

Ordination for Foreigners

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In fact the first question I usually ask westerners when they say they want to be ordained is, how will you support yourself? In traditional Buddhist countries the monastic sangha is supported by the lay community. Once one has received ordination one can 'renounce the world and go forth in faith' as the Buddha advised.

However for those foreigners ordained within the Tibetan tradition this security does not pertain. Tibetan lamas are concerned to support their own sangha and regard foreigners as well able to take care of themselves. To become ordained is quite easy but the subsequent commitment, as laid down in the Vinaya texts, that the ordination master then has the responsibility to train and sustain their students is ignored.

Of course we can 'give no thought unto the morrow, what we shall eat and what we shall wear' and if we have enough faith that the Three Jewels will take care of us then they probably will - karma permitting. This has been my experience anyway. Otherwise we have to think carefully how to survive without spending all our time making a living - in which case why ordain? Many foreign monastics give back their vows after some years because the situation is so discouraging: they are alone and not part of a sangha or else they live in a Dharma centre surrounded by lay people. It is often a lonely life and there is little support either financial or psychological.

Mostly monasteries and nunneries in India and Nepal do not accept foreign monastic and where they do accept them, it is hard both physically, socially and psychologically, and most foreigners (western & other Asians) don't stay long. One should not be too romantic about Tibetan-style monastic establishments.

I am not trying to put you off but you must realise that while Tibetan lamas are usually encouraging for foreigners to take ordination, they are thinking of their own nurtured experiences and do not consider the situation for outsiders. Nor do they often accept the responsibility to help those whom they ordain outside of their own Tibetan community. This is why you encounter a lot of independent foreign monastics wandering around.

