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The Ordination of the Buddhist Monks



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Thailand is a Buddhist country, so it is natural to see so many Buddhist monks in saffron robes everywhere. As a new comer to this country, you may wonder why they have to be ordained and may want to know how to become a Buddhist monk. *Thaiwaysthus* presents you an overall explanation about ordination.



Why ordained?

Every Thai male aged 20 and up from a Buddhist family is expected to be ordained as a monk for a period of time sooner or later. The Thais believe that being ordained as a Buddhist monk is a great way to gain merit. This is meant for the ordained person himself and especially for his parents. Ordination is also practised as a way to show gratitude to them as is evidenced by an idiom (*ko chai pha lueang khuen sawan*) meaning "clinging to the edge of the yellow robe to heaven". The Thais believe that when a man enters the monkhood, his parents will gain merit too.

The benefits of ordination

The benefit to Buddhism is that the ordained one will help disseminate religion, while the benefit to the ordained person and his relatives is to gain merit.



In the monkhood, monks spend most of their time studying the Buddhist scriptures.

The objectives of the ordination

The objectives of the ordination are to provide the ordained one with an opportunity to study the Buddhist scriptures and disciplines and apply them to the secular life when he is not in the monkhood. This is also aimed to prevent Buddhism from extinction.



The qualifications of a monk-to-be

Even though every Thai male Buddhist should be ordained as a monk once in his life, it does not mean that every one possesses all the required qualifications. Some of the main ones are:

1. Being male
2. Not affected by diseases such as leprosy, pustule, tuberculosis and epilepsy.
3. Being independent
4. Not in debt
5. Being 20 years of age or over
6. Permission to be ordained must be granted from one's parents and superior.



Naks in their white robes preparing to be ordained.

In addition to these criteria, one important requirement that may sound weird to you is being humans. The following legend will put you out of doubt. Legend has it that a naga

(or *nak* in Thai meaning a huge mythical serpent), who was a devout admirer of the Lord Buddha and his Teachings, once disguised himself as a young male human and was ordained as a monk. One night the magic lost its power and he turned to his natural serpent form, to the horror of his fellow-monks. It was said that the Buddha summoned the naga and sternly told him that only humans were allowed in the monkhood. The serpent sadly asked the Buddha to use his name "naga" or "nak" to call a young man who was about to be ordained so that his name would remain in religion for ever. The Buddha consented, and a monk-to-be has been called "nak" up to the present time.



The eight requisites of a Buddhist monk

The preparation of a monk-to-be

When a man turns twenty and is willing to be ordained, his parents will notify the abbot of the temple chosen to be the adobe of the monk-to-be for the purpose of ordination. Prior to the arrangement of all procedures, the monk-to-be is required to learn by heart the chanting verses used during the ceremony. Besides, a monk-to-be needs to prepare for his own use the eight requisites of a Buddhist monk, which are:

1. the outer robe
2. the inner robe
3. the under robe
4. a bowl
5. a razor
6. a needle
7. a girdle
8. a water strainer

In addition, there are several other necessary utensils such as a mat, a pillow, a mosquito net, an umbrella, a pair of shoes, a bag and a kettle.

The practice to ask for forgiveness from the respectable persons

Apart from the aforementioned processes, the monk-to-be has to ask for permission from his place of work in order not to make a mess of his work during his absence. Also, he has to visit his senior relatives and the persons he holds in respect, to ask for forgiveness for any unsuitable deeds he has done to them. The practice is a way to instill forgiveness into people.



The ordination procedures

Firstly, the monk-to-be or *nak* has to have his hair shaved before going through other procedures. The first trimming is to be done by parents, senior relatives or a revered monk. After that, a barber will shave off the hair, beard, moustache and eye brows of the *nak*, who afterwards takes a bath to cleanse his body and gets dressed in white. The next step is to go in a procession to the temple.



The monks-to-be having their hair shaved

When arriving at the temple, the *nak* and his relatives will circle the ordination hall clockwise three times. The parents and relatives walk in the procession, each carrying a requisite of the monk-to-be.

Then the *nak*, the parents and the senior relatives will enter the ordination hall where the monks are assembled to perform the ceremony, ready to examine the suitability of the candidate seeking to be a new member of the *Sangha*.



The nak and his parents and relatives about to enter the ordination hall



The nak and his parents and relatives circle the ordination hall clockwise three times.

The normal period to stay in the monkhood

Usually, the suitable time for people to hold an ordination ceremony is 1-2 months before the Rains Retreat* in order to make the most of the 3-month Retreat to study Buddhist scriptures and to practice Buddhist disciplines.



Procedures in the ordination hall

However, at present, some people have less time to stay in the monkhood. And as the number of days for remaining as a monk is not fixed, a man can be ordained and stay in the monkhood for any period of time as he desires, but usually about seven days. Moreover, the period of monkhood does not have to correspond with the Rains Retreat.

**It is a very old tradition for Buddhist monks to stay in their respective monasteries during the three-month rainy season (from the day after the full moon of the 8th lunar month to the full-moon day of the 11th lunar month, which roughly corresponds to August to October).*



Part of procedures in the ordination hall

From religious matter to traditional matter

Nowadays, ordination is viewed as a tradition rather than a way to propagate Buddhism. There are varieties of ordination ceremonies held in different localities. At some places, the *nak* is elaborately dressed up and rides on a horse or elephant back so as to be reminiscent of Prince Siddhartha* when he left his palace life and got into the monkhood.



The ordination ceremony on elephant back at
ban Hat Siao, Sukhothai province

If you would like to witness this ceremony, you can consult a

travel agent to make arrangements about your travel. See lists of Tour and Travel Agencies on pages 50-52. To go by yourself might be inconvenient because you may feel awkward as you are not accustomed to the Thai tradition and don't understand what the people are doing.

** Before entering the monkhood, the Lord Buddha was Prince Siddhartha.*



