

Psychological impact of power abuse in Buddhist groups and essential aspects of psychotherapeutic interventions for the affected individuals

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Abstract

Background: Recent developments in international Buddhist organizations and the results of the research project *TransTibMed* brought indoctrination, exploitation, violence as well as physical and psychological abuse to light.

Method: The research findings and the documents on the organizations provide the basis for analyzing decontextualized Buddhist concepts as well as the understanding of the mechanisms of damage and their impact on the health of group members.

Result: The psychological effects of the internalization of decontextualized concepts and neologisms encompass uncertainty about one's own perception and identification with the master and his group. Due to gradually evolving dependency, despite damage a person may thus adapt to the wishes and expectations of the abuser, justified by concepts such as *karma-purification*. The damage mechanisms and individual adaptations of affected persons require the development of specific psychotherapeutic treatment approaches. The diagnostic range covers reactions to severe stress, *post-traumatic stress disorder*, *depression*, *anxiety disorders* and *dissociative disorders*.

Conclusion: The analysis of internalised decontextualized Buddhist concepts reveals common damaging mechanisms across groups. Although it is possible to develop specific elements for crisis intervention and psychotherapy of affected persons through this approach, the impact extends to the provision of health care and prevention.

Keywords: abuse, Buddhism, Tibetan medicine, indoctrination, mind control

1. Power abuse in Buddhist groups

The *open letter* by eight Rigpa staff members of July 2017 (Standlee, Sangye, Damcho, Pistono, Standlee, Price et al.) not only described psychological, physical and sexual violence experienced and witnessed by them, but reported an abuse of psychotherapy and its methods referred to as "rigpa therapy". The resulting investigation by Baxter (Lewis Silkin law firm) implied interviews with involved individuals, differentiating the dynamics of incidents. The Sunshine Report (Winn, 2018; Winn, Edelman, Merchasin, Monson, Women Survivors, 2018; Winn, Merchasin, 2018) uncovered a tremendous level of violence and abuse in the Shambala organization. Thereafter, the partial addressing of the Wickwire Holm Report (Shambhala Interim Board, 2019) prompted an open letter from several longtime *Ku Sung* (attendants), making some of their experiences transparent in detail, as well as a comment by Merchasin (2019) and the development of a website presenting an apology (Coulson, 2019) regarding that organisation. Current research results are confirming and extend incidents similar to those mentioned above also in other so-called Buddhist organizations. The following analysis of the underlying dynamics and concepts is based on that. Following the above-mentioned incidents and investigations, their chronology can neither be denied nor revalued by superiors, and consequently the widespread stigmatisation of single individuals at least loses its effectiveness. It is the voices of the affected people that have shaken the rigidly hierarchical patterns of power and command lines in so-called Buddhist centers, which have been unreflectedly copied from Asia, as well as the demand that group leaders and those passing on orders should have absolute authority, being presented in spiritual attire. Thus, the mainstream of *double bind*, that is the discrepancy between stereotyping by means of seemingly Buddhist contents and lived realities, is put into question. Combined

with psychological identification processes and simultaneous tendencies of disconnection from unwanted thoughts, situations and persons, increasingly a separation between daily life and spirituality has developed, accompanied by the superelevation of so-called masters taking on the form of personality cults. The resulting dynamics of dependency was nourished by the longing for spirituality and concepts of transcendence considered to be viable only with the assistance of a supposedly needed human mediator, the so-called masters. Thus, such unquestioning overstatement of humans has laid the foundation for the abuse of power that has now become visible. The following analysis of the psychological and physical implications provides insight into psychodynamics enabling for the development of basic therapeutic approaches for the treatment of affected individuals. In this process, the decontextualisation of concepts derived from Buddhist philosophy and practice as well as dynamics repeatedly employed in different groups and related terminology will be clarified.

