

I'm writing this article based on my true experience of sexual abuse as a teenage girl within an Ashram, at the hands of the Australian leader at the time. I believe its worth writing about as it's important to all of us to understand the foundations that allow abuse to happen in our society and how spiritual philosophies can sometimes be exploited.

Most of us have heard about the sexual abuse cases coming out of some Christian churches and now the church is being brought into question as to how this abuse happened, why wasn't it detected and acted on? Why are people sometimes reluctant to believe that people in positions of spiritual power, people we may look up to, are capable of such an abuse of trust and devotion? The perpetrator may or may not have been dealt with, but what of the organisation that protected him and in a sense created him and often covered up for him? It's no different in Ashrams or any other spiritual group the potential is always there.

Abuse within spiritual organisations is particularly damaging because churches, spiritual centres, ashrams etc. are where we often turn for refuge, compassion, relaxation and contemplation. the abuse does not only affect the person directly involved, but also disillusion the wider community.

The spiritual teachings often advocate devotion, faith, selflessness, detachment and obedience and while I don't want to put all of those aside as worthless, I would certainly caution against and question the way they can be abused in some organisations and exploited to suit the leaders or the organisations own needs. In my own personal experience I've been absorbed by, blinded by, abused by and finally spat out by the exploitation of spiritual teachings.

some spiritual organisations can encourage people to avoid their emotions, by working harder, cutting off from the outside world, by only mixing with those within the organisation, being selfless, detached etc. Anger is sometimes seen as negative or sinful, not 'spiritual'. These attitudes do nothing to help survivors of abuse to heal and in fact can provide the perfect setting for abuse to occur. they prevent a person from expressing themselves honestly and if they do they are made to feel ashamed or sinful, negative or like they haven't got their act together because they feel such emotions. I have seen how unhealthy these types of distortion to spiritual teachings can be.

I'm not even suggesting that just because there's been ugly stuff in the past we should wipe an organisation off completely, however. the most important thing is how it's been dealt with. Is it denied? Is it played down? Is it hidden? Is the organisation very open and honest and regretful of what may have happened in the past?

Unfortunately, in my situation, when I spoke out about the abuse I was cast out as a liar, had threats made on my life, threatening mail etc. It was pretty brutal stuff and all from the swamis. Even after I'd spoken out the abuse of other girls continued for another 2 - 3 years. That's 2 - 3 years of abuse that could have been prevented, had the adult swamis that knew acted instead of being 'detached.'

I think most survivors of abuse know the lasting effects of such enormous trauma and the shattering of trust, the sense of betrayal. People will often say "just leave it in the past, let it go" but that can only be achieved after healing has taken place, after the survivor has been heard, believed and supported by warm, loving people. It's not a case of saying to yourself "Oh, I think I'll get over this today". If only it were that easy!

I decided to face my past many years later as trying to forget it ever happened wasn't working. The most disturbing thing in doing this has often been the incredible attitudes I've come up against from some of those still in this particular ashram, (although they're often common in the wider community as well). I've heard the abuse referred to as a "bit of a hiccup", that the teenage girls were provocative and the issue of abuse was no more than a conflict of opinions rather than a reality. It's also referred to as an "accusation" but it was no accusation as it was proven in court and the guilty person sent to jail eventually.

Referring to such a crime as an accusation can be very hurtful to a survivor as it still implies it may not have happened or that the girls may be lying. To call it a "hiccup" is to play down the severity of the crime and makes the victim feel she is making a big deal over nothing. Being told to get over it or forget it is like asking the victim to swallow her feelings and keep the secret going for everyone else's sake. These types of comments may seem like a small thing to the person using them but a very big thing to the survivor of abuse. All these attitudes are what allows abuse to continue in our society and doesn't support those who need it, the victims. It also indicates those using such lines have not/cannot deal with what's gone on, maybe it's too confronting. Healing cannot even begin until these attitudes change. It also indicates it can easily happen again because the underlying structures haven't been questioned and changed.

I believe it's essential for any spiritual organisation to question and review its basic structures to avoid exploitations occurring. This can be a core problem in some ashrams as one is not encouraged to question the Guru. Total faith is expected and that of course can lead to some pretty shocking abuse or at least leaves itself wide open to it. It's great to want to believe it won't happen but reality tells us it does. If the leaders of any group have any credibility they would see this need to reflect deeply and welcome it as part of creating a healthy organisation.

Survivors of abuse, wherever it occurs, need to be heard not feared. They need support and compassion and their feelings respected and believed. While for myself I can honestly say my years in the ashram were special to me and I gained a lot, I cannot deny the awful effects of the abuse, but perhaps more damaging the response when I spoke out, and that is why I'm writing this now. We all play a part in what goes on in our society.

If we continue to blame the victims and don't question structures and attitudes that allow abuse in the first place, it will continue to happen.

om satyam in truth

we are publishing this article unedited and without a name for obvious reasons