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## Editorial: Coloradans deserve a full account of sex abuse in Shambhala community



Cliff Grassmick / Daily Camera

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche presents the Dalai Lama with the Living Peace Award in September 2006 at the Great Stupa in the Shambhala Mountain Retreat in Larimer County. Mipham has been accused by Shambhala members of sexual assault.



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Allegations of sexual misconduct within Shambhala continue to mount. Some of the allegations have already led to criminal investigations and arrests while other cases are likely not to be prosecuted due to statutes of limitations.

Law enforcement should thoroughly pursue every credible allegation, and district attorneys should prosecute individual cases when possible and appropriate. But, beyond criminal proceedings, Coloradans deserve a full account of the truth about abuse connected to Shambhala.

The Shambhala Buddhist community was founded in Boulder in the early 1970s. It has grown to include thousands of members in 50 countries. The organization that oversees the community, Shambhala International, today is headquartered in Halifax, Nova Scotia, but its influence in Boulder and Colorado remains significant. The Boulder Shambhala Center was established by Shambhala's founder, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and its prominent downtown building signifies its central role in the spiritual life of the city. Countless Buddhists and members of the public from around the world have found inspiration at the Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, site of one of the foremost Buddhist structures in North America. Now that [numerous reports](#) of sexual and clerical misconduct have emerged, Coloradans deserve to know the full extent of wrongdoing. Such an account must come from an independent source, not Shambhala, which cannot be trusted to audit itself. An independent examination of the facts should come from a truly disinterested party, such as the Colorado attorney general's office, either through a criminal investigation or other form of third-party review.

Moreover, Shambhala, at both the local and international level, must do more to demonstrate that it is worthy of the community's trust. Shambhala International has taken significant steps toward reform and redress. But for too long it worked to cover up reports of abuse, and, though [he has been sidelined](#) in some respects, alleged abuser Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is still identified by the organization as its "temporal and spiritual director," and he continues to enjoy the titles of "earth-protector" and "dharma king."

Shambhala International last year commissioned from Halifax law firm Wickwire Holm [a "third-party" report](#) on claims of sexual misconduct. The report was released in February, and though it substantiated certain claims, some observers have challenged its thoroughness. A group of Mipham's former bodyguards [wrote an open letter](#) that highlighted aspects of the leader's behavior they felt were not addressed in the report. "His abuse of power goes far beyond the limited scope of the Wickwire Holm investigation," they wrote. And, they added,

After reports about allegations against Mipham were [published in the Daily Camera](#), Boulder District Attorney Michael Dougherty sent [a letter](#) to Boulder Shambhala Center Executive Director Melanie Klein offering to give a presentation on victim support services and advocacy and how to report allegations of sexual misconduct. This led to a phone call between the district attorney's office and the center, but the center reportedly failed to follow up, and a presentation was never arranged. After [extensive reporting on Shambhala by the Denver Post](#) this month, the center reportedly did accept the presentation, but it asked that it take place in October.

Want to know a better time for it? Yesterday.

The Shambhala sexual misconduct allegations are extensive, and they begin at the community's founding and with the founder himself. Trungpa, who also founded the Buddhist university Naropa in Boulder, was known as the "bad boy of Buddhism." It was said by people close to Trungpa, who died in 1987, that he pressured young women and girls into sex, and he reportedly kept multiple "spiritual wives." Mipham, Trungpa's son and spiritual heir, stepped back last year from a leadership role at Shambhala International after allegations against him of sexual misconduct became public. The Wickwire Holm report affirmed that Mipham engaged in sexual misconduct.

In February, 71-year-old William Lloyd Karelis, a former Boulder Shambhala meditation instructor, [was arrested](#) on suspicion of sexually assaulting a girl who was his student in the early 2000s. Other women have alleged Karelis behaved inappropriately with them. In June, 54-year-old Michael Smith, also a former Boulder Shambhala member, was [arrested](#) on suspicion that he sexually assaulted a girl introduced to him through Shambhala. The victim and her parents said local Buddhist officials knew about the allegations but kept them hidden from law enforcement. An agreement whereby Smith's name was withheld from police [was arranged with the girl's family by Dennis Southward](#), whom police describe as someone known in the Boulder Buddhist community as a person who "deals" with such matters. Another alleged victim has said Smith assaulted her in Barnet, Vt., when she was 11. Larimer County sheriff's detectives [opened an investigation](#) last year into alleged sexual assaults at the Shambhala Mountain Center. The investigation is ongoing. The Denver Post recently reported that Shambhala "for decades suppressed allegations of abuse — from child molestation to clerical abuse — through internal processes that often failed to deliver justice for victims," according to "a review of hundreds of pages of internal documents, police records and private communications." A former staff member of the Shambhala Mountain Center near Red Feather Lakes told the Post that there was a spirit of "free love" in the Shambhala scene of the 1970s and 1980s, and sexual activity occurred between older men and girls. "Every young girl I knew had something happen to her," the former staff member said.

The scope of alleged abuse is enormous, and the alleged crimes occurred in at least two Colorado jurisdictions. That is why Dougherty and the district attorney in Larimer, Cliff Riedel, should consider asking the Colorado attorney general's office to join the investigations. The attorney general's participation would give the matter a cross-jurisdictional perspective, and it could add valuable investigatory and prosecutorial resources to the pursuit of justice. It could also signal that law enforcement in Colorado — as Boulder police have already demonstrated in the Karelis and Smith cases — takes the allegations seriously such to give other victims the courage to come forward and share their stories. The attorney general's involvement could better serve the interests of justice, but it could also support the broader interest of uncovering the truth, whether or not convictions in particular cases are possible.

Last year, former Shambhala member Andrea Winn released the results of an investigation, called [Buddhist Project Sunshine](#), into what she described as the “sexualized violence embedded within the Shambhala community.” The report played a central role in Mipham's demotion. “Women are currently being abused without recourse, and past harm has not been attended to. Known child abusers are freely active within the Shambhala community, some are even senior teachers,” Winn wrote. “I was sexually abused as a child by multiple perpetrators in our community. ... The shocking truth is that almost all of the young people in my age group were sexually harassed and/or sexually abused. ... Quite simply, the violence that has happened and the lack of response from the Shambhala organization has resulted in a profound corruption in the heart of our community over the lifespan of this community — since the early 1970s.”

As revealing and troubling as the Sunshine Project report is, it lacks important details. The Boulder cases, for example, are absent. An exhaustive account of abuse within Shambhala in Colorado has yet to be produced.

Instances of sexual abuse in a spiritual community are especially pernicious, since the breach of trust involved so grievously contradicts the purpose of the community, and the community, being established on so fundamental a human inclination, resembles a family. Peers are supposed to be like brothers and sisters, leaders like mothers and fathers.

The Shambhala family in Colorado is a large one. The vast majority of its members are good people who have enriched the spiritual life of the state. But there are too many credible allegations against Shambhala for Coloradans not to demand a comprehensive understanding of what predation this family has perpetrated.

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