2. Implications of identification processes being based on decontextualised concepts

Although the philosophical texts of the Buddhist traditions are presented as instructions for self-responsibility towards one's own actions, the cultivation of motivation and corresponding individual learning processes, in the context of commercialisation under the label of Buddhism, dubious perspectives, concepts and personality cults have developed, whose impact is now being revealed. The idealisation of Buddhism in general contributes to blanking out the shady sides even after the victims concerned have raised their voices already many years ago and after the required legal investigations are under way. Thus, this longing for a humanitarian, peaceful and compassionate religion or a discipline dealing with mental transformations projected on Buddhism and all its representatives clashes with the facts of manipulation, violence and abuse of power in various international Buddhist groups and their tendencies of destruction against individuals who are considered to be disloyal or break away. After analysing the structural, conceptual and psychological effects of this decontextualisation of Buddhist philosophical concepts, it is the identification processes and stereotyping that are recurring in many groups that are subsequently described. Although the implications of claims to absoluteness and the cultivation of narcissistic tendencies of teachers and so-called masters extend well beyond Buddhist contexts, a particular emphasis here will be on the factors favouring their respective structures and contents and the corresponding psychological effects.

2.1 Identification processes in Buddhism

In Buddhist contexts, identification with the teacher is encouraged by several aspects. From a psychological perspective, all structural arrangements for paying respect to or elevating a person contribute to these identification processes, in addition to admiration and individual projection mechanisms. In this way they turn into behavioural patterns imposed by groups, becoming obvious not only by everyday linguistic patterns, but also by the strict and anticipatory obedience to persons of supposedly higher rank and by the numerous acts of glorification and superelevation. Developing such an overstatement towards a leader of integrity would be considerably less risky compared to what has now emerged as being merely the tip of the iceberg. With their unreflected copying of feudal structures for western Buddhist centers, however, the corresponding power structures and modes of exploitation and subjugation have also been adopted unconsiderately. The spiritual symbolism appeared to be able to mask all of the individual pain inflicted upon people as well as the violation of human rights. Psychologically, this involved two crucial processes: using *double bind* on the one hand and mechanisms of *reframing* the experience of group members on the other, meaning that even painful damage was supposed to be regarded a blessing. Furthermore, dependency is prescribed by a concept which conveys the assumption that human access to spirituality would only be possible through this very mediator figure. Thus, by means of adaption of the individual adapting to these processes of identification, its participation in the spiritual as well as the alleviation of feelings of dependency are promised. The enormous effects to the group dynamics, as well as to the individual come though the above concept of one and exactly that very person would be the only connection to spirituality and the individual spiritual experience or even enlightenment. Like everything else nowadays, it is said that the latter could be achieved at maximum speed, immediately within one lifetime at least, and ignoring the

otherwise common gradual training of complex methods being conveyed by *Vajrayāna*. Concepts of superiority and being the chosen one were created on this ground, thereby manipulating the feelings of those affected, who are made to compete with one another. The given mainstream is now considered to follow any so-called Buddhist master who may neither have passed examinations in terms of his education, authenticity or integrity. That person is supposed to be regarded the only connection to one's own spirituality, and even the physical proximity has been considered a means of increasing one's own speed towards enlightenment. The shady aspect of abandoning one's own spirituality bond and one's task of individual approach and processes, however, implied allowing for and enhancing depersonalisation processes altogether. This depersonalisation of others by the so-called teachers reveals itself through the arbitrary exchanging of persons. It has paved the way to the abuse of power and sexuality, seemingly beyond any control on the part of higher authorities. In the latest variations of *Vajrayāna* (Coleman, Jinpa, 2008) short courses, participants are taught highly specific techniques or perspectives without using the common traditional gradual approach and thus without even giving them chance to understand autonomous individual psychological stabilisation on the one hand and for the meaning of building personal relationships in that context on the other. Identification might reveal in the ways of projection upon mostly male teachers or the longing towards dissolving one's boundaries of the self, which is even encouraged by various ill-construed concepts such as the one on *Śūnyatā* (Tsepak, 2003; *emptiness* in Coleman, Jinpa, 2008). In *Vajrayāna* Buddhism, such identification processes are cultivated and intensified by means of the concept of *guru yoga* (*yoga* in Coleman, Jinpa, 2008).

