

CASE REPORT

HARMONISING TRADITION AND CHILD WELFARE: ORDINATION OF BUDDHIST CHILD MONKS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In Sri Lanka, where a majority follows Theravada Buddhism, there are rituals and norms related to the ordination of monks, as well as a process of certification. An 8-year-old male novice monk was presented for clinical forensic examination following an assault at a temple by several other fellow novice monks. Further investigation revealed that this recently-ordained monk did not possess proper certification of ordination and financial exploitation of the young monks' priesthood status and the alleged assault were suspected. This case discusses several suggestions, including the legal reinforcement of a probationary period, streamlining the registration process, and setting a minimum age for ordination, to safeguard the welfare of child monks while supporting the norms and traditions of priesthood.

Keywords: *Buddhism; child welfare; human rights; monks; Sri Lanka*

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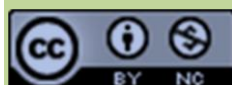
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are considered a philosophy^{2,3}, while adhering to the established norms and rituals handed over from generation to generation, to ensure the continuity of the religion. They are bearing the weight of the obligation of giving truthful information about what their very religious leader Lord Buddha preached more than two millennia ago. Currently, there are approximately 15,000 monks in over 6000 temples all around Sri Lanka⁴.

Theravada Buddhists have always regarded monks as the preservers of their tradition and its principal exemplars. Before one becomes a monk, one has to become a novice. This is done by the rite of '*pabbajja*', the lower ordination, where a layman is admitted as a novice or *samanera* under a different name of religious origin, under the supervision of a senior monk. This ritual consists of shaving the hair and beard, donning robes, and then taking from the selected preceptor the Three Refuges in the '*Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha*', and the Ten Precepts^{5,6}. The process of ordaining is carried

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious country in South Asia, where the majority practices Theravada Buddhism based on the teachings of Lord Buddha¹. Buddhist monks are responsible for preaching values and religious concepts, which

out for children with the consent of both parents. Higher ordination is known as '*upasampada*' which is conducted in a prescribed and duly consecrated chapterhouse when the candidate possesses the necessary qualifications. One must be at least twenty years old to become eligible for the higher ordination^{6,7}.

According to the current practice, to-be-ordained individuals are required to spend a customary probationary period in a temple under the supervision of an ordained monk to learn the basic practices of Buddhism, to get to know about the responsibilities he is going to have once he is ordained and to undergo a background check on the suitability of the individual to be ordained as there are certain practiced limitations are considered before one becomes a monk⁸⁻¹⁰. For example, blind or deaf people are deemed ineligible to become monks, and so are individuals with tattoos. This probationary period is 4 months long, especially for followers of other religions, as specified in "*Mahavagga*" volume in "*Vinaya Pitaka*", the basket of discipline⁸⁻¹⁰.

Following ordination, the monk should be registered in a list, which is maintained at the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, under the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs. Then the monk is issued a certificate of ordination or '*pavidi uppanaya*'. Suppose a monk is no longer willing to stay in the robes, in that case, a disrobing ritual is carried out and the disrobed individual can resume his or her previous identity as a layperson without any residual obligation to religious authorities. Nevertheless, religious practices prohibit a robed individual from staying in their former household.

CASE HISTORY

An 8-year-old male novice monk was presented for clinical forensic examination following an alleged assault with bare hands and sticks by 3 fellow novice monks. There were healing skin lesions that were 5-10 days old and compatible with the given history of assault as well as several other lesions suggestive of accidental childhood injuries (Fig. 1 and 2) and benign

scars due to infected and healed blisters (Fig. 3). The patterns of non-accidental injuries were compatible with the information divulged by the perpetrators. There was no evidence of sexual abuse. It was further revealed that his mother had separated from the family and his father had offered him for ordination due to financial difficulties. He had been ordained 3-4 weeks before the alleged incident without any probation period and following the ordination he was moved from temple to temple by his father citing various reasons including poor facilities and safety concerns. He had been subsequently presented to the temple where the alleged incident took place without any documentation of his ordination.

