

REPORT TO THE BOARDS OF TRUSTEES OF: RIGPA FELLOWSHIP UK, AND RIGPA FELLOWSHIP US

*OUTCOME OF AN INVESTIGATION INTO ALLEGATIONS MADE AGAINST SOGYAL
LAKAR (ALSO KNOWN AS SOGYAL RINPOCHE) IN A LETTER DATED 14 JULY
2017*

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A preliminary note on terminology

Within the Buddhist community, the epithet “Rinpoche” carries great significance. It will not escape the attention of anyone associated (or formerly associated) with Rigpa that Sogyal is referred to throughout this report by his full name, Sogyal Lakar, as opposed to calling him Sogyal Rinpoche. This simply reflects the fact that this report has been compiled from an independent, non-Buddhist perspective. It is intended as an expression of neutrality, and nothing more should be read into this.

Where possible, the use of personal pronouns which might enable witnesses to be identified has been avoided. This is not always possible as the content of their testimony sometimes reveals their gender.

Executive summary

Whilst I have seen evidence that many people feel that they have benefitted greatly from having Sogyal Lakar as their teacher, individual experiences are very different. There are varying degrees of closeness to Sogyal Lakar, with the closest relationships regularly referred to as the “inner circle”. The experiences of some of the members of the inner circle are very different from the experiences of many of those who are less close.

Not all of the allegations against Sogyal Lakar are upheld, as explained in the body of the report below, but based on the evidence available to me, I am satisfied that, on the balance of probabilities:

- a. some students of Sogyal Lakar (who were part of the ‘inner circle’, as described later in this report) have been subjected to serious physical, sexual and emotional abuse by him; and
- b. there were senior individuals within Rigpa who were aware of at least some of these issues and failed to address them, leaving others at risk.

A number of serious concerns arise out of my findings which, in my opinion, must be addressed. Recommendations and proposed action points are set out at the conclusion of this report.

Appointment and scope of investigation

Lewis Silkin LLP was first approached by Rigpa International in August 2017 to discuss the potential appointment of this firm to conduct an independent investigation into allegations which had been raised by eight former Rigpa students against Sogyal Lakar in a letter dated 14 July 2017 (the “Complaint”).

Rigpa International made clear that its overall goal was to “*restore peace and harmony*” to all who have been affected by the issues outlined in the Complaint, including anyone who feels personally hurt, as well as those within the worldwide Rigpa community. Rigpa International explained the Buddhist belief that reconciliation can only be achieved through compassion and understanding, and that it saw this investigation as a first step towards that goal.

Lewis Silkin set out a proposal for how it would approach the investigation, if appointed. There followed a lengthy period during which different law firms were considered by Rigpa’s various boards internationally.

Lewis Silkin was formally appointed on 19 December 2017, and I (Karen Baxter) was appointed as the lead investigator. It was agreed that Rigpa International would step back from the investigation process at that point given the likelihood of Rigpa International members being potential witnesses.

The organisations which engaged Lewis Silkin were Rigpa Fellowship UK and Rigpa Fellowship US; essentially they were the bodies that would be responsible for the fees connected with the work. Two members of each the U.K. and U.S. boards were appointed as their authorised representatives (“the Investigating Committee”) who were to act as the point of contact between Lewis Silkin and Rigpa.

It was agreed that the initial scope of the investigation was to collate the allegations and establish the facts in respect of the Complaint. It was my hope and expectation that this would initially involve interviewing the signatories of the Complaint, and would then extend to interviewing additional witnesses and/or members of Rigpa management as I deemed appropriate (and achievable within the agreed fee budget).

It was agreed between Lewis Silkin and the Investigating Committee that the investigation was to be objective and impartial. The Investigating Committee asked Lewis Silkin to ensure that due respect and sensitivity was shown to those who feel they have been harmed.

It was agreed that the fact that Rigpa engaged Lewis Silkin as a client should not be allowed to influence or bias the investigation or its conclusions in any way. It was expressly acknowledged by the Investigating Committee that the report might be critical of Rigpa and that there was nothing arising out of the relationship between Rigpa and Lewis Silkin that would prevent that.

It was expressly agreed that all interviews conducted as part of the investigation (and the notes thereof) would be confidential and would not be shared with the Investigating Committee, or anyone else, unless the witness specifically agreed to this, or unless Lewis Silkin was required to disclose this information by law.

I am satisfied that, throughout this investigation, the Investigating Committee has behaved in the way that was agreed at the outset; I have been allowed to investigate the Complaint as I saw fit and reach my own conclusions without interference, bias or inappropriate influence.

Aims of the investigation

The purpose of the investigation was defined by the Investigating Committee to be as follows:

- a. To ascertain in more detail the specific allegations against Sogyal Lakar and to identify the potential witnesses to those allegations.
- b. To understand the extent to which senior members of Rigpa were aware of these allegations and whether they were dealt with appropriately at the time.
- c. To enable Rigpa to take a first step towards healing and reconciliation with those who feel they have been harmed, by listening to the experiences in an open, impartial and sensitive way.
- d. To provide an independent assessment of what Rigpa needs to learn and change in the light of these experiences, in terms of structures, processes and the like.

It was agreed that this report would set out my key findings, together with any recommendations or learning points for Rigpa going forward. It was also acknowledged at the outset that this report might be a preliminary report, with a recommendation for further investigation to be carried out.

Approach

It was agreed with the Investigating Committee at the outset of the investigation that I would initially seek to interview the eight authors of the Complaint. Thereafter, I would identify who else I felt would have relevant evidence and I was free to determine who those people should be and how many people I should see, within the constraints of the budget that had been agreed with Rigpa.

On the same date as I was appointed, I wrote to the eight authors of the Complaint to invite them to meet with me in order to participate in the investigation.

To date, some of the letter writers have not responded to me at all. Others have, but it was clear from the outset that certain of the letter writers held a deep suspicion that the investigation was not being conducted independently, or was some sort of trap.

I spent some months agreeing parameters which would enable some of the letter writers to feel safe and willing to participate. We were, eventually, able to reach a point where some of the letter writers agreed to meet me. I have, however, agreed that I will not identify which of the letter writers spoke to me, or how many of them I have spoken with.

Whilst the process of negotiating the terms of participation for the letter writers was ongoing, I was approached by some other individuals who told me that they had first-hand knowledge to share with me. To the extent that these people claimed to have knowledge of the matters referred to in the Complaint, or of a similar nature, I arranged to meet with most of these individuals and received testimony from them in person. This group of people included three former trustees of Rigpa UK (Witness B, Witness C and Witness D), who each gave evidence to me separately and have agreed to be identified as former trustees in this way. I was also provided with a number of written statements or other evidence in relation to the allegations.

Within Rigpa, I requested interviews with three senior and long-term students who were identified to me by some of the letter writers as being the people I should speak to. All of them agreed to this and provided evidence to me in person.

I should make clear that there are some other individuals who offered to speak to me but with whom I was not able to speak. I address the fact of these outstanding testimonies below in the section headed: further allegations.

The investigation has been international in scope, and I have attended face- to- face witness interviews in six locations across three countries. In addition, I have been provided with written accounts from some further witnesses. In total, I have received evidence from twenty two relevant witnesses. Rigpa extended the original budget for the investigation in order to facilitate this.

Parameters of participation

From the outset, it was agreed by the Investigating Committee that where any witness wished to give evidence to me without being identified, or in confidence, that would be respected and I would be under no obligation to share that information with Rigpa.

In the lead up to the interviews taking place, Rigpa's Investigating Committee also provided the following assurances in response to direct requests from some of the authors of the Complaint:

"We confirm that no legal action will be taken by or on behalf of Rigpa against any of the 8 letter writers, or against any other victim of abuse who comes forward, as a result their providing witness evidence to Karen as part of the investigation.

There is a huge number of members of Rigpa worldwide so we are not in a position to prevent all of our members from taking legal action, but we confirm that Rigpa will not support or encourage anyone to take legal action against you arising out of your participation in the investigation. In addition, we would highlight that the confidential nature of your interviews with Karen ... will help to protect you - very few people will know what information you have shared".

In response to requests from some of the letter writers, the Investigating Committee also agreed to commit to making a copy of this report available to each of the letter writers who participated in the investigation and to the public.

These assurances made a significant difference for many people participating in the investigation, and were relied upon by many of the witnesses who agreed to speak to me. The majority of witnesses asked to remain anonymous. They have all, however, agreed that the information they provided to me can be used in this report, accepting that this may enable them to be identified to some degree.

In order to protect the identities of the witnesses as far as possible, I have applied an identifier to each person who spoke to me, or who was spoken about – those from whom I received evidence are referred to as, for example "Witness A" and those who were spoken about, but from whom I did not receive evidence directly, are referred to as, for example "Student 1".

There are three witnesses referred to in the report as the "Rigpa management witnesses" (Witness N, Witness O and Witness P); this description reflects the fact that they are senior students who have held and continue to hold positions of influence. I have not been more specific about their current roles as this would identify them. I will provide the Investigating Committee with a confidential key that will enable them to identify (only) those witnesses or students referred to in the report who hold current senior positions within Rigpa. This is purely so that Rigpa is able to take the steps identified in my recommendations below (should they be accepted).

For the sake of transparency, there is one person who is referred to in the report by two separate identifiers – this is because information provided in one area of the report would enable the witness to be identified by information included elsewhere.

Where sensitive information was provided by witnesses which relates to students who did not participate in the investigation and have not therefore consented to the inclusion of this information, that information has been set out in a separate confidential annexe to this report. The confidential annexe will be made available on a strictly confidential basis to the Investigating Committee (on the understanding that they will be permitted to share it only with the UK Charity Commission).

Burden of proof

In reaching my conclusions I have applied the U.K.'s civil standard of proof (as opposed to the criminal standard). This means that, in order to uphold an allegation, I need to be satisfied, on the basis of relevant and sufficient evidence, that the conduct occurred "on the balance of probabilities". In essence, this means that, in order to uphold the allegation, I need to conclude that there is more than a 50% chance that the alleged behaviour occurred.

Some of the allegations levelled against Sogyal Lakar would, if proven, constitute criminal behaviour. I should make clear that, in the UK, in order for someone to be convicted of a crime, a higher standard of proof applies – the allegations would need to be proven "beyond all reasonable doubt". Whether this is the case in respect of allegations against Sogyal Lakar would be a matter for the relevant law enforcement authorities and I have urged those who consider themselves to be victims of criminal behaviour to contact the police if they feel able to do so.

Interviewing Sogyal Lakar

I was initially provided with a copy of Sogyal Lakar's letter in response to the Complaint, dated 18 July 2017, which sets out his position to some degree.

I requested a meeting with Sogyal Lakar in order to interview him, but he wrote to me on 30 April 2018 explaining that he was not well enough to participate. He wrote:

"It is with regret that I must inform you that I am not available for interview, owing to my ill health. Last autumn I was diagnosed with cancer of the colon and have since received surgery and am receiving follow-up treatment with regular medical check ups ... Upon the recommendation of my doctors, I am taking a period of complete rest ... it is for this reason that I will be unable to participate.

I do hope that the investigation will nonetheless proceed in the best possible way."

I was provided with medical evidence to support the fact of Sogyal's cancer diagnosis and related ill health.

As I reached the point of concluding my investigation I contacted Sogyal Lakar again, in June 2018, to ask if his health had improved such that he would be able to meet with me. I also provided him with the alternative options of providing responses to specific written questions (which I sent to him) or providing a written statement to me.

Sogyal Lakar wrote to me on 4 July 2018. Sogyal's letter did not respond to the specific questions I had asked, but it did address the allegations, in general terms, from his perspective. The content of this letter is addressed in my report below.

I am, of course, disappointed by the fact that I have not been able to speak with Sogyal Lakar. In reaching my conclusions, I have been very conscious of the fact that I have not heard from him face-to-face. That did not, however, mean that the investigation could not proceed.

In both his letter to me of 4 July 2018, and the letter 18 July 2017 to the eight letter writers, I noted that Sogyal did not deny the allegations against him, but instead pointed out that he did not ever intend to cause harm. Having heard evidence from a number of witnesses and listened to some recorded teachings by Sogyal, I have concluded that it would not be safe to treat his lack of denial as a tacit admission. Sogyal has stated publically that he considers that he will not defend himself against attack, and others (e.g. Witness N) spoke to me of the Buddhist belief that there is no need to respond to any form of attack against you – *"wait and the truth will come"*.

As such, I have treated his position as akin to a 'no comment' interview – this is essentially a neutral position (save that he expressly denies ever intending to cause harm). This requires me to satisfy myself that there is sufficient evidence to support the allegations, in the absence of an admission or a denial on Sogyal's part.

Assessment of the witnesses

The vast majority of the witnesses that I spoke to came across as honest, credible and forthcoming; their motivation for speaking to me was clear and it was evident that a number of witnesses had overcome significant fear by agreeing to speak to me. Some of the witnesses were visibly distressed when relaying their account.

I tested each testimony to understand whether it stood up to scrutiny and I was satisfied that the witnesses were generally careful to ensure that they did not speculate but spoke only about what they had personally witnessed or experienced. Many witnesses produced physical evidence to support their accounts, such as emails, photographs, recorded teachings, videos, letters and minutes.

Of the Rigpa management witnesses, Witness N and Witness P were sincere and credible in their accounts; I believe that there were some areas where they were not entirely forthcoming, but they addressed some difficult topics in what appeared to be a candid manner. Some of their responses were troubling, particularly Witness P (for which, see the section entitled 'vacuum of accountability' below).

