**Assess the view that monastic life is escapist, as it does not engage with the real world.**

Members of the Buddhist Sangha are united in their quest to attain enlightenment and whilst it is crucial to recognise that the Buddha taught that everyone has the equal potential to become enlightened (and experience the joy of nirvana), many of the laity choose, often for a short period of time, to become monks (Bhikkhus) or nuns (Bhikkhunis)- renouncing worldly life to live in amongst the monastic Sangha in viharas. This has led to the inevitable assertion/ view that Buddhist monastic life is escapist as it does not engage with the real world, however, it can be seen that in many ways this is not in fact the case.

Firstly, monastic life could be seen as escapist as, when Bhikkhus are ordained into the monastic community, they are required to commit themselves to ten precepts: 5 of which the lay Buddhists do not adhere to. Upon entering the vihara, the Bhikkhu is subsequently freed from/ ‘escapes’ the responsibilities and pressures of the outside world: they do not have to work in the conventional sense- as according to the tenth precept they are not allowed to handle money (apart from Anagarikas) and are dependent on the laity for food and their necessities. Thus monastic Sanghas can only exist where the lay people are willing to support them and therefore many argue monastic life is escapist in the sense that it supposedly removes one from the distractions of the world (for example by helping the Bhikkhu/ Bhikkhuni to overcome tanha and attachment- attachment to material things- as they are allowed few possessions- 3 robes, a begging bowl, a strainer and a needle) and enables the full concentration on cultivating the qualities of the eightfold path and practicing meditation/ developing wisdom. However, monastic life is not escapist in the sense that ultimately Buddhists become monks and enter the vihara to seek and acknowledge the 3 refuges: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. In doing this, the Buddhist is consciously identifying enlightenment as his/ her ultimate aim and it gives them a sense of direction and meaning in life: offering them a goal of ultimate happiness and the practical means of finding it- therefore one is not so much ‘escaping’ anything, but rather they are refocusing their efforts on purifying their karma and bringing about the end of samsara and dukkha. Moreover, one of the three refuges is Dharma- of which the Buddha stressed the importance of trying it and only using it if one found it helpful. Dharma refers to the personal realisation of the truths of Buddhism and it includes a commitment to engaging in this process of discovery: the idea of the monastic life is to concentrate on practicing meditation/ studying the dharma- actively applying it to one’s own situation- which itself needs to be completely acknowledged and cultivated (hence showing how it is not escapist). Importantly, the Buddhist approach is not to surrender one’s intelligence and ability to reason and escape into blind belief in dogmatic truths- rather it entails personal effort and willingness to change- not a way of avoiding responsibility.

Interestingly, it is sometimes argued that monastic communities are too ‘closed’ to the problems of the outside world- as they live in viharas and meditate for much of the day- only receiving food before midday- they are often seen as escapist as they appear almost ‘shut off’ from society. However, most Sangha members have had experience of life before they renounced and thus can still relate to the pressures of the real world. Also, the fact that monastic Sanghas can only exist where they lay people want one helps to keep the Sangha relevant to the needs of the lay people and thus very much an integral part of the wider Sangha. Monastic life is therefore not escapist as Bhikkhus/ Bhikkhunis help other lay people in their quest to enlightenment in helping them practices meditation and understanding the dharma and perhaps most importantly- guaranteeing the continuation of the religion by ensuring that Buddhism is not reduced to a mere collection of words held in books.

Moreover, it could even be argued that those living in the outside world could be seen as escapist- filling their lives with distractions from the inevitable realities that are old age, sickness and death which perpetuate samsara. Only in monastic life is the meaning of life fully faced. Certainly for Mahayanists Bhikkhus monastic life is not seen as escapist as it allows one to concentrate on the ultimate truth of all things which is essentially shunyata: they are empty of inherit existence. Therefore it follows that by removing themselves from worldly life (which is only a conventional truth as it not permanent- only true in the word of empirical existence and allows others to ‘escape’ into reading, TV, partying, alcohol, shopping or drugs) they are helping to remove ignorance and cultivate right understanding. Thus this is the reason why the Sangha is widely considered to be venerable and worthy of gifts – because the monks/ nuns do the difficult things that the laity need not do (the laity can hence go to them for encouragement/ support). This idea is very much seen in Tibetan Buddhism where they emphasize the importance of the lama as he has the ability to make the Dharma accessible to the laity so they can apply it to their own situation. Therefore this highlights how monastic life is not a form of escapism as it actually comes with the pressures of ensuring a ‘good example’ is given to the laity.

To conclude, whist there is some evidence to suggest that monastic life is escapist as it involves the removal of worldly distractions and pressures and complete dedication of one’s efforts on the path to enlightenment, it is not to say that Buddhist monks are seeking to surrender one’s intelligence to escape into blind belief in dogmatic truths. Rather they are seeking a path that is not only beneficial for themselves but also the lay community. Within the monastic Sangha there are still reminders of the laity (and thus the outside, conventional ‘real world’- particularly for Mahayanist monks whose goal/ ideal is to become a bodhisattva to gain enlightenment for the sake of others, so that ultimately everyone will be enlightened)- for example whilst both Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis take the Patimokka- the fact that there are 331 for Bhikkhunis and 227 for Bhikkhus highlight the historical context in which the religion was born into- showing how the misogynistic attitudes also pervaded the Buddhist doctrine- thus illustrating the way in which monastic Sangha is very much in tune with ‘the real world’.