

## Article

# Postulant Education within the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism: A Critical Examination of Its Past, Its Present, and the Issues Facing Its Future

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**Abstract:** Over the last three decades of evolution, the Jogye Order's postulant education system has made considerable progress in standardizing, centralizing, and modernizing Buddhist education for aspiring monastics. As celebrated by the order's 2022 publication *The 30-year History of Buddhist Monastic Postulant Education*, the order's program has successfully seen over 9800 ordained novices graduate since its launch in 1991. However, there is a broad consensus within Korea's Buddhist community that the religion is in crisis and, within the order in particular, that its future is in peril. Unless it is reversed, the trend portends the very real possibility of the order's demise by the end of the century, if not sooner. The order recently vowed to reverse the downward trend in monastic recruitment and raise the annual number of ordained novices to 150 by 2025 through a multifaceted plan involving greater youth outreach efforts, an increased social media presence, and online Buddhist educational materials, along with an expansion of the order's international missionary efforts. Given that postulant recruitment is critical to the order's survival, this paper examines the past, present, and future of the Jogye Order's postulant education system in light of the current membership crisis, as well as the order's recent publication of *The 30-year History of Buddhist Monastic Postulant Education*.

**Keywords:** postulant education; Jogye Order; Korean Buddhism; monastic education system



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## 1. Introduction

Officially formed in 1962 after a highly contentious schism between Korea's married Buddhist priests and celibate monastics, known as the "Purification Movement" (K. *jeongh-waundong*), the Jogye Order (*Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong*, hereafter "JO" or "the order"), was established as a "monastic monk-oriented order" (Buswell 1992, pp. 22–23) representing the historical mainstream of Korea's Buddhist traditions. By far the largest of Korea's 250-plus Buddhist orders, the JO controls the vast majority of the nation's historically valuable Buddhist assets and operates more than 3000 temples around the country, vertically organized and overseen by the JO's central administration in Seoul. The order's temples and monasteries are staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics, almost half of whom are female, who vow to follow the precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya as well as the "Pure Rules" (*Baekjang Cheonggyu*) of Chinese Master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814). Each of the order's monastics begins their career serving six months as a postulant (*haengja*), followed by four years as a novice (*sami/samini*), during which they complete JO-mandated education at a traditional monastic seminary or accredited Buddhist university. With the approval of their preceptor/preceptress (*eunsa*), novices then take the higher ordination to become a monk/nun (*bigu/biguni*), beginning their life-long vocation as a Buddhist monastic and full member of the order (Kim and Park 2019, p. 2).

Operating a five-stage monastic education system, the JO mandates six compulsory months of education for all postulants, another four years of education for all novices, and an additional training session to be completed annually by all fully ordained monastics (<http://www.buddhism.or.kr/edu/sub2/sub2-1.php>, accessed on 6 January 2023). Uri

Kaplan, a scholar of Korean Buddhist monastic education, observes that the Jogye Order is unique among contemporary Asian Buddhist monastic traditions in the extensive amount of formal education it requires of its monastics, noting that the order's monastic education program has been unified for over a century and remains "all-encompassing, influencing the perceptions of virtually each and every home-leaver in the nation today" (Kaplan 2020, p. 9).<sup>1</sup> However, the order's present education system did not originate with the order's formation, but evolved through various reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, which, according to Kaplan, transformed an "apprenticeship-pedagogy, based largely on the inclinations of individual teachers . . . into a legally-enforced, curricular, institution-based monastic education system, controlled and managed by one central body" (Kaplan 2015, p. 263). Instituted in an effort to eliminate corruption, standardize qualifications, improve monastic conduct, and enforce a unified monastic identity, these progressive educational reforms have brought widespread changes within the order's monastic culture.

Despite the order's successes in standardizing and modernizing its monastic education system, the order has faced an increasingly critical crisis in monastic recruitment over recent decades: a problem which the World Economic Forum notes is shared by several major global religions due to dropping birth rates in developed nations (<https://www.wonnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=203027>, accessed on 3 March 2023).<sup>2</sup> Since the peak of 532 new postulants in 1999, the number of annual monastic recruits within the order has progressively fallen to just 63 in 2022. This dramatic decline has left the order with an increasingly aging monastic population and many temples without adequate staff. Unless it is reversed, the trend portends the very real possibility of the JO's demise by the end of the century, if not sooner.

With the recruitment of monastic postulants becoming critical to the order's survival, JO authorities have taken a renewed interest in the order's postulant education system (*haengja gyoyuk*), as evidenced by the order's 2022 publication of *The 30-year History of Buddhist Monastic Postulant Education (Haengja sugyegyoyuk samsib nyunsa*, hereafter "30-year History"), which surveys the first three decades of the order's current postulant education system. In an interview, Venerable Jin Woo, the book's editor-in-chief and former head of the order's Department of Education, explains that he hopes the publication will be "analyzed and utilized" in the future development of the order's postulant training program and serve as a "starting point" for new directions in monastic education (Park 2022a). Considering the potential importance of this recent publication, this paper will critically examine the past, present, and future of the JO's postulant education system in light of the order's current membership crisis. We will begin by briefly surveying the historical origins of the JO's postulant education program, before reviewing the contemporary history of the program's development. In Section 3, we will consider the current state of the order's five-stage postulant education program, before examining various problems and issues impacting the program's future in Section 4 and concluding with comments regarding the order's own plans for postulant education and recruitment in the future.

