



# Pragmatic Papers

## Center for Pragmatic Buddhism

### The Form and Significance of Ordination within the OPB

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## Perspective

In October, 2017 the Center for Pragmatic Buddhism (CPB) reaches its 11th year as a formal organization. We began in St. Louis, MO, as a continuation of the teaching efforts of our founder, the late Ven. Shi Shen Long, Ryugen Christopher Fisher sensei. After his passing in October 2006, his sangha--which I was privileged to lead--elected to press on in his memory. At that time, we did not know what the future would hold, but the foundation he had built was strong enough to persevere and thrive despite early challenges. We honor his life through our educational efforts today, and the growth we've experienced is a testament to the timeliness of his teachings.

Ryugen sensei was the product of a unique moment in the history of 20th century East Asian Buddhism. As a student of Soyu Matsuoka roshi, a Japanese Soto Zen Master, and Holmes Hinkley Welch sensei (Ven. Shi Mo Hua), an American Harvard professor of Daoism and Buddhism, he was trained in true pragmatic style. Matsuoka roshi brought his rigorously adaptable approach to Soto Zen to the States, while Welch sensei traveled to China to study Chan in its original environment for several years. In fact, Prof. Welch wrote the first comprehensive analysis of Chan Buddhism for his graduate dissertation at Harvard. Both teachers with their undeniable insightfulness and intelligence took the most meaningful and essential elements of their study with them to the States. The intersection between the two great teachers was the student, Ryugen Fisher.

As I entered formal training with Ryugen sensei in 2003, he called his approach "American Chan" to signify a new evolution in the transmission of Buddhism westward. The concept of American Chan soon matured into "Pragmatic Buddhism," to best signify the marriage between the American school of philosophy known as pragmatism that

grounded our interpretation of Buddhism. As a philosophy major, I had added this orientation to Ryugen sensei's interpretation, and when professor Meaghan Ruddy (now a sensei as well) joined us during our formative years, it solidified the formation of Pragmatic Buddhism.

Pragmatic Buddhism is easily summarized in my other teacher, philosophy professor emeritus and fellow Buddhist David Edward Shaner sensei's saying, "Your life IS your monastery." We must take our work and ethical commitments with us into our daily lives. This is an ultimate commitment to apply our teachings across communities, occupations, and life situations. Our most important robe, as Ryugen sensei liked to say, is "jeans and a work shirt."

It's fitting that we now have robust practice groups in St. Louis, MO, Columbus, OH, and a fledgling group in Scotland. I am proud, as I know our founders would be, that we have such a diverse group of people who find affinity with our work, and see the logic of Pragmatic Buddhism for our 21st century world. As we enter 2018, we will continue to work together to grow and develop, and welcome the exciting opportunities ahead.



**James E. Eubanks, Jr.**  
**Abbot**

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## Ordination in Pragmatic Buddhism

**Sensei Glenn Ge Jie Gustafson,  
OPB**

So what is monastic ordination in Pragmatic Buddhism? How does it compare and contrast with ordination in both Theravada and in other Zen Lineages? I would like to give you my perspective and speak to the way that I instruct my students. First let me give a little history on a major issue that distinguishes Zen ordination from other Buddhist ordinations.

When the Tendai sect began ordaining married people (primarily men) in the 13th century CE, they did so using the argument that their ordination was not

via the Vinaya Vows of Theravada but rather was an ordination via the Bodhisattva Vow of Mahayana Buddhism. This meant that they were not breaking the vows about celibacy but rather were simply not ordaining using them at all. While I have seen nothing really specific to



this change in Soto or Rinzai Zen, Soto especially did go to married clergy during the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century CE and this trend has continued in the West. This is actually the view that I personally have of our ordination in Pragmatic Buddhism. I see us as being ordained in the Bodhisattva Vow as teachers of Dharma Practice.

