

# The Exploring Monastic Life HANDBOOK



By  
The Sravasti Abbey  
Community



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*Having a “monastic mind” benefits our Dharma practice whether we are monastics or lay practitioners. A monastic mind is one that is humble, imbued with the Buddhist worldview, dedicated to cultivating mindfulness, clear knowing, love, compassion, wisdom, and other good qualities. Being mindful of the kindness I have received from all sentient beings, I will relate to them with patience, kindness, and compassion. I will be mindful of my precepts and values and will cultivate clear knowing of my thoughts and feelings, as well as how I speak and act. I will take care to act and speak at suitable times and in appropriate ways, abandoning idle talk and disruptive movements. With respect for others and confidence in my good qualities, I will be humble and easy for others to speak to. In all these activities, I will endeavor to remember impermanence and the emptiness of inherent existence and to act with bodhicitta.*



## INTRODUCTION

Welcome! We rejoice that you're making time and effort to explore your spiritual aspirations more deeply.

Many people come for the Exploring Monastic Life program at varying stages in their contemplation about whether a monastic life is for them. We hope this booklet will provide guidance and resources for your process of discovery.

While at Sravasti Abbey, you'll receive a wealth of teachings from Venerable Thubten Chodron and through your interactions with monastics and other course participants. There's a lot to absorb and digest! Mindful of that, we've put together this booklet with key resources on monastic life that you can read and reflect on during and after your time here, coming back to what resonates with you again and again.

Ordination is not a matter to rush into, nor is there one "right" conclusion to come to. We each need to practice in a way that works for us in this life.

The process of exploring the meaning and purpose of monastic life, and how you wish to pursue your spiritual practice right now, is invaluable. It will help you to get to know yourself better and provide you with the tools to progressively cultivate your potential to attain full awakening for the benefit of all beings.

May this handbook be a source of inspiration for you,

The Sravasti Abbey Community



The 21st annual Western Buddhist Monastic Gathering, held at Sravasti Abbey in October, 2015.

## HISTORY OF SRAVASTI ABBEY

The seeds for Sravasti Abbey were planted in 1993 at a Western Buddhist Teachers' Conference with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There, Venerable Thubten Chodron and other Western monastics shared openly about the difficulties that they faced in the West, where there is little understanding and support for Buddhist monks and nuns.

By the end of [Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's presentation](#), His Holiness wept. He told the Western monastics not to wait for the Tibetans to provide for them, but to go ahead and start their own monasteries. You'll find [a video of their historic meeting here](#). This was a turning point for Venerable Chodron and her dream of developing a Buddhist monastic community.

His Holiness' words gave Venerable Chodron the confidence to work towards creating a community where Western monks and nuns could live and practice together, without having to worry about obtaining the four requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

Co-organizing the [Life as a Buddhist Nun conference](#) in 1996, where Chinese and Tibetan monastics taught the Vinaya to Western nuns, also helped her to see how a Western monastic community might take shape. Venerable Chodron submitted a list of names for a future monastery to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and [he chose "Sravasti Abbey."](#)

With a name from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, there was no turning back. After a false start in Missouri, Venerable Chodron's Dharma students in Idaho began helping her to search for land nearby to build a monastery.

After attempts to found Sravasti Abbey in Missouri and Idaho, Venerable Chodron first viewed the 240 acre property near Newport, WA in August of 2003. Within a few months, the purchase was made and Venerable Chodron moved in with her two cats, Manjushri and Acala. Some of Venerable Chodron's students from Seattle, where she had been the spiritual advisor to Dharma Friendship Foundation for 10 years, formed Friends of Sravasti Abbey (FOSA) to support the Abbey's development. It's important to note that there were no big donors or backing organization that made this happen, but rather many, many hands helping in small ways.

Venerable Chodron had articulated the key principles that would steer the Abbey's course for residents and guests to develop a [Monastic's Mind](#). Over numerous meetings, FOSA drew up operating systems that are still in place. Many of the core members eventually moved to the Abbey. Some of them ordained as monastics and dedicated their lives to develop the Abbey and the Dharma in the West.

In the first years, several of Venerable Chodron's teachers came to bless the land, including Khensur Wangdak Rinpoche. He declared happily, "It's very fertile here. This place could support 10,000 monastics!"

Over the years, the Sravasti Abbey community has grown steadily, necessitating the construction of more buildings to house an increasing number of residents and guests. We [celebrated our 10th anniversary](#) in October 2013; moved into the new Chenrezig Hall, which has a commercial kitchen and more rooms for guests, later that year; and purchased Tara's Refuge, which will serve as a buffer for the Abbey's future growth, in 2015.

In many ways, Sravasti Abbey is the first of its kind. This Buddhist monastery in the West has found ways to adhere to the pure Dharma, adopting customs from the Tibetan and Chinese traditions to fit within US culture—such as the practice of prayers and meditation in English, and upholding gender equality.

Join us in creating the causes for the Dharma to continue to flourish in the West, to create peace in a chaotic world.



## GETTING STARTED...

This section starts at square one: exploring your aspiration for ordination. We have included two articles that give insight into Venerable Chodron's journey to monasticism and how she has navigated the challenges and joys of ordained life, such that over forty years later, she is still in robes.

To close, we have included an exchange between an aspiring monastic and her ordained friend, which gives insight into what issues might come up for you as you explore monastic life.



Venerable Chodron at her bhikshuni ordination in Taiwan in 1986.

## **You're Becoming a What?**

**By Venerable Thubten Chodron**

“Once upon a time...” When people ask me to talk about my life, I usually start with, “Once upon a time....” Why? Because this life is like a dream bubble, a temporary thing—it is here and then gone, happening once upon a time.

I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, doing everything most middle-class American children do: going to school and on family vacations, playing with my friends and taking music lessons. My teenage years coincided with the Vietnam War and the protests against racial and gender discrimination that were widespread in America at that time. These events had a profound effect on an inquisitive and thoughtful child, and I began to question: Why do people fight wars in order to live in peace? Why are people prejudiced against those who are different from them? Why do people die? Why are people in the richest country on earth unhappy when they have money and possessions? Why do people who love each other later get divorced? Why is there suffering? What is the meaning of life if all we do is die at the end? What can I do to help others?

Like every child who wants to learn, I started asking other people—teachers, parents, rabbis, ministers, priests. My family was Jewish, though not very religious. The community I grew up in was Christian, so I knew the best and worst of both religions. My Sunday School teachers were not able to explain in a way that satisfied me why God created living beings and what the purpose of our life was. My boyfriend was Catholic, so I asked the priests too. But I could not understand why a compassionate God would punish people, and why, if he were omnipotent, didn't he do something to stop the suffering in the world? My Christian friends said not to question, just have faith and then I would be saved. However, that contradicted my scientific education in which investigation and understanding were emphasized as the way to wisdom.

Both Judaism and Christianity instruct “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” which certainly makes sense. But no one said how to, and I did not see much brotherly love in practice. Rather, Christian history is littered with the corpses of thousands of people who have been killed in the name of Christ. Some of my schoolteachers were open to discussing these issues, but they too had no answers. In the end, some people with kind intentions told me, “Don't think so much. Go out with your friends and enjoy life.” Still, it seemed to me that there must be more to life than having fun, working, making money, having a family, growing old and dying. For lack of a sensible and comprehensive philosophy or religion to guide my life, I became a devout atheist.

After graduating from University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), I traveled, married, returned to school to do graduate work in Education and taught elementary school in the Los Angeles City Schools. During summer vacation in 1975, I saw a poster at a bookstore about a meditation course taught by two Tibetan Buddhist monks. Having nothing else to do and not expecting much, I went. I was quite surprised when the teachings by Venerable Lama Yeshe and Venerable Zopa Rinpoche proposed answers to the questions that had been with me since childhood. Reincarnation and karma explain how we got here. The fact that attachment, anger and ignorance are the source of all our problems explains why people do not get along and why we are dissatisfied. The importance of having a pure motivation shows that there is an alternative to hypocrisy. The fact that it is possible for us to abandon completely our faults and develop our good qualities limitlessly gives purpose to life and shows how each of us can become a person who is able to be of effective, wise, and compassionate service to others.

The more I investigated what the Buddha said, the more I found that it corresponded to my life experiences. We were taught practical techniques for dealing with anger and attachment, jealousy and pride, and when I tried them, they helped my daily life go better. Buddhism respects our intelligence and does not demand blind faith. We are encouraged to reflect and examine. Also, it

emphasizes changing our attitudes and our heart, not simply having a religious appearance on the outside. All this appealed to me.

There was a nun leading the meditations at this course, and it impressed me that she was happy, friendly, and natural, not stiff and “holy” like many Christian nuns I had met as a child. But I thought that being a nun was strange—I liked my husband far too much to even consider it! I began to examine my life from the perspective of the Dharma, and the Buddha’s teachings resonated within me as I thought deeply about our human potential and the value of this life. There was no getting around the fact that death was certain, the time of death was uncertain, and that at death, our possessions, friends, relatives and body—everything that ordinary people spend their entire life living for—do not and cannot come with us. Knowing that the Dharma was something extremely important and not wanting to miss the opportunity to learn it, I quit my job and went to Nepal where Lama Yeshe and Zopa Rinpoche had a monastery and Dharma center.

Once there, I participated in the community life of work, teachings and meditation. The Dharma affected me more and more deeply as I used it to look at our present human situation and our potential. It was clear that my mind was overwhelmed by attachment, anger and ignorance. Everything I did was grossly or subtly under the influence of self-centeredness. Due to the karmic imprints collected on my mindstream through my unrestrained thoughts and actions, it was clear that a good rebirth was extremely unlikely. And if I really wanted to help others, that it was impossible to do if most of my attitudes were self-centered, ignorant and unskillful.

I wanted to change, and the question was how? Although many people can live a lay life and practice the Dharma, I saw that for me it would be impossible. My afflictions—ignorance, anger and clinging attachment—were too strong and my lack of self-discipline too great. I needed to make some clear, firm ethical decisions about what I would and would not do, and I needed a disciplined lifestyle that would support, not distract me from, spiritual practice. The monastic lifestyle, with the ethical discipline its precepts provide, was a viable option to fulfill those needs.

My family did not understand why I wanted to take ordination. They knew little about Buddhism and were not spiritually inclined. They did not comprehend how I could leave a promising career, marriage, friends, family, financial security and so forth in order to be a nun. I listened and considered all of their objections. But when I reflected upon them in light of the Dharma, my decision to become a nun only became firmer. It became more and more clear to me that happiness does not come from having material possessions, good reputation, loved ones, physical beauty. Having these while young does not guarantee a happy old age, a peaceful death, and certainly not a good rebirth. If my mind remained continually attached to external things and relationships, how could I develop my potential and help others? It saddened me that my family did not understand, but my decision remained firm, and I believed that in the long-run I would be able to benefit others more through holding monastic ethical restraints. Ordination does not mean rejecting one’s family. Rather, I wanted to enlarge my family and develop impartial love and compassion for all beings. With the passage of time, my parents came to accept my being Buddhist and being a nun. I did not try to convince them through discussion or with reasoning, but simply tried as best as I could to live the Buddha’s teachings, especially those on patience. Through that they saw that not only am I happy, but also that what I do is beneficial to others.

My husband had ambivalent feelings. He was a Buddhist, and the wisdom side of him supported my decision, while the attachment side bemoaned it. He used the Dharma to help him through this difficult time. He has subsequently remarried and is still active in the Buddhist community. We get along well and see each other from time to time. He is supportive of my being a nun, and I appreciate this very much.

## Taking Ordination

In the spring of 1977, with much gratitude and respect for the Triple Gem and my spiritual teachers, I took ordination from Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, the senior tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. People ask if I have ever regretted this. Not at all. I earnestly pray to the Triple Gem to keep my ordination purely and be able to be ordained in future lives as well. Having ethical restraints is not restricting. Rather, it is liberating, for we free ourselves from acting in ways that, deep in our hearts, we do not want to. We take the ethical restraints freely; nothing is forced or imposed. The discipline is voluntarily undertaken. Because we endeavor to live simply—without many possessions, entangled emotional relationships or preoccupation with our looks—we have more time for the inner exploration Dharma practice requires and for service-oriented activities. If I had a career, husband, children, many hobbies, an extensive social life and social obligations, it would be difficult for me to travel to teach or to receive teachings as much as I do now. The ethical restraints also clarify our relationships; for example, my relationships with men are much more straightforward and honest now. And I am much more comfortable with my body. It is a vehicle for Dharma practice and service and so must be respected and kept healthy. But wearing robes and shaving my head, I am not concerned with my appearance. If people like me, it will have to be because of inner beauty, not external beauty. These benefits of simplicity become evident in our lives as we live according to the precepts.

Our ethical restraints center around four root precepts: to avoid killing, stealing, sexual relations, and lying about our spiritual attainments. Other precepts deal with a variety of aspects of our life: our relationships with other monastics and lay people, what and when we eat and drink, our clothes and possessions. Some precepts protect us from distractions that destroy our mindful awareness. My personal experience has been that much internal growth has come from trying to live according to the precepts. They make us much more aware of our actions and their effects on those around us. To keep the precepts is no easy job—it requires mindfulness and continuous application of the antidotes to the afflictions. In short, it necessitates the transformation of old, unproductive emotional, verbal and physical habits. Precepts force us to stop living “on automatic,” and encourage us to use our time wisely and to make our lives meaningful. Our work as monastics is to purify our minds and develop our good qualities in order to make a positive contribution to the welfare of all living beings in this and all future lives. There is much joy in ordained life, and it comes from looking honestly at our own condition as well as at our potential.

Ordained life is not clear sailing, however. Our afflictions follow us wherever we go. They do not disappear simply because we take ethical restraints, shave our head and wear robes. Monastic life is a commitment to working with our garbage as well as our beauty. It puts us right up against the contradictory parts of ourselves. For example, one part of us feels there is a deep meaning to life, great human potential and has a sincere wish to actualize these. The other part of us seeks amusement, financial security, reputation, approval and sexual pleasure. We want to have one foot in nirvana (liberation) and the other in samsara (the cycle of constantly recurring problems). We want to change and go deeper in our spiritual practice, but we do not want to give up the things we are attached to. To remain a monastic, we have to deal with these various sides of ourselves. We have to clarify our priorities in life. We have to commit to going deeper and peeling away the many layers of hypocrisy, clinging and fear inside ourselves. We are challenged to jump into empty space and to live our faith and aspiration. Although life as a monastic is not always smooth—not because the Dharma is difficult, but because the afflictions are sneaky and tenacious—with effort, there is progress and happiness.

While Catholic nuns enter a particular Order—for example, a teaching order, a contemplative order, a service order—Buddhist nuns have no prescribed living situation or work. As long as we keep the precepts, we can live in a variety of ways. During the more than forty years I have been

ordained, I have lived alone and in community. Sometimes I studied, other times I taught; sometimes I worked, other times done intensive, silent retreat; sometimes I lived in the city, other times in the countryside; sometimes in Asia, other times in the West.

Buddhist teachers often talk about the importance of lineage. There is a certain energy or inspiration that is passed down from mentor to aspirant. Although previously I was not one to believe in this, during the years of my ordination, it has become evident through experience. When my energy wanes, I remember the lineage of strong, resourceful women and men who have learned, practiced and actualized the Buddha's teachings for 2,500 years. At the time of ordination, I entered into their lineage and their life examples renew my inspiration. No longer afloat in the sea of spiritual ambiguity or discouragement, I feel rooted in a practice that works and in a goal that is attainable (even though one has to give up all grasping to attain it!).

As one of the first generation of Western nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there are certain challenges that I face. For example, because our Tibetan teachers are refugees from their own country, they cannot support their Western ordained disciples. Their primary concern is to rebuild their monasteries in exile and take care of the Tibetan refugee community. Therefore, Western monastics have no ready-made monasteries or support system. We are expected to provide for ourselves financially, although it is extremely difficult to maintain our ethical restraints if we have to put on civilian clothes and work in the city. If we stay in India to study and practice, there are the challenges of illness, visa problems, political unrest and so forth. If we live in the West, people often look at us askance. Sometimes we hear a child say, "Look, Mommy, that lady has no hair!" or a sympathetic stranger approaches us and says, "Don't worry, you look lovely now. And when the chemo is over, your hair will grow back." In our materialistic society people query, "What do you monastics produce? How does sitting in meditation contribute to society?" The challenges of being a Buddhist monastic in the West are many and varied, and all of them give us a chance to deepen our practice.

### **Being a Western Monastic in the Tibetan Tradition**

A great part of Buddhist practice is concerned with overcoming our grasping at an identity, both our innate feeling of self and that which is artificially created by the labels and categories that pertain to us this lifetime. Yet I am writing about being a Western nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a phrase that contains many categories. On a deeper level, there is nothing to grasp to about being Western, a nun, a Buddhist, or from the Tibetan tradition. In fact, the essence of the monastic lifestyle is to let go of clinging to such labels and identities. Yet on the conventional level, all of these categories and the experiences I have had due to them have conditioned me. I wish to share with you how these have influenced me and in doing so, will write more about my projections and afflictions than comment on the external circumstances I encountered. As limited sentient beings, our minds are often narrow, critical and attached to our own opinions, and this makes situations in our environment appear difficult. This is not to say that external circumstances and institutions never need to be challenged or changed, but that I am emphasizing the internal process of using difficult situations as a chance for practice.

Being a Westerner means I have been conditioned to believe that democracy and equality—whatever those two terms mean—are the best way for human beings to live together. Yet I have chosen to become a monastic and thus in others' eyes become associated with an institution that is seen in the West as being hierarchical. There are two challenges here: one is how I relate to the hierarchy, the other is how I am affected by Westerners who see me as part of a hierarchical institution.

In many ways the hierarchy of the monastic institution has benefited me. Being a high achiever, I have tended to be proud, to want to add my opinion to every discussion, to want to control or fix

situations that I do not like or approve of. Dharma practice itself has made me look at this tendency and to reflect before acting and speaking. In particular it has made me aware of when it is suitable to speak and when it is not. For example, as part of receiving the bhikshuni ordination in Taiwan, I participated in a 32-day training program, in which I was one of two foreigners in the 500 people being ordained. Each day we spent about 15 minutes filing from the main hall into the teaching hall. A quicker, more efficient method of moving so many people from place to place was clear to me, and I wanted to correct the waste of time and energy I saw. Yet it was also clear that I was in the role of a learner and the teachers were following a system that was tried and true. Even if I could have made my suggestion known in Chinese, no one would have been particularly interested in it. I had no alternative but to keep quiet, to do it their way and to be happy doing so. In terms of practice, this was a wonderful experience for me; one which I now treasure for the humility, open-mindedness, and acceptance it taught me.

Hierarchy in Buddhism manifests differently in the West. Sometimes race, ethnicity and culture are the discriminating factors. Some Westerners feel that if they adopt Asian cultural forms, they are practicing the Dharma. Some assume that Asians—being from far away and therefore exotic—are holy. Meanwhile, other Western practitioners grew up with Mickey Mouse like everyone else, and seem ordinary. I am not saying that Western practitioners are equal in realizations to our Asian teachers. There is no basis for such generalizations, because spiritual qualities are completely individual. However, fascination with the foreign—and therefore exotic—often obscures us from understanding what the path is. Spiritual practice means that we endeavor to transform ourselves into kind and wise people. It is not about idolizing an exotic teacher or adopting other cultural forms, but about transforming our minds. We can practice the Dharma no matter what culture we or our teacher come from; the real spiritual path cannot be seen with the eyes for it lies in the heart.

As a Westerner, I have a unique relationship with the Tibetan Buddhist religious institution. On one hand, I am a part of it because I have learned so much from the Tibetan teachers in it and have high regard for these spiritual masters and the teachings they have preserved. In addition, I am part of the monastic institution by virtue of having taken ordination and living a monastic lifestyle. On the other hand, I am not part of the Tibetan religious institution because I am a Westerner. My knowledge of Tibetan language is limited, my values at times differ from the Tibetans, my upbringing is different. Early on in my practice, when I lived primarily in the Tibetan community, I felt handicapped because I did not fit into their religious institutions. However, over the years the distinction between spiritual practice and religious institutions has become clearer to me. My commitment is to the spiritual path, not to a religious institution. Of course it would be a wonderful support to my practice to be part of a religious institution that functioned with integrity and to which I felt I really belonged, but that is not my present circumstance. I am not a full member of the Tibetan religious institutions and Western ones have either not yet been established or are too young.

Making the distinction between spiritual path and religious institution has made me see the importance of constantly checking my own motivation and loyalty. In our lives, it is essential to discriminate Dharma practice from worldly practice. It is all too easy to transplant our attachment for material possessions, reputation and praise into a Dharma situation. We become attached to our expensive and beautiful Buddha images and Dharma books; we seek reputation as a great practitioner or as the close disciple of one; we long for the praise and acceptance of our spiritual teachers and communities. We think that because we are surrounded by spiritual people, places and things, that we are also spiritual. Again, we must return to the reality that practice occurs in our hearts and minds. When we die, only our karma, our mental habits and qualities come with us.

Being a woman in the monastic institution has been interesting as well. My family believed in the equality of men and women, and since I did well in school, it was expected that I would have a successful career. The Tibetans' attitude towards nuns is substantially different from the attitudes in

my upbringing. Because the initial years of my ordination were spent in the Tibetan community, I tried to conform with their expectations for nuns. I wanted to be a good student, so during large religious gatherings I sat in the back of the assembly. I tried to speak in a low voice and did not voice my views or knowledge very much. I tried to follow well but did not initiate things. After a few years, it became obvious that this model for behavior did not fit me. My background and upbringing were completely different. Not only did I have a university education and a career, but I had been taught to be vocal, to participate, to take the initiative. The Tibetan nuns have many good qualities, but I had to acknowledge the fact that my way of thinking and behaving, although greatly modified by living in Asia, was basically Western.

In addition, I had to come to terms with the discrimination between men and women in the Tibetan religious institution. At first, the monks' advantages made me angry: in the Tibetan community, they had better education, received more financial support and were more respected than the nuns. Although among Western monastics this was not the case, when I lived in the Tibetan community, this inequality affected me. One day during a large offering ceremony at the main temple in Dharamsala, the monks, as usual, stood up to make the personal offering to His Holiness. I became angry that the monks had this honor, while the nuns had to sit quietly and meditate. In addition, the monks, not the nuns, passed out the offerings to the greater assembly. Then a thought shot through my mind: if the nuns were to stand up to make the offering to His Holiness and pass out the offerings while the monks meditated, I would be angry because the women always had to do the work and the men did not. At that point, my anger at others' prejudice and gender discrimination completely evaporated.

Having my abilities as a woman challenged by whatever real or perceived prejudice I encountered in the Asian monastic system, and Asian society in general (not to mention the prejudice in Western societies), has been good for my practice. I have had to look deeply within myself, learn to evaluate myself realistically, let go of attachment to others' opinions and approval and my defensive reactions to them, and establish a valid basis for self-confidence. I still encounter prejudice against women in the East and in the West, and while I try to do what is practical and possible to alleviate it, my anger and intolerance are largely absent now.

### **Being a Buddhist Monastic in the West**

Being a monastic in the West has its interesting points as well. Some Westerners, especially those who grew up in Protestant countries or who are disillusioned with the Catholic Church, do not like monasticism. They view it as hierarchical, sexist, and repressive. Some people think monastics are lazy and only consume society's resources instead of helping to produce them. Others think that because someone chooses to be celibate, they are escaping from the emotional challenges of intimate relationships and are sexually repressed. These views are common even among some non-monastic Dharma teachers and long-time practitioners in the West. At times this has been difficult for me because, having spent many years living as a Westerner in Asian societies, I expected to feel accepted and at home in Western Dharma circles. Instead, I was marginalized by virtue of being part of the "sexist and hierarchical" monastic institution. Curiously, while women's issues are at the forefront of discussion in Western Buddhism, once one becomes a monastic, she is seen as conservative and tied to a hierarchical Asian institution, qualities disdained by many Westerners who practice Buddhism.

Again, this has been an excellent opportunity for practice. I have had to reexamine my reasons for being a monastic. The reasons remain valid and the monastic lifestyle is definitely good for me. It has become clear that my discomfort is due to being attached to others' approval, and practice means subduing this attachment.

Nevertheless, I am concerned that a variety of lifestyle options is not being presented to Western Buddhists. While many people believe the monastic model is stressed too much in Asia, we must be careful not to swing the pendulum to the other extreme and only present the householder model in the West. Because people have different dispositions and tendencies, all lifestyles must be accepted in the panorama of practitioners. There is no need to make one better and another worse, but to recognize that each of us must find what is suitable for ourselves and recognize that others may choose differently. I especially appreciated the perspective of a non-monastic Western Dharma teacher who said, “At one time or another, most of us have thought of becoming monastics—of creating a lifestyle where we have less commitments to work and family and more time to spend on practice. For whatever reason we decided not to take that route now, but I treasure that part of myself that is attracted to that lifestyle. And I am glad that other people live that.”

In contrast to those who depreciate us for being monastics, some people, both Western and Asian, have very different projections on monastics. Sometimes they think we must be nearly enlightened; other times they liken us to the strict authority figures they encountered in religious institutions as children. Being simply a human being, I find it challenging to deal with both of these projections. It is isolating when people expect us to be something we are not because of our role. All Buddhists are not yet Buddhas, and monastics, too, have emotional ups and downs and need friends. Similarly, most of us do not wish to be regarded as authority figures; we prefer discussion and the airing of doubts.

I believe other Western practitioners share some of the challenges that I face. One is establishing a safe ambiance in which we can talk openly about their doubts and personal difficulties in the practice. In general this is not needed for Asian practitioners because they grew up in a Buddhist environment and thus lack many of the doubts Westerners have because we have changed religions. Also, Westerners relate to their emotions differently and our culture emphasizes growth and development as an individual in a way that Asian cultures do not. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage in spiritual practice. Being aware of our emotions enables us to know our mental processes. Yet we are often aware of our emotions in an unproductive way that increases our self-centeredness and becomes a hindrance on the path. There is the danger that we become preoccupied with our feelings and forget to apply the antidotes taught in the teachings to transform them. Instead of meditating on the Dharma, we meditate on our problems and feelings; we psychologize on the meditation cushion. Instead, we must contemplate the Buddha’s teachings and apply them to our lives so they have a transformative effect.