The only witness who gave me cause for concern about some elements of their testimony was Rigpa management Witness O, who I found, at times, to be guarded, hostile and inconsistent.

I must make clear that Witnesses N, O and P have not been afforded a right of reply in respect of the conclusions that I have reached in this report, and this will need to be taken into consideration by Rigpa as it decides how to move forwards in light of this report and its recommendations.

Where witnesses are quoted in this report, please note that these quotations are extracted from my contemporaneous notes of my interviews, or from written statements or documents provided by the witnesses. In the former case, the quotes are as accurate as possible but may not be verbatim.

Sogyal Lakar's teachings

Over the course of this investigation I have heard a great deal about the witnesses' understanding of 'path to enlightenment', which was described as a graduated path, starting with basic meditation and working up to the Vajrayana and, ultimately, the Dzogchen teachings.

What is set out below reflects the information that was provided to me by witnesses about their experience of these teachings with Sogyal Lakar as their teacher. I recognise that not everyone will agree that this reflects their own experience, and fewer people may agree that this is an accurate description of Buddhist teachings more widely, but this context is important in terms of setting out the experiences of the witnesses that I spoke to.

The Dzogchen teachings were described to me as "*the fast path to enlightenment*". Witness B explained that the Dzogchen teachings are like taking Concorde to enlightenment instead of getting there on horseback. Witness N explained that one part of the Dzogchen teachings involves your teacher working with you and 'pointing out' aspects that you need to work on. Witness N explained that if, as part of these teachings, Sogyal Lakar felt that someone's thinking or emotional response showed a lack of openness, he would seek to intervene.

Witness P provided me with a variety of texts which seek to explain the permission granted by a student to his or her teacher to work with them. The paragraph I found most helpful to understand the purpose of this technique comes from Dzogchen Ponlop's "Rebel Buddha" text:

"Essentially our spiritual friend has our permission to turn up the heat, to push our buttons, to add fuel to our fire of wisdom so that it blazes more intently and burns up our self-clinging. We trust our teacher to do this and also to make sure that the fire doesn't get out of control and become destructive. In this sense, it's like a controlled burn in a forest to make it more healthy and productive".

Several witnesses told me that Sogyal Lakar uses a technique known as 'crazy wisdom' or 'skilful means' as part of his teachings. This has been explained to me as a means of pointing out egocentric tendencies and different understandings that a student might have. This was described by Witness O as "*a last resort, when conventional methods don't work*".

Witness P explained as follows:

"The connection between a student and a master is undertaken consciously; you request to be a student and would then give permission to your master for them to help you wake up, even if this would mean some direct guidance of their attention. You get into a situation where permission is granted to a master to take care of your spiritual enlightenment and they will use all sorts of different ways to help them get over their self-defeating patterns – ego, delusions ...

For example, he would give me jobs to do which seemed pointless – eventually the penny dropped. He was trying to show me that I was doing the work based on self-regard. It would sometimes be absurd things, he would ask you to do repeatedly".

Other examples of crazy wisdom that were given to me included asking someone to run to the top of a mountain to see whether the sun had set, asking a student repeatedly to find answers to questions that they already knew the answer to, or asking someone to build a tower then take it down and rebuild it over and over again. I was told that the student is meant to watch their reaction to the seemingly impossible or pointless question or task and use this as an opportunity to "*look into their mind*". It was accepted by almost all witnesses that this process is not intended to be easy or comfortable, but challenging and, at times, difficult to understand.

Rigpa management Witness N acknowledged that there is an expectation that people will progress to the highest levels of the teachings, but Witness N agreed that, due to the challenging nature of these teachings, “*some people truly should not*”.

Witness O described the concept of crazy wisdom as “*a wisdom entirely for the student’s benefit; not crazy, mad or out of control, but unconventional*”. Witness O accepted that Sogyal could, on occasion, be wrathful as a means of achieving this, but that it was “*not ordinary anger as a gut reaction to a situation, it was anger as a method of showing people something, it was not uncontrolled*”.

I note that Rigpa’s new Code of Conduct expressly states that: “*if a guru asks you to do something and you cannot do it for whatever reason, you should know that you are allowed to say no*”, however, this document did not exist until after the Complaint.

Some of the witnesses that I spoke to had a significantly more negative take on Sogyal Lakar’s teachings and the ability of students to say no or question what they were taught. For example, a former instructor, Witness U, told me:

“We were taught to see these daily displays of anger not as anger but as kindness, specifically as wrathful compassion, as ‘cutting through ego’. I was never comfortable with these displays as I couldn’t see why they couldn’t be done in private, but we were told that they were a teaching for us—activity teachings teaching us how to be better workers, to be more efficient and more aware ... Sometimes [Sogyal] would spend the first hour of a ‘teaching’ finding fault with those who served him, sometimes sending someone into tears. These ‘activity teachings’ are not Buddhist teachings, they’re Sogyal’s own made up speciality.

A mark of our devotion was our ability to see these outbursts in a positive light, and we needed to show our devotion if we were to be allowed to receive the highest teachings, the Dzogchen teachings which we all sought.

In various sessions we were asked how we saw these ‘teachings’ and I, like everyone else, did my best to see them in a positive light. I took his ‘grumpiness’ as part of the package - if I wanted the Buddhist teachings Sogyal imparted, I had to take the bad along with the good, so I did, but I did my best to make sure I would never be on the receiving end of his verbal attacks—when offered a [management role], I turned it down, knowing that anyone in a major role opened themselves up to this kind of attack. He picked his targets though; he didn’t do it to everyone.

We were also taught that any attention given to you by a lama was good attention, even if it felt bad at the time. The situation is similar to a child with an abusive parent in that, for the student, the abuse is better than being ignored. (I likened the attitude we were taught to take about this as similar to my father strapping me for being naughty while saying that he did it only because he loved me.) The fact that Sogyal gives you any kind of attention at all is seen as an indication that he cares for you, and students on the receiving end of the public humiliation or ‘dressing downs’ said they felt ‘blessed’ by getting this kind of ‘wrathful compassion.’

One meditation instruction is to ‘let go of your risings’, meaning to let go of any thoughts or emotions that arise. This is not a wrong instruction, but in this instance we were taught to see our natural disgust with the public humiliation as ‘just a rising’ and we were taught to let it go without giving any consideration for the possibility that what we were letting go of was actually something we should be paying attention to. The instruction became a way to ignore, or suppress our instincts.

I see now that all of this was a form of brainwashing that desensitised us to his behaviour. The longer we stayed the more this attitude became programmed in”.

I recognise that the above description may not be accepted by those who remain students of Sogyal Lakar, but this context is important in order to understand the perception of many of the witnesses I spoke to.

I listened to a recorded public teaching delivered by Sogyal Lakar in which I heard evidence of the fact that senior students are taught to have pure faith and pure trust in Sogyal as their master. In this teaching, Sogyal said:

“With trust you can relax, with faith you can have peace. When you have trust and faith, for example with my masters, then you can really receive the blessings.

When you don’t have trust, you diminish the blessings because you doubt and you think this and that. You get yourself confused, you begin to mistrust things. This cleverness only brings you more suffering and confusion ...

I do everything for your benefit.

Don’t resist; trust. If you resist, you’re very stupid”.

It was explained to me that, in theory, students only progress through the nine levels (or yanras) of Buddhism when they are ready and once they have gone through a specific initiation process at each stage. Before I met with any of the witnesses, I conducted some initial basic research into the nature of the Samaya relationship and I understood there to be a long process of introduction to the basics of Buddhism before students would be ready to embark upon the Vajrayana path. Many of the witnesses that I spoke to, however, did not appear to have undertaken any meaningful initiation which would have enabled them to understand the true nature of this relationship, and the potential ways they might be tested, in advance. It is evident to me that many of the students I met did not truly understand what might be involved until they had already embarked upon the journey and, in their view, there was no going back.

Within Sogyal Lakar’s teachings, there appears to be a very informal approach to these initiations in some cases. For example, Witness N had started off by attending Buddhist courses and meditation practice and received an initiation around two years later. I asked whether Witness N felt that Witness N understood what this meant at the time, to which Witness N responded *“probably not”*.

Witness N explained:

“It was generally not a quick transition to go from being new to Buddhism to being a Vajrayana student, but not always. Some people go quickly - Buddhists would say there were past life connections. It’s akin to falling in love and the situation where most people do it slowly but some people might get married within a week. The teacher should have a good sense of where they are, and some people don’t really get there in 30 years”.

Witness D, a Dzogchen student, told me that Sogyal would give initiations quite freely; *“you turn up to a retreat and you’re part of it, you discover bit by bit what you have let yourself in for.”*

Several of the witnesses did not consider that they had undergone any form of initiation.

Witnesses explained to me that, once a student has asked a teacher to teach them and has been accepted by that teacher, there is said to be ‘Samaya’ between them. The meaning of Samaya is an area where there is considerable divergence of views. At its simplest, I am told that the meaning of Samaya is described (by Mingyur Rinpoche) as *“to maintain unwavering respect towards the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and in the case of Vajrayana, the guru”*.

Several of the witnesses that I spoke to described to me their understanding, which is that when a student agrees to enter into the Vajrayana path of Buddhism they enter into an agreement whereby they are permitting their teacher/master (in this case, Sogyal Lakar) to help them on the road to enlightenment by whatever means he believes will help them. In return, they understood that the student is bound never to criticise their master in public and is encouraged to have absolute trust that what their master is doing will help them on their path. They told me that it is meant to be understood that the means employed by the master will push the student's boundaries and that this may not be an entirely comfortable process.

Several of the witnesses I met told me that they were taught the consequences of breaking Samaya (which they understood included criticising or speaking out against your teacher). Witnesses told me that Sogyal Lakar's teachings describe a Samaya breaker as being condemned to Vajra Hell; I was told that this is described at length in historic teachings as the worst of the eighteen hells and a place of eternal torture. I heard evidence that breaking Samaya is taught by Sogyal to be the worst thing a student can do; it is said that it will damage their own health, the health of their family and cause harm to the teacher / damage his long life. Many witnesses considered that there was pressure on them to keep their Samaya.

For completeness, I was also told that the teacher is said to be bound by Samaya as well, and it is said that if a teacher breaks Samaya, they too are said to be bound for Vajra hell.

The fact that many of the witnesses I spoke to considered that they are, or were, bound by Samaya, and felt that they would be said to be breaking that vow by speaking to me, has been a particularly challenging aspect of this investigation. It is also a factor which I have had to take into account when assessing the credibility of the evidence available to me.

Findings

I turn now to the specific allegations against Sogyal Lakar as set out in the Complaint, and my conclusions in respect of them.

The allegations broadly fall into the following categories:

- a. Physical abuse.
- b. Sexual abuse.
- c. Emotional and psychological abuse.
- d. Living a lavish, gluttonous and sybaritic lifestyle.
- e. Tainting appreciation of Dharma.

I deal with each of these in turn below, but I think it is helpful initially to reiterate that there are varying degrees of closeness to Sogyal Lakar, with the closest relationships regularly referred to as the “inner circle”. I heard a great deal of evidence about the fact that Sogyal Lakar’s inner circle includes a team of students who provide assistance and personal care to him, typically working without pay in exchange for food and board. The level of care that Sogyal requires is extreme; this is not just about people booking his travel, driving him around, delivering his bags and cooking his meals. Sogyal requires round the clock assistance from the ‘lama care’ team, which is required to meet his every need, as and when he it arises; they dress him, massage him to sleep and even attend to him in the toilet. Some members of the lama care team described having to sleep on the floor of his room, being on call through the night, and many were surviving for weeks at a time with around three hours’ sleep a night. The experiences of Sogyal Lakar’s inner circle are very different from the experiences of those who are less close.

Physical abuse

It is alleged that Sogyal Lakar physically abused the letter writers by slapping them, punching them, kicking them, pulling their ears, hitting them with a backscratcher, phones, cups and hangers. It is alleged that a student was knocked unconscious by Sogyal and that monks and nuns were left bloodied and scarred. It was specifically alleged that a nun was “gut punched” by Sogyal in front of hundreds of people in August 2016 at Lerab Ling.

I started the investigation in the belief that it was alleged that there had been a handful of such incidents, however, I received corroborated evidence from several witnesses that people in the inner circle were beaten on a daily basis. Witness F claimed to have been beaten by Sogyal Lakar more than two hundred times.

Of the twenty two witnesses whose direct evidence I received, thirteen of them confirmed that they had been hit by Sogyal Lakar (this includes people who are currently senior students of Rigpa). The witnesses gave evidence that (between them) they were aware of a further twenty people who were regularly subjected to physical abuse.

Of the thirteen witnesses who said that they had been hit, the degree to which they said this happened varied considerably. By way of illustration:

Witness P (Rigpa management):

“He might tap someone on the head with a backscratcher; he did it half a dozen times that I saw. It was not violent ... he might shake somebody ... with me, he once pretended to punch me in the stomach, it was a non-event. He would kick people up the bum, very publically”.

Witness N (Rigpa management):

“He might shake you or pull your ear or tap you with a backscratcher, this was all in the context of surprise. He never hurt me or went too far. He has punched me. It was not full force and I laughed.

I did witness Sogyal punching a nun. She said it was experienced differently”.

Witness O (Rigpa management):

“He would occasionally [use physical force], not often. He once hit me on the knuckles with his backscratcher ... I didn't like it ... but there was a context – I had made a mistake of some kind.

I've seen him hit [students] with a backscratcher a few times – a handful - I can't recall who, it is not a clear memory”.