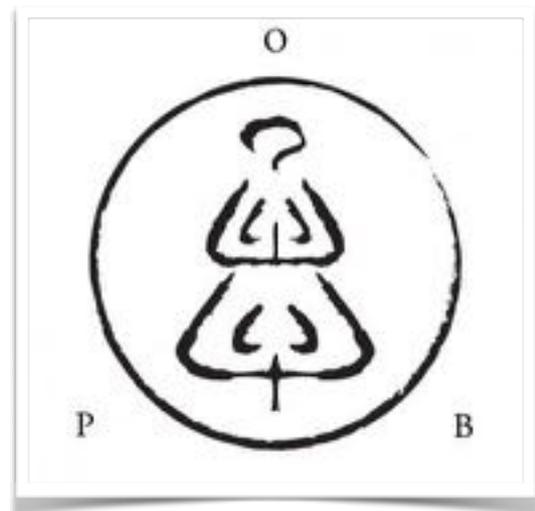
When I speak of Dharma

Practice I am talking about the full Dharma teachings that are referred to in the Bodhisattva Vow. To me this also includes some of the moral guidance given in the Pratimoksha Vows which were drawn from the rules laid out in the Vinaya. It also includes the teachings of the Eightfold Path, the Marks of Existence and Dependent Origination. In Zen and in the West this ordination is considered a clerical ordination (important for state recognition of rites performed by our monks) and I see it that way as well. I'd like to go through especially the Eightfold Path in explaining why I think this way.

We can divide up the Eightfold Path into three portions - Wisdom, Moral Discipline and Mental Discipline. In the Wisdom section we have two steps: Appropriate Intention and Appropriate Thought. These, for me, are addressed by the monks' training in philosophy and the historical growth of Buddhist thought. We learn - and learn to teach - what the Buddha originally laid out as the best ways to bring about the cessation of suffering; but also what other teachers down through the ages have taught about this. This teaching that we deliver is to provide a basis for ongoing practice among those people who study with us - either formally for ordination or informally in our Centers.

Within Moral Discipline we are taught about: Appropriate Speech, Appropriate Action and Appropriate Livelihood. This part of the Eightfold Path is where we encounter traditional clerical activities. Here we learn about and provide guidance into moral decision making in day to day life. For the monk herself I think that there is value in reading and following the Pragmatic Buddhist Pratimoksha Vows which are extracted from the Vinaya of Theravada and provide a guide for how she should act in public to enhance her teaching and living of the Dharma. For laity this is where we provide a clerical role in helping people determine appropriate speech, action and livelihood in their lives - not by laying down rules which must be followed but by teaching people to move from reactive response to responsive action. This moral guidance also includes assisting people in life-stage transitions; from birth to adulthood, marriage, new homes, death, etc. This assistance in these essentially secular events help to show that Dharma Practice pervades all of life and is not

just time spent sitting on a cushion. Bringing the presence of a monk into the daily lives of the laity is part and parcel of helping them to live their own Dharma Practice within those daily lives, not apart from them. The final segment of the Path where we help to guide people in their mental discipline by sharing what we have found in our own practice. Here a monk must be consistent in his own practice effort, mindfulness and meditation so that he may help people in his Center and others that he encounters do find the peace that comes through these practices. The function of the Centers is heavily based around this part of the Path since they should provide a place to practice these mental disciplines in a



supportive community environment. Of course all of these things must be done in the spirit of the Bodhisattva Vow - for the liberation of all beings, the extinguishment of all illusions, the mastery of dharma-in-life and the consistent following of the Buddha Way. Our ordination is not about achieving Enlightenment for ourselves or even about the cessation of our own suffering. It is about teaching the Bodhisattva Path to others as we practice it ourselves. It is about walking together with all the beings that are striving, falling and rising to strive again to live this path. It is not about having any special mark or gift or ability. It is about being an ordinary human who has dedicated themselves to the betterment of all.

**Glenn Gustafson is a senior Monk in the OPB, the founder and leader of the Central Ohio Centre for Pragmatic Buddhism.**

# The OPB Ordination Process

Julien Fouqueau

## Introduction

Before delineating the ordination process I'll talk about what it is we thrive to master through our PB education. Bear in mind that because of our basic philosophical tenets we rely much more on individual and situational interpretations than many a tradition out there. This is both a curse and a blessing. Its direct consequence is that even though you will see many points of overlapping between different teachers in our tradition, we still belong to the same tradition in the end. You may also notice a great deal of variability. I consider that our greatest richness. Not that other traditions are different in this regard, but we have the particularity of owning and revendicating this plurality.