Similarly, the Western emphasis on individuality can be both an asset and a hindrance to practice. On one hand, we want to grow as a person; we want to tap into and develop our potential to become a Buddha. We are willing to commit ourselves to a spiritual path that is not widely known or appreciated by our friends, family and colleagues. On the other hand, our individuality can make it difficult for us to form spiritual communities in which we need to adapt to the needs and wishes of others. We easily fall into comparing ourselves with other practitioners or competing with them. We tend to think of what we can get out of spiritual practice, or what a spiritual teacher or community can do for us, whereas practice is much more about giving than getting, more about cherishing others than ourselves. His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about two senses of self: one is unhealthy—the sense of a solid self to which we grasp and become preoccupied. The other is necessary along the path—the valid sense of self-confidence that is based on recognizing our potential to be enlightened. We need to rethink the meaning of being an individual, freeing ourselves from the unhealthy sense of self and developing valid self-confidence that enables us to genuinely care for others.

As Buddhism comes to the West, it is important that the monastic lifestyle is preserved as a way of practice that benefits some people directly and the entire society indirectly. For those individuals who find strict ethical discipline and simplicity helpful for practice, monasticism is wonderful. The



presence of individual monastics and monastic communities in the West also affects the society. They act as an example of people living their spiritual practice together, working through the ups and downs in their own minds as well as the continuous changes that naturally occur when people live together. Some people have remarked to me that although they do not wish or are not yet prepared to become a monastic, the thought that others have taken this road inspires them and strengthens their practice. Sometimes just seeing a monastic can make us slow down from our busyness and reflect for a moment, “What is important in my life? What is the purpose of spiritual paths and religions?” These questions are important to ask ourselves; they are the essence of being a human being with the potential to become a Buddha.



## **A Monastic's Mind**

*A talk given at Tushita Meditation Centre, Dharamsala, India where Venerable Chodron addressed issues about ordination not usually covered by Tibetan teachers.*

### **The Value of Living as a Monastic and Abiding in Ethical Precepts**

You have probably already heard about the benefits of ordination. I would like to talk about them now in a more personal way—how they play out in our lives. I clearly see the benefits of living as a monastic in my own life. Whenever I do the death meditation and imagine dying, looking back over my life and evaluating what has been of benefit in my life, keeping ordination always comes out as the most valuable thing I've done. Doing tantric practice, teaching the Dharma, writing books—none of these come out as the most valuable thing in my life. I think keeping ordination comes out so important because it has provided the foundation for me to do everything else. Without ordination, my mind would have been all over the place. But ordination gives us guidelines and direction. It provides a way to train our mind and steer it in a positive direction. On the basis of that, we are able to do all other Dharma practices. Ordination gives us useful structure in our lives.

It's helpful and important for us to think of the value of each of our precepts. Let's take the precept to avoid killing. What would our lives be like if we didn't have that precept and could take others' lives? We could go out to restaurants and eat lobster. We could hunt and use insecticides. Are these activities we want to do? Then think: how has keeping that precept affected my life? How has it improved how I relate to others and how I feel about myself? Do the same reflection for the precepts to avoid stealing and sexual contact. What would our life be like if we didn't have those precepts and engaged in those actions? What is our life like because we live in those precepts? Go through each precept and reflect on it in this way.

Sometimes our mind gets restless, thinking, "I wish I didn't have these precepts. I'd like to go out and find some nice guy and smoke a joint and..." Then think, "What would my life be like if I did that?" Play out the whole scene in your meditation. You go to McLeod Ganj, have a good time... and?! How would you feel afterwards? Then, when we consider that we didn't do that, we see the value of the precepts, how precious each precept is because it keeps us from wandering all over doing things that just leave us more dissatisfied.

If we think about each precept in that way, we'll understand its meaning and purpose. When we understand how it helps us in our practice, the inspiration to live in accord with that precept will come based on our own experience. We'll know that precepts are not rules telling us what we can't do. If we see the precepts as rules saying, "I can't do this and I can't do that," we'll probably disrobe after awhile because we don't want to live in prison. But, the precepts are not prison. Our own berserky mind—especially the mind of attachment that wants to go here and there, that wants more and better, grasping everything—is prison. When we see the problems that the mind of attachment causes us, we understand that precepts prevent us from doing what we don't want to do anyway. We won't think, "I really want to do all these things and I can't now because I'm a monastic!" Rather, we'll feel, "I don't want to do these things, and the precepts reinforce my determination not to do them."

If we see our ordination in this way, being ordained will make sense to us and we'll be glad to be a monastic. Being happy as a monastic is important. Nobody wants to be unhappy, and being a monastic is difficult if we're miserable. Thus we need to make sure we have a happy mind. To do this, we can ask ourselves, "What is happiness? What creates happiness?" There's the happiness we get from sense pleasures and the happiness we experience from transforming our minds through practicing Dharma. One part of us thinks that sense pleasures are going to make us happy. We have

to really check if this is the case. Or, does chasing after the things of this life—food, sex, approval, reputation, sports, and so on—only make us more dissatisfied?

Ordination isn't shaving our head and wearing robes, while we continue to act the same way we did before. The precepts are a support that helps us to keep our practice strong. The external changes in dress and hair remind us of internal changes—the changes in ourselves that got us to the point of wishing to receive ordination and also the changes in ourselves that we aspire to make as ordained people. The more we use our ordination to support our practice and the more committed we are to transforming our minds, the happier we'll be as monastics.

## **The Rebellious Mind**

Sometimes, as we practice as a monastic, our mind becomes unhappy or rebellious. It may happen that we want to do something but there's a precept prohibiting it. There may be some structure or prescribed behavior of the sangha that we don't like, for example, serving others or following the instructions of those ordained before us. Sometimes we may look up and down the line of sangha, find fault with everyone, and think, "I can't stand being with these people anymore!" When such things happen, when our mind gets in a bad mood and complains constantly, our usual tendency is to blame something outside. "If only these people acted differently! If only these restrictive precepts weren't there! If only these monastic traditions weren't the way they are!"

I spent many years doing this, and it was a waste of time. Then something changed, and my practice became interesting because when my mind bumped into external things that I didn't like, I began to look inward and question, "What's going on in me? Why is my mind being so reactive? What lies behind all these reactions and negative emotions?"

For example, the sangha has the tradition of sitting in ordination order. Our mind may rail, "The person in front of me is stupid! Why should I sit behind him or her?" We could go on and on complaining about "the system," but that doesn't help our bad mood. Instead, we can look inside and ask ourselves, "What's the button inside me that's getting pushed? Why am I so resistant to doing things this way?" Then, it becomes clearer, "Oh, I'm suffering from arrogance!" Then, we can apply the antidote to arrogance, for example, by reflecting on the kindness of others. "If I were the best one in the world, if I sat at the head of the row, then it would be a sorry situation because all that people would have to look to for inspiration would be me. Although I have something to offer, I'm certainly not the best. Besides, I don't want people having grandiose expectations of me. I'm glad some others are better than me, have kept precepts longer, and have more virtue. I can depend on those people for inspiration, guidance, and instruction. I don't have to be the best. What a relief!" Thinking in this way, we respect those senior to us and rejoice that they are there.

Working with our mind when it is resistant or rebellious makes our practice very interesting and valuable. Practicing Dharma doesn't mean chanting "La, la, la," visualizing this deity here and that one there, imagining this absorbing here and that radiating there. We can do lots of that without changing our mind! What is really going to change our mind is lamrim meditation and thought transformation practice. These practices enable us to effectively and practically deal with the rubbish that comes up in our mind.

Instead of blaming something outside ourselves when we have a problem, we need to recognize the disturbing attitude or negative emotion that is functioning in our mind and making us unhappy, uncooperative, and closed. Then we can apply the antidote to it. This is what practicing Dharma is all about! Keeping our monastic precepts requires a firm foundation in the lamrim. Tantra practice without lamrim and thought transformation is not going to do it.

For this reason, His Holiness the Dalai Lama continuously emphasizes analytical, or checking, meditation. We need to use reasoning to develop our positive emotions and attitudes. During the

Mind-Life conference I attended in 2000, he emphasized this again, saying that prayer and aspiration are not enough for deep transformation; reasoning is necessary. Transformation comes from studying the lamrim, thinking about the topics, and doing analytical meditation on them. With a firm grounding in lamrim, we'll be able to work with our mind no matter what is going on in it or around us. When we do this, our Dharma practice becomes so tasty! We don't get bored practicing. It becomes very exciting and fascinating.

## **Self-Acceptance and Compassion for Ourselves**

In the process of working with our mind, it's important to give ourselves some space and not expect ourselves to be perfect because we're a monastic. After we ordain, it's easy to think, "I should act like Rinpoche." Especially if we have a teacher like Zopa Rinpoche who doesn't sleep, we compare ourselves to him and think there's something wrong with us because we have to sleep at night. "I should stop sleeping and practice all night. If I only had more compassion, I could do this." We become judgmental with ourselves, "Look at how selfish I am. What a disaster I am! I can't practice! Everybody else practices so well, while I'm such a mess." We become very self-critical and down on ourselves.

Being like this is a total waste of time. It's completely unrealistic and has no benefit at all. Nothing positive comes from beating up on ourselves! Absolutely none. I spent a lot of time being very judgmental of myself, thinking that doing this was good and right, and I can tell you from my experience that nothing useful comes from it.

What is a realistic attitude? We have to notice our defects. We notice our weak areas and faults and have some acceptance of ourselves. Accepting ourselves doesn't mean we're not going to try to change. We still recognize a certain trait as disadvantageous, a negative quality that we have to work on. But, at the same time, we have some gentleness and compassion for ourselves. "Yes, I have this negative trait. Here it is. It's not going to disappear completely in the next ten minutes or even in the next year. I'm going to have to work with this for a while. I accept this and know that I can and will do it."

Thus we have some basic self-acceptance, instead of expecting ourselves to be some kind of perfect human being. When we have that basic self-acceptance, we can start applying the antidotes to our faults and change our life. We have the self-confidence that we can do this. When we lack that self-acceptance and instead beat up on ourselves, saying, "I'm not good because I can't do this. This person is better than me. I'm such a wreck!" we then push ourselves, thinking, "I've got to be a perfect monastic," and get tight inside. This is not a useful strategy for self-transformation.

Self-acceptance, on the other hand, has a quality I call "transparency." That is, we're not afraid of our faults; we can talk about our weak points without feeling ashamed or mortified. Our mind is compassionate with ourselves, "I have this fault. The people around me know I have it. It's not some big secret!" This transparency enables us to be more open about our faults. We can talk about them without concealing them and without feeling humiliated when we do so. Trying to cover up our faults is useless. When we live with others, we know each other's faults very well. We have all 84,000 afflictions and negative emotions. Others know it, so we might as well admit it. It's no big deal, so we don't have to pretend that we have only 83,999. In admitting our faults to ourselves and others, we also realize that we're all in the same boat. We can't feel sorry for ourselves because we are more deluded than anyone else. We don't have a greater or lesser number of afflictions and negative emotions than other sentient beings.

For example, at the Mind-Life Conference in 2000, I watched my pride come up, followed by anger and jealousy. I had to admit, "I've been ordained twenty-three years and I'm still angry, jealous, and proud. Everybody knows it. I'm not going to try to fool anybody and say these

emotions aren't there." If I recognize them, don't blame myself for having them, and am not afraid to acknowledge them in front of you, then I'll be able to work with them and gradually let them go. But, if I beat up on myself, saying, "I'm so proud. That's terrible! How could I be like that?!" then I'll try to cover up these defects. By doing so, I won't apply the antidotes to these negative emotions because I'm pretending I don't have them. Or, I'll get stuck in my self-judgment and won't think to apply the antidotes. Sometimes, we think that criticizing and hating ourselves are the antidotes to negative emotions, but they're not. They just consume our time and make us feel miserable.

One of the values of living with other sangha is that we can be open with each other. We don't have to pretend that we have everything figured out when we know we don't. If we're sentient beings, we don't have to have it all together! Having faults is nothing surprising, nothing unnatural. As sangha, we can support and encourage each other as we each work with our own problems. I'm telling you this because I spent many years thinking I couldn't talk with fellow monks and nuns about my problems because then they'd know what a horrible practitioner I was! I think they knew that anyway, but I was trying to pretend that they didn't. And so, we seldom talked with each other about what was going on inside. That was a loss.

It's important to talk and be open with each other. For example, we admit, "I'm having an attack of anger," and avoid blaming another person for being mean. We stop trying to get others to side with us against him. Instead we recognize, "I'm suffering from anger right now" or "I'm suffering from loneliness." Then we can talk with other sangha. As Dharma friends, they will give us support, encouragement, and advice. This helps us to resolve our problems and progress along the path.

Sometimes when we have a problem, we feel we're the only one in the world who has that problem. But when we can talk about it with fellow monastics, we recognize that we're not alone, trapped in our own shell, fighting an internal civil war. Everyone is going through similar stuff. Realizing that enables us to open up with others. They can share how they deal with a similar problem and we can tell them how we work with what they're going through right now. Thus we support each other, instead of holding things inside, thinking no one will understand.

## **A Monastic's Mind**

In a discussion with Amchok Rinpoche several years ago, he said to me, "The most important thing as a monastic is to have a monastic's mind." I've thought about this over the years and have concluded that when we have a "monastic's mind," things will naturally flow. Our whole way of being is as a monastic. We can think about what a "monastic's mind" means for years. Here are some of my reflections.

One of the first qualities of a monastic's mind is humility. Humility has to do with transparency, which is related to self-acceptance. With humility, our mind relaxes. "I don't have to be the best. I don't have to prove myself. I'm open to learning from others. It makes me feel good to see others' good qualities."

Humility can be difficult for us Westerners because we were raised in cultures where humility is seen as weakness. People in the West pull out their business cards, "Here I am. This is what I've accomplished. This is what I do. This is how great I am. You should notice me, think I'm wonderful, and respect me." We were raised to make others notice us and praise us. But this is not a monastic's mind.

As monastics, our goal is internal transformation. We're not trying to create a magnificent image that we're going to sell to everyone. We have to let that seep into our mind and not worry so much about what other people think. Instead, we should be concerned with how our behavior influences other people. Do you see the difference between the two? If I'm worried about what you think of me, that's the eight worldly concerns. I want to look good so that you'll say nice things to me and will praise me to others so that I'll have a good reputation. That's the eight worldly concerns.

On the other hand, as monastics, we represent the Dharma. Other people will be inspired or discouraged by the way we act. We're trying to develop bodhicitta, so if we care about others, we don't want to do things that will make them lose faith in the Dharma. We do this not because we're trying to create a good image and have a good reputation but because we genuinely care about others. If I hang out in chai shops all day or if I shout from one end of the courtyard to the other, other people will think poorly of the Dharma and the sangha. If I jostle people when I go into teachings or get up in the middle and stomp out, they're going to think, "I'm new to the Dharma. But I don't want to become like that!" Thus, in order to prevent this, we become concerned about the way our behavior affects other people because we genuinely care about others, not because we're attached to our reputation. We must be clear about the difference between the two.

A monastic's mind has humility. It also is concerned for the Dharma and others' faith in the Dharma. Generally, when we are first ordained, we don't feel this concern for the Dharma and for others' faith. New monastics generally think, "What can the Dharma give to me? Here I am. I'm so confused. What can Buddhism do for me?" Or, we think, "I'm so sincere in wanting to attain awakening. I really want to practice. Therefore others should help me to do this."

As we remain ordained longer and longer, we come to understand how our behavior affects other people, and we begin to feel some responsibility for the continuity of the teachings. These precious teachings, which have helped us so much, began with the Buddha. They were passed down through a lineage of practitioners over the centuries. Because those people practiced well and remained together in communities, we are fortunate enough to sit on the crest of the wave. We feel so much positive energy coming from the past. When we receive ordination, it's like sitting on the crest of the wave, floating along on the virtue that all the sangha before us have created for over 2,500 years. After some time, we begin to think, "I've got to contribute some virtue so that future generations can meet the Dharma and other people around me can benefit." We begin to feel more responsible for the existence and spread of the teachings.

I'm sharing my experience. I don't expect you to feel this way now. It took me many years to recognize that I was no longer a child in the Dharma, to feel that I am an adult and so need to be responsible and give to others. Often we come into Dharma circles or into the sangha thinking, "What can I get out of the sangha? How is being with these monks and nuns going to benefit me?" We think, "We're going to have a monastery? How will it help me?" Hopefully after some time our attitude changes and we begin to say, "What can I give to the community? How can I help the sangha? What can I give to the individuals in the community? What can I give to the lay people?" Our focus begins to change from "What can I get?" to "What can I give?" We talk so much about bodhicitta and being of benefit to everybody, but actually putting this into practice in our daily life takes time.

Slowly, our attitude begins to change. If we look at our ordination as a consumer and think, "What can I get out of this?" we're going to be unhappy because we'll never get enough. People will never treat us well enough or give us enough respect. However, we'll be much more satisfied as monastics if we start to ask ourselves, "What can I give to this 2,500-year-old community? How can I help it and the individuals in it so that they can continue to benefit society in the future? What can I give to the laypeople?" Not only will we feel more content inside ourselves when we change our attitude, but we'll also be able to make a positive contribution to the welfare of sentient beings.

To make a positive contribution, we don't need to be important or famous. We don't need to be Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama. We just do what we do with mindfulness, conscientiousness, and a kind heart. We shouldn't make a big deal, "I'm a bodhisattva. Here I am. I'm going to serve everybody. Look at me, what a great bodhisattva I am." That's trying to create an image. Whereas if we just try to work on our own mind, be kind to other people, support them in their practice, listen to them because we care about them, then slowly a transformation will occur within ourselves. Who we are as a person will change.

## Working with Down Times

We'll all have problems in the future. If you haven't already, you will probably go through a time of feeling very lonely. You might go through a time of thinking that maybe you shouldn't have ordained. You might find yourself saying, "I'm so bored." Or "I'm so tired of being pure. Anyway my mind is a mess. I should just give up." Or you might think, "I'd feel so much more secure if I had a job. I'm turning forty and don't have any savings or health insurance. What's going to happen to me?" We may feel, "If only someone loved me, I'd feel better. I wish I could meet a significant other."

Sometimes we may be flooded with doubts. It's important to recognize that everybody goes through these kinds of doubts. It's not just us. The lamrim is designed to help us deal with these mental states. When we go through periods of doubt and questioning, it's very important not to blame our ordination, because our ordination is not the problem.

When we're lonely we might think, "Oh, if I weren't ordained I could go down to McLeod and meet a nice person in the restaurant, and then I won't be lonely." Is that true? We've had plenty of sex before. Did that cure the loneliness? When the mind starts telling the story, "If only I did this, then the loneliness would go away," we need to check if doing that will really solve the loneliness or not. Often what we do when we're lonely is like putting a Band-Aid on somebody who has a cold. It's not going to work. That's not the right antidote for loneliness.

At those times, we need to work with our mind. "Okay, I'm lonely. What is loneliness? What's going on?" We feel, "Why doesn't anybody love me?" I used to remember my teenage years when I constantly wondered and wished, "When is somebody going to love me?" This made me realize that feeling I wanted to be loved was not a new problem, it's been going on for years. I had to look at what's going on in my mind. What's behind the feeling of "Why doesn't somebody love me?" What is it that I'm really seeking? What's going to fill that hole?

We just sit there with these kinds of puzzles and questions. In our mind we keep trying on different solutions to see what will help the loneliness and the wish to be loved. I've discovered that the lamrim helps a lot in this regard. It helps me to let go of fantasies and unrealistic projections. In addition, the bodhicitta meditations help me open my heart to others. The more we can see that everyone wants to be happy, the more we can open our hearts to have equal love for others. The meditation on the kindness of others helps us to feel the kindness others show us now and have shown us since we were born—and even before that! When we see that we've been the recipient of so much kindness and affection, our own heart opens and loves others. We stop feeling alienated because we realize that we've always been connected to others and to kindness. When we experience this, the loneliness goes away.

We need to work with our difficult emotions instead of running away from them, stuffing them down, or acting them out, let's say by thinking that we'd be happier if we got married and got a job. We just sit and work with our own mind, take refuge and start developing a heart that loves others. The mind inside of us that says, "Why doesn't somebody love me?" is the self-centered mind, and it's already made us spend a long time feeling sorry for ourselves. Now we're going to try opening our hearts to others, extending ourselves to others, and letting a feeling of well-being and connection arise inside of us.

At the conference, His Holiness was talking about the bodhisattvas of the first bhumi, which is called Very Joyful. At this stage they have just realized emptiness directly in the path of seeing. His Holiness said these bodhisattvas have so much more happiness than arhats. Even though arhats have eliminated all the afflictions and negative emotions that had kept them bound in samsara while the first bhumi bodhisattvas have not, these bodhisattvas are still millions of times happier than the arhats. What gives these bodhisattvas so much joy is the love and compassion they have cultivated in their hearts. For this reason, the first bhumi is called Very Joyful. They are joyful not because of

their realization of emptiness—because the arhats have that too—but because of their love and compassion.

He then said, “Although we think that others experience the result of our developing compassion, in fact it helps us more. Our developing compassion is for everybody’s benefit, including our own. When I develop compassion, I benefit 100%. Other people only get 50%.”

It’s true. The more we recognize that we all equally want to be happy and to avoid suffering, the more we feel in tune with others. The more we recognize that we and others equally don’t want to be lonely and want to feel connected, the more our own heart opens to others. When we start opening our heart to other people, then the love we feel for everyone, including ourselves, fills our heart.

## **Robes**

We should be happy to wear our robes and we should wear them everywhere, all the time. The only times I have not worn them was the first time I saw my parents after I ordained —because Lama Yeshe told me to wear lay clothes—and when I went through customs at the Beijing airport. Otherwise, I travel in India, the West, worldwide, in my robes. Sometimes people look at me, and sometimes they don’t. I am completely immune to their looks by now. Years ago in Singapore, I was walking down Orchard Road, and a man looked at me as if he had seen a ghost. I just smiled at him, and he relaxed. When we feel comfortable in our robes, then even if people look at us, we smile at them and they respond with friendliness. If we’re relaxed wearing robes, other people will also be relaxed with it.

It could happen that in the West we will eventually alter the style of the robes to be more practical. This was done in previous centuries in several Buddhist countries. What is important, however, is that we dress like the other sangha of that place. If we wear a sweater, we should wear a maroon sweater, not one that is maroon with a little blue border, or one that is bright red, or one that is fancy. Chinese monastics have jackets, with collars and pockets, that look very tidy. It would be nice if at some point we standardized our jackets and sweaters so we would look alike. Shoes and backpacks are status symbols among the Tibetan monastics. We should not emulate this. We should dress like everyone else and be simple and practical.

Here in Dharamsala, we look like everyone else. In the West, we don’t look like other people on the street. We have to learn to be content either way, not trying to be different when we’re with sangha in India yet trying to blend in when we’re with laypeople in the West. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey told us, when we put on our robes each morning, to think, “I am so glad that I am ordained.” He said to treasure the robes and treasure our fortune to be ordained.

Most of you know that we put our shamtab on over our head. Out of respect for our ordination, we don’t step into our shamtab. Fully ordained monastics should always have their three robes with them wherever they sleep at night, even if they are traveling. Getsuls and getsulmas have two robes, the shamtab and chögu. Keep your hair short. In the West I wear my zen when I teach or listen to teachings and a jacket or sweater when I go out, because I live in Seattle and it is cold there. I don’t wear my zen when I go out in the street there, because the wind blows it all over. In the summer I wear a maroon Chinese-style monastic jacket in the street, because I feel more comfortable being covered. Always wear your zen at teachings. When you put on your chögu or your zen, put it on gracefully. Don’t spread it out and toss it around as you put it on so that it hits the people around you. Unfold it first, then put it around your shoulder in a small circle.

## **Etiquette**

Etiquette and manners in daily interactions are a training in mindfulness. Don’t eat while you walk. Lama was really strict about this; whenever we eat, we are seated. When a monastic munches



popcorn or drinks a soft drink while walking down the street, it doesn't give laypeople a very good impression of the sangha. We may eat in a restaurant from time to time, but we shouldn't be hanging out in chai shops or restaurants. We didn't get ordained in order to be the chai shop guru or the chai shop socialite.

To share some practical dos and don'ts: avoid shouting long distances so that others are disturbed and look at you. Be mindful when you open and close doors. Be aware of how you move your body. We can learn a lot about ourselves by observing how we move. We notice that when we are in a bad mood, we walk differently and send out a different energy to the people around us. The various guidelines for etiquette and manners aren't just rules saying, "Don't do this or that." They are training us to be aware of what we are saying and doing. This, in turn, helps us to look at our mind and observe why we are saying or doing something.

In Chinese monasteries they are very strict about how we push in our chair, clean our dishes, and so forth. We do these quietly. Don't expect somebody else to clean up after you. When you see an old friend, greet him or her warmly, but don't scream with joy and make a lot of noise. In most Asian countries, avoid all physical contact with the opposite sex. The Tibetan tradition is a bit more relaxed, and we shake hands. But don't shake hands in a Theravada or Chinese country. Don't hug members of the opposite sex, unless they are family members. In the West, it can be embarrassing when people of the opposite sex come up and hug us before we can do anything to stop it. Do your best to reach out your hand to shake theirs first. That shows them that they shouldn't hug you. We may hug people of the same sex in the West, but we shouldn't make a big display of it.

Be on time for teachings and pujas. Make that part of your bodhicitta practice. Care about others enough to be in your seat on time so that you don't have to climb over them or disturb them by arriving late. Don't always follow the Tibetan monks or nuns as examples. I came to Dharamsala over 20 years ago and have seen the monastic discipline degenerate a lot since then. Don't think, "The Tibetan monks run, jump, and do Kung Fu chops, so I can too." Lama Yeshe used to tell us, "Think about the visualization you're giving to other people." What does it look like to lay people when the sangha shouts, runs, or pushes?

Our body language expresses how we feel inside, and it also influences others. How we sit in our own room is one thing. But when we are with lay people in a formal situation, if we sit in the best chair at the head of the table, stretch out on the sofa, or lean back in a big chair and cross our legs, what are we expressing about ourselves? How will that influence them? In the Chinese monasteries, we were trained not to cross our legs or stand with our hands on our hips. Why? In our culture, such postures often indicate certain internal attitudes. By becoming more mindful of our body language, we become aware of the messages we convey to others on subtle levels. We also become aware of what is going on in our minds.

