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MENU

# Stepping Down As “Shastri,” Staying For The Shambhala Community

July 20, 2018



**[Note before reading: I continue to be in a mode of listening and learning. Since making my initial statement on June 29 (read here (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/reflections-on-shambhala/>)) about the revelations in the Shambhala community and allegations against Sakyong Mipham, I have tried to listen to insights and experience regarding the current state of the community from survivors, friends, mentors, colleagues and students as much as possible. I have been heartened by many of the steps taken by some local Shambhala centers in addressing the structures and culture which allowed these harms to repeat themselves. If you'd like an update on what the Shambhala Center of New York has done to address these issues, please look here (<https://ny.shambhala.org/holding-harm/>).**

As we all attempt to move forward as a community, I have been asked two personal questions again and again. What follows is my attempt to answer these two. Both answers require some in-depth context. If you don't have time to read, the headline above says the two most important parts. Again, I speak for no one but myself, which is all that any of us can do. In lovingkindness, Ethan]

## Question #1: Is Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche Still Your “Guru”?

To answer this question, it feels necessary to briefly

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contextualize what it means to take the vow that enters you into a guru-disciple relationship. This formal vow is called *samaya* (loose translation: word of honor) and it is different from any other sort of student-teacher relationship on the Buddhist path. Anytime a student and teacher begin working together formally, there is some kind of mutual agreement to engage in the relationship. This mutual agreement is very important. We can admire or learn a lot from someone, but we can't truly call someone our teacher (or our student) unless both parties have agreed to study together, even if the student-teacher relationship lasts only for the duration of a short meditation retreat, at which point it dissolves. The student-teacher relationship should always include the setting of some mutual form of boundaries, modes of accountability and expected conduct. For example, every time I take on a student in the capacity of “spiritual mentor,” (Also called “*kalyana-mitra*,” which is a decidedly non-guru relationship) we lay down a clear agreement about our working relationship in a way that either of us could decide to do something different and respectfully back out. Most student-teacher relationships are mutually non-binding – the student or teacher can decide to end the relationship if it is not working for them.

The guru relationship and *samaya* vow are very different, and it is the intensity of this difference which makes these accounts of abuse and assault by the Sakyong so challenging for his *samaya* students to contemplate openly, especially given that Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is the *only* active guru in the Shambhala lineage, a monolithic path structure developed by his own design. I wrote in *The Road Home*:

*The important thing about the word “guru” is that it denotes a much more devotional and empowered relationship than those of the first two types of teacher. While the instructor and the teacher/mentor are both worthy of great respect, the guru is the one you make a full commitment to work with for life. The idea is that at a certain point you see the possibility of fully living in your own awareness; at this point, you must commit to your own awakening, and commit to benefiting others as a bodhisattva. On this basis, taking on a guru is a matter of making yourself accountable to someone for life. It’s the spiritual-teacher equivalent of getting married, and in many ways when we make the decision to commit to a guru, we make the decision for the same reasons we decide to get married. Not only do we feel great trust under a guru’s guidance and example, but we also realize, through a process of maturation, that we need to commit to certain relationships in order to overcome the fight-or-flight response that makes us jet at every sign of discomfort. At a certain point we realize that our fight-or-flight response is—literally—not very evolved. It’s when we stay committed to a relationship and a path of deep work with a guiding presence that we actually learn about our own habits fully. That’s the idea, anyway.*

Many of my friends who have not taken this samaya vow have asked over the last several weeks why anyone would even consider continuing a guru-disciple relationship with Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, given these revelations. If the person asking has first or second-hand experience of an abusive relationship, the disbelief that anyone would stick with this “guru” only grows louder and stronger. At the same time, some of my friends and mentors who *have* taken this vow with Sakyong Mipham view their commitment as choiceless, not up for debate, and they view this current situation as a storm they simply must weather, even if they are also hoping that the storm brings needed changes to the structure of the organization and a newfound awareness to the man himself.

The large rift between these two perspectives is exactly what could tear the Shambhala community apart. It is currently manifesting at many Shambhala centers in a way that might seem like a small formality to external observers: whether or not to cover the photos of Sakyong Mipham and Chogyam Trungpa that hang above our meditation hall shrines. Given that those who have *not* taken the samaya vow with Sakyong Mipham represent—by definition—any possible future that the Shambhala lineage might have, my loyalty lies with them right

now. In my humble opinion, given that those who have been victims of assault and abuse need support to be heard and healed, we should consider their needs to feel safe in our spaces before holding to the forms and ceremonies we have grown used to as a community.

According to the teachings, when the trust of samaya is wounded or broken, it can be repaired. That's very good news, and it fits with the idea of unconditional goodness which is so hard to apply in times of difficulty. Because the guru-disciple relationship is two-way, this trust can be broken or repaired in either direction. However, traditional literature says decidedly little about what happens when the guru breaks samaya (and simultaneously puts the future of their entire worldwide community in jeopardy through their actions). Traditional tantric teachings regarding samaya focus almost entirely on the ethical and spiritual burden of *students* in this relationship. Looking for thoughtful modern perspectives on how to handle breaches of trust on the part of the *guru*, I found the most help in this recent article by Mingyur Rinpoche (<https://www.lionsroar.com/treat-everyone-as-the-buddha/>) which was published last year after major harms were shown to have been committed by another guru, Sogyal Rinpoche, toward his own tantric disciples. I encourage you to read it, because it lends credence to the idea, from a lineage holder, that sometimes you just need to respectfully leave your guru. That is certainly a possibility here.

To determine the future of my own relationship with Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche as a guru, I find it necessary to consider both my role as a teacher along the path he has created (on which he is the *only* empowered guru), as well as my position as a personal disciple of his.

**1. As a teacher on his path:** Right now, it would feel deeply irresponsible to encourage students toward a path which still assumes they will take him as their guru. Long before these accounts of abuse came to light, many friends have felt that a large structural weakness of our organization is the expectation that every student committed to the development of enlightened society would necessarily study under the same guru. Since I began teaching in 2001/2002, I have personally seen many, many people leave our community because, while they connected with our teachings and communal vision, they didn't want to take the samaya vow with Sakyong Mipham, for a lack of personal connection or uncertainty about the commitment. To be very fair, the hit-or-miss nature of connecting with him is true of any teacher at any level. It certainly is true of my own journey as a spiritual mentor – I have had many personal students who would probably be better off studying with someone else. When this fact becomes clear, I often recommend other teachers to those who have come to me. Could you imagine a

society, or even a community, where everyone had to love the same teacher? It's just not possible: I've even heard some people express dislike for the teachings of Pema Chodron, and she is by far the most globally respected wisdom voice in our entire tradition. Participation in a community should not be based on everyone having the same guru. Any society is composed of far more than one viewpoint. Shambhala's structural problem of one solitary guru who empowers every single leader has been an issue for a long time, and the recent accounts of abuse by Sakyong Mipham have revealed these basic structural issues in greater clarity than ever before. Speaking only for myself, for the time being, it would feel wrong to recommend students to move forward with certain elements of our practice curriculum (vows and Vajrayana assemblies, etc) if it is automatically assumed that they eventually take him as their guru. I trust students to follow their own paths in the decisions they need to make for themselves.

