

FAQs on joining the Ramakrishna Order

(Frequently Asked Questions)

Many youngsters when they come across the inspiring life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda feel an urge to embrace monastic life in the Ramakrishna Order. For others, the urge to renounce the world may come as a result of their listening to a well-articulated talk on Vedanta, perhaps on YouTube. Disillusionment with worldly attainments and relationships also drive quite a few to the doors of a monastery. Then there are Good Samaritans who are impressed by the work done by the monks of Ramakrishna Order and want to dedicate themselves to the service activities of the Order. Whatever may be the immediate trigger, they need to carefully consider quite a few factors before taking a leap into the Ramakrishna Order. To help such would-be monks to arrive at a well-informed decision, the subject is discussed here through crisp questions and answers.

1. What is the Ramakrishna Order?

An order means, in this context, a group of monks living together and having a common allegiance. The Ramakrishna Order is a well-defined body of monks which owes its origin to Sri Ramakrishna and his eminent disciples the foremost of whom was Swami Vivekananda. Mention must be made here of Sri Sarada Devi, whose spiritual stature was equal to that of Sri Ramakrishna and who guided the Order with motherly love and spiritual ministrations for more than three decades since its inception. She is called the Holy Mother of the Order.

Ramakrishna Order means, for all practical purposes, two registered organizations – ‘Ramakrishna Math’ and ‘Ramakrishna Mission’, with their common Headquarters at Belur Math and more than 200 branches worldwide. To know more about the history, ideal and activities of these twin organizations, please visit our [website](#).

2. What does it mean to “join” the Ramakrishna Order?

Joining the Ramakrishna Order signifies leaving behind one’s family and friends, profession and attainments, all worldly interests, pleasures and concerns, and embracing the monastic life. The person will henceforth live in a monastery, usually known as Math or Ashrama, of the Ramakrishna Order devoting his life exclusively to spiritual pursuits and selfless service.

3. What are the essential conditions for becoming a monk in the Ramakrishna Order?

Interested young men (please note: *not* women) who are at least graduates and within the age-group of 18 to 28 are eligible to join the Ramakrishna Order. The upper age limit is 30 for engineering / medical graduates and post-graduates, and 36 for Westerners. For more details, please write to the Headquarters (Belur Math) at <mail@rkmm.org>.

4. What are the options for young women who are interested in embracing monastic life?

Ramakrishna Order is a monastic organization for men only. For women there is a parallel organization known as [Sri Sarada Math](#) which follows the same ideals as ours. Interested women may directly contact the Sarada Math at its headquarters in Dakshineswar, Kolkata. Email address: <saradamath.office@gmail.com>.

5. I’m married. Can I join the Ramakrishna Order?

We are sorry! Only unmarried men are allowed to join the Ramakrishna Order. A person who was married but now divorced is *not* eligible either.

But you are welcome to get associated with us as a devotee or volunteer. Please contact the head of our branch centre nearer to the place of your stay.

6. Why academic qualification is insisted upon for a man who wants to renounce everything?

Although academic qualification is not a prerequisite for spiritual growth, it is nonetheless necessary for the following reasons:

- (a) Embracing monastic life is a very significant decision and it needs a certain maturity of mind to arrive at this decision. Formal education, apart from everything else, usually helps to develop this maturity.
- (b) The monks of Ramakrishna Order need to run schools, colleges, hospitals and many other institutions serving people in various ways. Also, they are invited to give talks in national or international forums and universities. A good academic qualification helps to handle all these more effectively.
- (c) Some young men seem to opt for monastic life as a last resort or in desperation. Maybe they are afraid of studies and exams. Maybe they have failed in securing a job after their heart because of their poor academic performance or some other shortcoming. By insisting on a good academic record and age limit, we hope to ensure that such people do not sneak into the Order!

7. I'm a college/university student. Can I join the Order now?

It is strongly recommended that you continue your studies and finish the course which you have started. You may join the Order soon after that. Let not your studies be the first casualty of your spirit of renunciation!

Until the completion of your studies, you may keep in touch with any of our branches and serve as a volunteer in your free time there.

8. Can I pursue my college or higher studies after joining the Order?

Candidates, in general, are expected to have finished their formal education before entering the monastery.

9. I've some health issues. Will that be an obstacle to my joining the Order?

A good health is important for joining, since a monk is expected to serve others rather than to be served by others. As part of the joining procedure, candidates, therefore, need to compulsorily undergo a thorough medical test to prove their fitness. Persons with chronic and debilitating illness (physical or mental) are *not* allowed to join the Order, lest they should fail to bear the hardship of monastic life and become liabilities to the Order.

10. I've not read books on Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda. Can I join the Order?

It is not advisable for you to join immediately. Please make time to read at least a few important books of Ramakrishna–Vivekananda literature.