When I was training in the Chinese monastery, the nuns kept correcting me because I'd have my hands on my hips. I began to realize how I felt inside when I had my hands on my hips. It was very different than when I had my hands together in front of me or at my side. The more we become aware of things like that, the more we learn about what is happening in our mind. Although we need to be mindful about our body language and behavior, we shouldn't be uptight about it. We can laugh, we can be happy, we can joke. But we do these mindfully and at appropriate times and in appropriate circumstances.

## **Daily Life**

It's good to do three prostrations in the morning when we first get up, and three prostrations in the evening before going to bed. Some people are morning meditators, some people are evening or afternoon meditators. It's good to do some practice at least every morning and evening, but depending on the type of person you are—morning meditator or evening meditator—practice more

at the time that works best for you. Don't leave all your practices for the night, because you probably will fall asleep instead. It's very good to get up early in the morning, set your motivation, and do some of your practices before starting the day's activities. It helps us to begin the day in a centered way.

In the morning, think, "The most important things I have to do today are to do my practices, keep my precepts, and have a kind heart towards others." Those are the most important things. It's not going to the train station; it's not sending that fax; it's not organizing this or talking to that person. "The most important thing that I have to do today is to keep my mind centered, balanced, and comfortable." Then, everything will flow from there. If you live in a Dharma center, make sure that you don't get so involved in the center's activities that you start sacrificing your practice.

As new monastics, it's important to learn the precepts. That doesn't mean just reading the list. We should request in-depth teachings on the precepts from senior sangha. What is the boundary of remaining a monastic? How do transgressions occur? How do we purify them? How can we prevent them? What is the value of living in the precepts? The Vinaya is rich with interesting stories and information, and studying it helps us.

## Questions and Answers

**Question (Q):** After being ordained, I noticed major self-centeredness and eight worldly concerns in my mind. I thought, "I bet everyone in the Dharma center back home is trying to figure out how to keep me from coming home as a nun," and other things. My self-esteem plummeted right after ordination, and I thought, "I can't do this. I'm not worthy."

**Venerable Thubten Chodron (VTC):** Living as a monastic is very strong purification, and when we purify, we see our mental garbage. That's natural! When we clean the room, we see the dirt. We can't clean the room unless we see the dirt. When this stuff comes up, we see where the dirt is and see what we need to work on.

When such thoughts of low self-esteem come up, ask yourself, "Is that true? Are these stories I'm telling myself about how awful I am actually true?" Our mind thinks all sorts of stuff, and we shouldn't believe all of it! When our mind says, "I'm not worthy of taking ordination," we should examine, "What does 'worthy' mean? Does 'worthy' mean we're already supposed to be arhats or bodhisattvas before we ordain?" No, it doesn't. The Buddha said that ordination is a cause of becoming an arhat or a bodhisattva; it's a cause of awakening. We get ordained because we're imperfect, not because we're perfect. The mind that says, "I'm not worthy of this" is false.

When these kinds of thoughts come up, look at them and analyze if they are true or not. "What's everybody going to think of me back home?" I don't know. Who cares? I'm not that important that they're going to spend most of their time thinking about me! Some people will say, "I'm so glad she ordained!" and some people will say, "Why did she do something like that?!" Whatever you do, somebody's going to like it and somebody's not going to like it. Let them sort that out.

We'll go through times when our practice is strong, and we'll go through times when our mind seems full of self-centeredness. The key to keep on going is to focus on our long-term goal. When we're headed for awakening, our present happiness and unhappiness aren't such big concerns. We're content simply to create the causes for goodness.

When we have a long-term goal we know what we're doing. When our mind fills with doubts—"Oh, I wish this," or "How come things are like xyz?"—we come back to what our priorities are in life. Progressing on the path to awakening is chief. We remind ourselves, "If I don't practice the path, what else am I going to do? I've done everything else in samsara millions of times. If I don't try and follow the path to awakening, what else is there? I've been it all. I've done it all. I've had everything there is to have in samsara zillions of times in my previous lives. Look where all that's gotten me. Nowhere!! So even if awakening takes fifty zillion eons, still it's worthwhile because

there's nothing else worthwhile to do. This is what is most meaningful." If we can think of something else that's better, let's do it! But, it's very difficult to think of something more worthwhile, something that's going to bring more happiness for ourselves and others than cultivating the path to awakening.

When we're headed towards awakening, if we hit a glitch on the path, that's okay. If we're going towards Delhi and we hit a bump in the road, we continue on. So, don't worry about bumps in the road. When we hit a bump, it's important to recognize the role our mind is playing in making that obstacle. Many people hit a bump in the road and think, "I'm having problems because of the ordination. If I weren't ordained I wouldn't have this problem." If we look closer, we'll see our ordination is not the problem. The problem is our mind. So, if I'm going toward awakening and my mind is creating a problem, then I work with my mind because doing that is valuable. It may be uncomfortable and sometimes I may be unhappy, but if I were a lay person, I'd still be uncomfortable and unhappy, only much more.

**Q:** Is it important to know who your principal teacher is before you ordain? Is it important to know which Buddhist tradition is the main one you will follow?

**VTC:** Yes to both questions.

When we participate in an ordination ceremony in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we must have the intention to remain a monastic for our entire life (although it is possible to disrobe if one no longer wishes to keep the precepts). To make that commitment truthfully, we must have knowledge and understanding of the basic Dharma principles—renunciation of saṃsāra, bodhicitta, and correct view—and have a consistent daily meditation practice. We must have a relationship with a qualified spiritual mentor whom we trust to guide us on the path, and we need to know which Buddhist tradition is the one that suits our interest and disposition (although we can study other Buddhist traditions and integrate their practices into our own). Without these in place, a person will wander around in confusion without a clear idea of how to practice and without the guidance that is essential to make progress. It is well worth the time to go slowly and make sure suitable conditions are in place before ordaining.

**Q:** How do we relate to old friends? I've been ordained for about fifteen months and recently went back to the West for a visit. I was unsure how to relate to my old friends while living as a monastic amongst them. How much should I see them and when should I excuse myself from their activities because I'm now a nun?

**VTC:** Often when we meet old friends, we don't feel the way we used to. We all change, and it's okay. We don't have to fit in the way we used to. Sometimes we may think, "But they are my old friends. I love them so much, but I can't be as close to them now, because I can't eat at night or hang out at the bar." They want to take us to the movies, but we don't go to entertainment, so we feel, "I don't fit in with these people. What's wrong? Should I change and be the way I used to be?"

At the beginning this creates some anxiety, but the more we find our own stability, integrity, and dignity as monastics, this doesn't bother us as much. "Dignity as a monastic" doesn't mean arrogance. Rather, it's a sense of what we are doing in life. We are confident, "This is what I do in life. When what my old friends do and what I do correspond, that's nice. But when they don't, that's okay. They can do what they do and I'll do what I do."

It's okay if you and your old friends have different interests and your relationships go in different directions. I ordained in India and lived there for some years. When I went back to the West to visit, some of my old friends were surprised I was a nun, and some weren't. I still see some of them from time to time in the West, but I've lost touch with most of them. That's okay. Relationships change all the time. Whether we're ordained or not, we'll drift away from some friends because our lives and interests go in different directions. With other friends, despite the

difference in lifestyles, the friendships will continue and we will communicate very well. When we have a sense of well-being inside ourselves and a sense of what we are doing with our life, we'll accept it when some friends go in different directions as well as when other friendships continue.

Let things be as they are. It will take your old friends awhile to get used to you being a monastic, to understand what you will do and what you won't do, but that's okay. They will adjust. Some of them will like it, and some of them won't, and that's okay. Sometimes we find that what they do and talk about is boring. So much talk about politics, shopping, sports, and what other people are doing. It's so boring! In that case, we don't need to keep hanging out with those people. See them briefly, share what you're able to, and then politely excuse yourself and go do something else.

**Q:** What about our financial situation? Should we worry about it or not? Should we get a job?

**VTC:** I have quite strong views about this. When I first ordained, I made a determination that I was not going to put on lay clothes and get a job, no matter how poor I might be. The Buddha said that if we are sincere in our practice, we will never go hungry, and I thought, "I believe that." For many years I was very poor. I even had to ration my toilet paper, that's how poor I was! I couldn't afford to heat my room in the monastery in France in the winter. But since I ordained in 1977 until now, I've never gotten a job and I'm happy about that. I believed what the Buddha said and it worked. Still, it could be good to have some kind of financial set-up before you ordain. If you feel comfortable thinking as I do, do that. If you don't, then work longer before you ordain.

Make sure that you feel really comfortable inside with being poor. If you don't feel comfortable with feeling poor, then don't ordain yet, because chances are you will disrobe later. I don't think it is wise to ordain and then go back to the West, put on lay clothes, grow your hair and get a job, especially if you are living alone as a monastic in a city. Most ordained people don't make it if they do that because they don't have the joys of ordained life. They don't have time to meditate and study. They're living with lay people, not with a sangha community. They also don't have the "pleasures" of lay life, because they can't go out drinking and drugging after work. They can't have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Eventually people feel like they don't know who they are any more. "Am I a monastic or a layperson?" They get fed up and disrobe. This is sad. Rather than get yourself into this situation, I think it's better to wait to ordain until you've saved enough money or until you're able to live in a monastic community.

The Buddha said that we should stay in a sangha community and train with a senior monk or nun for at least the first five years after ordination. We need to build up our internal strength before going into situations that can trigger our attachment. We may feel very strong in India, but if we go back to the West and dress like a layperson, pretty soon we'll be acting like one too, simply because the old habits are so strong.

Once we're ordained, we have to work with the mind that desires comfort and pleasure. I am not saying that we should go on an ascetic trip. That's silly. But we don't need to have the best this and the most comfortable that. It is extremely important that, as monastics, we live simply, whether we have a lot of savings or a benefactor or not. To keep our life simple, I recommend giving away something if you have gone a year without using it. If four seasons have passed and we haven't used something, then it's time to give it away. This helps us to live simply and enables those who can use the things to have them.

We should not have lots of robes. Actually, in Vinaya, it says that we should have one set of robes. We may have another set to wear when we wash the first, but we consider the second set not ours, but as ones we'll give to somebody else. We don't need more than two sets. We don't need a car, even in the West. We don't need super comfortable furniture or a kitchen packed with goodies. We should just live simply and be content. With this mental state, we won't need much money. If we like lots of good food, if we want to go to the movies, buy magazines, and have several warm

jackets for the winter, then we'll need a lot of money—but we'll also run into difficulties keeping our precepts.

We also don't want to put ourselves into a position where we become a burden on others and they resent having to take care of us. We need to have some money, but we don't need extravagance. We should wear our robes until they have holes in them; we don't need to get a new set of robes every year or even every two years. We don't need to have the latest sleeping bag or the best computer. We need to learn to be content with what we have. If we have internal contentment, then no matter how much we have or don't have, we'll be satisfied. If we lack contentment, we may be very wealthy, but in our hearts we will feel poor.

We need to think about organizing ourselves and having monastic communities so we can live together without anyone having to work outside the monastery. Living in a community, we support each other in keeping our precepts and in practicing. The problem is that we Westerners tend to be individualistic, and that makes it hard for us to live in community. We like to do our own trip. We ask, "What will the community do for me?" We don't want to follow rules. We want to have our own car and don't want to share things with others. We don't like having to follow a schedule or work for the benefit of the community. We'd rather go to our own room and meditate on compassion for all sentient beings!

But then, when we're on our own, we feel sorry for ourselves, "Poor me. There's no monastery for me to live in. Why doesn't someone else make a monastery? Then I'll go there to live." We have to look inside ourselves. If we don't want to go through the difficulties of living in a community, we should not complain about not having the benefits of living in one. If we see the value of setting up a community—for ourselves and others, for the short-term welfare of monastics and for the long-term flourishing of the Dharma—then if we have to sacrifice something, we'll be happy to do that. Check in your own mind what you want to do. The Buddha set up the sangha as a community so we could support each other in practice. It's best if we can do that. But we have to make our minds happy to live in community.

**Q:** Sometimes the structure when we live together makes people tense. How can we be relaxed, warm, and support each other?

**VTC:** We go through a transition when we learn to live as a sangha community. At first, some things seem strange and other things push our buttons. We have to pause, look at our reactions, and use these situations to learn about our mind. For example, I've observed that newly ordained people love to sit in front. At public teachings, they put their seat even in front of the senior sangha. They think, "Now I am ordained, so I get to sit in front." But we sit in ordination order, so the new sangha should sit in the back. Often we don't like that.

Or, the sangha has lunch at 11:30, but we don't want to eat that early. We want to eat at noon. Or, the sangha eats in silence, but we want to talk. Or, the other sangha are talking, but we want to eat in silence. Or, they said the dedication prayers at the end of the meal, but we haven't finished (That's what happened to me today!). Our mind gets tense about all of this. Sometimes we rebel against the structure, sometimes we squeeze ourselves to fit in with it. Neither mental state is very healthy. So rather than try to figure out what to do, we need to pause, look at our mind, and let ourselves relax. Structure helps us to stop wasting time thinking about many things. When we sit in ordination order, we don't have to think about where to sit. We don't have to worry if there is a place for us. A place will be there. We know where we sit, and we sit there.

In all cultures, eating together is a sign of friendship. Sometimes the sangha can eat in silence, and we can be happy and relaxed when we do that. Other times, when we talk, we can be happy and relaxed and chat together. Try to go with what is happening, instead of having so many opinions about how you would like things to be, or what you think is the best way of doing them. Otherwise, our mind will always find something to complain about. We will spend a lot of time building up our

opinions, which, of course, are always right by virtue of their being ours! Structure enables us to let go of all this. We don't have to think about everything. We know how things are done and we do them like that.

Then, within that structure, we find so much space for our mind to relax, because we don't need to worry about what to do, where to sit, or when to eat. We usually think the lack of structure gives us space, but without structure, we often have confusion and indecision. Our mind forms lots of opinions, "How come we are having *dal-bhat* for lunch, I am tired of *dal-bhat*. Why can't the kitchen make something else?" Given a choice, our mind will be dissatisfied and complain. But if we get used to eating whatever we're given, then we'll be happy.

Of course, the structure should not be so tight that we can't breathe. But my experience with Western sangha in the Tibetan tradition is that too much structure isn't our problem. We get to know the people on either side of us very well when we sit in ordination order. One time I remember thinking, "I don't like the person on my right because she is so angry. I don't like the person on my left because she has such a stubborn personality." I had to stop and say to myself, "I will be sitting by these people for a long time. Whenever I attend a Dharma gathering, I'll be sitting between this one and that one, so I'd better get used to it and learn how to like them."

I knew that I had to change, because that is the reality of the situation. I couldn't say, "I don't want to sit here. I want to go and sit near my friend." I had to change my mind, appreciate them, and learn to like them. As soon as I started working on myself, the relationships with them changed. As the years go by, we develop a special relationship with the people we sit near, because we see each other grow and change.

When I got ordained, the Western sangha was basically a group of hippie travelers (some having previously had a career, some not). Do you have any idea what we were like? Now I look at the same people and see individuals with incredible qualities. I have really seen them grow. It's heartening to see people work with their stuff and transform themselves, to see their strong determination, and to see the service they offer to others. It's important that we appreciate each other. Now when I look up and down the line, I see people with many good qualities and rejoice. This one is a translator; that one does a lot to help nuns; this one paints, that one teaches.



Photo © Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive

## What Do You Give Up When You Ordain?

*In 2012, one of the Abbey residents who was considering ordination asked a good friend who had ordained a few years before some questions about what changed after her ordination. The following is their communication.*

**Question (Q):** I would like to get a dialogue going on some of the things that one gives up when one ordains. Which ones did you find especially difficult and which ones were surprisingly easy?

**Answer (A):** What do you give up when you ordain? A lot! Your identity, your independence, your privacy, many of your precious needs, hopefully your self-centeredness. This also depends on where you live and who's guiding you. Venerable is pretty strict but there is benefit in that. What do you gain? A lot! Learning to know what makes life meaningful, learning to discipline the mind, learning to love with equanimity, learning to let go of "my needs, my happiness" being most important, etc.

**Q:** I have questions about friendships and family relationships. How have they changed (your opportunities to visit, call, and see them). I am trying to see what is attachment and what is a lot of good, hard work on both sides of my friendships that I would hate to lose. Maybe one doesn't give them up, but extends the circle to encompass a larger group of people?

**A:** It sounds like you think happiness comes from friendships. Yes, we all need love to flourish, but in the past few years I have realized that happiness comes from my mind, not from others. Friendships may be the condition that allows seeds of happiness to ripen, but they are not the substantial cause of that happiness.

Often friendships shore up a sense of identity, but as we grow in the Dharma, more of that identity comes from realizing our true nature and our potential. When the goal becomes more focused on achieving a good rebirth, liberation, and awakening, our friendships naturally change of their own accord, similar to when you stop drinking, you naturally stop associating so much with drinkers and going to parties.

This doesn't mean that we cut off friendships, but the sangha really becomes more of your family and more of your arena for growing, learning, and reflection.

The more I surrender to this, the happier I am. Every person can be a friend. And our own loneliness is a great tool to learn from! Yes, we work to extend the circle of people who are friends.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that he tries to see every person he meets as an old friend. That comes from working with our mind and not so much with making sure we're surrounded by people we naturally like.

**Q:** Looking back, would you have done anything differently? When did you really start contemplating ordination? And when you decided to ordain, how did your process actually unfold?

**A:** In hindsight, I wish I had understood the Dharma better before I ordained. But even as naive as I was, I'm also glad that I ordained when I did and have had the opportunity to study. I know more clearly than ever that Dharma is about transforming our own mind into an awakened mind. I didn't really understand that at the beginning. I didn't really know about the mind and its process of transformation. I didn't see the bigger picture very clearly; I just jumped.

**Q:** Do you have any suggestions as to reading material? I am reading Venerable Thubten Chodron's booklet [\*Preparing for Ordination\*](#) for Westerners which has a lot of good questions to ask myself, so that will help.

**A:** The questions in Venerable Chodron's booklet are very helpful. I answered them a couple of times, and I could have kept going, looking more deeply into motivation, expectations, and so on. You might find some reflection/meditation in these areas helpful:

What is happiness? (Big question) What are the causes of greater happiness and satisfaction? (Hint: positive states of mind that drive virtuous acts of body, speech, and mind.) How am I creating their causes now?

Since everything I do is an effort to create happiness (Check it out—it's true! Everything down to choosing which socks to wear!), what will support me to create more genuine causes of happiness for myself and others? Is it possible to exist in a state without any suffering, i.e. to be free of cyclic existence? Begin to imagine what that would be like.

Has your family always been your family? What relationship did you have with your current sister in the life before this one? What relationship will you have with her next life? How many times has she been your mother, sister, lover, enemy? Can you lead her to awakening right now? Can you eliminate her suffering?

What kind of love can you offer her now and what kind of love could you offer her in the long run if you devoted yourself to the Dharma? Of what benefit am I to others now? Realistically, how many people can I actually help as an ordinary sentient being? How could I be of utmost benefit to others? What causes do I need to create to bring that about?

What is attachment? What is love? What is equanimity? What are the benefits of really trying to bring these about?

What are your fears around ordaining? What do you think you will lose? What are you afraid of experiencing? What could shift inside you on its own accord, making the direction you want to take in the future clearer?

I can't emphasize enough that meditating on the sufferings of cyclic existence is what begins to wake us up. All ordinary happiness is merely the suffering of change—it's temporary, in the nature of suffering, impure, and without any inherent existence.

Our basic nature is dissatisfaction. (Check it out. Know this for yourself.) How much chocolate or rhubarb pie can you eat before the pleasure disappears? How many kisses, hand holding, or orgasms would it take to really satisfy you completely? Or do we keep needing to get a new fix? How long could you spend with your friends before you'd be bored and ready to find a new friend?

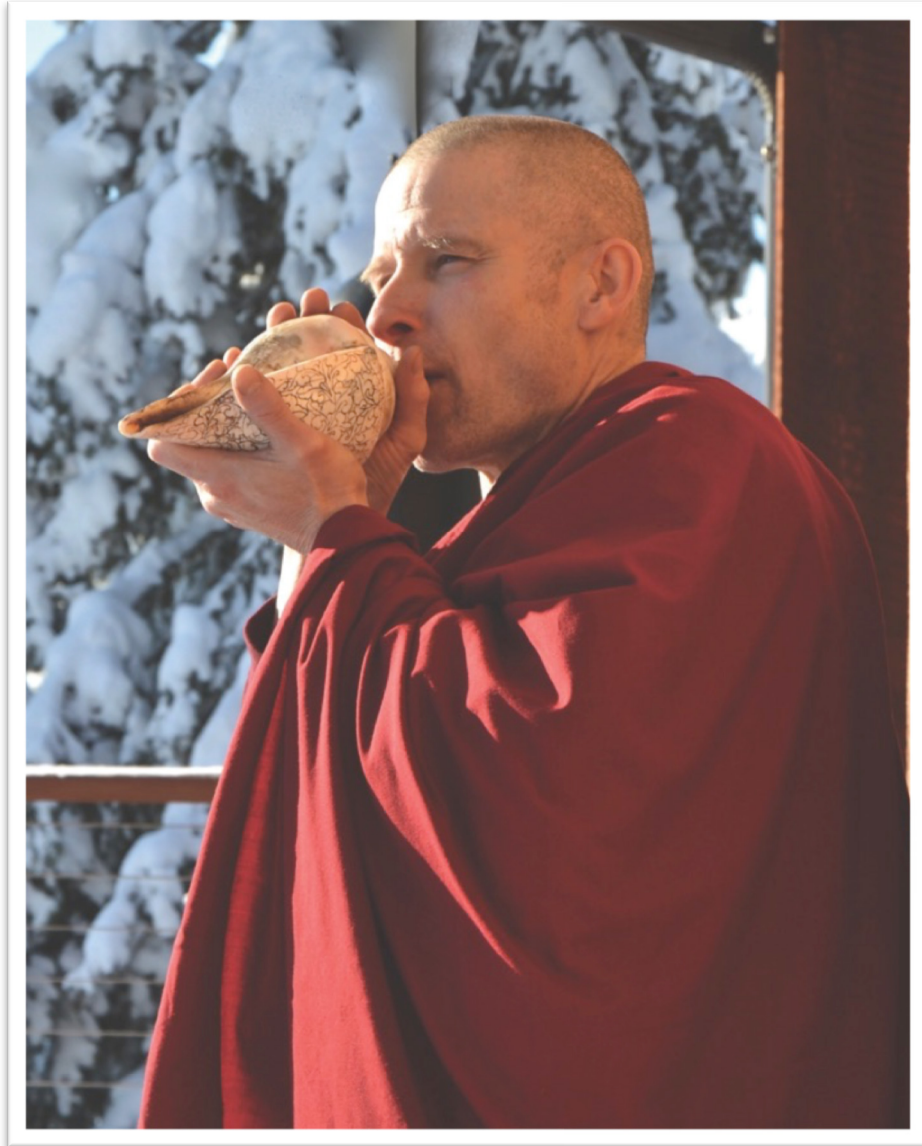
One metaphor that sticks with me is thinking that we all need brain surgery, so i'm stepping away from relationships to study medicine so that i can one day be of greater and greater benefit to others. Right now, all i can do is hold their hand, and this does nothing to cure their brain tumor.



## CHOOSING TO LIVE IN PRECEPTS

This section contains material specific to why we might consider living in monastic precepts. What are the benefits? What challenges may arise?

The two articles in this section – “The Purpose of Precepts” and “Our Relationship to Money” – begin to address such questions.



## The Purpose of Precepts

*A talk given at Tushita Meditation Centre, Dharamsala, India, on April 14, 2001, by Venerable Thubten Chodron.*

I feel very happy to talk to the sangha because sangha are the people who are dedicated and devoted to the Dharma. You've taken the jump. Being able to leave the home life, dedicate yourself to study, practice, and service, and be willing to undergo hardships to develop spiritually indicates something special. There are many excellent lay scholars and practitioners, but renouncing the pleasures and illusions of cyclic existence and living in pure ethical discipline are particular qualities of monastics.

I thought to begin by discussing why the Buddha set up the precepts. This is an important topic, and I have personally found it very beneficial.

### The Advantages of the Precepts

In the first twelve years after his awakening, there were no precepts when the Buddha ordained people. He just said, "Come, O bhikshu," and they were ordained. In those early years, all the monastics acted well, and nobody messed up terribly. Then, people started making mistakes—big ones and small ones—and word got back to the Buddha. In response, to guide the monastics in a positive direction, the Buddha set up the precepts one by one. Each precept was made in response to a mistake made by an ordained person. He didn't lay down all the precepts at the beginning. Rather, each time a situation arose when somebody did something inappropriate or improper, the Buddha would establish a precept to regulate the sangha.

Whenever he set up a precept, he talked about ten reasons for doing so, ten advantages of each precept. I recommend going through the list of precepts and contemplating that each one brings these ten advantages:

In detail		In general	
<i>To promote harmony within the sangha</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To direct the monastics</li> <li>2. To make monastics peaceful and happy</li> <li>3. To protect the monastics</li> </ol>	<i>The ultimate goal</i>	10. For the Dharma to be forever sustained
<i>To transform the society</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. To inspire those without faith</li> <li>5. To advance the practice of those with faith</li> </ol>		
<i>To bring about individual liberation</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. To restrain the restive</li> <li>7. To stabilize those with a sense of integrity</li> <li>8. To eliminate present defilements</li> <li>9. To prevent defilements from arising in the future</li> </ol>		

The advantages fall into three categories: first to promote harmony within the sangha, second to transform society, and third to bring about individual liberation.

## **To Promote Harmony Within the Saṅgha**

### ***1. To Direct the Monastics***

Promoting harmony within the sangha consists of three advantages, the first of which is to direct the monastics. Each precept directs us, the sangha: it gives us guidance, provides structure to our lives, and establishes helpful limits to our behavior. Each precept concerns our life, so it shows us how to practice, how to live, and how to be.

### ***2. To Make Monastics Peaceful and Happy***

Secondly, each precept makes monastics happy and peaceful. This is something to think about, especially when we don't like a particular precept. "I don't like this precept. This one doesn't make me happy and peaceful! This one makes me agitated. I don't want this one." But it's good to remember, to wait a minute and ask ourselves, "Even if I don't like a particular precept or have difficulty keeping it, could following it make my mind peaceful or happy?" We look at each precept and investigate what behavior or mental states it's designed to make us aware of and to regulate. What affliction in our mind is it tapping into? What button is that precept pushing?