## 2. History of Postulant Education in Korea

### 2.1. Historical Origins and Precedents

Precedents for the JO's current postulant education system can be traced to Buddhism's origins in the sixth century BCE. Since then, almost all of the religion's many branches have maintained a division between the roles of lay practitioners and professional monastics (Sk. *bhiksu/bhiksuni*), who vow to follow strict rules of moral conduct while devoting themselves full time to rituals, meditation, scripture study, and the propagation of the Buddha's teachings. Even in the Buddha's own lifetime, the ordination of these professional monastics has been regarded as a two-stage process involving both a "lower" and "higher" ordination. For the lower, novice (Sk. *sramanera/sramanerika*) ordination, also known as "going forth" or "home-leaving" (Sk. *pravrajya*), prospects must petition a senior monastic for acceptance in the community, shave their heads, take refuge in the Triple Gem, and vow to uphold the 10 Novice Precepts. The second, higher ordination, known as "acceptance"

(Sk. *Upasampadā*), requires novices to be at least 20 years old, be under the sponsorship of a senior monastic known as their preceptor/preceptress, and vow to uphold the hundreds of rules of conduct (Sk. *pratimoksa*) prescribed within the *Vinaya*.

With some variation, most Buddhist monastic traditions have maintained these two stages of lower and higher ordination throughout their histories, yet the specific prerequisites within each have come to vary. The Theravadan monastic and scholar Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes that the original requirements for both lower and higher ordinations contained no mention of religious learning, but rather focused on a prospect's age, moral fitness, relationship to senior monastics, and willingness to follow the monastic rules of conduct. The spiritual education of monastics in early Buddhism was apparently a separate affair (<https://www.dhammatalks.org/vinaya/bmc/Section0054.html>, accessed on 2 March 2023).

Yet, as Buddhism spread throughout Asia over the following millennium, monastic education often became intertwined with the requirements for ordination and the attainment of senior positions within the *Sangha*. During Xuanzang's travels through Central Asia in the seventh century, the Chinese monk observed that seniority among Indian monastics was based on oral testing rather than then the number years ordained. In China, where Buddhism has typically functioned as a state-sponsored religion, monastic examinations were introduced as early as the fourth century to sporadically purge the *Sanhga* of those who had ordained only to evade taxation and conscripted labor. In the eighth century, the Tang Emperor Zhongzong (656–710) first introduced a national examination system for aspiring monastics and, in 747 CE, began issuing ordination certificates only to prospective ordinands who successfully passed lengthy recitation examinations (Kaplan 2020, p. 120).

This pattern was repeated within the state-sponsored monastic communities on the Korean Peninsula. The Silla Dynasty's National Master Jajang (590–658), a *Vinaya* specialist, launched a system of biannual testing for Silla monastics in the early seventh century as part of his reforms to the Silla *Sangha* (Volkov 2007, p. 116).<sup>3</sup> In the tenth century, Taejo Wangeon (r.918–943), the founder of Korea's Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), introduced national "Sangha selection" examinations, which were then followed by a system of multilevel monastic exams (*seonggwa*) established in 954 CE by Goryeo King Gwangjong (r. 949–975). Mirroring the Confucian civil service examination system used to select government officials, these *seonggwa* were held every three years to determine eligibility for the higher ranks within the Korean monastic hierarchy. Although the system survived the nation's transition to the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), it was abolished by King Seongjong (r. 1469–1495) during his systemic suppression of Korea's Buddhist establishment (Vermeersch 2008, pp. 184, 188).

Yet, it was during this period of official suppression that the Korean masters Jieom (1464–1534) and Younggwon (1485–1571) laid the foundation for the four-stage "Gradual Study" (*Iryeok*) curriculum to be used within Korea's traditional monastic seminaries for the next 350 years. Taking up to 12 years to complete, the four stages of the *Iryeok* Curriculum guided Korean monastics through a series of 11 sutras, commentaries, and texts valued within the Korean Buddhist tradition.<sup>4</sup> While the relationship between the *Iryeok* Curriculum and monastic ordination requirements during this period remains unknown, the first of the curriculum's four stages is devoted entirely to compilations of "Admonitions Literature": short treatises composed by various Chinese and Korean Buddhist masters aimed at monastic neophytes. These anthologies form what Kaplan describes as a "comprehensive beginners' textbook" providing advice on communal life and following the precepts, as well as lessons on basic doctrine and meditation that present the "advice of elders and models of good monastic behavior" (Kaplan 2020, p. 15).

