

July 14, 2017

Sogyal Lakar,

The Rigpa Sangha is in crisis. Long-simmering issues with your behavior can no longer be ignored or denied. As long-time committed and devoted students we feel compelled to share our deep concern regarding your violent and abusive behavior. Your actions have hurt us individually, harmed our fellow sisters and brothers within Rigpa the organization, and by extension Buddhism in the West. We write to you following the advice of the Dalai Lama, in which he has said that students of Tibetan Buddhist lamas are obliged to communicate their concerns about their teacher:

*If one presents the teachings clearly, others benefit. But if someone is supposed to propagate the Dharma and their behavior is harmful, it is our responsibility to criticize this with a good motivation. This is constructive criticism, and you do not need to feel uncomfortable doing it. In “The Twenty Verses on the Bodhisattvas’ Vows,” it says that there is no fault in whatever action you engage in with pure motivation. Buddhist teachers who abuse sex, power, money, alcohol, or drugs, and who, when faced with legitimate complaints from their own students, do not correct their behavior, should be criticized openly and by name. This may embarrass them and cause them to regret and stop their abusive behavior. Exposing the negative allows space for the positive side to increase. When publicizing such misconduct, it should be made clear that such teachers have disregarded the Buddha’s advice. However, when making public the ethical misconduct of a Buddhist teacher, it is only fair to mention their good qualities as well.*

The Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, India March 1993

This letter is our request to you to stop your unethical and immoral behavior. Your public face is one of wisdom, kindness, humor, warmth and compassion, but your private behavior, the way you conduct yourself behind the scenes, is deeply disturbing and unsettling. A number of us have raised with you privately, our concerns about your behavior in recent years, but you have not changed.

Those of us who write to you today have firsthand experience of your abusive behaviors, as well as the massive efforts not to allow others to know about them. Our concerns are deepened with the organizational culture you have created around you that maintains absolute secrecy of your actions, which is in sharp contrast with your stated directive of openness and transparency within the Sangha. Our wish is to break this veil of secrecy, deception, and deceit. We can no longer remain silent.

Our deep and heartfelt hope is that this collective note might yield a more tangible result than any of our individual discussions with you have. We hope that long lasting and sincere changes may come about rather than short-lived pledges.

**Our primary concerns are:**

1. Your physical, emotional and psychological abuse of students.

2. Your sexual abuse of students.
  
3. Your lavish, gluttonous, and sybaritic lifestyle.
  
4. Your actions have tainted our appreciation for the practice of the Dharma.

### ***1. Physical, emotional and psychological abuse***

We have received directly from you, and witnessed others receiving, many different forms of physical abuse. You have punched and kicked us, pulled hair, torn ears, as well as hit us and others with various objects such as your back-scratcher, wooden hangers, phones, cups, and any other objects that happened to be close at hand. We trusted for many years that this physical and emotional treatment of students – what you assert to be your “skillful means” of “wrathful compassion” in the tradition of “crazy wisdom” – was done with our best interest at heart in order to free us from our “habitual patterns”. We no longer believe this to be so. We feel that we and others have been harmed because your actions were not compassionate; rather they demonstrated your lack of discipline and your own frustration. Your physical abuse – which constitutes a crime under the laws of the lands where you have done these acts – have left monks, nuns, and lay students of yours with bloody injuries and permanent scars. This is not second hand information; we have experienced and witnessed your behavior for years.

Why did you inflict violence upon us and our fellow Dharma brothers and sisters? Why did you punch, slap, kick, and pull our hair? Your food was not hot enough; you were awakened from your nap a half hour late; the phone list was missing a name or the font was the wrong size; the

internet connection was slow; the television movie guide was confusing; technology failed to work; your assistant wasn't attentive enough;<sup>1</sup> we failed to "tune into your mind" and predict what you wanted; or you were moody because you were upset with one of your girlfriends. There are hundreds of examples of trivial incidents that have set you off and your response has been to strike us violently.

