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# CHILD ORDINATIONS AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

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**R**ecent newspaper articles, photographs and reports in our newspapers have given prominence to massive campaigns to recruit thousands of children to the Buddhist Order with the Prime Minister himself urging the recruitment of two thousand children as novices.

He also urged the poor to multiply and bring forth children to bless the Sangha with new recruits and to serve in what he no doubt perceives as endless war. My concern here is with the whole problem of child monks because this seems to be a violation of both the letter and the spirit of the Theravada Vinaya, the authoritative source of rules for monks. One newspaper photograph shows a child of about eight years wearing yellow robes being greeted by his smiling sister. The boy was not smiling; I am not surprised because joining a mendicant order is an awesome experience even for adults.

One has therefore to ask whether little children are capable of making this kind of decision. Let me therefore address some of the issues that seems, to me, to be relevant for public consideration.

## In Order?

1. The recruitment thrust has the blessings of politicians and the officials of the Buddha Sasana ministry. I presume that, in order to set an example to others, the officials promoting the campaign have ordained, or will ordain in the near future, their own children or grandchildren. Outside of the offspring of these idealistically motivated officials, most of the child recruits must surely come from the poorest of the poor and also, nowadays, from those families who have been dispossessed or have suffered from the current war. One might make a case that monastic recruitment is a good thing because it provides homes and basic care for poor children. Yet, most of these children have had more than one meal a day, have had playmates and the support of family and kinsfolk. How would they fare with no solid food after the noon meal, without playmates and kin support? Moreover, if Buddhists are concerned about the welfare of poor children ought they not to develop alternative provisions, such as homes and orphanages, provision of food and education for destitute families—all of which are in keeping with the spirit of the religion?

## Serious

2. The more serious problem is that of sexual abuse notoriously associated with all forms of institutionalized monasticism, witness the recent cases of abuse of children put in their pastoral care even by high prelates of the Catholic Church. But Catholics have no system of child ordination and therefore the possibility of abuse of

children confined to Buddhist monasteries must be faced honestly and squarely. The ordinary term for homoerotic relations in Sinhala is *pansal keliya* or 'temple game' but this I think is mostly Sinhala humour at work and does not necessarily indicate widespread child abuse in monasteries. Over the last five or six years I have visited many Buddhist monasteries trying to locate two rare palm leaf manuscripts, and I believe that in general village monks are morally responsible human beings. Yet, it is foolish to believe that abuse of children does not take place in larger monasteries, in urban settings and among the more worldly monks.

## Specific

The rules of the Vinaya themselves were formulated when specific acts of immorality had taken place in monasteries and among these are unlawful homoerotic activities, generally among consenting adults. In our own troubled times, monks are provided with plenty of sexual stimuli: in TV and in coeducational interactions in campuses and other arenas. Yet the rules do not provide them with heterosexual outlets. One would imagine, therefore, that in our modern context the possibility of child abuse is certainly there and one ought to have institutional safeguards for that purpose. Urban monasteries today provide no serious monastic education because modern monks want to sit for secular government exams and go to secular universities. It is in the rare instance that monks study Pali or Sanskrit and have first hand knowledge of the doctrinal tradition. Many drop out of the monkhood after some time, though exact statistics are not available. If I am even partially right, then the real issue is to provide incentives for monks to study Buddhism seriously, engage in meditative exercises, and for the laity to provide support and encouragement for adult monks to remain in the order. When masses of children are to be ordained it is likely that most of them will follow the now popular pattern of secular education and many will end up disrobing. If so, what good will child recruitment do for the order?

## Vulnerable

3. Unlike adult monks, children have little chance of resisting sexual advances. They are much more vulnerable; the cultural and familial pressures are so strong that they cannot run away to their own homes and, as far as I know, there is no satisfactory way in which they can protest to the monastic authorities. The new ordinations require, I am told, a guardian who will act in the interests of the child. But how does the guardian inquire into such possibilities when the mere talk of homoerotic practices is taboo? And how does a guardian set about this task? Are there rules and institutional procedures laid out? Perhaps one solution would be to have

professionally trained child care workers among Buddhist monks who would then have the legal and moral right to inquire into problems of child abuse. But I doubt that this has even been considered by our pious officials and politicians.

4. What are the rules of the order regarding child ordination? The classic rule which officials and monks go by is formulated in the Mahavagga 1, 53-54 of the Vinaya Pitaka. In it the Buddha ordained his only son Rahula but, owing to strong protests by his own father, the sage formulated the following rule: "Monks, a child who has not his parent's consent should not be let to go forth (that is, ordained as a novice)." But well-meaning Buddhists are unaware that this rule was qualified by another sensible rule: "Monks, a boy of less than fifteen years of age should not be let to go forth. Whoever should let (one such) go forth, there is an offence of wrongdoing" (Mahavagga, 1.50). Because sixteen years was the permitted age of marriage for Buddhists at that time one would expect a fifteen-year-old youth to be fully mature. Nevertheless, this is further qualified by another rule which, unlike the previous one, is so vague that it simply cannot be applied to our time. It says: "I allow you, monks, to let a youth of less than fifteen years of age and who is scarer of crows go forth" (ibid, 1,51). This qualification, however, is nothing to crow about. It is not a general rule but an exception to the former one. And it has been interpreted by later traditions to mean references to a muscular youth capable of scaring crows (who in Buddhist texts are hardy creatures classed with vultures and living on carrion) by throwing a clod of earth at them with the left hand! Simply stated, the rule implies that one can qualify the fifteen-year norm if the youth (not child) is physically tough and up to the rigours of monastic life. Thus, it seems to me that the Theravada Buddhist rules of recruitment for novices are quite sensible: one must have parental consent; one must be fifteen years old; if not, one must be a youth with the physical maturity of a fifteen-year-

old. There is no space for child ordination according to the Buddha-word, which means that in these matters ignorance is our worst enemy.

### Vital

5. I, for one, agree that monks have a vital religious role in our society officiating in temple rituals and sermons and they are absolutely indispensable for death rituals, especially the *pansakula* and the remembrance of the dead (*mataka dana*). Hence, some form of recruitment is vital to the perpetuation of lived Buddhism. If monks, politicians and government officials declare that more monks are needed then they should also ask the question, how many monks does the nation require? Or, is one good monk worth the many who openly flout the rules of the order?

I have no answers to these questions, but if more monks are needed, there remains a very simple solution to the problem, and that is the recruitment of older folk. Many older people are increasingly given to meditation (of various types, some deep, some shallow) and they are nowadays educated, often with a good knowledge of the *dhamma*. They have more or less retired from work and worldly life and form an ideal recruiting ground for both novices and fully ordained monks (and nuns). Many of them have meagre pensions; therefore free monastic board and lodging would be added incentives. And given the imbalances in our population more and more older people (age fifty and over) will be available for recruitment. They have already enjoyed (or put up with) domestic life and are ready for the life after. They may not be as glamorous as child monks but they could well be the rock on which a solid foundation for the future of the Sasana could be erected. It seems that the sensible thing to do is for the Buddha Sasana officials to promote this form of recruitment rather than the Orwellian scenario proposed by the Prime Minister.

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