Witness C:

“Sogyal would walk along a line of students and hit us all in the stomach. [On one occasion], he came up behind me and hit me in the back. It was no worse than a game of rugby, I wasn't very concerned. I'm aware of others who were badly affected. At a 1992 retreat a woman was brought to the front with 300 people there and he slapped her in the face. This clearly didn't help her.

Most violence happens within the small inner circle, occasionally he would slip and do it in public. His punches were not soft, but not totally furious. He was like an enraged drunk on the street, on the edge of being out of control”.

Witness L:

“I was hit by Sogyal a couple of times with his backscratcher. He hit me three times and left me with a lump on my head. It was painful and was in anger. He would also kick me up the backside and slap me over the head ... it was usually about food. There was one time when Witness E and I both got hit because we hadn't put food in the car for him. He called us both in, called us idiots and hit us both.

Witness J did something and Sogyal beat him a lot with the backscratcher. We [approximately 9 students] were all practising in the lounge room. Sogyal came in and was furious about something Witness J was doing. He was throwing the remote control and hitting Witness J over the head. He was furious with Witness J”.

Witness L also gave evidence of witnessing physical abuse against a female student on more than one occasion because she had been *“too slow to do something”*.

Witness J:

“There was a lot of verbal and physical abuse that went on and I developed high anxiety. I slept on the floor next to the phone and would have panic attacks whenever the phone rang. Physical abuse was quite common, he would use a backscratcher to hit people over the head or hand or back. If he couldn't reach them, he would pick something up and throw it at them e.g. a phone.

In private, every day was random and you wouldn't know what mood he was in. He could be demanding things and then hitting, throwing objects and pulling hair. He would focus on me, Witness E, Witness F, [and six other students].

Mid-way through the retreat there was a major event – Buddha’s birthday. We had to practise all day and had been preparing for several days. We took everything to the house and practised together – it started around 4pm and went on until around 2am. During this, Sogyal was the most wrathful I have ever seen. Everything and everyone was annoying him. He was hitting everyone, pulling hair. Witness E and I were his main targets and he hit us repeatedly with the backscratcher and with leather bound parchments. My scalp was bleeding and my ear ringing from having been hit on the side of the head. He hit me 10 or 15 times and there was nothing soft or painless about it. It stings, it hurts, it knocks you over. If you try to move away he will call you out and make you come closer. I was in complete shock and petrified.

I was in a state of anxiety – my instinct was to run but those around me were convincing me to stay. I felt I had no choice. My brain stopped working – it was damage control to try to stay alive.

We were on call, day and night. We would try to pre-empt any scenario that would anger him and do anything to try to avoid irritation.

I saw Witness F being beaten a lot ... Witness F was regularly hit - he would use his backscratcher to hit her.

... it was unnerving to watch [another student being beaten]. You would have a sense of relief that it’s not you and you would be terrified. Stepping in would make it worse for both of you”.

Witness F:

“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.

If one of his girlfriends was at their limit, he would hit me instead.

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”.

I was provided with a recording of a teaching delivered by Sogyal Lakar to Witness F. During this teaching, Sogyal can be clearly heard to state:

“It’s like each time I hit you, I want you also to remember that you’re closer to me, closer to me. And the harder I hit you, the deeper the connection. And if this breaks it means that all the barriers of communication are gone. But, however, frankly speaking I don’t want to resort to that”.

Witness E:

“I saw him crash [two students] heads together so they both collapsed.

He lined [three female and three male students] up, grilling us about something, in his house. He started slapping and punching me, and kneed me in the stomach. He then grabbed a thick practice book and slammed it down on my head, breaking the spine of the book on my head. I fell to the floor ... he grabbed his glass and threw its contents in my face, then grabbed a metal stupa and went to hit me in the head with it. He stopped and backed off. I thought if he hit me with that, I'm going down – I thought I might never get up.

His favourite thing to hit us with was his backscratcher [which he would hit his male and female attendants with] ... he would hit us four or five times on the head and he wielded it heavily – it was wooden with teeth on the end and he would hit with the teeth end.

At one point, the beatings were daily; it could be several times a day. I would be left bruised and sore. He would come across as utterly ferocious and would seem to have lost control. The blows were aimed at my head and were serious, real blows.

I saw Witness J start to take the flack – Witness J received gruelling, ferocious, constant beatings ... it was like a mauling, slapping Witness J over and over until Witness J was reduced to a frightened jelly-like person.

He would grab your ear and twist it whilst pushing your head down and dragging you along.

He punched me out of the blue, a full punch to my jaw while I sat in the driver's seat and him in the passenger seat because I forgot a torch.

There was a correlation between being hit and Sogyal having fallen out with his girlfriends; out of the blue we would be screamed at for nothing.

He hit me over the head and made me bleed, there were around twelve people sitting around the table when it happened”.

Witness K:

“He realised an offering had been removed and he got apocalyptically angry – he was screaming and shouting down the phone. It was nothing to do with me but he threw a shoe at somebody and then got out his backscratcher and hit us all on the head - he whacked all of them, and me, really hard on the head. I felt very shocked and didn't understand.

I got hit several times with the backscratcher. I saw that if you argued back or drew a boundary it got worse. He was hitting [another student] with the backscratcher and she pushed back and said it was abusive. He was berating her for calling it abuse and said she was an idiot and not a good Buddhist for calling it that. Arguing against it doesn't help”.

Witness M described a female student who “received severe beatings”. Details are set out in the confidential annexe to this report.

Witness G described witnessing a female student being beaten by Sogyal with his backscratcher because a document was in the wrong font. Details are set out in the confidential annexe to this report. Witness G said “I asked her if she needed help and she said “forget it, leave it”. That bothered me; a man shouldn't beat up a woman with a stick”. Witness G also recounted another experience, as set out below:

“On another occasion, I had to leave a retreat early to get back to work. I knew he wouldn't be happy if I left without telling him, so told [another student] that I was leaving and asked her to tell Sogyal. When I was about to leave I checked with her that she had told him and it turned out she had forgotten. We went to find him and [the other student] told him that my friend and I had to leave early. He blew up saying “what do you mean you have to leave?” He

went into a rage and someone in the corridor was holding a huge binder. He grabbed it and whacked us both over the head with it.

In 2016, I was sitting 10 metres from the stage at the temple at the Dzogchen retreat. Sogyal came out and went to get up onto his throne – Student 19 has to bring him a stool. Student 19 put the step stool down for him. He steps up, then turns around and punches her. I heard the air explode out of her and she doubled up. I could see she was crying and she ran off stage. I thought it was totally fucked up. I was restraining myself and wanted to stand up and challenge him. The punch was the type of punch you use to get control of someone. If someone was out of control in a bar it's what I would do to enable me to grab them and cuff them while they're disabled. He's a strong, stocky guy; it was akin to a one inch punch that you see in martial arts.

The next day Witness P read out a letter from Student 19 which said 'it's all OK, just part of my training – sometimes I don't pay enough attention'."

Several of the other witnesses I spoke to were present when Student 19 was punched in the stomach by Sogyal at Lerab Ling in August 2016, in front of several hundred people. Witness H corroborated the account of Witness G above, telling me that:

"[Sogyal] quickly, aggressively and forcefully hit her in the stomach. I was close enough to hear the exhalation. She doubled up, burst into tears and disappeared for several hours ... when she reappeared she had reddened eyes, a facial expression of defeat and upset, a downturned mouth and a slumped body.

The next day she appeared on the stage and had to confess her own failings and agree that this had been highly beneficial and privileged event ... she had the appearance of a prisoner of war stating how well the North Koreans had treated her".

I have seen a statement issued by Student 19 since the incident in the temple has come to prominence in which she says:

"The day of the incident, the 25th of August, there was a smaller mishap, but [Sogyal] Rinpoche was definitely not in a fit rage [sic], there was just a single moment of wrath, which manifested in a soft punch, but it was neither violent or abusive, at least not to my feelings. Even though I was in tears and crying afterward and the situation easily could have appeared and seen as me being punched very hard, the fact is that I cried because of a complete different reason, which had nothing to do with the actual situation. The incident just sparked open an inflammation of a mental wound I was in the middle of experiencing".

The language used by Student 19 is strikingly similar to that used by the current senior students who confirmed that when they had been hit by Sogyal this had been a "soft punch", not something that caused them real pain. It gives me the impression that this is the 'party line' on the issue; the striking of people cannot plausibly be denied, but its significance can be minimised.

On hearing these accounts, I wanted to understand why people had 'allowed' themselves to be hit; why hadn't they complained, why hadn't they hit him back? This was explained to me as follows:

Witness G told me that it was "a source of eternal shame" that Witness G had not spoken up when Student 19 was punched. Witness G told me "I sat in abject denial of what my eyes were seeing; the whole room did ... we were conditioned to belonging for so long that there was not a peep of protest. Even more disturbing is that over the course of the next two days we were excoriated [by Sogyal and Witness P] for even thinking something had happened ... we were a brainwashed group, myself included"

Witness E told me that he understood that a teacher slapping you is a training; as a student Witness E believed that you should see it as pure, carry on and not react. Witness E said that, “as a newcomer, you look around you at the other senior students who it happens to and they don’t react, so you think that it must be doing some good as they tolerate it without complaint, and the students would even tell you that it is a training and is helping them in their practice”. Witness E said that “you kind of let go of your common sense when it comes to boundaries and you’re prepared to believe it might wake you up faster”.

Witness F made similar comments and explained that Sogyal would start by hitting you once, to see how you would react. Witness F said that “if you took it, he would then continue, gradually building up the severity”.

Witness I (who alleges both sexual and physical abuse) spoke about the need to adopt a coping mechanism where she would close her mind to what was going on and pretend it did not exist. Witness I spoke of feeling ashamed and unable to tell anyone about it.

Witness J said “your mind leaves your body, it’s a skill to protect yourself. [The abuse] has a numbing effect”. Witness I believed that Sogyal likes to be surrounded by people who had experienced trauma, abuse or neglect, and felt that he was easily able to identify such people. Witness J explained how being involved with Rigpa left Witness J disconnected from friends and family in the outside world and that the thought of leaving is very difficult because it means leaving the whole “Rigpa family” behind too, Witness J said “I didn’t have the strength to walk away”.

Various witnesses talked to me about not being ready to turn their back on something that they had been so devoted to for so many years, and not being ready to accept that it was not what they thought and hoped it was.

Witness K said that you start off being told by everyone around you that you are lucky to be singled out by Sogyal for special attention; you feel special because of this. Witness K said that she had witnessed other people push back or try to draw a boundary and things got worse. This had been Witness J’s experience too.

Witness K said she was told by another student to look at how well the people around Sogyal were doing and trust his process. Witness K said she was told that it is not an easy path, but it is the quick path to enlightenment. Witness K acknowledges that, technically, it was possible to leave, but doing so would have damaged the relationship between Witness K and a close family member, who was a committed member of Rigpa, and Witness K felt she had nowhere else to go.

In his letter to me, Sogyal Lakar says:

“It is clear that a number of people feel that they have been hurt, and hold me responsible. That is something I have to acknowledge and face up to. I am truly sorry if anything that I have said or done has caused anyone offence or harm and I ask in all humility for their forgiveness.

At the same time from my side I find it very hard to recognize myself in the descriptions in the letter, and the picture that it paints. It distresses me that my actions and intentions could have been misunderstood and characterized in this way.

I am a human being doing my best to follow the Buddha’s teaching and I have never knowingly set out to harm anyone, which would be against the most fundamental precept that I follow, as a Buddhist. Nonetheless I would be the first to acknowledge that I have faults, and I am always striving to work on myself, to become a better and more compassionate person. That’s why it is so troubling that anyone could be left with the impression that I am acting merely out of impatience, irritation or anger”.

Findings: physical abuse

Based on the evidence that I have heard, a number of witnesses gave credible evidence about physical abuse that they have personally suffered and witnessed. Several of the accounts were corroborated by other witnesses, and where there is a lack of corroborative evidence, the facts complained of are very similar, even from witnesses who were at Rigpa at very different points in time and locations in the world.

On the balance of probabilities, I conclude that Sogyal Lakar has subjected a number of his closest attendants to repeated physical violence by assaulting them with his own hands, his backscratcher or with items that he could throw or hit them with. Whilst some of the physical abuse might be described as being part of a teaching, it is clear that on many occasions the reason for the violence was Sogyal's own frustrations – for example, he would hit attendants for no particular reason following an argument with one of his girlfriends. I have heard compelling evidence that he effectively used several of his attendants as a punching bag to vent his own frustrations and anger.

It is also clear to me that, on the balance of probabilities, even if Sogyal's violence towards his students was intended to help them on the path to enlightenment, the physical abuse caused real harm. I heard evidence of an individual being knocked unconscious, several people were left with bleeding wounds and one received a concussion which lasted for days.

Sexual abuse

It is alleged that Sogyal Lakar:

- a. Used his role to gain access to young women and to coerce, intimidate and manipulate them into giving him sexual favours and has had decades of sexual relationships with students, including underage girls.
- b. Instructed students to strip, show him their genitals, take photos of their genitals and show them to him, give him oral sex, have sex with their partners in his bed and describe sexual relationships to him, as well as lying to cover up relationships with him.
- c. Groped students and asked one of his students to photograph attendants and girlfriends naked, forcing others to make collages of the images for him which were then shown to others.
- d. Offered a female attendant to another lama for sex.

These allegations are dealt with below.

