

Purpose of handbook

The purpose of this handbook is to give a brief outline of the current 'process' for women who wish to be ordained into the Western Buddhist Order and of the part we see Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre playing in that.

Although the process is the same worldwide, the part played by Tiratanaloka applies only to those women who are able to come on retreat here. However, even for those women who don't come to Tiratanaloka, we hope it will give an idea of the sort of training that is likely to be helpful in your preparation for ordination.

Some larger centres now have, in addition, their own guidelines for women who have asked for ordination which give details of what support is available locally.

Background to Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre

Tiratanaloka retreat centre for women was established in 1994 in order to meet a need in helping women prepare for ordination into the Western Buddhist Order. At that time, a team of experienced Dharmacharinis came to live and work at Tiratanaloka and undertook to act as the recommending body for all women who had asked for ordination (for information on what this means, see the sections on the role of preceptors below). This meant getting to know women who came on retreat here very well and, at the appropriate time, recommending that they were ready to join the Order. Since Tiratanaloka was set up, the number of Dharmacharinis worldwide has grown from just over 100 to over 500!

As the women's side of the Order grew, so the numbers of women asking for ordination increased too and it became impossible for the Tiratanaloka team to continue to be the sole recommending body. There are now many private preceptors around the world and they, in consultation with other order members, now take on the responsibility for proposing women (to the public preceptors) as being ready for ordination.

However we believe that, for many women, the retreats we run at Tiratanaloka continue to provide an important part of preparation for ordination. In the following section of this handbook, we outline what currently happens when a woman asks for ordination, the areas which we feel are important for ordination training and how these relate to our work here at Tiratanaloka.

We hope you find this information helpful. You can find more information about the team and our vision for Tiratanaloka on our website www.tiratanaloka.org.

Asking for ordination

If you decide you want to be ordained into the Western Buddhist Order, you can make your request to any Order member, either in person or by letter. What happens next depends on where you are situated. Some larger centres, e.g. the London Buddhist Centre, Cambridge and Brighton, have their own local processes which might involve asking you to put your request in writing, inviting you to meet local Dharmacharinis or providing you with a copy of their local 'handbook'. Wherever you are situated, the person to whom you have made the request will also forward your details to us here at Tiratanaloka. This is because we hold the only central list of women who have asked for ordination. We are also responsible for putting a notice into Shabda, the confidential Order newsletter, to let all other Order members know of your request. When we receive your request, we'll send you a letter of acknowledgement, some information on how you might follow up your request and a copy of our retreat programme.

If you haven't already done so, we'd suggest you read Sangharakshita's letter entitled "What is the Western Buddhist Order?" which he wrote in 2009, which outlines his vision and views about the nature of the Order. This can be found online at

http://www.sangharakshita.org/What_is_the_Western_Buddhist_Order.pdf

We'd be happy to discuss any questions or issues arising from this letter with you.

Training for ordination

Sangharakshita, the founder of the WBO and the FWBO, has defined going for refuge to the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as being the central definitive act of the Buddhist life. He talks in terms of ever-deepening levels of going for refuge in this way. Becoming ready for ordination into the WBO has two distinct parts –

- Deepening one's going for refuge to the Three Jewels to the point where it becomes effective, or is the principal guiding force in one's life
- Having a good enough understanding of the Western Buddhist Order to decide that it is the context in which you want to practise

These two aspects of practice are eventually reflected in the two parts of the ordination ceremony itself, in which we take the refuges and precepts from our preceptor in the private ceremony and then formally join the Order in the public ceremony.

There are a number of specific areas of practice which have developed from Sangharakshita's teachings and which are likely to help develop and deepen one's going for refuge. In a sense, you could say that the whole path towards ordination is simply about allowing these to manifest more and more in one's life to the point where others can see and recognise them. These areas, and the retreat themes which most closely relate to them, are:

- An effective practice of meditation
- An understanding and practice of Buddhist ethics (*2010 retreat: Ethics to Insight*)
- A good knowledge of the Dharma as elucidated by Sangharakshita (*2010 retreat: The Transcendental Principle*)
- An understanding of what it might mean to practise within the context of the WBO (*2010 retreats: What is the Order?, Going for Refuge*)
- An understanding of the altruistic dimensions of practice (*2010 retreat: the Bodhisattva Ideal*)
- Becoming part of a network of friendships (*2010 retreats: Going for Refuge, What is the Order? - all our retreats give a flavour of this*)
- A sense of the larger, 'mythic' context for practice (*2010 retreats: The Refuge Tree*)

It is also a significant part of training for ordination that you experience going on solitary retreats from time to time. These are an important part of being able to work on your own mind, away from all other distractions. Perhaps more crucially, they can also allow us to develop individuality, by showing us what goes on for us internally when we are away from the demands of others, simply being ourselves.