This being said, the rest of this document is a reflection of my personal vision of the ordination process. It also reflects the rules I apply to my students.

One of my particularities is considering the duration of each stage of the ordination process as being both incompressible and a minimum requirement. Should you be the finest human being out there, only one test will tell me if you stand : the test of time.

## Our Goal

The training you will receive in OPB revolves around the gradual deepening of skills and knowledge in three areas : study, practice and teaching. Of course the expectations in each of these areas are different at every point of the training and your learning program will be tailored to your individual needs and challenges according to my own better judgement. The general level of acquisition for each of these is detailed under the section concerning the diverse ranks.

## Study

As you move your way up through the organization you will be expected to be knowledgeable about a wide range of topics according to the requirements of your rank. They may include Buddhist history, traditional Buddhist scriptures, OPB Vinaya (the set of rules applicable to regulate behaviors within the community), philosophy (Buddhist, Eastern, Western), science and scientific thinking.



You will have at your disposal a virtual library. to navigate through its content a document has been created (still in progress) which references topics and concepts and links these with passages of books, articles and Dharma talks. Each of these references hold the mention of the background knowledge necessary in order to appreciate it to its full extent. The different levels are beginner (no previous knowledge required), intermediary (requires general knowledge of the field) and advanced (requires specific or expert knowledge of the field).

**“A minimum general level of excellence is expected at each rank in order to maintain the standards of our lineage.”**

## Practices

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You will have resources to learn different meditation techniques. You will also be introduced to the meaning and details of different ritual practices. You will find most of them described in the Buddhist Breviary, the Liturgical Guide and the Meditation Facilitator's Guide all written by Deshi Glenn Ge Jie Gustafson. Note that study and reflexion is also considered part of the practice in our tradition. Regarding learning and teaching: Nobody starts in the same place, so what is expected from you is not perfection but a diligent work to improve your style, the rhythm of your presentations and the use of a dash of humor to make your discourse more palatable. But above all you will learn to convey your message in a simple and straightforward way to become an engaging teacher. The role of a teacher here is not to sell some ultimate truth, but to help students to become more autonomous and self reflective in their approach. In the end it is all about showing a growing ability to convey the teachings in a personal and meaningful way and not at all about becoming the brainless parrot of a sclerotic tradition.

## Structure

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The different ranks within the order are a succession of seven different stages of involvement and proficiency. After having been part of the laity for some time, or not, there is an initial period of mutual discovery between the organisation and the candidate. Toward the end of it, it will be determined if student and Order are a good fit for each other. If not, the

applicant will be oriented towards a more fitting tradition.

Once this threshold is passed each rank is meant to correspond to a particular profile of practitioner. You can make all your career as a formal student or Deshi if it's what suits you, but if you want to move beyond the formal student rank you'll need to get through all the intermediary stages as each level builds on the previous ones. You will notice that there are many expectations from the student at each level. You don't have to gain perfect mastery over all of these. We're all different and some areas are more challenging for some than others.

Steady progress, the willingness to move forward, getting along well with other members are more highly valued than quantitative achievements or mere memoization of some texts. We defend equity more than equality, if you have greater capabilities you will be expected to show greater mastery. It's the rate of effort and involvement which determines the rate of progression.

Still, a minimum general level of excellence is expected at each rank in order to maintain the standards of our lineage. Usually, your Root Teacher will be at least Deshi (Novice in some cases) and will have already reached the rank above yours or be in the final stage to reach it.

The different ranks are as follows:

### Lay Practitioner

Lay practitioners are those who define themselves as curious or sympathisers of our



Picture source: The Smithsonian Institute

tradition. It could also be that they're thinking about joining the Order on a more formal basis but are just not sure yet. They are more than welcome to join in group practices and discussions as long as they remain respectful of the Order and its members.

