

The Steps to Be Ordained

The Procedure in the Kwan Um School of Zen, Musangsa Temple

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Each Buddhist tradition has a different procedure for an aspirant to be ordained. Most of those who became monastics in earlier times in the Kwan Um School of Zen were trained and ordained by Zen Master Seung Sahn alone, yet still based on the tradition of the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism. When he moved back to Korea in the early 1990s, he naturally followed the situation in Korea, which already had more than 1,500 years of Buddhist tradition. With the monastic community and training system still very much alive, most of those who wished to follow him and also be ordained were sent to the Chogye Order's monastic training. As time went by after he passed away, Musangsa Temple has become somewhat of a head temple for monastics in the Kwan Um School. At the same time, it is also active in supporting lay practitioners by providing various programs, including three-month Kyol Che retreats twice a year.

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Since the founding of Musangsa Temple, there have been some changes in the procedure to be ordained there. These processes evolved because some aspirants were not able participate in the Chogye Order's training, while others were simply not motivated to go through the Chogye training, wishing only to be ordained at Musangsa without leaving the teaching tradition and legacy of Zen Master Seung Sahn.

Here I'll introduce some important points in the current ordination procedure for those interested in undertaking the training at Musangsa, without going into all the differences between the Chogye Order and the Kwan Um School.

When one has decided to become a monastic at Musangsa, after which they will be recognized as a sunim in Kwan Um School, they must be legally single, have no dependents (for example, children who still need their care), have no debt, and have no outstanding legal issues. Also, they should be in sound health both physically and mentally, so that they can perform any tasks asked by the temple and the sunims to demonstrate their ability to complete the training. If they are sure of their direction and fulfill the conditions, the first step is to apply for the haeng-won program. It has been developed at Musangsa to allow practitioners from all over the world to get in touch with the Korean monastic root of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching. *Haeng* (行) literally means "action," and *won* (願) means "vow." These words also form Zen Master Seung Sahn's original dharma name,

Haeng Won (行願). The program offers an experience of immersion in the daily life of a Zen temple, following the work and practice schedule, in exchange for Zen training with room and board.

The daily training consists of approximately five hours of formal practice and five hours of work practice. As for those who are seriously interested in being ordained, the program is a good opportunity to see if they are sure about pursuing this path before they officially request approval to undertake the training to become a monastic.

When someone wants to apply for the haeng-won program, they must be currently a member of Kwan Um School. Their guiding teacher must write a recommendation letter directly to the Musangsa office. Sometimes, there are people who have no experience with any of the centers in the Kwan Um School, but they wish to come to Musangsa to practice and apply for the program. These people have to stay at Musangsa as a regular guest for a period of time designated by the guiding teachers, after which the guiding teachers decide whether they can enroll in the haeng-won program.

When the participant is close to the end of their haeng-won program, if she or he wishes to take the further step for the monastic path, they should let the guiding teachers or one of the director sunims know about their intention. At least three months of haeng-won program participation is required to be approved to move on to the haeng-ja training, which is the next step.

Again, *haeng* (行) literally means "action," and *ja* (者) means "person." The term used to be translated as aspirant, postulant, or apprentice in English. A haeng-ja is a person who is taking work as their main practice, learning to serve all people who come to the temple, while keeping harmony with everybody and dedicating their lives to helping all beings. Haeng-jas work for the temple or have a Zen center job to learn how a practice community is run. At Musangsa Temple, one must train as a haeng-ja for one year or more before being ordained as a novice sunim. The training is finished only when the guiding teachers and director sunims accept the haeng-ja as ready for novice ordination.

When a haeng-ja is recognized as having the potential to be ordained, one of the senior sunims will become his or her personal monastic guiding teacher. This sunim is called an *eun-sa sunim*, who will support and guide their monastic life in the initial stages. *Eun* (恩) liter-

ally means “beneficent,” and *sa* (師) means “teacher,” implying a monastic guiding teacher or guarantor when a haeng-ja takes ordination. Eun-sa sunims often support novices, not just in their practice, but also with material needs like clothes and other household necessities.

Some monastics come to realize some time after ordination that they want to leave their eun-sa sunim because they wish to practice with another teacher, or for any other reason. Then they can go forward, with the agreement of their eun-sa sunim, if at all possible. Even if that happens, usually the relationship with the eun-sa sunim is kept. The eun-sa sunim is sometimes called a “father monk” or “mother nun” in a figurative sense.