2. **As a student of his:** I am resting in “not-knowing.” The Sakyong has given so many useful practice instructions over the 19+ years that I have studied his personal teachings, and the 16+ years since I took the initial samaya vow with him. Ironically (or fittingly), it is through employing many of the contemplative techniques he has taught me that any clarity about my relationship with him has arisen amidst all the pain and confusion. I am so grateful for every teaching he has offered. But any student-teacher relationship is an active relationship, and I am wary of how ours will evolve in the long-term. To know if I am still his student in any meaningful way, he would have to make some request of me, and I would have to feel into his request based on whether or not it is helpful to me and helpful to others. He has never made any direct requests of me other than asking me to practice, and I have always found those practices beneficial to myself, and to my bodhisattva vow to help sentient beings, which I still consider the most crucial commitment I have ever made. He has never been the sort of guru to give much direct and meaningful feedback to his students. I am not the sort of person to say “never,” but right now, I can't imagine putting him back on that throne he once occupied, either mentally or literally.

It is possible in the future that Sakyong Mipham could become a very powerful example of open-hearted humility and transparency, embodying a redemptive story very different from the dark and simplistic tales of guru-power manipulation which the New York Times and Netflix both love to tell. *Anything* is possible. But for the foreseeable future, Shambhala wisdom must emerge from the ground up, not from the top down. Ideally, Sakyong Mipham could eventually help overcome the

insular patriarchy of his own organization, but he can't lead the way in doing so, because that approach would be both insular and patriarchal. Making any assumption that he will eventually resume anything similar to his former role seems disrespectful to the personal work that lies before him, as well as the hard work that lies before those of us who remain as a community. In the meantime, my personal accountability as a student lies to my mentors, my colleagues, my students, my family and my communities, as we all find our own paths forward, separately and together.

### **Question #2: What is Your Relationship To The Shambhala Organization?**

I am letting go of my title of “Shastri” (The first of two tiers of senior teacher) at this time. I would like to continue participating in Shambhala as a community member and teacher, and if requested to teach in group settings within the Shambhala organization, I'd like to focus primarily on helping train, supporting, and amplifying the voices and platforms of a new generation of teachers, especially teachers who come from historically marginalized positions (racial, gender, orientation, class, and more) in our society. I would also like to work as a student in receiving further training from experts outside of Shambhala regarding the problems of toxic masculinity and white supremacy. Within Shambhala, I'd like to collaborate with other men in our community, especially white men, on these problems, deeply assessing together how these social poisons have affected our own paths, as well as biased our teaching work with students and sangha.

Why am I letting go of my title? I was relieved to hear that The Sakyong would be “stepping back” pending an independent investigation, and that the governing Board of Shambhala International (the “Kalapa Council”) would dissolve. These seem like first steps in the right direction to overcome an atmosphere of worship and insularity which permitted these interpersonal harms to occur. However, it is important to note that *every* leadership structure within Shambhala International operates on a similar top-down and patriarchal basis, even if many local centers have created their own healthy mechanisms for code of conduct, accountability to the local community and transparency in their decision-making. The New York Center, for example, has become increasingly accountable to the local community in recent years. Still, the senior teacher titles (Shastri and Acharya) which are given solely at the discretion of the Sakyong, are another example of the non-transparency and monolithic power structure which must end.

***I want to be exceptionally clear:*** I believe the vast majority of the Shastris and Acharyas we know would also be chosen as senior teachers in a transparent and merit-based system of

empowerment. Some of the most important teachers and mentors I have ever had in my own life are empowered as Acharyas and Shastris in Shambhala. We truly have a lot of amazing senior teachers, and it has been perhaps the greatest honor of my spiritual and professional life to even be considered among them. However, merit and transparency are not the primary reasons we have our titles. We have our titles primarily because of the perception that we are loyal to Sakyong Mipham, specifically. I sometimes joke privately that the Sakyong has never even seen me work with students, and yet, he has given me a title as a senior teacher. This joke doesn't feel all that funny anymore. I don't feel like I can participate in such a system of empowerment going forward.

I feel like sharing my personal experience here. I became a Shastri in 2010 when the title was first created, but I heard multiple rumors from different sources, starting in about 2006, that Sakyong Mipham was considering giving me a senior teacher title. He never spoke to me directly about this, I just heard it from various others. The clear story shared with me was that, before such a title was offered, there had to be some “energetic shift” into open-hearted loyalty which the Sakyong was looking for. Not the testimony of students, not the number of hours of teaching experience or practice experience, not the reviewed recommendation of peers or mentors or the man himself based on one's conduct as both student and teacher, but an energetic read of some sort which *only* he could oversee, an invisible litmus test of devotion, a silent signaling of one's loyalty to him and the lineage. I never really knew what this meant, but friends I trust reported deeply intuitive experiences with him on an almost psychic level, and I had many powerful experiences of connection with him on a pre-verbal level during my own practice. So for about a decade, I “trusted the process.” Meanwhile, I kept doing the best I could working with students, with the organization, and with my own personal obstacles and shortcomings as I practiced these teachings on and off the cushion. Until just a year or two ago, I so often felt the subtle need—which was undoubtedly based on my own misunderstanding of the teachings—to “perform” my loyalty whenever I was in the presence of the Sakyong. Nobody *said* I had to do this, but something was always assumed, something floating in the air around him, an atmospheric persuasion that I found myself prone to as well. He wanted to be talked to a certain way, and if you were going to be around him, you had to comply or else you just wouldn't be around him. And if you couldn't be around him, he wouldn't empower you at a higher level. It was that simple, though usually unstated, and to be clear, I never experienced anything from him personally other than a quiet, opaque gentleness. But ours was also a relationship with almost no genuine feedback about the path forward for me as either student or teacher, and without any honest conversation about what either person *felt*.

I now realize that this performance of loyalty (mixed with true, genuine gratitude for him and his teachings) made me energetically complicit in all of the systemic problems that have caused harm. To be clear, I knew very little of the Sakyong’s personal life, and I knew nothing of the abuse or assault allegations against him until they were made public at the end of June and early July 2018. But, like so many others in our community, I did want Sakyong Mipham to *see* me, and I wanted him to *like* me, and I wanted him to agree to give me more *power* to help others along the path that he held. I could argue that the whole reason I wanted him to empower me further was that I wanted to help others more (via offering vows and so forth), but that’s far too easy and innocent to claim. I now realize that this toxic performance of loyalties, mixed with genuine respect and admiration for our lineage, created an inauthentic and codependent relationship between us as well, and I would like to take responsibility for my part in that shared performance.

What I have learned more deeply than ever before in recent months is that there is always an interdependence between harmful systems and the causes of personal harm by an individual perpetrator. If we want abuse to end, we need to end the monolithic and non-transparent nature of patriarchy once and for all. This non-transparent structure has directly affected the way senior teachers are chosen in our lineage—including, sadly, a great deal of truly amazing teachers. For now, as honored as I am to have received a title among this group, I no longer feel able to participate.

