



# WOVEN: LEAVING SHAMBHALA

written by Guest Contributor June 10, 2020



*WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN here.*

*Reread the archives, always.*

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I first learned to meditate when I was twenty years old. On a warm summer evening in 2004, I walked in the door of the Shambhala Meditation Center in Madison, Wisconsin and sat cross-legged on a rectangular blue cushion. A gray-haired woman named Kathy with warm, dark eyes and a face like the full moon taught me how to cross my legs, sit still, and notice my breath. *When you wander away from the present moment, just label it “thinking” and return to the breath.*

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Once, I slept with a man without wanting to. I got into bed with him, stayed beside his body until morning, kissed him on the lips, went quietly home, then fell to the floor crying endless tears.

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That summer evening when I first learned to meditate, my dear friend Miriam came with me. We sat side by side, hands carefully placed on our thighs, the faint buzz of cicadas droning through the open windows, along with the whoosh of traffic on Baldwin Street. We had discovered Shambhala through our writing teacher Paula, who rented an office above the Center. Paula’s classes were small and women-only, a circle of five or

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six students sipping chamomile tea in her cozy office, moving our pens swiftly across paper, then sharing our raw, newly formed words aloud, burning with power as they hung in the listening air. The classes always began with a meditation and a short reading from Buddhist teachers like Pema Chödrön. The clear, heartfelt wisdom felt like remembering a deep truth that I had always known but forgotten. They expressed something I had been starving for: a way to understand myself, to live with meaning, purpose, and heart.

When Paula had to stop teaching due to health issues, I missed the insight and community I felt in her classes. Then one day, I noticed a sign hanging above the door of the building where Paula had taught. I had never noticed it before. The sign showed a golden sun with a halo of squiggly rays like lightning bolts. It said, “Shambhala Center of Madison.” Shambhala was Pema Chödrön’s lineage. It felt like an omen.

Miriam and I went for meditation instruction that summer evening and never looked back. Over the next fourteen years, Shambhala would become the center of our lives.

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It wasn’t rape. Or not in the way we like to think about rape: she said no, he said yes. He held her down, she tried to fight him off, but he was just too strong. It was something murkier, slipperier. Something no one wanted to talk about. It was not as clean or clear cut. It was just as dangerous.

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Miriam and I weren’t the only ones attracted to Shambhala. When we joined, the organization had thousands of dues-paying members worldwide and many more who were unofficially affiliated to its web of over 200 meditation centers in fifty countries. Shambhala ran four land centers, a monastery, and was also affiliated with Naropa University. A statement on Shambhala’s website reads, “Our communities around the world cultivate kindness, bravery, and genuine dialogue. Our vision is to inspire compassionate, sustainable, and just human societies.” Their mission is “Making enlightened society possible.” The first time I heard those words—*enlightened society*—I thought, *Yes. This is what I’ve been searching for.*

\*

Everyone I told about the man was eager to put words in my mouth: *a little fling, a misunderstanding between friends*. Years after it happened, when stories about Shambhala were seeping out like bile, other phrases emerged: *sexual misconduct, sexual assault*. One person even said the word I had avoided for so long: *rape*. I cringed when I heard it. After all those years, did I still not understand what he’d done to me?

\*

I was drawn to meditation because I was suffering. Still in that excruciating limbo between childhood and adulthood, I was sensitive and insecure, with only a tenuous sense of who I was or where I was going. I had always felt like an outsider. Unschooled for most of my childhood, when I finally did go to high school for a year, I was bullied and struggled to make close friends. At twenty, I was still raw and shaky from running the gauntlet of adolescence. I was desperate to find somewhere I belonged. Somewhere that felt like home.

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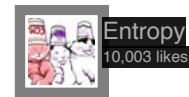
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There was never a yes, a verbal yes. I went along with him in the way that women have been trained to go along: a smile on our lips, ignoring our screaming bodies. This going along is taken as a yes. He heard yes in the absence of a clear *no*. For years afterward, I too thought I had said yes. Now, writing this, my body remembers. I never said that word.

\*

After that first night of meditation at the Shambhala Center, Miriam and I were hooked. We started going weekly, then twice a week, then more, sitting for hours at a time practicing *shamatha*, or “peaceful abiding,” as the sitting meditation was called. We started “Shambhala Training,” the intensive path of study that can take years to complete. We joined the Center as dues-paying members, then began volunteering.

In 2006, Miriam and I took the refuge vow, the ceremony in which you officially enter the Buddhist path. We knelt in the shrine room, surrounded by our community, or *sangha*, waiting in vibrating silence for the teacher to begin the ceremony. I wore a floor-length black skirt, a dark, fitted blouse, and a blue silk scarf around my neck. My short, tousled hair was dyed black to cover up the blue streaks. Photos of Chögyam Trungpa and his son Sakyong Mipham beamed down at us from above the red-painted shrine. We were about to officially join this incredible lineage. Goosebumps stood out on my arms as the teacher, an elegant, silver-haired man in a crisp gray suit, began the ceremony.

