

Becoming a Monk

***Summary:** The many streams of Buddhism differ in their approaches to monasticism and initiation rituals. For example, is it common in the Theravada tradition for young men to become novice monks as a rite of passage into adulthood. In some Mahayana traditions, women can take the Triple Platform Ordination and become nuns. Meanwhile, in some Japanese traditions, priests and masters can marry and have children.*

Becoming a monk is as old as the Buddhist tradition. Among the Buddha's first followers were those who left home and took the vows and robes of monks, a role central to most streams of the Buddhist tradition. In South and Southeast Asia, for example, the laity cook for and make food offerings to the monks, support them with gifts of robes and toiletries, and receive both satisfaction and religious merit for this support.

There are ordinarily two levels of ordination. A *samanera* is a novice monk. In the Theravada tradition, a man may become a novice as the first stage toward becoming a full-fledged monk or *bhikkhu*, or he may become a novice monk for a short period with the specific intention of accruing religious merit. After the death of a loved one, for instance, a man may undertake temporary monastic vows. In some Theravada countries it is also common for a young boy to become a monk for a short period as a "passage" of sorts into adulthood. Serving as a novice monk is understood to earn merit for one's parents and express one's gratitude for their care. In some Southeast Asian contexts, it also provided the primary avenue to education.

In the United States temporary ordinations are common, especially in the Cambodian and Thai communities. In Minneapolis, eight- and nine-year-olds may become temporary summer-monks to learn the basics of their tradition. In Lynn, Massachusetts, a young man expresses his seriousness about his Buddhist tradition and Cambodian culture by undertaking the monastic vows of a novice. In Long Beach or North Hollywood, California, teenage boys may take monastic vows for the summer, live in the temple, and undergo training with the elders of the tradition.

Full ordination as a monk (*bhikkhu*) or nun (*bhikkuni*) follows after the novice stage. The lineage of women monastics died out long ago in the Theravada traditions of South Asia, but has been preserved in some of the Mahayana traditions of East Asia. In Taiwan especially, the ordination of women to monastic orders

is still quite common. The Pure Land tradition of Fo Guang Buddhism, for instance, has many women ordained as nuns. For those interested in a monastic vocation, final vows of lifelong ordination as a monk or nun will follow the first two stages. This full ceremony, called the Triple Platform Ordination, has been performed at the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California.

It is important to note, however, that while monasticism is central to most forms of Buddhism, it is not central to all: the Jodo Shinshu tradition in Japan rejected monasticism. Its ministers in both Japan and the United States are married householders. And since the 19th century, Japanese Zen monks and priests have also married. While the stages of training to become a Zen master (*roshi*) involve intensive periods of strict monastic practice, even *rosHis* may have spouses and families.