In a remote, mountainous province of northern Thailand, ten-year-old Nawin Nanit is joining a group of boys preparing to be ordained as monks for the first time. All devout Buddhists in Thailand will spend around a month or more in a monastery at some point in their life, but for the Shan people of Mae Hong Son, boys traditionally are first ordained between the ages of seven and fourteen.

For Nawin this means a week-long spiritual festival called Poy Sang Long, during which he will be turned into a little prince before joining the monastery to study Buddhist philosophy.

1. Nawin is ten years old, lives in Thailand’s second largest city, Chiang Mai, and loves playing football.
2. The first step in the ceremony for Nawin is to have his head shaved as a sign of spiritual devotion. Buddhists believe that shaving their head gets rid of confusion, hostility and vanity. This is always done with a small razor—not an electric one.
3. Freshly shaved, Nawin and the boys are cleansed in a ritual using sacred water and turmeric, then brought to the temple for chanting and prayers.
4. Now begins the process of turning ordinary Nawin into a little prince. This tradition is based on the path that Buddha’s own son, Rāhula, took when he became ordained. He shed his princely riches to become a Buddhist.
5. From now until the final day of Poy Sang Long, when boys enter the monastery, novices are not allowed to touch unholy ground. They are carried from temple to temple by ‘Tapae’—which here is Nawin’s dad.
6. All of the boys are dressed up as princes, as Rāhula was before becoming a monk. In their colourful outfits they pray at each temple on the procession.
7. In one temple, Nawin and the boys all hold onto the Sai Sin—a white string that is tied to a Buddha image then passed around each boy’s folded hands. The chanting of the monks symbolically flows through the Sai Sin and protects those who wear or hold it.
8. The boys are all treated as the royalty they are dressed as—being fed by their parents.
9. Now Nawin has been ordained he is wearing the orange robes of a novice monk. He has also had his eyebrows shaved.
10. This is the day after Poy Sang Long, and the boys are now novice monks. One job for the novices is to rise early and collect alms, which is mostly food, from the nearby villagers.
11. Nawin will stay at the monastery for fifteen days, but his father can join him to spend the nights together.