## Applicant

When one applies for ordination, there is a period, to check whether applicant and organisation are likely to be a good fit for each other. It's also the first stage which is mutually binding for the Order and the practitioner. During this period of at least three months, you'll have the opportunity to get to meet some members and ask them the pressing questions you might have. It is also a period during which our members will use their previous experience to indicate you if they think you might enjoy the ride or point you to another tradition which might suit you best. This trial period can be extended if the monk designated to do the follow-up or the applicant thinks it is necessary.

What is expected from you during this period is just to catch bits and pieces about our tradition. It will get more formal and structured during the next steps.

## Formal Student

Formal students are members of OPB who authentically study and practice Pragmatic Buddhism in vivo, and if so desired, are preparing for more advanced training in OPB.

You will spend a minimum of six months as a Formal student before you might be considered for novice ordination by the Leadership of OPB.

During this period you will be introduced to the concepts of naturalism, pragmatism, expedient means, social engagement and dependent origination which form the bottom line and spirit of PB. You will also in light of these concepts be introduced to the 4 NT's, the 8-fold path and the 3 jewels.

Your Root Teacher will also rely on scriptures, books, articles and classic Buddhist concepts to illustrate and help you refine your understanding of what fits within a « standard » PB worldview.

You will have to study and internalize the OPB Vinaya so that your attitude within the

community demonstrates your acquisition of the values and sense of etiquette we uphold.

You will be introduced to diverse techniques of meditation and to some of our ritualistic practices and their meaning, this includes recitations and ceremonies. You won't work on your teaching skills per se at this stage but you will be asked to reformulate the concepts you're taught with your own words. Toward the end of this period you should begin to be conversant about PB and be able to sustain a general discussion about practice with the other members of the order using a common language.

## Novice Monk

At this stage you are recognised as a formal monastic student and full member of OPB who is granted provisional ordinal appointment.

You will have to study at least two years at this rank before your Deshi ordination by the Leadership. You will deepen your understanding of the concepts you discovered as a formal student. You will also start to study Buddhist history and philosophy. You will be introduced to more challenging concepts and ideas such as emptiness, the four Kayas, gradual and sudden enlightenment, conventional and ultimate reality, along with other advanced concepts, often through the study of scriptures, books, articles, under the guidance of your Root Teacher.

You will have to make your practice a daily activity and meet the retreat requirements needed for the growth and stability of your practice. At this point you should become knowledgeable about all the ritual activities and meditation techniques approved within the Order.

You will start to work on your teaching skills more formally as at this stage you're expected to be able to instruct a beginner on the primary meditation techniques, explain the meaning of the rituals and give a general idea of the central concepts described in the Formal Student section (naturalism, pragmatism, expedient means, social engagement and dependent origination along with the 4 NT's, the 8-fold path and the 3 jewels).

Toward the end of this training period you should be conversant about most commonplace

ideas and concepts in Buddhist thought. As such you should be able to sustain a discussion with intermediary level students of other Buddhist traditions about yours and their practice, assuming they are non sectarian and open to

“There is just no way you'll be granted formal teaching responsibilities... if you can't show respect and tolerance for other spiritual traditions” be they Buddhist or not.”

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dialogue. There is only one absolute imperative before to graduate as Deshi. You have to move beyond sectarianism. There is just no way you'll be granted formal teaching responsibilities and/or representative mandate of the Order if you can't show respect and tolerance for other spiritual traditions, be they Buddhist or not.

### **Deshi (Monk)**

A Deshi is a formal monastic apprentice who is granted provisional root-teaching assignments from the Leadership within existing chapters of CPB. You will have to study and practice at least three years at this rank before you can pretend to Sensei ordination. At this point your studies will become more and more self-directed due to the breadth and depth of the fields of knowledge involved. Nevertheless, you'll remain under the guidance and counsel of a Root Teacher.

In addition to the continuation of your effort to learn about, naturalism, pragmatism, social engagement, Buddhist scriptures, history and philosophy you're expected to become knowledgeable in the following fields : both Western and Eastern philosophy, science and scientific thinking (the most central and important concepts anyway).