If, in some future iteration of Shambhala, senior teachers are selected based on transparent and professional guidelines of practice and teaching qualifications, CVs, student testimonies and heartfelt performance/character reviews by mentors and other teachers, etc., and someone nominated me for such a title, I would be honored to be considered, as long as there is also a greater commitment to the many aspects of diversity amongst the cohort of senior teachers who select and review candidates (there is currently a decent gender balance among Shastris and Acharyas, but there are only three Acharyas of color, and zero Shastris of color). For now, I will continue as a kalyanamitra: to teach and mentor—and learn from— those who request to work with me both within and outside the Shambhala community. I will go by the title that those who connect with have always called me: Ethan.

Finally, the most important things are kindness and honesty. What I feel most protective of is the respect and friendship of everyone who knows each other in these amazing communities, and the need to see each other, to listen to each other, to care for each other. We don’t always speak to, or treat each other, kindly in this community. But that’s partially due to patriarchy and a glazed devotion, so we haven’t always been able to get *real* with each other. Sakyong Mipham has emphasized kindness in

so many of his public lectures over the last decade. But for kindness to be real, it must operate in an environment of transparency. This part has been sorely lacking. And I have been playing along in my role, hoping that things would somehow shift on their own, and hoping that the decent work we were doing at various local levels would overcome the clear problems with power consolidation at the center of our global organization. Those days of playing along are in the past now, and that is a basically good thing.

In love, friendship, and the vision of enlightened society,

Ethan

# 47 thoughts on “Stepping Down As “Shastri,” Staying For The Shambhala Community”

1.  David Wiggin says:

July 22, 2018 at 12:19 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10442>)

Hi Ethan,

I appreciate that this was a difficult decision for you and that you made a statement at all- nevertheless I can't help but admit I'm disappointed. Stepping aside for women and POC to take positions of authority is a good move, and necessary for the long term survival of Shambhala IMO, but I can't help but note the absence of any concrete steps you plan to take or agitate for for the immediate safety of Shambhala students. I understand if you lack the power to implement anything in a meaningful way, but as a charismatic and reasonable “face” of the organization, you have not insignificant influence in attracting seekers to Shambhala and thus some responsibility for their safety. To put it bluntly: I understand that you have a personal responsibility to stay with the Sakyong due to samaya, but professionally the right

thing to do would have been to quit Shambhala and strike out on your own.

As the Shambhala teachings (and your own teachings) and trainings have improved my life and helped me to deal with significant depression, I was considering taking a more active role in the Shambhala community and introducing my family to it- but I would not be comfortable with bringing them into an environment where they could be potentially harmed and the crime covered up. It's not just the current crisis: the Shambhala sangha has a decades long history of such abuses despite its noble aspirations. I worry that the teachings may disappear entirely due to bad association with an internal rot unless these crimes are atoned for- but not nearly as much as I worry about further people being harmed.

IMO, and riffing off some of your statement, I think the only hope for Shambhala lies in the Sakyong going along with the investigation 100% (and serving any necessary time) and the organization becoming more decentralized. Quite frankly, I think many of the centers, teachers, and indeed individual members of Shambhala are far more enlightened than Shambhala International. I do hope that this will be the outcome in the long term. If it is, I may just end up joining the NY center after all.

In the meantime, I'll be going my separate way and I wish you the best.

Reply

2.  Emme Edmunds says:

July 22, 2018 at 3:29 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10443>)

Thank you Ethan, for your awareness, honesty, and generosity in sharing your insights. It is profound for me to read. I am relatively new to Shambhala and can feel and see the value of the practices and the Sangha. I joined the Albany sangha last year as much because of the upstanding and lovely people there in addition to the classes and practices. However, I have felt a lot of ambivalence about the history of the founder of the lineage, the subsequent regent, and the general hard-to-put-a-finger-on-it lack of transparency and accountability regarding the hierarchy and power structure. Call it a gut feeling, or perhaps a hyperawareness partly due to some of my own life experiences. This feeling led me to keep one foot out the door regarding the complete Shambhala package. I figured, if everyone is sort of gently making excuses for CTR and completely ignoring the regent,

then maybe it's not so much of a safe place- or at least not any more safe than anywhere else in the world. Not trust-inspiring, I think. Naturally, the revelations of the recent investigations appear to have validated my holding back. At the same time, I can only begin to imagine the struggle and sadness being faced by so many who are much more invested that I have been and I truly feel for them (and you). I feel very sad about that, and my heart goes out to those people who have to decide what comes next for themselves and their practices. I wish them clarity, peace and renewal in whatever paths they choose.

But I'm having an odd moment of hope [odd because it is so unexpected.] I was surprised to read what you wrote about, to borrow a few words from you, an energetic complicity, a co-dependence, a lack of transparency. and particularly this: “What I have learned more deeply than ever before in recent months is that there is always an interdependence between harmful systems and the causes of personal harm by an individual perpetrator.”

This seems right to me and makes sense as well in my body. As you observed, this type of situation doesn't just appear out of nowhere but usually takes place in the context of a larger system. In this case, it most certainly not only had a familial and historic positional (leadership) precedent but it also occurred within a supportive structure. This structure, if not directly complicit, was at least unable to prevent, hold to account, or address the allegations in a more timely manner. Your description of a culture in which communication is implicit, loyalty is paramount over merit and the criteria for status elevation is unclear, all point to a situation which is the opposite of trustworthy and transparent. That unclarity is how we stumble, make mistakes and betray each other. It isn't just one person.

I recently found a body of research that begins to address the broader picture. It's about Institutional betrayal.

<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>  
(<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>)  
may you find it useful!

I want to stop writing here even though I appreciate other points you have made and agree with David Wiggins that you might do well to work with others in a way that might be outside of Shambhala or even a hybrid situation. Perhaps, just as CTR brought these teachings, now these times are calling for still different ways of doing things. You are a valuable teacher in the contemporary understanding of Kagyu/Nyingma Buddhism. Also, I agree “that many of the centers, teachers, and indeed individual members of Shambhala [may well be] more enlightened than Shambhala International.” The good things that exist in Shambhala should not be lost. So, please don't disappear. Get together with more like-minded folks and keep doing what you're

doing. I'll hang around on the margins and do small helpful things until the time is right.

Blessings and thanks

Reply

3.  Alex Sweeton says:

July 22, 2018 at 6:20 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10444>)

There is a core group of people who keep me connected to Shambhala and keep me 'coming back' and from whom I feel I learn an extraordinary amount from and you are one of them. I have so valued your teaching and the programs I've taken and staffed with you as teacher. I hope you WILL stick around as we adjust to our new ways. Thank you for all your teaching so far.

Reply

4.  Anna Marie Francis says:

July 22, 2018 at 7:25 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10445>)

Beautiful. Brave. What a lovely example of male leadership and integrity. I am so proud of you.

Reply

5.  Jane says:

July 23, 2018 at 2:31 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10446>)

Wow.

Your understanding of the situation echoes my own in many ways- your description of the opaque gentleness of the Sakyong is really helping me feel into what has been happening.

I agree wholeheartedly with the feeling that one cannot recommend students to move forward onto the path at this

point. I think maybe Shambhala Training is where I would draw the line these days. I have faith at that a way forward will present itself. But yes, it's going to be a long hard road.

I look forward to seeing how leadership evolves both locally and internationally under these current conditions.