Allegations with no supporting evidence / insufficient evidence

In relation to some of these allegations, I did not receive any evidence to support them and therefore cannot uphold them. Specifically, nobody gave evidence to me that they had been required to take photos of their own genitals and show them to Sogyal.

I heard some evidence in relation to relationships with girls under the age of 16, but I do not consider there to be sufficient proof of such relationships on the basis of the evidence provided to me. I do not therefore uphold this allegation.

No witness gave evidence to me that they had been asked to have sex with their partner in Sogyal's bed. One witness spoke of being invited to use a room in Sogyal's chalet to have 'make-up sex'. There was no suggestion that this was forced upon the couple, albeit that there is a general theme from all witnesses that they could not say no to Sogyal. I cannot therefore uphold this allegation.

I did, however, receive a significant volume of evidence in support of the other allegations, which I deal with below.

Allegation that Sogyal Lakar used his role to gain access to young women and to coerce, intimidate and manipulate them into giving him sexual favours and has had decades of sexual relationships with students, including underage girls

Sogyal Lakar is open about the fact that he has sexual relationships; he is not a monk and is not required to remain celibate. He is known to have often had girlfriends who are significantly younger than him and to have had more than one girlfriend at the same time. There is nothing wrong with this, if they are consenting adults.

Sogyal Lakar is also known for being attended to by a number of beautiful young women, who form a significant part of the lama care team. Again, on the surface there is nothing wrong with this, however, several witnesses shared their experiences of this role with me and their evidence was very troubling. I am particularly concerned about the vulnerability of the individuals who gave evidence that they were called upon to provide sexual favours to Sogyal Lakar and the apparent abuse of Sogyal's power over them.

It was again striking how many similar accounts were provided by different witnesses spanning a considerable time period – it supports a conclusion that Sogyal Lakar has a particular modus operandi when it comes to securing sexual relationships with his students; particularly young women.

First-hand accounts

Witness K shared the following information with me:

“When I was 18 or 19, he asked me to come and meet him at his personal shrine in his house. He said he had had a dream about me and it would be good if I worked for him as an attendant. He asked if I wanted to and I said yes. I understood it would be like a PA but the uber rich version, bringing him anything and everything he might need including food, laundry, cleaning and carrying his bags. He said it’s really important that you never talk to anyone about anything that goes on while you’re working, especially don’t tell [a family member also in Rigpa] as it will damage [that person’s] view and relationship with the dharma. I said OK. I didn’t expect this to mean there would be anything awful, but I understood I would have information about what he spent his money on and what he did which he would want to keep private. I was very young and emotionally vulnerable; he knew this.

One day he showed me some sexy photos of [another student] on the beach to see if I was shocked. I wasn’t.

Within three months of me arriving, I was helping him one evening to get ready for bed with [another student]. I had to bring his hot water. He suddenly asked me to lick and touch his genitals. He said it in a jovial way and I wasn’t sure if he was serious. [The other student] smiled and said “yes, do it”. I tried but I freaked out and he said “oh, that’s OK” and he dismissed me. The next day I felt very uncomfortable and said I was not well and stayed in bed. A couple of hours later I was called and told he wanted to see me in the garden straight away. I went to the garden reluctantly and he started screaming abuse at me, saying “you think I’m attracted to you, why would I be?” He was aggressive and it was terrifying, I was not used to being yelled at. I started to cry and felt panicked. I said I didn’t think that, but felt bad because I had failed him and his test. He immediately turned nice and said “oh no, you did well”. I felt shaken and was not OK with it. I had no one to talk to.

I then went to [another country] with him [as part of the lama care team] and I was leaning over to give him something. He put his hand down my top and touched me. He said my nipples were young. I felt shocked.

[Some time later], I attended a retreat and was feeling better and more on track. I was alone with him in the shrine room and he asked me to give him a blow job. I tried to be a good Buddhist and see it as a teaching. It was an out of body experience. I didn’t want to do it but I did. I didn’t do it for long and he then dismissed me. It felt like a power play, he didn’t seem particularly aroused”.

Witness L recounted the following experience which took place when Witness L was aged around twenty:

“Sogyal asked me to take my clothes off. It was just before he was about to teach and I had been ironing his clothes in the lounge area of his hotel room. He was on the bed in his underwear and called me into his bedroom. I laughed and made a joke about not wearing nice underwear. I think my reaction made clear that I wasn’t going to do it. I felt shocked, nervous and vulnerable. He dismissed me and I went back to ironing his robe, my heart was pounding and I wanted to run”.

Witness I also reported first-hand experience of this, which is set out in the confidential annexe.

Witness A was a former girlfriend of Sogyal, who confirmed that she had been in a consensual sexual relationship with him. She gave evidence, however, that on one occasion she had experienced a non-consensual sexual act by Sogyal. Details of this are set out in the confidential annexe.

The Rigpa management witnesses, Witness N, Witness O and Witness P accepted that Sogyal had girlfriends, and sometimes more than one at a time, but all considered these relationships to be consensual and denied ever seeing or having knowledge of him behaving inappropriately, or using the teachings to persuade people to have sex with him.

Very significantly, however, Witness P had witnessed a female student, being instructed to take her clothes off by Sogyal Lakar. Witness P stated that the response of the student was to burst into tears but not to comply with the request. Witness P says that Sogyal Lakar did not press the issue and changed the subject. Witness P was not concerned by this instruction and considered it to be an example of Sogyal Lakar having an agreement with the female student to “*intervene in [her] thought pattern by saying this*”.

Rigpa management Witness N had also witnessed Sogyal telling a female student to strip and reported that she then removed one item of clothing.

Further evidence – second hand accounts

I also received further, second hand accounts of similar, inappropriate sexual behaviour by Sogyal Lakar from Witnesses B, C, E, M and S, the details of which are set out in the confidential annexe because they relate to people who have not consented to that information being included in this report.

Because I did not speak to the alleged victims first-hand, these accounts necessarily must carry less weight in my assessment of the evidence than the first-hand accounts that I have referred to above. For the avoidance of doubt, I would have upheld the allegations of inappropriate sexual behaviour without these additional accounts, but they add further credibility to the accounts that I have heard and reflect the potential that there are further victims who have not yet come forward.

Consent

A number of individuals with whom I spoke told me that they did not want to participate in sexual activities with Sogyal and were not, therefore, consenting adults. I have given careful consideration to the question of whether, despite this evidence, Sogyal Lakar could reasonably have believed that they were participating as consenting adults.

It is apparent that some of the witnesses who gave evidence of performing sexual favours, or being intimately touched by Sogyal against their will did not expressly say no to him; quite often the evidence is that they complied with a request or a demand from him without outward complaint but because they felt they had to.

Some of the witnesses who spoke to me talked about that fact that when Sogyal first started to show them attention (although not sexual attention) they saw this as a blessing and a positive thing for their development as a Buddhist. Witness K, for example, spoke about initially feeling special to be singled out to work for him.

According to the UK's Crown Prosecution Service, under the UK's sexual offences legislation consent is only given when someone agrees by choice to participate in the activity and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice. The word consent should be given its ordinary meaning, but there is a difference between consent and submission. Consent is required for each and every sexual interaction; consent can be freely given for one interaction and not given for the next.

Some witnesses spoke about the apparent promiscuity or sexual openness of some of the alleged sexual partners of Sogyal, in particular the Rigpa management witnesses all made this point about one of the students. Witness O provided evidence to support this assertion in the form of a video of this student speaking openly about matters of a sexual nature. The Rigpa management witnesses all suggested that this student had been a willing sexual partner / girlfriend of Sogyal and that she had, in fact, “*seduced*” Sogyal.

There is no suggestion, however, that Witness L was a willing sexual partner of Sogyal Lakar.

In his letter to me, Sogyal Lakar makes no express mention of his sexual relationships with his students; he makes more general statements about never having any intention to exploit or take advantage of students:

“My abiding aim in life has been to transmit the Buddhist teachings as fully and completely as I can, to benefit as many people as possible. I cannot say I am entirely selfless, and I have no wish to exaggerate, but the way in which my character has been portrayed – as self-interested and pleasure seeking – is far from the truth.

The welfare of my students has always been paramount in my mind. My intention towards them has always been characterized by compassion and by love. I have always sought to ensure that they make a deep connection with the core of the teachings, and come to a personal understanding...

It has never been my intention to exploit or take advantage of students. I respect them deeply and have only sought to benefit them. Whatever I have said or done when interacting with my students has been with the aim of helping them to awaken their true inner nature.

Nonetheless I see this intention has been misunderstood and my action have been judged otherwise. For some, this way of training may not have had the desired outcome. I must accept my own responsibility in this, and apologize to anyone who feels this way”.

Sogyal’s statement - *“whatever I have said or done when interacting with my students has been with the aim of helping them to awaken their inner nature”* - causes me concern if and to the extent that it relates to sexual relationships. He is not saying, I thought that these were ‘normal’ consenting adult relationships. A sexual relationship which is designed to help awaken the inner nature of a student is, necessarily, a sexual relationship between a student and a teacher; it is not a relationship between equals. In that context, if such a relationship can ever be consensual (which is a controversial question in itself), I consider that the requirement for clear and unequivocal consent is paramount. That point is made even starker in a situation where the student considers that she is not permitted to speak out against her teacher and has been taught to see everything their teacher does as enlightened behaviour.

Findings: abusing young women

It is alleged that Sogyal used his position to coerce, intimidate and manipulate young women into giving him sexual favours. There is a significant weight of first-hand evidence which leads me to uphold this allegation. By way of illustration, Witness K, referred to above, who became upset when asked to strip gave evidence to me that she had first been sworn to secrecy with a threat to her karma and that of her family in the event that she broke this promise. This promise was extracted from her within a week of first coming to work as a helper in the lama kitchen as a teenager, having come to a retreat by way of respite from a period of depression and self-harm. Having broken down and refused to strip, she alleges that she was subjected to aggression and anger and she says she was also hit with a backscratcher.

On the balance of probabilities, I do not believe that Witness K freely participated in sexual activity with Sogyal Lakar. These interactions were against her will and took place after Sogyal had shouted at her after she had first said no to him. She was vulnerable and not in a position to refuse him: in my view she submitted; she did not consent.

I also conclude that Sogyal Lakar attempted to use his position of authority to obtain sexual favours from Witness L and I am seriously concerned about the ability of Student 15 to provide consent freely against the backdrop of physical abuse alleged to be directed towards her which is outlined in the confidential annexe.

Whilst one of the witnesses may initially have enjoyed Sogyal's attentions, and may even have been flirtatious with him, I do not accept that she consented to the sexual relationship that developed and the use of threats of Samaya breakage and bad karma towards her demonstrate that the relationship arose out of an abuse of power.

I am unable to make a clear finding in relation to the experiences of Witness A; this allegation arises out of a different sort of relationship (Witness A describes herself as a former-girlfriend of Sogyal). There is simply not enough direct or corroboratory evidence to enable me to uphold this allegation.

I do not believe that Sogyal Lakar could reasonably have believed that Witness K, Witness L or Witness I consented freely to his actions. When a significantly older man, who is responsible for a student's spiritual development, and who uses physical force against that student, tells that student to perform sexual favours for him, I cannot accept that there is any basis upon which this could be said to be a consensual act.

I should make clear that I do not conclude that all of the sexual partners of Sogyal are the victims of sexual abuse. There are some individuals who appear to be treated quite differently, are looked after by Sogyal and consider themselves to be his girlfriends. I spoke to one such individual who had a relationship with him in the 1970s and said he was a "*loving and gentle man*".

I do not think that the same can be said when it comes to the vulnerable people working in the lama care team, who are required to attend to Sogyal's every need around the clock. It is entirely possible that Sogyal has allowed himself to believe that these women choose to be his sexual partners but I cannot accept that there is any legitimate basis for that conclusion on the evidence I have heard.

Requiring students to lie to cover up relationships with him

Witness E told me that Sogyal Lakar would often be having a relationship with five or six women at a time. Witness E would, for example, be expected to drive Sogyal to a hotel where one female student was waiting for him in the hotel room. Witness E would then be instructed by Sogyal not to tell another student, who was known to be his girlfriend.

Witness E explained that a number of Sogyal's sexual partners were based in the same city and there would be times when one girlfriend was visiting Sogyal via one staircase as Witness E was escorting another girlfriend out of the building, via another exit.

Witness E accepted that most of the girlfriends knew about each other and would discuss it amongst themselves. This does not, therefore, appear to be wrongful behaviour on Sogyal's part per se, aside from expecting a Rigpa volunteer to give up time to facilitate his exclusively personal arrangements.

Whilst I accept the evidence of Witness E, I cannot uphold this allegation as an act of abuse or similar wrongdoing on the part of Sogyal Lakar.

Groping students, photographing attendants and girlfriends naked, and forcing others to make collages of the images

Witness G alleges that, on one occasion, Sogyal walked up to him in front of eight or nine of his attendants and grabbed Witness G by the testicles; it is alleged that Sogyal squeezed Witness G's testicles and made a lewd comment about whether or not Witness G was aroused. Witness G says he tried to laugh this off, but felt violated by this act and continues to look back on this as a "*damaging and traumatic event*" and a moment of "*abject humiliation*". Witness G believes that this was an assertion of authority on Sogyal's part, as opposed to being sexually motivated. Witness G spoke of Sogyal being very concerned about the size of other men's penises, and how his own compared. Witness E made similar comments, and told me that Sogyal would often ask male students to show him their penises. As set out above, Witness K also gave evidence of Sogyal groping her.

