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Medical and societal challenges
resulting from enemy images, restricted freedom of choice,
violence justified by religion and exploitation in Buddhist groups

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Background and research project since August 2018

Societal and medical challenges after indoctrination and abuse in international Buddhist organizations became evident in the past years.

Legal issues in different large international Buddhist organizations:

only confirmed cases or partly investigated cases by several sides

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Aims

To analyze and understand

- the groups' impairment of the individual's freedom of choice,
- the pressure to give up ones most important relationships or even job,
- the quality and amount of enemy images in these groups,
- the common exploitation by means of several questions about unpaid work, the usual expected monetary 'donations' additional to seminar fees, and any favors beyond that,
- and the violence and its rationalization by neologisms and justification by religion.

Methods

Mixed method approach in questionnaires designed for that purpose.

When quantifying questions were confirmed (agreed to with "yes"), participants were asked to qualify along with some of the following questions:

1. to describe examples,
2. their own experiences on the issue,
3. their witnessing of other group members' experiences on the issue,
4. and their own thoughts and reflections on that topic.

Results: International organizations (many groups each)
15 probands from 13 Buddhist organizations

Organizations:

Rigpa (2)

Pagode Phat Hue (2)

tibetan Buddhism/ in France

Diamantweg (Karma Kagyü)

Pathgate/ England

Ratna-Shri Drikung Kagyu center in Berkeley/ California

Dharma Ocean / USA

Tariki Trust/ England

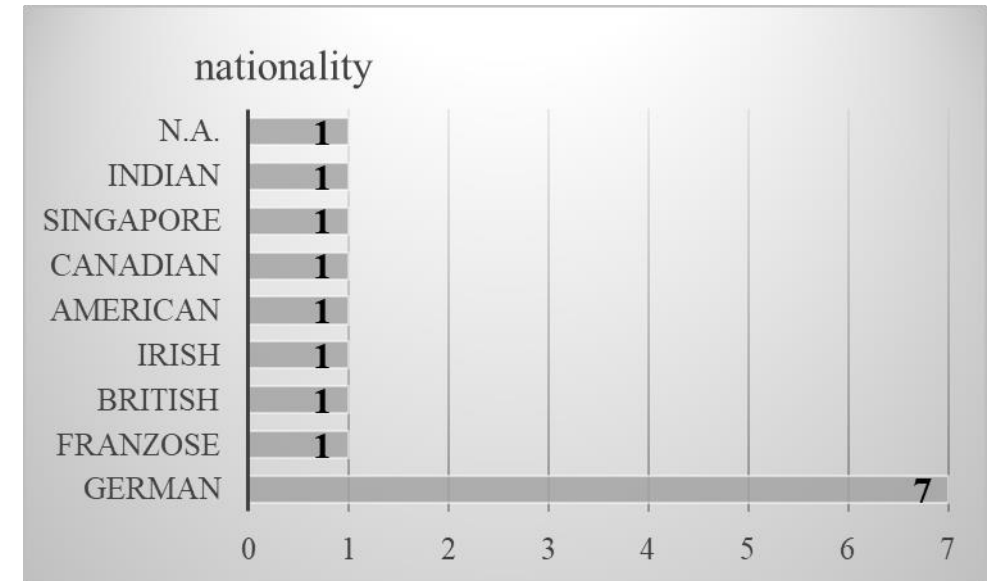
Ajahn Tong/ Thailand

TDC Thekchen Do-ngag Choe-ling Tibet Dharma Center

Drikung Garchen Institut

Buddhist group in Australia

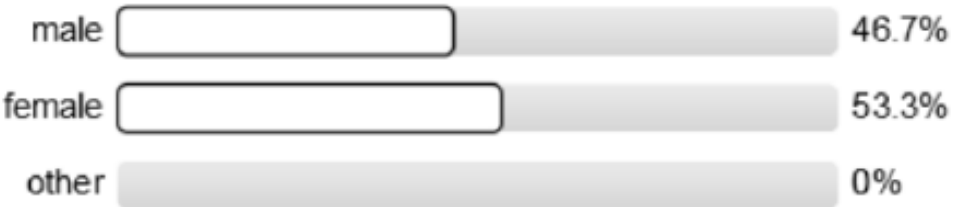
Dhammasukkha monastery in Missouri/ USA



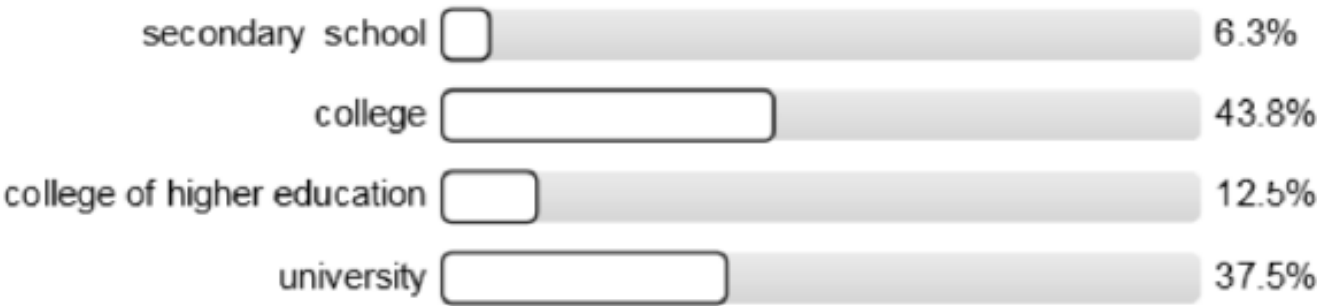
Results: 15 probands from 13 organizations

Age range: 23-68

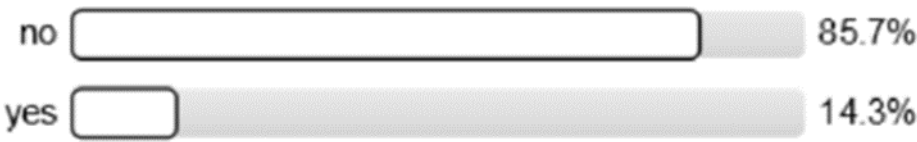
Gender:



Education:



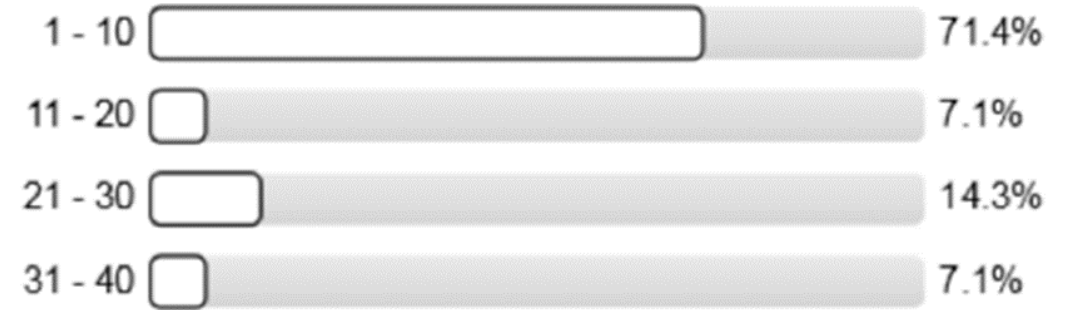
Elitist subgroups show in contrasting paid and unpaid group members: *Are you a paid member of the group* (n= 14)



Interpretation of the 14% paid group members:
due to the current globalization of Buddhism, it is a very small paid elite.
Commonly this commercialized-Buddhism elite is earning tax-free income from seminar fees and additional expected so-called 'donations' by travelling from one center of their organization in one country to the next.
Furthermore, there is few of their helpers in the respective centers of the organization in different countries who also draw profits.