2.2 The method of *guru yoga* as a seduction to identification

Guru yoga is a technique used in *Vajrayāna* Buddhism that combines the visualisation of forms of light (*yoga* in Coleman, Jinpa, 2008), that is very enhanced forms of meditation, with the spiritual teacher. These methods, serving for facilitating and intensifying processes of contemplation and insight, are usually applied very specifically to certain stages of training. However, without the imperative, necessary evaluation of the integrity and education of a spiritual teacher (Patrul, 2004), as well as the gradual learning of basic requirements and stabilisation methods, naively combining those methods - the visualisation and the working with attachment to the teacher - might impact adversely. Thus, lacking the examination of training and integrity of teachers combined with the current approach of short-term seminars in various so-called Buddhist centers, has led to health-damage through applying these above mentioned decontextualised concepts. Moreover, such processes are left to the imagination of participants without any correction by a trained, reference person.

2.3 Shady aspects of identification mechanisms

The oversized longing for enlightenment, in the sense of quick relief from suffering rather than through a process of taking individual responsibility and of training, appears to contribute to denying one's own unconscious aspects, those of the master as well as the resulting group dynamics. Demonstrative donation activities and anticipatory obedience etc. are regarded as signs of devotion and demanded as proof of identification with the so-called master and his goals and of denying shady sides. This translates into *double bind*, separating the idealised level from the actual experience in life. Thus, unresolvable internal conflicts with their corresponding consequences as well as irreconcilable group dynamics emerge, resulting in differing, opposing interests which are not democratically negotiated. As every action seems to be a mistaken choice anyway, the individual is subjected to some degree of rigidity or stagnation. Furthermore, unreflected copies of Asian hierarchy concepts into western centers referring to Buddhist organisations and the decontextualisation of technical philosophical terminology led to the assumption that only an elite were allowed the privilege of enjoying the master's proximity and, in turn, that such closeness would even be a special honour for the individual concerned. Though other concepts such as the one of *crazy wisdom* have even authorised any teacher in the context of the freedom of foolish behaviour, he or she still remains accountable for any physical or psychological damage inflicted on others. Such dubious concepts, along with identifying processes, have made people submit themselves to violence, in some cases for decades,

hoping that they might be enlightened even faster and finally released from suffering, as well as to silence on the part of witnesses and associates. Moreover, the concept of so-called *karma purification* has been applied in order to legitimate and rationalise abuses of power and violence across all levels. The mere assignment of the authorisation to a person being allowed to purify anyone evokes a reminder of the shadow sides of history in German-speaking countries with the corresponding consequences in group dynamics.

2.4 Inhibition of genuine learning- and self-development processes

In this way such identification patterns impede individual processes of maturing, the self-reflection of actions, individuation and individual accountability and thus contradict the underlying objectives of traditional Buddhist teachings as well as individual progress. Unlike the emic interpretation of Buddhist philosophy as methods for individual training and its corresponding maps on processes of maturation and transformation, these authentic processes of learning seem to be not only prohibited, but also considered dangerous. In this respect, individual independence seems to be regarded a threat to the greatness of so-called masters and their systems. That is evident from the fact that anything which could be achieved by authentic development and individuality is interpreted by the group to be tendentially threatening and thus potentially dangerous, and accordingly is devalued or rejected. In this context, the enforcing of the unification of group members appears to serve structural demands of absoluteness. This clear shift in values on the part of the teachers themselves, who favour expansion and financial administration networks with their many centers in different countries over the needs of carefully developing relationships, is also revealed by the modification of traditional concepts such as *guru yoga*. Narcissism, the greed for power and profit on the one hand and ignorance, salvation fantasy and personality cult on the other hand appear to be some of the driving forces leading to overpriced seminars, exploitation of labour and critical group dynamics. These pursuits of profit by elites and their assistants with their view of other people as being merely utilisable, interchangeable objects and exploitable resources are opposed by the invulnerability of human dignity. These are lost as early as in deliberately exchanging people who are used to work for the higher purpose. However, individuals counteracting such treatments are weakened through the mechanisms of confusing their own perception, irritation through *double bind*, identification with leaders and their goals as well as the group pressure built against them. Due to tendencies of downplaying, rationalising and shifting the dynamics to individual cases, that have already been preventively presented publicly as problem cases by the group and thereby turned into a projections surface, the constitutional measures are only slowly beginning to take impact.