Reply

6.  **Caroline Couture** says:

July 23, 2018 at 5:32 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10447>)

Thank you so much for this statement. You have articulated many of my feelings toward Shambala. I wish you well. May all beings benefit.

Reply

7.  **Shannon van Staden** says:

July 23, 2018 at 6:39 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10448>)

Thank you Ethan. Your words brought me to tears as they reflect what I have struggled with for so long and really helped me see more clearly. I hope we get to meet some day. All the best on your contribution to the world.

Reply

8.  **Cristina Castro** says:

July 23, 2018 at 6:44 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10449>)

Thank you, Ethan. I appreciate your reflections and am heartened to see your call for a radical structural change to the way we learn from and relate to one another. Love and solidarity.

Reply

9.  **Paulina Martinez** says:

July 23, 2018 at 7:41 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10450>)

I love your bravery Ethan . You Live the teachings!  
We are so grateful that you're sticking around and would love to have you as a mentor to become a dharma teacher.  
Thank you for your heartfelt dharma-filled leadership,  
Paulina

Reply

10.  **Steve Whiteford** says:

July 23, 2018 at 8:17 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10451>)

Thank you, Ethan. This is an amazingly thoughtful and transparent revelation that gently addresses many of the key points of necessary examination and growth needed for the evolution of Shambhala. The need for Transparency resonates strongly. Although “mystical” suggests hidden, a lack of transparency invites error.  
May you continue to thrive in your authenticity.

Reply

11.  **Nick** says:

July 23, 2018 at 8:39 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10452>)

Thank you Ethan. I'm new to Shambhala and your perspective and insights are always refreshing and vital. As another white man, I've long been disheartened by the lack of diversity and lack of representation in western Buddhism. I'm inspired by your talk of the need to address toxic masculinity and white supremacy, as I think this is more vital than ever in the present day, and Buddhism, especially through the Shambhala perspective, offers such powerful tools to address and dismantle toxic masculinity.

Reply

12.  **Gayle Hanson** says:

July 23, 2018 at 8:53 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10453>)

I know this was a difficult decision. You are doing the right thing. I support you 100%. I think that there's great work to be done in the dharma and you're doing it. I would staff a program with you anywhere, anytime!

Reply

13.  **Kathleen Lyon** says:

July 23, 2018 at 9:06 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10454>)

I have a lot of respect for this statement Ethan, and the work you are doing to try to regain and maintain integrity in your spiritual path and in your role in your community. I wish you the very best.

Reply

14.  **Alison Forster** says:

July 23, 2018 at 9:07 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10455>)

Thank you Ethan.

You have always been the voice in Shambhala that I have connected with most.

To me you, embody what it is to live in this modern world in a practical way, while steadily moving towards enlightened society.

While I was initially disappointed you were stepping down as Shastri, after reading your post, I not only understand your decision but think it was the bravest most respectful decision you could make.

I also found it interesting what you noted about Vajryana students who want to take a samaya vow but did not feel a connection with the Sakyong. For a long time I thought there was something wrong with me that I did not have the same feeling about the Sakyong that more senior students and teachers did (I valued his wisdom but simply did not feel a

connection) but I have realized on a much deeper level now because of the allegations – to trust myself.

Please do keep teaching.

Myself and others benefit from your thoughts and words.

I hope one day the timing and circumstances are right that I could call you a kalyanamitra. In the meantime, thank you for everything you have given us, thank you for posting this and please don't go anywhere – if you teach in Shambhala or outside – it doesn't matter to me.

Reply

15.  **Gil Corral** (<http://gilcorral.com>) says:

July 23, 2018 at 9:16 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10456>)

Thank you Ethan.

Not knowing is the only place to be right now, or at least it seems that way. Some may “know”, but I reckon they “know” for themselves. The bottom truly has fallen out here. Seems to be falling out with so many structures. Where do we go from here?

Thank you for your efforts.

“Call me by my true names” comes to mind by Thich Nhat Hanh

Reply

16.  **Dr Ellen Ruth Topol** says:

July 23, 2018 at 9:52 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10457>)

What you write is impressive and heartfelt! Bravo! Some light into darkness. Thank you!

Reply

17.  **Modesto Fortuna** says:

July 23, 2018 at 9:56 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10458>)

Thank you very much for this.

Reply

18.  **Caitlin Turner** says:

July 23, 2018 at 10:41 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10459>)

I appreciate what you have shared here. This vision is crucial right now. I am excited to help however I can!

Reply

19.  **John Caron** says:

July 23, 2018 at 11:02 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10460>)

Ethan, Than you so much for your thoughtfulness and commitment to the vision of what Shambhala should represent. You are a gifted teacher and your podcasts and books have meant so much to me as I walk along the path.

Also, one FYI to note. At some point a few days ago, you must have posted this privately to your blog. While it didn't show up on the blog, the title of this post did show up on your RSS feed, which given the nature of the communication, I assume you didn't intend to make public at that point. Now I may be one of the 3 people left on the planet that use RSS readers, but I just wanted to make you aware of this.

Reply

20.  **Irv Kirschbaum** says:

July 23, 2018 at 11:19 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10461>)

Ethan, I've always admired your bravery and critical intelligence...and no less so after reading this post. So glad you're staying to work with us as we reimagine Shambhala for this century and culture. I am inspired to ask if you would consider being a part of whatever new governance structure arises from the ashes? We need your contemporary view and

wisdom if we're to survive.

Reply

21.  Perry says:

July 23, 2018 at 12:32 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10462>)

Like a Warrior, stated bravely and clearly, Ethan! Bravo!

“If we want abuse to end, we need to end the monolithic and non-transparent nature of patriarchy once and for all.”

I take as good news that history shows us how the dharma changed its cultural veneer as it spread throughout Asia over millennia – first to southern India, then to Southeast Asia, then to China and Tibet, and finally to Korea and Japan.

And each time the dharma teachings move from one land to the next, it adopts new cultural norms appropriate for those cultures, yet different from the previous.

It seems highly appropriate to me that we in the West bear some role and responsibility to shape this change ourselves, as dharma practitioners. The flag has been planted to us here in the West for a couple of generations now.

It's up to us.

Thank you dear Ethan for setting such a great and vast example.

Reply

22.  Kevin Knox says:

July 23, 2018 at 1:54 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10464>)

It's nice to see such a thoughtful response to this unfolding situation. I admire your courage and thoughtfulness.

I'm going to respectfully disagree though with your statement that “traditional literature says decidedly little about what happens when the guru breaks samaya” because there is in fact quite a lot of writing about this topic, from Patrul Rinpoche's discussion in “Words of My Perfect Teacher,” to many cleat statements by the Dalai Lama (see link

below), to Ken McLeod’s very recent comments and those of long-time Trungpa Rinpoche Dan Montgomery on Facebook.

