

**Children Entrusted to Buddhist Monasteries to Live as Child Monks**

A Submission to the Day of General Discussion on  
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Deborah W. Parkes  
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[deborah.parkes@uottawa.ca](mailto:deborah.parkes@uottawa.ca)  
[childmonksproject@gmail.com](mailto:childmonksproject@gmail.com)

## Children Entrusted to Buddhist Monasteries to Live as Child Monks

My name is Deborah Parkes. I am a registered social worker in Canada and a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa. My research focuses on child Buddhist monks (novices) and children susceptible to being entrusted to monasteries to live as child monks. There are tens of thousands of child Buddhist monks in Asia, including in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Some are as young as 6. Many are living in temples or monasteries far from their parents and may not see their parents for months or even years.

This submission has two goals. The first is to recommend that child Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as children who are susceptible to being entrusted to Buddhist monasteries or nunneries, be fully included as a focus of the initiatives being undertaken to promote the best interests of children in alternative care and to prevent children from being unnecessarily separated from their parents. A second goal is to draw attention to some practices and situations pertaining to entrusting children to monasteries and conditions that they experience that do not necessarily fit with values in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UNGA, 1989) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (Guidelines; UNGA, 2009)

In this submission, I refer mainly to child monks, i.e., boys, as I am more familiar with practices and traditions concerning this group of children than I am with those related to child nuns. However, many of the same principles would also apply to child nuns. When I refer to child monks, I am not including children who ordain for a few weeks or a few months as part of a rite of passage common in some traditions. I use the term monasteries generically to also include temples and *pirivenas* - institutions of religious studies in Sri Lanka.

My comments are informed by Master of Social Work fieldwork at a Buddhist monastery in India (Parkes, 2017), by the scholarly literature (e.g., Childs et al., 2014; Holt, 2009; Sasson, 2012; Tsomo, 2012), and by visits to dozens of monasteries over the last several years, primarily in India, but also in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Mongolia. I have spoken to many scores of monks, scholars, and others knowledgeable about traditions and practices of entrusting children to Buddhist monasteries. I also draw on reports from journalistic sources.

In this short submission, I can touch only briefly on issues. I have reflected on the rights of children in monasteries in other writings (e.g., Parkes, 2018, 2020, 2021).

For many child monks, temples and monasteries have been places of caring and belonging. My intention is not to generalize. I draw attention to practices at some temples and monasteries that are not in keeping with principles in the CRC and the Guidelines. Among the child-rights principles and guidelines that stand out are the child's right to maintain regular contact with parents (CRC, art. 9.3; Guidelines, para. 81) and the "desirability, in principle, of maintaining the child as close as possible to his/her habitual place of residence" to foster contact with his or her family (Guidelines, para. 11). The Guidelines also state that "(t)he provision of alternative care should never be undertaken with a prime purpose of furthering the political, religious or economic goals of the providers (para. 20)." I suggest that it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle motives.

The Guidelines are a valuable instrument; however, not all fit well with assumptions underlying the tradition of entrusting children to monasteries. Notably, the Guidelines prioritize keeping children with their families or returning children to their families (para. 3). When children are sent to monasteries, there may be no assumption that they will return to live full-time with their families, however. Many

child monks do eventually leave monastic life. Nonetheless, many monasteries hope that at least some children will remain monks until well into adulthood, if not for life.

There are many reasons why children are sent to monasteries. Many parents consider that it is an opportunity for the child to develop spiritually. In many Buddhist traditions, having a son who is a monk is held to bring good karma to the child, the parents, and other family members. For children from remote areas, attending a monastery can be a way to get an education. Family poverty is an important contributing factor in many cases (Guidelines, para. 15).

Pull factors include efforts by monasteries to recruit children, and in some cases, government support for recruitment drives (e.g., Pathirana, 2010).

Without generalizing, it is clear that not all monasteries encourage regular contact with parents (CRC, art. 9.3; Guidelines, para. 81). Restrictions may be placed on phone contact or on how often a child can visit home. In my travels, I have come across monasteries with policies whereby children from far away would only get to go home to visit their parents once they had been at the monastery for three years (Parkes, 2021). I have met children at monasteries in the south of India who were from Nepal or India's northeastern states—more than 2,000 kilometres away. Some had not been home in several years.

Certainly, visits home can be complicated, especially when children are from remote areas in the Himalayas that require not only a train, bus, or air journey, but also a few days on foot. However, some monasteries are also concerned that if children go home to visit their families, they may not return to the monastery after (Parkes, 2021). Manandhar (2016) tells of parents in Nepal who agreed for their children (aged 6 to 12) to be taken to a monastery in India, who were told their children would be brought back to visit after three years.

In many communities, the tradition of sending one child to the monastery has declined significantly. Monasteries, meanwhile, need monks. News reports and knowledgeable individuals I have spoken to tell of children recruited to monasteries from marginalized communities (Bodt, 2019; Manandhar, 2016; NDTV, 2010; Rina, 2019a, 2019b; Tharu, 2014). Poverty leaves people vulnerable to exploitation. Families from marginalized communities struggling to make ends meet may not have a clear sense of risks children may be exposed to, or their state of oppression may preclude them from contemplating risks.

There are issues to consider of child's participatory rights (CRC, arts. 12, 13) and the child's right to not be separated from parents against their will (CRC, art. 9.1). Many children agree or even ask to be sent to the monastery; however young children do not necessarily fully understand what they are agreeing to. Once children are at the monastery, it may be hard for them to get home—especially if they have come from a distance. Child monks may not have someone they can turn to if they no longer wish to be at the monastery—someone they experience as supportive, and whom they can count on to take the necessary steps to help them get home. A sensitive topic, child sexual abuse occurs in monasteries just as it occurs in so many other environments. Subtle and not-so-subtle power dynamics, a lack of words or conceptual understanding to express what is happening, and concern that one's own parents might not welcome hearing negative things said about monks can prevent children from letting parents or other adults know what they are experiencing. Children also may not have a way to contact their parents on their own.

## Concluding thoughts

In this submission, I have focused on concerns. Again, I recognize that monasteries and religious life play a hugely important role for many people. It is my hope that this submission will help to encourage other conversations on the place of monasteries as places of alternative care for children, including among individuals within the communities from which child monks emanate.

Some thoughts:

- The CRC emphasizes that value for children of being brought up in a family environment (Preamble), with the term *family* to be interpreted "in a broad sense to include...members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom" (General Comment 14, [CRC Committee, 2013], para. 53; also CRC, art. 5). It would be interesting to reflect on what ways temples and monasteries do or do not constitute a family environment for children. Does the size of the monastery matter? Does the type of care children receive matter? Do sleeping arrangements matter? Does the extent to which daily life is flexible versus regimented matter?
- The Guidelines (para. 67) say that children in temporary care should be guaranteed the right to a regular review of their placement. Is this idea of a regular review a useful concept to consider for children in monasteries? How might this work?
- What steps are being taken and what steps could be taken to seek out the voices of child monks and adults who were themselves child monks? (CRC, arts. 5, 9, 12, 13, 14).

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