

Bringing Child Buddhist Monks into the Alternative Care Conversation: Reflections on an Under-considered Group of Children

Institutionalised Children Explorations
and Beyond
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Abstract

Tens of thousands of children in India, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries are living as child Buddhist monks. Many are in temples and monasteries far from home and do not see their parents for months, even years. Some are as young as 6 years of age. The aim of this article is to engage scholars, practitioners, child rights advocates, and others in a conversation around the rights and vulnerabilities of child Buddhist monks and children susceptible to being entrusted to monasteries to live as child monks. This group of children receives relatively little attention in alternative care conversations despite many parallels and overlaps with children in orphanages and care homes. This article identifies risks and vulnerabilities that child monks can face, including sexual abuse. It reflects on how aspects of entrusting young children to live as child monks do not necessarily fit with principles articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNGA, 1989) and the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UNGA, 2009).

Keywords

Alternative care, child rights, child Buddhist monks, child sexual abuse, poverty

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Introduction

My first encounter with the world of child Buddhist monks was at a monastery in northern India in 2011. Since then, I have visited dozens of monasteries in five countries, asking deeper questions about the contexts and processes by which children become entrusted to monasteries to live as child monks, especially in the case of young children, some as young as 6 years of age. Traditions vary widely, and it is important to not generalise. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the literature and what I have observed that many child monks have been entrusted to monasteries for the same underlying reasons of poverty or family problems that underlie the cases of many children in ‘orphanages’¹ (Agence France Presse, 2017; Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985; RENEW, 2015; Ruiz-Casares & Phommavong, 2016; Sasson, 2014; Serasinghe, 2014; van Lochem, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to reflect on parallels between children in orphanages and young children entrusted to monasteries to live as child monks, framed in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UNGA, 1989) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (Guidelines; UNGA, 2009), and to offer examples of situations I have come across. It asks: What aspects of children living as child monks conflict with the CRC and the Guidelines? I propose that certain assumptions that underlie rights and values articulated in the CRC and the Guidelines do not always accord with situations in which child monks are living. To maintain that for a child to live as a child monk is a privilege and will bring positive karma to the child, his parents, and other family members can, I propose, serve to justify a practice whereby young children who, if the family had alternative supports might still be living with their parents, are, in effect, being deprived of parental care.

My intention is to invite a conversation. I recognise that there have been many initiatives to improve conditions for children in Buddhist temples and monasteries,² including improving the school curricula (many monasteries now also offer a modern education) and ending the use of corporal punishment (Child Care and Protection Office, Dratshang Lhentsog, 2014; Poudel, 2017). In Sri Lanka, I met with a monk whose centre is working to provide knowledge to temples on how to nurture children. In Cambodia, where pagodas (temples) have often served as ‘orphanages’ for lay children (Hamilton et al., 2018), a safeguarding initiative to prevent sexual abuse and other maltreatment of children in pagodas and that also calls on pagodas to support family-based care and to avoid encouraging families to place their children (Ministry of Cults and Religion, 2018) appears groundbreaking. Whether that initiative also aims to prevent pagodas from accepting young children (below a given age) to live on-site for extended periods as novices is not clear.³

I propose that there are two broad aspects to consider. Quality of care is one. However, even if all temples and monasteries are made safe places for children, there remains the question of whether preparing children for a religious vocation can justify separating young children from parents.

Methodology

This article draws from a broad range of sources. These include journals I have kept documenting my visits to dozens of monasteries and conversations with many scores of monks, former monks, lay teachers of child monks, scholars, and others with close-up knowledge of Buddhist monastic environments. It draws from the scholarly and grey literatures and online news reports in English. I offer my perspective with full acknowledgement that my understanding is limited and that as a White, middle-class, non-Buddhist Western woman I am a cultural outsider coming from a place of privilege. Clarifications and alternative views are welcome. I am most familiar with Tibetan Buddhist contexts within the Tibetan exile communities of Nepal and India. I have also visited monasteries in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Mongolia. Due to a need to circumscribe my research focus, I focus on child monks (i.e., boys); however, principles raised would also apply to girl children entrusted as child nuns (who, overall, represent a small percentage of child monastics).