Then we can imagine, "If I were free from that affliction, if I were free from that button, what kind of peace and happiness would exist in my mind?" Thinking like this, we see the precepts aren't designed to make us miserable by preventing us from doing fun things, but to make our minds peaceful and happy by abandoning activities that make us agitated. That's why we chose to take ordination! Nobody forced us to take precepts. We chose. Why did we choose to take precepts? Hopefully, we had some awareness that our mind was uncontrolled and needed some guidelines. We knew we needed some structure in our lives and we needed to live ethically. Hopefully, we had that kind of understanding about how our mind functions before we took the precepts, and therefore we saw taking the precepts as a tool and method to pacify our mind and bring peace to our lives.

### ***3. To Protect Monastics***

We didn't become a monk or nun because we liked the clothes or the haircut or because we liked to hang out in McLeod Ganj. We didn't ordain so we could sit in the front row where everyone can see us! We took the precepts for a different purpose. The third advantage is that precepts protect monastics. They protect us from negative actions as individuals, and they protect us from disharmony in the community. When we all live by the same precepts and we're all trying to be ethical, kindhearted human beings, there can be genuine harmony in the community.

Let's face it—the sangha is not always perfectly harmonious. We're not all Buddhas; we're human beings and we have our little tiffs, quarrels and stuff going on like everybody else. But when we're committed to the precepts, then they act as a mirror for us so that we can see what we're doing that antagonizes others and agitates the situation. In that way, the precepts help us restrain our negative behavior, and they act as guidelines for us. We find that the more we keep the precepts, the better we get along with other people, because the precepts are designed to subdue our negative actions of body and speech. They improve our relationships.

Those are the three reasons that the precepts promote harmony within the sangha.

## **To Transform the Society**

### ***4. To Inspire Those Without Faith***

How do precepts inspire those without faith? When people in society encounter others who live in precepts, they meet people who are kind and ethical human beings. Naturally, this inspires faith in them. This is a beautiful thing that the sangha can offer to people in the West and the East, especially when we live in community. We offer an image of a group of people whose function in living together is to cultivate their own good qualities and develop ethical discipline.

That can be a very profound example for society, because why do people usually come together in groups in society? To make money, to have sex, to get more power, to fight their enemies. But we're not coming together for those reasons. We're living together and helping each other in a different way, and that can inspire and uplift others. We sangha have our problems, but if people in society see us work out our problems, go through our difficulties with each other, listen to each other, give up clinging to our own opinions in order to live harmoniously with others, that is very good example for others to see. It gives them hope.

### ***5. To Advance the Practice of Those with Faith***

Each precept advances the practices of those with faith because those who already have faith in the Dharma feel happy and their faith in the Dharma increases when they see people living it out. As monastics, we represent the Dharma, and a lot of people judge the Dharma based on us. We may think this may not be fair, "I'm just one human being full of faults. Why should people say the Dharma works or doesn't work based on my behavior? That puts too much pressure on me." But it's true that, whether we're lay or ordained, how we act influences other people. We care about others; we want them to have faith and to have happy minds. We want them to be inspired to practice. Since they're looking to us as people a few steps ahead of them on the path for help, we have some responsibility to act well so that we don't damage their Dharma practice.

If someone is new to the Dharma, comes in full of hope, and then sees the monks and nuns down in McLeod at all hours of the day and night, going to the movies and hanging out at the chai shops, eating, gossiping, shouting, and doing kung fu chops, then these people will think that Dharma practice doesn't help people at all. "Look, these monastics act just like laypeople. They are uncontrolled, loud, and rude just like me. What good will it do me to learn the Dharma and to meditate if these people do that, yet they still act this way?" These people won't have much faith in the Dharma. If we remember this, it will help us modify our own behavior because we care about others.

On the other hand, if newcomers see us being kind, working out our difficulties, hanging in there, and being considerate, it "gives them a good visualization," as Lama Yeshe used to say. Being aware of this makes us more mindful of our precepts.

## **To Bring About Individual Liberation**

### ***6. To Restrain the Restive***

The third broad point is that each precept brings about individual liberation, first by restraining the restive. When the mind is restless, when it's going here and there, when we're physically and verbally agitated, the precepts help us. They give us boundaries. We have chosen those boundaries; we're aware of them. That helps us to recognize, "I might be feeling restless and I might want to go do this and that, but I've chosen to have these boundaries. These boundaries help me to contain and direct my energy. So, I have to take a deep breath and let go, look at my own mind and work things out."

### ***7. To Stabilize Those with a Sense of Integrity***

Second, the precepts stabilize those with a sense of integrity. When we have a sense of integrity, we want to keep good ethical discipline because we respect ourselves. In this case, the precepts help stabilize that virtuous mind of self-respect and integrity. When we have that mental state, we happily regulate and moderate our own mind. We don't feel confined, forced, or oppressed, but gratefully and with choice, we put our energy in a good direction, in a direction that accords with the precepts.

### ***8. To Eliminate Present Defilements***

Third, the precepts bring about individual liberation because they eliminate defilements. When our mind is under the influence of a defilement and we bump up against a precept that reminds us we've chosen not to do a certain act, then we have to look at our defiled mind. If we're angry, we have to work it out. If we're attached, we apply the antidotes. The precepts help us eliminate our defilements because we've deliberately made these boundaries about how we want to act and speak. When we bump up against these boundaries, we have to look at the mind that makes us want to go beyond these boundaries. That process of looking inside and saying, "What's going on inside me? How do I work with this defilement?" is extremely valuable. This is the meaning of practicing the Dharma.

If we don't look inward, we will become very unhappy as monastics because we will see the precepts as external rules to rebel against. If we see the precepts as something imposed by somebody else, we're going to be incredibly unhappy. But, if we see the precepts as something that we've chosen because we know that our own mind needs them, then even when we bump up against them, we're aware, "Yes, I took the precepts because I know my mind is defiled, and here is a defilement. I'm angry; I want to criticize this person and blame them. Well, my whole life I've blamed others for my problems, and it hasn't worked to alleviate my unhappiness. Maybe I need to look inside and see what's going on there. What in me makes me want to accuse others of breaking their precepts? What in me makes me want to dump on them and vent my anger? The mental state in me that makes me act in these ways also makes me miserable." In this way, the precepts eliminate present defilements in our mind.

### ***9. To Prevent Defilements from Arising in the Future***

Fourth, the precepts help prevent defilements from arising in the future because each time we apply an antidote to a defiled state of mind, we are cutting the habit of that mental state. Let's say we have a lot of attachment and the attached mind arises and says, "I want to go smoke a joint or have a drink or smoke a cigarette." Maybe you were a smoker before you ordained and that habitual mind of attachment comes up. Then you pause and reflect, "I've chosen to stay within the boundary of the precept that prohibits taking intoxicants. It's attachment that's afflicting my mind and making me want to smoke. This is the same attachment that prevents me from attaining liberation and awakening. I want to do something about this! What are the antidotes to attachment?"

Then you remember the teachings, "Thinking about the disadvantages of the thing I'm craving is one antidote. Remembering the impermanence and the transience of the pleasure that I'm going to get from this is another." Then you sit and meditate on one or more of these antidotes in relationship to the specific intoxicating substance your mind is craving at that moment. In this way, you subdue the attachment that craves that substance, and your mind becomes peaceful again. Instead of being like turbulent water churned up with craving, it's serene. In this way, you've eliminated the present defilement and have also begun to cut the habit of that particular attachment. It will take time to cut it completely, but you've taken an important step in that direction, and the habit has been damaged.

Each of us finds particular precepts difficult to keep. These point out the issues we need to work on in our life, and that's very helpful. We keep on coming back to some core issues again and again, working on them over time.

My guess is that celibacy is the most difficult precept for most people to keep. What do you think? Of the four root precepts, which one is the most difficult for you to keep? Killing a human being? Anyone want to go out and kill a human being? I don't think so. Stealing something that's going to get you arrested? Is anyone craving to do that? Lying about your spiritual attainments? Well, maybe. Sometimes the mind can arise that would love for people to respect us, think we're holy, regard us as realized beings so we'd have status and prestige. Maybe we could do that one, but it's not so likely. But what about emotional and/or sexual relationships? How much do we daydream about these? Which of these four do you find the hardest to abandon—killing human beings, stealing valuables, lying about attainments, or having a sexual relationship?

**Audience:** Celibacy. The first three are things that we've always known to be incorrect whereas we've been conditioned to seek out pleasure in the last. By laypeople's standards, that is something positive. We have a lot of conditioning in this area.

**Venerable Thubten Chodron:** Yes, there's a lot of conditioning. None of us were conditioned by our parents or society to kill people, but we were conditioned to have a relationship, make a family and have kids. Everybody does it. We see it on TV; we see it all around us. We have to be very aware of this. We have to work with two things: our sexual energy and our emotional dependency, wanting to have that special somebody with whom we are very close, someone who is always there for us, who understands us, smiles at us, appreciates us. We've all had relationships before; we've read about them and seen them in movies. Our attachment easily arises in this area, and that's why, in general, of the four root precepts, this is the one we have to work with the most.

For some people sexual attraction is more prominent; for others emotional attraction is greater. We need to be very frank and honest, to admit we have these kinds of attachment, and to consistently apply the antidotes to them. For sexual attachment, Shantideva's method of visualizing the inside of the other person's body is an infallible way to cut attachment. The problem is that we don't want to do it! When we're attracted to someone, the last thing we want to do is to imagine what their intestines, kidneys, and pancreas look like. We don't want to do it because it works. It cuts the attachment, "What do I want to hug that person for? They're just a bag of yuck!" When we do the meditation of thinking about the inside of that person's body, it works. But we've got to do it, not to just go on thinking, "Yes, but they're so beautiful. Yes, he has a liver, but look at his eyes." We've got to think about his liver, the inside of his eyeballs, and his bones.

Then there's emotional attachment, just having someone who is our best friend, who understands us, who always supports us, who we can depend on. That's sticky too, isn't it? It takes time and inner strength to learn to handle our own emotions when we're upset instead of running to our loved one, collapsing into somebody's arms and saying, "Ohhhh, life is treating me awful," and waiting for that person to say, "Yes, you're right, and the world's wrong." When someone comforts us, soothes us, tells us how wonderful we are, then we feel loved. Wanting to feel uniquely romantically loved can be a strong emotional habit.

But, when we're a monk or a nun, we need to work with this emotional dependence. Sure, we all get upset; we all have ups and downs. Sometimes we go to the senior monks and nuns when we feel miserable and that's fine. But this is a different kind of relationship. Seeking guidance from a Dharma friend, especially from a senior sangha member, is not the sticky, emotional dependency that we get into in lay life. A real Dharma friend will help us work with our own emotions and to apply the antidotes. We have to be emotionally aware and work with whatever comes up, not stuff

the negative emotions down and pretend that they aren't there. We have to learn how to work with them effectively and creatively and transform them.

For me, emotional dependency on someone special was the hardest thing. I've worked on it for years and know that I'll continue to do so my whole life until I realize emptiness. Sometimes it's more of an issue and other times it isn't, but the precepts encourage me to keep working on this. The process of being aware of and working on this has made me a lot stronger and clearer, and I've definitely seen improvement. The attachment isn't nearly as strong as years ago.

## **The Ultimate Goal**

### ***10. For the Dharma to be Forever Sustained***

The tenth advantage, which is the ultimate goal, is to sustain the Dharma forever. I find this interesting; when I first heard it I thought, "Why didn't the Buddha say that the ultimate goal is for me to become enlightened?" Then, I realized that Dharma practice is not just about me being enlightened. Dharma practice is about sustaining the Dharma so that others have access to it. We sustain the Dharma through our own practice, by realizing it and generating bodhisattva qualities in ourselves. We also sustain the Dharma by sharing it with other people. The Vinaya lineage especially needs to be preserved and passed on to others, so that ordination can act as the basis of people's practice for generations to come and so that monastics can continue to preserve the body of the Buddha's teachings. The Dharma must be sustained internally as well as externally.

Understanding this is important because oftentimes we Westerners come to the Dharma with the unconscious attitude, "What can I get out of Dharma? What's it going to do for me? How can it help me with my problems and my unhappiness?" It's fair enough that we begin Dharma practice with that attitude, because we have problems and are seeking a remedy. But, after practicing awhile, we begin to see that the purpose isn't just for ourselves. We have access to the precious teachings because other people kept them alive for twenty-six centuries, because millions of others practiced the Dharma over the last 2,600 years, because they put in the effort and generated the realizations—the doctrine of insight—and because they sustained the verbal doctrine—the Buddha's words and scriptures.

Because they did that, the Dharma still exists in the world. I just came along, bumped into it, and received so much benefit. We begin to see, "I received so much benefit because of the kindness of others. Thus, I also want to help preserve the Dharma so that other people will receive benefit from it." This understanding energizes us to assume responsibility for actualizing the teachings and creating the structures so that the Dharma will continue to exist and other people can benefit. If we just think about what we can get from the Dharma and not what we can give of the Dharma, then the transmission of the teachings will not be here for others. Nor will it be here for us should we be born as a human being in our future lives. So, preserving and sustaining the Dharma forever is very important.

## The Six Harmonies

By Venerable Thubten Chodron

I'd like to speak about the sangha community. The Buddha wanted us to live together in community for a reason. He gave guidelines for how to make community life beneficial for the members individually as well as collectively. In this regard, he spoke of six areas in which the sangha should work to be harmonious:

1. Harmony in the body: living together peacefully
2. Harmony in oral communication: avoiding disputes
3. Harmony in the mind: appreciating and supporting each other
4. Harmony in the precepts: observing the same precepts
5. Harmony in views: sharing the same beliefs
6. Harmony in welfare: enjoying benefits equally



Photo by Gen Heywood Photography

### 1. Physical Harmony

Harmony in the body, or physical harmony, means we live together peacefully and with mutual respect. We don't physically harm each other, nor do we disturb others with our physical behavior. When we live together, we follow the schedule, rather than do our own thing whenever we want to. Elders who have had much experience with living in community and training juniors set up a schedule that will help the community and the individuals. It may not be exactly the schedule we would like, but giving up our own self-centered preferences to live harmoniously with others is part of our practice.

We arrive at events on time. We enter a room and sit down quietly. We close doors gently. We clean up after ourselves. We return things that we borrow and put things back in their place after we use them. We help serve other members of the community. Many of these things are common



manners, but you'd be surprised how often we overlook them and the amount of difficulty such behavior can provoke in a community.

## **2. Verbal Harmony**

Verbal harmony means developing good communication skills and avoiding disputes and when disputes do arise, we resolve them. Most of our disputes are oral. Speech is very powerful. We should change the rhyme we learned as children to, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words hurt more than you can ever know." How can we avoid disputes and resolve the ones that do occur? Let's look at that part in ourselves that likes to quarrel and get a rise out of someone else. Let's observe that part of ourselves that wants to get our own way and that part of ourselves that blames other people when we're unhappy. To try to create harmony in the community, rather than dump our aggravation and frustration on others by saying that it's their fault, we have to look at our own mind and ask, "What are my buttons? What are my issues?"

One of the benefits of living in community is that our own issues are right in front of us because we live with others who we would probably never live with otherwise. From the outside, people look at monastics and say, "How come you all dress the same; you all have the same haircut? You must all think the same, because you follow the same religion." Is that true? No way! We monastics have such different personalities and ways of doing things. In lay life, if we don't get along with someone, we go home and our family is there. They love and support us, so it's ok. But, in a monastery we live with others who we would never work with, let alone marry! We go to puja with them, share a room with them, work with them. We can never get away from them.

So, when people say someone gets ordained to escape from problems, I say, "I wish it were so easy!" Instead, we enter a community, and someone wipes the dishes in a way we don't like. We can't stand it! All of a sudden, how people wipe the dishes becomes incredibly important and we think, "I've got to teach them how to wipe the dishes correctly, because otherwise they'll spread germs and everyone will get sick. I'll give everybody lessons on how to wipe the dishes, and everyone better do it my way because I'm right!" What happens then? We get into quarrels because someone says, "I don't like your way of wiping dishes. It's wrong. You should do it this way instead." Offended, we replay, "What do you mean my way of wiping the dishes is wrong?" and it goes on from there, doesn't it?

That's why living together is so helpful for transforming our mind, because we're right in front of all of this stuff and we can't run away from it or pretend it isn't there. Speech is powerful, and we can immediately see that our uncontrolled speech makes others miserable. In addition, when we've hurt others' feelings or denigrated them, we don't feel great afterwards either. Not only are we unhappy with ourselves after we've dumped our frustration on somebody, but he or she doesn't like us and will avoid us in the future. In addition, we're embarrassed because others in the community saw us lose it. So, after awhile we automatically start to think, "Maybe I have to do something with my speech." This is when we really engage in practice. We start observing how we speak to others, why we say what we do. We begin to check if we are careful to express what we mean. We notice our negative habits of speech that provoke disharmony: only when we recognize them can we start to change them.

Each of us has our own negative habits of speech. Some of us may exaggerate a lot. We don't mean to lie—well, sometimes we do—but many times we just exaggerate. We tell the story in a certain way, consciously emphasizing some details and overlooking others. Some of us have distorted a story so that we look pure and the other person doesn't look so good.

Some of us talk behind people's backs. I have a problem and am angry at somebody, so I go and tell my friend, "So-and-so did this and that! Can you believe it?!" I let you know how awful she is, and since you're my friend, then you'll say, "Oh you're right Chodron, and she's wrong." I may not

be consciously thinking to turn you against her or to win you over to my side, but that's the effect of my speech. And if I look closer, I may see that, in fact, I do want you to shun the person I'm mad at.

Then, I recognize, "Of the four negative acts of speech; that's divisive speech. Oops! I'm making others feel distant from each other in an attempt to find solace for my anger. That's not so cool for others and it also doesn't free me from my bad feeling. Hmmm, maybe I have to look at my anger."

Some of us have the habit of teasing other people about their sensitive points, or we ridicule others or shout at them. We say a lot of cruel things that hurt others' feelings. We're not like the previous person who goes and complains about someone to a third party. Rather, we tell the person in front of us what a jerk they are. Living in community, we notice our behavior and then have to do something about it.

Some of us talk all the time. It's a silent retreat, but we feel that silence is for everybody else but us, so we talk because what we have to say is very important. We must say, "Why don't you line your shoes up straight?" I have to talk during silent retreat because there's this very important thing I have to tell everybody.

Others like joking all the time, so whether it's appropriate or not, we crack jokes and make others laugh. Or we are very loud and walk into the room saying, "Hi everybody, here I am," and draw attention to ourselves. Many of our verbal habits can disturb others.

When we practice to live together with harmony in oral communication, we start to see all these things. That's very good. We shouldn't get upset when we see these but instead recognize, "Great! I'm seeing my junk. Now I have a chance to do something about it. I have a chance to correct it."

When we live together in community, we get to know each other very well because we see each other first thing in the morning and at all other times of the day. Some people are grumpy in the morning, some are grumpy in the afternoon, some of us are grumpy in the evening. When we live together, we see each other often—when we're in a good mood, when we're in a bad mood, when we're sick, when we're healthy, after somebody has praised us, after somebody has criticized us—so we get to know each other extremely well. That helps us drop our airs and our images. Either we let go, or we cling to our images and deny that people see our faults. A good quality to develop is to be able to acknowledge, "Yes, I do get grumpy when I'm tired. I live with these people and they know that about me. I have no excuses and can't blame anyone else. I accept this fault in myself and am working on it. My friends know this."

When we're willing to be transparent and acknowledge our faults to ourselves and to everybody else, something inside of us relaxes. We stop feeling like we have to look like a perfect nun or monk. We stop feeling we're a square peg that has to get into a round hole. We just admit, "I have a lot of rough edges and the community is the sandpaper that wears them down. When I acknowledge my junk, I let go of attachment to reputation, and it helps me work on these things." Transparency creates a special kind of closeness with each other. When we live together we become very close. Even the people in the community that we don't like so much, we still feel close to them because we know them well and share a common experience. We go through ups and downs together and stop trying to hide ourselves from others. This creates a special bond, don't you think?

### **3. Mental Harmony**

Harmony in the mind means appreciating and supporting each other. It's so important that sangha members appreciate and support each other. Why? Because when we appreciate and support other sangha, we're appreciating and supporting the part in ourselves that practices the Dharma. We can look at another person and say, "Wow, that person has firm ethical integrity. I rejoice." Or, "This person has faith in the Three Jewels," "So-and-so genuinely wants to work on themselves," "This person's practice is going well. I know because I've seen them change." When we do this, we're rejoicing in their virtue, rather than having the painful mind that compares, competes, or

judges them. When we can appreciate good qualities in others, we are able to appreciate those same qualities in ourselves. When we appreciate that others can be monastics and not be perfect, we appreciate that we can be a monastic and not be perfect and that there's still something good in what we're doing.

It's especially important that Western sangha respect each other. Many Westerners have the attitude, "If you're Tibetan, you're holy, but if you're Western, you grew up with Mickey Mouse like me, so you don't know much." When we consciously or subconsciously think like this, we are implicitly feeling, "I don't know much and can't practice because I'm a Westerner." But, if we respect other Western practitioners, we respect and encourage our own potential as well. This is very important so that we have the confidence to practice the path continually.

Last year I was asked to give a talk to the sangha, and somebody asked how we can encourage laypeople to respect the sangha more. I said that we have to respect the sangha more! Especially as Westerners, if we respect each other, then we're setting an example. If we only respect Tibetans and in particular, Tibetan males, then how are we going to respect ourselves? If we don't respect ourselves, our culture, our potential, then how can others?

We're not seeking respect. That's not the issue. Other people's respect does not get us to awakening. They can respect us up, down, and across and we can still get reborn in the lower realms. The point is that we learn to respect the good qualities in ourselves and in others.

#### **4. Harmony in the Precepts**

Harmony in the precepts means that we have voluntarily chosen to live together and observe the same precepts. It's not that I keep some precepts and you keep other precepts. It's not that you should keep this precept, but I don't need to. No, we all keep the precepts together. That creates harmony in the community.

#### **5. Harmony in Views**

Harmony in views means we share the same views, beliefs, and refuge in the Three Jewels. We're all trying to generate the determination to be free, bodhicitta, and the wisdom realizing emptiness. We have the same worldview, a similar understanding of karma and its effects, suffering, its origins, its cessation, and the path to that cessation. We have the same views, the same aspirations, and that makes a community very harmonious and close in a special way. If we come into the sangha community and say, "Buddhism is very nice, but everybody should study psychology, which is more important than Buddhism," then we're not going to be very harmonious living in that community. Psychology has benefits, but the basic view that we share as monastics is our refuge and our aspiration for awakening. We have to make sure that we stick to what we chose to do and not think, "Now that I'm a monastic, I'll study Hinduism or psychology as my principal interest." That won't work if we're going to be harmonious in our views.

Within our similar views, we certainly have a divergence of opinions. That's what debate is about. We discuss and debate. I'm not saying that we should make ourselves believe something we don't believe. That doesn't do any good. But, because of our similar aspiration for awakening, we're trying to generate the correct view. Thus, we have heated debate about that correct view so that we can refine our discernment of it.

#### **6. Harmony in Welfare**

Harmony in welfare means that we enjoy the benefits—the resources offered to the community—equally. In the Western sangha, this has been quite difficult until now. Each of us is responsible for supporting ourselves, and as a result there are rich monastics and poor monastics because some people have savings while others don't; some receive money from their family while others don't; some receive offerings from teaching, while others don't. Personally, I don't think this

way is right. It's not how the Buddha set up the monastic system. He didn't make it so we each have our own benefactor and those with wealthy benefactors fly around the world to attend many teachings, while those who don't have a benefactor go to work in a Dharma center cleaning the floors. That's not how the Buddha set up the sangha. I think we need to try to share resources more equally among the sangha.

It's very nice that Tushita lets the monastics stay here on a dana basis. When I was first ordained, we were charged the same amount as everyone else, and that made it very difficult. But ideally we should not have private property (except for the thirteen items allowed in the Vinaya) and private money. We monastics should share money equally. Of course, that depends on living in a community, which many Western sangha do not wish to do.

Until we are in a situation where we do not have private money and are supported by the community, we should help each other. If you're a monastic who happens to have more finances, help some of the others who don't. I say that because I was one of the poor monastics and was very grateful for the help extended by other monastics. One time when I lived in France, Lama Yeshe was teaching in Italy, and the center was charging sangha to attend the teachings. I didn't have enough money for the fees, let alone for the train ticket there. Lama Yeshe is one of my gurus, and I didn't have enough money to go to his teaching! One Dutch nun kindly offered me some money so I could go to the teaching. I remember this with much appreciation. It was over twenty years ago, but I'm still aware that due to her kindness I was able to attend those important teachings.

The system shouldn't be as it is, with monastics being charged to attend teachings at Dharma centers and with there being different classes of monastic—rich and poor. But at the moment it is like that, so until we get ourselves together in communities, we should try to help each other.

When offerings are distributed, everybody should get the same amount. In the Tibetan system, this isn't always done. If you're sitting on the stage and have a title, you usually get double or triple the amount than everyone else. The way the Buddha set it up in Vinaya is that everybody gets the same amount of offerings. If something is distributed, it doesn't matter whether you're highly realized or not, whether you've been ordained a long time or a short time. Whoever you are, you share equally in the offering. I'm saying this so that in case you're ever making offerings, this is how they should be distributed. It creates harmony in the community because no one is privileged. Everyone is equal.

Gen. Lobsang Gyatso, who used to be the principal at the Dialectic School, was exemplary in this regard. As the principal, he could have had the monks cook him special food that was better than what everyone else was eating. He could have better quality clothes and special this and that. But he ate the same *dal-bhat* (rice and dal) that all the other monks at the school did. He lived in the same unheated rooms like the other monks did. He was a very good example of a monk who lived simply and did not take the perks that he could have.

The harmony of sharing equally creates a special energy in a sangha. Other sangha are very precious for us in our practice. The deepest part of ourselves is our spiritual yearning and aspiration, isn't it? That's why we got ordained. So few people in the world understand this. Very often, our family can't even understand it. So when we meet other people who understand that part of us, let's recognize how precious those people are. That's the value of being around other monastics. Whether we like them or don't, whether we get along or don't, under the surface we have a common passion for the spiritual path. Thus, we can trust each other on that level and help each other.

Those of us who chose as adults to be monastics are aware of our spiritual yearning. If you're put in a monastery at a young age, you're not so aware of that part of yourself. But those who were ordained as adults got ordained for a reason. We chose it. That's something we can cherish in each other and support in each other. It creates a very good feeling.

