

The call of monkhood

Family and social pressures are challenges faced by young people taking monastic vows



Lea Wee

When a 27-year-old Ms Choo Boon Noi told her family in 1992 that she wanted to be a Buddhist nun, they were devastated.

Ms Choo, now 50, recalls: "One of my brothers pulled me aside to ask if I was okay, while my mother cried harder than she did when my father died."

The youngest of eight children was then working as an administrative assistant in a training department. She graduated from Ngee Ann Polytechnic with a diploma in business studies.

She says: "All my siblings were married and they wanted me to get married too. But when I studied the Buddhist teachings closely, I felt that life is more than raising a family and building a career. All these things are impermanent and I will not be able to take them with me when I die."

The path that Ms Choo, who now goes by her ordained name Venerable Shi Fa Xun, took 23 years ago remains uncommon among young Buddhists here today.

There are no official figures but the Buddhist Youth Network, which provides career coaching and leadership workshops for the 20 or so Buddhist youth groups here, estimates there are only about 15 Singaporean monastics under 40 years old. Most are in their mid-to-late-30s. About half are based overseas.

Ven Fa Xun, who wrote an honours thesis on why women become nuns for her Bachelor of Arts degree in education at the University of Western Australia, says: "There are too many distractions for young Singaporeans. In their 20s, they are busy finishing up their studies or building a career. In their 30s, they are busy working and raising a family."

"It's usually when people find that all these things still don't bring them happiness that they start to consider taking up the monastic path."

From her own experience, she says "the good thing about doing it young is that you are more flexible and it is easier to change yourself to cope with monastic life."

Regardless of their age, however, she feels that Buddhists here are generally not drawn to life in a monastery as they have been conditioned by a capitalist society to climb the social ladder and indulge in sensual pleasures to achieve happiness.

Also, Chinese Singaporeans are still largely Confucianist in outlook and value having a family, she says.

Buddhist monastics, on the other hand, have to take a vow of celibacy. They are encouraged to live a simple and

disciplined lifestyle and have to be contented with basic clothing and shelter.

Ven Fa Xun feels that monastics are still misunderstood by society today.

She says: "Monastics have often been portrayed as failures or uneducated in literature and popular media. The spiritual motivation behind their decision is often neglected."

"As a result, Buddhists who wish to pick up the robes often do not get enough support from family and friends."

Venerable Jue Fang, 37, is an expert.

"I was very lucky," says the nun, who has a brother four years younger. She is now the director of international relations at Nian Tien institute in Australia, a tertiary institution which draws on Buddhist teachings.

For another 41-year-old Singaporean Buddhist monk who declined to be named, it took longer to win the approval of his parents, who practised ancestor worship and were not familiar with Buddhist teachings.

The youngest of three children was inspired to be a monk after reading Buddhist teachings and seeing his buddy in national service don the robes and the "serene" effect that had on him.

He decided to do the same after he completed his degree in English literature from NUS and worked for a year as a finance officer. He was 25.

Given the dearth of young monastics, are Buddhist elders worried about who will succeed them? Ven Fa Xun says: "We can only try our best and let people understand and value monastic life through Buddhist classes and dispel misconceptions that monastics are losers or victims. Ultimately, we cannot force people to take up the robes. The spiritual path must come from within."

According to the 2010 census, Buddhists form the biggest religious group here, with more than one million of them.

Tomorrow, they celebrate Vesak Day, which represents the birth, the Nirvana (enlightenment) and the Parinirvana (a state beyond birth and death) of Gautama Buddha.

While Buddhists accounted for 33 per cent of the resident population aged 15 years and over, this is down from the 43 per cent in 2000 census.

The number of Buddhists aged between 15 and 35 also dropped, from 35 per cent in 2000 to 30 per cent in 2010.

A spokesman for Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery in Bright Hill Road says, however, that there has been a surge of spirituality among the younger generation who are searching for a more meaningful life beyond material pursuits.

He adds: "Young people who took up monastic vows today are working professionals with life experiences who seek a higher purpose in life."



Venerable Goh Chun Kiang collecting cooked food from people at a food centre. The food is then distributed as lunch to the monks and lay people at Palelai Buddhist Temple.