11. I'm interested in studying Vedanta in depth. Can I do that after joining the Order?

Yes, a number of opportunities are available in the Order to study Vedantic scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads. Every novice, after about three years of joining, is made to undergo a two-year rigorous course of study at our seminary – the Probationers' Training Centre (TC for short) in Belur Math – where a number of religious subjects including Vedanta are taught.

The life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and other monastic disciples are also, in a sense, Vedanta only, because they realised and represented the Vedantic truths in their lives. Following them, the monks of our Order are taught to study scriptures not for acquiring scholarship but to have a firm conviction and ultimately a direct realisation of the scriptural truths. In the TC as well as in the entire Order, the pattern of living, therefore, is so set that the spiritual growth of monks and novices is most stressed upon.

12. I'm not a Hindu by birth. Can I join the Order?

That is not an issue. Ramakrishna Order is open for people of all religions, nationalities and ethnic groups, provided they are ready to lead a pure life of renunciation and accept Sri Ramakrishna's ideals which say, among other things, that all religions lead to the same goal and service to human beings is service to God.

13. I'm a devotee of Krishna (or Shiva, Kali, Christ or any other deity). Can I join the Order?

You are welcome! If you have respectful regard for Sri Ramakrishna and are convinced about the truth of His teachings, you can join the Order.

14. Can I join the Order to serve my country, especially the poor and helpless?

Yes, you can join the Order provided you are willing to broaden your idea of service. Our organization is not just another NGO engaged in social service. Our motto, given by Swami Vivekananda himself, is *ātmano mokshārtham jagad hitāya cha* (for the attainment of one's own liberation, and for the welfare of the world). Spirituality is the basis, guiding force and also the ultimate aim of this organization. Our monks consider service activities as another form of their spiritual discipline. So this spiritual outlook (and not just a compassionate heart or patriotic spirit) is indispensable to continue in the Order.

15. I want to become a monk. But my parents are against it. What should I do?

Although it is very desirable to have the consent of parents for joining the Order, we do not consider it a must because you are an adult. Only in rare cases do parents encourage their son to become a monk and most candidates need to face the opposition and sometimes even wrath of their parents for cherishing monastic aspiration. But if you are sure from within that you are choosing this life out of a genuine aversion to worldly pleasures and not to evade any responsibility, nothing should hold you back. At the same time it is also a fact that a majority of parents will come to appreciate, after a few years, the decision of their son to join the Order and many even feel proud of him.

In the face of opposition and thwarting circumstances, an aspirant should take heart from the

fact that monasticism is an age-old institution and has the backing of scriptures. *Yadahareva virajet tadahareva pravrajat* (one should renounce the world whenever one feels the urge), says Jābālopaniṣad.

16. Can I remain in touch with my parents and relatives after joining?

During the initial days, a novice is allowed to talk to his parents and inquire about their well-being if necessary. But a monk is required to let go eventually all attachments that he had developed in his pre-monastic life. Since this is something that can't be achieved overnight by all, the spirit of detachment is to be cultivated by tapering off all worldly relationships.

17. I've some property in my name. What will happen to it if I join?

Monks by definition can't own personal properties. Both Hindu scriptures and legal interpretation are unanimous on this. You need to dispose of and settle, as per your wish, the movable and immovable properties recorded in your name as early as possible after joining the Order, if not done before switching over.

18. Will I be paid salary in the Order?

No salary is paid to monks in our Order as it is contrary to the monastic ideal. Monastic life is not like working at a job in expectation of salary. Here you give, voluntarily and entirely, your body and mind, your talents and capacities without looking for any material gain.

19. If I join the Order, who will take care of my personal needs? Who will look after me when I become old?

Embracing monastic life presupposes a complete dependence on God for everything. All the same, the Order will take care of you and support you in every way. There is no need to worry on that front.

20. How should I dress after joining the Order?

The members of the Order usually wear a *kurta* (loose & collarless shirt), *dhoti* (cloth tied around waist extending up to feet) and *uttariya* (cloth wrapped over the shirt). The colour of these garments would be either white (in case of novices or Brahmacharins) or ochre/*gerua* (in case of Sannyasins).

21. If I join tomorrow, how long will it take to become a monk in the full sense of the term?

It normally takes a minimum of nine years. This is the period allowed for a candidate to prepare himself to receive the final monastic vows. When you are finally ordained, you also get a new name ending with "ananda" and a title "swami".

22. What am I expected to do after joining the Order?

After joining the Order, you have to devote your entire life to achieve the twin ideals: *Atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha* – one's own liberation and the good of the world. For the rest of your life, you will therefore immerse yourself in spiritual practices and selfless service. By spiritual practices are meant japa, meditation, prayer, worship, chanting

of hymns, singing of bhajans, study of sacred literature and other spiritual practices. Among these, the daily practice of japa and meditation is very important. Some of these you will do on your own, while others, in the company of monastic brothers in the ashrama. Along with these practices, you will also engage yourself with equal zeal and sincerity in selfless work, thus playing your part in the service activities of our organization. And whatever work you do either for the monastery or for the service of the people at large, you are expected to do it in a spirit of worship so that your work becomes yet another form of spiritual practice.