You should be able to perform most of the ceremonies and to lead any approved practice. You should train regularly and have a sufficient level of mastery to become able to teach every item up to the novice curriculum. Your goal here is to perfect your teaching skills. You will begin

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Image source: Wikipedia

to hold teaching responsibilities and become a Root Teacher under the guidance of a senior member.

During this phase, daily practice and yearly retreats shouldn't be an issue anymore. After you get well established at this level you should be able to sustain informed discussion on subtle philosophical points with spiritual teachers and monks both within and outside of Buddhism. Assuming they are non sectarian and open to dialogue.

### **Sensei and Dharma Heir ranks**

Since I'm just a Deshi it wouldn't make much sense to talk about the ordination process above my rank.

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## A quick note on disciplinary issues

No rank or position gives you a free pass and you are always liable to the group as long as you claim your legitimacy as a practitioner or teacher from it. Leadership has a rightful claim to hold more weight in the decision process but consultation of a large sample of members is commonplace.

In most cases we try to resolve issues regarding discipline and diligence through dialogue and consultation by using private rather than public means of communication. One thing to bear in mind is that as long as you don't decide to leave permanently the organisation you won't lose your rank and prerogatives, especially if you have to step aside for personal, professional or health related reasons. On the other hand, you can be deprived of the prerogatives of your rank or in extreme cases excluded from the Order if the Leadership in accordance with a college of members reach the conclusion that it is the best way to maintain the stability and continuity of the group.

**Julien Facauld is a Dishi based in Le Bourg, France.**

## A Layperson's Thoughts on OPB Ordination

**Brian Nutwell**

If you grew up in suburban America in the eighties as I did, you may never have met or seen an actual monk (or nun). My pre-OPB conceptions of monks were actually all from Hollywood movies – replete with Gregorian

**"We stand not "between" but "across" tradition and progress, in both the contemplative life of the mind and a purpose-driven life in the world..."**

chants, Gothic cathedrals, secret societies, and illuminated manuscripts. Plus of course Hong Kongcinema, featuring Shaolin temples, gurus on mountaintops, and mystical feats of chi. Very romantic, aside from that pesky celibacy bit! Perhaps you had an older relative who was taught by the nuns in Catholic school, and shared horror stories of Sister Margaret's severity – not romantic at all! So when Dennis asked me to share some thoughts on my layperson's view of ordination in OPB, I had to examine those assumptions and do a little homework. A reasonably Buddhist approach, I hope. The word "ordination" itself is pretty direct – straight from the Latin root behind "putting things in order," "giving orders," ordinal

numbers, and ordinary. That last one's interesting – ordinary means something that falls within the expected order of daily life. We'll come back to that later.

But as far as traditional ordination goes, many Western and Eastern orders actually do have extensive and stringent rules governing their behavior and livelihood. From physical isolation in monasteries and convents, to vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, the Order in question has often been a regimented life – both physically and psychologically apart from society. In return, the organization offers a lifetime of room and board, education, training in useful skills, and opportunities for both service and advancement. Plus of course strict daily supervision – Sister Margaret was well within the traditions!



In contrast, the spiritual leaders of OPB today are very much "in the world" in daily life – they may hold paying jobs, own property, have intimate relationships of their choice, and probably aren't counting on the Order for daily direction or for their retirement income. From a practical and structural standpoint, our order

seems not to follow the rigorous traditions of brother- and sisterhoods past. And no wonder! in a Western culture which provides a myriad of opportunities for studious or compassionate individuals to pursue, even the historical orders and brotherhoods are struggling to attract applicants.

So how about the more romantic elements? The cinema versions are certainly fun – but if Glenn and Dede et al were granted esoteric keys to the universe or gained mystical powers upon ordination, I certainly don't know about it.

Honestly, I've seen the jumble that is our Google Drive space – if the OPB has any secrets at all, it's more likely because someone forgot a password to the archives! So I'll assume for the moment that “mystical empowerment” isn't the key to OPB ordination either.

OK then: no monasteries, flexible life rules, full immersion in society, and (sadly) no magic powers or martial arts secrets. So what exactly is the “order” that our initiates join?