When you take refuge, you’re given a name that’s meant to show an intrinsic part of your awakened nature, yet is something that you’re simultaneously aspiring towards. Mine was *Sheltri Wangmo*, or Crystal Sword Lady. By that time, I had already gotten a tattoo of a sun on my upper right arm. Although it was different from the “Great Eastern Sun” that represented the essence of Shambhala’s vision, it still symbolized the teachings to me. Several years later, I would get a sword on the inside of my left arm, evoking my refuge name. I wanted the teachings inked into my flesh, a constant reminder.

\*

Shambhala describes the structure of its global community as: “organized on the principle of a classical *mandala*, an energetic pattern of relationships radiating out from a central organizing principle. In Shambhala, the central organizing principle is the Shambhala lineage and teachings. Local teachers, meditation instructors, and leaders are appointed by the Shambhala lineage holder—the Sakyong—to lead people on the core path of training and provide personal support to those who want to study and practice these teachings.”

\*

When I took my refuge vow, there was so much I didn’t know about Shambhala’s leaders, including its founder, Chögyam Trungpa. I didn’t know that he had married a girl in England—without her parents’ approval—when she was sixteen and he was thirty. I didn’t know that he had slept with many of his students and taken seven honorary wives, or *sangyums*, who were supposedly his spiritual consorts. I didn’t know that he was a raging alcoholic and died of cirrhosis of the liver at age forty-eight. I didn’t know that the community had already gone through one wave of scandal after Trungpa died in 1987.

The student he appointed as his successor was a man named Thomas Rich, though the title Trungpa gave him was the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin, or “Radiant Holder of the Teachings.” He emulated Trungpa’s patterns of abusive behavior, drinking heavily and sleeping with students. In 1985, Tendzin told Trungpa that he had

AIDS, but kept sleeping with students without informing them. Eventually, he passed the virus to a young male student. The man later died.

The only reason that the sangha heard about Tendzin's behavior was because the victim's mother and sister took it upon themselves to personally inform them.

Even once the community knew, many defended Tendzin's actions. A member named Irini Rockwell said at the time, "My feeling for the Regent as my teacher has not wavered...I have the view that he should continue to teach. The Regent never intended to hurt anybody, and my religion has taught me to never, ever reject anybody who does not intend harm."

Tendzin refused to resign, but was eventually pushed out of Shambhala. He died of AIDS-related complications in 1990, at the age of 47.

\*

Chögyam Trungpa was famous for his style of teaching called "crazy wisdom." While most Buddhist teachers will say that crazy wisdom should never be abusive or harmful, much of Trungpa's problematic behavior was brushed off by his followers as a profound teaching that critics weren't enlightened enough to understand.

After several years in Shambhala, I began to hear the stories. Often they were told laughingly, later in the evening after a weekend meditation program had wrapped up, usually after several glasses of wine. There was always alcohol at Shambhala events, and often quite a lot of it.

I heard about Trungpa pissing on the leg of someone he didn't like at a dinner party, being driven around in fancy cars, waited on hand and foot by adoring followers, and posting a sign-up sheet for students to sleep with him. The stories were always chalked up to Trungpa's crazy wisdom, his amazing power to cut through people's bullshit and bring out their wisdom. They were usually told with reverence and a tinge of awe. No one mentioned any controversy about it within the community. I often felt uneasy, but the feeling slipped by so quietly, it was almost like seeing an eel flicker by under water, or trying to hold onto a dream upon waking.

I asked people who had known Trungpa what they thought of his behavior. Everyone said something similar: "His methods were unconventional, but he was the most compassionate, loving person I've ever met. He was a brilliant teacher. He changed my life."

Even the skeptics seemed to accept Shambhala's wild past because, as everyone was quick to say, "The Sakyong is so different from his father." The photo of Sakyong Mipham that hung above the shrine in every Shambhala Center shone with a golden light. He was a marathon runner, happily married to, just one, woman. Looking up at his photo smiling beatifically down from the shrine as I sat for long hours in meditation, I felt a sense of comfort suffuse my body.

Everyone I met in Shambhala was so kind, so caring. The teachings were profound, reminding me that my basic nature—the basic nature of all beings—was sane, wise, compassionate, and good. I began to understand myself in a way I never had before, within a close-knit community of other people who were doing the same. It felt amazing.

\*

After I moved across the country in 2008, from Madison to Portland, Oregon, I stayed deeply involved in Shambhala. I started working at the Portland Shambhala Center as their Administrative Assistant. I maintained a daily meditation practice and travelled all over the U.S. and Canada attending Shambhala retreats. I volunteered at the Center, in addition to my job there. I kept paying my membership dues, even when I was making so little money that I had to go on food stamps.