## 2.2. The Emergence of Korean Temple Postulants

By the end of the Joseon Era, there had also arisen within Korean temples and monasteries the lower, more informal monastic rank of postulant, or literally "practitioner" (*haengja*), which preceded the Novice Ordination. Serving for a minimum of three years, postulants dedicated themselves to performing menial labor within their temples, including cooking,

cleaning, and housekeeping while learning basic Buddhist scriptures, rituals, and doctrine. Typically recruited from the local communities surrounding Korea's predominantly rural temples, this lengthy term of service at the postulant's prospective "home temple" (*ponsa*) not only ensured their suitability for monastic life prior to ordination, but also provided impoverished monasteries with valuable sources of labor.

As described by Buddhist Studies scholar and former Korean monastic Robert Buswell, in the 1970s, postulants were "busier than anyone else" in their temples. Living in tight quarters with other postulants, they woke at three in the morning and spent the day rotating among various kitchen and house-keeping duties. What little free time they had between chores was spent learning temple etiquette, chants, and ceremonies and basic Buddhist texts. Only after these postulants had become socially integrated into the hierarchies of their monastic lineage, or "dharma families", and had thoroughly demonstrated their physical, mental, and moral fitness for life as a career monastic did their preceptor/preceptress (*eunsa*) and grandmaster grant approval for their lower ordination (Buswell 1992, pp. 76–81).

Prior to the official formation of the JO in 1962, the role and responsibilities of postulants within Korea's monasteries had remained loosely defined, as were the requirements for both the lower and higher ordinations. Approval for ordination was often left to the discretion of local temple authorities, leading to a wide variation between temples and individual monastics. Furthermore, after Buddhism's Joseon-era suppression, the Korean monastic community lacked any national system for verifying ordinations and other monastic qualifications of those claiming to be monastics, leading to the proliferation of unqualified monastics, if not outright imposters. Complicating things even further, many Joseon-era novices were apparently content to continue their entire monastic careers without taking the higher ordination (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 30–32). Additional confusion arose with the Purification Movement in the 1950s, during which the minority faction of celibate monastics reduced the period of postulancy in their monasteries to just six months in order to more quickly expand their ranks. It is rumored that, during the conflict, some temples even took to ordaining "thugs off the streets" to bolster their movement (Buswell 1992, p. 31). With the official schism between the married and celibate factions in 1962, the JO faced the challenge of standardizing and enforcing monastic qualifications within the newly formed order. For the first time in modern Korean history, the Korean temples formally defined the requirements for lower and higher ordination within the Jogye Order's Constitution and Ordination Laws in 1962, which additionally clarified the status and responsibilities of the order's monastic postulants. Nevertheless, the order would lack the bureaucratic structures necessary for enforcing these standardized requirements on a national level for at least two more decades. In practice, lower and higher ordinations remained under local control until the JO's sweeping reforms in the 1980s and 1990s.

### 2.3. The Contemporary History of Postulant Education within the JO

As celebrated in the Jogye Order's *30-year History*, on 27 February 1981, 161 postulants (84 men and 77 women) undertook the novice ordination together at Tongdosa Temple, marking the first collective monastic ordination ceremony in the modern history of Korean Buddhism. This ceremony marked a clear turning point within the identity and monastic culture of the order. By standardizing the requirements for both lower and higher ordinations, the order established official clarified expectations regarding monastic discipline and behavior while also laying the foundation for the development of a cohesive monastic education system, including for postulants, and the JO has nationally conducted both lower and higher ordinations semiannually ever since (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 33–34).

Nevertheless, numerous JO-affiliated temples chose to abstain from the order's collective ordination ceremonies through the 1980s, preferring to keep the ordination of prospective monastics under local control, perpetuating what Kaplan describes as the "sporadic and subjective manner of educating postulants" (Kaplan 2020, p. 127). These continued irregularities in postulant education in the 1980s did not go unnoticed by leaders within the order. Venerable Beopjeong (1932–2010), a JO leader and popular author, complained

that too many postulants wasted all their time with temple chores and, instead, advocated for the establishment of a postulant curriculum covering basic Buddhist doctrines, rituals, monastic discipline, and meditation. Venerable Beopjang, former head of the JO's main assembly, similarly criticized the overemphasis of manual labor for postulants and advocated for the creation of a standardized postulant education program that balanced chores with doctrinal and ritual education and mediation practice (Kaplan 2020, pp. 127–28).

Recognizing that a practical institution was needed to provide basic education to aspiring monastics, in 1991 the JO established the Education Department for Buddhist Postulant (*Haengja Gyoyukwon*, hereafter EDBP) (Yuljang Research Community 2018, pp. 61–72). Acting under the aegis of the order's Department of Education, the EDBP was officially tasked with providing the education necessary for the development of the Jogye Order and Korean society without any discrimination, thus qualifying postulants to become ordained novices through the compulsory education (Articles 47 and 52 of the Education Act). EDBP facilities were to be established at a location of the order's choosing, with men's and women's postulate education centers operating separately (Article 54 of the Education Act) and, since 1992, the EDBP has held collective novice ordinations for all qualifying postulants within the order's temples twice a year.