As we grow old together as monastics, we get to know each other very well. Many of the senior Western monastics have known each other for well over twenty years. If you ever got us together

and had us tell stories about what we were like, you'd be amazed. We were quite a crew, let me tell you! But we've been the same group of people practicing together all these years, going through all the ups and downs. There's something very nice about it. It's great to see old Dharma friends. We're scattered all around the world, but when we bump into each other at an airport or a Dharma teaching, a closeness is there because we know and appreciate something special about that person: their spiritual aspirations.

We sit in ordination order, so we sit near the same people year after year. Once, I was sitting in a teaching thinking that I don't like the nun on my left because of blah blah blah, and I don't like the nun on my right because of blah blah blah. One day it hit me that I'm going to be sitting next to this one and that one until the day I die, so I'd better do something with my mind because there is no way I'll be able to avoid them. We're glued together in ordination.

Geshe Tegchok used to say to us, "You look up the line of sangha and find fault with each person, 'This one gets up late and that one eats too much. That one doesn't close the door quietly,' and you look down the line and find fault with each person, 'That one is bad tempered, and this one has too much attachment. That one is always late for puja.' You find something to criticize about everyone. Does that attitude make you happy? What kind of karma do you create with it?"

When we recognize that we're going to be sitting with these people until we die, and maybe even in the next life too, then we realize we have to find a way to get along with them. We can't make them change to be what we want them to be. We have to get along with them by changing the way we look at them, or by approaching them and discussing the situation so we can work it out.

As I worked on my mind, my view of people changed. Later, when I went to another sangha gathering, I was still sitting between the same two people, but I thought, "This one can translate Tibetan. I can't even speak Tibetan and she's able to translate. That's fantastic. She knows much more than I do and she teaches. Great! And the one on the other side is very artistic, and she has offered much service to our teacher." I was able to see some good qualities in these people. Changing our attitudes so we can get along with people is a big part of our practice.

Despite the quarrels I'd had with one of them, she came to talk to me once when she was having some difficulties in another area. I was touched and thought, "Wow, we've been through a lot together and she knows that she can trust me."

There's the story about a layperson saying to another sangha member, "What's with this nun? She's been ordained a long time, and she's still so bad tempered. How can you be a nun and be so disagreeable?" The other sangha member replied, "You should have seen what she was like before!" So, we see others grow and change and work with their stuff, and they see us work with our stuff and progress too. Dharma works when we practice it.

## Questions and Answers

**Question (Q):** Could you say more about having money? I have money, and I find it difficult to know where to draw the line about spending it. What's a monastic mind about when to go get a package of biscuits?

**Venerable Thubten Chodron (VTC):** Technically speaking, we're not supposed to handle money. It's one of our precepts. If we don't handle money, then that can help dampen our craving for biscuits because we know we can't just go to town and get some.

However, nowadays, it's pretty difficult not to handle money. Thus, the question becomes, "How do we handle money wisely?" One way is, if we live in a community, we don't have our own cash on hand. If we go shopping, we're buying things for the community and using community money. Thus, we have to be responsible because we're spending the sangha's money. We can't go out and buy whatever our whims tell us to. Whatever money gets spent, it's spent for the community. Hopefully, laypeople can help with shopping and driving.

If you live on your own, spending money is self-regulatory. You have to set parameters and stick to them. One idea is to make a list of what you need at the store and then buy just that. Don't buy anything that isn't on your list. That cuts down on indulging the craving that arises from seeing things in the store.

I have an advantage. I hate shopping. When I was a little kid, my mom would want to take me shopping to buy things and I hated shopping. I find it boring and confusing. There are so many things to choose from in the West, so the mind starts to operate overtime wondering, "What will make me most happy? This? That? How can I get the most pleasure?" For me, that mental state trying to eke out the most happiness makes me confused. So if I need a pair of socks, I ask a layperson who has previously volunteered to help me to please get some socks. Whatever they get me, I wear. Giving up some of our choices helps us to practice being content with whatever we have.

We can ask ourselves what we need within the remembrance that we chose to live a life of simplicity as the Buddha advised. We can have the things we need, and we should keep our body healthy. Let's not go on some ascetic trip—that wasn't the Buddha's way either. Whenever someone at Kopan would be super-ascetic, Lama Yeshe would scold them. On the other hand, we don't need the best bed, the softest quilt, lots of shoes, furniture, or the latest digital gadgets. We can have just what we need. As long as it's functional, it doesn't need to be beautiful and attractive. If we're doing the shopping, we get what is functional and practical. If someone gives us the item, we use that. When people give us things we don't need, we give them away. We don't stockpile them. It doesn't seem right to know that people are starving in the world when a monastic, who has chosen to cultivate compassion, has a closet stuffed with things they don't use or need.

Regarding getting a package of biscuits, if I'm craving them, I'll get a package and then offer it on the altar. Or I'll get two packages and offer one and eat one. The point is, we eat what we need to eat, we have what we need to live, but we don't need luxury and excess. If we live simply and are satisfied, think of what an example that becomes to people in the West who are searching for happiness from external things. People there have so much stuff and they're still not happy. When they see people who live simply and are happy, it makes them stop and think. We can give lots of Dharma talks about how sense pleasures don't bring happiness, but our actions speak louder than all these words. If we're a happy person, that tells people that Dharma works.

I feel that the place where I'm currently living is a bit too luxurious for what I need. The Dharma center supports me as their resident teacher, so they pay the rent on the apartment. In my eyes, the furniture and other things in the apartment belong to the center, and they are letting me use

it. I don't see it as "mine." There's a microwave because a person insisted on getting me one even though I said I didn't want it. The next year the same person wanted to get me a television, and I absolutely refused! What do I need a television for? Our monastic precepts prohibit listening to music or watching entertainment. Why did the Buddha prohibit these? Because they agitate our mind. I see that very clearly when I examine my own experience. Music and entertainment don't bring happiness, they just make me distracted and agitated. In addition, they take up time that we could be using to study, practice, or offer service. If someone wants to watch entertainment or listen to music, I think it's better for them to remain a layperson. But we got ordained because we want to do away with those distractions. We want to use our life for a higher purpose.

Another method that helps me live simply is to give away anything that I haven't used in a year. If I've gone through all four seasons and haven't used something, then I don't really need it, and it's time to give it away. Sometimes the right person to give something to isn't there, so I keep the article until someone is there. For example, if I have an extra shamtab, I have to wait until I see another sangha member it would fit to give it away.

As sangha, we shouldn't have any lay clothes. When we get ordained, we should give away all of our lay clothes. There's no need for us to travel in lay clothes. Some people say, "I have to wear lay clothes because others stare at me if I wear robes." I disagree. I've traveled over the world wearing my robes—Mainland China, the former Soviet republics, Israel, Latin America, the USA, and so on. Sometimes people stare at me, but it's no big deal. Other times, people come up and ask me if I know the Dalai Lama, and we have a conversation on spiritual practice. Once in a while, when I'm walking in the park or down a street, someone will compliment me on my nice "outfit" or say how nice I look with that hairdo! They're not being facetious, they're sincere. I say, "Thank you," and if they want to talk, I stop to chat with them.

The only time I didn't wear my robes was the first time I went to see my parents after ordination. Lama told me not to because my mother would have started crying in the airport. So that was wise. The only other time was when I entered the Beijing airport. I thought it might not be too cool to show up in Tibetan robes. However, I changed into my robes once I was in the country.

When the occasional person stares at me, I smile back, and they relax. When others see we're friendly, even if we dress in unusual clothes, they will be friendly back. Now it's much easier to travel in robes than in 1977 when I was ordained. His Holiness has traveled to so many places, and now people recognize the robes. One time, I got off a plane in a U.S. city and the flight personnel at the gate said "Tashi delek" to me!

I don't wear my zen when traveling because it falls off. Instead I wear a maroon jacket or sweater. I have a Chinese style jacket. The Chinese style robes are much more practical because the jackets have pockets. You actually have a place to put your tissue and Chapstick. Venerable Wu Yin made several of these jackets in maroon and gave them to Western bhikshunis. In teaching, I don't wear sleeves, but in the city, it's more convenient to wear a jacket. Also, I feel more comfortable being covered up. Our jackets and sweaters should be simple. No trim. No fancy this or that.

**Q:** What do you think about monastics working in service professions. Isn't that kind of a compromise, whereby they offer service but also earn money to live?

**VTC:** I feel very strongly that monastics should not work at a job. If we want to do service work in the broader community, we should volunteer. I want my life to be one of generosity where I work or teach without asking for a salary, and people will offer what they wish. I don't want to start thinking, "If I take the job in the hospice center, I get paid more than if I work in a school." Or, "I work long hours in the nursing home; they should give me a raise." I don't want my mind to become involved in such thoughts. I also don't want to put on lay clothes. I got ordained so I could live as a nun, so I'm going to do that. I don't want to live like a layperson.

Sometimes someone will ask me to give a talk, and they don't know what *dana* (generosity) is, so they "pay" me by sending a check, and that's fine. I don't tell them how much to give. Their school or institute may have a fixed policy regarding honorariums. I'll give a talk there whether they give me an honorarium or not.

When I was ordained, I made a determination never to go out and get a job no matter how poor I was. Sometimes I've been very poor, but I've never gone out to work at a job. I felt that if I did that, it would be extremely difficult to keep my precepts. If I put on lay clothes, then I want this nice dress, and I have to grow my hair a bit longer so that I fit in at the workplace. Then I start thinking about how my hair and clothes look. Then there's this good-looking guy at the place where I work. I'm the only monastic in this city; robes isolate me from others, and I'm lonely. So I might as well disrobe and go off with this guy. And that's what happens to most people who go out and get jobs, especially new sangha.

Since there are not communities that support monastics at the moment, I advise people who do not have savings to work for a while and save their money before they ordain. Or they should arrange some means of support with friends and family being their benefactors. But, my experience has been that when people go out and work, they can't keep their precepts for very long. Of course, there are a few exceptions, but generally this is the case.

Why do sangha go out and work? Because they're not living in a Dharma community or a monastery; they're living on their own. If you live on your own, you have to pay rent. Therefore, you have to get a job. Then you have to buy the proper kind of clothing to wear to work and you have to get a car to get there. In the evening you're tired, so you want to watch TV, so you need to buy a TV. Pretty soon, you wind up living like a layperson. There aren't any or many Dharma people around you to support your practice. So, even if it has drawbacks, I think we should live in a Dharma center where there are other people practicing. Hopefully, there will be a few other monks and nuns there and you can practice and discuss the Dharma with them. Then, as a group, you can request the center's resident teacher for teachings on Vinaya, the monastic precepts, and monastic rituals.

Hospice work is wonderful, but I think it's better if you do it as a volunteer, unless there is a specific benefit that others receive by your working as an employee. If someone wants to give you money for that, fine, but that's not the main reason you're doing the work.

It's similar with teaching the Dharma. If we're asked to teach, we do it for free. We don't choose where we go to teach according to how much *dana* the people there will give us. We go to a place to teach because the people there invited us and they sincerely want to learn the Dharma.

**Q:** I think that when you have to work, you can still think, "Ok, I got some money from this, and in addition to supporting myself, I can use it for other people and other purposes." In that way, you're not taking it only for yourself.

**VTC:** Yes, that's better than selfishly keeping the money. However, the question still remains: As a monastic, why aren't we living with other Dharma people? Why are we living on our own, alone in a city? How are we going to sustain our practice if we're working at a job with colleagues who have worldly values?



## Our Relationship to Money

By Venerable Thubten Chodron

In our consumer-driven culture, money can be a huge focus in our lives. It is not only that money provides us with the means to buy the requisites we need to live—it can also symbolize various things such as power, love and freedom. Examine the various points below and see what resonates with you. Identify the areas that feel ‘sticky’ around your relationship to money. How does this fit with the idea of becoming a monastic, where we live entirely on the kindness of others? How can you begin to transform your relationship to money, so that you will be content to live simply, with more time and mental space to devote to your spiritual practice?



Photo by Gen Heywood Photography

### Money Equals Power

- The most powerful people in the world are rich.
- If I had more money, I'd definitely be more powerful.
- When people lose money, they lose power.
- I need a lot of money to accomplish my goals and feel in control of my life.
- Less money means less power to live my life as I choose.

Do you know people who don't have a lot of money but seem powerful to you?

Do you know people who have a lot of money but lack personal power?

What factors besides money are necessary to attain personal power?

### **Money Equals Freedom**

- Having more money would enable me to do what I really want to do in my life.
- It is mainly money that is preventing me from doing what I really want to do.
- Wealthy people are truly freer to create the kind of life they want.
- The key to real freedom is to have enough money.
- I often think about all the things I could do, and the freedom I would have, if only I had more money.

### **Money Equals Self-worth**

- Do you feel a lot better about yourself when you're making more money?
- Does the income of people close to you affect your respect for them?
- Do you fear that people would look down on you if you underwent a salary cut, for any reason?
- Would being unemployed for a short period make you feel bad about yourself?
- Do you lose some respect for people if you find out they are making much less money than you thought they were?

### **Money Equals Security**

- When you think about not having a lot of money saved for the future, do you feel uneasy?
- Do you judge people who spend a lot of money for present pleasures as unwise?
- When you think about being secure in your old age, is having enough money the main thing that comes to mind?
- Does putting away money in savings or in safe investments make you feel secure?
- If you have fears about your old age, does thinking about having more than enough money during that period comfort you and allay your fears?

### **Money Equals Love**

- Do your feelings about yourself or someone else change a lot after they give you a gift?
- Do you feel more attractive or loveable when you have more money?
- Is one of the chief ways you show affection to give someone a gift?
- Do you feel unloved or rejected when someone forgets your birthday and doesn't give you a gift?
- Do you think about the value of a gift someone gave and does that influence how much you feel they care about you?
- Do you rely more on giving a gift than on words or helpful actions to show affection?

## CHOOSING TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

As the Buddha recommended monastics to live, study and train together, it is important to explore your feelings about community life. Why is community life a conducive environment for Dharma practice? How might we approach community living authentically, with personal integrity and consideration for others? What benefits—and challenges—can we expect from communal life?

Included here for your contemplation is an article by Venerable Chodron on *'What is a monastery?'*, structured points for contemplation on living in community, and the ceremony of request for training that you will take as part of participating in the *Exploring Monastic Life* program.



Photo by Gen Heywood Photography

## What is a Monastery?

*Venerable Thubten Chodron originally gave this as a short Bodhisattva's Breakfast Corner talk on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018. You can watch the original talk [here](#).*

I thought today I'd talk a little bit about what a monastery is, because we all come here with our own ideas of what a monastery is, and what's going to happen to us at a monastery, and probably most of our ideas don't fit the situation.

What's usually familiar to us in the societal institutions and group situations that we know already are school, where you have semesters with specific topics, you have a curriculum, it starts week one, it ends week 12, you have quizzes, you have midterms, you have a final exam, you have a paper, and so on. The purpose is to imbibe a lot of information and then to tell the teachers basically what they already know, to show that you've learned that information. That is one institution we're very familiar with. Very structured—how we act, what we receive from it—very fixed in our minds, we know what it is. The teachers are there to teach, they're supposed to teach us and we can like them, we can not like them, it doesn't really matter and we're there to get a grade. Some people, sure, they go to learn things but just kind of normal, regular.

Then the other societal institution we're familiar with is work. So work: you make an application that exaggerates your good qualities, you don't tell the people what you don't know and you don't tell them your faults—either on the application or after you start the job. So you keep a lot of who you are hidden and put on a face that makes you look competent and good, knowing what you're doing and so on and so forth. There you're mostly going to earn money, to support your family and to do things you enjoy. So some people may like their jobs, that's very good, but I think the money aspect and what they receive from the job is—if you don't have the money aspect, why do it?

You cooperate with other people but there's a certain amount of vying with them too, people who are equal with you. Because when it comes to promotion time you want to seem better than your colleagues so that you'll get the promotion. You want to make a good impression on whoever is above you in the organizational structure because you get certain perks if you can have a good relationship with that person. Again, there's very standard things. You are employed for a specific period of time or maybe until you quit or whatever, and you get this much pay and this is your job description and everything is very clearly, neatly laid out. If you work for a good company, they're going to come talk to you about your career expectations and what you would like in the future if you continue working for that company, what kind of positions you would like, what kind of things would bring you job satisfaction. Your mind is focused on going through these stages that society considers to be success—because you make more money, you get a higher title, maybe you get a corner office eventually, or whatever it is. That's another institution we're very familiar with.

The third is family. So family institution: a mother and a father or maybe a mother, maybe a father, maybe neither these days, maybe you're living with a grandparent or an aunt or uncle or who knows what, but those people are responsible at least for feeding and clothing you and for bringing you up. Most parents love their children and they want their children to be and have everything that they weren't able to be and have. So parents, when they bring you up, they have specific ideas of who they want you to be, what makes you happy, how you're going to take care of them when they're old. There's a lot of expectations within families. Again, there can be a lot of competition and vying between siblings for parents' attention. There can be, you hit teen years and you rebel and everybody knows that, and you hate your parents and your parents, really, they love you dearly, but they are pretty fed up when you're a teenager and you just hope for the best growing out of that. I'm

just making loose, general terms. Not everybody's the same in here. But what I'm saying is that these are the three kinds of situations that we're very familiar with.

In school, we're, "What can I get out of it? I need the degree, I need the recommendations, I need the after-school activities to make my resume and whatever." So it's, "What can I get from school?" Work – "What can I get out of work? I want money. Job satisfaction would be nice. But I really want a promotion and I want status." Maybe you want job security. People can have other things, but it's, "What can I get out of it?" Family, from the child's point of view, it's also what can I get out of it. "My parents had me. I didn't ask to be born. They're responsible for taking care of me and making sure I'm okay and feeding, clothing, and educating me and I can take what I want or don't want, but I don't really owe them anything." Although there's a lot of expectation in there about what you should do for your parents. But in none of those three situations are we going in with the mind that says, "What can I give?" In those three situations it's all, "How can I fit in and how can I benefit?"

You come to a monastery and this is totally different. What my point is, we don't have anything in our previous upbringing that prepares us for what coming into a monastery is, because when we come into the monastery what are our purposes? "What can I give? How can I contribute?" Of course it's about developing our own mind, deepening our Dharma practice—but why are we deepening our Dharma practice? Why are we studying and learning concentration and meditating? It's to benefit sentient beings; to be able to give more. No other institution in our society has that as a platform, as your value for coming in, "What can I give?"

Also when you come into a monastery, part of it is we are part of a tradition that began from the Buddha and has passed from one monastic generation to the next to the next to the next. We are trained to see ourselves as just one link in this process where we're receiving this immense amount of precious and blessed material and knowledge and so on from the practitioners that came before us. Our job is to realize it and preserve it and pass it on to the next generation. So we're charged with preserving something that is very precious, not just for our family, not just for our alma mater, not just for the job we work at, but for all sentient beings, so that all sentient beings will have access to the Dharma, if they so desire, on this planet. And by actualizing the Dharma so that we have the Dharma in our minds, sentient beings can access that by our giving the Dharma, explaining the Dharma, helping people learn it. Do you see how different the motivation and the whole set-up is for a monastery? And how different it is from a family and a school and a work place?

Like I said, we have no role model for this before coming into a monastery. So we usually come in with our usual attitude of, "What can this place do for me? How am I going to benefit by being here? Okay, there's jobs I have to do, so I have to do them. And if I get some help, that's good. But maybe we should have discussions about what I want from my offering service job in the future. How I can progress and attain a higher status in my offering service job? Maybe I can become the director of the monastery. Maybe I can become a translator. Maybe I can be the chief person in charge of the forest. Maybe I can become a teacher. What are my job possibilities? What can I become?"

This is what we're taught in our upbringing, to become somebody with a title with certain educational qualifications and your name card of what you are and then you feel secure; you now have a monastic career. You have a title with this, you're head of the department, you're the assistant department head, you know what you're doing. Because we think the important thing about offering service is, "Let's get the job done efficiently." The important thing is we have a time table, get the job done efficiently, then take the rest of the time off—because that's what we did in our ordinary work job, that's what we did in school.

Here, what are the criteria for your offering service? What's the state of your mind? Are you offering service with a pure motivation to benefit others? Are you learning about your own mind from your interactions with everybody else at the Abbey, like when people don't do things the way

you want them done, or they think differently from you? Are you learning about yourself from those? Are you able to practice fortitude and patience? Are you able to develop loving-kindness for all the other people who live here and all the guests? Those are the criteria for successful offering service jobs—not your title, not your status in the monastery. It's what's going on in your mind.

So again, in our upbringing we have no role model for a place where you go where your own internal development, with which you alone are responsible for and to monitor, is the qualification of what is successful or not in terms of your offering service. It doesn't correspond with society. Our motivation for going to the monastery is thinking, "What can I give? How can I preserve this tradition?" That's not why you go to school or get a job! So again, coming here involves this incredible thing of resocialization, because a lot of our old attitudes, they just don't work here. Of course we bring all our old attitudes and our old expectations and our old assumptions with us, and that's where we keep bumping into things because the criteria here are different. So it's really, in our offering service, "What's going on in my mind?" Not, "This is my office and this is my job and only my job and you stay out of it." Or, "This is my department and I need help so you come in here and help me! But this is mine and I have territorial clinging to it." That's not why we're here in the monastery. So just be aware when you're training here, if you keep bumping up against things, this is why—because it's a very different place here than what you've ever experienced before.

So of course you're going to bump up against stuff and you're going to go, "What the?! What are people doing here?" Then if you remember this talk—then that's the thing, if you remember this talk, which you'll probably have to hear at least 20 times before you have a chance of remembering it—then you'll be able to say, "This is what I need to be paying attention to; this is what I need to be doing right now," and then accommodate your behavior to how things are done here. So it's a little bit of a rough and tumble job sometimes. But what are our real values in life? If our real values are, "What can I get out of this and what status can I achieve?" there's the whole rest of the world you can go do that in. But if that's not what you want in life, then you have to adjust. We have those values but sometimes it's really hard for us to live according to our own values because we have so much habit in the other way. So we have to be clear on our values, clear on the values of the monastery, and then keep practicing. If those two sets of values correspond—then keep practicing to recondition our mind so that we can live according to our own values.

That, from a Dharma perspective, is a successful life. Because at the end of this life when we come to the time to die, there will be no regrets because we've lived according to our values. We're not going to fear what happens at death time because we've abandoned negativity and created virtue and we can be satisfied with this life. Maybe I gained some realizations. Maybe I just planted a lot of very deep seeds of the Dharma in my mindstream, but how wonderful it is to have spent this life doing that. Now I can go on to my next life with all those seeds of the Dharma and slowly nurture them, lifetime by lifetime until I become a Buddha. So then there's a real feeling of contentment and fulfillment at the end of our lives.

**Question:** I worked with some activist groups, one where we were trying to protect buffalo. I was around a lot of people that worked in different capacities volunteering for different activist groups and they definitely had the attitude of, "What can I do to contribute to changing for a better world?" But I think a big part, one thing when I was around those groups I had to look at motivations a lot. How much do we just want to be around this situation? Because I was sometimes around very nice people but what we lacked, I thought, were some common philosophies and that commonality of wanting to work on ourselves. A lot of it was an outward trying to change external things. Some people would say, "I don't have any possessions but what's in my backpack," and trying to live some level of renunciation and there was some pure motivation in there somewhere. But there were a lot of other things going on and it was a lot of trouble too because there was a lot of anger and we weren't working on our own selves.

**Venerable Thubten Chodron:** Yes, so a lot of those people really mean well, but they don't have the tools to deal with the emotions that come up in their mind so they can really stay doing that long-term. So I wasn't trying to imply that nobody else has good motivations for what they do. But it's like you said, it's outward directed. We want to change this external situation and that depends on changing other people. Here we're wanting to change the internal situation and through that, then open an opportunity for other people to change.



Photo by Gen Heywood Photography

## Points for Reflection on Living in Community

*Here are some points for contemplating various aspects of living in community as a Sangha member. Take these to the meditation cushion and explore what comes up for you. What aspects of community life appeal do you? What don't? How could you transform those aspects where you feel resistance into a source of growth for your spiritual practice?*

### Benefits of Community Life

1. Group support: the schedule and group participation make getting to the meditation cushion and studying easier.
2. Increased merit: we generate much more merit by doing activities in groups than if we were doing them on our own. How much more effective and powerful is it to sweep a room with a broom with many bristles than with one single piece of straw?
3. We generate a sense of belonging from living with others who understand our spiritual yearning and support it.
4. Everyone is working on themselves, so we can be transparent instead of ashamed about our afflictions and our process of working with them.
5. We can stop taking ourselves so seriously and learn to laugh at our foibles.

### Important Elements of Community Life

1. A shared vision and values for the community that everyone supports.
2. A supportive environment where we and others can support and encourage each other to learn, contemplate, meditate, and share the Dharma.
3. A sense of shared resources: examine how we identify with our possessions, how they reinforce our sense of self, how that impacts our interactions with others, and note which things we choose not to share with community.
4. Environmental awareness.
5. Cooperation, working for the benefit of others and of self.
6. Simplicity of lifestyle—nothing extraneous in terms of possessions or activities.
7. An overall sense of community stemming from all the above, so that the monastery is not just a boarding house for monks and nuns.

### Practical Elements of Community Life

1. Observe our speech, how we use it, and its effects on others and on ourselves.
  - Develop consistency between what we feel and what we say and do.
  - Notice when we speak and act sincerely and when it's done in order to produce a certain effect in another. For example, notice when we pretend to feel something, say something, or do something in order to win someone's approval or to avoid their disapproval; when we are two-faced or being a fair-weather friend.
  - Develop consistency between what we say and what we do, e.g. following through on commitments.
  - Notice how insecurity leads to wanting to control, pushing our opinions, insisting on our preferences.
  - Engage in meaningful conversation, not speaking too much or too little.
2. Observe our actions and their effects on others and on ourselves.
3. Being able to apologize and forgive ourselves and others.
4. Have mutual responsibility for the running of the household, garden, forest, etc.
5. Do not wait to be asked to help, but see what needs to be done and help.



6. Being able to do things we don't like to do with a good motivation.
7. Knowing when to forego our own preference in favor of the group's wishes out of affection for them.
8. Avoid special friendships and develop affinity and equanimity towards all.