\*

Shortly after moving to Portland, I began grappling with unprocessed childhood sexual abuse. Meditation gave me a way to work with the suffering that seemed more than I could bear. The Shambhala community gave me a kind, loving anchor, a space where I could show up weeping and be met with warmth and acceptance.

After my long-term partner ended our relationship, I was even more of a mess. Members of the Center stepped up to support me through the howling void of my suffering. They held me while I cried, my eyes swelling shut and nose dripping snot. They took long walks and listened to my endless dark river of misery. They let me sleep in their guest bedrooms when I couldn't bear to be alone. They treated me like family. I still don't know how I would have made it through that time without them.

Slowly, the thick veil of grief began to lift. I started therapy, enrolled in community college, and started a group at the Center for meditators in their twenties and thirties. There was still heaviness, but it was laced with flickers of happiness and glimpses of something beyond the shadowy land I had traversed for so long.

\*

Lodro Rinzler was one of Shambhala's prominent young teachers. He was only a year older than me, short, redheaded, with a small potbelly. He was funny, confident, and charming. He'd written several books. His first, *The Buddha Walks into a Bar*, was about navigating the pitfalls of dating, career, and friendships, and how you might bring all the normal experiences of being a twenty or thirty-something to the path of meditation. It felt edgy and exciting to read about the possibility of having a mindful breakup, a mindful hangover, a mindful one-night stand. I was studying to be a meditation instructor and had recently begun teaching at the Shambhala Center. In the young meditators group, we all looked up to Lodro.

He was touring the country promoting his latest book in October of 2013, and I was asked to coordinate his stop in Portland. The program included an event at Powell's Bookstore, as well as a program at the Shambhala Center. I was responsible for taking Lodro out to dinner on Sunday and driving him to the event at Powell's, in addition to coordinating the Monday program at the Shambhala Center.

As I watched him sit on stage at Powell's, speaking with kindness and humor, the room crowded with other young people, eyes glistening, eager for wisdom, I felt a warm tingle of pride. I wasn't just some newbie off the street who was hearing these profound teachings for the first time. I was here with the teacher himself. I was special. *I belonged.*

After the event, Lodro and I got drinks at The Sweet Hereafter bar, talking earnestly about dharma as we leaned across the small, dimly-lit table, sipping our Moscow Mules from shiny copper mugs. Afterwards, I drove Lodro back to the apartment where he was staying. As we sat in the dark car, the engine humming beneath the buzz of our voices, he asked if I wanted to come up for another drink. I hesitated, my stomach tensing. Something in me was saying no. But I was warm and happy, buzzed from alcohol and the attention of this famous young teacher who had just commanded a room full of people with elegance and poise.

I said, "OK, but just one drink."

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We entered the beautiful old brick building where he was staying and took the vintage elevator upstairs. Once we were inside the apartment, sitting on the small sofa with whiskeys in hand, he leaned towards me, his lips

aiming for mine.

I pulled back and put out my hand. My palm made contact with his chest as I pushed him away.

I said, “No, I don’t want to kiss you.”

He smiled at me knowingly—that meditation teacher smile of infinite, benevolent wisdom. That smile that said, *I know best*.

“Let’s just try it,” he said. “I’m curious.” He leaned towards me again. “Just relax and see what happens.”

I didn’t want to kiss him. But some part of me was flattered to be getting attention from this teacher who I had looked up to.

In this wasteland between *yes* and *no*, I started to leave my body. My head was spinning, my thoughts disjointed and fighting each other. Lodro was a teacher, and I had been well-trained to respect Shambhala teachers. Was this crazy wisdom? Was there some profound teaching he was imparting that I was just too ignorant to understand?

\*

In 1975, the poet W.S. Merwin and his partner Dana Naone had met Chögyam Trungpa at a meditation program in Boulder. A Halloween party was held near the end of the retreat, and at the height of the festivities, Trungpa ordered everyone to get naked. Merwin and Naone refused, escaping to their room as the party got more raucous. Trungpa ordered his students to bring them back to the party, by any means necessary. His students broke down the door to their room, and, despite Merwin breaking off a liquor bottle to keep them at bay, they dragged the couple outside, crying and clinging to each other, and presented them to Trungpa. He drunkenly berated them, then commanded his followers to strip them naked. They obeyed.

When I first heard this story, I brushed over one key detail: even after the abuse, Merwin and Naone stayed for the rest of the program. Now, that is the detail that strikes me most.

