

## **First Thoughts about Becoming a Monk at Shasta Abbey**

The Buddha created the Fourfold Sangha: male and female lay trainees and male and female monks. We need all of them; they help and support each other. Traditionally, the monks depend on the lay trainees for food and the other necessities of life, and the lay trainees look to the monks for teaching and guidance.

Most people don't want to be monks, but there are always a few who do. This does not make them better than other people; it's just that they have the call of the heart, the vocation. They have the aspiration to leave the household life and devote themselves to finding the Truth.

If you are thinking about the possibility of becoming a monk at Shasta Abbey, here are some practical things it would be helpful for you to know.

We use the term "monk" for all genders and gender orientations, since we train side by side equally, while keeping to our rule of celibacy. Monks leave the household life, live in the monastery and receive ordination into the Buddhist priesthood. We make a wholehearted commitment, but there are no lifetime vows. We are all volunteers, and if monastic life is not working out for someone they may leave at any time.

If you are considering becoming a monk, you need to be familiar with our practice, and you should have received the Precepts of our tradition and thereby become a lay Buddhist. You need to spend some time in residence at the Abbey in order to get to know us and have a sense of our monastic life: "Is this what I want, is this how I want to live my life?" If you feel that the answer is yes, you should talk to the Novice Master about your aspiration, what it means to be a monk and the master-disciple relationship, and what you need to do if this is what you wish.

Not everyone is suited to monastic life. We don't accept everyone who asks; we try to discern what is best for the person. Some people want to be monks and they can't, for reasons of health, or age, or family commitments or other difficulties.

We generally discourage people who are currently married or in committed long-term relationships from becoming monks. A person would need to be single and unattached, ideally for at least two years, and be able to live independently, before being considered for the postulancy. We would not wish someone to divorce their spouse or separate from their partner, only to find that they are not suited for the monastic life.

If monastic training at Shasta Abbey seems to be the right path for you, you should plan to spend six months to a year in residence at the Abbey as a lay person, just doing the training day by day, to see if it is indeed a good fit. This does not mean things will always be easy; living in community can be a challenge as well as a blessing. You will be advised not to "burn your bridges" (such as selling your house or giving a lot of things away) at this stage. You are just doing the daily training and seeing how things go, with no promises made on either side.

Towards the end of this period, if you still wish to be a monk, and if it is felt by the Abbess and senior monks to be a good thing for you, you will be asked to fill in an application for the postulancy. This

involves a number of questions about your background, family, religious upbringing if any, marital status and any children you may have, employment, health, finances, and so on. The purpose of this is to let the Abbess and senior monks know as much about you as possible in order to help you with your training, and to be as sure as possible that you are suited to monastic life. The information given is confidential, and is reviewed by the Abbess and a few 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 debt or financial obligation; you will need to dispose responsibly of your possessions such as real estate, car, household items, etc., just keeping what you need. You do not need to give away your money; if you wish we can advise you on how best to take care of it. You will be asked to undergo a medical examination before entry. You will be given a copy of the rules of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives and of the rules of Shasta Abbey, and you will be encouraged to ask about anything which is not clear. You will be asked to sign an agreement to keep these rules before you enter 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 not yet fully enter the meditation hall. This is so that you may experience monastic life without yet making the commitment of ordination. After six months up to a year or so, if you wish to be ordained as a monk, and if this is clearly the right vocation for you, you will be ordained by your Master, given the full set of robes, 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 their training and to do what is best for them and for other beings.

Much has been written and spoken about monastic life, but only by living it can we really know it for ourselves. It is not always easy, but for those who choose it and are suited to it, it brings peace and joy.