

## Release

*After visiting Wat Pah Nanachat, a mother from Canada reflects on the experience of attending her son's bhikkhu ordination.*

APRIL 9, 1999: Twenty-three years ago today my life changed. My consciousness expanded to include my only born child, who came into the world on this day. And so began the biggest commitment I have made in my life, a commitment that would be my greatest gift, my greatest challenge, and my greatest teaching. And while this journey has ever been one of change and evolution, four months ago today I felt my life transform again in a momentous way. Who could have predicted this nameless passage and its mysterious temperament.

DECEMBER 7, 1998: As we slowly floated down the escalator I saw him standing alone on the far side of the mostly empty baggage room. He stood tall and barefoot in his brown/gold robes. He moved quietly across the room toward us, then broke the intensity by going to get a cart for us. My eyes filled with tears as I bowed to him in the way that the Thai people greet each other. I had rehearsed this moment, when I would see my son for the first time in 22 months in his new home, wearing the clothes of a monk, living a life into which he was about to be ordained, a life held in the highest honor by the Thai people. I knew that I could not touch him. I knew that it would be different. I had prepared myself for that. He nodded and smiled, blinking back his own tears. Casual words were exchanged about the trip and about transportation to the monastery. The next few moments were taken up with bathroom breaks, baggage handling, and getting into the van that would take us to the place that is now my son's home.

There was something about this meeting that reminded me of the first time I ever saw him, upside down, long and barefoot at the end of the delivery table. A hubbub of medical procedures persisted before I was able to hold him for the first time. I remember that I was wearing my glasses so that I could see him being born, and then as they wrapped him up to give to me, I thought that I should take them off so he would recognize me. But as I held this new being in my arms, I realized that I didn't know him. We had never met before. This was to be a journey of getting to know each other. And now again, I was reminded of that journey, one that never ends.

As we got into the van, already the familiarity of being in his presence was returning, the sense that we could pick up where we had left off. But there was also something new here. This was no longer a private relationship. Many eyes were watching us because he was dressed as a monk, and because we were foreigners. There are many rules that pertain to the decorum of a monk, and many rules that pertain to others in relation to them, especially to women, even a mother. The issue of proximity was a constant companion during the visit with my son. At first I found it unnatural and confining not to be able to sit or stand close to him. I had to remind myself constantly to keep my distance. It frustrated me, and emotions that I did not fully understand began to broil underneath the surface.

Even worse for me was that I could not hand things to him. I remember after he was born, I sat and looked at my hands for a long time one day and realized that my hands were to be my tools for keeping this child alive, for providing everything that he needed from baths and diaper changes to food and wind-up toys. Now he could no longer receive from my

hands. I stood by while my husband, Stuart, did one thing after another for him. I felt as though I were being cut off from my own instincts.

The first days were hard for me and for my son as he watched me struggle to conform to the rules. As I watched him I began to see that for every rule that applied to me, there were many more that applied to him. While I could eat whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, my son could only eat what was offered him, and at that, only once a day. He could never reach or ask for food that was not offered. I watched him move through a myriad of such rules with equanimity, using each one as a springboard for mindfulness and awareness. Eventually I too began to see that the rules required me to stay present, to take nothing for granted, to challenge habits and ways of being that reflected an unconscious sense of entitlement to people and things around me. As time went on it began to be less painful and more interesting.

As I watched the Thai women around the monks I noticed that they never came within five feet of a monk, and then always with great care to keep their heads lower, such that if a monk was sitting down, they would even approach by walking on their knees. I attempted to keep the five foot distance and began to be interested in what I could see from there. I noticed that I saw more of my son, and I saw him more in his own world, rather than in relation to me and my world. It reminded me again of the first days in the hospital when I sat on my bed and watched him from across the room in his bassinet, a distance of about five feet. I remember that I looked at him with such wonder. Who was this soul who had come into the world through me? What was his life going to be about? He looked like an old soul to me. For the first four days I called him Little Grandfather. I wanted to find the right name for him, so I sat and watched him, sensing his energy. This physical distance helped me to "see" him better in his own uniqueness rather than as an extension of me. The hospital personnel were concerned that I hadn't named him yet since most of the parents named their babies before they were even born, as I had been. Finally, with the help of family and friends, he was named Julian Christopher.

Now Julian had been given a new name, a Pali word meaning restrained, dignified, abstinent. When he first wrote and told us about his new name I must confess, not understanding the name in the context of monastic life, that it seemed like some kind of a curse. But now seeing him within the monastery, I could see how beautiful and fitting it was for him. In any formal situation such as meals, meditation, the evening teachings, or even sitting in the airport waiting for a plane, Julian was notably contained and peaceful in his countenance. This was not a trait that every monk exhibited, even though it is part of the expected behavior of a monastic. I could see that this was his gift. And since I have changed my own name because I believe that what you are called literally "calls out" certain attributes in you, I could see that his new name was appropriate for him. This quiet, serene being is the same little boy that used to drive us all crazy at mealtimes with his fidgeting. I was prepared to call him by his new Pali name, but he requested that we continue to call him Julian because he liked to hear that name as well.

Throughout our visit in and around the monastic community we were treated as honored guests. We were housed in a simple and beautiful guesthouse that had been provided by a benefactor specifically to accommodate visiting parents. We were often ushered to the head of a line of lay people who were eating at the monastery. We were given the opportunity to accompany our son to an exquisite retreat centre in Northern Thailand where we were invited to the home of a princess, and also to the home of a family of famous Thai artists. What became clear through our interactions with these people is that they considered our lives

to be blessed as a result of having a monk in our family. For them, this was the greatest way a son could honor his family, especially his mother.