\*

I had been groomed to idolize Shambhala teachers. We all were. I was told that I should use the word *Rinpoche*, which translates as “precious jewel” or “beloved teacher,” when I referred to Chögyam Trungpa or Sakyong Mipham. I was instructed to think of the Sakyong as an enlightened monarch and to call him “your Majesty” on the rare occasions when I was in his presence. During meditation programs, I was instructed to crawl on my knees to bring the teachers water, so that I wouldn’t show disrespect. At first I felt uncomfortable with this worship of authority, but everyone around me was behaving this way. They all had eloquent explanations about why this was an essential part of the path, why the top-down, male-dominated leadership made sense, how it was part of building an enlightened society. They said we all had basic goodness, but we needed an enlightened teacher to guide us, to mirror our wisdom back to us.

Some people voiced their discomfort about referring to the Sakyong as a king. Everyone listened and nodded politely. Secretly, I guessed that their failure to accept the Sakyong meant that they were missing some profound teaching, a teaching that *I* would be certain not to miss.

\*

My hands pushed Lodro away. My hands said no. But his desire confused me—confusion masking survival. Some part of me remembered that it was safer to go along. Some part of me remembered that this is how

women survive: believe that what he wants is what you want.

After Lodro kissed me, I said, “I want to go home, but I’m too drunk to drive.”

He said, “You can stay here. I promise I won’t touch you. We can build a pillow fortress down the middle of the bed—your side and mine.”

I hesitated, but I stayed. I pretended to believe him. If I didn’t, my community, my spiritual practice, the way I had made sense of my life for the last decade, would crumble.

\*

If you continue on the Shambhala path for long enough, you’re encouraged to take a formal vow with the Sakyong. The vow is your entrance into Vajrayana Buddhism, a tantric path shrouded in secrecy. Vajrayana students are instructed to speak about their study with non-Vajrayana students only in the most general terms and to never reveal the specifics of their practices. Once you take the *samaya* vow, your teacher becomes your guru, and it is believed that you are bound to them—not just for the rest of this life—but over all your future reincarnations. If you break your vow, terrible things are said to happen.

If I didn’t say *no*, I must have said *yes*. Or, since I did say *no*, I must have done it incorrectly. I must not have been loud enough, forceful enough, meant it enough. My timid *no* could so easily be dismissed by Lodro, a legal court, the court of public opinion. Wasn’t it true that I was drunk? Wasn’t it true that I was wearing a short dress? A dress he later said made him think *I have to have her*. My *no* must have been defective. And if I didn’t say *no* properly, who’s fault was it but mine?

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As soon as we were in bed, Lodro started kissing me again. He asked if I was drunk, as if he hadn’t heard me say I couldn’t drive myself home. As if assaulting a sober woman would be more acceptable.

I said “No.” I wanted to believe that I was sober, wanted to believe that I was making a choice, instead of simply being sucked out to sea by the riptide of oppression and trauma. I felt my body moving further from shore, felt the weight of dark water sucking me down.

Lodro wanted to have sex.

I said, “No. I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“Why not?” He asked.

“Because I have a history of sexual trauma,” I said. I felt like I had to explain myself. That a simple *no* wasn’t enough.

He shook his head solemnly. “I think you have trust issues,” he said, his voice like sticky syrup. His words fixed my limbs in place like a bug stuck in amber.

“Maybe this will help,” he purred into my empty ear. “Just lean in.”

*Just lean in*. It was a phrase I had heard dozens of times before. It was part of the jargon of Shambhala I had been steeped in, along with other phrases imbued with layers of meaning, things like: *taking your seat, good head and shoulders*, or *auspicious coincidence*. *Just lean in* was coded language, signaling, yet again, that Lodro was the teacher and I was the student. That he knew best.

A white-hot bolt of rage electrified my frozen body. In the darkness at the bottom of the ocean, pressed under bricks of water, something in me stirred.

“This is *trauma* we’re talking about,” I said sharply. “Leaning in will not help.” With all the effort I could muster, I dragged my body away from him, towards the edge of the bed. I crossed my arms over my chest, tried to summon the energy to kick my legs out from under the sheets, grope for my underwear, grab my clothes, and escape. But my body was still frozen, stuck to the bed as surely as if I was pinned under a whale. As desperately as I wanted to, I couldn’t break free.

Maybe he half-heartedly apologized. I don’t remember. He didn’t seem to understand what I had said. As if all his training in Tibetan and Sanskrit didn’t allow him to understand one simple, English word.

He didn’t stop touching me.

Now the deep water changed to an icy, spinning vortex. I had completely left my body. The only thing I could do was survive, as women have learned to survive for thousands of years. *Textbook PTSD*, a therapist said later.

The only way Lodro would stop touching me was if I got him off as quickly as possible, so I numbly gave him a blowjob. Afterwards, he quickly fell into a deep and peaceful sleep. I lay awake all night, hovering near the ceiling, my mind gnawing the bloody bone of itself.

