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Mayor's Office
City of Portland
1221 SW 4th Room 340
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The Honorable Tom Potter,

Greetings,

I am Rev. Meiko Jones, Prior of the Portland Buddhist Priory, a small Soto Zen Buddhist temple in Southeast Portland. Our temple is affiliated with the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, whose headquarters are at Shasta Abbey in Mt. Shasta, California. This temple and lay congregation (Sangha) have been in Portland since the mid-seventies. There are three monastics living in the temple and offering Buddhist services to the public. We monastics are those who have left the householder's life and have taken vows of poverty and celibacy as we practice the Way of Buddhism and offer the teaching of the Buddhist Way. In our Order both men and women are usually referred to as monks.

The reason for writing to you is to ask the City of Portland via the Mayor's office if you would grant permission to the monks of the Priory, and occasionally other monks who are part of our Order, to do a traditional Buddhist alms round. This practice has been an integral part of monastic Buddhist practice for the last 2500 years and in recent years has been introduced into American culture in such cities as Spokane, Washington; Bloomington, Indiana; and Ukiah and Mount Shasta, California. It is traditional to ask the City or town one lives in for permission to do the alms round.

Historically, going on alms rounds enabled monks to live and teach after taking up the “homeless” life, which entailed offering or relinquishing worldly possessions at ordination and beginning to practice relying upon the lay followers (Sangha) for their well being and support. In return the monks would offer the Buddha Dharma (the teaching) to all those who would ask or make offerings to the monks; this is so to the present day. A purpose of the alms round is to teach monks the virtues of humility and gratitude, and to remind us that we are completely dependent on others. The underlying attitude is that we make ourselves available to the generosity of others, rather than to look to receive offerings. Performing the alms round reminds us that we are permitted to live in this society and City due to the goodwill and tolerance of others.

There is also a public benefit. It is believed in Buddhism that the presence of monastics in society is a sign of blessing and merit for the country and its citizens. Making an offering of food during an alms round benefits the donor. The opportunity to see monks in public is something that many people find encouraging in today’s world. It is an opportunity for any person, not just Buddhists, to make an offering and have that offering dedicated to a good cause, whether it be a wish for their well being, or a memory for a loved one, or as a prayer or wish for peace, the eradication of poverty, etc. The alms round also serves as a gentle reminder that there are people dedicated to practicing loving-kindness and peace in this world.

Up to this point I have stated what the alms round is, but I think it **is** important to mention what the alms round is not. This religious practice is not begging and involves no solicitation or proselytizing of any kind. Only food, and no money, is accepted. The monks walk silently in a meditative way ringing a bell, and then chant a formal “alms verse” when something is offered. Questions regarding the alms round will be answered if someone asks, but the monks will do so only briefly, as the wish is to complete the round as quietly as possible. In doing an alms round the monks wish not to disrupt the daily routine of the City and its citizens, nor call attention to themselves for any purpose other than what is being stated here. The purpose is to simply perform the traditional alms round quietly and with dignity and then return to the temple. We look upon the alms round as a ceremony and conduct ourselves mindfully, with silent respect and reverence to all around us.

If I may, I would like to describe the form of the alms round as it would occur here in Portland. A number of monks (3-6) would walk silently along a selected and approved route in the City. A lead monk carries a staff and rings an “alms bell” (the sound is about the same noise level as the kind

of bell you hear at Salvation Army donation stations), with the remaining monks following and carrying the traditional alms bowls. They would simply walk slowly along the determined route, pausing only when approached by a donor to give alms, then continue along until they arrive at the pick-up point. Monks are not allowed to make any kind of verbal or bodily request for alms. They do not pause in front of places of business, nor interfere with or obstruct the flow of pedestrian or automobile traffic in any way; they just simply walk. The monks wear traditional broad brim hats that cover a portion of their faces yet allow them to keep the eyes lowered and focused ahead of them, i.e. allowing adequate vision. They do not speak except when an offering is made by a donor. At that time they chant a verse of thanks. There would be a few others (lay sangha) following the monks who would be available to answer questions and to collect up any offerings that exceed the amount the monks can carry.

How a person would make an offering is as follows. Anyone who wishes to make an offering approaches one of the monks in the alms line and holds an offering within view. The food offering is then received by one of the monks in his/her bowl. (If it is too large for the bowl it is passed to one of the lay sangha who take care of it.) The monk then asks the person to what or to whom they would like to dedicate the merit of the offering. Upon hearing the purpose, they chant a scripture verse in gratitude for the offering and resulting merit. If there is more food donated than the monks can use, what is left would be offered to one of the organizations in the city that feed the homeless and the poor.

Upon reading the above it is our hope that you will consider our request and grant permission for us to do the alms round in Portland. We would then confer with you or your designated representative or city department about possible routes and frequency of occurrence. (Most groups we know perform the round monthly.) If you would like some information about others who have done it, I have some newspaper and magazine articles which I would be glad to provide for your review. My deepest gratitude to you for taking the time to consider this. I will await your answer.

Sincerely,

Rev. J. Meiko Jones
Prior, Portland Buddhist Priory
503 238-1123