The first and most obvious point is that a monk in the Order of Pragmatic Buddhism represents the order in speaking and living the Dharma. Students and lay members certainly have insight, they may be wonderfully educated – but the monk IS the Order, and his or her words and actions represent us to anyone paying attention. I suggest that this is the first power or responsibility assumed at ordination, to embody the Dharma in the world with the weight of the Order behind you.

Of course we claim a lineage from Japan, China, and the early OPB leaders – and “lineage” means something quite specific and powerful in Buddhist context. But this doesn't mean our approach to the Dharma is perfectly clear, fixed and inviolate. On the contrary, one of my favorite aspects of OPB is that we are consciously engaged in building a Western Buddhism that brings the value of these teachings to a new culture.

This sense of historical context, that we are living quite early in this dharma transmission

and may help to shape the experience of future generations, forms the second power and responsibility at ordination: With intention, build a modern Dharma that resonates and sustains us, our friends and loved ones, our community, our environment. Which brings us back to the “ordinary” variant of our word-root discussion.

To be sure, genuine monks and nuns of all eras have led intentional, quiet, pragmatic lives for the most part. Freed from many typical social demands, they can focus on daily tasks both sacred and banal – from chants and hymns, prayers and meditation, masses and rituals, to chopping vegetables, sweeping floors, and caring for the sick and elderly. These are, if you will, the ordinary parts of the order they follow. And these daily actions have accumulated day by day into the practices that became the Dharma, and have contributed drop by drop to a world influenced by their intention. Actually, that's exactly why this article starts with the duality of Western and Eastern monastic traditions (even the silly cinematic ones). We Buddhists love our Middle Way analogies. And though we are unashamedly “Buddhism influenced by pragmatism” much more than the other way around, by its very nature the Order walks the bridge between East and West. We stand not “between” but “across” tradition and progress, in both the contemplative life of the mind and a purpose- driven life in the world, in trivial daily actions against the vast sweep of history.

Inevitably then, ordination in the OPB is a commitment to share the Dharma in words, to embody the Dharma in action, to build our own Dharma in practice, and to carry forward the skillful means of our lineage with the compassionate intention in one's heart. At least that's how I see it. A daunting but worthy calling, and I'm always grateful for the opportunity to practice and study with those who have accepted the challenge, and to share in the OPB sangha.

**Brian Nutwell is an active member in the Columbus Sangha.**

# The Ordinand's Conditioning

Dennis Oliver, Glasgow

Every ordination is different, and would be even if all the words and actions were the same. The immediate context and the ordinand's conditioning will differ for every individual involved (with many emotional, cognitive, volitional and relational implications). Each of our lives are "complex and complicated" - and in different ways. The Pragmatic Buddhist Order seems to have a greater tolerance for variety than many (most?). Within the order, our individuality can shine.

Yet, every collective needs commonality. For example, I appreciate being allowed to add a few meaningful distinctives to my ordination service. But they were placed within the pattern of an established PB ordination service. If each ordination expressed a radically different understanding, it would be difficult for PB to remain a coherent movement.

In this brief article, I'm going to contextualise my ordination in terms of my own conditioning, as an example of the differences we all bring into the PBO. I'm assuming that each ordinand's conditioning is potentially a positive contribution to our PB community.

I was ordained in May 16, 1969 - decades before our Order was born! It wasn't a Buddhist ordination, but a Christian one, specifically within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. For me it was a great milestone - and still is. I remember the personalised sermon that was preached to me, urging me to share "good news" (implicitly Christian) with others. What has stayed with me is a sense of responsibility - natural and joyful, not burdensome - to openly speak about anything that supports or stimulates people to live in a

way that is satisfying and helpful. My understanding of "helpful" has, of course, radically changed from that time!



Years after my ordination, I 'heard the voice of God' (as I thought). I now understand this as something significant emerging from my depth, as it connected with others'. The voice said, "Feed my s h e e p " ,

confirming my deep desire to nurture other people. It still seems the essence of my "calling". Now I see The Dharma, not The Gospel, as the most reliable stimulus to spiritual growth - for my transformation and for others. Yet, at my Pragmatic Buddhist ordination (2017) I sensed a strong continuity with my earlier one - all part of the same developing person.