ST PHOTO: JAME KH

Calling came in primary school

Ever since he was in primary school, Goh Chun Kiang has wanted to be a monk.

While in Bukit View Primary School, he came across some simple booklets on Buddhism on his father's bookshelves.

Venerable Goh, 29, who donned monastic robes six years ago, says: "I found the Buddha's intention to end human mental

suffering very noble and I wanted to be like him."

"When he told his mother, a housewife then, about his intention, she was dismayed. She practises ancestor worship and goes to Chinese temples to pray for health and peace. Ven Goh recalls: "She got all the relatives to come the next day to try to dissuade me."

From then on, he kept his aspiration a secret. Although his family's finances went through some rough times – his father's trading business went bust in the 1998 economic crisis – Ven Goh says his growing-up

years were generally happy.

He continued to read books about Buddhism through his secondary school days at Assumption English School. He still thought about becoming a monk, but his aspiration dimmed somewhat with "materialistic happiness."

He says: "I was the top student in class. I also had a group of friends and we would often go to play arcade games after school to enjoy ourselves. Life was good."

It took his parents' divorce when he was in Secondary 4 to shake him out of his "complacency". Worried about what would hap-

pen to him and his brother, who was eight years younger, he could not concentrate on his studies and instead of the expected AS, got Bs and Cs for his O Levels.

He says: "I became disenchanted with secular life. I saw that not everything would go according to our will or expectations."

Together with his father, who won custody of the children, he became a Buddhist. He also resolved anew to take up the monastic path, believing that he could make faster progress spiritually than if he were to remain a lay Buddhist.

When he told his parents about his intention, they were more receptive this time. Having gone through a divorce, they saw no point in forcing their child to get married.

He signed up for a meditation course and went for his first meditation retreat.

After he completed his studies in chemical process technology from Singapore Polytechnic, he entered national service. All this time, his resolve to become a monk never wavered.

He says: "I was just waiting to complete NS because one needs to be free of government debt to get ordained."

Meanwhile, to condition himself to the life of a monk, he went for Buddhist meditation retreats at least once a year.

A few months after his national service, he was ordained in the Theravada tradition at Santi Forest Monastery in Johor in a ceremony attended by his parents and brother. He was 23 years old.

He spent the next six years away from city life, first staying at the forest monastery in Johor and then at various forest monasteries in Thailand. There was flooding during the rainy seasons and during winter, he had to put on more robes.

He says: "My teacher wanted me to realise that inner peace comes from within and is not dependent on external factors."

At the end of 2012, he returned to Singapore and is now a resident monk at Palelai Buddhist Temple in Bedok Walk. Among other things, he is in charge of the accommodation for visiting monks.

Life after ordination has its "ups and downs", He says: "You still have to deal with people's politics. There are quarrels and disputes. But this is a human problem which existed even in Buddha's time."

"Our practice is to just be mindful of anything that comes, tell ourselves that it's impermanent, and let it go."

As a monk, he has to adhere to 227 precepts including remaining celibate. It has not been too difficult, he says, as he has been practising most of them even before he got ordained.

He says of his training as a monk: "We were asked to meditate and contemplate on the foulness of the human body to help us reduce our attachment to it."

His parents visit him regularly. His father, Mr Anthony Goh, 57, works as a taxi driver while his mother, Madam Lee Geok Mui, 53, today runs a small spa business.

Says Madam Lee of her son: "I wanted him to go to university and get a job after that, but when I saw how much he wanted to do this, I had to let him go. And now that I see he's happy, I am happy for him too and wish him well."

Princeton degree, dating brought no joy

Growing up, Ms Ruby Pan wanted to be a writer. In her teens, she fell in love with the theatre and dreamt of being a playwright.

She won a Public Service Commission teaching scholarship to study English literature at Princeton University in the United States, where she bagged prizes for a play and a collection of short stories she wrote. She even got to perform a monologue she wrote at a show produced by the famous Royal Shakespeare Company in England.

She thought she had done everything that was artistically fulfilling, but when she graduated in 2006, she felt no joy.