### **Internal Habits on the Part of Each Individual That Impede Community Life**

1. Shame.
2. Attempting to hide what we don't want anyone else to know about us.
3. Comparing ourselves to others, which leads to jealousy, competition, and/or arrogance.
4. Seeking approval—ask yourself, “Whose approval do we seek? What do we do to get it? What are the results of seeking approval?”
5. What is our coping strategy when we feel hurt? Lashing out, criticizing others, withdrawing, sulking, and so on. What is the difference between reacting and responding?
6. Observe what happens as we contact sense objects. Feeling arises and we react to that with attachment, hostility or indifference. Notice how we describe situations to ourselves and how we react.
7. Imputing motivations on others.



Photo by Libby Kamrowski

## WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU ORDAIN?

This section contains an edited transcript of two talks Venerable Chodron gave during the 2013 Exploring Monastic Life Program. Venerable discusses the seven factors that change when you ordain— appearance, name, livelihood/occupation, dress, shelter, diet, responsibilities towards community—and the psychological and practical impact this has for day-to-day life. These talks provide many valuable points for contemplation regarding your level of readiness and willingness to make such changes, and what areas in your spiritual practice you can focus on to grow. You can watch or listen to the original talks [here](#).

### Motivation

Let's remember that the bottom line motivation for becoming a monastic is to have the aspiration for liberation; then as Mahayana practitioners we also want to add onto that the bodhicitta motivation. Our monastic life has to have a deep purpose and meaning, a very clear motivation. It's not something that we just fall into or do on automatic, but that we're quite consciously choosing.

### Dispelling Myths about Monastic Lifestyle

I said in the motivation that we're consciously choosing this lifestyle; this is very important. We're not doing it just on automatic. When you've been ordained for awhile, you have to really make this something you keep coming back to every day, "This is why I'm doing what I'm doing. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing." It's not just that you ordain and you space out and just keep doing what you're doing and what monastics are doing, without really thinking why you're doing it. This motivation is quite important to keep very vivid in our mind. Not only for monastic life but for Dharma practice in general.

Today Venerable Tarpa and Venerable Yeshe are in Spokane shopping. Now you might say, "Well if monastics are going shopping..." but the work that they're doing is in service of the sangha. When we live together as a community, then we divide up the different jobs and the different things and people do them all in service for the sangha. Although we try and arrange it so that nobody has to miss teachings and so on, sometimes there's things that come up. Like when you're building a building and you need a stove—and the only hours they're open are in the daytime and that's the time when the teachings are—then clearly you have to miss one of the regular activities the sangha is doing.

I think it's important because lots of times we have this airy-fairy idea of monastic life. Like you ordain and then after that all you do is meditate, and preferably all alone in a cave, and then realizations just shower upon you magically as you float up in the sky and are blissful. Oh! I'm sorry to disappoint you but it's really not like that. It's like the precepts are designed for ordinary beings and we're ordinary beings. They help us become extraordinary beings, but we really need to get over this fantasy of what monastic life is: like I'm just going to study and meditate, that's all I do. I don't have to do any work for anything. Well, actually, if you're living in a community, you have to do something because everybody has to work together to sustain the community.

Even if you live on your own, you have to do something. It's not like in your cave they have an instant water dispenser and kerosene flows through the rock—I'm sorry you don't use kerosene... that there's a ready-made gas stove, propane that automatically gets filled. And anything that tears, your robes that tear, automatically get fixed. No, I mean like the meditators above Dharamsala, they all carry their own water. You have to walk to the stream with a big barrel or pot or whatever it is and bring your water back. And then if you're fortunate, a disciple brings you kerosene (you don't

have a nice gas stove). And you have to sew your own stuff when your robes tear and if your hut needs repairs, you have to repair them.

What I'm trying to say is that people sometimes have such a fanciful idea of monastic life. Then they're very disappointed afterwards when they realize, "Gee, I still have to do things to take care of this body and I still have to do things to, you know, take care of the community." They somehow feel like, "Well now I'm a monastic and everybody should take care of me." No. Lama Yeshe, one of the big things he really hammered into us, and I have this very vivid image of him as he really made it a point one day, to pick up his mala and he said, "Your mantra is, 'I am the servant of others, I am the servant of others, I am the servant of others.' That's got to be your motivation for whatever you do. Don't expect other people to serve you."

Having said that, we do receive a lot of offerings and service from lay people, and we depend on the lay support a great deal. But knowing what it's like ourselves to serve others, then we should really make sure that we appreciate the service we receive and not just take it for granted and not have some kind of idea of, "Well, I sit in the front row because I'm a monastic, so they should do stuff for me." That kind of arrogant thing, which sometimes you find amongst people, that just doesn't fly. That's the easiest way to have lay people disrespect you, is if you're arrogant and you have a big mouth or a bad mouth. It's the easiest way to lose respect.

So we've always got to work on our motivation. Then when we serve, to really have an attitude of serving. Not an attitude of, "Oh well, okay, I guess somebody's got to do this. Gee, I hope it can be somebody else next time!" But to really kind of appreciate that opportunity and do our service work with joy. I mean, we have to keep our precepts while we are doing service work. Don't we? Because so many of the precepts regard how we get along with other people and how we treat other people, so those precepts are for when you are dealing with other people! They're not for when you are in your fanciful dream in a cave where you're up there complaining because they don't have all the modern things you want and at the same time hoping that everybody, all your friends, know how renounced you are and what a great yogi you are. So to serve with joy.

And everybody contributes something different according to their different abilities. But also the monasteries are quite different. In the Tibetan monasteries, because they have such a huge population of people who ordain and many of them ordain when they are young, their philosophy is ordain a lot of people and out of a big batch, you'll get a few gems, and then the rest will serve the monastery. So you have a whole group of people who after some years of education, that way of teaching doesn't speak to them and so they prefer very much to offer service. In the Chinese monasteries they do it a little bit different. You get a basic education program and then after that everybody offers service. But even during the basic education program, they consider part of it's learning to do the different jobs in the monastery. So everybody rotates taking care of the altar, everybody rotates being in the kitchen or doing this or that. There are some jobs that have specific skills, so those you have to have people who have those skills, but many others you rotate so you get an idea really of how the entire monastery runs and an appreciation of the jobs that everybody does.

In the Tibetan monasteries it really is quite different; there is much more distinction. The Rinpoches don't work. If you enter a monastery and you have benefactors, then they can make a large donation to the monastery and then you don't do as much work. When they were first exiled in India, then almost everybody worked in the fields. Now the monasteries are richer so they pay the Indians to work in the fields so the monks have more time for their practice. So things are different in each kind of place.

## **What Changes When You Become a Monastic**

So now to talk about what changes when you become a monastic. I'll just briefly read the list and then go through and talk about them. One is a change in appearance; and then second is a change in your name; third change in livelihood or occupation; fourth change in dress; fifth change in diet; sixth, a change in your lodging or your shelter; and seven, change in responsibility towards the Buddhist community and society.

### **Change in Appearance and Dress**

I'll talk about change in appearance and change in dress together as they kind of come together. So our appearance does change when we ordain, doesn't it? One thing is shave your hair, shave your beard. That is the way that it's been since in Ancient India. I think one of the reasons is because hair is, in a way, an adornment, and how we have our hair creates an appearance and makes us attractive. Since we aren't trying to be attractive to anybody else, then there's no need to have the hair. It makes it so much easier! You don't have to worry about how your hair looks or what color it is. The guys don't have to worry about if they have hair or don't have hair because it all gets shaved off anyway. Not only is our hair specifically referring to our vanity about our physical appearance, which applies to men as well as women, but also shaving it off represents cutting off ignorance, anger, and attachment, the three poisonous minds that are consistently creating problems for us and keeping us bound in samsara.

Another change in appearance is we don't wear jewelry or ornaments or perfumes. Without hair, you don't have all the hair ornaments. We don't wear any jewelry that could be adorning in any way. Now the question of watches comes up a lot. In Tibet when they first had watches, they didn't know what they were for, so they were quite a status symbol. Even here too, what kind of watch you have, it creates an image, doesn't it? It kind of shows what kind of person you are: if you have one of those ones with all those different dials and barometers, pressure, and this and that, or if you have a Rolex. You create an image, you draw attention to yourself through your watch. That's why we keep our watches in our pockets or the Venerable Semkye way, you tack it onto the back of your cap. Again, all other jewelry, we have no need to decorate our body because we're not trying to attract anybody. No need for perfumes or aftershave because we're not trying to attract anybody. It's fine to use deodorant. In fact, please use deodorant, and get an unscented version. Somebody gave me some unscented and it still smells, but you do your best.

Same with soap. Try and use unscented soap whenever possible. Sometimes it's not possible but try and do that. If you are getting glasses, get one set of frames and just keep using those same frames unless they break or your old lenses don't fit in them or whatever. But we don't need to get the latest style in glass frames because that can also become an adornment, can't it? Have you ever noticed that people are really into their glass frames? All that kind of stuff, we're just ignoring. No cosmetics. You can use hand lotion or some kind of lotion if your skin is getting dry. You can use Chapstick, but no lipstick. Don't draw in your eyebrows. I have seen monastics who draw in their eyebrows. Don't do that.

There are other monastics who shave their eyebrows. In the Thai tradition, in Thailand, they shave their eyebrows, but that is not required in the Vinaya. The story I heard, why the Thais do that, is because some Thai monks were making eyes at women, moving their eyebrows—I'm not sure quite how they do it—so after that, they had to shave their eyebrows.

We wear our robes all the time. The exceptions are unless you are doing manual work where your robes would get totally filthy, in which case it's disrespectful to the robes, or in which your robes would be a safety hazard. If you're working around equipment with an engine and your robes

could get caught in that engine or something like that, then definitely you would put on work clothes. You see all of us in work clothes when we're in the forest or working with the tools in the tool shop and stuff like that. You get maroon work clothes—you don't put on jeans and a nice fashionable in-style sweatshirt or t-shirt, but you just wear maroon clothes and keep it at that.

The only other exception, I think, is if you're going through a border check. Like if you're going to go on pilgrimage in China, then maybe you might want to put on just some maroon pants and not wear your robes out because sometimes the immigration officials in China can make a problem with that. Everywhere else in the world it's no problem, but in China sometimes it's better just to really be as incognito as you can, even though you're not doing anything anyway. The only other time when I wore lay clothes was because my parents were quite upset when I became a nun and didn't speak to me for quite awhile and then my brother got married and they wanted me to come to the wedding. So my teacher told me to wear lay clothes and he said, "You look like California girl." "Ugh. I don't want to be California girl." But he was actually quite wise because I think if I had landed at the LA International Airport with my head shaved and robes, my mother probably would have gone hysterical in the middle of the airport.

Except for situations that are definitely something like that, then otherwise there's no need to have lay clothes or wear lay clothes. I say this because I remember visiting one Dharma center—this was so strange—the guy who was the director and one of the teachers of the Dharma center was a lay man, married, and there was a Tibetan monk there who was teaching. It was so funny because the lay man wanted to wear robes, even though he was a lay man, so he would wear these maroon skirts and it kind of ups your status if you look like a monk. And he wore a white thing, which is appropriate for a lay practitioner. I think that sometimes he was wearing a maroon one, which is not appropriate. But he really wanted to look like a sangha member. Meanwhile, the Tibetan monk was putting on lay clothes as he was going to an ESL program and he wanted to become Americanized.

It was like, "Gee, this is really backwards. That's not the way it should be." I mean if you have the opportunity to become a monastic, you should treasure your robes and respect your robes and feel privileged to wear them and not just kind of put on something else when you have to go into town. Unless there is some danger. If you are in a situation where there is some danger, then of course.

Within wearing robes, I also noticed that because our robes are dictated, then sometimes people really look for nice quality cloth. We get attached to nice quality cloth. So some people wear like silk shirts or things with a pattern in them or whatever, although in the Chinese tradition you don't wear silk and you don't wear leather. So again, not looking for the best quality cloth and really precious soft shiny cloth. In India, shoes are a big status thing for monastics. Everybody wants Nike shoes; and your jola, your monastic bag, so people now want fancy backpacks. So we have to always keep aware: are we getting something that we carry with us because it's nice and we use it as a status symbol? Like a really nice backpack, or special shoes or this or that. We should be completely content with whatever shoes we have. Best is not to wear leather and also we don't wear black and white as they are considered lay people's colors. It's okay to have brown shoes or dark blue shoes. But not powder blue shoes or pink shoes, because they really decorate the shoes now with all sorts of different patches and things like that. My personal feeling is that's not appropriate for a monastic as it's too easy for your mind to start thinking, "I'm different. I'm better." But, of course you also have to have shoes that fit your feet properly and if you have feet trouble and need arches or whatever, then you need to get the kind of shoes that work for you and sometimes those may cost more. But if it's the difference between being able to walk and not being able to walk, I think that's okay.

Underwear should be plain and simple, no fancy underwear. By Vinaya, the monks have three robes; the nuns have five robes. Of those, you are allowed to have one set that is your own. Most people have a spare set, so that they can wash what they are wearing. But your spare set (and there is

a little ceremony for doing it), either you place it under joint ownership where you share it with somebody else, or you think, “I’m going to give it somebody at a certain time. I’m going to give them this robe. In the meantime, I will use it.” It really cuts out this possessive mind that wants a lot of robes.

I mean, you might need maybe three donkas, something like that, because you switch, you have to wash your clothes, and we only wash on certain days and things like that. But you don’t need a whole pile of donkas. We don’t need a whole pile of undershirts, and we sleep in our undershirt and then a t-shirt. That’s good enough. And we don’t need like... well, one jacket; well, actually two jackets in case one needs to be washed. And then I need two coats and then I also need a light coat and then I need a sweater—maybe two sweaters, and maybe four sweaters as there’s some sweaters I wear when it’s a little bit cold and some I wear when it’s very cold. And then pretty soon you wind up with a drawer full of various jackets, sweaters, vests, and so on and that’s not appropriate. The same thing can go with hats, gloves, scarves, because we need those things. So to really try and keep it simple.

People give us many different things and so even if you think, “I will need this later,” for the time being, put it in the closet with all the monastic robes and then if you need it later, if it’s still there, you take it. If it’s not still there, I’m sure you will find something because we very fortunately don’t suffer from a lack of things and we have a surplus. But we don’t need to keep so many things in our room. You may need some long underwear, but you don’t need five pairs of long underwear. Same with socks. And then we try and repair things. If something tears, we don’t just throw it away and go get a new one—we repair it, and we wear things until they are really old and worn out.

At the time of the Buddha, it was very difficult for them to get robes. That’s one reason if you look at all of our robes, they’re all patched because you were lucky if you found just scraps of material. They would often go to the cemetery and take the material—when they dumped the bodies in the cemetery, they would take the shrouds and dye them and stick them together. They’re stitched together in this pattern because the Buddha one day was standing looking out over the rice fields and noticing the beautiful pattern—and you can still see this in India today—of how the small plots are arranged, and so wanted the robes arranged in a certain way.

We definitely don’t need more than one chogyu and more than one namjar. If you ordained in the Chinese tradition and you have your robes from that, then your present Tibetan robes are your namjar and your chogyu. Then the other ones, if you want to keep them, you don’t claim them as your own as then you would possess too many. Or we can give them to other people who may need them. That doesn’t happen too often because usually at the ordinations, people are very happy to offer the new robes.

## **Change in Name**

Then a change in your name. So we should be addressed by our Dharma name. I know when I started out, very few people used their Dharma names as nobody could pronounce the Tibetan and we couldn’t remember each other’s names and it’s just so much easier to use the name you knew somebody by. But I think it really does change your feeling when you have a new name, because your old name is just associated with so many different things. I heard somebody say once, “Why do kids have middle names?” Because then you know when you’re really in trouble. It’s true, isn’t it? When you’re really in trouble, it’s, “Cheryl Andrea Greene!” It’s like my passport name! So it’s much better, actually, if we could use our ordained names, because our ordained names also have meanings and it’s inspiring when you reflect on the meaning of your ordained name. It gives you something to live up to in some way.

In terms of legally changing your name, some people do, some people don’t. I think that’s completely up to the individual. I didn’t legally change my name basically because I’m too lazy and

it's too much of a hassle, so I use my legal name for legal things and use Thubten Chodron for everything else and it's worked out. I know other people who have legally changed their name to their ordination name, so it's up to you as a person.

## **Change in Livelihood**

Then change in livelihood or occupation. This is a big one. This is very important as Buddhism goes to the West. Extremely important. If you look at Buddhism in Asia, the monastics do not work individually for their own personal income. If they're working, they're working for the monastery. So, for example, some of the monasteries in India will set up guesthouses and they'll send a few of the monks to manage the guesthouse. Personally speaking, I don't think that's a good idea because I think when monastics are hanging out with tourists and travelers, their minds change. So personally speaking, I wouldn't choose that. But, they're doing it. But the money goes to the monastery. When they have these tours, the profits go to the monasteries. Very often, people will give them individual offerings and they tend to keep that themselves.

What I'm getting into now is the whole financial structure of the sangha, which I think is quite important, because in old Tibet, you had rich monks and poor monks. If you've ever read Geshe Rabten's autobiography, he had hardly anything to eat because he came from a very poor family and didn't make friends with all the rich people in town who would give him money. And then there were other people who had benefactors and who ate better and who had better housing. In the monasteries nowadays, what they often do is they try and get individual sponsors for individual monks.

The nuns have been doing it completely differently, which I think is much, much better. And that is, instead of the sponsors giving the money directly to the individuals, which again can easily create class differences: those who have benefactors that give more, and those who don't have benefactors or whose benefactors don't send as much. And then you have some monks who have two or three benefactors, while others don't have any. So this whole thing that happens, I don't think is a good idea. We were emphasizing before that the monastics should have equal access to resources, and that's very important for the quality in the sangha. So I think it's much better, when donations are given, that they come to the monastery and that the monastery then supports everybody. That way, everybody is supported equally and the money—some people get more offerings, some people get less offerings—it's used to support everybody in the monastery.

In the US, we have to take into consideration the high cost of healthcare here. In no other country do you have to pay as much for medical care as in this country. It's really outlandish and outrageous. So what we have is if people have money from before they ordain, (this is the way we do it at the Abbey) they can keep that money, but they can only use it for medical and dental expenses. When you are fully ordained, then the monastery pays for your health insurance, but until you're fully ordained, you have to pay for your own. That's because the monastery wants to know that you're really in there for the long-haul, that you're really stable in the practice, before covering your health insurance. So if you have funds from before, you can keep them, but you can only use them for that. Or you can use them for travelling to teachings or for making offerings.

If you don't have enough money for your health expenses, then the monastery, the Abbey, will supply them. But if you have savings from before, then you're expected to use those savings. But you cannot go and buy your own clothes. Usually regarding shoes, we see if there is somebody who wants to offer them and we may need to go out and try them on because otherwise they don't fit. You can't go buy a new blanket for yourself, or a new light for your room or a new anything for your room. We have a common supply for toiletries and things. If you have certain skin problems and you can't use the soap, then when somebody calls and says I want to offer something, then we can give them the name of the kind of soap you need for your skin, or if you need something special.

But aside from that, you can't go out and buy your own stuff because that really creates too much of a class difference. I have been very aware of that as I've lived in monastic communities and it doesn't create a good feeling.

Also, when you can go to the store and buy stuff for yourself, then that consumer mind comes back. It's like, "Well, I just want to get a few artificial flowers for my altar. It's for my altar! Come on, I can go get." But while I'm at the store, I also see a nice vase for my altar. Not for the community, but my altar. And also at the store, "Oh! They also sell certain kinds of this or that and I happen to need that as well." So then it's very easy to just start buying all sorts of stuff for yourself. The issues of computers come up. At the Abbey we may use the term 'my computer' or 'so and so's computer,' but in fact all the computers belong to the Abbey. They are not your individual computer, and if your computer doesn't work, we get it fixed; if it breaks and you need a new one, we'll supply it. But you can't just go around getting a new computer because you want a new computer.

Some people say, "Well I need a computer for my work, and I need a computer for my study." Really? The computers have so many gigabytes on them now, why do you need two different computers? Well if you're doing your study in Gotami House where there is no internet and you have a big computer over here and you can't carry your big computer over there, then that makes some sense to have a smaller computer you use for your study. But if you do your study where there is internet, you don't need a separate computer for that. If you're afraid of using your work computer for study, then you just make two different logons and you logoff your work thing when you're using your computer for study.

Because otherwise, especially for technology, we always need the latest, newest this and that, don't we? There's never any end to it. So the same with cell phones or fancy phones. Maybe we have one or two for the Abbey, which we usually forget to take with us when we need them, but we're trying to remember because sometimes people need to call us when we're in town. But aside from that, we don't have our own cell phones. There's no need for that. There is no need to get the latest this, that, and the other thing. So let's remember to try and keep it simple. Of course, if your old computer just isn't working with the new programs or it takes 15 minutes to turn on, which we did have that problem at one point, then you say something and the Abbey gets you a new computer. But we have to keep the mind wanting possessions to a minimum.

Similarly, in our rooms, no family pictures because it breeds attachment, doesn't it, family pictures? You don't need pictures of yourself in your room. I have one picture that Tracy gave me of me offering tsok to Geshe Jampa Tegchok. I have that. But I've seen some, I went to one monk's place in the US, and the apartment was filled with pictures of him with His Holiness, with this and that. Gave me a certain impression. But we don't need mementos. We don't need small decorative objects and souvenirs. All we need in our room is what we use for study, our altar, and clothes. I mean, I have my office in my room, so I also have paper in my room and stuff like that. I have some khatas. I have tea bags, vitamins, whatever. Really try and keep things as simple as possible. You'll notice that at the beginning of the practice, your mind will have one definition of simplicity and we think, "Oh I'm really living a simple lifestyle." And that's because you've pared it down. But as you practice more then you realize, "Actually I could live simpler. I could live simpler."

At the Zen monastery at Mount Shasta, when you're a postulant and a novice, so I think for six years, you don't have your own bedroom. You sleep in the meditation hall so there's absolutely no question of not getting up for meditation—because you sleep in the hall, so you've got to get up! There's a small cabinet in front of your place and you have your robes and toiletries in there. I don't know if they have their own desks or not. I'm not sure. But what you have is really at a minimum and it's very good training. I've talked to some of the senior monastics and they say then when you're senior and you get your own room, you are trained and so hopefully you're not as greedy about possessions. But somehow because there is more space and you don't have your small cabinet,



just the possessions start sticking in your room! So again we have to be vigilant about continually taking things out that we don't really need. If you need a lamp because your eyes are getting strained reading in your room, then you talk to the monastery and we come up with a lamp somewhere. But really keeping it simple as much as possible.

Then the whole thing, livelihood and occupation. So the Buddha was very strict—India was an agricultural society at that time, so the monastics could not grow crops; they could not work the fields. The reason for that was twofold: one was it's too easy to get into an occupation growing food because that's what everybody did, and second, the possibility of killing animals and insects. Also, in our precepts, we're not allowed to buy and sell things, so we can't do business. Many monasteries do business, at least in the Tibetan community. They have various businesses. And in the West, many monasteries have businesses. I think it's just much more clean clear that we live the way the Buddha intended, which is dependent on the kindness of people who give us donations. Because if we do business, then our mind becomes a business mind and we're always looking for how we can get the most money out of something and what new product we can produce, and where we can market it, and what price we're going to charge, and who we give discounts to. That gets you into a state of mind that is not very productive for your Dharma practice.

So at the Abbey, everything is given freely. The reason we do ask some people to give a deposit for programs or to give us a certain amount of dana before a program is so that they commit to come. At the beginning we didn't ask people to do this, but we had the situation where people would register and then not show up and because they only cancelled at the last minute, there was no time to fill their place with somebody else. So in order to get people to feel more committed to coming, then we said they have to send in a small donation, some donation beforehand. Or for the long programs they send in some dana—not their own dana, you are not paying your own way—but you're making it possible for the Abbey to have the program. So everybody is getting sponsored on the longer programs like EML, or the Winter Retreat, we ask for that. The reason is to support everybody doing the program. It's happened that people come and say, "I want to attend the program. I don't have any money." We let them come. It's fine. But we want to make sure people are committed to coming so that places don't go unused.

I also think that by doing that and not charging things, then that gives us the freedom to give and we create virtue by having a mind of generosity that wants to give. Then we hope that people reciprocate. And I've seen many Buddhist centers now charge for courses, charge for teachings, some of them pretty hefty amounts, and the Buddha never charged. The Buddha never charged; his disciples never charged. If there were costs, it was covered because there were benefactors who made offerings because they saw it was so virtuous to make offerings so that so many people could come hear the teachings. That's a really beautiful mind and now when His Holiness teaches in India, this is very much the way it's done. There is usually somebody who invites and they support, or a group of people, an organization, invites and they support. They also have an office open during the teachings where everybody can give donations because you have so many people there, so many monastics, and as they say, a group that's that big, there's got to be some bodhisattvas! So just giving even a little bit, you create so much merit making contributions to the sangha. Then everybody creates merit; everybody has this really happy mind.

Whereas if you have to pay for a ticket to go, and you're getting charged for it, it just doesn't feel right; it isn't good. Now, I recognize in the West it's a different seating thing. In India, you don't have seats. So if ten people don't show up, it's not like ten seats go wasted and there's ten people who wanted to come who couldn't. In India, everyone just crams in. In the West, if you give out the tickets and then people don't come, then there's a lot of seats that go wasted. So I can see the need there to charge a small amount in order to get people to really think about coming and not just grab a whole bunch of tickets when they don't need them or aren't going to use them.

And His Holiness, nowadays, he prohibits sponsoring groups to make a profit from having him come. He says any money that is leftover should be given away to charity. He himself does not take anything from it, or if they give him money, he then gives it away. His Holiness sponsors the whole Tibetan government in exile, I think, by his funds. So again, not to have this mind of doing business, but from our side, just being able to give, and then other people's side being able to give, and then everybody feels happy because they are giving. That creates such a different mentality, when everybody is giving freely. When you give the Dharma freely, people can come and stay here freely.

That doesn't mean we let everybody come and stay. There also has to be a screening process, because we've had people come and they have absolutely no money and then it doesn't work out for them here and they don't have any money to go onto wherever they're going to go onto and that's not fair to them. So we make sure that when people come, that they always have enough money so that if they have to leave, they can get to where they are going. So we have different requirements and so on, but we're not charging so much a day. People will write us and say, "Can I have a single room? I'm willing to pay more." Sorry, we don't have any single rooms, and we aren't charging you to start with! Because part of the thing is to be part of the community and to give freely.

