

VINAYA

The Ordination Ceremony of a Monk

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The ordination ceremony (*UPASAMPADA*) which makes a Theravada Buddhist monk is one of the 'legal acts of the Sangha' contained in the Buddhist Monastic Rule (*VINAYA*). The ceremony must be performed according to this Rule or else the ordination is invalid and the candidate not a monk. The strict requirement to follow the Rule has meant that the ceremony has remained unchanged since the time of the Lord Buddha. It is still conducted in Pali, the language of original Buddhism, to give the rite a solemn formality which reflects the importance of the occasion. However, as the ceremony is always public, with relatives and friends and other well-wishers in attendance, the Pali phrases are often translated and the ceremony explained.

According to the Rule, some may not become monks: one who has murdered an Arahant (Enlightened Being), one who has murdered his mother or father, one who has injured the Lord Buddha, one who has raped a Buddhist nun, one who has caused a schism in the Sangha, one who has pretended to be a monk without ordination, one who has left the Sangha and ordained in another religion, one who as a monk committed any of the four 'disrobing offences' ([see below](#)), one who is a Eunuch, Hermaphrodite or who is an animal ...

... Once a Naga, a powerful serpent who can take the form of a human being, was mistakenly ordained as a monk. Shortly after, when asleep in his hut, the naga returned to the shape of a huge snake. The monk who shared the hut was somewhat alarmed when he woke up to see a great snake sleeping next to him! The Lord Buddha summoned the naga and told him he may not remain as a monk, at which the utterly disconsolate snake began to weep. The snake was given the Five Precepts as the means to attaining a human existence in his next life when he can then be a monk. Then out of compassion for the sad snake, the Lord Buddha said that from then on all candidates for the monkhood be called 'Naga' as a consolation. They are still called 'Naga' to this day.

... all the above may not be monks and if 'ordained' mistakenly must be asked to leave.

The candidate must be 20 years of age or more, counting from when "consciousness first appeared in his mother's womb". Because of the obvious difficulty in knowing when this occurred, it is usual to insist on at least 20 years since birth. If, by mistake, he was 'ordained' under the age of 20, the candidate remains a ten precept novice and is not a monk.

There are others still who should not be ordained, although if they are ordained by mistake their ordination is valid. These include: one with infectious diseases, a slave, one escaped from jail, one known to be wanted by the police, one with unpaid debts, one in the 'King's Service' (e.g. a soldier), one maimed, deformed, disabled or very old (meaning to the extent that it is impractical to perform the duties of monastic life). One also needs the permission of one's parents.

The ceremony begins with the candidate's sponsor, often his parents, presenting him with his monk's robes and bowl. One may not be ordained without a set of robes and a bowl of one's own. When the sponsors are his parents, he often takes the opportunity to show his gratitude to his parents by formally asking for their forgiveness for any wrong he has done to them over the years, intentional or unintentional, by body, speech or mind. Then with his parents' blessing, the candidate approaches the waiting Sangha.

To perform the ordination ceremony, one needs a Sangha of at least five monks, one of whom must be a knowledgeable senior monk of at least ten years who will be the candidate's Preceptor (*UPAJJHAYA*). The

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Preceptor will be responsible for that candidate throughout his monastic life and the candidate should, in turn, take care of his Preceptor as if he was his father. Thus the ceremony continues with the candidate choosing his Preceptor, and the Preceptor agreeing.

The candidate is then briefly instructed about the ceremony and given his new name, a monk's name to always remind him of his new life's purpose. He is sent to stand outside of the gathering of monks and then two senior monks are chosen to go out and question the candidate on his suitability to be a monk. They ask him if he has any infectious diseases, if he is a human being (to prevent nagas), a man, a freeman (to prevent someone on the run from the police), without debt, free from government service, that he has his parent's consent, he is over 20 years of age, that he has his bowl and robes, and that he has chosen a Preceptor. Having successfully examined the candidate, the senior monks return to the gathering of monks, inform the monks of the examination and then call the candidate back into the gathering. The candidate is asked the same questions again within the gathering just to make sure.

One cannot be forced to be a monk against one's wishes and so, in the next part of the ceremony, the candidate makes a formal request to the Sangha to be ordained as a monk. Now the crucial part of the ceremony begins, wherein the whole Sangha formally agree to accept him as a monk. If this part of the ceremony is performed incorrectly, the ordination is invalid.

All the monks within the agreed monastic boundary (*SIMA*) must be present and sitting within arms length of each other. Then two senior monks make a formal announcement to the gathering that the candidate has requested ordination and has been found suitable to become a monk. They continue by proposing three times that he be admitted as a monk. Should any monk in the gathering object to the ordination during these three proposals then the ordination is stopped and the candidate fails to be a monk. If no monk objects, at the end of the third proposal the candidate becomes a monk.

The time has to be noted because the new monk's seniority will be counted from that time. Another monk ordained even a few seconds before him will sit ahead on the line.

The Preceptor will then usually instruct the new monk on the four disrobing offences (sexual intercourse, stealing, murder and falsely claiming high attainments), and the four basic needs of a monk (food gained on alms round, robes made of rags, a shelter under a tree, and medicines made from urine), adding that anything more than this is to be regarded throughout his monk's life as an unnecessary luxury! With this lesson in the four dangers to his monkhood and the encouragement in frugality, the ceremony comes to an end.

In spite of this instruction in monastic frugality, parents and well-wishers often continue by offering gifts to the new monk! Having received the gifts, however, he can later give them away if he wishes! After all, ordaining as a monk is all about letting go.

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