On the balance of probabilities, I conclude that Sogyal Lakar did grope Witness G and Witness K against their wishes; whether this was sexually motivated or a display of power does not, in my view, make a difference as to the harm done to the students in question.

It is alleged that Sogyal required one of his students to photograph attendants and girlfriends naked, forcing others to make collages of the images for him which were then shown to others. Several witnesses confirmed to me that they understood that a student who was a photographer was required to take naked photographs of Sogyal's girlfriends and attendants.

Witness L gave evidence of an occasion when four female students were called upstairs, and Witness E was then asked to go upstairs to take photos in Sogyal's personal shrine room. Witness L said "*I went upstairs a day or two later and saw photos of them all posing naked in the shrine room. I felt shocked to see it*".

Witness G also saw intimate sexual photographs of Student 3 in Sogyal's possession and alleges that he saw Sogyal share these with another lama. I have been provided with evidence (which is addressed in the confidential annexe) which confirms the existence of these photographs.

I have also been provided with evidence (which is addressed in the confidential annexe) which confirms the existence of some of the video footage that Witness E says he was asked to film or was given by Sogyal to edit. This includes a video of two young female attendants who are asked by Sogyal to dance for him. One starts dancing in a bikini until he simply tells to her: "*take it off*". She complies with the instruction. In my opinion, the student who is dancing looks uncomfortable and awkward. I was told that this footage was filmed by Witness E, at Sogyal's request. Another of the videos includes a student being told by Sogyal that she can stop what she is doing when she wants to, but when she immediately asks to stop she is told by Sogyal to repeat what she was doing "*one more time*".

Multiple witnesses confirmed seeing naked pictures of "*Sogyal's girls*" in his accommodation and to there being huge blown up collages with naked images of one of his girlfriends in his private rooms, to which only the inner circle were granted access.

Witness E, who took many of the photographs, explained that Sogyal would ask him to crop and enlarge the images that he would take so as to focus only on the genitals of the women in the photographs.

I am satisfied that Witness E, in particular, was asked to photograph attendants and girlfriends naked. Whether there is anything wrong in this conduct depends primarily on whether the photographs or videos were taken of people who did not consent to them being taken or shared in the way that they were. I have not spoken to any of the women in the photographs so cannot determine whether they were consented to this on the evidence available to me. This could be investigated further if they women in the photographs were willing to provide evidence in future.

I have not heard direct evidence of anyone being "forced" to make collages of the images for Sogyal, as is alleged, but there is evidence to support at least one student being asked to do so. There is also a significant volume of evidence to support the conclusion that saying no to Sogyal Lakar was not easy to do. Witness E, however, confirmed that taking the photographs was not the problem in itself, it was more about the relationships Sogyal was having with these women that was the cause for concern for this witness.

Offering attendants to other lamas

It is alleged that Sogyal offered one of his female attendants to another lama for sex. I heard evidence that this happened on more than one occasion.

Witness E told me that he had heard Sogyal Lakar on the telephone to another guru on two occasions and that during the phone calls Sogyal 'offered' a student to the guru. This account is dealt with in the confidential annexe. I was not able to corroborate this account independently; however, another witness spoke of a similar experience, as set out below.

Witness K

"Another lama was visiting and Sogyal made comments in front of others asking me if I would sleep with the lama. I thought he was joking and trying to get a rise out of me. I jokingly replied "yes, of course" and Sogyal then said "good you can be his attendant" he also told me to go and buy condoms. ... On the second day of attending the lama, he led me to a bedroom and started kissing me. I suddenly realised it was not a joke and I froze. The other lama realised I was not consenting and stopped. He asked if I was OK and let me go back to the house.

I realised I was in over my head and locked myself in a bathroom and broke down. I didn't have anywhere else to go – I was 20, had nowhere else to live, no money and no food. I was very scared. There was no way out but I felt very unsafe.

Someone found me and I was crying hysterically. I had to meet with Sogyal and the other lama; Sogyal said he was sorry as he thought that [offering me to the other lama] would be good for me.

Witness E then took me to a bus stop and put me on a bus to [the city], even though I had nowhere to go when I got there. No one contacted me or checked I was safe".

Another witness provided a similar account to me, but did not wish for details to be included in this report.

Based on the evidence available to me, on the balance of probabilities, I uphold this allegation.

Emotional and psychological abuse

As set out in the section above entitled "Sogyal Lakar's teachings", I consider that there are aspects of Sogyal's teachings which are designed to push a student's buttons psychologically. In his letter to me, Sogyal Lakar states:

"I believe it is common in many traditional cultures and disciplines – such as education, art and sport – that the teacher encourages the student to go beyond his or her limits and sometimes this kind of training can be confronting. It is in this spirit that at times I have tried to train my own students, especially when I see great potential in them. I believe this is very much in keeping with the culture of training that we find in Tibetan Buddhism. I have never had the feeling that I was obliging someone to do something that was against his or her own will, and that was not aligned to their inner development".

It is alleged, however, that Sogyal's techniques went beyond legitimate teaching and crossed the line into emotional and psychological abuse. Some specific examples of this allegation were included in the Complaint. These examples were:

- a. Comments about Ian Maxwell
- b. Telling people their loved ones would be at risk / died because they displeased Sogyal
- c. Pushing students to the verge of emotional breakdown
- d. Use of Rigpa therapy

I deal with these in turn below.

Ian Maxwell comments

It is alleged that Sogyal Lakar referred to a senior student, Ian Maxwell, as an “*asshole*” during a live streamed teaching from the unfinished temple at a time when Ian Maxwell was dying in hospital.

I have been able to obtain a copy of the December 2015 live teaching in a temple during which Sogyal Lakar spoke about Ian Maxwell, who was terminally ill at the time. Sogyal does refer to Ian Maxwell as “*a bit of a stubborn asshole*” in this teaching and says “*so I kick his arse*”, but in my view this comment appears to be to be an attempt at a comic aside in the middle of a longer commentary which talks about the positive impact that Ian has made, how “*crucial*” he has been and asking everyone to “*think of him very strongly*”.

Rigpa management Witness P acknowledged that these comments had been made but felt that they were taken out of context. Witness P said “*I was shocked when I heard it, but he was doing it to wake people up again*”.

It is also alleged that, after Ian Maxwell died, Sogyal Lakar told students that Ian had “*died spitting up blood*” because he had defied Sogyal in the past, and that Sogyal would ask students “*do you want to die spitting up blood like Ian for defying me?*”

Witness E confirmed that these comments were made in his presence and he understood this to be a reference to Ian Maxwell and Sogyal not seeing eye-to-eye in relation to the cultural side of Tibetan Buddhism. Witness E said that Ian Maxwell just wanted to benefit from the teachings and did not want to deal with the rest of Sogyal’s behaviour.

Rigpa management Witness N was not aware of the specific comments alleged to have been made about Ian Maxwell but confirmed that there was some tension in the relationship between Ian and Sogyal. Witness N also confirmed that Sogyal would say deliberately provocative things at times.

On balance, I accept that these comments about Ian Maxwell were made, but the comments made in the temple appear to have a context which makes them less shocking. The comments made about dying spitting up blood being the fate of people who do not follow Sogyal are distasteful and add to the overall concerns that I have of people being put under great pressure not to question Sogyal’s actions. However, I do not believe that these comments can, on their own, be described as emotional or psychological abuse.

Telling people their loved ones would be at risk / died because they displeased Sogyal

The Complaint refers (at footnote 3) to one of the letter writers being told that his partner got sick because the letter writer had shouted at him. I understand that this was during a telephone conversation between only the letter writer and Sogyal Lakar.

This complaint is consistent with evidence received from Witness K and Witness I that they were told that there would be negative karmic consequences for them and their family members if they spoke about their dealings with Sogyal.

Witness P commented that Sogyal had devoted a lot of time to the letter writer and his partner during her illness, that he would pray for her and showed incredible kindness to them. Witness P confirmed that Sogyal:

“... probably did say these things – it was all about disturbing thoughts, provocation, startling things that woke people up. It’s easy to get the wrong perception”.

However, I do not believe that I have sufficient evidence to uphold the specific complaint about the comments Sogyal is alleged to have made about the letter writer’s partner.

Pushing students to the verge of emotional breakdown

A number of the witnesses that I spoke to gave evidence of the serious impact of their involvement with Sogyal Lakar on their health.

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:

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. 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.

I was informed that there are a number of other students who suffered breakdowns as a result of their involvement with Rigpa. I was not able to corroborate this information with those individuals.

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.

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 N accepted that there was a period when four or five students, who were also therapists, were looking at how modern therapy techniques could have confluence with Buddhism. Witness N stated that one of these therapists also saw some students privately, but that this was not a Rigpa offering.

Witness P also told me that there was a therapist (Student 20) who would see people, but described this was an individual thing and not arranged by the organisation. Witness P said that people would choose to see Student 20 and it was private and confidential, there was no official organised therapy.

Witness O agreed that there had been some work done by a group of therapists to see if they could develop a Buddhist inspired therapy technique, but that this had not been able to make much progress. Witness O confirmed that there was some completely informal therapy with a therapist (Student 20) who would informally support students with any problems during the three-year retreat. Witness O stated that this would be confidential and Witness O’s sense was that the therapy was used to get to the bottom of what the cause of any problems might be.

Witness K told me that she was “*assigned*” to Student 20 for therapy. Witness K said that this was not a great experience. Witness K says that Student 20 “*made it all about your relationship with your parents*”. Witness K says that Student 20 was caring but she felt that the key message was that

Witness K should keep Sogyal's behaviour under wraps and not make a scene. At one point, Witness K says she was told to see Student 20 for therapy twice a week. Witness K says it was a relief to be able to speak to someone, so Witness K did not say no. Witness K continued seeing Student 20 for therapy via Skype for some years but now sees this as a means of keeping Witness K tied up in the Rigpa way of resolving these issues instead of going to the police.

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*".

I have heard a recorded public teaching in which Sogyal asks for Student 20 to share something that has come out of Witness F's therapy sessions. Student 20 then shares information coming from those therapy sessions with Sogyal and the rest of those present. This is clear evidence of the misuse of these therapy sessions and the confidential information shared therein.

Witness L confirmed that she was aware that Witness F and a number of the young women in the lama care team were seeing Student 20 for therapy. Witness L alleges that those undergoing therapy reported back that Student 20 would persuade them to blame their families, or their karma from past lives, instead of holding Sogyal responsible for his actions towards them.

I must make clear that I have not received any testimony from Student 20. There is, however, a significant volume of evidence to support the allegation that (whatever Student 20's intentions were) the therapy sessions held by Student 20 were encouraged or sanctioned by Sogyal Lakar and caused harm to those who participated in them.

On the balance of probabilities, I uphold the allegation that therapy sessions were improperly used.

Lavish, gluttonous and sybaritic lifestyle

It is alleged that Sogyal Lakar demands money from his students to fund his lifestyle, which involves a steady supply of sensual pleasures: personal chefs, entertainment, cigars, drivers, masseuses, and expensive restaurants. It is alleged that he demands free labour.

It is apparent that Sogyal has a taste for the finer things; he does indeed have a staff available to him around the clock, including masseuses, drivers and chefs. Many of these people, however, appear to donate their time, without charge, as part of a personal offering, or people worked in exchange for free accommodation and food on retreat. Some witnesses explained that there is an expectation within Tibetan Buddhism that a high lama would have these things. Whilst it was understood that some lamas would reject such trappings and live a simple life, it was acknowledged that Sogyal is not one of them. He was described as being from an old school, aristocratic family with certain expectations.

Several witnesses spoke about Sogyal having very specific, and expensive, taste when it came to meals that were cooked for him and restaurants that were frequented. It was accepted by Rigpa management Witness N that the cost of such hospitality would be met by the local Rigpa group, not

by Sogyal personally. It is not clear to me the extent to which these costs were met by the Rigpa entities or by individual students within the local sangha; it appears that there was a mixture of both.

Several witnesses described the fact that at the end of a retreat, students are invited to give a financial offering to Sogyal Lakar. The offerings were encouraged through a speech known as the 'offering pitch' in which a senior student or monastic would explain that the money people had already paid was to pay for the infrastructure of the retreat, accommodation and food. It was explained that Sogyal did not personally receive any of this money and that there was now an opportunity to express gratitude to him for the teachings and to 'accumulate merit'. It would be explained that the teachings were priceless but this was nonetheless an opportunity to make a gesture. Students would be informed that they could donate by cash or cheque. This speech would then typically be followed by a statement from Sogyal about the fact that he did not keep the money for himself (although some witnesses suggested he would indicate that he might keep a small amount to cover daily necessities), but would use it to donate to worthy Buddhist causes, such as supporting monks in Tibet who were in retreat, or to help build temples.

Some of the witnesses I spoke to were involved in collecting the offerings. They told me that the money collected would be counted up by Rigpa staff and kept in personal safes within Sogyal's living quarters at the relevant Rigpa centres. Witnesses that I spoke to were involved in providing detail to Sogyal of exactly how much had been donated and they confirmed that this would run to many thousands of pounds.

Two of the witnesses that I spoke to confirmed that Sogyal would ask for some of the money (typically 500 euros per person) to be put in envelopes and delivered to his mother and to two of his girlfriends. Witness E explained that they had been asked to deliver significantly larger sums to two girlfriends of Sogyal.

Several witnesses also told me that when they travelled overseas they would be asked to carry 10,000 euros in cash in order to move Sogyal's money across country borders.