Time of participation and withdrawal from an organization or group

Time of participation: *Since how many years have you been attending the above seminars*

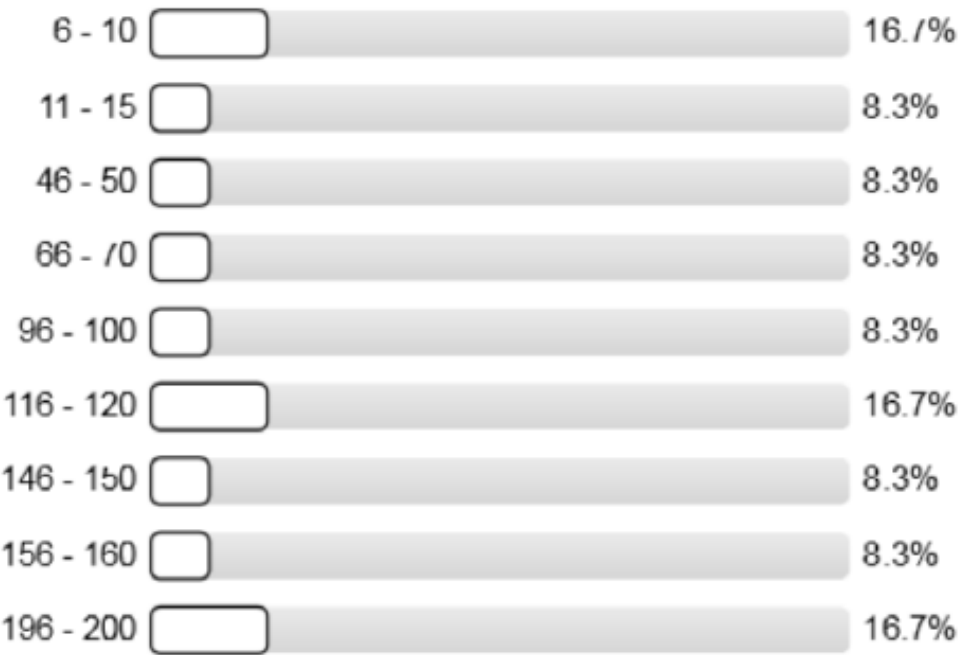


Withdrawal from a group: *Have you withdrawn from any Buddhist organization*



Amount of and expenses for Buddhism seminars and retreats: 40% didn't have to pay

Amount of seminar days: *How many seminars have you attended (in days, approximately) (n=12)*



Payment of seminars: *Did you pay for the seminars attended (n=15)*



Interpretation of the 40% people who did not pay:
another elitist part of the group gets seminars for free for a while, which is often even interpreted to be the 'good karma' of these group members and used to seduce newcomers. This highly affects group dynamics as well as its hierarchies. Usually, it is utterly intransparent who pays as well as who are those who draw additional financial profits. The narrative is: we are all students and working for enlightenment and for free (which is not only confusing for the newcomers and untrue but is used to build a lot of pressure to work for free and to donate more than one is able to).

How much were your expenses for Buddhism seminars: 1000-50 000 Dollar (n=10)

Question: *How do you truly feel about these financial expenses retrospectively*

"Okay - I could live and eat in the monastery and attended the seminars" [#1] [this was not a monastery, but a center Western style with even a so-called health center attached]

"I'd say: I am learning from mistakes. I was generous and naive. That was my own responsibility, just as I allowed myself to be manipulated. Probably I would have spent the money somewhere else. I consider money spent on seminars separately from e.g., donations for temple buildings etc. So, the total amount was much higher." [#2]

"The money is all right; it was not much." [#3]

"Clearly, all my money has gone into these courses. But I don't feel exploited, because the courses were very cheap. It was always about keeping the costs as low as possible so that everyone could come. Most of it went to airfare/transportation costs. Entrance fees, accommodation and meals were really very low (e.g., breakfast 3,-, lunch & dinner 5,-). We have always camped, also indoors in halls or even on the mat in the meditation hall in front of the altar - the main thing is that everyone can be there. It was not about money. After all, [...] worked around the clock - when should he have spent the money and for what? He doesn't have a minute to rest. Besides, I've experienced incredibly much during all these trips and got to know foreign countries." [#4]