She says: "Instead, I felt burnt out, like I had run a very long race for no reason."

Ms Pan, 31, who now goes by her ordained name, Thubten Damcho, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in a forested area in Washington in the United States, where she now lives.

"One day in class, she learned what 'true happiness' was."

She recalls: "He was well-educated, humorous and explained Buddhist concepts in a logical and practical manner."

One day in class, she learned what "true happiness" was.

The venerable drew a picture of the six realms of existence in Buddhist cosmology, and showed how the Buddha had gotten out of the cycle of rebirth.

She says: "By transforming his mind

through moral conduct and meditation, he was no longer subject to an uncontrolled cycle of mental and physical suffering, and was able to benefit others."

"And I thought, 'That's what I want to do with my life! I wanted to follow in the Buddha's footsteps.'"

For the next three years, she started to seriously consider being ordained as a nun. She attended a novice retreat, where she shaved her head and wore robes. She simplified her lifestyle and gave away things she did not need, including her books.

When she told her parents, both free-thinkers, and sister, a Christian, about her intention, they were sad.

She says: "My mother cried and asked if she had done anything wrong. I told her, it's because she has raised me well that I wanted to live a virtuous life."

However, a two-week visit to Sravasti Abbey in 2010 to check out monastic life put her plans on hold.

She was shocked to find that in between meditation sessions, the monastics' life was grounded in the menial work of unplugging toilets, mowing lawns and doing dishes as part of serving the community.

She explains: "I realised that monastic life was not about having time for your own spiritual practice. Instead, you learn to put the community first, and do things you may not enjoy because they benefit others."

"This was a real challenge to my self-centered mind that's used to doing whatever I want, whenever I want."

Confused about her aspiration, she returned to Singapore and buried herself in work.

She had been transferred to a policy-making division, which was more competitive and she found her drive to achieve resurfacing.

Then in 2012, while serving as an assistant to Venerable Chhodron, the abess of

Sravasti Abbey, at a retreat in Indonesia, she saw again how her mind was overwhelmed with negativity.

For instance, she was jealous of her then boyfriend's ex-girlfriend, whom she did not even know.

Conversely, she saw how the abbess was always joyous and equanimous regardless of the situation, the "fruit of decades of spiritual practice as a monastic."

She quit her job two years ago and moved to the abbey in Washington, where, with her family's blessings, she got ordained.

Her parents visited her once and she chats with them over Skype once every two weeks. Dad, 62, is a lecturer in mechanical engineering while mum, also 62, is a retired administrative executive. Her sister, 28, is a chemical engineer.

Among her main duties at the abbey are to edit and upload daily video teachings on YouTube.

She also spends a few afternoons in the forest every week doing fire prevention work and cutting down dead trees and branches, an activity that took her "a while to get used to" but which she now enjoys.

She feels her degree in English has not gone to waste.

She says: "It helps me communicate my ideas clearly so that people understand and benefit from them."

"Yes, there are days when my mind gets dissatisfied or doubtful, but I know that's just the monkey mind at work and there are Dharma antidotes to apply."

She has no regrets about her chosen path: "People think monastic life is difficult because you have to give up your freedom and creature comforts. But that is liberating because I do not have to figure out how to do my hair, what to wear, eat or buy."

"This frees up time for me to focus on transforming my mind and learning to be of benefit to others."



Thubten Damcho (far right), with her dharma sisters, after being ordained at Sravasti Abbey.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THUBTEN DAMCHO

newspapers:special

People's Association Youth Movement

May 31, 2015 thesundaytimes

Rallying whole school for charity

Orchid Park Secondary School students help to organise a National Day carnival and raise funds for needy pupils as part of PAYM Loves Red campaign

Audrey Ng

ORGANISING a carnival for the whole school is no easy feat.

For Secondary 4 student Brandon Tan — who was part of the carnival organising committee at Orchard Park Secondary School (OPSS) — the experience has helped him to "develop leadership skills and patience, and appreciate better the importance of giving back to society".

Held on Aug 8 last year as part of the school's National Day celebrations, the OPSS carnival was organised together with the Nee Soon South Community Centre Youth Executive Committee (YEC) as part of the People's Association Youth Movement (PAYM) Loves Red campaign.