There is a significant amount of evidence to suggest that Sogyal enjoys what has been described as a "*five star existence*", however, based on the evidence provided to me, there is nothing wrong with that in and of itself. The problem arises if he is doing so using money which has been donated for a different purpose. Most significantly, it seems to me that it is essential that the money should not have been donated on the understanding that it would be used for benevolent purposes, if it was, in fact, going to fund Sogyal's chosen lifestyle.

I have received evidence that people working for Rigpa are the ones who count, account for, store and move the money that is offered at the end of a retreat. Despite this, the Rigpa management witnesses displayed a lack of knowledge about what happens to that money and what it is for. Witnesses gave evidence that there are safes located at various Rigpa centres which are believed to contain significant amounts of cash (said to be in excess of £0.5 million each). Some of Sogyal's girlfriends are alleged to receive payments of around £50,000 per year out of these cash reserves. The cash is also alleged to fund their yoga retreats in Thailand, botox and expensive lunches, though I did not see any direct evidence of this.

Whilst I have not found evidence to support the allegation that Sogyal Lakar *demand*s money from his students to support his lifestyle, it appears to me that there is at least the potential that money has been collected by or for him under false or misleading pretences, or that the money received has not been fully accounted for by him. I do not have sufficient evidence to make a definitive finding about this and, subject to the points below, I consider that this requires further investigation, particularly in relation to the role that Rigpa students are alleged to play in explaining what the donations will be used for.

Close consideration should also be given to the extent to which (if at all) charitable money has been used to fund extravagant personal expenditure when local Rigpa centres host Sogyal. I do not have sufficient information to reach my own findings on this point.

The UK trustees have explained to me that there has recently been a process of enquiry, investigation and accounting to the Charity Commission (in the UK) about the UK Charity's fundraising and I am told that *"this has been gone through meticulously with the auditors and solicitors for the UK and disclosed to the Charity Commission"*. As a result of this process, I am told that the UK trustees are satisfied that all money received by the UK charity has been properly used and accounted for. I am not in a position to assess any aspect of this financial investigation or the conclusions that were reached, so I would simply invite the UK trustees to review the findings of fact and areas for further investigation which are set out above (particularly in relation to what is said during the offering pitch) to ensure that this does not impact upon the advice that they have received or the position detailed to the Charity Commission.

To the extent that it has not been done already, it seems that a similar process of enquiry, investigation and accounting should be undertaken in all of the other relevant jurisdictions in which Rigpa operates to ensure that appropriate financial practices have been adopted.

Tainting appreciation of Dharma

The Complaint sets out the damage that is alleged to have been done to the letter writers' appreciation of the Dharma. Given the conclusions that I have reached above, it is entirely understandable that they feel this way.

In his letter to me, Sogyal says "*my utmost concern is that no one should be deterred from their spiritual path and their commitment to following the Buddhist teachings*". Sadly, it appears that the damage has been done for many of those with whom I have spoken.

Vacuum of accountability

The Complaint states “we see no clear or identifiable ethical standards or guidelines to which you are held. There is a vacuum of accountability”.

Witness O told me that turning against your teacher would amount to breaking Samaya. According to Witness O, if a student were to change their mind, they could move away from the teacher but they should not “turn against them”. Witness O said it should be like an amicable divorce, as opposed to a nasty divorce.

I was particularly troubled by the responses of Witness P on this topic. Witness P’s view was that if someone was unhappy, they should leave:

“If you feel you can’t continue even with the support of the sangha members then the important thing is to leave in a harmonious way. You need to leave in a non-acrimonious way and maintain relationships after you have left”.

Witness P said that an unhappy student should:

“Talk openly to the community and say you feel it is not right. You should ask ‘how shall we proceed?’ You could continue in the community putting a mental pause on your relationship with [Sogyal]. You can receive teachings from others and may reach a different understanding in due course. If not, you could leave in a harmonious way. It depends on the maturity of the sangha. It’s about doing the most beneficial thing for everybody”.

I then asked Witness P specifically about what a student should do if they considered that they had been seriously sexually assaulted by a guru. Witness P responded:

“It would be good for them to talk to each other and senior members of the community that they trust. Information doesn’t have to be suppressed. Perhaps bring it to [Sogyal]’s attention. You need to find out what they want”.

I asked Witness P what a student should do if they had tried to speak to the community and take teachings elsewhere, but still considered themselves a victim of sexual assault. Witness P responded “I don’t know.” I asked whether it would ever be OK for that student to go to the police. Witness P responded “I don’t know”.

I found these responses extremely troubling. Witness P, who accepted that a guru is not perfect and can make mistakes, did not say that a student who believes they have been subjected to a serious sexual assault can go to the police. Witness P is one of the most senior members of the Rigpa community and a vital conduit for complaints (for which, see below) yet, in my opinion, Witness P is not prepared to hold Sogyal to account.

Overall, based on this information and the information set out in the next section of this report, I uphold the allegation that, for many years, there has been nobody within Rigpa holding Sogyal Lakar to account. In saying this, I recognise that Witness P and Witness N were instrumental in the instigation of this investigation, which I see as a very hopeful sign the vacuum of accountability might become a thing of the past.

An organisational culture that maintains absolute secrecy

The final allegation in the Complaint is that Rigpa, as an organisation, has helped to keep the allegations against Sogyal Lakar secret; the letter writers describe a “*veil of secrecy, deception and deceit*”. Indeed, the writers go on to say that “*some of us, who have held positions of responsibility within Rigpa, struggle with our own part in having covered for [Sogyal] and “explained” away [his] behaviour, while not caring for those with traumatic experiences*”.

My investigation into this aspect of the complaint was greatly assisted by the willingness of three former trustees of Rigpa to give evidence to me: Witnesses B, C and D. What they each had to say was critical to enable me to understand the extent of the information available to members of Rigpa management over the years, and to understand how that information was responded to.

I deal with the chronology of various matters which are relevant to this allegation under the various sub-headings below, and set out my conclusions at the end of this section of the report.

Allegations raised by Witness C

Witness C’s account is set out in more detail in the confidential annexe due to the involvement of a third party in the account, but is summarised below.

Witness C was a trustee of Rigpa. During 1992, he had started to hear some rumours of Sogyal having abusive sexual relationships with students. He had heard that one student had left because of this and Witness B had also raised some concerns with him (for which, see below).

In 1992, a student told Witness C she had been sexually abused by Sogyal over an extended period of time. Further details of this allegation are set out in the confidential annexe.

Witness C says he spoke to Witness P and said that Sogyal’s sexual behaviour was abusive but that Witness P sought to reassure him that nothing was wrong. Witness C said he felt alone with his concerns and did not know what to do.

On 1 February 1994 Witness C made an unannounced presentation to four senior Rigpa students, which included Witness P, Witness O and Witness N. This presentation outlined Witness C’s concerns about Sogyal’s behaviour, which, he said, related to money, sex and power, and urged these individuals to take action. When Witness C sought to include his presentation as an addendum to the minutes of the meeting he was instructed by one of the attendees to unconditionally withdraw the statement as a formal record of any kind, and that it should remain a personal document to him.

At some point between April and June 1994, Witness C says that Witness P addressed another formal Rigpa meeting and confirmed that these matters had been raised with Sogyal Lakar and that there was nothing to be concerned about. Witness C says that there was no further discussion.

Contact from Inform

In June 1994, Rigpa UK received a letter from Inform, which describes itself as “an independent charity providing information that is as up-to-date and reliable as possible about what many call cults, sects, new religious movements (NRMs), non-conventional religions”. I was shown a copy of the letter from Inform which said:

“It is said that Sogyal Rinpoche has had sexual relations with several of his female disciples. The allegation comes from a number of sources and indeed appears to have been common knowledge among those concerned with Buddhist affairs ... Could you please confirm that it is true and could you say whether it is an experience for which young women joining Rigpa now and in the future should be prepared? Further, can you explain how the practice fits in with accepted Buddhist teaching?”

Witness C shared with me a number of different draft responses prepared by Witness P and Witness O, as well as a draft prepared by Witness C. In my view, the responses prepared by Witness P and Witness O were defensive and focussed on the good done by Sogyal; neither draft suggests that there is any cause for concern. Witness C's draft was very different; it sought to acknowledge the problems and recognise that harm had been caused. Witness C says his approach was rejected.

The final response to Inform was not sent until 10 September 1994. In the interim period, the meeting with Witness B (referred to below) took place, and Rigpa UK was contacted by both the Observer newspaper and the Charity Commission (see below). Witness C says that the eventual response to Inform was prepared by a lawyer instructed by Rigpa and was considerably briefer than the earlier drafts.

On 11 September 1994, Witness C wrote to Witness P to raise concerns about the minutes of an earlier formal meeting and to complain that Witness P had told Inform that sexual relations with teachers did not form any part of the teaching of Buddhism practised by Sogyal. Witness C did not believe that this statement could be made in good faith given the matters disclosed by Witness B (see below). I have not seen a response to this from Witness P.

Allegations raised by Witness B

Witness B claims to have been approached by a number of women during the early 1990s who complained in confidence that they had been involved in sexually abusive relationships with Sogyal Lakar. Witness B says the incidents complained of included "*sexual harassment, sex within the environment of emotional manipulation, coercion to have sex with him "for the sake of the teachings, his health and long life", verbal abuse, sexual infections as a result of his refusal to practise safe sex and pregnancies resulting in abortions*".

I have set out below the allegations made by Witness B; I should make clear that this is Witness B's account, as opposed to my own findings. I should also make clear that I have not interviewed Student 21, who is referred to below.

Witness B says that Witness B saw three main patterns emerging from the allegations:

- In the first, women undertaking lama care (i.e. acting as attendant to Sogyal) were told, upon entering his room, to lock the door and take their clothes off, whereupon Sogyal proceeded to have sex with them. As described to Witness B, they did not feel they had a choice in the matter, and submitted to him in a state of shock since he was their master.
- In the second, Sogyal would talk about marriage with the female student, indicating that she was very special. She would then find out later that he was having sex with multiple partners. On one retreat, a student told Witness B that she estimated that Sogyal Rinpoche was having sex with seven women including herself.
- In the third, women found themselves attracted to Sogyal out of curiosity, knowing him to be sexually active. However, once involved, they frequently found themselves unable to extricate themselves from the relationship.

Witness B believed that these events were causing harm on many levels. The women who confided in Witness B are said to have expressed shock, confusion and distress, especially since the man who seduced them was their spiritual teacher in whom they had placed their trust. They also reported that this caused distress to the partners of the women involved, since they were seduced into maintaining a sexual relationship which they were told to keep secret from their partners.

Witness B claims to have raised these concerns directly with Sogyal Lakar on three occasions, and also referred to them in a letter which Witness B wrote to him on 15 September 1992. Witness B believed assurances from Sogyal Lakar that he would change his behaviour and seek help.

Subsequently, Witness B was approached by two further women who described traumatic sexual experiences with Sogyal Lakar. As a result, Witness B concluded that the assurances from Sogyal were not to be trusted.

Witness B told Student 21 and Witness N that, in Witness B's view the sexual relationships in which Sogyal was engaging with his students were abusive and detrimental to their well-being. Witness B also spoke to Witness C about these matters who shared Witness B's concerns. In these conversations, Witness B emphasised the need for Rigpa to fulfil the requirements of its status as a registered charity, and the responsibilities of the trustees to ensure accountability and safeguard students.

Having discussed the situation with Student 21 and Witness N, they agreed to inform Witness P of this and facilitate a conversation with Sogyal. Witness B says that the efforts to contact Sogyal were blocked by Witness P, who allegedly said that Sogyal was too busy with his book tour to be dealing with this kind of stuff. It is alleged that Witness P stated that the problems lay with the students.

On 13 October 1992, Witness B then wrote a personal letter to Sogyal Lakar of 10 pages setting out these concerns and the basis for them. Witness B also sent a copy of this letter to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Also on 13 October 1992, Witness B wrote giving notice of resignation as a trustee.

After leaving Rigpa, Witness B continued to be engaged in conversations with women who were traumatised. Witness B decided that it was important to share information in a way that protected confidentiality in order that Rigpa management were officially briefed on what had happened. Witness B arranged a private meeting on 10 July 1994, attended by Witnesses C, N, O and P, and Student 21 as well as four other individuals.

Witness B felt it was important that people in senior positions at Rigpa clearly understood Witness B's reasons for leaving. Around the same time, Witness B had been approached by a journalist from the Sunday Observer with a request to comment on allegations of sexual misconduct by Sogyal, and financial irregularities. Witness B had declined to make any comment.

Witness B prepared a speaking note in advance of the meeting, which Witness B read out loud, providing information which had come to Witness B's attention from both the men and the women who had confided in Witness B about their experiences of Sogyal's behaviour. The speaking note is 18 pages long and a copy has been provided to me. Witness B did not give the attendees a copy of the note or permit them to take notes.

Witness B's speaking note does not identify victims by name, but provides significant detail of the allegations referred to above. It makes clear that those alleging sexual misconduct include those in the lama care team, as well as other students. The note states that these incidents happened behind closed doors when Sogyal got them alone. The note sets out three specific examples of women who said they had been sexually abused by Sogyal.

I spoke to Witness C about this meeting, who was present at it. Witness C recalls that when Witness B finished speaking Witness P asked "*is any of this information out there anywhere?*" Witness C says that he was quite upset at this point and said something along the lines of "*you have just heard about sexual abuse, rape and abortion and all you seem to be interested in is who else has the information.*" Witness P is said to have replied: "*it's a jungle out there*".