At Musangsa, another important supervisor for the haeng-ja is the *gyo-mu sunim*, who is the educational director. The *gyo-mu sunim* is in charge of education not just for the haeng-jas, but also of the novice monastics. Basically, the haeng-jas will be overseen by all the director sunims, for example, the hwe-ju sunim, ju-ji sunim, seon-won-jang sunim, ip-seung sunim, do-gam sunim, won-ju sunim, gong-yang-ju sunim, and also the jo-shil sunim, the head Zen master of the temple. (Please refer to the annotations below for these titles in temple.)

As the haeng-ja training is finished, one is ready for novice ordination, but only when there is consensus among the guiding teachers and director sunims for a haeng-ja.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “Haeng-ja means no opinion, no idea. Only follow the haeng-ja situation. Only say yes.” It sounds very tough, yet it’s the true meaning behind the training to be ordained as a monastic, who has renounced worldly life and will eventually have to renounce his or her own world too, that is, the ego.

Zen Master Seung Sahn also used to say, when asked what should be the correct reason to become a monastic, “There are two kinds of sunims: ‘feeling sunim’ and ‘correct sunim.’” Some people become monastics because they think “Ah, I feel like I was a sunim in a past life!” or “I feel like my karma is to be a monastic” or “I want a simple life, and I like the temple.” They have a feeling. But feelings and situations always change. If they become a sunim because of their feelings, then when things change, their sunim direction and life will be broken.

“Correct sunim” means someone perceives this world—everything is impermanent, they only want to find their true self and help others—and perceives their job, then becomes a sunim. That person will not lose their direction even when situations or feelings change or become difficult.

Even if someone becomes a sunim because of their feelings, if they practice hard and try to keep a clear direction in their practice, finally they can find their true self and can live a bodhisattva life without worldly concerns.

If one finds that the monastic path is the best for his or her life in order to find their true self and help all beings, all the steps toward being ordained will become a precious gift. It’s true that a lot of pain and sacrifice may await the aspirant, but that’s why it’s called haeng-ja—an aspirant who just acts to serve all beings.

Temple Positions Listed in Order of Seniority

jo-shil (祖室): *Jo* (祖) literally means “patriarch” and *shil* (室) means “room.” Jo-shil literally means the living quarters of a Zen master. The term is usually translated as the spiritual master, that is, the head Zen master in a Zen monastery.

hwe-ju (會主): *Hwe* (會) literally means “gathering” (specifically a dharma gathering), and *ju* (主) means “host.” The position is usually for the community elder, who is an elder monastic and has made a significant contribution in founding or refounding the temple in Korea.

ju-ji (住持): *Ju* (住) literally means “reside” or “abide” and *ji* (持) means “maintain” or “take care.” It is translated as abbot. Traditionally the job was given to a monk or nun in the temple who had gone through all the trials and tribulations of temple life and had practiced for a quite long time, and was also committed to live as a resident there to take care of running the temple and help the community members with their needs when they live or visit. These days ju-ji sometimes refers to the head administrator of the temple, depending on the structure of the temple.

seon-won-jang (禪院長): *Seon* (禪) literally means “Zen,” *won* (院) means “hall” or “house,” and *jang* (長) means “chief.” The seon-won-jang is the leader or the head director of the Zen hall, who supervises the general practice in the Zen hall or Zen center.

ip-seung (立繩): *Ip* (立) literally means “stand,” and *seung* (繩) means “monastic.” Translated as “head monastic,” this title is for the exemplary monastic who is in charge of discipline at the living quarters in a Zen monastery and who assists the seon-won-jang.

do-gam (都監): *Do* (都) literally means “capital,” and *gam* (監) means “oversee.” The head of general affairs, or superintendent at a Zen monastery. The do-gam usually oversees any issues for the facility and construction and sometimes supervises occasional work projects.

won-ju (院主): *Won* (院) literally means “hall” or “house” and *ju* (主) means “host.” It’s translated as “housemaster,” who takes care of the household and cleaning of each area in the temple, assigning daily jobs to residents and visitors.

gong-yang-ju (供養主): *Gong* (供) literally means “offer,” *yang* (養) means “nourish,” and *ju* (主) means “host.” It’s translated as “kitchen master,” the one who cooks the meals and takes care of the food for the community. The kitchen master often gives the haeng-jas jobs in the kitchen. ◆