celestial beings. And then later, ‘Oh, it’s literal, and it’s that guy!’” Bizub laughed. “So there's a somewhat of a bait and switch happening here.”

By early 2020, many of the Shambhala Centers who removed the photos of the Sakyong and Trungpa had reinstalled them.<sup>18</sup>

## **Looking Forward**

For Bizub, what initially seemed to be the loss of her belief system now feels like “a stroke of luck.” She observed, “I think for my personal spiritual path, I needed to go explore.” After finding her answers to the crisis of Shambhala not in the teachings or texts, but in the woods, she continues to explore earth-based spirituality. When asked if she still considers herself a Buddhist, she replied: “I still meditate. I still consider compassion and wisdom sort of my guideposts. I guess I would say if I’m Buddhist, I’m not exclusively Buddhist. But I know that those viewpoints are with me; they are in my bones.” Smiling, she explained, “Yeah, not exclusively a Buddhist, but not *not* a Buddhist.”

Today, the small red book *Awakening Loving Kindness* by Pema Chödrön, the portraits of the Sakyong, and the other items from her home shrine are all packed away in a box at the back of a closet. She paused, then stated directly: “I have a feeling I will probably burn them by the end of the year.” Bizub acknowledged that while this might sound dramatic, there is a Buddhist practice of getting rid of things by burning rather than throwing them in trash. “And it feels clean to me; like it’s gone. It’s definitely gone.”

## **Endnotes**

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

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<sup>1</sup>All quotes from Jessica Bizub, unless otherwise noted, interview by author, via Zoom, May 29 and June 3, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Bizub email to the Milwaukee Shambhala community announcing Governing Council’s decision to remove photos from public shrines, April 10, 2019, from Jessica Bizub.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Bizub email to Shambhala Interim Board, Process Team Steering Committee, Acharyas, and Leaders Formal and Informal Local and International outlining serious concerns about Shambhala, April 22, 2019, from Jessica Bizub.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Bizub to Deputy Minister MacKay and Interim Board Members of Shambhala International expressing ongoing concerns about Shambhala, July 4, 2019, from Jessica Bizub.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Letter from Ani Pema Chödrön,” Shambhala Times Web site, <https://shambhalatimes.org/2020/01/16/letter-from-ani-pema-chodron/>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “A Letter to Students of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche,” Shambhala Report Web site, <https://shambhala.report/r/a-letter-to-students-of-sakyong-mipham-rinpoche/>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Karmê Chöling, one of the most important Shambhala Centers in the U.S., is among those centers that removed, and later reinstalled, the shrine photos. See cover image on website <https://www.karmecholing.org/> and commentary on the decision at kalayanmitrata.com : <https://www.kalyanamitrata.com/single-post/2019/06/29/Karme-Choling-rehanging-pictures> and an annotated version of the announcement at matthewremski.com <https://matthewremski.com/wordpress/shambhala-centre-will-rehang-devotional-pictures-of-alleged-sexual-predator-announcement-annotated/>