Background

Tens of thousands of children in more than a dozen countries in Asia, including India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Laos, have lived at least part of their childhood as child monks.⁴ As noted, poverty is an underlying factor in many cases, though it is not always. In many communities, the custom has been that if parents had more than one boy child, one would be sent to the monastery (Goldstein, 2010; Tsomo, 2012). Many parents have looked to temples or monasteries to provide their children an education. In Thailand and Laos, it is common for teens from remote areas with limited educational opportunities to ordain to access the secondary education that monasteries offer (Holt, 2009 [see chapter 4]; Wipatoyotin, 2017). In Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia it is accepted that most teen monks will disrobe (leave the monkhood) after completing their education. In other traditions, especially fully ordained monks but sometimes even a child may fear social reprobation or parental disappointment for disrobing (Samuels, 2012).

In recent decades, the tradition of sending a son to the monastery has declined in many communities, especially where families have other economic and educational options available. In addition, allured by modern-day lay life, many young monks disrobe (Bangsbo, 2004; Gellner & Levine, 2007; Richard, 2015). Difficulties attracting and keeping monks have left some monasteries struggling to keep up numbers (Childs, 2004; Kazmin, 2013). Monasteries' prestige and ability to attract donations from 'sponsors' are dependent, in part, on how many monks they have. In Sri Lanka, where a shortage of monks has been blamed for the closing of hundreds of temples (Sinhale News, 2006), the government has encouraged parents to donate a son to the *Buddha sasana* (religious community) (ColomboPage News Desk, 2006; Pathirana, 2010; Sinhale News, 2006; Sri Lanka Mirror, 2017a, 2017b; Wijayaratne, 2019).

Though some child monks say they were the ones who asked to become a monk (Biswas, 2016; Borchert, 2012; Tsomo, 2012; van Lochem, 2004), young children do not necessarily have a clear sense of what monastic life entails or what it will be like to be away from parents for an extended period. Some children have other siblings or cousins at the same monastery; however, this is not always the case. As in all religions, cultural and religious respect for the religious institution can prevent individuals from voicing concerns (Doyle, 2006). The fact that raising concerns is a delicate matter adds to children's vulnerability.

The United Nations Guidelines and Other Child Rights Convention-related Considerations

The Guidelines (UNGA, 2009), which supplement the CRC (UNGA, 1989), aim to better protect children 'deprived of parental care or at risk of being so'.⁵ They were drafted in a context of increased awareness of the harms and deprivations children can experience in institutional living (Cšaky, 2009). Monasteries come in all sizes, but they can easily be home to dozens of children, or even several hundred.

Guidelines and related CRC articles and concepts that bear particular relevance to the present conversation include that poverty alone does not justify removing children from parental care or receiving children into alternative care (Guidelines, para. 15), and that children have a right 'to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis' (CRC, art. 9, para. 3). Children who are placed outside the home should be maintained 'as close as possible to his/her habitual place of residence, in order to facilitate contact and potential reintegration with his/her family' (Guidelines, para. 11). Unless contrary to children's best interests, children's contact with parents 'should be encouraged and facilitated' (Guidelines, para. 81; also see para. 51).

Children have the right to not be separated from parents against their will (CRC, art. 9, para. 1). They also have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, with 'due weight' given to their view based on their 'age and maturity' (CRC, art. 12). Children's right to participation makes it incumbent on adults to ensure children an emotionally safe space in which to communicate their views (General Comment no. 12, CRC Committee, 2009). For child monks, that would mean reassurance that, should they no longer wish to remain at the monastery, they can tell adults without fear of reprisals, and, ideally, someone will assist them to return home.

Paragraph 20 of the Guidelines is also relevant: 'The provision of alternative care should never be undertaken with a prime purpose of furthering the political, religious or economic goals of the providers'. Any analysis of monasteries' taking in children must bear in mind that monasteries need monks.

The CRC guarantees children's right to freedom of conscience and religion (article 14, para. 1) and parents' right to provide direction in their children's exercise of that right (para. 2). General Comment no. 14 (CRC Committee, 2013), however, makes clear that cultural and religious 'practices that are inconsistent or incompatible with the rights established in the Convention are not in the child's

best interests' and cannot be justified (para. 57). Sri Lankan legal scholar Savitri Goonesekere (1998) submits that child ordination, particularly in the case of younger children, 'goes beyond the aspect of a child's right to freedom of conscience and religion, since a child's...ordination has little to do with his/her religious convictions, and is usually a response to external factors such as traditional family and community customs or practices' (p. 323).⁶

In short, for a 16-year-old to enter the monastery for a year is one thing. For a young child, who by definition has relatively little power, to be entrusted to the monastery is another.