I've come a long way since my "conversion" from a non-theistic humanism (my parents' faith), to a Christian understanding, and then a Buddhist one. I had never settled comfortably into any Christian context. Each denomination/tradition had attractive ideals, but were the proverbial ill-fitting wheels for the vehicle I was seeking. Time and time again I sensed "unreality" in their practice and understanding, so I kept joining new groups and fellowships to satisfy my desire for an authentic spirituality. My naive idealism undoubtedly led to over-easy, immature disillusionment. But it also kept me searching for authenticity, in myself as well as the organisations I had joined.

However, my Christian story has been far from unrelieved negativity. Thankfully, I was able to

contribute to other people's happiness and well-being, and to collaborate with some very wonderful people in some very positive projects.

Yet, in the end, Buddhism (specifically Pragmatic Buddhism) has allowed me to be more openly 'myself' than ever before, and to transform that self. The process is continuing, which is both comforting and challenging. Buddhism has shown me in detail what I knew intuitively already: that our perceptions of what seems outside us, is rooted in our minds (our mental habits, assumptions and biases - including both light and shadow).

I joined the OPB after more than a decade of intense Buddhist training: study within the Amida Buddhist Psychology program, and then ten years' formation within the Triratna community. These experiences have, of course, shaped me, both consciously and unconsciously. with creativity and reactivity. For me, as for you, It's "all part of the beautiful tapestry" - a life shaped by numberless conditions.

How might one personal story contribute to a discussion of ordination within the PB? My journey is illustrative of the common fact that each of us brings to the OBC her unique, complex personality, shaped by our different histories. Each is a gift of sensitivity and understanding, with particular skills, talents and proclivities. Thankfully, our particular tradition allows for deep differences as well as recognising (and demanding) some profound commonalities. My individuality includes a kaleidoscopic Christian background, with decades of experience in non-coercive and non-manipulative 'evangelism'. Others bring the benefit of a longer, deeper nurturing within a particular faith setting. Still others have been led by a spirituality which cannot be termed 'religious' in any sense. And we all bear the scars and stars of our past! Our gifts are varied, as are our reactivities and

assumptions. Our Sangha is the richer for it. At least potentially!

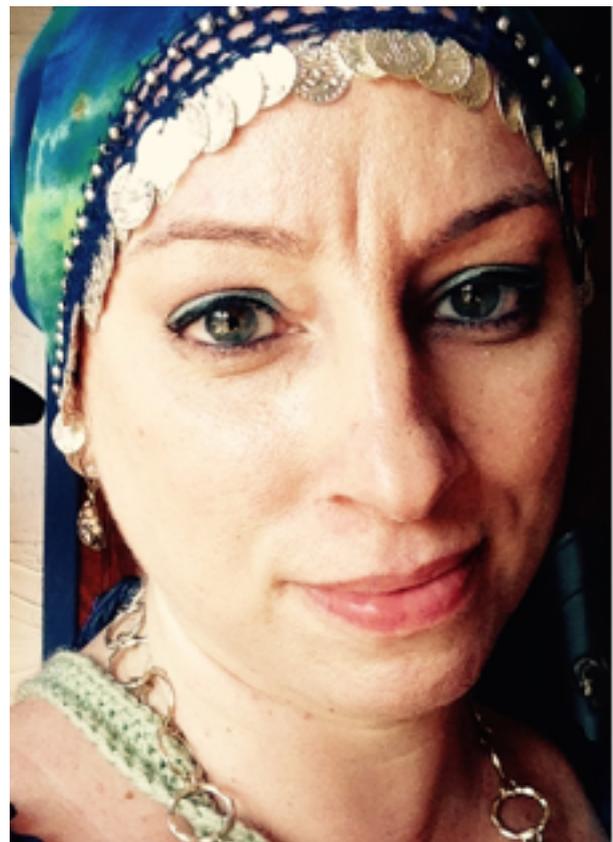
**Dennis Oliver is a Novice within the OPB, living in Glasgow, Scotland, co-leading an OPB outreach in Stirling.**

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## How Ordination Has Changed Me

De De Thomas Parker

I showed up for practice one Wednesday evening and Glen sensei told me that he had discussed my probation period with the other teachers and they agreed that I was ready for Novice Ordination. I was surprised, and a little



apprehensive, but figured that if they thought I was ready, then I would go ahead. I asked Glenn for the ceremony ahead of time and studied it to

make sure that I agreed with everything I was going to be vowing to.