Witness B's recollection is that Witness P was trying to ascertain if Witness B was going to take this any further. At the time, Witness B had no desire to do so, and says that Witness P seemed to relax visibly when Witness B did not seem interested in taking the information outside of Rigpa. Witness B's view is that Witness P was trying to gauge whether or not Witness B would go to the press. Witness B considers that Witness P was only concerned about damage limitation for Sogyal Lakar.

When I met with Witness N and Witness P, I did not know about this meeting, but the way that they each dealt with this meeting in response to more general questions about their knowledge of any concerns is set out below:

- Witness P volunteered the fact that “*someone in England*” had said that they had talked to some women who said they had been mistreated. Witness P said that they had asked who this person was referring to and the person wouldn’t name names due to confidentiality problems. Witness P said that Witness B had talked to quite a lot of people and said that a few females had been approached by Sogyal and were unhappy about it. Witness P said that there were “*some kind of sexual implications*”. Witness P said “*I kept asking who they were and said if anyone wants to make a complaint they should do so. There weren’t any names, this was problematic for us and Witness B ... we were stuck. The result is a stand-off – who is it and what can we do?*”
- I asked Witness N an open question about whether Witness N had any suspicion of wrongdoing by Sogyal Lakar and Witness N responded “*no one has ever come to me saying that they have been mistreated or feel uncomfortable*”. Whilst this may technically be true (at least in respect of this meeting, as the complaints were being delivered by a third party), the fact that Witness N did not mention this meeting gives me concern that Witness N was being selective in the information provided to me. Whilst I acknowledge that this meeting took place a long time ago, this is not a meeting that would be easy to forget.

By the time I met Witness O I was aware of the July 1994 meeting having taken place so was able to ask more direct questions. Witness O accepted that there had been a meeting at Witness B’s request with lots of people present. Witness O could not recall the detail of what was discussed; rightly pointing out that it took place a long time ago. I asked Witness O what the gist of the meeting was and Witness O said that Witness B was very aggressive and said that Sogyal was abusing people and causing suffering. Witness O said that the allegations related to sexual and emotional issues, not physical coercion or rape.

I asked Witness O what they did with this information and Witness O responded that: “*nobody complained to us. I asked one other person ‘do you have a complaint, how are you feeling now’; somebody had given me her name. She was just a bit upset and did not make a complaint*”.

November 1994: Janice Doe

Towards the end of 1994, Sogyal Lakar and Rigpa were sued in the US by a complainant known as Janice Doe. I was able to obtain a copy of the claim (but should make clear that this did not come to me from Janice Doe or anyone involved in the litigation) which states:

“Plaintiff brings this action for reparations and to halt a pattern of physical, mental and sexual abuse by world famous Tibetan author and teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche ...

Defendant Sogyal Rinpoche has used his position as an interpreter of Tibetan Buddhism to take sexual and other advantage of female students over a period of many years and has caused extreme injuries to many students, including Plaintiff.

Plaintiff is a student who sought out Sogyal Rinpoche and Rigpa Fellowship ... at an especially vulnerable time in her life [following the death of her father] and met Sogyal Rinpoche [in 1993] ... She was almost immediately subjected to systematic indoctrination designed to separate her from her normal support systems including family and friends ...

A central aspect of this mental coercion was to lead plaintiff to believe that her only way to enlightenment, or salvation, was to serve her master, Sogyal Rinpoche, and that by pleasing him she would achieve enlightenment and relief of her suffering. The corollary to this was that to incur displeasure, or to refuse him in any way, could cause dire consequences to herself and her family. As a result of this pressure she was coerced into an intimate

relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche that continued through November 1993, and included physical, mental and sexual abuse.

Simply put, under the guise of teachings of the Buddha, Sogyal Rinpoche took unfair advantage of plaintiff's and other students' vulnerability for his own sexual and other gratification ...

... defendant Sogyal wilfully, intentionally and maliciously assaulted and battered, and committed sexual assault upon plaintiff."

Witness P confirmed to me that this claim was settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

I asked Witness O about the Janice Doe case and Witness O confirmed being aware of it, but denied any direct involvement. Witness O said *"there was a whole team of people behind her, supporting her. She was persuaded to do it by people who had been in Dharamasala and there were secret meetings to plan the law suit. It was part of an anti-Asian guru movement"*. Witness O acknowledged having read the case at the time, so Witness O would have been aware in the 1990s that the claim alleged that there were a number of other victims, not just Janice Doe (even if Witness O had forgotten that detail now).

I asked Witness O what Sogyal's response was to the allegations in the claim and the other issues raised in the Witness B meeting earlier that year. Witness O did not know but *"would imagine that"* Witness N or Witness P would have asked him. I asked Witness O whether Witness O had been told that Sogyal denied the allegations; to which Witness O replied *"I've forgotten what he said"*. Witness O was *"personally satisfied that he hadn't behaved as alleged"* and had never had cause for concern for anyone.

Witness O accepted that it was Witness O who was tasked with producing a grievance procedure and code of conduct for trustees following these issues. Witness O says that a grievance procedure was drafted but never adopted. In any event, I understand that the mechanism that was proposed was that anyone with concerns should talk to a senior instructor, member of management or trustee.

I asked Witness P to tell me about Janice Doe. Witness P said she was someone who had a relationship with Sogyal and had been his girlfriend for some time. Witness P said that Janice Doe had then *"decided she had been taken advantage of ... because the relationship had not met her expectations"*. Witness P could not recall exactly what Janice Doe had alleged, but said it was sexual and physical abuse. Witness P understood the claim to be *"an over dramatized description of the relationship"*. Witness P accepted that Janice Doe's father had died and said she was *"fragile and had issues"*. Witness P went on to describe Janice Doe as *"a pawn in the beginnings of a battle"*, attributing her legal action to a group of Western Buddhist Teachers who were known to be hostile towards Sogyal Lakar and other Asian teachers in the west.

I asked Witness P whether Sogyal had been asked for his response to the allegations against him. Witness P's response was: *"we must have talked to him, I can't recall his take"*.

I asked Witness N about the Janice Does law suit. Witness N confirmed that he was aware of it but that it had been handled by Witness P. Witness N said that he was aware that Janice Doe had alleged sexual misconduct but that *"the circumstances around her weakened her credibility"*. Witness N did not, however, have any personal knowledge of these circumstances and relied on the accounts of others, specifically Witness P, who Witness N told me is trusted by Witness N implicitly.

The Charity Commission meeting

On 9 November 1994, I understand that Witness C, Witness O, Witness P and Student 21 attended a meeting with the Charity Commission in the UK. Witness C showed me the notes that were taken by Witness C during that meeting.

In this meeting, the notes record that Witness C, Witness O, Witness P and Student 21 were asked about the Janice Doe law suit. Witness C's notes of this meeting state that Witness O responded that *"the result of our preliminary findings is that there is nothing in it. This is the first time in 20 years that there have been any allegations of harassment or misappropriation of funds"*.

Witness C recalls that Witness C, Witness O, Witness P and Student 21 were asked in turn whether they had concerns about the sexual allegations and that only Witness C said that he had concerns. Student 21 is alleged to have told the Charity Commission that the trustees *"had been in dispute"*. Witness C says that the Charity Commission did not ask what Witness C's concerns were, but said that the fact that the trustees had been in dispute was *"a good thing; that's why you have more than one trustee"*.

In a letter dated 31 March 1995, the Charity Commission wrote to Student 21 thanking Student 21 for letting the Charity Commission know that Rigpa was *"drawing up guidelines to deal with harassment"*. No such guidelines were put in place, although I have seen evidence that Witness C had put forward detailed proposals at a trustee meeting on 22 February 1995. .

It is clear that Witness C's position caused friction between the UK trustees. Witness P accepted that it became increasingly difficult to work with Witness C. Witness O's description of the reasons for this are set out in the confidential annexe as they involve a third party's position.

Issues raised by Witness D

I have set out below the allegations made by Witness D; I should again make clear that this is Witness D's account, as opposed to my own findings.

Witness D was appointed a UK trustee in 2006, having become a student of Sogyal Lakar in 2001. Witness D says that Witness D was not informed of any of the allegations set out above when Witness D accepted a role as a trustee. Witness D considers that these matters should have been disclosed so that Witness D could have made an informed choice about whether to become a trustee in these circumstances.

Witness D attended the three-year retreat which commenced in August 2006 on a part-time basis (attending for the summer only). When Witness D returned to the retreat in August 2007 he was approached by a prominent student, and warned about physical and sexual abuse by Sogyal Lakar against a young female student, Student 27. Details of the allegations are addressed in the confidential annexe.

Witness D understood that Student 27 had confronted Sogyal Lakar with her allegations at the Easter retreat in 2007. This evidence was corroborated by Witness E who told me that Witness E had been present at the Easter retreat and had been tasked with collecting Student 27 and driving her to the retreat. Witness E says that, during the journey, Student 27 confronted Witness E with her allegations about Sogyal. Details of what was said are set out in the confidential annexe. Witness E said he *"gave her a lame response and told her to look at the positive things that come out of the way he trains us"*. Witness E accepts that this was simply an attempt to placate Student 27 as Witness E was not yet ready to accept that what Student 27 described was anything other than a teaching. Witness E believed Student 27 was telling the truth as other girlfriends had confided similar details to Witness E before.

Witness E told me that, on arrival at the Easter retreat, Student 27 spoke in private to Sogyal and was very distressed when she left.

Witness D recounted being shocked by these allegations which had come as a complete surprise. Witness D recalls his wife expressing concern for Witness P and what these allegations would mean for Witness P whose life had been devoted to Sogyal. They assumed that Witness P would have no idea about such allegations.

Witness D understood that Student 26 had confronted Sogyal about Student 26's allegations and that Sogyal accepted they were true. Days later, Witness D wrote to Witness P, Student 21 and Student 23 resigning as a trustee and confirming that he would explain his reasons to them in person.

Witness D returned to the retreat to collect his belongings, having cancelled his membership of Rigpa. Witness D met with Witness P and recounted the allegations raised by Student 26 and Student 27. Witness P confirmed to Witness D that he had asked Student 26 to promise not to speak to anyone about the allegations and he was concerned that Student 26 had broken that promise. Witness P is said to have asked Witness D what he would say to the Charity Commission if asked why he had resigned. Witness D said he would tell the truth. Witness D was still not aware, at that point, of the previous enquiries that had been made by the Charity Commission and now infers that Witness P was actively trying to minimise the number of people who knew about the allegations.

Witness D had a conversation with Sogyal before he left the retreat during which Sogyal highlighted the importance of judging the situation from all angles. Witness D recalls discussing the allegations with Witness N as well, who he says responded that if the disclosures were made public it would threaten the future of Tibetan Buddhism in the west.

Witness D says he subsequently had a two-hour telephone call with Student 27 in which she went into detail about her allegations; Witness D said "*I was shocked beyond words by what she told me*". Witness D then spoke to Sogyal again and told him that Student 27 had shared, in detail, what had taken place, to which it is alleged Sogyal responded "*oh dear*".

Witness D attempted to broker a mediation between Student 27 and Sogyal to allow her to articulate her concerns in a safe environment. Witness D also wanted Witness P and others to hear her first-hand account so that the concerns were taken seriously. I understand that Witness P and Witness N offered to meet with Student 27, but she did not wish to do so.

On return to London, Witness D met with Students 21, 23 and 24 to explain why he had resigned. Despite Student 21's awareness of the issues raised by Witness B and Witness C, the contact from Inform and the Observer, and being present at the meeting with the Charity Commission in 1994, Student 21 is alleged to have said nothing about any previous allegations of a similar nature. It was only when Witness D spoke to Witness C about the allegations some time later that he discovered this history.

I have seen a copy of a letter from Witness P to Witness D dated 11 July 2007. Witness P went to some considerable lengths in this letter to persuade Witness D that these issues were "*an obstacle that – given time and reflection – you can overcome, and for the better*". The letter attempts to persuade Witness D that he has been tricked or seduced by ideas of victimhood which are a distortion of the truth. The letter is, in my opinion, an attempt at silencing Witness D – in Witness D's words, it paints Witness D "*as the one with the problem, which was only based on the machinations of [his] own mind, woven out of shadows residing there*". As Witness D said to me: "*reading it now, and knowing what I now know Witness P knew when he wrote that letter to me, I am frankly sickened*".

Witness D says that Sogyal himself also attempted to persuade Witness D in person that he has been "*very foolish*" and that he had been "*bamboozled*".

Witness O is then said to have approached Witness D on a separate occasion and told Witness D that Student 27's relationship with Sogyal had been as a consenting adult, that Sogyal disputed Student 27's allegations and that there was nothing objectionable about it. Witness D says that Witness O was highly critical of Student 26 in this conversation, the basis for which Witness D struggled to understand.

Witness O's comments were the first suggestion to Witness D that Sogyal disputed Student 27's account; Witness D had previously understood that Sogyal accepted it entirely. Witness D then spoke

to Witness P again who, this time, denied knowledge of the allegations. Witness D found this extraordinary as he knew that he had personally discussed them with Witness P, and Witness P had written to Witness D about the obstacle that they caused. Witness D recalls that Witness P was now also critical of Student 26.

Witness D met with Witness O again and shared a full copy of Student 27's letter to Student 26 (with permission). Witness O was said to be dismissive of the entire letter and is alleged to have focussed on the problems in the relationship between Student 27 and Student 26. Witness D wanted to discuss the allegations against Sogyal, but Witness O stated that they were not accepted and would not accept that there was any issue in a sexual relationship between Sogyal and a student. Again, Witness O is said to have made no reference to the fact that this was not the first such allegation against Sogyal.