2.5 Implications for the individual and the group

The imposed requirements of secrecy and non-disclosure, along with stirring fears of hell as a result of one's own noncompliance with agreements (*samaya* in *Vajrayāna*; Coleman, Jinpa 2008), has silenced many voices, even though those having long been disrupted by the higher ranking bodies or their bases having been suspended by them. Using conceptual indoctrination in prescribing beautiful expression and employing phrases such as *pure view* (Coleman, Jinpa, 2008) as well as declaring the abuse of power and acts of violence a taboo contributes to maintaining coexisting realities and double standards and has been supported for decades by many people who have enabled financial profit for the elite in established international structures. The ductus of indoctrinating of the so called *pure view* for the purpose of adapting the individual to the hierarchical order and uncritical idealisation of individuals releases from any accountability. Except asserting having been derived therefrom, such terminological demands do not have anything in common with the emic perspective and its interpretation of such terms (Coleman, Jinpa, 2008), that are used for a specific limited context of training. It is precisely this point to understand why the teaching and translating would deserve to be carried on by qualified individuals who traditionally would have developed their understanding based on adequate application experience. And in the contexts of developing Buddhist centers, this was the cost of prescribing the idealisation of so-called dignitaries without examining their formal and professional qualifications as well as their integrity. Besides, with the help of wordings such as "

the master has said", command structures and hierarchy requirements seduce groups to implement various demands. This means a balancing act for group participants, requiring highest adaptation in order to avoid attracting attention and being harassed thereafter using the corresponding methods facilitated by such hierarchies due to a lack of accountability. The resistance of courageous voices of individuals turned into a symbol. And in their personal lives, they are paying a high price for it. This, however, illustrates that the reported concerns are in some cases justified by realistic death threats or the use of various other measures, such as the enforced return of long-time group members, systematic denunciation, etc., which have already taken place. Against such backgrounds, the appropriate diagnostic differentiation is crucial at this point. Thus, a structural repetition of incidents is evident in the various so-called Buddhist organisations, which make use of quite similar concepts. It is these publications, which have served as role models and initiated investigations, that have made it increasingly difficult to isolate individuals or outshine them as objects carrying problems. The solidarity of the victims themselves, who were subjected to abuse, seems to counteract the structural violence of their social isolation, the denial of listening to them when they speak out and the writing of history by elites according to the idea of conquering western countries through Buddhism. This current system of providing positions which are not based on qualification criteria and in which teachers and other staff do not require appropriate credentials or a certificate confirming good conduct is currently being investigated by the Charity Commission for England and Wales (The Charity Commission, 2018). In many of these so-called Buddhist organisations the deployment of unqualified helpers seems to be carried out systematically. This in turn weakens the self-responsibility of one's own position, causes considerable chaos in daily routine and encourages random replacement of people following labour exploitation. The exploitation and exchange mentality seem to not even allow well-educated people into the field or even define them as a threat to the system, instead one prefers to install untrained people as their superiors. Doing so initially serves for increasing uncertainty and a feeling of dependence and leads to a lack of accountability. For long periods, successful expansion and financial gain appeared to neutralise the costs of the sacrifice of integrity and well-trained persons of the subject in such groups. Strategies such as rationalising so-called good karma for the winners of this system have further reinforced this. However, a system demanding a high degree of adaptation and tabooing of anything that might be considered so-called bad karma appears to have been developed in order to prevent the reversal of the supposedly bad karma from being applied to oneself in this way of reasoning. This involves beautifying through rationalization, causing the projection of one's own unpleasant features onto others or on external enemies and stereotyping as a *good Buddhist* who even learns to devalue the counterpart's human dignity by speaking of compassion. These mechanisms already indicate the impact of the loss of confidence in one's own perception and the denial of one's own feelings. Then the split between self-awareness and the cognitive stereotype is explained as a normal condition. Thus, the rigid defence mechanisms and the given harshness against those whose ostensibly bad karma were to be purified in collective consensus while simultaneously proclaiming compassion were declared a part of the system. Its victims now have begun to raise their voices. Given the present depersonalisation and instrumentalisation of people, however, genuine relatedness has been lost. And the price for the above described schism and loss of real connection is no less than the separation from what the techniques were traditionally described for in Buddhist traditions. Thus, decontextualisation itself has annihilated the foundations of inner processes and the development of genuine compassion and *bodhicitta* (Coleman, Jinpa, 2008; Köttl, 2009; Attersee, 2014; Attersee Anders, 2016; Attersee Anders, 2017). In this way it has become clear how developing Buddhist centers on the basis of established hierarchical structures and by means of decontextualising terms and concepts has brought about physical, emotional and psychological abuse. However, since these structures have been established as the Buddhist mainstream in western centers, there is an urgent need for profound processes of change, of compensation for the victims as well as support for healing. Such structural mechanisms and concepts result in suppressing one's own self-perception at the expense of the individual's health. The absence of individual accountability in favour of carrying out commands and limiting thinking to the demands or anticipated desires of a leading figure constitute extremely serious developments, the social and individual effects of which have already become visible as the tips of icebergs.