The money from the publications, all the money from my royalties, goes into a special account—it's used only for Dharma. We use it for statues, for Dharma related activities, for teacher's airfare when we invite guest teachers. All that money does not get used for food, clothing, this kind of stuff. It's only for Dharma related things. So in the West, what you see is a lot of monastics working and I think this is a tragedy. In the beginning it was because the Dharma centers were very poor and also because Westerners didn't have much respect for monastics and so didn't think to support the monastics in the Dharma centers. So the monastics had to work either for the Dharma center where they got room and board and maybe a small stipend, or many monastics work regular jobs where they have to put on lay clothes and they have their own flats and everything and their car and they put on their robes when they go to the Dharma center.

I think this is not a good idea. It's extremely difficult to keep your precepts when you're basically living like a lay person except for putting on your robes and going to the Dharma center. Very difficult to keep your precepts. The mind is always worried about money and you have to get a job that pays a certain amount as you have to pay for rent and food and all these things. Then also you can so easily go to the market, the department store, and get what you want when you want it. So the mind doesn't change much. Because of the physical condition, it's very much like it was before you ordained. It's even gotten so bad that some of my friends who were leading the preparing for ordination class at Tushita told me that one man came one year and wanted to take ordination with His Holiness and he thought after he ordained he could go back and live in the house with his wife! There was no difference in his mind between being a monastic and being a lay person.

That is what makes the Dharma degenerate, I think, when that happens. And so I know the situation in the West is difficult, but I think we have to work to make it better instead of just giving into it and saying, "Okay, well I need my flat and my car and my this and my that and my TV and my blah blah blah blah blah..." Try and at least live together with other sangha members as it helps your practice to live together with other people. When you live on your own, it's easy not to wear your robes and spend money when you want. When you at least live with some people, it just increases your mindfulness of what you are doing.

What I've noticed is, in recent years, even some Geshes at the center now tell their ordained students to go out and get a job. That I find really interesting because at the very beginning, the Geshes would say only work if you have to, but try and get it so that you can stay at the center and study as much as possible. But then some centers just have enormous costs of rent and the sangha who lives there pays rent and so the Geshe tells them also go out and get a job. I find that very difficult. You get some of it from that side, you get some of it from the side of people who want to

ordain, but they really want to keep the same lifestyle they had before. It's really a rather sticky situation and everybody's motivations in all of this is going to be very, very different.

Also it's quite a different thing: I know some senior monastics who are professors; they live on their own, they have their own car and their own stuff. But they've also been ordained for 30 years and they also know how to live simply and they also keep their precepts very well. That's a completely different ballgame than someone who is brand new ordained or who has only been ordained three, four, five years who really needs training. Because when you live on your own, you don't get that training. So very, very difficult. I realize community life is not for everybody, but there are so many benefits that come from living in a community because you can really see when there is a community, the collection of your merit makes so much more possible.

It's like, if I want to receive teachings, no teacher—no matter how much money I have—is going to come to teach me alone. I do not have the merit for somebody to teach me alone. “I want to learn Abhisamayalankara for five years. Come and teach me alone.” I don't have that merit. Teachers come when there is a group. So when there is a sangha community or at least a lay Dharma center with some sangha members in it, then you are able to get teachings and have more Dharma in your life. I think this is something really to think about. It's like if you're going to ordain, well why do I want to ordain? Like this man. Why do I want to ordain if I'm going to go back and live in the house with my wife and keep my job? What is the purpose? Well, he might say, “Well I want to keep precepts.” Well then keep the eight precepts. The eight precepts are perfect for lay people because you have the five fundamental precepts, plus your third precept becomes celibacy, and then you have the three other precepts and if you want to live like a monastic, but not be a monastic because you have to... I mean that's what you do and it's really praiseworthy, I think, to take the eight precepts and keep them. Then there's no confusion about, “Is somebody a monastic, or is somebody a lay person?”

Actually we have a few people affiliated with the Abbey that have taken the eight precepts and live like that and I think it's wonderful.

## **Q&A Session**

Any questions about that? I think this whole thing about livelihood and occupation is quite important.

**Question (Q):** When I hear this kind of thing, I have my own concerns—the concern for the pure Dharma to flourish and sustain in the West—because living here, I'm more and more convinced that it's the sangha that can do that. So the quality of the sangha, as far as keeping the Dharma pure, can become the bigger issue for the long term.

**Venerable Thubten Chodron (VTC):** I think that's a big part of it. Because the sangha acts as the example and when you have a community and a place where the sangha lives, then there's a place where people in society associate with the Dharma. There are many lay teachers and it's fine to be a lay teacher, but your house with your spouse and your kids does not give the same energy as a monastery. Your house is not going to be the house people think of when they want to think of virtue being created. So it's a very different thing.

I really see the difficulty for lay Dharma teachers who don't work another job. It's very admirable they've devoted their life to the Dharma. They don't work another job, but by not working another job, then even though they give Dharma talks on dana, the places that give the most dana get those teachers more. A lay teacher always has to think, “I have to pay my rent and my kids have to have Nike shoes and go to summer camp, and my spouse and I want to go on vacation and our whole income is dependent on my teaching the Dharma and it's all done on dana basis. So let's think about where the crowds are going to be biggest and where those people are the most generous

and those are the places that I choose to go.” Whereas as a monastic, we don’t have to feed a family, we don’t go on vacation, so you don’t have those concerns.

Now it’s true that a lot of our support does come from teaching. But we don’t choose where we go to teach based on who gives us the most dana. We choose where we go to teach based on the sincerity of the people who invite us and the people who, really, we can see practice and have the most sincere interest in the Dharma. Some places we go and the people give a lot of dana and some places we go, the people don’t give much dana, and it’s okay. The same: some people stay here, they give a lot; some people don’t. It’s okay. Whatever people give, we want them to give from their hearts, not because they are doing business.

**Q:** A few years ago, I met a fellow who was a monk. I think he was living in Spain and he had to work as a photographer because he didn’t live close to the center. But I guess he had to drive to the center a lot and he was constantly changing his clothes. And then I thought, what do his neighbors think about what a monastic is? Some days he’s a lay person taking photographs and sometimes he’s looking like a monk. So that’s really hard for lay people too.

**VTC:** Yes, it is. It is very hard for lay people when they don’t know what you are. Serkong Rinpoche used the example of a bat. For a bat, when people are putting out mouse traps, then the bat says, “I’m not a mouse. I’m not a mouse. I’m a bird!” And when people are trapping birds, then the bat says, “I’m not a bird. I’m not a bird. I’m a mouse!” So you’re not quite sure what you are, like a chameleon. It’s not so good for the mind.

You can really see that what we are doing involves an incredible process of education because people come here, they have no idea what a monastic is, how monastics live, anything about it. So we’ve really had to teach them and explain what dana means, and the economy of generosity and explain some of the etiquette and different things like that. But what we’ve really seen is how the lay supporters are really generating sincere respect for the sangha. Not for us as individuals, because respect for the sangha is not for the individual. It has nothing to do with you as an individual, so if somebody offers you respect because you are in robes, don’t start getting all inflated. It has nothing to do with you as an individual. It has to do with you wearing the Buddha’s robes, and those robes are inspiring and those robes give people a visualization of what they can become, and of people’s potential in general. They give people a vision of ethical conduct and of people trying to develop love, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

So we find, as we’re going along, that people are developing that kind of association with the robes. But really, especially if you go to Asia—not in the Tibetan society, but if you go to Taiwan or Singapore—people will bow to you because you are wearing robes. You always think, “There’s the Buddha in my heart and the people are bowing to the Buddha. It has nothing to do with me.” But you really see how, when people are doing that, you develop this sense of, “Wow, their minds are so virtuous.” They have this incredible faith in the Triple Gem, and this cloth is representing that to them and when they’re bowing, their faith in the Triple Gem is being expressed and it’s so beautiful to think about that. So you really rejoice at their merit.

Same with if they give you an offering; it has nothing to do with you. It has to do with the robes, with the sangha, with keeping the precepts that the Buddha set down. So you see people’s virtuous minds and there they are giving money or whatever and you think, “What did I do? I’m not doing anything.” Then you think, “Well my part of the thing is I’ve got to keep my precepts well and I’ve got to do my practice well. So I can’t oversleep, and I can’t just kind of indulge in my attachments. I really have to work with my mind because I’m wearing those robes and that’s what those robes are indicating.”

It’s not a thing of guilt-tripping ourselves or pushing ourselves. It’s a thing of growing into an awareness of your potential to be a beneficial influence to people. Simply by wearing the robes, by doing your practice, by how you carry yourself, by how you talk to other people. Then, of course, all

of that depends on how you really work with your own mind. If you are monastic and you're out in public and you're getting angry, it gives people a certain visualization. Or you're hanging out in the movie theaters, it gives people a certain visualization.

### **Change in Receiving Requisites**

Then there's also a change in, here it says change in diet, but what it means is a change in how we receive our requisites. We talk about the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter and medicine, because those are the four things we need to stay alive. There's a big change in how we get those when we ordain. In normal society, you have your career, you get your paycheck, you go out and buy. You're a good consumer: you buy your food, you buy your clothing, you pay your rent or buy a house, you go to the doctor and pay for medicine. But as a monastic, we have a totally different relationship with money and business and we try and disengage ourselves from these things as much as possible.

In terms of the actual precepts, there's a precept against handling gold and silver, which means money as well as gold and silver, because those were the mediums of exchange at the time of the Buddha. And there are precepts against buying and selling. Not only doing business with selling things, but also buying stuff. The monastic lifestyle was initially set up like that where you went on alms with your alms bowl, walking through the village, and then people would put food in your bowl. You got your robes, like I was saying before, usually from the cemetery or, after doing the three-month rains retreat, people would often offer robes. Shelter was, for the men, under a tree or in the forest out in the open. The women weren't allowed to do that; we were not allowed to be alone but to have a friend, and to stay in a house, and that was for the purpose of safety.

I think now in our world, that things are so crazy, that precept should be extended to men as well, because it's really not safe. We had one person who was here who wanted to just wander around the countryside here and I said, "Oh, well, are you just going to sleep on somebody's land here?" I said, "Everybody around here has guns and they don't necessarily like trespassers and if they see somebody strange sleeping on their land, it could be dangerous for you." This isn't Ancient India where nobody had guns and there was plenty of space and a lot of land wasn't even owned. So I think that should be actually extended for men too in terms of wandering like that.

### **Change in Medicine**

Then medicine: according to the precepts you start with cow urine and progress from there. I don't think they have cow urine at our pharmacy. So again, we depend on other people to get these things. And the idea is that you live a lifestyle in which you're dependent on other people, so it does a couple of things. One, it makes you really aware of the kindness of other people. Especially when you've spent some time working yourself and supporting yourself and paying your own bills. Then you recognize how hard people work and when they donate money to the Abbey—or to whatever monastery you're living at—how kind they are because they work so hard to earn that money and it's money they could be using to go on vacation or get themselves some treat or whatever—get them food, clothing, shelter, medicine—but they're choosing to give it as a donation.

So when you make yourself dependent, you really feel that kindness and what people are giving up to support you and how much faith they have in the sangha and so that gives you a feeling of, "I've really got to do my share in this," which means keeping the precepts, studying the Dharma, practicing it, serving society. I'm not just here to take the things. It isn't like before, somebody giving you a gift—in your lay life people give you a birthday present and then you give them birthday presents and you appreciate it, but it's a gift. This is a little bit different. It's not just a gift of something that people think we would like; it's a gift of something that, actually, we need to stay

alive, because we need food, clothing, shelter and medicine just to stay alive. So we have a feeling that our whole existence is dependent on the kindness of these people. So it really helps you to practice and to be more conscientious because you really feel this interrelationship.

Second, by making ourselves dependent on others, or by living in dependence on others, it helps us cut attachment because we don't go out and go shopping for our own things. We wait and see what is given to us. You can see in the bhikṣuṇī precepts that sometimes in ancient India, people would give a donation to make a bhikṣuṇī or a bhikṣu a robe, but if you went to the tailor and said, "Make it like this, and this kind of cloth, and make it this big, and this and that," you break a precept.

The whole idea is whatever you are given, you accept that with gratitude and you wear that. Whether it's old, whether its new, whether all the patches match... Nowadays, you have to take a whole piece of fabric and deliberately cut it up into patches so it looks like you're wearing a patched robe. At the time of the Buddha, you really had different patches of robes that were different colors sewn together.

So here at the Abbey we wait and see what's given and we wear the clothes that are here. It may not be exactly the kind of sweater you want, the coat might be a little bit too big or a little bit too small, but it's what we have; it's what we wear. Shoes are a little bit more difficult because you have to have shoes that fit, otherwise your feet really hurt and you can't do much. In Ancient India, you walked barefoot, so just rejoice you're not doing that! We don't have leather shoes and so you look around for vegetarian shoes and do the best you can in that perspective. It's cultivating an attitude of contentment. So instead of, "Oh, I want this, and I like this particular way and not that particular way," then it's just whatever there is, I'm content with it.

So that's a big change isn't it? I remember when I was little and people would give me clothes or my mother would get me clothes that I didn't like. "I don't want to wear that!" How big of a deal it was in the mind. And then okay, now you don't have a choice, just, "This is it!" You appreciate people's generosity.

## **Change in Lodging**

The next one is change in lodging. So again, in lay life you go out and you look for a flat or you go out and buy a house and then you can decorate it and remodel it and make it exactly what you want it to be and make it beautiful and put down the colored carpeting you want, and paint the walls the color that you want and do everything you want to do to it. As a monastic, we're supposed to live simply. It's interesting you might say, "Well you're building your own buildings and you're designing them yourselves, so aren't you getting what you want?" Well, there are a few things regarding that.

In terms of designing the buildings, I've listened to the advice of some senior abbesses. In particular, Venerable Wuyin said don't have bedrooms with attached baths because if you do, then it's very easy for somebody to isolate themselves from the community. They don't have to come out of their room; they don't have to share anything. Then since they have running water and a bathroom in their room, they can get a tea kettle and little burner stove and really make quite a posh little thing and isolate themselves. So she said don't do that. That's why none of our rooms have individual bathrooms; we always have shared bathrooms and you don't have a kettle in your room. I have a kettle in my room because my room is a bedroom, a meditation room, and an office and a kitty place, all rolled into one space!

And we deliberately designed the rooms very simply. There are no closets in the room so you can't accumulate a lot of stuff. The rooms are not large and luxurious. The rooms are all painted the same color paint, or whatever paint we have leftover from the last thing we painted. So you don't get to choose the color of your rooms. You don't get to choose your blankets, although some people

really do their best to do that. You don't get to choose your pillows, although some people again do their best to work their way around that one. Or the kind of carpeting, because the kind of carpeting is chosen by the nuns who are in charge of designing the building and we don't always agree, so the color carpeting is who knows what! It depends on what the majority of people happen to agree on on that particular day, before we changed our minds again. So you don't get to decorate your own pad, so to speak.

In the Chinese monasteries, they are quite strict about that, especially when you first ordain. For many years, you live in a huge dormitory. Everybody has a wooden bed. You roll up your blanket and your quilt in the day, and your pillow, and you can't tell one person's bed from another as everybody has the same pillows and the same quilts. All your clothes go in a locker. So when you walk in the room, maybe 10, 20 people are sleeping in it and it just looks like a room with beds and everybody has the same pillows and the same quilts. So you don't have this individuality. In the Chinese monasteries, you don't make your own altar in your room. Your books are in another locker or under a desk that is your assigned desk.

We already have a lot of individuality in our rooms. You can set up your own altar; you can have one shelf of books; you find ways to kind of make things a little bit individual. But in the Chinese temples, that's not the case. In the Zen monasteries, not the case. In the Tibetan monasteries, you have your own altar, you have books, but everything is quite simple; they don't have a lot of money so there is not much besides that. So we should try and live simply. If you have things in your room that you have somehow innocently managed to get for yourself, you might consider putting them in the community storeroom so that others can have a chance to use them. So our lodging changes.

### **Change in Responsibility Towards the Buddhist Community**

Then the next one is a change in responsibility towards the Buddhist community and society. This is a little bit what we talked about yesterday in our discussion group. What is our responsibility towards society and towards the Buddhist community? Here we definitely have a responsibility. It's not just all about me again. We have a responsibility to learn the Dharma, to practice it, to model it, to sustain it for future generations, to uplift society. Like I was saying, when you are part of a community, as a community you can do so much more than when you are on your own because the community acts as a place where people think of Dharma practice going on. Whereas if you have your own flat, people don't think of that as a Dharma place that inspires them or where they can go visit.

### **Change in Relationship to Family and Friends**

Another thing that changes, that isn't specifically listed here, is a change in your relationship to your family and your friends and your social life. This is a big change! Now our parents are always our parents. There is no way that they cannot be our parents. That's kind of over and done with, isn't it? We have the same parents for our lives, so we reassure our parents that they aren't losing us as children. However, our relationship with our parents does change. In the Chinese monastery, I was there when Venerable Wuyin did a Sramanerika ordination and she allowed the parents to come and observe and at the end she spoke to the parents. She said, "Your daughters from now on will not sleep in your house." She said it directly to them, which I can imagine for some parents was like, "Oh!!" But it's like, you've left the home life, so you don't go back and stay with your parents or do things like that.

Now, we have it a little bit different here. People can go visit their family. You can stay in your parents' house or your siblings house. You have two weeks during the year where you can go away

and you can choose where you want to go and what you want to do, within reason. Nobody has gone to the Riviera yet, and I don't think anybody will! Unless His Holiness is going to be there teaching! So you can visit them, but you're not as involved in your family life. You have to somehow step back from a lot of the drama that happens in families, and different people in the family don't get along, and this and that. We all know family drama, don't we?

So as a monastic, we step back and we deliberately don't get immersed in the family dramas. We keep a good relationship with everybody in the family. We can offer them Dharma advice or we can do NVC [non-violent communication] with them if they're upset, but we don't get involved with it—siding with this one, against that one, and all the drama that happens and the upset and gazillions of phone calls going back and forth because this one is fighting with that one because they weren't invited to this party or that party or... Do you know? Is your family like mine? My family is so interesting. Whenever there is a big family gathering, it's very difficult to figure out who sits together at the same table because there's so many people who don't speak to each other! So I just don't get involved with any of it. With any of the extended family, I don't even know who speaks to each other and who doesn't and I don't want to get involved in any of that at all. Not good for the mind.

So we still help our parents when they're elderly, but again we try not to be the one who takes primary responsibility if we have siblings who can help our parents out. Sometimes there's nobody else, so you do that. But it's not a good situation for a monastic in that way. I mean, it's quite meritorious to take care of your parents and to be kind. If there's nobody else to help, then we do. But we don't step up to be the first one to do it because otherwise—well you can see. We just had somebody here with a very sincere monastic aspiration and yet feels very attached to her mother, very responsible for her mother, and so isn't here at EML even though she would like to have been. This kind of attachment to family can bring a lot of distractions in Dharma practice.

I began to be able to see that with my friends. Because my parents were not very happy when I ordained, they didn't support me in any way, but it gave me a lot of freedom. I could do whatever I wanted, live in India, live abroad. I was quite poor but I had a lot of freedom. Then I see some of my monastic friends whose families support them and they don't have that freedom because when the family wants to go on vacation, they expect that monk or nun to go on the family vacation with them. Or when there's a big family dinner, they expect their son or daughter to come home for the big family dinner because they're the ones who are the chief benefactors, so they have something to say. Sometimes even if they're the ones who buy the house that the monastic lives in, then they have a say even over what is in the house. So it's very kind of coarse for parents to benefact their son or daughter as a monastic. You have to really have some lines and restrictions there; otherwise it's very easy to still stay in that identity of being their son or daughter, being a member of that family, getting all tied in with all the family dynamics and expectations.

So we go and visit our family and we're kind to our parents and we still love our parents, but there's some more space. We've seen in certain EMLs, different EMLs, we've had people come who have been very attached to family members. Remember there was one where somebody was very attached to their kids, really so attached? Really difficult. And attached to grandkids. Or a few years ago, another person attached to their mother. You can see that attachment creates a lot of obstacles. And I mean, because attachment craving is what makes samsara go around. It's not that song, "Love makes the world go around." Well that's because they confuse love with attachment. It's attachment that makes the world go 'round! The samsaric world.

Then similarly, with our friends, our old friends, there's a change in relationship when we ordain. We don't go hang out with our old friends in the same way that we used to. Because you may have gone with your old friends, what do you do? You go to the tea shop or the coffee house. How does it look for a monastic regularly to be seen in the teahouse or coffee shop? It doesn't look so good, especially with a lay friend. Especially with a lay friend who, if you're straight, is of the



opposite sex; if you're gay, is of the same sex. I mean it doesn't look good. It doesn't give a good visualization to people. And people could think, "Oh, but you're a monastic. What are you doing spending all day in the teashop, in the coffee house?" Here, maybe they would kind of encourage you to leave Starbucks after awhile, after you've had 15 lattes. But in India, you can sit in a teashop all day and nobody asks you to leave and you just keep buying one cup of tea after the other and chat with all your friends all day long.

Then how do we relate to our friends as a monastic? What did you used to do with your friends? Besides going to the coffee shop, you went out drinking, you smoked joints together, you went to the movies, you played miniature golf, you went to the football games, you went shopping together. What else did you do with your friends? You went white water rafting and you collected seashells on the seashore.

So if you're a monastic, can you do those things? What does it look like to other people to see monastics doing those things? And what is it going to do for your practice to be involved in doing those things? I mean, what's your practice going to be like if you go to the ski resort? Where of course you have to go shopping in the ski store because you have to wear the right clothes when you're going skiing and have the right equipment; the robes won't work! It could be an interesting new Olympic sport though!

Or even going to movies with all these scenes of sex and violence. What is that going to do to your meditation? The activities that we used to do have got to change when we ordain and if those activities are very linked to our old friends, then there's going to be a change in how we relate to our old friends because we're not going to do the same things with them as we did before. With our old friends, "Would you like to come and do Tara Puja? Would you like to do mindful walking? Would you like to work in the forest with us? How about offering service in the monastery kitchen?"

So these relationships are going to change. Even for laypeople, I think, when you get involved in the Dharma, your relationships with your friends change. I remember at Dharma Friendship Foundation where I was the resident teacher for 10 years, many people would come and say, "It's like I'm really into the Dharma and I love the Dharma, but I don't quite know how to relate to my old friends anymore and they're not quite sure how to relate to me." So it's a thing that even as a layperson, that begins to change in you and your relationship with friends changes. I would suppose if there were a Buddhist society, it wouldn't be so noted; it wouldn't be such a big thing, as everybody would be Buddhist. But here, because everybody isn't... Many of our friends might not even be spiritually inclined, or if they are, it's only when they're loaded. So the relationships change.

So that can be quite a different experience and people feel really kind of wobbly when it's like, "I can't relate to my old friends the same way, but I don't have that many Dharma friends yet." So it can be a little bit wobbly. Or some people are quite attached to their old friends and feel, "I've just got to keep these friendships at all cost, but I don't know how to do that because my old friends' interests and my interests are going in different directions now. So how do I continue those friendships?"

In my own personal case, because I had to leave the US to learn the Dharma and I spent so many years living abroad, there was just this natural thing. And this was in the ancient times before email and texting and everything, and I wasn't going to be in India just writing letters all day. So my relationships with my old friends just changed quite naturally and I cultivated a whole new set of friends quite naturally because I was in a Dharma environment. Here, it might be different. I've seen it too, even you go to Asia sometimes, your old friends want to hear reports from you. Or with you, your friends in Germany, they wanted you to do a blog and I said no because when you're here, you've got to be here. Nowadays, if you travel, you go somewhere else, you do a blog. You're creating a persona, aren't you? Look what I'm doing! So that again is why nobody has their own individual Facebook page here or individual blogs—we don't do blogging. We don't have individual

Twitter accounts. The Abbey has Facebook and Twitter. I don't know... do we send much out on Twitter?

**Q:** We do now.

**VTC:** Yes, because what happened is there were some laypeople who created Abbey Twitter and Facebook pages and they're really great and they keep tabs on what we're doing here and they put it up on Facebook and they let people know about it by Twitter and it's really nice and they're into it. It's really good for them because that way, they watch all the teachings; they keep up with the Abbey. They feel really a part of our extended community. And then it frees us from having to do it. Because who wants to sit... I mean, I have enough computer work all day anyway. I don't want to sit and write a blog and I really don't want to read what people ate for breakfast.

So again, to think about, "Well how do I feel about that? All my friends have a Facebook page and I don't." A few years ago, there was one young man who came to EML and had no computer during EML. The day after the course ended, because he was staying on, he was on that computer looking. "I've got to see what all my friends are doing!" Its like, "No you don't!" And this feeling of, "I've got to see! What did my friends eat for breakfast?" Or, "Who is going out with who? And who is fighting with who? And who is thinking about what?" Again, this is just distraction.

You can see so clearly how it comes into your meditation. Yesterday when Jeffrey was talking about both distraction and excitement... You sit down to meditate and you start thinking about what your old friends are doing. "Oh I was just on Facebook and so and so is now in Nepal and climbing Annapurna Mountain. I wish I had done that before I ordained! Well there is Buddhism there. Maybe I can make it into a pilgrimage of some sort and still go to climb Annapurna." And we're off and running. That's the mental factor of excitement. "And it's going to be so virtuous as I'll go to all these Buddhist temples on my way backpacking." Right?

**Q:** There was a little hook I had to look at maybe just a few years ago, is that some friends I had, before moving to Seattle and practicing the Dharma, we were very close and had a lot of shared values and stuff. This little hook is because I hadn't communicated with them for a few years, that I won't get to see them again this life. That's the little hook. "And where they will be next life? And we won't recognize each other anyway." So there's this little hook and then there's one, "Well, maybe you can reconnect and share the Dharma with them and give them some opportunity to create the causes for them to..." I have to be really careful. That's the mind where I go to this attachment to missing, this sense of loss of a relationship that used to have some meaning for me and now I'm feeling like, "That's it!"

**VTC:** So relationships that were meaningful to you, where you had really good connections with other people and then feeling, as a nun, "Well I may not see these people again." Well, even if you were in touch with them, at some time you won't see them again too! But you can see there how the mind is hanging onto permanence. "They're the same person. It's been 10 years since we've had a good solid talk, but they're the exact same person and I want to make sure that I see them again. I'm not quite sure what it's going to be like or what we're going to talk about. But there's an inherently existent person there and I have an inherently existent connection with them."