As surveyed in the JO's *30-year History*, since its launch in the early 1990s, the EDBP has worked to implement a standardized, systematic, and meaningful educational curriculum for the order's postulants. In the summer of 1990, Venerables Mugwan, Jihyun, and Jiwoon, all senior JO monastics with experience teaching within the order's seminaries, volunteered to meet at Haeinsa Temple to design a curriculum for the EDBP's postulant education program. They divided the postulant training manual into three broad sections symbolizing the Triple Gem or Three Refugees of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The text's first section thus centered on the sacred biography the Buddha, while the second included *Novice Precepts and Decorum (Samiyoolyi)* and *Admonitions to Beginners (Chobalsim Jagyeongmun)*, and the last section focused on practice (*supyi*). A chapter from the *Avatamsaka (Hwaeom) Sutra* on Samatabhadra Bodhisattva's vow (*Bohyunhaengwonpoom*) and the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks (Gosengjeon)* were added to the manual later (Interview with Venerable Mugwan on 27 May 2017). With the launch of the EDBP and the order's standardization of the requirements for lower and higher ordination came further changes in the practical culture of the order's monasteries. While previously all JO monastics had traditionally worn all-gray robes, with novices and postulants inheriting recycled old robes, postulants now donned all brown, while novices wore grey robes with brown bands, making it easy to distinguish ordination ranks within the order (Yuljang Research Community 2018, pp. 73–74; Jogye Order 2022, p. 35).

The movement to further centralize the order's monastic education system continued over the 1990s, and in 1994 the order began replacing the traditional Joseon-era *Iryeok* Curriculum within the order's seminaries with an entirely new system of studies. This revised monastic curriculum begins with a year-long Basic Course (*gicho*), followed by four years of intermediate education (*gibon*), and, lastly, five years of professional education (*jeonmun*) to be taught within the order's traditional monastic seminaries and accredited universities. The transition was driven, in part, by the desire to modernize the education system and deemphasize the need for fluency in Chinese characters; Chinese was the traditional ecclesiastical language of Korean Buddhism in which all the texts in the *Iryeok* Curriculum were written and read. Through this expanded system, the order became better equipped to train, track, and evaluate the educational progress of both its postulants and novices under a centralized bureaucracy, and the order began training a record number of ordained novices. Such reforms not only eliminated irregularities and local variations in the ordination requirements between different temples but also potential corruption and the ordination of insincere or unqualified monastics. The reforms of 1994 further clarified the requirements for postulants, mandating that postulants spend at least five months residing at their prospective home temples and five days at their parish headquarters before receiving three weeks of in-person training directly from the EDBP before they could

qualify for their Novice Ordination (*sami/samini gye*) (For more details on the order's 1994 reforms, see Kaplan 2020, pp. 66–67; Lee 2018, pp. 191–213; Yoon 2012, pp. 35–63).

While maintaining the general framework established in the 1990s, the order has continued to make adjustments to its postulant education program since the turn of the millennium. In 2006, the EDBP discussed unrealized plans to extend the postulant education program to four years and to require courses in English and oratory and propagation methods (Seo 2006). Additional changes to the program were launched in 2010 when the Postulant Education program was formally renamed "Ordination Education" (*sugye gyoyuk*) and the EDBP three-week training retreat was reduced to 16 days, and then in 2016, down to just 10 days. While it has been significantly shortened in length, efforts have been made to introduce more modern and relevant topics to the training program (Jogye Order 2022, p. 41).

### 3. Present System of Postulant Education within the JO

After 30 years of development, postulant education within the Jogye Order is presently organized into five stages: (1) Daily Education (*Ilasang Gyoyuk*); (2) Introductory Education (*Ipmun Gyoyuk*); (3) Parish Headquarters Education (*Bonsa Gyoyuk*); (4) Ordination Education (*Sugye Gyoyuk*); and (5) Fifth-level Sangha examination (*Ogeup Seunggagosi*). According to Article 2 of the Ordinance on the Operation of the EDBP (Jogye Order 2022, p. 41), Daily Education refers to education that is routinely conducted at the postulant's temple of residence. This stage begins with postulants formally "entering the mountains," shaving their heads, and officially registering with the Jogye Order. Lasting a minimum of five months, this stage requires that postulants learn basic Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and ceremonies while assisting in various chores around their prospective home temples and generally acculturating themselves to temple life. The order additionally provides postulants with video lectures, textbooks, and other materials necessary to prepare for the Fifth-level Sangha examinations, the final stage of the order's postulant education program, qualifying them for the Novice Ordination. Included among the order's 13 prescribed textbooks for postulants are *Life of the Buddha*, *Buddhist Doctrine*, *Admonitions to Beginners* (*Chobalsimjakyungmun*), *Novice Precepts and Decorum* (*Sami/Samini-yuli*), *Forty-two Section Sutra* (*Sasibijangkyung*), *History of the Jogye Order*, *Chanting Manual* (*yeombul*), *Practice Manual* (*seubyi*), *Recitation Manual* (*doksong*), *Buddha's Living*, *Buddhist Bible*, *Introduction to Buddhism*, and *Introduction to Buddhist Chinese Character* (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 43–44).