2.6 Examples of psychological and physical implications

One crucial element of weakening individuals is the way in which their own perceptions are systematically put into question. Furthermore, constant confluency with the (mostly male) master and the required use of stereotyped wording, leads to weakening within. And the physical and psychological damage inflicted is even misinterpreted as a spiritual benefit in the sense of *karma purification* performed without accountability, thus introducing *reframing* in favour of the group leadership. In this way, emphasizing the spiritual superiority and good motivation on the part of the offender prescribes the adoption of that perspective by victim as a kind of recipe for salvation. If this conceptualisation and corresponding group pressure have been practised and tolerated over a period of many years without any corrective experiences having taken place, not to speak of residence within those structures, the corresponding severity of psychological damage as a result is likely. Through the supposedly spiritual components, the impact of cruelty is in no way relieved, but only concealed. In the Lewis Silkin Report (Baxter, 2018) "physical abuse", "sexual abuse", "emotional and psychological abuse" (Baxter, 2018, 16) were listed, and in the context of describing the legal proceedings by the former group of children of the OKC organisation Ogyen Kunzang Choling, the narrative of pain was presented as a benefit: "Before the court of first instance, we described severe deprivations: emotional, nutritional, medical, educational. Physical and psychological violences were daily: beatings with sticks, confinement, running outside barefoot in the snow, deprivation of food, having to stay outside at night are just a few examples. It was impossible for us to realize the injustice we were suffering and we were terrified at the thought of disobeying. The pain was presented as beneficial" (23 ex-adepts' children). Due to the widespread exploitation in very many of these groups, serious situations involving inadequate social insurance and unavailable resources were encountered after leaving a group. Obstructing school education for children in the context of OKC, Ogyen Kunzang Choling, is just another intensification of devastating policies: "There have been many other persons that have testified against [...] These include: - **adults** reaching the age of retirement but they don't have savings, a place to stay or pension. [...] - **youngsters** who struggle to integrate themselves into society and live a normal live because: - they were stopped [...] to join college or university, - they have suffered from a lot of violence during their childhood - they were sexually assaulted by other educators when they were children" (Ex-born kids, 2018, slide 38). The following testimony on incidents in the organisation Rigpa shows the physical and psychological aspects of the incident:

"On one occasion he was hitting me, [and three other students] with a broken wooden hanger. He hit each person repeatedly and was so tense that he bit through his own lip while doing it and drew blood. My initial assumption was that the blood on his face had come from one of the people he was hitting. [One student] was knocked unconscious."
(Witness F in Baxter, 2018, pg. 18).