**Q:** Forgetting that I've known them since beginningless lives, in all different scenarios, and I'm going to be doing it again. This is only an 80-year cycle, so I have to put it in a bigger context.

**VTC:** Right. I find that actually helpful to think, "Okay I've had all these different relationships with this person in the past, and they haven't always been who they are. They haven't always been the same personality. We tend to think, "Oh well, different relationships, but it's still so and so in the form of a bird. So we just have the same close connection as parrots in the cage in the previous life." Give me a break. It's like there is no inherently existent person there; there is no fixed personality

there. Everything is changing. So you meet somebody in the next life and not only are they going to be in a different body, but they're going to have a different kind of personality. And they're not fixed people and even in this lifetime, they aren't fixed personalities. They change. Being able to accept that and being able to say, "I'm doing my practice for the benefit of all sentient beings and hopefully in the future life, because I do have some kind of karmic connection with this person, I will meet them and due to the force of practicing very well in this life, I'll be able to help them in the Dharma in future lives."

That is what I did towards my parents who weren't interested in the Dharma at all. It's like, "Okay, all of you are my parents too, so I have to help the parents who want to be helped, and I can't shove the Dharma down the parents who don't want it. But hopefully, in future lives, there will be that opportunity." So it really is seeing that it can bring you into a very good meditation on emptiness—when you see that there is no solid person there and there is no real personality to cling to in your friends, in your relatives. I mean whoever is our mother and father of this lifetime, they weren't our mother and father in previous lifetimes. They won't be our mother and father in future lifetimes. Now that my mom passed away, I see different bugs and I go, "Hmm, I wonder."

Or different living beings. We have bunny rabbits here. Who was that bunny rabbit in a previous life that I have a connection with them and they have a connection with the Abbey? I can't hold to fixed personalities or fixed people. So that, I think, is an especially important way to meditate on emptiness when you're a monastic in order to really create space in your relationships with your old friends and with your parents and with whoever it is you're attached to. They are not a solid personality. There is nothing there to cling on to. We haven't always known each other and we're not always going to know each other and they're changing all the time and I can't find anything that is the essence of them anyway. Whatever I might try and find that is really that person has changed in the next moment.

Questions, comments about this?

**Q:** I think what I wrestled with the most is the expectations. For example, in my culture the female daughter is expected to take care of the mom or the parents as they age. And I'm the only female and I can feel the weight of that expectation and I'm trying to move my mother, help her to see that my brother could also take good care of her and there are a lot of barriers there that come up. That is definitely a weight. In terms of my daughter, I feel this expectation of, "You're the mom. You're always there. You have to go fill this role." It's a big prison, that expectation. It's a big boulder of expectation because it's hard to break free. That's kind of what I wrestle with when I think about the decision to come and to ordain, is feeling that pull. I'm working with it.

**VTC:** Yes, very much there is that pull from family members. What I also find very interesting is if you have a tight knit family, you feel the pull of the expectations and you want some space from it. And then other people who don't have a tight knit family, they really want more, they wish they had more family and they wish they had more connection. But with the connection comes all the expectations. So to me, it's a thing of you're never satisfied and it's very difficult to have the perfect relationship with your family—if you're very close, you want more space; if you're not close, you want to be closer.

## WHAT NEXT?

Having completed the *Exploring Monastic Life* program, the question will likely arise, “What next?” It’s important to take your time in making the life-long decision to ordain.

It’s important to get clear about what Buddhist tradition you wish to ordain in and which teacher you wish to train under. You may already have a teacher-student relationship with a spiritual mentor that you would like to ordain you. Discuss your wish with him or her. Be sure to discuss the practical aspects too: where you will live, where will your requisites come from, what will you study, and so forth?

If you’re interested in ordaining at Sravasti Abbey, we have a slow, helpful process to guide monastic aspirants in getting clear about the way they wish to live out their spiritual aspirations. First of all, head home and think about what you learned during the course. In terms of training at the Abbey, the next step would be to apply for a 3-month visit to have a longer experience of our day-to-day schedule and overall way of life. From there, you can request to enter the one-year anagarika training period that is required before anyone ordains at the Abbey. In the section below, you will find the ‘Request for Long-term Training’ ceremony that you would take part in, if you wish to enter into the process of pre-ordination training at the Abbey.

To help you in this process, you will find an article by Venerable Thubten Kunga and a letter by Venerable Thubten Chodron in the following section. Venerable Chodron’s letter is from *Preparing for Ordination*, a booklet of reflections for Westerners considering monastic life and is available in full at <http://thubtenchodron.org/books/preparing-for-ordination/>

As Venerable recommends in the letter, take time to contemplate and write down answers to each question. Then, revisit your answers after a few weeks and see if your perspectives have changed, and why. A few weeks later, do this again. This process of repetition will build clarity and confidence in your decision regarding whether you wish to live a monastic life.

You can access more information about ordination and monasticism at both [ThubtenChodron.org](http://ThubtenChodron.org) and [SravastiAbbey.org](http://SravastiAbbey.org).



## **Making the Decision**

**by Venerable Thubten Kunga**

*Christina Manriquez first came to Sravasti Abbey for the Exploring Monastic Life program in 2016, where she took the five lay precepts. She then returned to her job at the U.S. State Department and considered her options. After some months, she decided to return to the Abbey for a longer visit and requested training. After another few months, she requested the eight anagarika precepts of a pre-monastic trainee. After over a year of careful consideration, she made the decision to request monastic ordination and in May 2019 became Venerable Thubten Kunga. She wrote this essay in the period between requesting and receiving ordination with the wish to support future monastic aspirants in their decision-making.*

Frustration and confusion can arise while deciding whether to ordain, so I wanted to share my own experience in case it might be helpful. If I had to summarize the key ingredients for reaching a decision, it would be:

1. Deepen your understanding of the Dharma
2. Practice as sincerely as possible
3. Have the aspiration to reach a conclusion
4. Don't worry about when the answer will appear

I found the decision-making process to be a big practice in dealing with uncertainty and learning to have patience, most of all with myself. Many doubts arose and I couldn't be sure that all of them were afflicted, so I had to work through them all, one by one. I felt like my whole confused predicament in life had been compressed into this one particular decision point and timeframe. I found that what helped in life more generally was helpful here too—having a relaxed and happy mind and lots of time and space to allow all things to be considered that needed to be considered.

### **Intention and Allowing**

To receive monastic ordination, we must have the intention to hold the precepts for the rest of our lives. It's hard to put a timeframe on a decision as vast as this one, so the best one can do is to have the intention to reach a conclusion and then relax. When the conditions are ripe, the conclusion will emerge. Our desire to have an answer as soon as possible actually interferes with the process of reaching a decision. Like many other areas of practice, letting go of the craving for an answer clears up space for virtuous influences to enter and work on us at deep levels and creates a relaxed mental environment for them to bear fruit.

Venerable Chodron gave a talk during the 2009 [Exploring Monastic Life](#) program about how the Buddha brought himself to renounce his life as a prince. He said, "Suppose that being myself subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, I seek the un-aging, un-ailing, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled supreme security from bondage, nirvana."

Venerable Chodron suggested that the method of saying "suppose" is a gentler way to steer our mind in a different direction than commanding it to change on the spot. She continues:

(By using 'suppose.' the Buddha was) not pushing himself. He's not saying, 'You should renounce, you should give up. What you're thinking is stupid, just change it.' Instead, he's trying to

understand. We get so dissatisfied with the situation that we meditate on the dissatisfaction instead of trying to understand the situation. What really changes our mind is not pushing ourselves but understanding with wisdom. When we understand with wisdom, our mind changes automatically. When we push ourselves, it seems like Dharma practice is like having your teeth pulled!

We always have to go back to understanding. What do I need to understand in order to change my mind here? What do I need to meditate on in order to relax this attachment, anger, or jealousy, or to let go of this confusion? We come back to the importance of taking the Dharma medicine. We have to stop to think about things and really make that understanding part of ourselves. That's why practicing Dharma takes time. We need to repeatedly contemplate so many things about life over a period of time in order to transform our mind and develop understanding.

## **Wisdom Takes Time**

The ordination decision-making process takes time because developing wisdom takes time. Just by living at the Abbey—following a schedule structured solely around Dharma practice, surrounded by people practicing ethical conduct, living in precepts—one's wisdom is bound to grow. And one really cannot reach the decision to ordain until one has a certain degree of wisdom. This is why ordaining is so rare in the world—you need wisdom to have any interest in ethical conduct, but you have to practice ethical conduct to gain wisdom. It's like a Catch-22.

Thankfully most of us come into this world with some degree of wisdom. We are human beings after all, and we have an interest in the spiritual path. In fact, our enthusiasm for spiritual practice is our most valuable possession and we should always focus on sustaining and enhancing it, whether we are a layperson or a monastic.

At the beginning of our spiritual path, we practice in a way that suits our lifestyle, in a way that enhances its quality and minimizes disruption. Naturally we will see the benefit and want to increase our involvement. Then we may come to a point where we want to immerse ourselves in the Dharma deeply, setting other interests and priorities aside, at least for a time, so we go on retreat. If we like that experience, we will probably repeat it. Then comes the question, "What if I lived my life like this all of the time? Would I be happier? Would my life be more meaningful?"

One cannot really know the answer to this question unless one tries it out. There will be resistance in some (or many) areas of course, but hopefully the anagarika experience of training with eight precepts will be positive enough to outweigh the discomfort of dropping old habits and safety blankets and adjusting to a new set of values, people, and living conditions. Then there comes a time when a decision feels natural. If you aren't yet sure, don't push it.

It's not so unusual if one day you feel in your bones you were born to ordain, while the very next day you are wishing you were lying on a beach. This is natural and to be expected. We are, after all, fresh off the streets from lay life with all of its addictions and distractions. We have been accustomed to rushing to these false refuges our whole lives, so our interest in them is not going to fall away overnight.

## **Decision Comes Naturally**

It will take quite some time to completely reorient ourselves away from worldly concerns. It is difficult because we have received what we perceived to be genuine pleasure from these activities in the past and we haven't yet received the kind of contentment and spiritual happiness that comes from practice. It is like jumping ship but not being sure the next boat will be there at the time you need it. But again, we have some wisdom already in us to be spiritually inclined; we have experienced the benefits of spiritual practice or else we never would have made the effort to

seriously explore monastic life. So we can at least find some comfort in our ability to make sound decisions based on evidence and the courage to look in unexpected places for answers to questions most people are too afraid to ask.

If we have some endurance and fortitude, we can stick it out until the decision feels natural. Journaling, reflecting, and meditating on foundational Buddhist teachings eases this process along. Our decision should always be in response to the questions, “What lifestyle is best for my practice, my long-term spiritual goals, the best use of my human life, and for all living beings?”

If we decide we aren’t suited to become a monastic at the end of the anagarika period, we will have discovered something very valuable about ourselves. We can remain as a lay practitioner with the confidence that we are pursuing the kind of lifestyle that will most benefit our practice in the long-run.

### **And then?**

If we do decide that monastic life suits us, there are still other questions to be considered. We need to make sure: What tradition suits us best? Do we have a teacher that we can rely on for guidance in the Vinaya? Where will we live and train after ordination? How will we be supported? See the next section “Letter to a Friend Considering Ordination” for additional relevant questions to consider.

We should also focus on stabilizing our aspiration, such as by doing purification practices to overcome any obstacles to ordaining or keeping the precepts. We need to reflect again and again on the benefits of renouncing cyclic existence, cultivating the determination to be free, and deepening understanding of the four truths of the aryas so that the intent to ordain remains strong.



## **A Letter to a Friend Considering Ordination**

**By Venerable Thubten Chodron**

Dear Dharma friend,

I received your letter. You want to be a monastic! You sound both happy and nervous about this. It is very worthwhile to be a monastic, and the more prepared your mind is for ordination, the easier the transition from lay to ordained life will be. Therefore, I will write some questions for you to reflect on in the hopes that they will help you to think deeply and thus eliminate potential obstacles in your mind. When I requested my spiritual master for permission to be ordained, he said, "Yes, but wait awhile." He had me wait nearly a year and a half. I was impatient to ordain and did not want to wait, but looking back on it now, it was very good that I did. During that time I repeatedly contemplated the topics outlined in these questions. This helped me considerably, so now I would like to share them with you. When you contemplate these questions, it is important to be as honest as you can and use them as a tool to discover your own thoughts and feelings. Sometimes your truthful answer may not be what you would like it to be or what you think your spiritual teacher would want it to be. However, there are no right or wrong answers here. The better you know yourself, with all your strengths and weaknesses, the better you will be able to prepare for monastic life.

1. Why do you want to become a monastic? What is your deepest motivation, your deepest reason for wanting to become a monastic? What does living as a monastic mean to you? Are there difficult relationships, situations, or emotions that you are trying to be free from? Is ordination a way of avoiding those or a way of facing them?
2. Where does being a monastic fit into your Dharma practice? How will it help you? What things about living as a monastic will be difficult for you?
3. One of our precepts is to follow the Dharma advice of our abbot/abbess or teacher. Is there a teacher with whom you have a strong connection? It is important to train under the guidance of a qualified and skillful teacher, not just to move around going wherever your fancy takes you. Are you willing to discuss your plans with your teacher and follow his or her Dharma instructions, or do you like to do what you want to do?
4. As sangha members, we are part of a larger spiritual community. We sit in order of our ordination and respect those ordained before us. We should listen to the advice and suggestions of the senior monks and nuns because they have more experience as monastics. Is there a part of you that has difficulty with respecting and listening to those who are senior? How can you work with that attitude so you can value their guidance and reap the benefit from their experience and concern?
5. Which of the Buddhist traditions is your principal practice? Theravada? Chinese? Tibetan? It is important to know which direction you will take in your practice; otherwise you could end up doing a mixture of things and not get anywhere.
6. In order to be able to keep our precepts, we need living conditions conducive to spiritual practice. Where will you live after taking ordination?
7. There is no large organization that supports and looks after Western monastics. We are responsible for our own finances, health insurance, and so forth. Worrying about these



things can distract us from practice, so it is better to have these firmly in place before ordination. Will you have an income or financial support? Do you have health insurance?

8. Do you have any social obligations to clear up before ordination (debts, divorce, caring for aged parents or children)? Do you have any serious health problems that will influence your ability to practice, to live in community, or to keep the ordination?
9. We have years and lifetimes of conditioning behind us. It is important to look at this closely and resolve it. Thus, the next sets of questions deal with societal values and goals that previously have been inculcated in us. Do you wish to be successful in a career? Imagine meeting your old friends after several years. They have good careers, success, a comfortable life, and reputation. How will you feel? Will you feel like a useful member of society even though you have not produced anything tangible that is valued by society?
10. Ordination entails developing our ability to handle our own emotions without seeking emotional support from a partner. It also involves managing our sexual energy. How do you feel about marriage and family life? Would you like a life-long companion to share your life with? Is it difficult for you to control your emotional or sexual attraction for others? Even if marriage and family do not seem so interesting now, how will you feel when you are older? Often women in their middle or late thirties and men in their late forties undergo a crisis, thinking, "If I want to get married and have children, I have to do so now. Otherwise, my age will make having a family difficult." Imagine yourself at that age and investigate how you might feel.
11. How will you feel when you are old if you have no children, grandchildren, home, security, and so forth? What could your old age be like as a nun or monk? As a lay person?
12. Two of our precepts are to abandon the signs of a lay person and to take on the signs of a monastic. This entails shaving our head, wearing robes, and keeping our precepts wherever we are and whomever we are with. Are you easily influenced by what other people think of you—be they strangers or family and friends? How will you feel if people on the street stare at you because you wear robes? How will you feel if your family and friends say that you are escaping from reality or wasting your life by being a monastic? How will you feel if your parents are upset because you are not living a "normal" life?
13. Have you told your family and close friends that you are considering becoming a monastic? Are you comfortable with the way they reacted, or do you feel guilty, hurt or angry? It is very important to work out these emotions. Also, it is important to give your parents love. They often fear that their child is rejecting them, or that they will never see their child again if he or she becomes a monastic. We have to be sensitive to their needs, to reassure them that we love them, and yet not feel pulled by their emotions or wishes. What meditations can you do to help you overcome the attachment or anger you may have towards your family?
14. Are you prepared to live in a community? This involves giving up doing what you want to do when you want to do it. You have to follow the discipline of the community. You have to live and work with people whom you may not normally choose as your friends. How do you feel about having your ego confronted like this?
15. Do you have issues with people who are in positions of authority? Are you open to receiving feedback or do you prefer to be left alone?

16. Which is your strongest disturbing attitude: attachment, anger, ignorance, jealousy, pride, doubt? If it goes unaddressed, it will cause problems in your practice and make you doubt your ordination. Know which one is the strongest and start applying the antidotes in your meditation now.
17. To actually receive the ordination during the ordination ceremony, you must have developed to some extent the determination to be free from cyclic existence and to attain liberation. To be able to keep your precepts after receiving them, you have to constantly cultivate this motivation. Do you regularly meditate on the disadvantages of cyclic existence and its causes, or is there a part of your mind that is resistant to thinking about that?
18. The eight worldly concerns are some of the chief obstacles to developing the determination to be free. We are attached to 1) money and material possessions, 2) praise and approval, 3) reputation and image, and 4) pleasure from the five sensual objects. We have aversion to 5) not receiving or losing our money and possessions, 6) blame or disapproval from others, 7) bad reputation or image, and 8) unpleasant sensations from our five senses. Which of these are the strongest for you? Are you familiar with the antidotes for them? Do you apply those antidotes? Do you feel that giving up those eight mental states would make you unhappy?
19. How do you feel about going through the hardships of monastic life? How can you strengthen your spiritual goals and make them more heartfelt and central to your life? Ordained life, like lay life, is not always easy. There will be problems, ups and downs. When the down times come, people are tempted to blame their ordination, thinking “Being a monastic is the problem. If I were not a monastic, I would not have this problem.” What are the benefits of ordination? Do you have deep conviction in them? It is important to have a clear understanding of these things beforehand, and to be courageous in facing physical, emotional, and spiritual difficulties in your life.
20. Is there a part of your mind that seeks respect from others because you are a monastic? Do you expect others to treat you well? To give you things? To show you respect? Or are you willing to cultivate the altruistic intention and be the servant of others?
21. What are your needs and concerns after ordination? What resources do you have—internal and external—to help you meet those? What things do you feel confident about? What things do you feel shaky about?

These are some things to think deeply about. Each point has several questions, and it could be helpful to write down your responses. Put them aside for a few weeks. Then reread them and make adjustments. Reflecting on these questions again and again over time will help remove lack of clarity in your mind and possible obstacles in your ordination. They will help you go through the emotional high of wanting to be a monastic and to understand your mind better.

I wish you all the best on the path to awakening and pray that your wisdom, compassion, and skill grow so that you may spread happiness to many beings.

Yours in the Dharma,



Venerable Thubten Chodron



## CEREMONIES TO REQUEST TRAINING

### Ceremony to Request Training for Exploring Monastic Life

Abbess and the two senior monastics sit in front of room. Everyone else faces them, with the person requesting training (PRT) in front.

- Everyone recites the refuge and bodhicitta prayer and the first two pages of the “King of Prayers” (red book p. 55 to penultimate verse of p. 56)
- PRT bows three times and makes any offerings they wish to make.
- PRT then kneels, and says:

*Abbess and community elders, please look at me with kindness.*

*I have observed my mind and seen that I am under the control of afflictions and karma that cause suffering to others and myself. Wishing to free myself from these and to attain liberation and awakening, I request training at Sravasti Abbey. During my stay here I will abide in the five precepts plus celibacy in order to cultivate mindfulness and introspective awareness. Knowing that the Abbey guidelines have been developed to create conducive circumstances for Dharma practice, I will use them to guide my actions. I will follow the Abbey’s daily schedule to give structure to my practice.*

*Because I am not perfect, I request the members of the community to support me in training my mind, subduing afflictions, and cultivating virtue. Because others are not perfect, I will practice cultivating patience and compassion. All of us are like rocks in a tumbler: together we will smooth each other’s rough edges and polish each other so that we will become radiant gems who are wise and joyful and who work for the benefit of all sentient beings.*

*I will stay at the Abbey until the completion of the Exploring Monastic Life program and request Dharma teachings, meditation guidance, and loving support to help me actualize my spiritual aims.*

- Abbess and community elders say:

*Dear Participants in Exploring Monastic Life, we are delighted to have you as a resident of the Abbey for the duration of the program. We will do our best to help you to learn the Dharma and to develop your virtuous qualities and inner goodness. It is wonderful to see you turning your mind toward cultivating thoughts, feelings, speech, and deeds that will benefit yourself and others. This is indeed a happy occasion!*

- PRT stands, bows three times, and sits again.
- Everyone together recites the dedications in the blue prayer book p. 67.

## Ceremony to Request Long-term Training

Abess and the two oldest monastics sit in front of room. Everyone else faces them, with the person requesting training (PRT) in front.

- Everyone recites the refuge and bodhicitta prayer and the first two pages of the “King of Prayers” (red book p. 55 to penultimate verse of p. 56)
- PRT bows three times and makes any offerings they wish to make
- PRT then kneels and says:

*Abess and community elders, please look at me with kindness.*

*I have observed my mind and seen that I am under the control of afflictions and karma that cause me and others suffering. Wishing to free myself from these and to attain liberation and awakening, I request training at Sravasti Abbey. During my stay here I will abide in the five precepts plus celibacy in order to cultivate mindfulness and introspective alertness. Knowing that the Abbey guidelines have been developed to create conducive circumstances for Dharma practice, I will use them to guide my actions. I will follow the Abbey’s daily schedule to give structure to my practice.*

*Because I am not perfect, I request the members of the community to support me in training my mind, subduing afflictions, and cultivating virtue. Because others are not perfect, I will practice cultivating patience and compassion. All of us are like rocks in a tumbler: together we will smooth each other’s rough edges and polish each other so that we will become radiant gems who are wise and joyful and who work for the benefit of all sentient beings.*

*I plan to stay at the Abbey for (state the length of your intended stay \_\_\_\_\_).*  
*The concerns I have about living with the community are (please say any concerns or hesitations you may have \_\_\_\_\_ or say, “At this time, I don’t have any concerns about staying here.”).*

*The qualities I would like to cultivate are (state those qualities \_\_\_\_\_), and thus I request Dharma teachings, meditation guidance, and loving support to help me actualize them.*

- Abbess and community elders say:

*Dear (say the person's name), we are delighted to have you as a resident of the Abbey for (say the length of the stay). We will do our best to help you to learn the Dharma and to develop your virtuous qualities and inner goodness. It is wonderful to see you turning your mind toward cultivating thoughts, feelings, speech, and deeds that will benefit yourself and others. This is indeed a happy occasion!*

- PRT stands, bow three times, and sits again
- Everyone together recites the dedications in the blue book p. 67

## MORE RESOURCES

### Monastic Life in General

Watch [Life as a Western Buddhist Nun](#), a lively public talk at Central Michigan University in 2016 where Venerable unpacks what it means to be a Western Buddhist nun.

**Two forums** from *Lions Roar* magazine, where monastics and long-term lay practitioners of different Buddhist traditions explore the ongoing value of monastic life and the meaning of renunciation:

[‘Why We Need Monasticism’](#), by Robert Thurman, Jan Chozen Bays, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ayya Tathaaloka. Introduction by Ajahn Amaro.

[‘The Beauty of Renunciation’](#), by Ajahn Amaro, Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, and Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel. Introduction by Koun Franz.

Watch a short Bodhisattva’s Breakfast Corner (BBC) talk by Venerable Thubten Chodron on the [benefits of a renunciate life](#), from when the BBCs first started back in 2008!

### Community Life

A [four-part teaching](#) by Venerable Chodron at *Lama Tsong Khapa Institute* in Italy on the benefits on living in precepts and in community.

[“Right Livelihood for the Sangha in the 21st Century”](#) by Venerable Chodron.

Various short [5-15 minute] talks by Sravasti Abbey monastics and guests about community life on a [specific YouTube playlist](#). This features talks such as,

Venerable Thubten Chonyi’s reflection on how [living in community can make you crazy](#), but is a wonderful platform to cultivate fortitude and other good qualities.

A reflection by Venerable Thubten Jampa on the [benefits of living in community](#).

Read or watch Venerable Thubten Damcho’s presentation of a monastery as an [‘experiment in love’](#).

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## Sutras

From the *Majjhima Nikaya (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha)*:

- MN 3            *Heirs in Dhamma (Dhammadayada Sutta)*
- MN 15          *Inference (Anumana Sutta)*
- MN 21          *The Simile of the Saw (Kakacupama Sutta)*
- MN 22          *The Simile of the Snake (Alagaddupama Sutta)*
- MN 31          *The Shorter Discourse in Gosinga (Culagosinga Sutta)*
- MN 33          *The Greater Discourse on the Cowherd (Mahagopalaka Sutta)*
- MN 46          *The Greater Discourse on Ways of Undertaking Things (Mahadhammasamadana Sutta)*
- MN 50          *The Rebuke to Mara (Maratajjaniya Sutta)*
- MN 54          *To Potaliya (Potaliya Sutta)*
- MN 65          *To Bhaddali (Bhaddali Sutta)*
- MN 75          *To Magandiya (Magandiya Sutta)*
- MN 76          *To Sandaka (Sandaka Sutta)*
- MN 77          *The Greater Discourse to Sakuludayin (Mahasakuludayi Sutta)*
- MN 82          *On Ratthapala (Ratthalpala Sutta)*
- MN 85          *To Prince Bodhi (Bodhirajakumara Sutta)*
- MN 104         *At Samagama (Samagama Sutta)*
- MN 105         *To Sunakkhatta (Sunakkhatta Sutta)*
- MN 108         *With Gopaka Moggallana (Gopakamoggallana Sutta)*
- MN 113         *The True Man (Sappurisa Sutta)*
- MN 125         *The Grade of the Tamed (Dantabhumi Sutta)*
- MN 128         *Imperfections (Upakkilesa Sutta)*
- MN 139         *The Exposition of Non-Conflict (Aranavibhanga Sutta)*



MN 142        *The Exposition of Offerings (Dakkhinaṅgaha Sutta)*

From the *Dīgha Nikāya (The Long Discourses of the Buddha)*:

DN 25        *The Great Lion's Roar to the Udumbarikans (Udumbarika-Sihanada Sutta)*

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