First Thoughts about Becoming a Monk

If you are beginning to think seriously about becoming a monk at Shasta Abbey, here is some information for you to consider.

First of all, we use the term “monk” for both male and female monastics, and this term implies leaving the household life, living in the monastery, celibacy, and ordination into the Buddhist priesthood. The vocation to be a monk requires a wholehearted commitment.

In order to begin the process of entering the monastic life, you must first be familiar with our practice, and you should have received the Precepts (usually at the Ten Precepts Retreat), and thereby become a lay Buddhist. You will need to spend time in residence at the Abbey, and at some point you should talk to the Novice Master about what you have in mind, what it means to be a monk, and what you need to do if this is what you wish. You will be told that to become a monk at Shasta Abbey means that you will be taking the Abbot as your Master, unless your taking another Master has been fully discussed and agreed upon.

Age and health are considerations because the training is very rigorous; however, neither age nor state of health alone is an impediment.

(Please note: We usually discourage people who are currently married or in committed long-term relationships from becoming monks. This is because, although neither the Abbot nor the Order would require that anyone divorce or separate from a spouse or partner, a person would have to be single and unattached for at least two years prior to being considered as a possible applicant for the postulancy. The person has to know, and demonstrate, their ability to live independently. The risk here is that a person could divorce their spouse, or separate from their partner, and then find that they are not suited for the monastic life. Being separated or divorced is not a guarantee that a person will be accepted as a postulant.)

If monastic training at Shasta Abbey seems to be the right path for you, you should plan to spend a year in residence at the Abbey as a lay person. (The time may vary from person to person with each of these steps.) You will be asked to memorize the daily scriptures, follow the schedule and participate in all activities. You will be advised not to “burn your bridges” (e.g. sell your house or give a lot of things away) at this stage. You are just doing the training and seeing how things go; no promises are made on either side.

Towards the end of this period, if you still wish to be a monk, and if this is felt by the Abbot and senior monks to be appropriate for you, you will be asked to fill in a postulancy application. This involves a number of questions about your background and family situation, your religious upbringing, your marital status and any children you may have, employment, health, finances, any psychological difficulties, and various other things. The purpose of all this is to let the Abbot and senior monks know as much about you as possible in order to help you with your training and to be as sure as they can be that you are suited to monastic life. The information given is confidential, and is reviewed by the Abbot and a number of senior monks.
If your application is accepted, you will be asked to tie up your worldly business: you must be unmarried and without dependent children; you must be free of any debt or financial obligation; you will need to dispose of your possessions such as real estate, car, household items etc., just keeping what you will need. You do not need to give away your money; this you may keep and use as seems good to you. You will be asked to undergo a medical examination and HIV test before entry. You will be given a copy of the Rules of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives and of the Rules of Shasta Abbey to read, and you will be encouraged to ask about anything which is not clear; you will then be asked to sign an agreement to keep these rules before entering the postulancy.

Entry as a postulant means that you will wear the daily monastic robe and clip short, but not shave, your hair. You will live and train with the monks but you will not yet enter the meditation hall. This is so that you may experience the monastic life without yet making the commitment of ordination. After a year or so, if you wish to be ordained as a monk, and if you have demonstrated that this is the right vocation for you, you will be ordained by your Master, given the full set of robes and bowls, and you will enter the meditation hall as a novice monk.

All of this may seem a bit daunting; however, the purpose of this gradual process is so that you may have as clear an idea as possible of what monastic life is like before committing yourself to it, and, more broadly, to help anyone wishing to train in Buddhism to clarify the path of that training and to do what is best for them and for other beings.