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Symposium: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

Sexual Abuse in the Buddhist Monastery: A Burden on Sri Lankan Children

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In this critical note, I combine my lived experience and doctoral research findings to highlight the problem with ordaining young children. My research and experience confirmed child abuse and systemic barriers to detection and disclosure within the monastery. Victims remain silent due to ignorance and shame. Social deference and power associated with monastic leadership deter external safeguarding oversight. The monastic leadership is emboldened by the privileged position afforded by the constitution and is mainly concerned with preservation of its lineage and reputation. Despite abuse, risks and high attrition rates among novice monks, child ordination continues along with the problems associated with it and children from the low socio-economic backgrounds remain vulnerable to it. While safeguarding measures must be urgently taken, more resources should be dedicated to research this area.

Keywords: child ordination; monastic child abuse; institutional silence; Theravada Buddhism; child safeguarding

THE information that I share in this piece is derived from two main sources: my tacit knowledge resulting from twenty years of living as a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka and recently conducted doctoral research. In the subtitle of my piece, I use "burden" with a particular meaning in mind. While the dictionary meaning is "a heavy load you carry," a psychological meaning can be "a foreign feeling or belief that one carries as a result of direct adverse life experience" (Schwartz 2021: 18).

The Sri Lankan Buddhist monastery is a 2500-year-old institution with an influential contemporary presence in the country. The Buddhist monastery is an integral part of peoples' social life and plays a significant cultural role in their daily lives. The population of Sri Lanka is majority Buddhist, and Sri Lankans actively interact with Buddhist monks for a variety of religious, political, social, economic, and personal reasons (Raghavan 2018). According to the Department of Buddhist Affairs, there are over 12,000 monasteries in Sri Lanka, of which 753 are training monasteries known as Pirivena. They perform a dual function as monasteries and educational institutes for novice monks. These boarding school-style monasteries accommodate between 15 to 150 novice monks each. They are funded by the government, managed by monastic lineages, and supported by the lay community (Keerthirathne 2020).

The political co-dependency between the state and the Buddhist monastery is a noteworthy factor in understanding sexual abuse in Buddhist monasteries. Article 9 of the Constitution recognizes the foremost position of the Buddhist establishment, and the obligation of the state to protect it. In the past seven decades of post-colonial politics, both the state and the monastic leadership have placated each other for their mutual benefit. However, it is worth noting that the Sri Lankan Buddhist sangha is not a unitary organization like the

Roman Catholic Church but rather a decentralized structure like the Church of England (Jay et al. 2020). This feature may have implications in understanding institutional transgressions and potential reforms.

Child Ordination

Ordaining children is the main form of recruitment for the Buddhist monastery. While some historical narratives describe the occasional ordaining of children in the time of the Buddha, child ordination as a mainstream practice may have begun during the formation of Buddhist monastic education system during British colonial administration (1815–1945) (De Silva 2019). Political leaders in the past have organized mass child ordinations to celebrate events in the Buddhist calendar and, perhaps thereby increasing the popularity of this practice (Pathirana 2010, October 15). The senior monastic leadership, particularly those who run large monasteries with material and reputational interests, continue to ordain children to maintain their respective monastic lineages. Often, children from low-income families in the rural countryside are targeted for ordination. Unlike Buddhist clergy in other cultures, Sri Lankan Buddhist monks are given ordination names that indicate their birthplace, usually their village (Amarasekara 2007). One can see that the vast majority of these names refer to villages outside of the more prosperous parts of the country. The continued demand for young monks is fueled by the rapid attrition rates of young monks as many novices leave monkhood once they reach their twenties (The Mirror 2024)[1].

Unlike in other Theravada Buddhist countries, the Sri Lankan tradition holds that the child is ordained for life. This commitment creates pressure on the novices to remain as monastics despite any abuse they experience. While disrobing is possible, it is considered a betrayal of that commitment, a moral failure, and an inauspicious act. Therefore, those who leave tend to carry a burden of shame, leading them to hide their monastic past.

Lack of Oversight And Research

Aside from the occasional media coverage of a severe case of monastic child abuse, this issue is not discussed publicly.[2] While Sri Lankan Buddhism has been a subject of academic interest among scholars in the fields of religion and anthropology,[3] apart from Gananath Obeysekere's (2019) passing remark that child ordination is problematic, child abuse as a systemic monastic problem in Sri Lanka has not received much academic attention. Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic leaders, presumably taking on the role of the moral arbiters of the society (*kuladevatha*), are generally vocal about a wide range of socio-political matters. However, they have been silent around issues pertaining to child ordination, including the potential risk of child abuse in monasteries. There has never been a critical debate about the developmental, moral, and spiritual implications of child ordination despite its high dropout rate. For example, my undergraduate cohort had sixty-three monks, all in their mid-twenties, but only about fifteen remained in robes till the end of the degree. Therefore, partly informed by my lived experience, I explored why the survivors tend to remain silent about their adverse experiences, why the politically active Buddhist monastery seems to be reticent on this topic, and finally why the child protection authorities remain silent despite their mandate to safeguard all children.

Silence

To answer these questions, I conducted an instrumental case study exploring the phenomenon of silence around child abuse in the Buddhist monastery[4]. I interviewed four survivors who had experienced some

[1] Monks tend to disrobe due to combination of reasons. Many as they grow older form interests such as romantic relationships or the desire to pursue worldly careers that are contradictory to monastic ideals, while some leave due to a falling-out with their teachers.
[2] See Pathirana (2012) for an example of an extreme case covered by the media.
[3] See Gombrich (2006), Samuels (2013), Senevirathna (1999), Obeysekere (2006), and Abeysekara (2008).
[4] This research was conducted following research governance policies of Canterbury Christ Church University in the U.K. Approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee was obtained, and all the personally identifiable details of the participants were anonymized to protect their privacy.

form of child abuse, three current monastic leaders with monastic responsibilities, and three child protection officers who had some work experience in dealing with cases of monastic child abuse. I was interested in illuminating the individual, institutional, and social dynamics that imposed the silence from an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The ecological perspectives map human development from family (microsystem), through schools (mesosystem) to society (macrosystem). These perspectives were instrumental in identifying gaps between nuclear families, preschools, schools, religious institutions and broader social institutions such as law enforcement and political leadership. Having insider knowledge was also instrumental in gaining access to survivors who might otherwise be inaccessible.