Introductory Education, the second stage of postulant training, consists of a compulsory four-day-long educational retreat conducted at a temple chosen by the order, which must be completed within two months of registration. The retreat's purpose is to help establish personal spiritual goals for postulants and to introduce them to traditional forms of asceticism and religious praxis within the order. During the third stage, postulants reside for three months at their prospective temple's Parish Headquarters, one of the 25 head temples overseeing the JO's regional administrative districts, to further study Buddhist doctrines and traditional ceremonies. The education methods, textbooks, and specific educational schedules used for this phase are autonomously planned by the parish headquarters.

The fourth phase of postulant education, Ordination Education, consists of a second residential training retreat held twice a year, usually at Jikjisa Temple, for the purposes of confirming the postulants' educational progress and further cultivating the qualities of expected novices ordained within the order. While originally lasting three weeks, the Ordination Education retreat was reduced to just five days in 2020. Led by senior monastic "practice guides" (*seubuisa*) from the order's major monasteries, during this retreat postulants attend a tight schedule of special lectures, classes, ritual rehearsals, and confessional bowings.

At the end of the Ordination Education retreat, postulants take Fifth-level Sangha examinations, the final stage of the order's postulant education program. Verifying the postulant's qualifications for the Novice Ordination, the written portion of the exam

includes essays and multiple-choice questions on the required reading, as well as reflective essays concerning the postulants' own motivations and spiritual goals. The test also includes an oral component consisting of a brief interview by two senior monastics on the fitness required to become a novice, as well as the performance of a memorized chant from the order's canon of rituals. As noted by Kaplan, around 99% of postulants pass the exam, suggesting that its primary purpose is to motivate postulants in their studies rather than to limit entry into the order (Kaplan 2020, p. 132). After passing the exam, postulants then gather for the ceremonial taking of the 10 major Bodhisattva Precepts from the *Brahma's Net Sutra*, followed by an all-night vigil wherein they make 3000 prostrations before the Buddha. The following morning, they undertake their formal Lower Ordination ceremony, before returning to their home temples as newly ordained *sami/samini*. As novices, they will then spend at least another four years training and graduate from one of the order's traditional seminaries or accredited universities, before taking their Fourth-level Sangha examinations and completing their full ordination at Tongdosa Temple to become *bigu/biguni*.

While much of the content of the postulant and novice curricula center their focus on texts and doctrine, Kaplan argues that this content is perhaps less important than what Buddhist studies scholar Jeffery Samuels terms the "action-oriented pedagogy", which trains prospective monastics in how to speak, behave, and perform their various roles (Kaplan 2020, pp. 62–63; Samuels 2004 as cited in Kaplan 2020, pp. 62–63). Kaplan observes that many of the JO's seminary instructors themselves claim that the most essential part of training neophytes is enculturating them to the "communal living" (*taejung saenghwal*) of Korean monasteries. This training involves a near total lack of privacy for postulants and novices, as well as the "lower(ing)" of "their minds" (*hasim*), which Kaplan describes as "humbleness bordering on self-negation, accompanied by order, cleanliness, quietness, and other qualities necessary to maintain peace in a very small room full of busy students" which he regards as "the most foundational educational objective" of the training (Kaplan 2020, p. 52).

#### 4. Issues Regarding the Future of Postulant Education within the JO

The statistics for the Ordination Education covering the past 30 years are displayed in the table below (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 420–21):

##### 4.1. Postulant Education and the JO's Current Membership Crisis

Of all the issues facing the future of the JO's postulant education program, the decline in postulant recruitment is clearly the most critical. As seen in Table 1, the number of annual recruits has progressively dropped from its peak of 532 postulants in 1999 to just 99 postulants in 2021. As discussed in previous papers, the reasons behind this crisis are manifold. The South Korean birthrate has dropped by over half since the 1990s and, if current trends continue, the nation's population will begin contracting by 2035. Meanwhile, South Korean society has grown increasingly materialistic and secular. As of the nation's 2015 census, only 15.5% of the country described themselves as Buddhist, compared with 22.8% a decade earlier, while 56% of all South Koreans and 65% of young adults claim no religious affiliation at all. Korean Buddhism is not alone in this crisis, however, as dropping birthrates and aging populations are adversely affecting the recruitment of Catholic clergy, not only in Korea, but around the globe (<https://www.wonnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=203027>, accessed on 3 March 2023) However, the impact of these trends on Korean Buddhism have been further exacerbated by a series of public scandals and factional in-fighting that shook the order in the 1990s and 2010s. The JO is clearly struggling to remain relevant in contemporary Korean society, especially among the younger generations, and unless the JO reverses these trends, the order faces the real possibility of extinction (Kim et al. 2019).