There are a variety of ways in which you might explore and develop these areas in your own life and these will take different forms for each person. It's important to recognise that there is no set 'time frame' for getting to the point of ordination – it's probably more helpful to think of setting up the best conditions for deepening one's practice and going for refuge and bearing in mind that this process continues on and on beyond ordination.

Retreats at Tiratanaloka

Our retreats at Tiratanaloka are, not surprisingly, based around the areas outlined above, and we've shown in brackets after each area the retreats that explore it most directly. However, you'll probably find that each retreat has a taste of many different themes, for example, many people have a strong sense of Bhante's teaching through going deeply in the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice on The Refuge Tree retreat or experience a sense of what the Order is about through studying 'A Survey of Buddhism' on the Transcendental Principle.

On our retreats you will also experience what we sometimes refer to as a 'mandala of practices' associated with the themes – these include ritual, discussion, the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice, working together, confession and silence.

We feel that our retreats, all for women who have asked for ordination, have a particular depth because of the commitment of all the women who come on them. On most retreats, discussion groups are a central part of the programme, helping you to get to know both the team here and, very importantly, other women who will one day be in the Order with you. Many long-standing friendships are forged at Tiratanaloka!

*In our programme for 2010, we say that *The Transcendental Principle and The Refuge Tree* themes are suitable for those who have previously attended 2 or more retreats at Tiratanaloka. This suggestion is not related to what we see as someone's ability to study or meditate, but because we feel you'll benefit most from these particular retreats if you've already had experience of what it's like to study and practice with others here at Tiratanaloka. We therefore ask you contact us before booking on one of these retreats if you haven't been here at least twice before.*

A good basis of study, if possible the mitra study course, makes an excellent basis for coming on our retreats. As well as giving an understanding of basic Dharmic principles, the mitra study course covers Sangharakshita's particular exposition of the Dharma and will allow you to go deeper with the material studied in groups here.

All retreats at Tiratanaloka are run by members of our resident community, currently 8 of us. If you come on retreat regularly with us, you're likely to make connections with particular members of the team. We keep any correspondence you have with us (with your permission) so that we can get to know you and have a sense of your progression over time. We can also liaise with your private preceptor, when you have one, and it can be helpful to have a perspective on your practice from outside your local situation.

In addition to the retreats at Tiratanaloka, Taraloka retreat centre offer a number of meditation retreats a year specifically for women who have asked for ordination. Details of these can be found on their website www.taraloka.org.

The roles of the private and public preceptor

The private preceptor

As you continue to deepen your understanding of going for refuge and the F/WBO, you will naturally develop friendships with people who are in the Order and at some point it is likely to become clear that a particular Dharmacharini might become your private preceptor. You can ask any Dharmacharini who has been in the Order at least 10 years to take on this responsibility in relation to your own ordination process. Within the WBO, there is a specific consultation process by which Order members can become private preceptors. This involves everyone in the Order having the opportunity to comment to the person in

question on their suitability to take on this responsibility. If the person you ask to be your preceptor has not been through this process, they may undertake to do so when you ask them. If they have already been agreed as a private preceptor then they can take on the responsibility, usually with the agreement of their chapter, if they feel able to do so.

Again, there is nothing 'set in stone' about who should or should not become your preceptor, but it is often helpful to wait until you have naturally developed a good connection with someone before asking them, as it will be a very significant and lasting relationship. It is sometimes also the case that the circumstances of your relationship change over time and you may both agree that it is more appropriate for another Dharmacharini to be your preceptor.

When you and a Dharmacharini have agreed that she should become your preceptor, then she will be responsible at some point for proposing you as being ready for ordination. This will probably involve gathering information from a number of people in the Order who know you and who also have a sense that your going for refuge is effective and you are ready to join the Order. When this happens, your preceptor will pass the proposal to the College of Public Preceptors.

The public preceptor

The Public Preceptors are a worldwide body of senior Order Members who are responsible for overseeing the process of entry into the Order. Other responsibilities that they have include the appointing of private and public preceptors and carrying out public ordinations.

