

August, 2021 | First locally trained Zen Buddhist priest ordained in Toledo

<https://www.toledoblade.com/news/religion/2021/08/15/Community-service-Winifred-Shokai-Martin-is-the-first-locally-trained-Zen-Buddhist-priest-to-be-ordained-in-Toledo/stories/20210815019>

With each pass of the razor, each silver lock that fell away, Winifred Shokai Martin transformed.

In many ways, in line with the tradition of the spiritual and religious path she had chosen in Zen Buddhism, Ms. Martin had already been acting as a priest for years; the community who gathered around her on the temple lawn already thought of her as a priest.

With her shaved head, and later the heavy o'kesa wrapped around her shoulders, she now looked the part, too.

"The ceremony," she reflected, "is just a recognition of what's already there."

Reverend Martin's ordination represents a significant milestone of the Buddhist Temple of Toledo, representatives of which gathered in lawn chairs for the outdoor ceremony on Aug. 8. She entered into the temple's just-started seminary in its inaugural class in 2017, and she is now the first locally trained priest to be ordained in Toledo.

The Rev. Jay Rinsen Weik called the moment "a real point of pride for everyone here."

Reverend Weik serves as the abbot of the Buddhist Temple of Toledo, and until now, he and his wife, the Rev. Karen Do'on Weik, have served as the sole clergy for a growing community of more than 225 Buddhists. Especially with a geographic reach that they saw extend under the exclusively virtual services and programming of the pandemic, that community extends well beyond the immediate region in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan.

Reverend Martin, 63, of Sylvania, is a welcome addition to their clerical ranks at the Buddhist Temple of Toledo. She goes by Shokai, now Reverend Shokai, in the community that uses chosen dharma names. Her now formalized role enables her to celebrate liturgies like those the temple holds twice a week on Wednesdays and Sundays.

She's also in a position to honor special requests for liturgies, too, like a marriage or a home blessing – something that she said tends to crop up in a growing community.

“People will often call and say, ‘Can you do a house blessing?’” Reverend Martin said. “We don't have enough priests to serve all of these requests. Now we can be much more responsive.”

## THE PATH TO PRIESTHOOD

Reverend Martin's path to the priesthood started – indirectly, at least – in the office.

She's an executive assistant in the provost's office at Eastern Michigan University, and she recalled that the university had years ago brought in a secular meditation teacher to help assuage workplace stress. She liked it; it piqued her interest, and she began connecting with meditation groups in Ann Arbor:

Then she heard about the Zen Center of Toledo, as it was known at the time. She decided to check it out, too. But, that, she recalled, “was a bit of a culture shock.”

She wasn't expecting “liturgy and robes and bells,” she said, and wasn't keen on them. She'd by that point disengaged from the faith tradition of her childhood in the deeply Catholic Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, and she didn't think she wanted these liturgical trappings.

But something kept pulling her back.

When the Rev. Melissa Myozen Blacker of Worcester, Mass., ordained the Weiks at Lourdes University in 2010, Ms. Martin was there, too, as a part of the inaugural class to take the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts in a Jukai ceremony on the same day; another Jukai ceremony is scheduled for Sunday.

Then there was an opportunity for a more formalized student-teacher relationship known as Shoken. And then the launch of a seminary, Ms. Martin again among the first cohort of five.

“Everything around this path is organic. I'm always saying that, and it really is,” she said. “I didn't go in with the intention of being a priest. Nothing was farther from my mind.”

Zen Buddhism isn't a monolithic institution, and so different different sanghas, or communities, tend to organize themselves somewhat differently especially in this country; some ordain priests and some do not, Reverend Jay Weik explained, and there's also a difference in general between the sometimes overlapping roles of teachers and the liturgy-focused priests.

The Buddhist Temple of Toledo set up its seminary for one year of a discernment-oriented postulancy, then an indefinite number of years of training in the novitiate. Novices learn under individual relationships with their teachers, the Weiks, and the curriculum covers academic texts as well as elements like pastoral counseling and liturgy – much the same topics that any minister-in-training would find in a seminary of any faith tradition, Reverend Martin said.

And through it all, novices are serving the sangha: “It’s not that you qualify and then you go do it,” Reverend Martin said. “You’re actually building the plane as you’re flying it.”

It’s in large part why the recent ordination, while momentous, is less a new chapter than a recognition of a chapter that’s already being written.

“The sangha sees a priest,” Reverend Weik said, pointing to this among the factors that he and his wife consider in determining when a novice is ready for ordination. “There is a sangha recognition that this person has been functioning beautifully as a priest for some time.”

## **BECOMING A PRIEST**

Her fellow novices snipped the first locks of hair during the ordination ceremony on Aug. 8, then deferred to the professional hand of Gina Shindo Sparks, another member of the sangha whose steady use of the razor became a focal point in the two-hour ceremony.

Reverend Martin is not expected to keep her head shaved as she goes forward as a priest, but it’s a deeply rooted and meaningful act upon ordination, as the lawn-chair congregation came to appreciate as they watched outside the Buddhist Temple of Toledo.

It symbolizes letting go of attachment, as the ordinand and her teacher explained; the final symbolic snip is a visualization of the transition between secular and ordained life.

“It’s been part of the Buddhist tradition from its very inception, some 2,600 years ago,” Reverend Weik said. “It’s something that’s common in pretty much any Buddhist tradition, from Thailand to Tibet to Japan to China to Vietnam to Toledo.”

Concerns regarding the delta variant – particularly among a safety-conscious congregation that only just returned to limited in-person gatherings – had drawn the ceremony outdoors. And pandemic-related construction delays on a new temple facility for now keep the sangha in their long-time rented space in Holland.

But even the occasional motorcycle roaring past on Angola Road didn’t pull from the solemnity of the ordination service, with its sonorous bells, melodic chants, and spiritual depth.

The ceremony in some ways offered a visualization of the growing and maturing community, a point on which Reverend Martin said she'd been reflecting as she approached ordination.

Those who participated or attended represented a wide range of service and commitment to their community: Some wore the bib-like rakusus associated with Jukai, and others gray robes signifying Shoken. The four remaining novices, in black robes, significantly participated in the ceremony.

Reverend Martin now wears a robe known as an o'kesa, distinguishing her as a priest. She said she's been thinking about her new role as such in the sangha, and in the distribution of these commitment levels, no one better than another; that they refer to as the mandala.

To be a priest is a weighty responsibility, she said.

"I feel a great responsibility for the mandala of the sangha," she said, "for holding that priestly place for now and being joined by others."