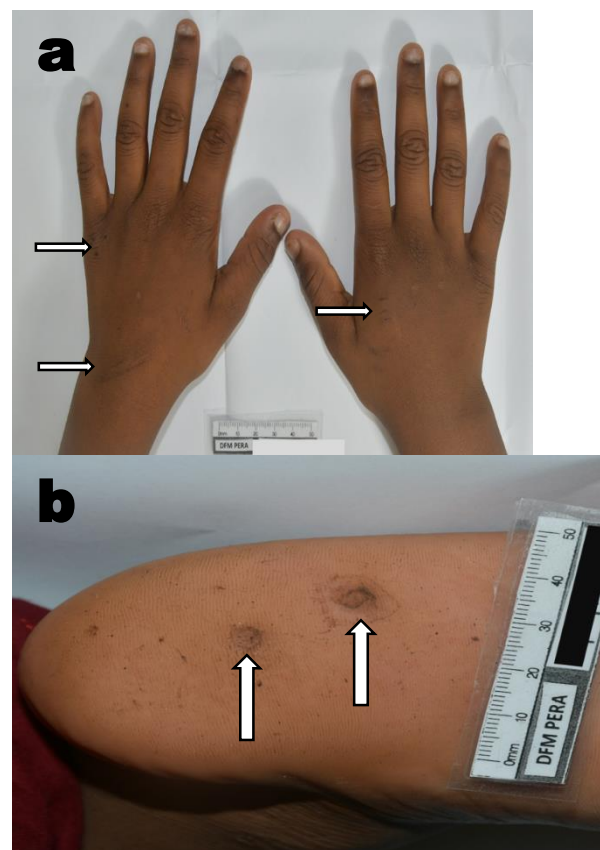


Figure 1: Healing injuries on the back aspect of both hands (thin white arrows in a) due to accidental circumstances and on the right sole (broad white arrows in b) indicative of benign callosities.



Figure 2: The buttock area of the child shows healing abrasions indicated with circles caused by beating with a blunt weapon(s) and the right upper area of the buttock indicating healing tramline contusions caused by pliable blunt cylindrical weapons indicated by white arrow.



Figure 3: The left side of the head shows an area of healing skin infection with dermatitis, indicated by white circle, a benign dermatological condition.

Background checks on the family by the Police revealed that the father also neglected the other siblings of the monk. The possibility of financial exploitation by demanding compensation from the head priest of the temple where the incident took place by the child's father was also suspected. Police investigation further revealed that he had also been kept in his home in his robes for a time in

between moving from temple to temple and his father had collected donations from his neighbours exploiting the child's priesthood status. During this time, it was also noted that the continuity of his education was also disrupted.

He was treated for his injuries at a tertiary care center with referrals to a child psychiatrist, where he was concluded to be mentally stable with no psychological sequelae and his intelligence quotient (IQ) was determined as average. A subsequent institutional case conference participated by the senior officials of the Buddhist chapter, law enforcement officials, and forensic and psychiatric experts decided to de-robe the monk and re-ordain him when he is older and if he is willing to. Further, the child has been kept under probation and social services to monitor the child's welfare and education. The Police had filed a case against the child's father for child endangerment and exploitation. However, it did not proceed as he was the caretaker of the child.

DISCUSSION

The World Health Organization defines anyone under 18 years as a child¹¹. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that all individuals below 18 should have certain rights regardless of their background¹².

These rights hinge on four principles: non-discrimination, the child's best interest, the right to survival and development, and valuing the child's perspective¹³. Violations can be deemed as child rights infringements or, in severe cases, child abuse. Decisions involving children must always prioritize these rights for the best results.

The minimum age for lower ordination is described in "*Mahavagga*" in "*Vinaya Pitaka*",

as the age where one can shoo crows away, which is, according to separate interpretations by Gombrich, Sasson and Dickson, the age of six to eight years¹⁴⁻¹⁶. However, the same has been interpreted as 15 years in the writings of Obesekere and Thanissaro^{17,18}. Due to this issue of age, debates have arisen about its compatibility with children's rights. While some question the appropriateness of child ordination^{17,19}, Sri Lankan law supports religious freedom for all, regardless of age. This necessitates a societal dialogue to clearly define age requirements for monkhood, taking into account a child's autonomy and psychological preparedness for the significant lifestyle changes post-ordination.