When your private preceptor proposes that you are ready to be ordained, then someone within the College of Public Preceptors will undertake to be your public preceptor. You may well know this person, but it is unlikely that you will have as close a relationship with them as you do with your private preceptor.

It is the public preceptor's responsibility to ensure that all relevant information has been checked and to follow up anything which she is not clear about in relation to readiness for ordination. Once she is satisfied that everything is complete, she will make a recommendation to other public preceptors in her kula, who all have to agree that you should join the Order.

Then at the time of your ordination, your private preceptor will witness your effective going for refuge and your public preceptor will welcome you into the Order.

It's worth mentioning that there is no central funding for men or women carrying out the responsibilities of being public or private preceptors. Those who live at retreat centres may receive some allowance from the retreat centre to cover, for example, the costs of attending preceptors' training retreats or travel to and from retreats. From time to time the College of Public Preceptors ask for donations from men and women who have asked for ordination to help fund their work.

The ordination retreat

Most women who join the Order do so in the context of a special ordination retreat. Sangharakshita has said that he believes longer ordination retreats are very helpful in creating the conditions to take this step. A longer retreat can provide you with a real sense of going forth from your 'ordinary' life that can be greatly supportive in starting your life in the Order. It also gives you a period of time in which to create strong connections with the women who will enter the Order with you.

The women's wing of the movement now has a retreat centre – Akashavana – in Spain where the first 3-month ordination retreat was held in 2007. As part of your preparation for ordination, your preceptor will probably discuss with you if there is any reason you would not be able to attend such a retreat at Akashavana.

However, for a variety of reasons, some women cannot attend a long ordination retreat. If this is the case, then there are other options such as shorter ordination retreats or ordinations taking place in the context of other retreats. This will all be discussed as you near readiness for ordination.

Kulas

As you practise within the context of the FWBO, you will very probably develop friendships with a number of order members who may – formally or informally - support you in your path to ordination. This support may involve the order members discussing your progress with you and, at the appropriate time, liaising

with your private preceptor. Some centres where there are a large number of Dharmacharinis have developed a 'kula' system (kula simply means 'family') in order to liaise with and support people who have asked for ordination most effectively. It's worth noting that it's not necessary for someone to have an 'official' kula in order to become ordained. At smaller centres, for example, where there are only one or two women's chapters, it is likely to be clear who is involved in your ordination process without a specific kula being defined. It may be more helpful to think in terms of developing friendships rather than of having to set up a kula.

Going for Refuge groups

Many people who have asked for ordination find it very helpful to meet regularly with others locally who have also done so. They may form what is often referred to as a 'going for refuge group' and you may find that there is one or more such group around your centre. These groups can be very significant in helping to deepen friendships and an understanding of what going for refuge really is. If there is no group locally, one way of keeping in touch with other women who have asked for ordination is through the email newsletter Hridayavani. You can find out more about this by contacting Siobhan, Helen or Sue at hridayavani@hotmail.co.uk.

Other information

We hope that this information has provided a useful general background to training for ordination for women.

We'd like to emphasize that training for ordination does not take a 'fixed' form – it is likely to be different for every woman, depending on her individual circumstances, so it's important to recognise that the information in this handbook is not a definitive guide. For example, the situation of someone at a large centre such as the LBC, where there are many order members and mitras, will be very different from someone who is the only mitra somewhere a long way from any centre. Nevertheless, people do get ordained when living in a huge variety of circumstances.

If you'd like more information on Tiratanaloka, Taraloka and the F/WBO generally you may find the following websites helpful: -

www.tiratanaloka.org.uk website of Tiratanaloka retreat centre for women on the Tiratanaloka website, you can sign up to receive email information about retreats from us. There's also a link to our blog <http://tiratanaloka.blogspot.com>

www.taraloka.org.uk website of Taraloka retreat centre for women

www.akashavana.org website of the women's retreat centre in Spain

www.fwbo.org the main FWBO website

www.freebuddhistaudio.com an archive of audio recordings on Buddhism and meditation

Reading lists for retreats and generally:

A Survey of Buddhism: Sangharakshita

The Three Jewels: Sangharakshita

Who is the Buddha?: Sangharakshita

What is the Dharma?: Sangharakshita

What is the Sangha?: Sangharakshita

Ritual and Devotion in Buddhism: Sangharakshita

The Ten Pillars: Sangharakshita

A History of my Going for Refuge: Sangharakshita

Teachers of Enlightenment: Kulananda

Living Ethically: Sangharakshita

Know Your Mind: Sangharakshita