The following paragraph clearly shows the psychological shift from the offender to the victim:

"Between 2006 and 2010 I was beaten over two hundred times; if he was in a bad mood he would beat me every day, or more than once a day. At one stage he had fallen out with [his girlfriend] – he would meet her daily at her chalet, come back to his chalet, slam the door and punch me in the guts. He was just taking out his frustrations; it was nothing to do with me. He did the same thing every day for ten days. On one occasion I asked him if he had remembered to take a calendar that he wanted to give as a gift. He responded by grabbing me by my ear - it ripped all down the back and was bleeding"
(Witness F in Baxter, 2018, pg. 18).

Long-term damage was reported by lawyer Baxter:

"In addition to numerous examples of witnesses working very long hours, with little sleep, for long periods of time, the following specific examples of long-term harm being caused were given to me: [...] Witness F gave evidence of being forced to undergo elocution lessons because Sogyal would refuse to understand anything said by Witness F, insisting that Witness F must speak in a received pronunciation, English accent. Witness F says that this went on for months and months and meant that

“my tongue was taken away from me” and that “it was like being gagged”. Witness F felt that this was an effort to break Witness F’s attachment to Witness F’s own country and family. Witness F reports being left with chronic fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. [...] Witness K reported that she suffered from hallucinations and suicidal thoughts and still suffers from chronic insomnia and anxiety. Witness K says she has spent thousands on therapy since leaving Rigpa. [...] Witness J reported having suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and extreme anxiety. Witness J described being terrified of the phone ringing and explained how this anxiety had negatively affected Witness J’s relationships. Witness J felt able to start therapy after several years of processing what had happened and the therapy is ongoing”
(Baxter, 2018, pg. 31).

The breakdown of people in the organization Rigpa was reported:

"I was informed that there are a number of other students who suffered breakdowns as a result of their involvement with Rigpa. [...] Overall, based on the information available to me, I conclude that Sogyal did indeed push some of his students to the verge of emotional breakdowns"
(Baxter, 2018, pg. 31).

As for obvious reasons such issues were not only common within that organisation, there is a need for regulatory measures within these contexts towards preventing disease.

2.7 Incorrect use of psychotherapy as "Rigpa therapy" in the organisation Rigpa

By now, the tendency to prescribe an internal interpretation has become mainstream in so-called Buddhist organisations. Consequently, it is expected to identify the fault and problem within the damaged person by all means. On such a basis, the focus of attention was moved from the offender to supposedly childhood issues by psychotherapists using the so-called "Rigpa therapy". In the *open letter*, these shifts were described as follows:

"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"
(Standlee, Sangye, Damcho, Pistono, Standlee, Price et. al, 2017, pg. 4f.).

These procedures of shifting toward any cause other than the real one are typically found with various Buddhist groups and may be directed at a selected person especially for this purpose or their so-called *bad karma*. In this way not only explanatory mechanisms that actually distract from the true cause are initiated, but in turn this even implies the legitimacy of attributing any *bad karma* to any person. And that has enormous individual consequences, not only for the persons concerned, and allows them to be quickly isolated from the community and to justify any wrongdoing. An underlying structural problem is indicated by the fact that from a certain point onwards this dynamic within a group implies either participating or risking being struck by the abuse of power and punishment oneself. The misuse of seemingly therapeutic techniques labelled psychotherapy by trained therapists was carried out according to the current standards of absoluteness and idealisation:

"Use of Rigpa therapy It is alleged that Sogyal Lakar introduced 'Rigpa therapy' for his closest students and that trained therapists were "*given the task of dealing with the pain that was being stirred up in the minds of those [he] was abusing*". It is alleged that therapists were used to ensure that the students did not see Sogyal as an abuser, but instead blamed old family relationships. [...] Witness F describes Rigpa therapy as a strategy of psychological abuse, saying that Student 20's job was to mop up the mess created by Sogyal, which enabled him to push them all further and Student 20 would catch them. Witness F agrees with the account of Witnesses N, O and P as to how the therapy discussions started, but says that the idea of one-on-one therapy with Student 20 came from Sogyal himself. Witness F was "*sent*" for Rigpa therapy around the time that Witness F started to develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Witness F says that the idea of the therapy seemed good at the time. Witness F described the therapy as a chance to relax and not be on-call for an hour. Witness F says that during the therapy, Student 20 was told by Witness F about the beatings and other concerns. Witness F says that Student 20's focus was that the behaviour of Sogyal was purifying Witness F's relationship with Witness F's father. Witness F describes this therapy as their one chance of finding help, and that it was abused. Witness F alleges that Student 20 once told Witness F "*the things these girls tell me – if they happened in the real world I'd have to report them*" (Baxter, 2018, pg. 30f.).