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The next morning, I pretended that everything was fine. I even got coffee with Lodro and kissed him on the lips before I drove home. It was a sunny day, the sky a crisp, October blue, the falling leaves shimmering crimson and copper. It took all my focus to get home. I felt like I was trying to outrun a tornado. Even as I calmly put on my turn signal and waited at red lights, I could hear the winds screeching, see the black funnel cloud gaining on me in the rearview mirror. As soon as I climbed the stairs and shut my bedroom door, I collapsed on the bed and curled into a fetal position, rocking back and forth, sobbing uncontrollably.

Now the storm wasn’t just outside, it was ripping off the roof. I could see beams splintering and windows shattering. Frantic, I called Miriam—still one of my closest friends, still the person I trusted most in a crisis. She sucked in her breath when I told her what had happened, made a low groan. I cried until I couldn’t see, wads of wet tissue spilling from my white comforter onto the wooden floor. The golden autumn light filtered through my curtains, illuminating each grain of dust. I tried to draw a shuddering breath.

On the other end of the line, Miriam spoke comfortingly. But there was a hollowness inside me, something sucking the air from my lungs. Neither Miriam nor I could say the words *sexual assault*. Even though the day was calm, I could still hear the tornado screeching. Everything I had built my life on, everything I had thought would keep me safe, now lay in a pile of rubble.

I never wanted to see Lodro again. But it was Monday, and I still had to coordinate his program at the Shambhala Center that night. I couldn’t bring myself to call the Center Director, even though she was a friend. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her what had happened, couldn’t even lie and say that I was sick. Even though I was sick, my guts a mess, my eyes swollen shut, my heart beating like the wings of a bird grasped in a fist.

I summoned all my courage and called Lodro. I told him that what he had done was absolutely not okay. He seemed confused, so I kept trying to explain. Even as I was angrily saying that he had manipulated me, I felt like I had to protect him. To protect Shambhala.

After the program wrapped up that night, I tried to confront Lodro again. I felt lobotomized, my mind and body still strangely disjointed from each other. I followed him back to his apartment, then sat on the same couch where he had kissed me the night before. I said again how totally inappropriate his actions had been, but I felt far away, as if someone else was saying the words. Lodro apologized, his round face pinched with contrition, his blue eyes moist and sorrowful.

I felt no relief, only a gaping, ragged pit in my stomach, a whirling void in my head.



I heard myself say, “apology accepted.” Didn’t the Shambhala teachings tell us to be compassionate? Didn’t being compassionate mean that we should forgive?

\*

After Lodro assaulted me, I continued to feel sick. I couldn’t sleep and had continual flashbacks. I felt intense shame, despair, and hopelessness. I struggled to speak about it. Mostly I didn’t. It was an invisible rope around my neck: the way that so many women before me had learned to choke themselves.

Still, there was an ember in my stomach, an angry red eye that refused to shut. I kept fighting.

\*

I reported Lodro’s assault, even though I still didn’t use that word. I told my friend, the Director of the Portland Center, and she was supportive. She and another local leader encouraged me to report it to the people at Shambhala International who were in charge of handling teacher misconduct.

I was referred to Judith Simmer-Brown, an Acharya, the highest rank a Shambhala teacher could have. She was a Distinguished Professor of Contemplative and Religious Studies at Naropa University. One of her specialties was Women in Buddhism, and she had previously worked with sexual assault survivors. I had never met her, but in pictures, she looked late middle-aged, with a neat blonde bob, glasses, and a warm smile. My hands were shaking as I dialed her number.

“Hello?” She was rushed and curt. Before she had even heard my full story, she said that there was more pressing sexual misconduct than mine to address within Shambhala. She suggested that Lodro and I were friends who’d had a bad fling. Judith said she had known Lodro since he was a small child. There was tenderness in her voice when she spoke of him, tinged with annoyance, like an aunt discovering her nephew had stolen a cookie.

After our conversation, Judith reached out to Lodro without my knowledge or consent. Lodro told her that he was “heartbroken” that he had hurt his “friend”—meaning me. Judith wrote an email to the Portland leader saying she hoped we could “circumvent the Care and Conduct procedure and try to ameliorate the situation in some other way.” The Care and Conduct procedure was Shambhala’s internal process for dealing with conflict. Circumventing it would mean there would be no permanent stain on Lodro’s record.

Judith said she would work with Lodro to help him learn from his mistakes. He would not teach in Shambhala for six months. But soon after, I found out that Lodro was still teaching—a program about love and relationships. I confronted Judith, but she said she’d had no idea that he was teaching.

I demanded to speak to another Shambhala official and was connected with Acharya Adam Lobel. He was another senior teacher and the Sakyong’s right-hand man. When I had met him in person several years before, I had liked and trusted him immediately. But when I told him my story, even though his voice was warm, he said, “That sounds confusing.”

A hot wave of shame drenched my body and the floor wobbled beneath me. If these revered senior teachers saw no problem with Lodro’s behavior, maybe I really was the one who was confused. Maybe they were right: it had been a bad fling, for which I was just as responsible as Lodro.