By spending your days in this manner, you will strive to grow in the qualities of a Sadhu (monk) such as purity, devotion, detachment, unselfishness, truthfulness and Brahmacharya (celibacy), and realize God.

23. What is the method of spiritual practice (sādhana) in Ramakrishna Order?

Here a harmonious combination of all the four Yogas, namely Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga, is followed. This scheme contributes to all-round development of personality. In fact, if anyone follows with unflinching faith and regard the way of life (as described in the answer to the previous question) that is practised in this Order, he can harmonise these four yogas almost effortlessly in him. The harmony of four yogas is beautifully illustrated in the emblem of the Order designed by Swami Vivekananda. Our emblem is explained [here](#).

24. I want to know more about celibate life in general. Any guidelines or recommended reading?

Swami Vivekananda's teachings on Brahmacharya (continence or celibacy), compiled from various sources, are posted [here](#).

Also, you will find very useful guidelines in the two books given below:

- Chapter on *Strength of Brahmacharya* in [*Youth! Arise Awake and Know Your Strength*](#) : By Swami Srikantananda.
- Chapter on *Brahmacharya* in [*Spiritual Practice*](#) : By Swami Ashokananda.

25. Are there any spiritual teachers in the Order who can help me after I join?

Yes, senior monks will guide you in every aspect of your monastic life if you approach them. They will also keep a watch on you to see if you are on the right path.

26. I haven't had spiritual initiation so far. What should I do?

Mantra Diksha or spiritual initiation is a solemn ceremony in which the guru imparts a Mantra (sacred name of the Lord) to a spiritual aspirant. The guru will also teach how to repeat the Mantra (i.e. how to do japa) and the method of meditation (upasana). In our Order only the President and the Vice-President Swamijis give Mantra Diksha. If you haven't received Mantra-Deeksha from any one of them, arrangements will be made for the same sometime after your joining the Order.

27. Can I join at any branch of the Order?

With the exception of a few, all our branches, including those in other countries, admit novices.

You can join at Belur Math also. We have a Pre-Probationers' Training Centre (PPTC) in Belur Math for new entrants.

But as it has been mentioned earlier, wherever you join, you will get an opportunity to spend two years at TC in Belur Math.

28. **What is special about joining at Belur Math?**

Belur Math is the heart of the Ramakrishna Order where the central monastery is located, and where Swami Vivekananda and a few of Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples lived. It is also our Headquarters. Because of its sacred associations, many wish to begin their monastic life here. After keeping the new entrants in PPTC for six to twelve months, they are posted to different branch centres.

29. **There is a Ramakrishna Ashrama in my neighbourhood. Can I join there?**

Not all Ashramas bearing the name of 'Sri Ramakrishna' or 'Swami Vivekananda' are our branches. So please check if the particular Ashrama you are referring to is a recognized branch of ours. The list of our official branches can be had from our website <belurmath.org>.

30. **I like one particular branch of yours. Can I spend the rest of my life there as a monk?**

You may join the Order at that centre and continue there for about three years at the most. After that, it is up to the senior monks at Belur Math (which is our Headquarters) to post you to any branch of the Order.

The wish to spend the whole life in a particular branch centre is contrary to the monastic spirit. You may join the Order at the centre of your choice and continue there for about three years at the most. After that, you should be ready to get posted to any branch of the Order as per the discretion of the senior monks at Belur Math.

31. **Will I get a chance to do preaching work in foreign countries?**

You may or may not. The authorities at the Headquarters decide on whom to send to foreign countries, and they do so after considering a number of factors.

It is best to join the Order after eschewing strong likes and dislikes, and in a spirit of self-surrender to the Lord.

32. **Do you suggest any other book to read to know more about monasticism in general and Ramakrishna Order in particular?**

The books suggested in answer to question no. 10 above should be enough. Still, you may refer to the following two books:

- [*The Glory of Monastic Life*](#) : By Swami Bhajanananda
- [*Monasticism – Ideal and Traditions*](#) : A Vedanta Kesari Presentation

33. **Suppose I'm unable to continue in the Order, can I quit?**

Yes, you can quit the Order at any point in your monastic life. People enter this life of their own accord and can also step out of their own accord. No legal or financial obligation on either side if one leaves! Quitting the Order need not mean the end of your spiritual pursuits. You will continue them wherever you are.

34. Fine. My questions are all answered. But I'm still not sure whether to join the Order or lead a normal life in the family. Can you help me?

This is a matter which you alone have to decide. Observe carefully your own mind to understand where your real interest lies. Pray to God sincerely to make your mind strong and steady. You may also consult wise people and seek their advice in the matter, but the final decision should come from within YOU.