Examples of Situations Child Monks Can Face

The following examples touch on four areas: (a) distances and other factors limiting in-person contact, (b) restrictions on phone contact, (c) risks of child sexual abuse, and (d) the recruitment of children from vulnerable communities.

In-person Contact/Visits Home

Not only can distances get in the way of child monks' contact with parents, but in some cases, 'too much' contact may be discouraged. The distances involved can be considerable.⁷ At monasteries I visited in the south of India, there were children from Nepal, Ladakh and the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh—distances of more than 2,000 km. There are children in monasteries in Nepal from Arunachal Pradesh, as far as 1,000 km away. At seven Tibetan Buddhist monasteries I visited in India, I was told of policies whereby children are only sent home for the winter break if they have already been at the monastery for 3 years. Some child monks wait longer than that. At one monastery, a teen told me that he was going home for the first time in 8 years. At another, a young adult said that in 8 years, he had been home twice.

Certainly, when children are from far away, travel can be complicated. In the Himalayas, getting home can also require a few days on foot. However, beyond complications of travel, based on what adults have told me, a significant concern is that once children go home, there is a significant risk they will not return. A senior monk at one monastery justified the 3-year policy noting that 'some monks coming home and then not coming back. We are giving good education'. A lay teacher at that monastery told me that, in fact, two or three times a year a child will insist they no longer want to be monks and that arrangements will then be made for someone to bring them home. Though reassuring, this does not address the dilemmas some children would surely experience. For example, a child may not be prepared to announce that he wants to leave the monastery for good.

At another monastery, a lay teacher explained that the 3-year rule was put in place after about 10 out of 25 children sent home for winter break that year failed to return.⁸ At monasteries in Sri Lanka, also, I was told of limits on the number of days that child monks are permitted to spend at their parents'—in some cases, as few as 2 days or 5 days a year.

Phone Contact

In some cases, parents do not have a phone, or there is limited or no cell (or Internet) coverage. However, even when there is a way to connect, contact with parents is not always encouraged and may, in fact, be discouraged. Though, at some monasteries, I was told that children could call home when they wanted, or that there was one day of the week where typically children called home, at other monasteries, I was told it is not uncommon for children to speak to their parents only every 2–3 months. At a monastery in Sikkim, in northern India, I was told that children could call home once a month, on a Sunday. When I asked my interpreter to ask whether children could call more often if they felt a need, the answer came back: ‘They cannot. He’s strict about that. *That* he won’t allow.’ At a monastery in Nepal, the principal explained that if children had already spoken to their parents recently, unless they had a good reason, like illness, they might be told that they have talked to them enough already. There has to be a ‘gap’ between the parents and the monastery, he explained. At another monastery, children said that permission to call their parents could be denied for reasons such as not having studied enough.

Again, practices vary. For example, a monk in Sri Lanka told me that, in many cases, parents are quite involved with the temples where their sons are residing, and, thus, those children would see their parents regularly in any case. That said, there exists a view that, for monks, keeping a certain distance from one’s home community and family can be a good thing as it allows the person to focus on monastic life without being pulled in by the concerns of lay life.⁹ The Dalai Lama (1995), for example, has told followers that it is sometimes necessary for those seeking spiritual advancement to leave ‘home and country’ (p. 17):

This helps cut our natural attachment for those we have around us, our family and friends. This gives us distance from the turmoil, the worries and daily nuisances connected to living in a social environment of objects, conditions, and circumstances which give rise to illusion. (Dalai Lama, 1995, p. 17)

To what extent monks with authority over child monks see too much contact with parents as interfering with spiritual development is not clear.

Child Sexual Abuse

Globally, attention to child sexual abuse and its cover-up in religious contexts has focused on the Catholic Church (Clark, 2009; Rashid & Barron, 2019). It is clear, however, that child sexual abuse spans human environments and religions. The past few years have seen an emergence of media commentaries and reports on child sexual abuse in Buddhist temples and monasteries (Chongcharoen, 2019; Ekachai, 2019; India Times, 2018; Lewis, 2019; Millar, 2018; Narim, 2015; Ngamkham, 2019; Ongmo, 2013; Pathirana, 2012; Phillips, 2018). I have found little, however, suggesting that risks and realities of child sexual abuse in Buddhist monasteries are being addressed in a widespread manner. One monk I spoke to said that many individuals within his community are aware of the problem but consider that it would be a betrayal of one’s community to speak publicly about it.