Adam said my options were to go through the Care and Conduct process or do mediation with Lodro. He said the Care and Conduct process would be like a legal proceeding, where my own statements, as well as Lodro’s, would be scrutinized and judged. He encouraged me to pursue mediation. Though outwardly Adam was nothing but kind, he subtly pushed me not to carry the situation any further.

Even though I was devastated and exhausted from this months-long back and forth, I still explored meditation. I spoke with the facilitator, a member of the Portland sangha who, to my knowledge, had no training in working with instances of sexual misconduct. When I asked her about the process, she said she would simply hold space for the conversation without “taking sides.”

Every time I imagined myself trying to talk to Lodro, I wanted to throw up. I couldn’t go through with meditation. I was left to grapple with my shame, confusion, and trauma alone.

Adam checked in on me once. I said I was fine, that I had moved past the experience. I didn’t know what else to say. In reality, my psychological and emotional health spiraled. I operated on autopilot, still attending events at the Center, but feeling increasingly alienated. I had thought of the community as a loving, trustworthy family, but the assault and how it was handled created a deep rift in my relationship to Shambhala, making me doubt the teachers and the teachings, and most painfully, myself. I blamed myself because it was easier than blaming the community I loved. I paid dearly for it.

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I remained silent until one summer day in 2016. I was sitting in a coffee shop on the Oregon coast, drops of rain falling against the windows and the smell of salt and seaweed in the air. I opened my notebook to a blank page and found myself writing, *I have never told you this*. After that sentence, I kept scribbling feverishly for an hour, not noticing as the sky cleared and the afternoon turned into a vivid golden sunset. I wrote as if a swarm of bees were chasing me, as if my hair was on fire. It was the first time I had written about Lodro without just recounting the facts. It was the first time I had let myself write uncensored, unafraid of what anyone would think. In writing that piece, I started to set myself free. I shared it with two trusted friends, Jaes and Miriam. They both wholeheartedly supported me. Jaes said, “When you’re ready, this piece needs to live in the world. Other women need to hear this.”

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In February 2018, Andrea Winn released the first phase of a year-long report she had conducted called “Project Sunshine,” which detailed widespread sexual violence within Shambhala. Winn recounted her own experience and that of other former sangha members through anonymous interviews.

In the introduction to the report, Winn wrote: “I was sexually abused as a child by multiple perpetrators in our community. When I was a young adult, I spoke up about the community’s sexual abuse problem and was demonized by my local Shambhala center, ostracized and forced to leave . . . Women continue to be abused in relationships with community leaders and by their sanghas.”

Seeing experiences like my own named as sexual violence, I felt a complex rush of emotions: rage, excitement, and relief.

In the months after the report came out, it was as if a dam had broken: a flood of survivors began coming forward to speak publicly about their experiences of sexual violence within Shambhala.

Miriam told me about a secret Facebook group for Shambhala survivors. Even though I didn’t think I belonged there, I requested to join and was accepted. There were three other women in the group, and through hearing their stories, I finally got up the courage to share my own.

I was terrified when I posted my story, afraid that they would brush off my experience as so many other people had. But they didn’t. Instead, they showered me with love and support, and told me that what Lodro had done was terrible. That it was sexual assault.

When I first saw those words on the screen, I was flooded with relief. I began to cry, my tears loosening all the frozen emotions that had been trapped in my body for so long.

The #MeToo movement was sweeping the country. Thousands of women were publicly sharing their stories of sexual violence and were being listened to and believed. If the women in the Facebook group believed me, maybe others finally would too.

I decided to file a Care and Conduct complaint with Shambhala International. At least then they couldn't say I hadn't done everything I could. I placed the complaint in June 2018. That same month, Winn released a second Project Sunshine report. It included multiple accounts of Sakyong Mipham sexually assaulting female students, including an attempted rape. Winn released a third report in August, which found cause to believe that the Sakyong had assaulted underage girls. Even as I was horrified by these revelations, part of me wasn't surprised.

A member of the Facebook group connected me to a former women's trauma lawyer who had been part of Shambhala. When I told her my story, she was furious. She confirmed once again that what Lodro had done was sexual assault. She said that if I wanted to, I could press charges.

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After Winn's reports became public, the Shambhala community began to unravel. It was messy, confusing, and overwhelming. Although I had friends within Shambhala who remained supportive, it was horrifying to realize that many other people I had known for years were more interested in protecting their idealized image of Shambhala than supporting me or other survivors.

I heard stories about several other women who were "befriended" by high-up Shambhala teachers after they were sexually assaulted by the Sakyong. They believed that it was an intentional strategy designed to keep them silent. Just as I had been "befriended" by Adam Lobel. His checking in on me, his assurances that he was there if I needed anything, now took on a whole new meaning.