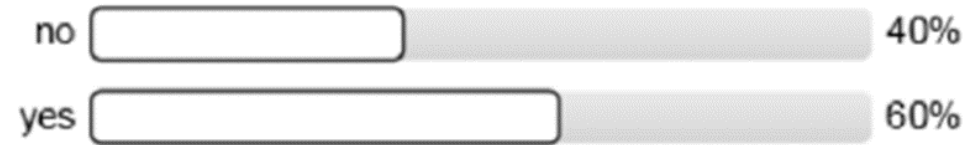
"I believe dharma should be free. Teachers give it for free, and we help them with dana as we can. We give back dharma for free when we can. My monetary donations, I consider dana." [#5]

"While I feel relieved that some of the money has been indeed used for Palyul projects, at the same time, it was for PY to advance his own narcissistic agenda. Therefore, I feel deceived and angry." [#6]

"OK because I was only interested in the teachings/ philosophy, and I choose to go." [#7], "Ok" [#9]

55,6 % of those who separated (60%) were declared crazy by their Buddhist group

Question: *Did you separate from any Buddhist organization*



Question: *Have you been called crazy by that group or people around them?* (n=9)

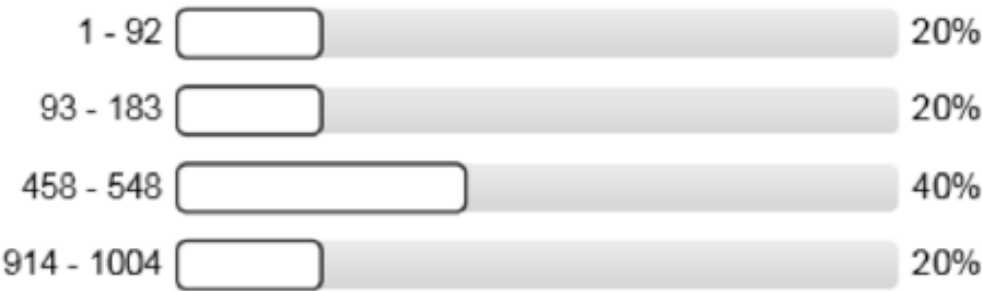


57,1% of probands provided unpaid work beyond monetary donations and other favors (up to 1004 days)

Question: *Have you worked for free in the context of Buddhist seminars* (n =14)



Question: *If so, how many days (eight hour days) have you already worked for free* (n=5)



Question: *Have you provided any favours other than free work and monetary "donations" to Buddhist seminars or to Buddhist centers* (n=15)



Truthfulness about unpaid work beyond the monetary donations and other favors

"Unfortunately, I often did not know what was behind it. For example, when I wrote the speech on disrobing and the entire presentation to the outside world, I was called to Frankfurt to write it all. Nobody, not even from the sangha, some of whom were friends and had visited me privately in Berlin, told me the reason which [...the leader] has told me (I want to take a new spiritual direction, adapted to Western society). Actually, the real reason was, as I was told 1,5 years later, that a criminal investigation had been initiated against him. Had I still been living in the monastery, maybe I would have known that reason or it could not have escaped me - maybe nobody said anything to me, because everybody thought I was the trusted student of [...]. At this point the perfidious thing can be seen, that is how I was deliberately instrumentalized, and I was too blind to notice it." [#1]

"I regret some of it a lot: I have made myself a fool, contrary to my intuition. I didn't disagree where I could have done so. I was so convinced that I defended Sogyal Lakar against accusations without investigating. I have allowed myself to be blinded by charisma and hype instead of building a solid foundation in the basics of Dharma. I have stopped all donations for Tibetan purposes. Reason: Intransparency." [#2]

"I am upset about all the unpaid work I have put into it with being therewith nothing but a shattered heap in the end, not knowing what I want or where to go, and having to move back in with my family at the age of 32. I have done demanding and challenging work 6 days a week without the right to vacation." [#3]

