



Ordination in the Three Jewels Order Chicago Zen Center

All who pursue the Buddhadharma are invited to follow the Path as a Noble Disciple, committed to realizing the Noble Truths and coming to the end of dukkha. In this great undertaking, there is no distinction to be found. We—*all of us*—practice simply as human beings bent on awakening.

In practical terms, however, the sangha has traditionally been comprised of ordained male and female monastics and non-ordained male and female householders. Monastics separate themselves from the everyday world of family, occupation, and social standing, devoting their entire lives exclusively to manifesting the Dharma for others. They take no spouses, produce no offspring, and rely on others for their food. Householders, for their part, practice within the context of everyday life by attending to the teaching and by living upright and Dharma-filled lives in line with their occupations, social station, and family commitments. They provide material support to the monastics as the monastics provide spiritual support and teaching.

Such was the dominant model throughout the Buddhist world for more than two millennia. However, in 19th century Japan the Meiji emperor forced all monastics to marry, beget children, and earn their own keep. Japanese Zen was caught up in that mandate, and what emerged was this thing known as *the Zen Buddhist priest*. Neither simply a monastic nor simply a householder, the priest was nevertheless expected to be *both* monastic *and* householder, responsible for manifesting the Dharma to the sangha *and* for attending to the care of spouse and family. Since that time, most every expression of Zen coming out of Japan has followed this model, although Zen monastics are still to be found wherever the practice has spread.

In the West, some Zen lineages are strictly lay, and Dharma transmission is passed on without ordination as a priest (Sanbo Zen, for example, or some of the Aitken line). In other lineages (Sōtō, for example) ordination as a priest already carries with it a preliminary sanctioning as a teacher. The Rochester lineage is an ordained lineage, but it draws a bright line between ordaining as a priest and being sanctioned as a teacher, for the two are outgrowths of two very different processes and serve two distinct functions.

Priests provide an indispensable service to the sangha by living openly as vessels of the Dharma. They are the workhorses of the sangha. They provide a point of continuity for the practice life of the

Center. They are the custodians of the Path, and since only ordained persons may administer the precepts, they ensure that the local sangha remain a *Buddhist* sangha. Most importantly, it is the individual's *voluntary decision* to submit him- or herself for ordination. Teachers, on the other hand, preach the Dharma in the place of the Buddha, and they confirm and help deepen the insight of others. *They do not choose to be teachers.* That burden is thrust upon them by another.

In the Rochester lineage, then, there are teachers who are not priests, priests who are not teachers, and persons who are both priest and teacher. Only those who are both priest and teacher, however, may sanction others as teachers.

STEPS TO ORDINATION

In keeping with the long tradition, one who wishes to ordain simply asks someone who is ordained to ordain them (i.e., there is no seminary system). It is then incumbent upon the ordained (hereafter *mentor*) to ascertain the individual's aptitude and readiness for ordination. This takes time and discernment, for great harm can be done when one functions as a priest without the requisite cultivation of insight and character. No one should seek to ordain out of any sense of ego satisfaction, and no one should ordain someone who bears but few or only very weak signs of readiness to ordain; as Dongshan Liangjie, founder of the Caodong (Sōtō) school observed, "The greatest suffering there ever could be is to wear this robe and not understand the great matter." Here we follow a step-by-step process from first inquiry to actual ordination to avoid such distress to both the candidate and the sangha.

First Inquiry

Someone interested in ordaining will already have shown signs of deepening commitment to the Dharma. He or she will be a long-standing member (at least 7 and closer to 10 years) of the Center or a kindred sangha, will have taken the precepts, will have assumed various practice-related functions (timing, lead chanting, monitoring, etc. as talents permit), and will have shown eager readiness to offer time and energy to the Center outside the formal practice schedule. He or she will also have some measure of confirmed insight ("passing *mu*") and will be so taken with the Dharma that an urgency is felt to do whatever is within one's power to keep it alive. He or she will have no psychological or social impediments to functioning as a priest. Asking to ordain is a plain outgrowth of concerted practice, and one's interest in ordaining should come as no surprise to anyone in the sangha who has gotten to know the person.

That person broaches the prospect of ordination with the teacher, usually in the context of dokusan. As a rule, he or she will be told no, though this *no* will be either definitive or provisional (more of a *not yet, ask again*), depending on the mentor's assessment of the applicant.

