

Study day 1 February 2020, organised in cooperation by the BUN and the VU

Power and abuse in Buddhism

Opening speech by Michael Ritman, chairman of the BUN.

"No more abuse"

The other day someone asked me: How is it possible that sexual abuse also occurs in Buddhism? Buddhists are peaceful people, aren't they? They love meditation, don't they? And I can add to that question. Isn't it a tradition of wisdom? You get to know your mind, don't you? Don't you learn to understand that desire, aggression and ignorance are the cause of all suffering? For yourself and for others?

That's what I thought when I first entered a Buddhist center in 2004. That's what I thought when I became chairman of the BUN in 2014. Until that illusion was rudely disturbed. In 2015 the NOS newsroom opened with news about sexual abuse within Buddhist communities. About the deceased teacher Mettavihari. About other stories in the past that had been swept under the carpet of history. But mostly about victims, who have not been heard. Who have struggled all these years with that abuse. Who found only locked doors everywhere. Which we all left out in the cold. And that's not the last story that came out. In recent years, the stories have piled up. One after the other. Among other things, about my own teacher. Believe me, I've also struggled with shame and confusion.

But at the BUN, we turned that question around. Now, what can we do ourselves to prevent abuse? We're responsible, aren't we? We can take action, can't we? What can we do to ensure that victims can always knock on the door and be helped? We supported the establishment of an independent hotline in 2015. In 2017, we appointed an independent confidant counsellor. We asked our members to develop ethical policies. And we facilitated them in doing so. In 2015, three of our members had a code of ethics that was also on their website. In 2020 more than two-thirds of our members developed their own code of ethics, which is supported within their own organisation. In fact, by the end of 2020 this will be an obligation for all our members.

But that doesn't mean we are there yet. We need to better understand how the sexual abuse could have happened. We need to delve into that. That's what this study day is for. We need to see that a lot of knowledge is already available from outside Buddhism. And from within Buddhism. We have to make use of that. We must develop an ethical policy together. We must learn from each other's experience. Make use of each other's expertise. Many Buddhist organizations have been working intensively on this in recent years. We are here today to support each other in that process of learning.

'No more abuse' may be an illusion, just like 'No more war'. Look around you what's happening in the world. Seventy-five years of "No more war", and the world is on fire. But we can learn from history. By immersing ourselves in it, and continuing to do so. And there's a lot we can do to prevent abuse. I would like to say: Especially within Buddhism. Precisely

because it is a tradition of wisdom. Buddhism as it is meant to be must offer a refuge, a safe haven. That's the Buddhism we want to pass on to our children, to the next generation.

Let me tell you something I've told you before. And not everyone has always agreed with me. But I'll keep saying it. If you volunteer within your organization, you do it to support your teacher. To create and maintain an environment in which the dharma can be passed on. But especially if you have a board position, there is also a responsibility. A responsibility you will have to take. The responsibility to create an environment that is safe. Safe for the students, safe for the teacher, safe for newcomers. Also, and perhaps even more so, if this means that you have to speak to a teacher about his or her behaviour. That can prevent a lot of trouble.

Thank you, representatives of Buddhist organizations, members of the BUN, for coming here today. It takes courage to talk to each other about a theme that is so charged. Some of you have had to deal with sexual abuse in your own organization. By coming here today, you show your commitment to do everything possible to provide a safe environment in the future for anyone who wants to learn about Buddhist studies and practices.

Thank you people from the VU, who have embraced and made our idea for this day of study possible. Who welcome us here today in this academic environment.

Thank you people from the VU, who embraced our idea for this seminar and made it possible. Who welcome us here today in this academic environment.

Thank you speakers and other experts, for your willingness to share your knowledge with us today and support us in engaging in the dialogue.

Thank you moderators for your willingness to support the groups in discussing the case studies.

Thank you students and alumni of the VU to the study of Buddhism and the ministry training for Buddhist Spiritual Guardian for coming as well. You have chosen to support those people in our society who may need it most.

Thank you Henk and Timo, the other members of the organizing committee, for the work you have done in the run-up to this day. Especially Timo did a Herculean job in compiling the information folders of the cases. For outsiders it might not be obvious that we organize this day together. But we are here together today, and I am proud of that.

Thank you, Timo, for giving a Keynote speech today in addition to all your preparatory work. About a special aspect of tantric Buddhism, and about how you, as a young Buddhist of a new generation, are amazed about it.

I would also like to thank Rob Hogendoorn, Buddhist and journalist. He was the first to listen to victims of sexual abuse in Buddhist communities, at a time when no one was listening within those communities. He made his documentation available to the VU for this study day, and I have always found that he has his documentation in excellent order.

A big thank you to the people of 'An Olive Branch'. After our first contact you offered without hesitation your willingness to join us today, the three of you together. You worked as a team to thoroughly prepare your contribution here this weekend. You bring with you not only your compassion in action, but also your professional expertise of many years in addressing sexual abuse in spiritual communities. Sadly, Barbara Gray cannot be with us this weekend. She suffered a minor car accident and was not fit to travel. I am sure everybody here joins me in wishing her a speedy return to health.

It is a private meeting today, although we have made an exception for a number of guests for whom this day has special relevance. Buddhist chaplains, confidant counselors, students at the VU. And of course a number of experts from outside. Let's work together to make them feel welcome today.

From the beginning it has been a priority for us that this day of study on sexual abuse is moderated by professionals. Precisely because of the sensitivities this theme evokes for everyone who has to deal with it. Also, to make sure that today's process is managed in such a way that the participants learn as much as possible from it.

Let's not forget what is the starting point for today and what is not. The starting point is not to lecture each other about what went wrong with the other one, and how they dealt with it. Today, no one should feel that they are being forced into the defensive when it comes to their own organization. It's about learning lessons from what happened. That we face it. That we talk to each other. That we learn to analyze which processes are involved and which factors play a role. That we learn from each other what to do if we are confronted with abuse. Or even better, to prevent it from happening. That is why a conscious choice was made to let participants choose a case from a different tradition than their own. It is about learning to recognize the common elements that give us a clearer picture of the general problem. And it is about doing this together, learning to understand each other.

Thank you very much.

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