The way you describe your relationship to the Sakyong doesn’t bear much resemblance to the kind of close, intimate, one-on-one involvement with a QUALIFIED teacher the texts describe. And of course you’ve had far more contact with him than most students, many of whom have taken samaya en masse with a teacher who doesn’t even know their name (and who not incidentally can’t even keep the five precepts for laypeople, let alone the higher vows of Mahayana and Vajrayana.) That Shambhalian phenomenon is something I (as a student in the Tibetan tradition for 43 years) will guarantee you won’t find discussed in the texts. The kind of transformative relationship that Trungpa Rinpoche had with Jamgön Kongtrul of Sechen, or that Matthieu Ricard had with Dilgo Khytense, is simply not something that can be “scaled” and I don’t see anyway that their can be meaningful samaya on the part of either teacher or student without that kind of closeness.

As an old Trungpa Rinpoche student myself (1974-1982) I of course know a goodly number of the acharyas and shastris as well. Many are truly lovely people but I hold all who knew of the abuse of students by not just the Sakyong but by Trungpa Rinpoche and Thomas Rich – and that includes almost all of the acharyas including especially the most famous ones – even more accountable than the Sakyong for the current state of affairs, which was made possible in large part by their complicity, silence and suppression of complaints and dissent.

All of us old-timers know full well that the Sakyong was never supposed to be in the position of power he’s in and was thrust into it without the benefit of the kind of in-depth training in primary languages and advanced practices that people like Pema Chödrön, Judith Simmer-Brown or Larry Mermelstein (just to name three people I’ve long loved) bring to the table. Resigning your shastri title is commendable and brave, but that is a teacher’s club of which no one with claims to bodhicitta ought to want to remain a member.

<https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2013/02/21/the-guru-disciple-relationship-advice-by-hh-the-dalai-lama/>  
(<https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2013/02/21/the-guru-disciple-relationship-advice-by-hh-the-dalai-lama/>)

Reply

1.  Perry says:

July 24, 2018 at 9:27 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10474>)

“Be nobody. Want nothing.” — Zen koan

Reply

23.  Paul DeLong says:

July 23, 2018 at 5:19 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10466>)

Your integrity, transparency, willingness to sacrifice personal and professional title, for the sake of Sangha shouldn't surprise me, but I am struggling with all this. So, it is extremely uplifting and encouraging that you are sticking with the teaching, but looking for an authentic extension of it as well. I am so encouraged. May you also be encouraged and uplifted, for I am sure there are many tough elements of it for you. Beacon you are. Love.

Reply

24.  Elise Rannestad says:

July 23, 2018 at 5:38 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10467>)

I so appreciate your soul searching in this moment. I have not had to deal with sexual assault or harassment from teachers, but from students of Buddhist organizations, including Shambhala. I actually had a student stalk me, sexually assault me and threaten to rape me all while I was at work after being at a dharma program together in 2012. The harassment began during a teaching at a different Kagyu organization. Apparently, this student had been harassing women at the Seattle Shambhala center too. Of course, there was a lot of discussion between me and the leadership of Shambhala, which I greatly appreciated. The other organization did not discuss anything with me at all and even told me at one point to not come to teachings anymore because they would not guarantee MY safety. I told them it was not just about my safety, but about EVERYONE'S safety. In dealing with this

stalker I also found that there was a solid reluctance to call the police and file a report on this student because people in Shambhala were trying to “work with him”. I found this “working with him” very enabling and allowed him to assault me after he’d harassed three other women at the center before me. I was also surprised to find out that the leadership had not received any training in identifying sexual predation in the organization by consulting with the <https://www.kcsarc.org/> (<https://www.kcsarc.org/>) King County Sexual Assault Resource Center, which provides tons of information and resources on how an organization can deal with sexual predation. I felt alone even when people were trying to help me because they didn’t really know how to help me and seemed more interested in helping my tormentor. I stopped going to public teachings for a few years because frankly they were not safe because I could run into my tormentor. This was all pre-metoo movement so a lot is beginning to change. With your attitude, I think a lot can change for the better. I know it can. You give me a lot of hope for a better way to work with others in the Dharma which I think is first and foremost understanding what sexual assault and harassment is and how it needs to be dealt with within a spiritual organization. There needs to be a lot of discussion between victims and the organization to figure out how to make things safe in the future. The biggest obstacle I found was people not wanting to listen to me, not being interested in protecting me the way I needed to be protected. The abuser got more protection than I did. I felt more like I was a liability. When people are truly safe, we can then talk about “working with” others, even if that means working with them is while they are potentially behind bars. May we all be free from danger, be healthy, be healed and whole in this new era.

Reply



1. **Dave Lindberg** says:

July 27, 2018 at 10:45 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10488>)

Wow. Thank you for sharing your story with such bravery, Elise. Structures which enable abuse do so throughout the organization, not just at the top. Hearing from people with experiences like yours helps me better understand how deeply Shambhala needs to change.

Reply

25.  **Ellen Kahler** says:

July 23, 2018 at 6:27 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10468>)

Thank you Ethan. This was so helpful to me. I especially appreciate your clarity on the samaya vow as i have only been on the vajrayana path for 2 years and i feel like there was much that was not fully explained to us. You are a great teacher and writer so i am glad you will be continuing this work, even if you give up the title. I really appreciated the way you laid out your thoughts around this. So helpful!

Reply

26.  Maggie Tuck says:

July 23, 2018 at 7:18 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10469>)

Wow. You grapple with your heartbreak, responsibilities, and decisions and then share your thoughts, which are steeped in wisdom, so clearly and openly: this is why I love your teaching. I'm relieved you will continue to teach, and couldn't care less what you're called.

Reply

27.  Arnold Hammerschlag says:

July 23, 2018 at 7:24 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10470>)

Hi Ethan,

Thank you so much for your thoughts on how power and lack of transparency have played out in a top down structure. Now I see my own experiences much more clearly.

I consider myself a student of the students of Trungpa Rinpoche; Sakyong Mipham is one of those students. I also feel that my path was greatly influenced by the amazing teachers that Shambhala Meditation Center of New York invited as guest teachers – most notably the regular visits by Ponlop Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Khandro Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche and the many Shambhala Acharyas – especially Judy, Eric, Gaylon and Suzanne. I take refuge in the worldwide Buddhist community.

The allegations have inspired me to renounce shyness. I think indulging this habit contributes to the problem. I would rather enter like Kramer on Seinfeld than be a silent student in the back, more concerned if his questions are worthy.

See you soon,  
Arnold

Reply

28.  York Stillman says:

July 23, 2018 at 7:55 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10471>)

Good Morning Ethan,

You write beautifully. I wish I had just a part of your talent.

I am one of the “old dogs” who joined Vajradhatu/Shambhala at Naropa in 1974. Helped to start or build 6 Shambhala Centres in 2 countries, started teaching in 1984 and am currently a Shastri in Brazil. I have also been an active “kasung” since 84 – and personals for Chogyam Trungpa, the Vajra Regent, the Sawang and the current Sakyong.

Why the resume? None of these three titled individuals has ever been unkind to me in any way. I have never seen any act of unkindness by any of them towards any other. I heard some stories (some really crazy ones) and some stories had a wide range of versions. That is my side and my personal experience.

As I mentioned I live in Brasil and have since 1991, so I was here when the Sawang was here in 1993 and 2002. I was also in Chile in 2002, but I will not discuss that trip in this forum. I was recently contacted by someone in SI about an alleged “incident” with the Sakyong in 2002 in Brasil. I (and another Brazilian kasung) was with him whenever he was not sleeping. Nothing happened here – nada. It was a beautiful trip with magical teachings.

