

Best-selling Buddhist author accused of sexual abuse

\$10 million civil suit filed in Santa Cruz by a woman who says Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, "coerced" her into an intimate relationship

By Don Lattin
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SAN FRANCISCO -- With the blessings of the Dalai Lama, a group of American Buddhist women have launched a campaign to expose the alleged sexual misconduct of a prominent Tibetan lama and best-selling author.

Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, is accused of "physical, mental and sexual abuse" in a \$10 million civil suit filed last week in Santa Cruz County Superior Court.

According to the lawsuit, an anonymous woman identified only as "Janice Doe" came to Rinpoche for spiritual guidance last year at a retreat sponsored by the Rigpa Fellowship meditation center in Santa Cruz, but was "coerced into an intimate relationship" with the Tibetan guru.

"Sogyal claimed (she) would be strengthened and healed by having sex with him and that to be hit by a lama was a blessing," the lawsuit states.

The suit -- which accuses Rinpoche of fraud, assault and battery, infliction of emotional distress and breach of fiduciary duty -- also charges that the Tibetan lama has "seduced many other female students for his own sexual gratification."

Sandra Pawula, spokeswoman for the Rigpa Fellowship of Santa Cruz, one of many meditation centers in the United States, Europe and Australia, declined to comment about the allegations, but said that Rinpoche is not married and does not claim to be a celibate monk. Rinpoche, who lives abroad, could not be reached for comment. The lawsuit follows a letter-writing campaign to the Dalai Lama by American women concerned about alleged sexual exploitation by Rinpoche and several lesser-known Tibetan lamas.

"What some of these students have experienced is terrible and most unfortunate," said Tenzin Geyche Tethong, the Dharamsala-based secretary to the Dalai Lama.

In a letter sent earlier this year to one of the women, Tethong said Tibetan Buddhist leaders "have been aware of these (allegations) for some years now."

Jack Kornfield, founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, was among a group of two dozen Western teachers who discussed the sexual misconduct of Buddhist teachers with the Dalai Lama last year in India.

According to Kornfield, the Tibetan Buddhist leader told the Americans to "always let people know when things are wrong. Put it in the newspapers if you must do so."

Another woman allegedly abused by Rinpoche, Victoria Barlow of New York City, said she is "disgusted by the way the Tibetans have manipulated the reverence Westerners have for the Buddhist path."

Barlow, 40, said she first met Rinpoche in the mid-1970s, when she was 21, and that she was sexually exploited by him during meditation retreats in New York and Berkeley.

"I went to an apartment to see a highly esteemed lama and discuss religion," she said in an interview with the *Free Press*. "He opened the door without a shirt on and with a beer in his hand."

Once they were on the sofa, Barlow said, the Tibetan "lunged at me with sloppy kisses and groping."

"I thought I should take it as the deepest compliment that he was interested and basically surrender to him," she said.

Sources say the Tibetan Buddhists were trying to handle this issue within their community but decided, especially after the Dalai Lama made the comment about going to the press, to go public now.

"The Dalai Lama has known about this for years and done nothing. There is a real code of secrecy and silence," said Barlow.



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