**Table 1.** Statistics for the Jogye Order Ordination Education over the past 30 years.

Year	Class	Education Period	Postulant Number
1991	1	22	273
1992	2/3	23	409
1993	4/5	23	510
1994	6/7	23	499
1995	8/9	23	448
1996	10/11	23	468
1997	12/13	23	377
1998	14/15	23	428
1999	16/17	23	532
2000	18/19	23	528
2001	20/21	23	476
2002	22/23	23	406
2003	24/25	23	373
2004	26/27	23	297
2005	28/29	23	326
2006	30/31	25/23	334
2007	32/33	23	337
2008	34/35	23	287
2009	36/37	23/14	266
2010	38/39	23/14	287
2011	40/41	14/16	253
2012	42/43	16	212
2013	44/45	16	236
2014	46/47	16	226
2015	48/49	16	204
2016	50/51	16	157
2017	52/53	10	151
2018	54/55	10/12	122
2019	56/57	12	143
2020	58/59	12/5	131
2021	60/61	5	99
Total Number			9795

As mentioned in Section 1, such a drastic reduction in postulants has caused numerous practical difficulties within the order as well as a significant shift within monastic culture. Mirroring the aging of South Korean society as a whole, the average age of JO monastics is over 50, and the order must now contend with the difficulties of supporting an increasingly aging monastic population without enough younger monastics to do so (Lee 2022). Furthermore, JO monastic and Dongguk University Professor Venerable Mungwang notes that this demographic shift additionally risks widening the generation gap between older and younger monastics within the order, potentially pitting the interests of the older monastic establishment against those of younger potential recruits (Interview 23 January 2023). Meanwhile, the diminishing of the order's monastic manpower has caused hundreds of smaller branch temples and hermitages around the country to close or pass in to the hands of lay caretakers. Mungwang additionally observes that the growing scarcity of postulants within the order's temples has actually shifted the balance of power in their favor, with many temples now actively courting postulants by reducing their chores and responsibilities for fear they will quit (Interview 23 January 2023).

While the individual attitudes among the order's monastics towards the crisis are varied, and often ambivalent (see *Jogye Order 2022*, pp. 53, 58, 75), the order's institutions have taken steps to attempt to stem the decline and make the monastic life more attractive to younger generations of Koreans. In 2016, Venerable Wonhaeng, president of Joong-ang Sangha University, established a four-year-long "uni-stay" program, inviting Korean students, having graduated from high school, to spend four years at the university living as novices. The invitation emphasized that, as JO novices, students may attend the Joong-ang Sangha University for free and, if they do not want to live as monks after graduation, even

return to lay life after graduation should they wish. Wonhaeng hoped to make “leaving home” an attractive alternative for “young people suffering from intense competition” present among university entrance exams (Kim 2016b). In 2017, for the first time, the order produced and distributed recruitment posters targeting Korean young adults, encouraging them to join the monastic community with images of smiling monks and simple slogans such as “(t)he most brilliant choice of my life” and “(l)eave”. However, the results of the effort were negligible and prompted a backlash among older, more conservative monastics. While the novelty of the ad campaign garnered positive attention on Korean social media, it also propped a fierce controversy within the order as opponents found the campaigning demeaning (Park 2017).

Considering that 99% of the JO’s Korean postulants have successfully matriculated through the order’s postulant education system to take the novice ordinations, it does not appear that the postulant education system itself is a major deterrent to “leaving home.” Nevertheless, the order continues to make adjustments to its postulant education system in hopes of boosting recruitment with more up-to-date online resources and technology. The JO has reorganized its website to better provide information to prospective recruits, including an online pre-education system permitting prospective postulants to complete monastic education courses in advance, prior to “leaving home.” The order has additionally reorganized their web portal for postulant training, providing an AI-drive chat system to answer questions for postulants, along with all the relevant information through email and telephone hotline connecting postulants to professional counselors (Jeon 2021). These changes are not likely to be the last made by the order to their postulant education system over the coming decades.

#### *4.2. The Shortage of Qualified Monastic Instructors for Postulant Daily Education*

While the last 30 years have seen the EDBP succeed in centralizing, standardizing, and streamlining the order’s postulant education system, there still remain difficulties in consistently securing qualified monastic instructors for new postulants. During the first “Daily Education” period of training, postulants are provided with 13 texts to read and study in order to prepare for the Novice Examinations in their free time. Yet, as postulants spend this five-month period residing at their home temples, the instructors selected to teach these texts are chosen by local temple authorities or, as is often the case in smaller temples, postulants are simply left to study texts on their own without any in-person instruction.

This lack of guidance by qualified monastic instructors during the initial stage of a postulant’s education stands in contrast to the Introductory Education and Ordination Education retreats, the second and fourth phases of postulant education, which are led by qualified monastic instructors selected by the EDBP, with between five and twenty years of experience as monastics. While initially temporary appointments, since 2004 these instructors have become permanent, paid staff, with their positions renewed annually by the EDBP. In 2004, the EDBP further tightened their hiring protocols for retreat instructors, opening recruitment to any professional monastic teachers who have graduated from specialized order-affiliate institutions and are recommended by senior monastics within the order (Beopbo 2004; Cho 2004; Park 2021). It is the authors’ opinion that establishing a similar system to recruit and hire professional monastic instructors to guide postulants through their textual studies during the initial five months of Daily Education would help to ensure a high quality of instruction during this critical period of postulant education.

