



How to Address Buddhist Monastics & Buddhist Teachers in the Tibetan Tradition

Venerable Tsultrim Tenzin Choesang

Including information regarding the different levels of ordination and taking precepts.

I have written this piece specifically for Sakyadita and it is released as a 2nd draft. It may be circulated on this understanding. If anyone feels that I have made any errors in my understanding, and/or they have additional knowledge that they consider would be useful, please contact me and I will happily consider the information for inclusion in any update. I also touched lightly upon the politics surrounding the continued practice of Lamaism in Tibetan Buddhism.

Bikshuni Choesang 20 January 2008
Choesang@the-hermit-online.co.uk

We all feel more comfortable when we are able to mingle with any group in society without appearing to be impolite. Of course it is our ego coming to the fore if we feel embarrassment when creating a faux pas, although our embarrassment is often due to our wishing to appear polite and not stand out as appearing ignorant.

I have attempted to cover all the 'everyday' forms of address that one is likely to come across when meeting monastics practising within the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism. Several protocols have changed since His Holiness the Dalai Lama came out of Tibet and it can be very confusing, as some Tibetans use and wish to retain the old protocols, while His Holiness advocates a simpler, more accommodating and freer style of address and behaviour. There are many that are unsure of the accuracy of the 'word of mouth' advice that is given, as in the past we just mimicked what we could pick up while watching Tibetans and other Dharma followers and this has resulted in a mix of understanding. For instance, a number of nuns that I mix with will still follow the Tibetan reverence address of wagging their tongues when a lama arrives. It is wholly a Tibetan form of address, nothing to do with Buddhism, and we are not expected to even try to copy this habit. One can also see misunderstandings in monastery protocols as in recent footage filmed in Tibet, as the suppression of old customs and protocols have affected the training of monastics and lay followers of the Dharma.

It is very important to always use one of these titles when you are addressing Sangha. It is considered rude to just say their name.

There are some other titles left out here as I felt that, as they are not in current common use, that it would create more confusion. For instance, a lama can have a title that has been created from his home monastery (carrying the monastery name) or some other significant name (usually parochial) which is pertinent to that monk's habitat, experience or realisation. At times, this name then becomes a title in its own right and future incarnations are recognised.

[Reference to the Title of Sangha](#)

I think that it is worth mentioning the title Sangha here.

The word Sangha was originally coined in the days of Shakyamuni Buddha and referred to the monastic body. This has continued throughout the convening years and is used for all groups of Buddhist monastics.

It is usually used in regard others and not about oneself. For instance, I would not say that I am sangha, unless I was specifically teaching and saying that 'as a member of the ??? sangha' and so forth.

A very recent interpretation has developed among westerners, that of referring to all practising buddhists as sangha. It is now becoming a familiar group title but I think that it is important to still make the distinction between ordained sangha and lay sangha.

When one is taking refuge, one takes refuge in the sangha. This refers to those who are nearing enlightened (arahants – individuals with high realisations) and thereby are closer to buddhahood, and secondly the body of monastics who are practising Buddhism. This is due to the number of vows that each individual holds and recognition of the profound blessing that holding precepts brings. It is a way of both honouring their commitment as well as tapping into the merit that this brings. Therefore it can be seen as a little presumptuous for lay people to assume the group title of sangha and you would not find either a Tibetan or a Thai presuming this form of address. In another way, one could say that it is a nice way of defining lay buddhists as a group and this could possibly be a point for discussion in light of historical knowledge when a Dharma group is formed and creates its group identity.

[The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet](#)

His Holiness is often referred to in his short form as The Dalai Lama. It is commonly shortened even further to HHDL in writing when referring to him a number of times in the same document (informal). It is appropriate to refer to His Holiness once with his full title and in further discussion or writing to just mention 'His Holiness'. In emails / on the web it has become common practice to refer to him as HHDL, and this is still considered polite.

The Dalai Lama is referred to as His Holiness by buddhists when amongst other buddhists and as [The Dalai Lama to non buddhists](#).

In formal situations it is appropriate to introduce him with his full title His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet and then continue to refer to him as 'His Holiness' throughout the same discussion. One would refer to him personally as 'Your Holiness'. It is not necessary to use any of his other names when introducing him and the majority of 'lamas' only use two names – eg Tenzin Gyatso.

Tibetans refer to him as Kundun when they are talking sometimes in private but never to his face or in a public situation, although one may hear murmurs in the crowd.

[Heads of Lineages](#)

They may have a number of titles but they also have His Holiness as the prefix. There is some confusion over this and some great Lamas, including Dargyab Rinpoche, advise that only His Holiness the Dalai Lama should be referred to as His Holiness, whereas we certainly refer to the heads of the three other main lineages as His Holiness – ie HH the 17th Karmapa, HH Sakya Trizin and HH Mindroling Trichen Rinpoche HH 100th Ganden Rinpoche. In short form it is acceptable to write HH, especially in email when referring to them.

Some heads of areas of Tibet are referred to as 'His Eminence' eg His Eminence Lodon Sherab Dargyab Kyabgön Rinpoche. Again one would use the title then full name when introducing him for the first time to a non buddhist audience or a mixed large buddhist and non buddhist audience, and then refer to him as Rinpoche or His Eminence / Your Eminence at a public talk. Within his own student base and at smaller audience opportunities, one would slip straight into Rinpoche as the form of address after the initial introduction. His usual form of address is Dargyab Rinpoche.

