

Guru sex scandal at Mount Eliza yoga retreat

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Swami Shankarananda. *Photo: Gary Sissons/Mornington Peninsula News Group*

A sex scandal has shattered the zen-like calm of an ashram in Mount Eliza, with revelations its "guru" and director, Swami Shankarananda, allegedly had sexual relations with dozens of women attending the ashram.

Distressed former members of the Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga claim Swami Shankarananda, 72, had sexual relationships with up to 40 women, and say a number have since sought counselling.

At a prayer meeting in December, a board member of the residential ashram - which has about 500 members and up to 40 "seekers", or residents - announced the ashram was aware of sexual allegations against American-born Swami Shankarananda, also known as Russell Kruckman, and he would be standing down as director.

The ashram then released a statement to members saying it was aware the swami had had "secret sexual relations" with a number of women over time but he had never claimed to be a sexual renunciant or demanded celibacy from his disciples.



"It is well known that our lineage is a tantric path, involving worship of the Goddess with strict disciplines," the letter says. "...until now Swamiji has kept aspects of the teaching and his personal activities secret in line with age-old Hindi tantric scriptures."

"Swamiji now accepts that this is not appropriate, and he must be transparent both personally and in the teachings."

The letter goes on to say that while the board has been advised there is no basis for criminal complaint, the activities in question raise a number ethical questions, and free counselling is available.

"Swamiji has asked us on his behalf to reiterate his message for the year of holding the feeling - that is, stay away from enmity, and keep returning to love."

In an accompanying letter, the swami directly addresses the members of ashram, apologising and saying he had a "carrot in his ear", an apparent reference to a book he wrote in 2004 called *Carrot in My Ear: Questions and Answers on Living with Awareness*.

"My dear ones, I feel a lot of anguish ... I had a carrot in my ear. Truly. When contemplating Baba's life, I was most engaged by the dramas of succession. I profoundly underestimated

the impact of his tantric sexual activities. And my own. I recognise at last their disastrous effect."

Swami Shankarananda vowed to stop his behaviour and make amends in an atmosphere of "love and generosity of spirit".

"I am open to a dialogue about the role of the guru and the sannyasa in the modern West and also the place of sexuality in spiritual life ... we are pioneers, after all, and getting it all right isn't easy."

A longtime member of the ashram - who did not have sexual relations with its director - said members felt "absolutely shocked" and "aghast" that the swami remained in his role.

The source described it as an abuse of power from someone who held "huge sway" over a number "impressionable" people.

"He's very charismatic, he's like a big teddy bear. Everyone loved this guy but he's just a master at this," they said. They claimed that women were told that sex with the swami represented a path to "enlightenment".

Some residents at the ashram are now scrambling to try to find alternative accommodation and many long-term members had left, they said.

Fairfax Media was told the management committee of the ashram is deeply involved in the everyday life of its members, including giving advice on their relationships and marital problems.

In a statement the Shiva School said Swami Shankarananda is not on the school's management committee but remains the spiritual head of the Shiva ashram.

The ashram has engaged mediator Callum Campbell, the chief executive officer of the Australian Mediation Association, who will undertake a confidential mediation process and then report back to the ashram with recommendations for any action.

There is no current Victoria Police investigation and Fairfax is not implying that there is any evidence of sexual abuse.

Swami Shankarananda established the Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga in 1992.