Considerations regarding psychotherapeutic treatment approaches result from the above analyses as well as from current results of research. (Anders, 2019).

3. Approaches to psychotherapeutic treatment

Due to specific mechanisms of damage, often lasting for years, as well as the individual adaptations to the above described contexts, for the treatment of affected persons certain vital aspects require consideration. Even though the diagnostic range mostly covers reactions to severe stress, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders and dissociative disorders, careful analyses regarding the process of separation, current life situation and prospects as well as specific damaging mechanisms are useful for both diagnostics as well as selected approaches to treatment. The choice of interventions may well be guided by the fact that, right from the beginning of the treatment, issues such as the loss of confidence and rationalisations that were learnt far away from one's own feelings constitute substantial and diagnostically meaningful aspects. Therefore, in the case of a given identification with the stereotype of a *good Buddhist*, it is precisely this very mask of perceptually distant rationalisations and shifts behind which the person has sought protection from the various kinds of assaults that becomes apparent. However, as a rapid removal of this protective function may lead to increased dissociation, the importance of its protective capability should not be underestimated. After close observation and psychotherapist's analysis of trigger situations it will definitely be important to recommend to stop exercising dissociation as a method in case people assume to be practicing any advanced *Vajrayāna* approach. That means that dissociation together with training constant confluence with others leading to health deterioration has to be actively discontinued.

In psychotherapy, the interactive process of developing trust and confidence in the therapeutic relationship on the one hand and gaining increasing access to one's own feelings on the other contributes to stabilising affected persons. In this context, the loss of confidence in one's own perception, as a third aspect, is of vital importance. Whereas reframing and interpreting may trigger that state of mind and further irritate the person concerned, restoring the trust in one's own perception through experiencing respectful empathy on the part of the psychotherapist is conducive towards recovery. As many of the individuals concerned have experienced trauma from their relationships in the group, it is reasonable to assume that such experiences may be triggered as early as in the process of developing trust. Probably trauma, whether as a victim or as a witness, is not reported immediately, which might be due to the engraved superelevation of the abusive persons, the aforementioned strategies of explaining *karma purification* or simply to psychological mechanisms of suppression. Therefore, it can be useful to use interventions for the strengthening and furthering of individual resources, again paying particular attention to self-awareness and developing confidence in one's own perception. Anchoring through the body and bottom-up techniques should facilitate