Similar views have been conveyed to me by others. As with sexual abuse, generally, factors that keep the phenomenon hidden or not talked about are complex. In Sri Lanka, the political power of high-ranking Buddhist clergy can add a chill, as suggested by a recent case where a government minister was obliged to apologise to the chief priest of a Buddhist religious order for speaking out about child sexual abuse in temples (INFORM, 2019).¹⁰

Practices of Recruitment

Views on whether it is acceptable to encourage parents to entrust a child to be a child monk depend on what one considers to be in children's best interests. A monastic I met in the south of India said that if one believes that sharing the *dharma* is a good thing, then taking in children to live as child monks is to offer them something positive. At that monastery, monks go to remote areas of Nepal and Sikkim and recruit children, the monastic said, giving as examples orphans and children of single mothers or of parents with disabilities.

Though few in number, news reports suggest that some vulnerable parents agree to send their children with monks or other third parties to be brought to far-away monasteries in the hope they will get a good education, sometimes without clearly understanding where these monasteries are located or how to get in touch with their children afterwards (Bodt, 2019; India Times, 2018; Kumar Singh, 2010; Manandhar, 2016; Rina, 2019a, 2019b; Tharu, 2014). A scholar I communicated with who has spent long periods in the Himalayas tells me he is aware of cases where parents have sent their children to monasteries and then been unable to retrieve them. He noted that he did not want to imply that this would happen at most monasteries.

In sum, without generalising, it is clear that many child monks experience injustices and rights violations that can include separation from parents and the failure of adults caring for them to encourage regular contact with parents. The risks of sexual abuse are exacerbated in contexts where social norms demand respect for religious authority and where children have limited contact with parents. Children from marginalised communities can face increased risks of being recruited for monasteries.

Conclusion

That there are many caring monks and monastic leaders committed to the best for children is not in question. What is not so clear is how the Guidelines should be and are being interpreted and applied in the case of young children entrusted to or at risk of being entrusted to monasteries to live as child monks. For many of these children and their families, monasteries serve a role similar to orphanages, with the important difference that the practice of placing the child is, in this case, sanctioned in the name of a religious or cultural tradition. As this article aimed to demonstrate, as a group, child monks are vulnerable and can experience deprivations and rights violations. Governments and child rights bodies including

the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child working to discourage the unnecessary separation of children from parents should keep in mind that child monks are also children without parental care as defined by the Guidelines (para. 29 [a]). It is suggested that campaigns aiming to promote family-based care be designed in ways that ensure they reach communities with traditions of entrusting young children to monasteries. Explicitly naming child monks and children susceptible to being entrusted to live as child monks as a group of children deprived of parental care or at risk of being so would also be a step in the right direction.

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Notes

1. I use the term here in the popular sense of institutional settings taking in children who are not necessarily orphans.
2. For simplicity, I use ‘monasteries’ in a generic sense to mean monasteries, temples, *pirivenas* (monastic schools in Sri Lanka) and similar environments, where children are living as monastics.
3. It is estimated that roughly 50% of the more than 69,000 monks in Cambodia are children, some as young as 10 years of age (UNICEF Cambodia, 2019). This includes many youth who enter the sangha temporarily around 16 years of age as part of a ‘coming-of-age’ tradition, usually for less than a year (Ministry of Cults and Religion, 2018).
4. I do not include young boys who in Theravada traditions temporarily ordain for a few weeks or months.
5. The Guidelines define ‘children without parental care’ as ‘all children not in the overnight care of at least one of their parents, for whatever reason and under whatever circumstances’ (para. 29 [a]). Exclusions include children in custody for judicial reasons and temporary informal arrangements where children stay overnight with friends or relatives (para. 30).
6. Also to consider in the case of Theravada practices are restrictions on monks having physical contact with women, including their mothers, and restrictions on the right to play. See Serasinghe (2014) and De Livera (2019).
7. In contrast, writing of the Dai-lue community of Southwest China, Borchert (2012) reports that temples are usually a short walk from parents’ homes and novices commonly return home for a meal.
8. A news report from Nepal (Manandhar, 2016) mentions parents being told that their children would be brought back from the monastery to visit after 3 years.
9. This value has also been a cornerstone of much monastic life in Christianity (Jestice, 2013).

10. In a seminal piece, Sri Lankan scholar Gananath Obeyesekere (2001) notes the risk of child sexual abuse in monasteries and also states that ‘most of the child recruits must surely come from the poorest of the poor’. See also Serasinghe (2014).

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