Our shrine pictures are on the shrine, we talk a lot about everything that is happening in Shambhala world wide, we continue to practice and teach. We are also feeling excited that a new Shambhala, as Ethan described, will arise. One without moats, with glass walls, flowing communication, more teachers that represent the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions as well as Shambhala and maybe someday others.

And from our Brazilian community our hearts and prayers , our love and lungta, go out to anyone who has suffered inside

or outside Shambhala.

Reply

29.  **Carol B** says:

July 23, 2018 at 11:54 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10472>)

Trying to improve the harasser instead of supporting the harassee and removing the harasser from the situation is a case of idiot compassion. You dont save the world by kindly enabling damaged, damaging people. That’s not our job and we aren’t that good.

Reply

30.  **Brett Boyar** says:

July 24, 2018 at 6:42 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10473>)

many thanks for this, Ethan. i have thought of you often during these weeks.

Reply

31.  **Chris DiMeglio** says:

July 25, 2018 at 6:09 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10477>)

Dear Ethan,

I have a great deal of respect for your thoughtfulness and integrity here. I also feel compassion for you and everyone dealing with this painful situation. I thought you and others might like to see a discussion with one my main teachers, Shinzen Young, at the podcast link below titled, “Why Good Teachers Go Bad.” You can listen from 46:30 to hear Shinzen’s very clear ideas.

Love,  
Chris

<http://deconstructingyourself.com/podcast/dy-020-why->

good-teachers-go-bad-with-guest-shinzen-young  
(<http://deconstructingyourself.com/podcast/dy-020-why-good-teachers-go-bad-with-guest-shinzen-young>)

Reply

32.  Marcia says:

July 26, 2018 at 7:28 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10479>)

Ethan, Thank you so much for your awareness, transparency and generosity in sharing your insights.

I am not a native English speaker, then my interaction in the Sambhala Community and NYC Sangha always was more “contemplative”. It began in 2011, when I did the 3 first steps to become a warrior. You were my teacher in some moments of this learning. I can feel and see the value of the practices and the Sangha, where I always have been felt welcome – as an practitioner, student and volunteer.

Since then, as a paradoxal, I have felt some ambivalence in relation to hierarchy, even knowing and being admirer of the history of the Trungpa and of the lineage. I had opportunity to met Sakhyong during Harvest feast. When, I was in the position you describe ( I felt a mix of admiration and desire to be accepted by him). And maybe because that I didn’t committed myself with the all vows. I didn’t like this interference the whole structure and hierarchy cause me.

Naturally, the recent revelations appear to have validated my holding back. At the same time, I truly feel sad for those are deeply committed at the International Sambhalha Community and I wish them clarity, peace and learnings in the path that is just beginning.

As my part on that, I will keep my practicing, my studies – special “tongling” for all harmed in this process. And I have to confess I feel more comfortable to step in NYC Sangha with the pictures covered. At least as a indication to reflect on ...

Also, thanks for all teachings I had got from Interdependence Cominunity. Even the most of time been outside US.

In love, friendship, and the vision of enlightened society

Reply

33.  Han de Wit says:

July 26, 2018 at 3:15 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10481>)

Dear Ethan,

Greetings from Holland, suffering under a heat wave and draught! Thank you for your “Stepping Down As “Shastri,” Staying For The Shambhala Community” which I appreciate very much, up to the second part Question #2: What is Your Relationship To The Shambhala Organization? where you write: “merit and transparency are not the primary reasons we have our titles. We have our titles primarily because of the perception that we are loyal to Sakyong Mipham, specifically. I sometimes joke privately that the Sakyong has never even seen me work with students, and yet, he has given me a title as a senior teacher”

It seems to me that you and the people around you do not know that shastris are chosen based on a recommendation of their own center and then that recommendation is looked at by acharya Judith Simmer and nowadays by Melissa Moore. Of course the Sakyong has to give his approval in the end. So, I would say transparency is there. You are in fact asked by your local center to work as a shastri, even though formally the Sakyong approved and rubber stamped your local sangha’s recommendation. If I look at my own appointment as acharya – even though the Sakyong asked me personally in 2000 to take on this responsibility, it did not feel like a question mysteriously coming down here from heaven or from some inscrutable depth of the Sakyong’s mind, but simply from practical considerations and information about my work for the sangha in Europe so far.

So, even though giving up your shastri position has in my perception a very attractive ring about it, your argumentation to do so is based on a misunderstanding about the shastri process. Am I stating it too strongly if I say that you are making a mistake, here? As a shastri you can help and be with the sangha as well.

Warmly and with appreciation for your work,

Han de Wit

Reply



malijimenez108 says:

July 27, 2018 at 5:21 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping->

down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community  
/#comment-10483)

From Ethan: “Han, thank you so much. It is an honor to hear from you and have you read what I wrote. Although I think we only met once, I have great respect for your role in our sangha.

Again, I want to triple-emphasize that the vast majority of our current senior teachers would also be selected in a transparent, merit-based system.

I am quite familiar with how Shastris are selected, to the degree that there is a system. I was apparently one of the very first people (in 2009) to be contacted about interest in the role, first by Gaylon Ferguson, followed by conversations with Adam Lobel and Judith Simmer-Brown. They also spoke with a few local people in New York (though I travel a lot to teach), though they never said who. I didn’t have to submit any materials or other experiential evidence or CV, and student feedback was not part of the process. Again, the whole process was anecdotal at best. I am tremendously grateful to how much Judith and Adam took on in organically organizing the whole thing in the best way possible given their resources or lack thereof.

I have recommended various other Shastris as well from 2009 until 2018. However, it’s not very clear what the actual qualifications for the role are, in terms of practice or teaching experience, student feedback, or even how many Shastris each center or region need. There is a VERY wide range of actual teaching experience among both the Shastris and Acharyas. I know that Adam and Charlie Goetzl were sketching a plan for a training program (5-year?) in the future which would bring a lot more clarity and transparency to the path to become a Shastri. A question that I raised to Adam directly: will there be any thought given to a livelihood model, or training in career elements and audience-building given to these future shastri trainings, given that there is no other system of a five year educational training that doesn’t lead to some potential career path? That question was not answered, and without answering it, I don’t think many people will go down such a training path.

As for the Acharya role, I am so happy that your empowerment felt very practical for the community. I’m sure it was. I’m sure every Acharya has served the practical needs of the students in some way. The Acharyas that I have worked with, co-taught with, and studied with certainly have. My closest mentors – Suzann, Arawana, and Gaylon, have meant more to me than almost anything on this path, and my collegial friendship with Adam has always

been a deeply meaningful connection.

However, I would encourage you to maybe look at the idea that one person (a brilliant person, for sure) choosing you to hold that Acharya title, a person who has never seen any of us work with students (at least only very rarely) does not rise to the level of transparency which inspires any real confidence in a whole educational system. It does not provide a clear path for any new teachers looking ahead. If a new teacher asks me: “how would I become a Shastri or Acharya?” the only answer to the Shastri question is “a representative of the Sakyong will ask you.” The only answer to the Acharya question is “The Sakyong will ask you himself.” Neither of these answers inspire a clear journey forward, because there is nothing clear that you can do to go down this path, other than hope the Sakyong hears good things about you.