access to this. And by picking up triggers in the unfolding process it will become easier to understand contents of the imprints by the structures that have been experienced, which appear as self-attributions and ways of thought as well as specific stereotyping concepts. Thereby it is important to understand stereotyping as well as introjections in the sense of adaptation measures of the individual to protect its own psychological structures, and to adapt therapeutic interventions accordingly. As the growing true bondage in the therapeutic relationship already allows for contrasting the previous experiences within so called Buddhist groups, it is precisely this new experience which can be used and considered a central element of further exploration. Experiencing genuine empathy has the potential to touch those affected by such contexts at moments in such ways that they are reached behind the very masks they have trained to wear and the stereotypes behind. Moreover, focusing on and relearning of self-perception at the present might be a key element to treatment, providing for recognising and meeting of simple basic needs as well as for an understanding of the split between such self-perception and whatever stereotypes regarding thought or behaviour patterns of a so-called *good practitioners*. This self-perception is an essential precondition for working with the individual resources, which in turn is a central issue for psychotherapy with affected individuals from such contexts, because of their relatively large amount of acute or complex trauma. With regard to resources, it is particularly important to not merely focus on psychological resources, but to investigate the actual life situation of the affected persons, which is often quite fragile due to the massive exploitation, at times over very many years, rapid leave situations, etc.. Therefore, whereas at the beginning of psychotherapy the main focus lies on building trust and stabilising both the outer living situation as well as the psychological structures, the work on the individual resources and regaining self-confidence already addresses identification processes and introjections. The confidence-building process, however, is complicated by experiences of abuse of psychotherapy in diverse so-called Buddhist contexts for the purpose of deflecting from the offender and his actions, as well as limiting the use of therapeutic techniques that remind to those so-called therapies and therefore act as triggers. This is why referring people to the present, describing current health conditions and developing a strong therapeutic relationship is of central importance, as is the nuanced development of self-responsibility from the outset. It is despite, and because of, the far-reaching impact of man-made traumas pretending any spirituality, that self-confidence and trust in others become central issues in psychotherapeutic treatment approaches for people from such contexts. Their development leads to psychological stabilisation and allows for changes of self-image over time, thus opening up life perspectives. Especially in the case of traumatisation, working with introjections in the course of psychotherapy becomes one of the necessary, specific tools of treatment as well as analysing changes in personality, which may be even further distorted by processes of identification and stereotyping. Parallel to emotional processing of trauma by means of trauma-specific interventions, deconstructing the idealisation and feeling of dependency on the offender, who was defined as the only path towards spirituality, seems to be of crucial importance in the course of psychotherapy.

It is in the process of integration that individual resources may appear in developing ones very own direct approach to spirituality. Furthermore, on the psychotherapist's part, it is important to develop an understanding regarding individual aspects of particular issues: for example, the formation of stereotypes may become obvious by severe anxieties to withdraw or separate from a so-called *Vajrayāna* mediating master at all, or by fears nurtured by conceptualising attachment via *samaya* (mutual promises). It is the isolation from the community experienced by the individual and the knowledge of how those having distanced themselves were dealt with that reinforces the quality of anxiety that has developed in the given context. Also, denying reciprocity of commitment to agreements on the part of the offender and accomplices, while at the same time instilling fears of hell (*vajra hell* in the case of unkept *samaya*) in those who fail with keeping promises, referred to as *samaya*, causes deep-rooted fears in those concerned. Subjects of ordination, abandoning ordination or long-term stays abroad involve similar characteristics. For the purpose of adequate diagnostics and differentiated therapeutic interventions, it is advisable to inquire at an early stage inquire into the separation process and the sense of inner separation. Thus, the diagnostic differentiation between actual life circumstances and intrapsychological tensions may be reached. That is important because obviously even being a witness, accomplice or victim of projections and violence in such contexts could pose a real threat (danger to life, slander, stalking with the destruction of social contacts or professional activities). The reports of victims regarding conflict resolution being obstructed inside the

system itself, processes of separation with manoeuvres of serious damage and sometimes death threats, involving actual persecution far beyond national borders, or dynamics of destroying the dissident individual (including defamation using any available means) tell a lot not only about the individual, but rather about the structures in which it was entangled, and can therefore not be interpreted merely as inner psychological anxiety dynamics. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, a prolonged stabilisation period may be required. It may also be important, however, depending on the experience of the person concerned, to explain countertransferences to the person encountered outside therapeutic contexts. On the point, therapeutic skill in this context implies providing space for the silent voices of those affected and for their new curative encounters.

4. Societal implications

Due to current testimonies and scientific research results neither the effects of decontextualising concepts of Buddhist philosophy nor of abusing people at all levels in so-called Buddhist centers can be denied any longer. Though initially the breakdown of common procedures for idealising is an advantage with regard to the necessary structural and substantive changes, disentangling from conceptual distortions and the healing of the wounds inflicted upon human beings will continue for long periods of time. The corresponding progression towards developing specific psychotherapeutic approaches for the affected persons raises societal implications in dealing with authority, self-responsibility, spirituality and cure. That is, a society's implementation of its values reveals in how it is treating its victims.

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