#### *4.3. Length and Content of the Postulant Ordination Education Retreat*

Another issue pertaining to the future of the order’s Postulant Education Program is the length and content of the Ordination Education retreat, the penultimate stage in the order’s postulant education program, which has been drastically reduced over the last decade and a half. As shown in Table 1 above, for the first 20 years of the program, the retreat lasted over three weeks in length. Yet, in 2009, its length was reduced to just over

two weeks due to the country's Swine Flu epidemic. The retreat's length was reduced again in 2017 to 10 days and, in 2020, it was shorted to just five days in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. This drastic shortening of the Ordination Education program has coincided with the reduction in postulants, and, in its 2022 report, the JO has justified this drastic reduction by noting that the curriculum has become more streamlined and less redundant, while postulants have become better educated prior to "leaving home." Furthermore, the order has claimed that the overall quality of education during the program has been drastically improved, while new, more modern subjects have been introduced to the retreat's curriculum (<http://www.ibulgyo.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=98789>, accessed on 6 January 2023; *Jogye Order 2022*, p. 41). Despite these claims, some have cited recent reductions in the order's postulant education budget as the true reason behind the recent shorting of the Ordination Education retreats (*Jogye Order 2022*, pp. 41–42).

Whatever the reasons, critics, including those involved with administering the retreats, have complained that five days is far too short a time for this critical stage of postulant education, especially considering the aforementioned lack of qualified monastic instructors available during postulants' five months of Daily Education. Furthermore, five days is not nearly adequate for training postulants in traditional Buddhist rituals or preparing them for the Fifth-level Sangha examinations conducted at the end of the retreat (*Jogye Order 2022*, pp. 41–42). While it is advantageous for the order to streamline and update the Ordination Education curriculum, such a drastic reduction in the program's length risks leaving postulants ill-prepared for their responsibilities as novices and fully ordained monastics, creating potential of further problems within the order in the future.

#### 4.4. *The Establishment of a Permanent Postulant Education Center*

An additional issue facing the JO's postulant education program concerns the establishment of a Permanent Postulant Education Center (hereafter PPEC), which has been repeatedly proposed as an alternative to the current system over recent decades (*Jogye Order 2022*, pp. 45–47). Presently, all JO postulants spend a minimum of five months of their Daily Education period residing at their prospective home-temples before proceeding to the later stages of education, and attend the Ordination Training retreat held twice a year. Yet under the proposed PPEC system, all new postulants would reside at a permanent education facility wherein they could complete their entire training and take the Fifth-level Sangha exam at any time throughout the year. The establishment of a PPEC was initially suggested at the turn of the millennium in response to the large numbers of postulants then graduating from the order's postulant education program (*Hyundae Bulgyo Editorial 2001*). The EDBP convened a planning committee, which, in 2002, had selected four monasteries around the country to serve as regional PPECs (*Cho 2002*). Yet the plan was abandoned due to resistance from postulants' home temples, which had relied on postulants to provide manual labor.

Despite the cancellations of the planned PPECs in 2002, the EDBP has revisited the proposal several times over the last decade. During an order-sponsored workshop held in 2016 for monastic instructors in charge of postulant education, several monastics again began advocating for the establishment of a PPEC. However, this time the proposition was not in response to the large number of postulants, but out of concern over the quality of education postulants were receiving and the lack of qualified monastic instructors during the "Daily Education" period of postulants' training, (*Shin 2016*, see Section 4.2 above). The possible establishment of PPEC by the order continues to remain a subject of discussion within the EDBP. Given the order's increasingly aging population, the continued drop in postulant recruitment, and the closure of the order's smaller temples, the establishment of a PPEC might be inevitable if the order is to maintain consistency in the training of the younger generations of monastics. Yet, it is unlikely that such plans would materialize soon. Not only are their practical considerations to overcome, but such a reorganization would represent a further shift in monastic culture, removing postulants' preceptors/preceptresses and prospective home temples even further from these crucial stages in their monastic

education. Nevertheless, the order's *30-year History* argues that the creation of a PPEC would be the most effective way of establishing a stable location for training postulants in textual studies, meditation, doctrine, and daily rituals while also cultivating "the right Buddhist faith and mindset as true monks" (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 45–46).