The campaign aims to involve youths in volunteering activities for the community, and proceeds from the sale of the carnival tickets went to the school's fund for needy pupils.

Game booths, stalls and performances were all part of the fun at the carnival, whose guest of honour was Dr Lee Bee Wah, Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC.

One of the highlights of the carnival involved everyone in the school dressing up in red and white and forming a heart-shaped Singapore flag.

The students also invited the residents from the nearby Khajib neighbourhood to write words of gratitude on postcards.

Growing together

The students and teachers involved in the carnival had YEC members as their mentors to guide them in project management — from brainstorming to implementation of the activities.

The project also helped the YEC members sharpen their mentoring and communication skills.



One of the various activity booths manned by the students for the National Day Carnival. The proceeds from the sale of carnival coupons went to the school's needy pupil funds. PHOTOS: PAYM

"Our YEC team leader was very proactive in engaging the teachers from OPSS involved in the project, providing updates regularly, discussing with them how best to meet the learning objectives for the students, and how YEC can add value to the experience of the OPSS students," says Ms Lee Hui Ying, vice-chairperson of Nee Soon South CC YEC.

The teacher-in-charge, Madam Lo Weng Han, says the project enabled the students to develop leadership, teamwork and communication skills.

The project was a success, she adds, as students became more resilient and resourceful.

Letting the students take charge of organising the carnival enabled them to gain a greater sense of accomplishment so as they put in the effort.

Sec 4 student Koh Jun Jie says: "I have learnt the importance of working well with others."

"There might be differences when we were working together with our classmates to organise the different activities, but it was most important to always bear in mind that we were all working towards a common goal."



While organising these activities came with their own set of difficulties, Jun Jie says that listening to classmates' different opinions made working together easier.

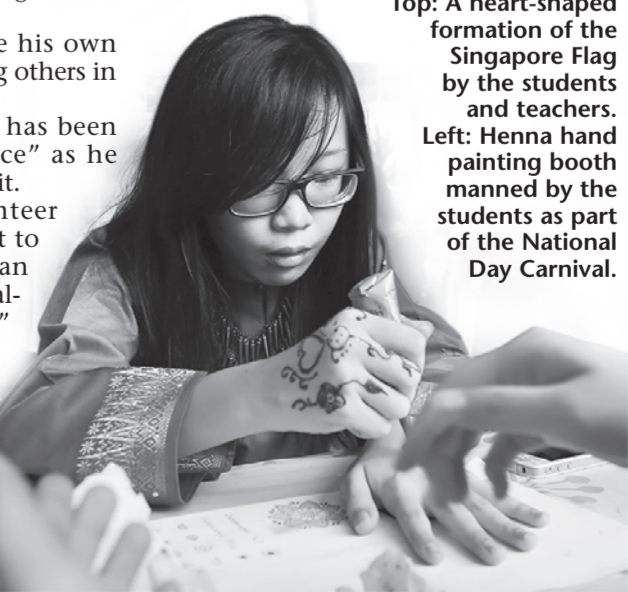
various avenues where youth get their footing into volunteering.

He also plans to continue his own volunteering efforts by helping others in need, such as the elderly.

For Brandon, the project has been a "heart-warming experience" as he gleaned priceless lessons from it.

"It is important to volunteer because of a genuine interest to give back to society rather than for tangible rewards such as Values-in-Action service hours," he says.

He hopes youth will not see volunteering as taking time away from their studies but, rather, will continue to lend a helping hand even after they leave school.



Top: A heart-shaped formation of the Singapore flag by the students and teachers. Left: Henna hand painting booth manned by the students as part of the National Day Carnival.

The most complete bone & joint formulation

ALL LINK BONE & JOINT RESTORATION

- Repair damaged joint cartilage
- Ease joint discomfort
- Maintain strong bones

Our Retailers: ALL LINK MEDICAL & HEALTH PRODUCTS PTE LTD

Tel: 6845 0337 • Fax: 6845 0336 • Email: info@alllinkmedical.com • Website: www.alllinkmedical.com