So many talented teachers look elsewhere in the dharma world and mindfulness community for their roles and positions and training. Our monolithic model also creates a system where, when the Acharyas or Shastris might want to act as a check and balance on the Sakyong’s power ( given the harms being revealed) or even publicly question his decisions or actions, they have to wonder if doing so will lead to their disenfranchisement as a senior teacher. That lack of transparency leads to a system without much honesty about what we really feel.

The lack of public statements from male Acharyas given the current situation seems to reflect this basic structural problem.

Also would encourage you to consider this: when a Roshi is empowered in many Zen lineages, they get to keep the title no matter what. Similar to a Khenpo title in Tibetan lineages. They can teach wherever they want. Similar with Western Doctorate programs. The fact that Shastris and Acharyas no longer keep their earned titles if they do not satisfy the Sakyong’s curricular requests is fairly unique to us. It seems monolithic, and designed to keep a tight container on who can convey our teachings at the highest level and under what circumstance. It’s hard not to read such a tight container as both insular and insecure.

I assure you, if I am making a personal mistake, I will receive feedback from family, friends, mentors, colleagues and students. I will reflect on my choices and actions. If I ever receive another communication from the Sakyong himself, I will also hold that with the highest care as I reflect on my choices. But I’m not going anywhere. I just feel like I can be more use to the sangha if I am accountable to the community itself, rather than accountable to the Sakyong via a mode of empowerment which I never really

understood.

With much gratitude for you reaching out,

Ethan”

Reply

34.  Han de Wit says:

July 27, 2018 at 5:54 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10484>)

Dear Ethan,

Thank you for your nuanced and extensive response to my may be somewhat stiff or unyielding way of phrasing.

I think your response deserves some further investigation, because at the bottom of it lies, it seems to me, the issue of what kind of organization Shambhala has been up till now and, more importantly what kind of organization we want to see it become in the future. That is an important point. Let me explain why I see it this way.

From my point of view the fact that the Sakyong has delegated the process of finding candidates for shastris to our local centers -that is bottom up – shows the Sakyong’s trust in and willingness to rely on the wisdom of the sangha. Of course he then rubber stamps the recommendations that come to him through the acharyas that collect and investigate the information they got from the centers. And this is what you and I want him to do – even more so in the future, I would say.

I can tell you that in the early days of the shastri proces the acharyas themselves still felt they would be a good source of information, but it became quicly very clear (to Judith Simmer at that time) that their recommendations had too much personal bias and that the councils of the local centers were much more in a position to be objective and reliable in terms of providing information. The acharyas simply were not as close enough to the local reality of the centers, they were still too much ‘top down’ And that was (and is still) true. So your remark that the Sakyong rubber stamped you assignment as shastri is correct – even though you said that jokingly. That is how Shambhala re the Shastri process has been operating till now.

Of course the phenomenon of ‘rubber stamping’ is a very common phenomenon in (bigger) organizations – both commercial and governmental ones. The director or

president has to rely on his or her subordinates, even though he or she stays accountable for the decisions they make. It sounds to me as if this accountability for you means that you are appointed not by the sangha but by the Sakyong. Formally (or legally) you are right, but materially you are wrong, if I may say so. I wonder what kind of organizational model you have in mind in which you would \*not\* have given up your work as shastri. That is an important question I think!

With best wishes!

Han

Reply

35.  Han de Wit says:

July 27, 2018 at 6:05 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10485>)

Dear Ethan,

And let me add – perhaps unnecessary – that “merit and transparency are the primary reasons we have our titles”. I am sure it is because of your merit accumulated by your work for your local sangha that your sangha by mouth of its local council have recommended you to take on the responsibility as a shashtri. The proces of becoming a shastri is a ‘bottom up’ process. As you say, the Sakyong does not always know the people personally who are recommended but he trusts the judgement of those who are responsible for selecting future shastri’s. And that is the transparency of the process. Merit and transparency are the \*primary\* reasons we have our titles. By leaving your post as a shastri you turn your back on the sangha that wanted you to take on this position of shastri. Please reconsider your step! Thank you!

Han de Wit

Reply

36.  Sean says:

July 27, 2018 at 6:45 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10486>)

Thank you Ethan,

Thank you for calling out the unhealthy/abusive dynamics of

the monarchy, secrecy, hierarchy, wealth, and singular guru devotion in Shambhala. Thank you for prioritizing those who feel betrayed or unsafe over the rituals and forms you have become attached to.

I've been heavily involved with shambhala, living at centers, practicing 3 hours a day, and was planning on going to Sacred World next summer. Now I know that I could never take Samaya with the Sakyong.

I have been investigating other Lamas and Rinpoches and I have learned that Samaya as it is taught in Shambhala is not the norm throughout Tibetan Buddhism. I have even found statements from Mingyur Rinpoche that warn against entering into an exclusive guru-student relationship that makes you feel like you are “cheating” on your guru if you see another Lama. That dynamic is limiting and unhealthy. In conversations with non-shambhala vajrayana practitioners they have expressed shock that the Sakyong required exclusivity.

The norm in Tibetan Buddhism is to have a “root” guru, but also see other teachers. The instruction is simply not to mix and match vajrayana practices between teachers. So if you received the same vajrayana practice from two different teachers, you stick with one version of it for a particular thun, or retreat.

It seems they have much more flexibility around seeing other teachers, leaving, etc. their understanding of Samaya is not as different. It is actually encouraged to see and have more than one teacher.

Also Secrecy is different. The practices themselves, as well as the higher teachings, are kept secret because if misunderstood they could be abused.

But other than that there aren't secret groups, meetings, court mansions, etc. the secret inner circles of shambhala are not normal to vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism.

I am realizing that everything you would expect in an unhealthy relationship such as control, rigid exclusivity, secrecy, extreme demands, etc, are unique to Shambhala. The wider Vajrayana community, I am now learning, has much more flexibility and less rigidity as a healthy relationship would.

On the one hand I am angry that Shambhala teaches this unusual, if not outright incorrect, version of Samaya to students who have little knowledge of These things before coming in to Shambhala.

On the other hand it means that when I am ready some day, that I could enter into a Vajrayana relationship with a different teacher (or teachers!) that have a much healthier approach to it and not have to worry about being stuck no matter what the teacher does or what life circumstances

arise.

Another issue is the Court lifestyle, of which you may not have fully known about, but I witnessed it for myself this summer. I found all of the secret wealth, power, and obedience quite alarming at first. I was shocked that I didn't learn about it until I was very far into Shambhala. My concerns about it were reframed as being about my own issues, not what I was seeing happen. This too is something that needs to change. Both the secret wealth, power, and obedience of the court as well as the default to reframe students concerns about what is happening in Shambhala to be about their own minds and not about something that might be wrong with the system.

I hope Shambhala does radically change. If the monarchy, court, kusung, are undone and people are allowed to have different Gurus/multiple teachers from different lineages are allowed to teach, and the Sakyong is removed from the shrine, I could consider coming back some day. But if Shambhala continues with its harmful patterns as it did after the vajra regent, I believe it will be extremely harmful to people again and will have to warn people to stay away from it.

