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Buddhists in U.S. Agonize on AIDS Issue

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Did leader knowingly infect others?



Osel Tendzin, head of America's largest Tibetan Buddhist group, has been accused of knowingly transmitting the AIDS virus to male sexual partners.

BOULDER, Colo., Feb. 20 — America's largest Tibetan Buddhist group has been thrown into turmoil by allegations that its leader knew he had AIDS and transmitted it to his sexual partners.

Osel Tendzin, the 45-year-old regent of the Vajradhatu International Buddhist Church, is said to be in seclusion in La Jolla, Calif., and could not be reached for comment. Many members have urged that he resign, after a man with whom he had sex received a positive test for the AIDS virus. In December, a high priest of Tibetan Buddhism told a group of American Buddhists that there was concern that Mr. Tendzin "might have passed this on to many, many people."

Three senior members of the Vajradhatu congregation, who asked not to be identified, said Mr. Tendzin's companion, a man in his 20's, unknowingly passed the virus along when he had sex with a woman in the community. She has since tested positive for the AIDS virus. They said the leader had other partners who might also have been infected.

And they said some members of the church board of directors did nothing about Mr. Tendzin's behavior for months even after they learned that he was infected with the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome and was still sexually active.

'Great Pain and Confusion'

At a meeting in Boston Jan. 8, the 12-member Vajradhatu board of directors asked Mr. Tendzin to quit his teaching and administrative duties, saying his "actions have become a source of great pain and confusion." So far he has not complied, and members of the community say the board is considering what to do next.

Mr. Tendzin's condition became widely known in early December, after the regent's companion was tested positive for the AIDS virus. The infected man's mother and sister began to tell others in the sangha, the Sanskrit word for community. Members telephoned each other and spread the news through the large Buddhist community here and around the country.

At a meeting of several hundred Buddhists in Berkeley, Calif., on Dec. 15, Mr. Tendzin was questioned about AIDS and his sexual relationships. According to a tape of that meeting, he did not deny that he was infected with the virus or that he had AIDS. He indicated that he may have infected others and that some people knew of his illness before reports of it spread through the community. Asked why he did not realize he could infect someone else with AIDS, he replied: "It happened. I don't expect anybody to try to conceive of it."

Some members of the community remain loyal to the regent, saying he did not intend to harm anyone. But others have reacted with confusion, outrage and a sense of betrayal.

'Reprehensible Moral Behavior'

"There was an immediate sense of shock, and a lot of horror," said Ralph Hiesey, 47, who has resigned as coordinator of a small Vajradhatu study group in Santa Cruz, Calif. "I don't want the head of this organization to demonstrate what I consider reprehensible moral behavior."

The teachings of Vajradhatu, a branch of Tibetan Buddhism with 3,500 to 5,000 followers in the United States, Canada and Europe, do not prohibit homosexuality or sex with more than one partner. "Buddhism is non-dogmatic in that it doesn't lay down rigid codes of behavior," said David I. Rome, a member of the Vajradhatu International Church's board of directors in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

He and other board members declined to answer other questions about Mr. Tendzin's behavior and said they did not know where he was.

The highest-ranking Buddhist to have spoken publicly on the issue is Kalu Rinpoche, a high priest of Tibetan Buddhism in India, who spoke at a meeting of about 100 Buddhists in Los Angeles Dec. 22. According to a tape of the meeting recorded by a church member, Kalu Rinpoche, speaking in Tibetan through an interpreter, said: "As all of you know, the Vajra regent has contracted AIDS. And people worry very much about the fact that he might have passed this on to many, many people." He then asked members to show compassion for the regent.

Conversation With Founder

At the meeting in Berkeley, Mr. Tendzin said he had talked about his illness in 1985 with his predecessor, Chog-yam Trungpa Rinpoche, who died of heart disease in 1987. Mr. Tendzin added that he came away from that conversation feeling he could "change the karma."

"Thinking that I had some extraordinary means of protection," he said, "I went ahead with my business as if something would take care of it for me."

The Vajradhatu International is now based in Halifax, but it was founded 18 years ago in Boulder, where about 900 members now live. Its followers in North America and Europe are largely non-Asian professionals.

Mr. Tendzin, who was born Thomas Rich in Passaic, N.J., is the first Westerner to hold so high a position in the Kagyu tradition, one of four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Vajradhatu's founder, designated him to lead the church until a permanent successor is chosen. As regent, he transmits the teachings of Buddha to Vajradhatu followers.

Fear and Loyalty

Some members say they fear that important teachings will be lost if the regent is forced to resign. At the meeting in Berkeley, Mr. Tendzin was asked if he had made plans for a successor; he said he had not but promised to do so before his death.

Others say the regent's behavior reflects badly on the teachings of Buddha, and add that he abused his position by having sex with his students.

"We don't want people to think our tradition is just another cult," said Robin Kornman, a Princeton graduate student who is also a senior student of the Rinpoche. "We are asking, 'Are any of us blind followers?' If so, that's not what we want."

But other followers remain loyal to Mr. Tendzin. "My feeling for the regent as my teacher has not wavered," said Irimi Rockwell, who teaches dance at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, a liberal arts college founded by the Rinpoche in 1974. "I have the view that he should continue to teach. The regent never intended to hurt anybody, and my religion has taught me to never, ever reject anybody who does not intend harm."