Miriam and I had many long phone conversations during this time, me in Portland and she in Madison. We were both reeling from shock and grief at the allegations coming to light and the lack of appropriate or compassionate response from Shambhala leadership. We cried a lot. We yelled. We tried to make sense of our lives amidst the wreckage. Miriam told me that she supported me no matter what—if I wanted to leave Shambhala, to press charges against Lodro, or to get my story out in some other way. Miriam was sick and angry about what was happening, but she wanted to stay in Shambhala. Even more than me, she had built most of her life around the community. She had become a Shambhala teacher and travelled widely offering contemplative writing and photography programs. She still believed in facets of the teachings and community, even if it was increasingly clear that many aspects of the organization were rotten.

I knew that I had to leave Shambhala, but I didn't know how. I agonized about how to publicly share my story. I knew the risks of putting my name on the internet with that kind of accusation. At best, I could expect condemnation from loyalists within Shambhala. At worst, I could be trolled, threatened, or possibly even sued.

To make matters worse, I was still working as the Administrative Assistant at the Portland Center. In addition to dealing with my own rage and grief, I was on the front lines of the community's response, answering every outraged email, hearing each tone-deaf remark, trapped behind my desk as sangha members marched in and out of the cramped office, airing their grievances, expecting me to support them.

Sitting in the small, windowless office day after day that endless summer, I started to feel allergic to everything about Shambhala. Just setting foot in the big brick building sent a wave of nausea hurtling through my stomach. Once inside the cream-colored rooms with their bright brocade tapestries, the photos of Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham still smiling at me from every wall, I got light-headed. I felt such overwhelming anxiety and rage that I could barely sit still, let alone work.

Outside of a few trusted friends, almost no one in the community knew I had been sexually assaulted by Lodro. I kept thinking that if they did, they would step up and support me. When a community meeting was

called to discuss the Project Sunshine reports, I attended, hoping that I would finally get the support I had been craving for so long.

We sat on blue cushions in a circle on the turquoise rug, Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham gazing down on us from the shrine. I avoided their glossy eyes, trying to get up the nerve to speak. My heart was hammering so loudly I could barely hear what anyone was saying, even though their voices were rising angrily. Someone said that even if the Sakyong had assaulted women, we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater—there wasn't a culture of sexual violence, just a few bad apples. Besides, we at the Portland Center had never had any issues like that.

I exploded. My voice shook and tears blinded me as I said that no, it wasn't just a few bad apples, and our center was not above it all—I had been assaulted by a Shambhala teacher visiting Portland, and he was never truly held accountable, despite my reporting it to local and international leadership.

There was a moment of stunned silence. I drew a ragged breath, too scared to look at the faces around me. Then the arguing continued, even louder than before. Now some people were using my story as ammunition to shout down those who had been defending the organization. No one looked at me. No one asked what I needed. No one hugged me, even though I was still crying. I sat there, surrounded by my community, utterly alone.

After the meeting ended, one person pulled me aside to see how I was doing—a friend who already knew about Lodro. He was the only person who acknowledged what I had just shared. He was the only person who expressed concern.

I realized that it was time to leave Shambhala. I called the Director, sobbing, and told her I was quitting, effective immediately. I agreed to train whoever they hired to replace me. Even in full crisis, I was still bending over backwards to help Shambhala. Writing that now, my jaw clenches, and my knuckles ache to shove themselves into someone's face.

\*

On July 1st, 2018, Lodro announced that he was leaving Shambhala—but not because of his own misconduct. The statement on his personal Facebook page read, “I am feeling a lot of pain around what is happening in the Shambhala community. I personally have clarity that it is time for me to officially exit Shambhala as an organization and no longer teach there.” He offered his support to anyone who wanted to talk about their experience or discuss any “rumors or allegations” they might have heard in Shambhala. He continued, “I will hold space and listen and share my heart if you would like me to. I am truly available to you.”

It was as if a swarm of hornets had attacked me. His bone-deep denial was astounding. I found out later that Lodro had heard about my Care and Conduct complaint. But even if Shambhala revoked his teaching privileges, they would probably never make a public statement. He would still have control over the public narrative unless I did something about it. It was time to take matters into my own hands.

A woman in the Facebook group said she had talked with an investigative reporter and that her story of sexual assault by the Sakyong would soon be published on a prominent news site. She had requested to remain anonymous, and the newspaper had agreed. Suddenly, I had a path forward.

Before he interviewed me, the reporter asked if I had the emotional support I needed, since the conversation might be difficult. A lump gripped my throat and I couldn't speak. How was it possible that a complete stranger had more concern for my well-being than members of my own community?

\*

On July 23, my story was published: “Buddhist Teacher Quit Shambhala in ‘Protest’ Before His Own Sexual Misconduct Allegation Went Public.” The subtitle read, “He’s Promoting a Book Called *Love Hurts*.” I stared at the screen in shock. I’d had no idea that he was promoting another book. The irony of the title made me laugh, then choke.