#### 4.5. Education of Foreign Postulants

A final issue of importance to the future of the order's postulant education program concerns the quality of education among foreign postulants seeking to ordain with the order. Following the efforts of Masters Kusan (1909–1983), Seungsahn (1927–2004), and other JO-affiliated monastics since the 1970s to spread Korean Buddhism among western audiences (Kim and Park 2022, pp. 2–5), the order has seen an increase in non-Korean monastics. Since the turn of the millennium, the majority of these foreign postulants have been funneled to the Hwagysa International Zen Center in Seoul and the Musangsa Temple's International Zen Center outside Daejeon, which both share dual affiliation with the JO and Master Seungshan's international Kwan Um School of Zen. Given the level of attention given to foreign monastics in South Korea's Buddhist media, it is surprising that the order has provided little data regarding its foreign postulants and the subject has been entirely ignored in the order's *30-year History*. Nevertheless, in March 2011, the JO's Education Department formally opened a training center for foreign postulants at the Hwagysa International Zen Center and, during its first three years, the program saw an average of 15 foreign postulates graduate per year. However, by 2014, that number of successful graduates had dropped to just three or four, with the majority of their peers abandoning the program, and by 2016, the program had closed entirely due to a lack of enrollment. According to Venerable Hyongak, an American-born, Harvard-educated former JO monastic who had served as head of the Hwagysa International Zen Center, many western postulants were driven away from the program by the JO's militaristic, hierarchical, and coercive culture. Furthermore, in addition to the myriad chores and other responsibilities expected of Korean postulants, foreign postulants were additionally required to attend Korean language courses at Dongguk University during their training (Kim 2016a; Cho 2016). Following his formal break with the order in 2016, Ven. Hyongak claimed that "(f)oreign monks in Korea are simply decoration for the Jogye Order" as the order "keeps narrowing [its] doors" for foreign monastics.<sup>5</sup>

Given Ven. Hyongak's harsh criticisms and the failure of the Hwagysa foreign postulant training center, it is not surprising that the order's *30-year History* would avoid the subject. Yet, the absence is notable considering Uri Kaplan dedicated several pages to the subject of foreign postulants in Korean monasteries in his recently published monograph, *Monastic Education in Korea* (2020, pp. 113–17). Considering the JO's renewed interest in international propagation in response to the order's domestic decline (see Kim and Park 2022, pp. 12–14), the order would do well to reevaluate why the Hwagysa International Zen Center failed to better prepare foreign postulants for success as monastics within the order. Nevertheless, Kaplan notes that the successful matriculation of the order's postulants and novices not only requires a good command of Korean and Chinese characters but also enculturation to the order's "rigid hierarchies" early in their monastic careers (Kaplan 2020, p. 116). So long as this remains the case, the barriers to the successful ordination of foreign postulants within the order will remain high.

## 5. Conclusions

As surveyed in the order's *30-year History*, over the last three decades the JO's postulant education system has made considerable progress in standardizing, centralizing, and modernizing Buddhist education for aspiring monastics. Furthermore, the program has successfully seen over 9800 ordained novices graduate since its launch in 1991. Yet, as noted by Venerable Hyeil, the newly appointed ninth director of the JO's Education Department, there is a "broad consensus" within Korea's Buddhist community that the religion is in crisis and, within the JO in particular, that its future is in peril. As such, Hyeil vowed upon

his appointment to reverse the downward trend in monastic recruitment and raise the number of annually ordained novices to 150 by 2025 through a multifaceted plan involving greater youth outreach efforts, an increased social media presence, and online Buddhist educational materials, along with an expansion of the JO's international missionary efforts (Park 2022b).

As Hyeil has promised even further reforms to the order's monastic education system, it is likely that the JO's postulant education system will continue to undergo changes. Given the aging population of order's monastics and the widespread closures of many branch temples, it is likely that the general trend towards centralization and standardization of the postulant education process will only continue. Yet, as noted in the order's *30-year History*, postulant education "should not simply be a rite of passage." Rather, it is "urgent" that the order develop appropriate educational facilities and textbooks for its postulants and that staffed and taught professional educators are present in an adequate timeframe. The *30-year History* concludes that primary obstacle to attaining these goals is securing adequate funding and argues against cutting the budget for the order's postulant education program "just because the number of Postulants has decreased" (Jogye Order 2022, pp. 46–47).

Whether any future changes to the order's postulant education program will involve the establishment of a PPEC, the hiring of additional monastic educators, or attempts to relaunch a dedicated training center for foreign postulants remains to be seen, as do the future effects of recent changes on the traditionally hierarchical culture of the order's various monastic lineages. The JO faces the delicate challenge of balancing its attempts to increase the attractiveness of the monastic lifestyle for younger generations in the 21st century without sacrificing the high standards of education, practice, and morality the order struggled to establish for its monastics over recent decades. As noted by Ven. Hyeil, "the Sangha community must adapt to social changes" while remaining grounded in the Buddha's precepts. "We need to create a climate of diligence and training while keeping the precepts so that we can become a trusted Sangha" (Park 2022b).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As noted by Kaplan, "(s)mall numbers of the Thai and Tibetan sangha actually go through the seminary programs, and if any mandatory training is required for ordination at all, it is commonly short and focused on learning the ritual chants. Even in contemporary Japan, where most Buddhist priests receive degrees from sectarian universities, other than short training sessions in monasteries, extensive Buddhist doctrinal education is not a mandatory precondition for ordination". (Kaplan 2020, p. 68).
- <sup>2</sup> For more detail discussion on the general monastic education in modern Korean Buddhism, see Kim (2013, pp. 61–87; 2017, pp. 277–312).
- <sup>3</sup> Volkov notes that the purpose and content of these exams remains unknown.
- <sup>4</sup> See (Kaplan 2020, p. 12) for a complete list.
- <sup>5</sup> [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_entertainment/755201.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/755201.html), accessed on 16 January 2023.

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