In the OPB Facebook forum, someone said that they looked at vows as more goals to aspire to than actions that you are promising to perform. This seemed to be the general consensus in the group. I could not disagree with this more strongly. If you've vowed to do something, that's a pretty strong promise in my book. In our version of the Bodhisattva vow, we say "I vow to strive." We're not actually promising to bring liberation to all, we're vowing to strive to do it. A vow is a vow. If it were a goal, it would be called a goal.

In reading over the vows, I was surprised to learn that four out of the 10 vows are about speech. As someone who usually speaks first and thinks about it later, this was something I really had to contemplate. Could I really consider the impact of each of my words before I said them? How difficult was this going to be, and was I able to promise to do it?

With this in mind, I would like to see a little more solemnity in terms of admonishing the newly ordained to consider the vows earnestly before agreeing to them. As a representative of Pragmatic Buddhism, especially if one is making it public on a blog or social media, people will look to that person as an example of how Buddhists act and speak. As unfortunate or annoying as this may be, it is the reality of being a social outlier. If we are to be change-makers, these types of effects need to be considered.

I've never been someone to say things that I don't mean, or to speak in anger. I've never wanted to regret something that I said. But for some reason, I didn't use this same paradigm when telling stories, or noticing my place in a conversational dynamic within a group. I only used it when I was having a disagreement or was frustrated or angry with someone. The vows about speech have changed this drastically. They are 1. Kind speech 2. Meaningful speech 3.

harmonious speech 4. Verbal empowerment (abstaining from useless speech).

When adapting my speech and thoughts to this model, I found that a lot of the time, I had nothing to say. I couldn't say what I usually would, and I didn't know what to put in its place. In this silence was a space for me to learn. To consider what would be skillful and meaningful and helpful to others. That was a tall order! It's been about a year since my Novice ordination, and I feel that I'm just now



Quan Yin, Personification of Compassion,  
Public Domain photo.

becoming skillful in reaching out to others and employing speech that is supportive and valuable. Since I'm required to teach once per month at the Center, many people ask me for

advice. The Sunday morning talks are live streamed, posted to Facebook, and uploaded to iTunes. This causes me to put pressure on myself to consider my audience in the sangha, the current emotional climate of the group, what's happening politically, and what I'm learning through my practice. I try as best I can to use the vows as a model for how I'm to communicate. For example, if I gossip about someone to a sangha member, that person isn't going to ask me for advice about how to speak with someone at work or resolve a personal conflict. I've already demonstrated to them that I don't demonstrate good values in that area. As a representative of the Order, that's not acceptable to me.

Lastly, I have a suggestion about the ceremony itself. During the ceremony, the Novice has quite a bit of reciting. I felt as if I was just reading off a page and trying to avoid mistakes, rather than being present in the ordination ceremony. My suggestion is to send the ceremony to the Novice far ahead of time to give them time to get familiar with it. That way they can familiarize themselves as much as possible, allowing themselves to be more present. I'd have liked to been able to look around more, to see my sensei and sangha participating with me.

Ordination solemnizes and formalizes our growth process; it recognizes the work the initiate is doing and impresses upon them the mantle of responsibility - for their words and actions - in terms of the Order itself and the world at large.

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Amidha Buddha and Two Attendants 8th Century CE Japan. Photographer: OGAWA SEIYOU (1894-1960), Public domain photo

## Editor's Remarks

*By now you will have noticed that the authors follow different spelling conventions (American and European), reflecting our international community.*

**Future Issues:** *We look forward to publishing occasional issues of themed content, and welcome suggestions of what should be included. As well, These Papers could include timely news and opinion pieces from the PB Community. Send all suggestions to the editor;*

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