

Ordaining at Wat Pah Nanachat

One of Ajahn Chah's main purposes for establishing an international forest monastery was to offer a solid training as a Buddhist monk to foreigners unfamiliar with Thai culture, using English language for communication and instruction. So in 1975 Wat Pah Nanachat came to be, as a place where Westerners (or other non-Thai speakers) can take on the yellow robes and become Buddhist monks. It has proved very useful to enter the monastic life taking gradual steps, as life in a foreign culture with its new forms and routines does not come easy for most non-native Buddhists, and takes time.

The following is a description of the various stages involved in becoming a monk at Wat Pah Nanachat.

So you'd like to ordain...

There are several stages that we go through at Wat Pah Nanachat in making the transition from lay person to monk (bhikkhu). Having the intention to prepare for ordination, you would first stay in the monastery as an eight-precept layperson for about one month. Then you would become a white-robed postulant (anagarika, a 'homeless-one', in Thai known as a 'pa-kow'). Pa-kows make a formal commitment to the eight precepts, and begin to train in the general monastic rules. After about four to six months, one can proceed to request the Going Forth (pabbajja) as a novice (samanera). The main difference between a pa-kow and a novice is that a pa-kow is still able to own and handle money, and therefore has more freedom and independence, while the novice adopts an additional precept that prevents him from ownership and the handling and use of money. This makes the samanera a full alms mendicant relying on the support of the lay community for his living. Novices wear the same brown robes as the monks and train in almost the same ways as the monks, but their explicit code of rules is much smaller and less detailed. At Wat Pah Nanachat our novices already start studying the monks rules, and also acquire various basic skills of monastic life such as chanting and making robes and other requisites. Otherwise novices practice meditation and apply themselves to the duties of communal life just as the monks.

If everything goes smoothly, one is well prepared, and the Sangha considers one ready for bhikkhu life, after about one year as a novice, one can proceed to request Higher Ordination and become a part of the bhikkhu Sangha. This is a typical course of training that our monastery has used for many years now and seems to work well. It is a gradual way of becoming familiar and adapting to the new lifestyle, Thai culture, practices and rules of conduct as a monk, and it also enables our community to get to know its new members in an unhurried way. In addition, being a novice and already living in the midst of the Sangha is a very conducive opportunity to reiterate or clarify ones own plans and possibly communicate them to parents and close family members before making the step to a full commitment to the bhikkhu life.

The community requests that people coming to ordain as monks at Wat Pah Nanachat have a genuine interest in long-term training within the communities associated with Ajahn Chah. The monastic code requires new monks to be under dependence of a teacher for a period of five years. We consider this to be a good time frame for an initial commitment, as in such a period one has learned enough about the ups and downs of monastic life that one's further aspirations

become clear naturally. Such a long term commitment helps to create a stable community and facilitates the continuity needed in one's own practice to overcome personal restlessness and to find peace and contentment in one's spiritual search. If you are still interested in checking out different places, communities and traditions in order to find out what suits you, we recommend that you explore all your options well before taking on the training in the yellow robes at Wat Pah Nanachat, as the opportunities to travel around individually as a novice and a new monk are limited. Please also clarify your relationships to parents and family before ordination. With their support you will feel much more at ease living here long-term.

For now, we'd like to welcome you to come and see what it is like here, as a guest first and then, if you and the community wish, as a pa-kow. You will find out by living here to what extent you would like to commit yourself to monastic life in our community. For becoming a pa-kow, there are no specific requirements, but for novice and bhikkhu ordination one needs one's parent's permission. Generally we have agreed upon an age limit of about fifty years for ordination. Other requirements for ordination are that one needs to be free from debts, free from government service, and free of major diseases such as epilepsy, HIV, cancer, etc. If you have ever had serious psychological problems before, such as depression or psychotic episodes, or serious drug addictions, please be so kind to speak openly with the abbot about them, so we can realistically discuss whether or not the monastic lifestyle will really be helpful.

We ask people to be careful not to cut off their financial life-line before coming here, because even though the monks freely share their almsfood and the monastery infrastructure with everyone, all guests and pa-kows still need to take responsibility for their private needs and business, such as medical care, visas, return airfare, and personal items such as toiletries, before becoming ordained. Especially the cost of visas over a long period can be significant. The visa situation normally requires making several trips to Laos or Malaysia. A trip costs about \$150 (US). Alternatively you can make many trips to the nearby Laotian border to acquire a new one-month transit visa. These visas are issued free of charge, but you will have to pay for a Laotian visa \$30 (US) before you can re-enter Thailand and request the one-month transit visa.

Until you take the novice precepts, we are not able to assist you in visa matters, other than arranging a non-immigrant visa the last time you leave the country before your Going Forth. Once you are a novice, though, we will take care of your visa applications without you having to arrange for any payment. Before you come to Thailand we suggest that you get a two-month tourist visa at any Thai embassy (or a multiple entry tourist visa if possible).

One last little note on something that seems to be more of an issue these days: although everybody who comes here is surely generally inspired by the idea of 'leaving it all behind', many visitors who come with the wish to ordain carry a variety of electronic gadgets with them (telephones, i-pods, cameras, laptops, etc). To maintain the spirit of a forest monastery, living in a simple, natural environment, we encourage all our newcomers to give up such items, and generally we have decided not to use e-mail and internet in our monastery.

Hopefully we have not overwhelmed you with these practical details, and we look forward to seeing you soon in the midst of our Sangha.