Your emotional and psychological abuse has been perhaps more damaging than the physical scars you have left on us. When we have worked for you while organizing and setting up the infrastructure for you to teach at different places around the world (Europe, North America, Australia, and India and Nepal), your shaming and threatening have led some of your closest students and attendants to emotional breakdowns. You have always told us to be appreciative of the personal attention that you give, that you were "pointing out our hidden faults" in our character, and freeing us from "our self-cherishing ego." We no longer believe this to be so. It was done in such a way that was harmful to us rather than helpful, a method of control, a blatant means of subjugation and undue influence that removed our liberty. You have threatened us and others saying, if we do not follow you absolutely, we will die "spitting up blood like Ian Maxwell."<sup>2</sup> You have told us that our loved ones are at risk of ill-health, or have died, because we displeased you in some way.<sup>3</sup> At public teachings, you have regularly criticized, manipulated and shamed us and those working to run your retreats. You have told us for years that this is part of your unique style of "training" students and that this shaming is part of the guru-disciple relationship. We no longer believe this to be so.

As more students verged close to emotional breakdowns because of your "trainings", you introduced "Rigpa Therapy" for your closest students. Trained, practising therapists (who are also your students) were given the task of dealing with the pain that was being stirred up in the minds of those who you were abusing physically, emotionally and psychologically. During one-to-one sessions, the therapist heard from the student of your "crazy wisdom" methods and the trauma that it caused the individual. One such "Rigpa Therapy" method for processing the

trauma was to negate the validity of seeing you, the teacher *and* instigator, as the source of the trauma. Instead, we were instructed to see old family relationship histories as the issue. In effect, our very tangible and clear discernment of seeing you as an abuser was blocked and instead we were blamed and made to feel inadequate. On the occasions when the “therapy” did not result in a student changing their view of you, you shamed the therapist into feeling that they weren’t doing their job properly and were not skilled.

## **2. Sexual Abuse**

You use your role as a teacher to gain access to young women, and to coerce, intimidate and manipulate them into giving you sexual favors.<sup>4</sup> The ongoing controversies of your sexual abuse that we can read and watch on the Internet are only a small window into your decades of this behavior. Some of us have been subjected to sexual harassment in the form of being told to strip, to show you our genitals (both men and women), to give you oral sex, being groped, asked to give you photos of our genitals, to have sex in your bed with our partners, and to describe to you our sexual relations with our partners. You’ve ordered your students to photograph your attendants and girlfriends naked, and then forced other students to make photographic collages for you, which you have shown to others. You have offered one of your female attendants to another lama (who is well known in Rigpa) for sex. You have had for decades, and continue to have, sexual relationships with a number of your student attendants, some who are married. You have told us to lie on your behalf, to hide your sexual relationships from your other girlfriends. Publically you claim that your relationships are ordinary, consensual, and proper because you are not a monk. You deny any wrongdoing and have even claimed on occasion that you were seduced.<sup>5</sup> You and others in your organization claim this is how a Buddhist master of “crazy wisdom” behaves, just like the tantric adepts of the past. We do not believe this to be so and see such claims as attempts to explain away egregious behaviors.

### **3. Gluttonous lifestyle**

Your lavish lifestyle is kept hidden from your thousands of students. It is one thing for you to accept an offering of the best of everything (that we may have) as an acknowledgement of our gratitude for spiritual teachings. It is quite another to demand it from us. Much of the money that is used to fund your luxurious appetites comes from the donations of your students who believe their offering is being used to further wisdom and compassion in the world.

As attendants, drivers, and organizers for you, most of our time and energy is taken up providing a steady supply of sensual pleasures. You demand all kinds of food be prepared for you—at all hours of the night and day—by your personal chefs and attendants (who Rigpa pays for) who travel the world with you. You demand all forms of entertainment; this includes having detailed TV guide schedules for the shows that you often watch for hours on end each day; elaborate movie lists so you know what's playing in theaters near you at all times; continual supply of take-out restaurant food; drivers and masseuses on call 24-hours a day to serve you and deliver you and your companions to theaters, expensive restaurants, venues to shop and secretive places where you can smoke your expensive cigars.