Second Inquiry

Before making a second inquiry, the aspirant will have begun to address *in all seriousness* the implications of ordination for his or her personal and professional life. If married or in a committed relationship, the prospect of ordaining and its impact on the relationship will be discussed frankly with one's partner. If children are involved, they should ideally be at least of middle school age by this time. One will begin to envision life as a priest and come to terms with the anticipated demands (both explicit and implicit) the members of the sangha will place on them. At that point, the aspirant once more asks to ordain, again usually in the context of dokusan.

The ensuing necessary discussion will exceed the time constraints of dokusan, so the aspirant and mentor will arrange for a separate time to meet. The mentor will ask hard questions of the aspirant, and the aspirant is expected to be thoroughly transparent and open with the answers. In the end, what is being ascertained is nothing other than the aspirant's degree of ego-attrition. At the conclusion of this discussion, the student will again be told no, but again that *no* will either be definitive or provisional.

Third Inquiry

After another, likely much shorter, period of reflection and settling, the aspirant will ask again. At this point, the mentor will say yes (unless some significant impediment has come to light in the meantime) and arrangements will be made for scheduling a novice ceremony.

Novitiate

The novitiate period lasts *a good two years* (21-27 months). It begins with a ceremony on a Sunday (replacing the teisho) in which the aspirant openly declares his or her intent before the sangha and is formally installed as a novice. During the ceremony the novice will receive a black rakusu (sewn, as usual, by the individual) and a black shukin (cord type belt) to be worn with his or her brown robe.

During the novitiate period the novice is steeped in the lore of the Dharma. The novice will become conversant with—and demonstrate an ability to expound upon—key Buddhist concepts and selected core texts of the tradition. He or she will also learn the more important elements of ceremonial priestcraft. A detailed reading list will be presented, and a regular schedule of discussions about the readings will be set up. Moreover, the novice will be expected over the course of the novitiate period to give several Dharma Talks, join the rotation of leading Intro Nights, and assist in ceremonial activities. During this time Center members should find themselves developing increasing confidence in the novice as a spokesperson of the Dharma and as an elder sibling on the Path, and the mentor may occasionally solicit feedback from sangha members on how the novice is faring in these regards. It goes without saying that the novice will continue his or her own personal practice (e.g., making steady progress in the kōan curriculum) as before.

As one passes through the novitiate period, one will begin to incorporate the lineage's outward signs of the ordained state by transitioning to the exclusive use of blue, black, and gray in one's clothing, wearing only collarless or band collar shirts, and keeping one's hair short (buzz cut for men, short cut for women). Once ordained, these changes become permanent, and deviations from this norm that may be necessary because of work or other commitments, while not completely prohibited, should first be discussed with the mentor.

Ordination

When the time is right, the ordination ceremony will be scheduled. The ordinand will again take the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts, and he or she will receive a new Dharma name to be used in all practice- and Center-related circumstances. The ordinand will then receive, in addition to the shukin already received, a black (formal) and a blue (informal) robe, two short underrobes, the black rakusu now inscribed with one's ordained name and date of ordination, and a black kesa and zagu. Persons connected with the Center pitch in to purchase all of these as a sign of support for and confidence in the candidate, and they are presented on behalf of the sangha in the course of the ceremony. This is a joyous event, a major milestone for the sangha, and a celebration follows.

LIVING AS AN ORDAINED

Ordination marks a beginning, not an achievement. From this point on, one's whole life becomes a particular kind of kōan, since no one really knows what it means to be a Zen Buddhist priest. That life will be fruitful if one remains focused on the Dharma for the welfare of all one encounters. It will be well-rooted if one understands that one is simply a bearer of the tradition until others take on the burden. Although it is the work of a lifetime, none of it belongs to oneself. It will grow and deepen as one's own insight grows and deepens. It offers an open landscape for the robust exercise of all of the pāramitās—giving, uprightness, patience, vigor, meditative concentration, and wisdom. It is a practice unlike any other, full of countless challenges and any number of small insights.

That said, should the time come when one can no longer in good conscience present oneself as a vessel of the Dharma or serve as a bright example to others, one should be honest enough to turn in one's robes and revert to lay life. If at that time one does not disrobe voluntarily, one's ordination may be publicly revoked.

Ven. Shodhin Geiman
Abbot, Chicago Zen Center
June 2026