DECEMBER 9, 1998: A pre-ordination ceremony began at four o'clock in the morning in the main hall at Wat Pah Nanachat; the full bhikkhu ordination would take place immediately afterwards at Ajahn Chah's monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong. The six novices (who had spent the last one or two years in training at the monastery) were on the platform on which they took their meals. Before them a community of family and friends settled on the cool floor to share in this celebration. The ceremony began with the offering to the novices of all of their worldly essentials as monks. We were invited to participate in this offering, though most of the things our son was being offered had been provided by the lay community around the monastery. We had only donated money for the purchase of his bowl. The material for his robes, as well as his shoulder bag, toque, vest, toiletries, mosquito net, and his glot (a large umbrella which serves as a travelling shelter) had all been provided through gifts to the monastery. Julian had sewn his own robes and made his own bowl stand, though they were now to be ceremonially offered to him.

We watched carefully as one lay woman made offerings for the most senior novice, a young man from England who had no friends or family there to celebrate with him. Julian was second in line, and Stuart and I followed her lead. From a posture of sitting on our heels, our hands together in front of our chests in a praying position, we lowered our head and hands to the floor in unison three times in front of our son. I wasn't prepared for the feelings that would be evoked by such an honoring. It was difficult to contain the tears that flowed from this recognition of the sacredness of human life, and in particular, the sacredness of this human life. How often is one given the opportunity to express such reverence for one's own children?

According to the ritual, I began by offering Julian his robes and glot, his means of protection from the elements. I picked them up and walked on my knees over to the platform where Julian sat with his offering cloth extended so that he could receive this offering from me. Stuart offered his bowl and stand — his tools for taking nourishment into his body. I can't say how the rest was offered, so enfolded I was in the magnitude of this experience. There was no room for understanding or making meaning. It is only now that I think of this part of the ceremony as giving him away. Giving him to the world.

After all six of the novices had been honored in this way, we were loaded into trucks and driven to the mother monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong, less than a thirty minutes away. The ride provided some distraction from the intensity of what had just happened. Smiling and chatting inside the covered truck, looking outside at the dimly lit landscape, I was lost to my own experience. When we arrived we followed the small crowd to the steps of a large open-air building in which the ordination would take place. From this point on we were observers and no longer participants. We were literally on the outside looking in. Only members of the Sangha, the monastic community, were allowed inside. All the rest of us sat on porches that extended out from three sides of the room. Stuart and I sat near the middle of the porch facing the front of the hall. Around us the forest inhabitants were waking and making their morning calls. A breeze rustled leaves. A soft light began to reveal the landscape around the building. Inside only candlelight illuminated the quiet of the monks.

The ordination ceremony was carried out entirely in Pali, the language in which the Buddha himself taught. It was performed according to age-old rituals: questions and answers, prescribed movements forward and back, bowing, and chanting. For the novices there was a

sense of tension around getting it all right — relief when it was over. The ordination is about meeting the requirements for becoming a monk, being accepted by the Sangha, and establishing the dependence of the new monks on a teacher. As we sat and watched, occasionally distracting ourselves with taking pictures, the outside light began to illuminate the room, revealing its intricate beauty. I don't know what to call my feeling; a visceral rhapsody of pride, joy, gratitude, loss, pain ... release. I only know that it was accompanied by tears, tears that I fought to control, tears that felt like they would not stop falling until I was washed clean, if I allowed their full expression. I felt conspicuous in my show of emotion. It seemed that there were many eyes on us to see how we were reacting. I found myself unable to comprehend or explain what I was experiencing. Perhaps only another mother could have known the meaning of these tears.

When we got back to the guesthouse later that day, I sat and talked with the mother of the other North American novice who had been ordained with my son. We discussed the deep sense of change we felt from the experience of attending the ordination, and our conversation helped me begin to sort out some of what I was feeling. I told her about how, when I was pregnant with Julian, I meditated on the child I was carrying and prayed each day for the highest possible evolution for him. As we talked, it began to dawn on me that his ordination was the outward sign that he himself had taken on this commitment to his own spiritual life. I was seeing the answer to my prayers.

That night I woke up, uncomfortable because of the hard lumps in my breasts, something I had been dealing with for several months prior to our trip to Thailand. The full diagnostic procedures determined that this was not a cancerous symptom, but rather a symptom common to many women as they enter into the change of life. It was a sign of hormones being out of balance, a sign that the need to physically nurture children is over. How interesting, I thought, that my body had manifested this change coincident with this step my son was taking in his life. The intense emotionality of this hormonal backwash was a profound reminder of my pregnancy and the period soon after the birth of my son. I felt as though I had come full circle.

In the days and months to come, the meditation I had been working with for the past year seeped into my awareness:

I remember the place before I am born  
And now I am born  
I gather life experience and put it in a basket over my head  
I cut a place for myself in this world  
I go out to my edges and back to my centre  
I put my vision out into the world  
I release the results and offer it all back  
And I return to the place before I am born.

Finally the phrase, "I release the results and offer it all back," had real meaning for me. I have offered my son to the world. He has sprung from my bow, and is now flying in a world of his own making. For me, this is the greatest way a son could honor his family, especially his mother.

Willow  
April, 1999