With impatience, you have made demands for this entertainment and decadent sensory indulgences. When these are not made available at the snap of a finger, or exactly as you wished, we were insulted, humiliated, made to feel worthless, stupid and incompetent, and often hit or slapped. Your behavior did not cultivate our mindfulness or awareness, but rather it made us terrified of making a mistake. You tell your students that you spend most of your time engaging in Buddhist study and practice, but those of us who have attended you in private for years know this is not the reality.

We feel it is unethical that ours and others' financial contributions to you—believed to be furthering the Dharma—are used to support this lavish lifestyle. Please stop living a duplicitous life. If you have no shame about your behavior then let it see the light of day. Allow the rest of your students to see who you really are, and let them make their own informed decision about whether you are the teacher for them.

#### **4. Tainted our appreciation for the practice of the Dharma.**

Please understand the harm that you have inflicted on us has also tainted our appreciation for and practice of the Dharma. In our decades of study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism with you, we trained our minds to view you as the “all embodied jewel” and the “source of all the teachings and blessings” of the Buddha-Dharma. We trusted you completely. Yet, we struggled for years because your actions did not square with the teachings. Today, for many of us who have left you, the Lerab Ling community, and Rigpa the organization, our ground of confidence in the Buddha-Dharma has been compromised. Some of us, who chose to depart abruptly Lerab Ling, left all of our possessions, because we were desperate to break away from your abuse and the community that supported it. □ Whether we departed abruptly or have faded away from you and Rigpa, we struggle to rekindle an appreciation for the transformative teachings and teachers we encountered. Often when we sit down to meditate and practice, we feel polluted with trauma from our experience with you; some of us relate to the Vajrayana with deep suspicion; and some of us are at work rebuilding from scratch the foundations of our study and practice recognising that your manipulation was intermingled with all that we were taught. Others of us seek conventional therapy as a means for processing. So quite contrary to your aspiration to bring the true Dharma to beings, the effect of your methods is that our relationship to the Dharma has been tainted. We now see clearly the many ways that you betrayed our trust, manipulated and abused us and our Dharma brothers and sisters.

We are not showing a lack of trust and respect, being a “trouble-maker” with “negative talk” as you often assert when anyone has dared to object to your methods. In fact, we have trusted you too long, given you the benefit of the doubt over and over again. When we’ve attempted to raise these concerns you’ve shamed us, and threatened to withhold the teachings from all the students because we had “doubts.” You have encouraged us to defame others, in particular in France, who have spoken out against you in recent years. We have seen how you hold the teachings “hostage” and demand that students show their devotion through continuous “offerings” in the form of money and free labor. You tell us this is how to become an authentic Dharma practitioner. We do not believe this to be the path of the Dharma.

With regards to your abusive behavior, your sexual misconduct, and your lavish lifestyle, we see no clear or identifiable ethical standards or guidelines to which you are held. There is a vacuum of accountability. We hope that sending you this letter, sharing it with your peers, and the Rigpa Dzogchen mandala students, will serve to fill that vacuum.

What you have taught in the last thirty years, and in particular *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, has brought immense benefit to so many people including those who write to you today. If we are wrong in what we write, please correct our mistaken view. If your striking and punching us and others, and having sex with your students and married women, and funding your sybaritic lifestyle with students’ donations, is actually the ethical and compassionate behavior of a Buddhist teacher, please explain to us how it is. If, however, we are correct in our assessment, please stop your behaviors that we believe to be harmful to others.