Child monks may lack the emotional and psychological maturity to fulfill their monastic duties and often yearn for familial love and care. While some may be ordained for spiritual growth, many parents have ulterior motives, viewing ordination as a means to escape poverty and gain privileges, benefiting not just the child but the entire family. There is even a belief that when one family member is ordained, seven generations of his or her family will benefit from “*Nirvana*” which would prompt families to offer their children for ordination¹⁹. Thus, a thorough background check before ordination is crucial to ascertain the child's suitability for monastic life.

While Buddhism has long-standing norms for converting lay people to monks, many of these traditions have been orally passed down, lacking written documentation. Regrettably, there is no accessible and organised database containing descriptive information about individuals' lay names, ordination age, temple affiliations, de-robing records, or post-ordination names.

There are evident ambiguities in ordination practices, leading to variations across temples and high priests. Historically, priests convened ‘*Dharma sangayana*’ or Buddhist councils to codify and affirm practices. Some of these established norms are documented in the *Vinaya pitaka*, a guide to which followers and priests are expected to adhere to. Therefore, priests need to adhere to those rituals that

have been documented and passed down from generation to generation to avoid biases.

SUGGESTIONS

Before the ordination, a mandatory training period should be introduced to scrutinise the child's background, ascertain parental motives, and prepare both the child and parents for the impending lifestyle shift. Instituting a protocol wherein the temple's head priest notifies the regional probation office upon a child's admission for the probationary period, would enable appropriate actions if the child is deemed unsuitable.

There is a clear exigency for a structured, digital database that encapsulates pivotal details of monks, including their secular names, ordination age, affiliated temples throughout their tenure, instances of de-robing, and nomenclature post-ordination and de-robing.

The current monk registration and identity document issuance procedure, centralized in the capital Colombo, is unduly laborious and protracted. Establishing regional registration hubs would streamline this process and obviate associated challenges.

Under Sri Lankan legislation, children's welfare and rights fall under the purview of the state, with the Department of Probationary and Child Care Services taking primary responsibility. Analogously, there should be a dedicated government agency overseeing the well-being of child monks, equipped with a round-the-clock complaint line, and regional committees composed of ‘*Adikarana sanganayaka*’ (court convenor), ‘*Lekakadhikari*’ (registrar), and officials from probationary services or new agencies, social services, and police for inquiry and decision-making.

There's a need for either current social services or a new agency to visit temples upon notification through an online registration platform, ensuring child monks are informed of their rights and avenues for assistance. Concurrently, establishing a minimum age for

ordination is essential to prevent child rights violations and mitigate societal disputes.

If a child, ordained due to poverty, fails to meet the commitments during this probation, they should be de-robed and reintegrated with their families, who should subsequently receive social support. Families must be educated about alternatives like adoption and probationary services to prevent child neglect or rights deprivation due to poverty. Public awareness campaigns can guide families to appropriate organizations; ensuring children aren't relinquished to religious institutions merely as an escape from economic hardships. It should also be noted that these suggestions can be implemented not only within Buddhist societies but also within other religions in which child priests or novices are concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

This case highlights the issues surrounding the child ordination in Sri Lanka, concerning the abuse and exploitation of a child monk. The suggestions presented include the introduction and legal enforcement of a probationary period, streamlining the registration process and setting a minimum age for ordination to protect children's rights while supporting the norms and traditions of the priesthood.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

DISCLOSURE

ANV and EMKBE are members of the Editorial Board of the Sri Lanka Journal of Forensic Medicine, Science & Law. Therefore, they did not participate in any way in the publication/decision-making process of this submission, as per journal policy.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The presented case was conducted for clinical forensic examination and the findings are used for

academic purposes, including teaching and publication, according to the institutional guidelines, with the consent of the next of kin, without divulging the identity of the individuals.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

None.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the work; the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data work; drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. All authors approved the final version to be published.

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