"Courses and centers can only exist if everyone contributes, and there are basically no full-time staff (except for a handful of people who work directly for [...] around the clock). For me, it has helped tremendously to get into activity from my lack of drive due to the depression. And having the idea of volunteering to do something for the community in the first place. So I cooked, cleaned, organized, etc. But it was fun. And we were also told over and over again to take care of ourselves, that it wasn't too much, and to take time off as well. Nevertheless, it happened that some people worked very hard, especially when they had a lot of responsibility for the big events. Some of them even lost their annual vacation. And for me, it led to a kind of restlessness that is not great either. But no one is looked at strangely if they don't do anything and need a break. I don't feel exploited, not at all." [#4]

Truthfulness about unpaid work beyond the monetary donations and other favors

"It feels nice to reflect on it, feels like good deeds." [#5]

"I feel that it was not worth it, and I was only supporting a con-artist." [#6]

"I never did favours, and the help was maybe 2 hours a few days a week. So, I was OK about that." [#7]

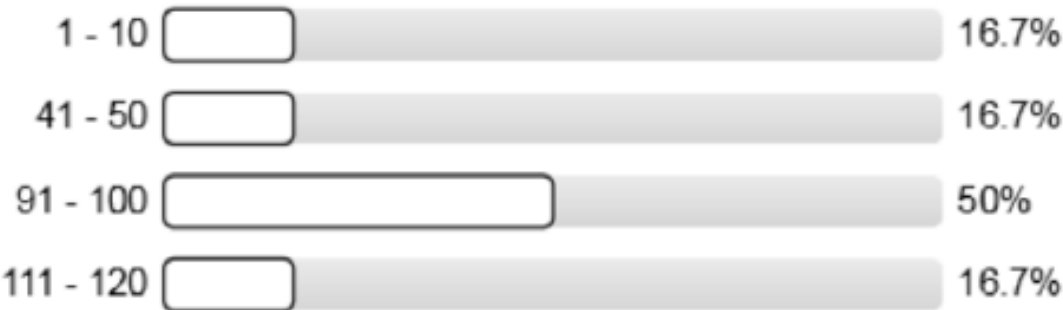
"The worst abuse happened to me when I was working for free for 27 days straight at a Vajrayana Retreat. I had a recent head injury and still decided to go to help others. I feel bitter about that favor because both of the spiritual directors very badly behaved the whole retreat and instead of treating me gently because of my injury, used me and other staff members as their abuse targets including: yelling, hanging up the phone, threats, threatening my paid job if I did not agree to shut down a facebook page on which people were criticizing reggie ray, gaslighting, love bombing and devaluation, triangulation and creating drama between staff members, speaking poorly of staff members and using them as 'examples' to teachers in training." [#9]

46,7% attended seminars for free (as an elitist group, for a while at least), up to 120 days

Question: *Have you attended seminars in Buddhist centers free of charge* (n=15)



Question: *If so, how many days of seminar have you attended for free* (n=6)



Conceptual challenges, e.g., enemy images, and the dynamics of convincing people to abandon core relationships or the means for earning their living

Question: *Have you experienced that in your Buddhist group **enemy images have been built up*** (n=15)



Question: *Have you been persuaded by any Buddhist group to **give up your most important relationships*** (n=14)



Question: *Have you been persuaded by any Buddhist group to **give up your job*** (n=13)



26,7 % experienced impaired freedom of choice for themselves,
46,7% testified impaired freedom of choice of others

Question: *Has your freedom of choice been impaired by a group, interpreter or teacher* (n=15)



Question: *Have you witnessed other group members' freedom of choices being constrained by a group, interpreter or teacher* (n=15)



Specification on the effects this impairment had on them and why they allowed for it at all

If so, why did you allow this to be done? Were there any concepts by means of which this was demanded of you? Was there some group pressure with which you were asked to do so? Please explain elaborately.

"We were conditioned by PY that the correct way to practice Buddhism is to be totally devoted to the teacher and submit to his will. He called this 'Guru Yoga' or 'Guru Devotion'. As every regular student is subjected to this paradigm, there is an unconscious pressure to conform even though there was no overt coercion." [#6]

"There was a subtle pressure to only take teachings in the group. If people went outside and some did the teacher could mention them publicly at teachings. The people who did go outside the group for teachings just ignored the lama." [#7]

"I didn't adhere to the edicts and rebelled. I was shocked when my teacher asked me to give up my child. There was no way in hell I would do that. He was just jealous and wanted complete control." [#8]

"As soon as I could complete the requirements for the basic certificate in Buddhist counselling I did. But I allowed my self to be abused because I had paid money up front for the training and didn't want that money to be wasted." [#9]

Interpretation: there is not much thought about self-responsibility. One rather can observe struggling with undue restrictions on the group participants in different ways.