In closing we want to acknowledge that most of the public critique of you that is found on the Internet is factual. Some of us, who have held positions of responsibility within Rigpa, struggle with our own part in having covered for you and “explained” away your behavior, while not caring for those with traumatic experiences. Our past motivation to see all the actions of our

tantric teacher as pure obscured us from seeing the very real harm that you are inflicting. We are each taking a long and serious look at our own behaviors, trying to learn from them, and supporting each other on our journey. We can no longer stay silent while you harm others in the name of Buddhism. Our deepest wish is to see Buddhism flourish in the West. We no longer want to indulge in the stupidity of seeing the Guru as perfect at any cost. The path does not require us to sacrifice our wisdom to discern, our ethics and morality, or our integrity, on the altar of “Guru Yoga.”

Our heartfelt wish is that you seek guidance from the Dalai Lama, other reputable lamas of good heart, or anyone who can help to bring you back onto the true path of the Dharma.

With deep respect for the Dharma,

- **Mark Standlee**, student for 33 years, Three Year Retreatant, former Director of the International Rigpa Online Courses & Rigpa US Teaching Services for 5 years, International Senior Instructor
- **Sangye**, student for 16 years, Three Year Retreatant, Buddhist monk for 14 years, Co-director of technology for Rigpa International
- **Damcho**, student for 15 years, Three Year Retreatant, Buddhist nun for 10 years, personal assistant to Sogyal Lakar

- **Matteo Pistono**, student for 19 years, former Rigpa US Board Member, author of *Fearless In Tibet: The Life of the Mystic of Tertön Sogyal*
- **Joanne Standlee**, student for 18 years, Head of Sogyal Lakar’s household in US for 15 years, National Director for Rigpa US for 7 years, Director of Zam America for 5 years, Rigpa Instructor
- **Graham Price**, student for 20 years, Sogyal Lakar’s personal attendant and driver,
- **Michael Condon**, student for 21 years, Rigpa Instructor, Sogyal Lakar’s personal attendant and driver in the US
- **Gary Goldman**, student for 23 years

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<sup>1</sup> Sogyal Lakar gut-punched a nun in front of an assembly of more than 1,000 students at Lerab Ling in France, August 2016.

<sup>2</sup> In December 2005, in a live streamed teachings from the unfinished temple, Sogyal Lakar said that Ian Maxwell, one of his oldest students, was “an asshole”, as Ian lay dying in the hospital in

Paris. After Ian's death Sogyal Lakar said that Ian, "died spitting up blood" because he had defied him in the past. Sogyal Lakar regularly used this incident, saying, "Do you want to end up dying spitting up blood like Ian for defying me?" as an example to other students when he threatened them with dire consequences if they did not obey his commands.

<sup>3</sup>Sogyal Lakar told Graham Price that his beloved partner, Elena, got sick (and died a year later) because Graham had shouted at him. In reality Graham didn't even raise his voice.

□ <https://behindthethangkas.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/13-dakini-janine/> is just one example

□ <https://behindthethangkas.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/16-the-three-year-retreat/>

"Gerard demanded an interview with Sogyal, who was initially wary, but then admitted he had had sex with Janine. He tried to shift the blame onto her – claiming that she had seduced him and that he was at first resistant, but later gave in to her demands."

□ Lerab Ling residential monastics Ani Damcho Drolma and Ngawang Sangye struggled for many years to fulfill Sogyal Lakar's ever increasing demands while receiving physical and emotional abuse. They asked for help from the community but were victim-blamed, and viewed as being unappreciative of the blessing of working close to the lama. There was extreme pressure to stay and conform. They both felt as though they had to "escape" the predicament as there was no arena in which to negotiate their position, or find resolution in how to tolerate their working relationship with Sogyal Lakar.

*As a gesture for support and with an understanding for the many emotions and issues that could arise for individuals as a result of reading this letter we are sharing some resources and helpful links - <https://sanghacare8.wixsite.com/sanghacareresources>*

*As well as a blog where concerned students can connect with each other*  
<https://whatnow727.wordpress.com/>