Seeing other practitioners reactions from different lineages in the following forum was helpful:

<https://dharma.wheel.net/viewtopic.php?f=40&t=28894>  
(<https://dharma.wheel.net/viewtopic.php?f=40&t=28894>)

So Ethan, please look into other teachings on Samaya. Mingyur has many other good things to say about it here too:  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=pD76AwAAQBAJ&pg=PT254&lpg=PT254&dq=%22we+make+a+connection+to+one+teacher,+fine%22&source=bl&ots=5I\\_gM3nLYM&sig=sThlczuVm1D2oNvf4uc3A4Zhtmo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK06-qmrjcAhULY6wKHZKkCukQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=%22we%20make%20a%20connection%20to%20one%20teacher%2C%20fine%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=pD76AwAAQBAJ&pg=PT254&lpg=PT254&dq=%22we+make+a+connection+to+one+teacher,+fine%22&source=bl&ots=5I_gM3nLYM&sig=sThlczuVm1D2oNvf4uc3A4Zhtmo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK06-qmrjcAhULY6wKHZKkCukQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=%22we%20make%20a%20connection%20to%20one%20teacher%2C%20fine%22&f=false) ([https://books.google.com/books?id=pD76AwAAQBAJ&pg=PT254&lpg=PT254&dq=%22we+make+a+connection+to+one+teacher,+fine%22&source=bl&ots=5I\\_gM3nLYM&sig=sThlczuVm1D2oNvf4uc3A4Zhtmo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK06-qmrjcAhULY6wKHZKkCukQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=%22we%20make%20a%20connection%20to%20one%20teacher%2C%20fine%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=pD76AwAAQBAJ&pg=PT254&lpg=PT254&dq=%22we+make+a+connection+to+one+teacher,+fine%22&source=bl&ots=5I_gM3nLYM&sig=sThlczuVm1D2oNvf4uc3A4Zhtmo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK06-qmrjcAhULY6wKHZKkCukQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=%22we%20make%20a%20connection%20to%20one%20teacher%2C%20fine%22&f=false))

Take care,  
Maybe I'll come to a talk you give some day

Reply

37.  **Dr Dean Nelson** says:

July 29, 2018 at 11:30 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10489>)

Dear Ethan Nichtern,

Thank you for your choice to give up your teaching title perhaps instigating and helping to create a blank canvas for the teachings and community to arise.

I hope everyone gives up their titles, their pins, their levels, their ranks, their status and their uniforms so we as a community can trust in the wisdom of ‘beginners mind’.

Hopefully, our collective wisdom will display how to proceed to preserve the teachings and the container of Enlightened Society.

Good luck to us all,

Aloha nui loa,

Dean

Reply

38.  **Margaret Ervin** says:

July 31, 2018 at 5:49 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10490>)

I hope others will follow your example. The empowerments put you and others in the role of patriarchal representative and defender (at least implicitly). Even the women with these empowerments are implicated in the patriarchal system. That’s currently quite problematic. Thanks for your honesty, insight, and bravery in relinquishing the empowerment. And thanks for staying!

Reply

39.  **Adam Hart** says:

August 1, 2018 at 7:02 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10491>)

Perhaps all this has been a long time coming ever since the Sakyong was a near orphan midst the chaos at Samye Ling that ensued upon Chogyam Trungpa's self- unmasking , marriage and departure to North America, a fuller truer story about which remains untold/ not believed when told .

For me the present crisis does not mean we should give up on simple basic dharma and mediation practice and so much good teaching that you find in Shambhala however narrow that maybe at times. This is good at the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end.

As Ken Wibur suggests in the 4th Turning, It is the so called higher religious practices , and abuses of power, that we need to investigate critically through the cultural lens of the philosophy of European Enlightenment, from which most of us westerners are embeded in, whether we like it or not .

Whilst emotions are vital stuff ( big thoughts) to work with , emotional conversions and attendant peak experiences are perhaps not quite they seem or promise to be.

So it is back to basics, back to the earth, back to our hearts, back to our selves , back to each other.

In meantime as balm, the lyrics of Leonard Cohen's Heart with No Companion , might well help.

Reply

40.  **Susanne Vincent** says:

August 4, 2018 at 11:03 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10493>)

Dear Adam

I just do want to share my response to your comment, 'so much good teaching that you find in Shambhala however narrow that maybe at times'.

The Shambhala teachings, as conveyed to me from Level One just to Warrior Assembly, and also of course the Kagyu guru supplication, the terrifying richness of the Buddhist chants and the Sadhana of Mahamudra and so on, could never be described as narrow. I would call them massive, colossal, vast.

The utter privilege and inestimable power of the Ashe that is transmitted is supreme in this age. The impeccable instructions in the terma regarding the Kingdom of Shambhala and the explicit brilliance of Tiger, Lion, Garuda Dragon vision are among the most exciting and fantastic in the world of dharma teaching. This is a complete path. If

thunder and lightning are narrow, these teachings are narrow!

Yes, we need to come back to each other, and I am so glad to see this is happening. But let's also come back to the incredible power of these teachings and the truth of egolessness. This is all intact, and all available.

With warm wishes

Reply

1.  **Adam Hart** says:

August 22, 2018 at 7:54 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10501>)

Dear Susanne

The vastness of what you describe may well exist but I am referring to the fact that at present these teachings largely only attract and are accessed by a few groups and classes of people in the western world at least , and they are, like me, mostly privileged, white and middle class .

kind regards and very best wishes

Adam

Reply

41.  **Beth Messler** says:

August 22, 2018 at 5:06 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10502>)

That was a beautiful letter Ethan. Stand where you are and be who you are. Here's to truth. That is my path as well. May my community evolve as I do.

Reply

42.  **Debbie Lassiter** says:

August 23, 2018 at 12:36 pm (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10503>)

Ethan,

Thank you for taking action and sharing with the community. In working with my west coast Shambhala center, I am finding no similar action from them or the senior teachers. They do however, regularly share the acknowledged confusion. We have a sharing session coming up in a few weeks led by one of the Transition Task Force members. I plan to discuss your statement and action as part of addressing patriarchy, power structures, and corrupt leadership. The pattern of corruption here (as laid out by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche himself) looks like it reads from the playbook of current Presidential Administration. I am certainly one of those individuals who has found benefit in Shambhala because it worked for me and I was blissfully ignorant of what has been occurring for others. I want very much to support and advocate for those who have been harmed. I do not believe that any action taken to save the Shambhala teachings should be in any way at their expense or endanger people in the future from continuing in the same manner. Times are indeed confusing, but I feel there are very clear fundamental areas of focus that need to stay in the spotlight.

Reply

43.  Modesto Fortuna says:

February 10, 2019 at 10:16 am (<https://www.ethannichtern.com/stepping-down-as-shastri-staying-for-the-shambhala-community/#comment-10781>)

Hi, Ethan! It would be very helpful if you could update us on your position. What are you thinking about your relationship with the Sakyong as guru, in light of the Wickwire Holmes report?

Reply

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