The pressure to remain silent was already noticeable during the process of contacting child protection officers and monastic leaders, many of whom refused to cooperate. Communications with the National Child Protection Authority and the Department of Probation and Childcare Services took nearly a year to produce any result. Some regional commissioners openly refused to cooperate because they thought it was not appropriate to talk about this issue due to religious sensitivities. Most of the monastic leaders/senior monks I reached out to also did not respond to my requests for interviews, while some responded but refused to be interviewed. Liaising with relevant stakeholders was doubly challenging due to Covid pandemic travel restrictions. Finally, I resorted to interviewing a few senior monks who were known to me on the basis of my monastic past.

Four former monks disclosed experiencing or witnessing repeated incidents of sexual abuse by senior monks, including the tutelar (*āchariya*), and unwanted sexual acts performed by junior monks on their younger peers. These participants felt that sexual abuse and misconduct were ubiquitous and had become normalized. Child protection officers did not have direct knowledge of widespread sexual abuse in monasteries other than their limited knowledge of a serious sexual assault on a novice monk that sparked a medical and legal investigation (Vadysinghe et al. 2024). Three senior monks admitted that child sexual abuse in monasteries was not a recent phenomenon but downplayed the widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse today, citing recent stricter laws and punishments for child sexual abuse in the country. However, they admitted the institutional reluctance to address this issue for fear of reputational damage. When confronted with the issue of sexual abuse, they admitted that the impulse always seems to be to cover up any negative incidents, practices or corrupt individuals to protect the reputation of the lineage. This trend is similar to the findings of the leading national inquiries into child sexual abuse in religious institutions in the U.K. and Australia, where the discourse of denial, deflection, dismissal, and minimization was deployed by the intuitional leaders when handling incidents of sexual abuse within their organizations (IICSA 2021; "Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse" 2017).

The Monastery as a Place of Sexual Abuse

A pervasive sexual undercurrent seems to accompany the selection of children for ordination. For example, senior monks tend to show more interest in selecting children with particular physical features such as a lighter skin tone and full rounded bodies. Sexual innuendoes surround the teacher-disciple relationship and, based on my knowledge now as a lay person, even the lay community is not completely oblivious to the reality of children becoming sexual servants to abbots. There are many discourses that tacitly acknowledge monastic sexual culture; for example, sayings that "ships don't leave tracks on water (*nevak giyāta muhude pāra hitinne nehene*)," or "there is no sin in putting one dhamma book on top of another (*bana patak udin tawa bana potak thibbata vapak ne*)."

Two of the four survivors I interviewed lived under the tutelage of abbots who acted with impunity when it came to sexual misconduct. One abbot was the head of a network of monasteries with links to powerful monks and politicians. According to the survivor, who lived under him for more than five years, this abbot was

infamous for his compulsive sexual abuse of young novices, female teachers who worked in the school he was running, and vulnerable village women who depended on him for material help. He was also known for being drunk most of the time. The other abbot mentioned was primarily interested in boys and young men, both monastic and lay. Based on participants' accounts, his entire monastic life was organized around gratifying his sexual needs. For example, he would ordain novices whom he later groomed to perform sexual acts on him. If they did not comply with his demands, he found a reason to expel them from the monastery. He also befriended young laymen, who would eventually come to live in his quarters and participate in abusive acts. He recently died, and the cause of his death is rumored to be a sexually transmitted disease.

It is also worth noting a few features about these two survivors, both now in their early forties, who endured abuse during their early teens. Although there is no direct way of finding out the exact damage these experiences did to their lives, the trajectory of their lives has notable similarities: both are still single and struggling to form and maintain meaningful romantic relationships, both have problematic relationships with alcohol, and their connection to spirituality seems to have been permanently broken. As the abuse was perpetrated by teachers who were entrusted with the duty to protect and nurture the children, it appeared that the capacity to trust significant others was lost.

Conclusion

Child abuse in Sri Lankan Buddhist monasteries is a relatively unexamined area. While providing a voice to survivors, my research also found evidence of complacency among monastic leadership and policy gaps in safeguarding that impede effective child protection by external authorities. The four adult survivors in this research disclosed experiences of sexual and physical abuse as novice monks. They also attested that sexual and physical abuse was a normal part of their monastic life experience. All four of them, as well as two of the three monastic leaders interviewed in this study, suggested that children should not be ordained because it has become an unsafe and unsuccessful path for children. One senior monk proposed that while children can be given an opportunity to explore monastic life on a temporary basis, under parental supervision, ordination should be a choice made by an adult. While the child protection officers did not propose any new regulations focused solely on monasteries, they thought that the existing safeguarding laws and regulations should be implemented without differential treatments towards monasteries based on cultural deference. Further research and swift action to safeguard children in monasteries are needed while balancing the cultural sensitivities around child ordination and reputation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As a signatory to the United Nation's Convention of the Right of the Child, Sri Lanka has a national obligation to safeguard every child and create condition for them to thrive without risking their lives to become monks to get a better start to life. While there is a universal admiration for the convention of Buddhist monasticism, the way it is practiced in Sri Lanka has become a burden on the nation's most vulnerable children.

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