Lodro denied everything. “I was deeply troubled by the allegations against the leadership of Shambhala and after learning of them stepped away from any involvement with Shambhala’s programs entirely of my own accord,” his statement read. “There is no truth to the allegation that Shambhala fired me. Nor have I ever been involved in any inappropriate sexual behavior or interactions with any individual.” There were also statements from Adam and Judith, saying that they had spent years “offering support” to me, and they hoped I would “find the healing” I was seeking.

After the article was published, I made a Facebook post telling the story in my own words. It was shared with a woman who had also been assaulted by Lodro. When she contacted me, my heart started hammering. After years of doubting myself, wondering if Lodro really had just made a one-time “mistake,” it was mind-blowing to realize that I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t alone. The woman thanked me for my courage and said I was a hero. Her assault had happened several years before mine. At the time, she had told everyone within Shambhala who would listen, but nothing was done, and even her friends had doubted her.

She said she had heard of two other women who had also been assaulted by Lodro.

\*

After Winn’s reports came out, the Kalapa Council, Shambhala’s governing body, sent a series of panicked emails, alternating between downplaying the allegations and tentatively acknowledging the abuse. One email read, “Members have at times not felt heard or have been treated as though they are a problem when they tried to bring complaints forward. We are heartbroken that such pain and injustice still occurs.” Adam was part of the Kalapa Council. Knowing he had helped craft those words felt like more gaslighting. It was impossible that as the Sakyong’s closest advisor he wouldn’t have known what was happening. However “heartbroken” Adam professed to be, he had played an active role in keeping the silence.

As Shambhala fall apart, the Sakyong sent his own series of tone-deaf and defensive emails, the final one admitting that he had engaged in “relationships” with women in the community, but only “recently learned that some of these women have shared experiences of feeling harmed as a result of these relationships.” *Feeling* harmed. As if, once again, abuse was just a matter of opinion. This was the great leader I had been trained to worship? This was the shining example of enlightened society whose conduct I was supposed to emulate?

\*

I moved to Vermont for graduate school that August. As I drove across the country, the miles of road unspooling behind me, wind whipping my hair, gazing at the stars from inside my tent each night, it was a relief to leave the Portland Center far behind.

Once in Vermont, I still watched for news of Shambhala, hoping that healing and justice would finally come. There were moments when I thought it would. In August of 2018, Lodro lost his latest book deal. In early 2019, two different men—both long-time members of Shambhala—were arrested for sexually assaulting young girls they had met in the organization. Although I felt hopeful at these developments, soon enough, Lodro’s face began popping up on meditation websites again. He was still teaching.

In January 2020, Pema Chödrön, the respected teacher whose books had first sparked my interest in meditation, formally stepped down from her position as Acharya. Chödrön said her decision came after the new governing board had invited the Sakyong to teach a meditation program—without any input from the

community. “The seemingly very clear message that we are returning to business as usual distresses me deeply,” she said. “I find it discouraging that the bravery of those who had the courage to speak out does not seem to be effecting more significant change in the path forward.”

Chödrön was applauded for her decision to resign, but I couldn’t help wishing she’d done it sooner. In the third Project Sunshine report, Chödrön herself had come under fire. A female student had allegedly told Chödrön that she had been raped by a Shambhala Center Director, gotten pregnant, and miscarried. Chödrön allegedly said, “I don’t believe you,” then continued, “Well, I wasn’t there, but if it’s true, I suspect you were into it.” Chödrön apologized to the woman in 2018, after the story became public.

\*

I still struggle to wrap my mind around it all—the abuse, manipulation, confusion, and loss. How could this community have been so helpful to me—and so harmful? How could people I trusted turn their backs on me when I needed them most?

This isn’t a happy ending, or any ending at all, because the story isn’t finished. Will it ever truly end? Will Lodro be held accountable, along with the Sakyong and all the other abusers? Or will this all be covered up by the thick silt of time, like so many stories before mine? Years from now, will a new Shambhala teacher be abusing their students, and will the revelations come with just as much disbelief?

Only time will tell. Whatever happens, I hope this story will be a record. That it will keep echoing out from the caverns of silence. Telling the complicated truth.



**Rebecca Jamieson**’s writing has appeared in various publications, including *The Offing*, *Rattle*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Lion’s Roar*, and *Stirring*. Her chapbook of poetry, *The Body of All Things*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2017. She holds an MFA in Writing & Publishing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

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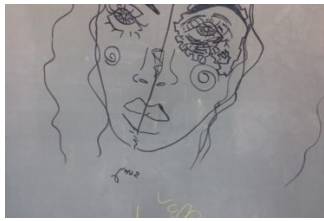
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