Witness N and Witness P made no reference to these discussions with Witness D when I met with them (and I was not aware of them at the time of those meetings so was not able to ask them directly).

When I met with Witness O, Witness O explained the basis for these allegations from Witness O's perspective; this information is set out in the confidential annexe. In essence, Witness O does not believe Student 27's account and referred to Student 27 as a beauty who manipulates men with her beauty. Witness O said that Student 27 is "*bright and bubbly but manipulative and I think she's invented it*". Witness O provided me with video footage of Student 27 telling a risqué joke in public. Witness O says that Sogyal accepts that he had a sexual relationship with Student 27, but said that she had seduced him and that there was no coercion. According to Witness O, he "*could not recognise himself in the way she was describing things*".

Witness O accepted that Witness D had thought that there was cause for concern, but felt that the fact that Witness D later returned as a student of Sogyal's must have meant that he changed his mind.

Witness D described to me the difficult situation he found himself in and that he wrestled with whether he could remain a student of Sogyal, whose teachings he found hugely personally relevant and helpful, at the same time as holding concerns about his behaviour. Witness D decided that he would remain involved for the purpose of the study of Buddhism, but was not prepared to accept any management or pastoral role given what he knew.

Witness D has stepped away from Rigpa in light of the Complaint.

Representing Rigpa

I also heard evidence of the various ways that Rigpa appears to have sought to control the dialogue about and response to the various allegations that have circulated about Sogyal's behaviour. One of those is a series of training sessions which were rolled out, known as "Representing Rigpa".

Witness C recalled his experience of attending this training. He says attendees were taught a strategy where if someone raised concerns, they should point them to an instructor who will give them space and listen. Witness C alleges that they were told to acknowledge the concern but encourage the individual to look at what's behind it. Witness C says they were not given the answer to any specific questions about historic allegations, but were told that the allegations were being stirred up by a handful of people and that no one knows what happens in Sogyal's private life. Witness C says they were told that they could acknowledge that Sogyal has relationships and has a child, but were told to say that they have never seen anything inappropriate. Witness C says that there were not asked to lie, but that the training skilfully manipulated instructors to be able to deny knowledge of concerns and reassure students.

Witness P acknowledged that the training was an initiative on behalf of the organisation to respond to demands from the press. Witness P said that the first version, called 'responding to criticisms' was "*done enthusiastically by amateurs and may not have come across well*".

Witness N accepted that Public Relations firms were engaged by Rigpa in light of a critical 2011 television documentary. Witness N said that the meetings were designed to train them on how to be a spokesperson in light of the media interest.

Around Easter 2017, a working group was again formed to discuss the topic of 'working with criticism' which Witness D says was essentially formed to discuss how to respond to criticisms about Sogyal's conduct.

Findings

On the basis of the evidence available to me, it is clear that a number of senior individuals within Rigpa management have been aware of serious concerns about the behaviour of Sogyal Lakar since, at least, the mid-1990s.

Witness P appears to have had the most knowledge of the allegations of impropriety as Witness P handled the Janice Doe claim, attended the UK trustee meetings in the mid-90s, attended the meeting called by Witness B and was involved in the issues surrounding Student 27. It is also Witness P who was understood to have raised these issues with Sogyal, according to Witness N.

I conclude that Witness P's devotion to Sogyal Lakar has resulted in Witness P refusing to accept the possibility that anything Sogyal had done might have been wrong. In my view, it appears that Witness P has made no meaningful efforts to establish whether or not the allegations are true. I believe that this reaction arises out of his view that students who are unhappy should simply leave quietly – Witness P was not really concerned about whether these things happened, but seems to have been prepared to accept that Sogyal intended no harm, regardless of what happened.

I asked Witness P whether Witness P thought a guru could ever be bad, to which Witness P responded "*if it said never you would think I have been brainwashed*". Witness P agreed that mistakes may have been made "*due to cultural differences*", but I was not able to understand what Witness P understood those cultural differences to be.

Witness P's letter to Witness D was, in my view, designed to manipulate Witness D into dropping his concerns about Student 27. I believe this demonstrates a proactive cover-up, not just a failure to deal with things adequately. I also find Witness P is responsible for telling others that complainants should not be believed, for example, those of Janice Doe and Student 27.

Witness O went to some length to deny holding any management responsibility that could cause Witness O to be responsible for anything that has happened, yet Witness O was clearly heavily involved in the issues raised during the 1990s – it was Witness O who was tasked with investigating them and devising the relevant policy documents to protect against these concerns. Witness O was involved in relation to denying what had happened to Student 27 and Witness O had a pivotal role in the "representing Rigpa" training.

Witness O said to me "*there has been a lot of rumour and innuendo, a lot of people talking on behalf of people, a lot of exaggeration and gossip – we can't act on that as an organisation. Why in the space of forty years hasn't anyone complained?*" I found this to be an extraordinary statement from someone who was aware of Janice Doe and Student 27, as well as the complaints brought to their attention by Witness B, which I do not believe can reasonably be dismissed as mere gossip or rumour.

At the start of my meeting with Witness O, Witness O said [about the letter writers] "*I'm not blaming them, [Vajrayana] is subtle and complex, but what they say shows something fundamentally hasn't*

clicked ... there are grains of truth in [the Complaint] but they are exaggerated and distorted'. But Witness O later said to me "we don't believe that [Sogyal] abuses people, it's not the [letter writers] understanding either – it's a mystery for me why in this letter they have changed their mind". Witness O also described it as "pretty heart-breaking to see these friends turn against everything; I don't believe [Sogyal] has been harming people like this".

In my opinion, Witness O is not prepared to accept that Sogyal has done wrong; I believe that has always been the case and this seems to be why Witness O has not been prepared to take any complaints seriously over the years. In my view, Witness O's mind is closed even to the outcome of Rigpa's own investigation.

I remain somewhat perplexed as to Witness N's role. Many witnesses who spoke to me were adamant that Witness N would have known about all of the abuse that was going on, but when pressed were not able to provide me with clear evidence to demonstrate this. It is apparent that Witness N attended the meeting with Witness B in 1994, but it seems Witness N was not involved in the follow-up to that meeting involving the Charity Commission and Inform. I am concerned, however, that Witness N did not tell me about this meeting, which I think would be hard to forget in this context, notwithstanding the passage of time.

I received evidence from some witnesses that Witness N had provided real and valuable help to some individuals; Witness F felt that Witness N was supportive when Witness F left Rigpa, and Witness E understood that Student 5 considers that she would have "gone under" if it wasn't for Witness N's help. During our interview, Witness N was prepared to acknowledge the experience of the letter writers – for example, Witness N said:

"I was very shocked to read [Witness F]'s experience, I don't want to say that [Witness F] didn't experience this. [Witness F] is a very sincere person and evidently [Witness F] did. Something has gone awry".

On balance, I believe that Witness N knew that some people were being harmed by their involvement with Sogyal Lakar. I conclude that Witness N did not take sufficient action to stop this or prevent future harm being caused, but did make some efforts to intervene to help specific individuals.

There are other individuals who held management positions and, it is alleged, had knowledge of the allegations against Sogyal. This includes, for example, Student 21, Student 22, Student 23 and Student 24. I recommend that their knowledge should be investigated further if they are to retain management roles or positions of influence in future.

I am satisfied that the organisation had several opportunities to realise and address the extent of the harm that was being caused, but failed to take these. The efforts made to investigate these issues and protect students in future were, in my assessment, entirely inadequate and, in some cases, there is evidence that proactive steps have been taken to discredit those raising concerns.

That said, I recognise that a number of the witnesses I spoke to and who have now left Rigpa had also seen things that they knew were wrong but had felt unable to speak up for a long time. It is clear that, by speaking out, these individuals feel that they have to leave behind the 'Rigpa family' and their support networks. In addition, they have had to lose their relationship with their teacher and, to a degree, their beliefs. Speaking out appears to require a willingness to 'step off the path to enlightenment', and many are not ready to do that. It should not, therefore, be overlooked, that the Rigpa management witnesses referred to above are also students of Sogyal and will have likely faced huge difficulties in speaking out against him, assuming that they felt that there was a need to do so.

As a final note, several of the witnesses expressed their unhappiness at the way Rigpa had responded to the Complaint. As this issue strictly falls outside the scope of this investigation, I will not address this further in this report but it is right to acknowledge their concerns.

Further allegations

Throughout the course of this investigation I have been contacted by a number of additional people who have further stories of abuse. Regrettably, the scope of this investigation has had to be limited to investigating the Complaint and there came a point when it was not feasible to conduct further interviews.

I have assured those who raised concerns with me that I would alert Rigpa to the fact that there are more concerned students and former students who would like the opportunity to be heard.

To ensure a proper investigation is undertaken, any such process needs to be truly independent of the influence of those individuals who I conclude have been involved in failing to deal with concerns for many years.

Recommendations

I have been asked to set out any recommendations that I have for change within Rigpa as a result of my findings. My practical recommendations are set out below. Should they be accepted, there will be detailed work to be done in implementing the recommendations across the Rigpa organisation, which operates in a number of different territories. It will be necessary in a number of respects to take into account local laws, regulations and guidance in each such territory as well as having regard to the legal personality and governance structure through which Rigpa operates in each territory.

There are also a number of matters which may require further investigation before the Rigpa leadership is able to reach final decisions in relation to this overall matter. The possibility of such further investigations is referred to at various points above.

Before moving to implement the recommendations below, my view is that the leadership of Rigpa should consider first the overall effect of these findings on its mission and work as an organisation. In the United Kingdom, for example, the trustees would need to consider whether the findings of the report, the resources required to act on the recommendations and the degree to which the work and profile of Rigpa has in the past been closely associated with the persona of Sogyal Lakar, make it possible for the organisation to move past these events and operate sustainably and successfully in the future. Appropriate advice should be taken on this and it should be noted that in raising this issue for the trustees I do not seek to guide their decision either way, such guidance being outside the scope of my investigation and remit.

Assuming that the Rigpa leadership concludes that the appropriate overall course is to put in place structures and procedures to ensure that its work as an organisation can continue in the future without the risk of harm, I recommend the following:

1. Sogyal Lakar should not take part in any future event organised by Rigpa or otherwise have contact with its students;
2. Rigpa should take steps to disassociate itself from Sogyal Lakar as fully as is possible (having regard to any legal arrangements which may for the time being connect the organisation with him);
3. Rigpa leadership in each country (being the trustees or equivalent) and the Vision Board should, as necessary, be refreshed in order to ensure that;
 - a. its members are unconnected with the harmful events referred to in this report and so can credibly lead the programme of changes required;
 - b. its members are all publically committed to the concept that abuse will not be tolerated by anyone, or against anyone, within Rigpa (including teachers); and
 - c. wherever possible, the leadership should include some members who are unconnected with the student body, for example lay trustees as such would be recognised in the United Kingdom.
4. Professional management should be appointed at each major Rigpa centre. Wherever possible, the management team should include some members who are not part of the student body. Care should be taken to ensure that all members of management are able to perform their responsibilities and are not inhibited in doing so, for example, as a consequence of considering themselves bound to demonstrate 'unwavering respect' towards the guru.
5. An appropriate risk assessment addressing the whole range of the organisation's activities should be conducted and regularly refreshed. The risk assessment should specifically address teaching practices which are, or have been, associated with the Dzogchen Mandala - careful, well guided

judgments will need to be made on the future use of such practices in the organisation's work. For the avoidance of doubt any practice amounting to abuse of a student should never be tolerated.

6. A comprehensive and written safeguarding policy should be put in place to ensure that:
 - a. sexual relationships between teachers and students are either prohibited entirely, or subject to specific safeguarding measures to ensure there can be no abuse of power;
 - b. any 'lama care' that is deemed to be necessary is carried out in a way which ensures the health and safety of those providing these services is adequately protected;
 - c. mechanisms for the confidential reporting of concerns are clear and can be easily found by those with concerns;
 - d. reports of any incidents and allegations are recorded and stored in a secure and proper way;
 - e. incidents and allegations are promptly investigated in accordance with the policy with appropriate follow up action taken;
 - f. consideration is given to reporting serious incidents to relevant law enforcement authorities and/or regulators; and
 - g. the management and leadership of each Rigpa entity is aware of and properly trained in its responsibilities.
7. An abuse helpline outside of Rigpa should be set up, in addition to the internal reporting mechanisms made available.
8. To the extent that it has not done so already, Rigpa should review its fundraising activities to ensure that these are compliant with local laws and regulations. This review should specifically include contexts in which Rigpa events such as retreats may be used as an opportunity for third parties such as external speakers to raise funds for other causes and/or invite gratuity payments on their own behalf. There should be absolute clarity on the proper uses of all such funds.
9. A clear approach to the engagement of speakers and teachers should be established which ensures that they are aware of relevant policies, including the safeguarding and fundraising policies, before having contact with students.
10. So far as is consistent with the wider financial responsibilities of Rigpa, a fund should be created to provide professional counselling to those affected by abuse.
11. An appropriate programme of communications related to the above steps should be undertaken with the letter writers, students and the wider Rigpa community. In addition to a first communication setting out Rigpa's commitment to a safe and secure environment for all students and the steps to be taken in achieving that, regular updates should be given until the programme of changes has been completed.
12. Rigpa's leadership should consider (taking further advice as necessary) the extent to which it is obliged to report any of the matters set out in this report to law enforcement authorities or relevant regulators in each applicable jurisdiction.

END