40% experienced violence towards themselves, partly justified by religion (in 66,7%)

Have you as an adult experienced violence in a Buddhist group (n=15)



Was the violence you experienced justified by religion (n=6)

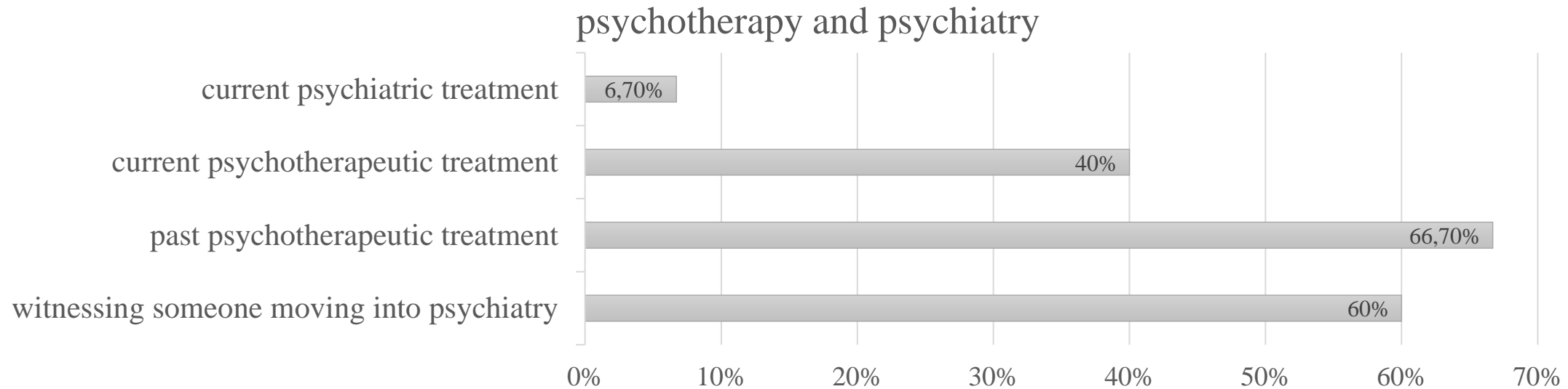


26,7 % got false promises by their Buddhist teachers

Have you been made any false promises by Buddhist teachers (n=15)



Psychotherapeutic and psychiatric treatment (n=15)



60% witnessed someone of their group moving into psychiatry,

66,7 % have been in psychotherapeutic treatment,

40% are currently in psychotherapeutic, and

6,7 % in psychiatric treatment.

Conclusions

Since the thirteen organizations the respondents reported from maintain centers in very many countries, these findings indicate the need for not only correcting the idealization of (Tibetan) Buddhism (*Vajrayāna*), but also point to the international challenge not yet addressed.

Societal and medical challenges:

Prevention: There is international efforts needed to prevent further (mental health) damage to people and develop treatment strategies while at the same time restricting pseudotherapeutic approaches in these groups.

Therapy: Thus, the efforts for the recovery of people after such experiences falls back on society while the groups currently do not even take responsibility to pay compensation for the damages induced by their elites.

Conceptual challenges:

The decontextualized terms and concepts established in the organizations need correction, which is the very core task of academic disciplines such as Buddhist Studies and Tibetology.

Violence, creating enemy images, impairing people's freedom of choice and persuading them to give up relationships and jobs strongly contrasts the current idealization of (Tibetan) Buddhism and mindfulness methods.

Negative impact on Buddhism and *Vajrayāna*:

As these developments highly impact on Buddhism, particularly the *Vajrayāna*, their knowledge, handed down over centuries, is confused and destroyed by those who merely use its name for their own interests.

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