[Tulku](#)

This is the title used to define the reincarnation of a great teacher. It is more often used as an adjective but occasionally used as a title.

Tibetan Buddhism is very patriarchal and the majority of titles and recognitions are given to men and are a recognition of past great male teachers/practitioners. When one asks why a nun or

great yogini has not been similarly recognised, the usual reply is one of repeating the parable of 'it is better for one's practice to hide one's realisation – like a butter lamp under a pot'.... Or we are asked if we are full of ego in our desire to have a title. My view and my usual response is that monks have many highly realised masters as role models who are recognised by their peers and 'the establishment' and it is important for nuns and lay females to have the same. The previous Panchen Lama, prior to his death in 1989, stated that "one should not always worry about a future teacher being the actual reincarnation of a lama, but one that holds the qualities of that previous lama"..... .."and it is better to recognise a monk at 10 years old as a reincarnation of a long past master, after he has shown his capabilities and character". From this, one can deduce that monks or nuns showing great abilities could be recognised as having potential and groomed from about 10 years old onwards. As the situation currently stands, it is important for some nuns to be recognised very early in life as when young monks are 'recognised' they are given a better education and groomed to become the next generation of teachers. This means that Tibetan nuns rarely become teachers of the Dharma outside of their nunnery classrooms. I have met a couple of amazing young girls who have been put into a nunnery at a very early age (4 years and 2 ½ years). In this they have been recognised by their parents as being someone really special, however, this will not be taken further by anyone and both of them receive the same education and opportunities as their sister nuns. One hopes that they will continue to shine - I wonder what the true opportunities will be at the end of the day!

Very few westerners have been recognised as tulkus and this appears to be wrapped up in Tibetan politics as well. Again, we need a system of recognising good role models of both monks and nuns within our own societies. It does not really matter if we use the Lamaism system for recognising potential great teachers or not. They shine out as examples anyway. However, when the whole of our 'church' is wrapped up in this system for recognition of ability and permission for teaching at its various levels, it is difficult to function outside of this framework with any true success, which seems the case at this time.

[Rinpoche](#)

The title of Rinpoche is a recognition of (1) being a past great teacher (tulku) or (2) that of portraying high realisations or devoted works in this life. Invariably it is only given to men, except in rare exceptions.

Usually the title Rinpoche comes at the end of the name, therefore a [Rinpoche is referred to](#) by his name and then Rinpoche [if you are speaking](#) about [him](#). Generally students refer to him as just Rinpoche if around at a common meeting and it is obvious which Rinpoche they are referring to. You also [just](#) say [Rinpoche](#) if [you are talking to him](#) and this is considered appropriate and polite.

Again, when first introducing a Rinpoche at a meeting or to a large audience, one uses the full title and name in the first instance. If one is introducing one's own teacher within one's own student base, then the general name and Rinpoche is all that is used, ie Thrangu Rinpoche. Often a commonality is developed for each individual ie Lama Zopa Rinpoche is always referred to as such and not just Zopa Rinpoche. It is all a matter of choice by the lama in the early stage of their vocation and organically develops.

[Kabje \(Je'\)](#)

This is a recognition of realisations and slips into usage when writing about some lamas, usually initiated by students when their teacher reaches a certain level of experience, realisation and behaviour in their life. Usually the shortened form Je' is used, as in Je' Tsongkhapa.

[Jetsuma Jetsuna](#)

This is a title that is given to females and is often used as part of the title - eg Jetsuma Tsultrim.

Khendro

A title given to female teachers. This can be either lay or ordained sangha as in Pema Sangzin Khendro, at the Vajra yogini nunnery in the States, who is a lay person and recognised as the emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal (A Tibetan yogini).

Lopon

Master Dharma Teacher. This can be used for either lay or ordained sangha. It is given to the recognised head teacher, eg Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the head teacher within the Bön lineage/tradition and Lopon Barbara Bois, the senior lay teacher at Garchen Institute, Arizona.

Khensur or Khen Rinpoche

If they are an Abbot of a Monastery they are called Khen when they are still Abbot and Khensur when they retire from this position.

So a Lama could be referred to as Khen 'their name' then Rinpoche, or Khensur 'their name' and then Rinpoche. Sometimes the title Rinpoche is put before their names and sometimes after. Again it seems to be a matter of personal preference and what seems to trip more naturally off the tongue and becomes established in their early years.

When you are referring to them within their student base, then you say Khen Rinpoche and sometimes just Rinpoche. When talking to them, you just say Rinpoche.

Again, when introducing you use the full name and title in the designated order and then slip into the familiar of Rinpoche while still in the same conversation.

The full title of a Khen or Khensur can also include the name of the monastery that they were abbot. eg Sermey Khensur Lobsang Tharchin Rinpoche, who was Abbot of Sera Mey. I am not sure if this also applies while they are still the incumbent abbot.

Lama

The title Lama is given in a number of situations and can mean different things in different lineages, eg it can be used for the teacher who also holds the title Rinpoche, or as a title given to a monastic who has completed at least one three year retreat, or has completed the years of study required and is designated as fit to become a teacher of Buddhism.

Sometimes the title Lama can come at the end of the name and sometimes in front. So if I were to be called by the title Lama, I could be called Choesang Lama or Lama Choesang.

Some have a number of titles and each of them have a favourite way of being referred to. For instance, one of my Lamas is called Lama Lhundrup. Lhundrup is in fact his surname, whereas many use their first name. He is also Abbot of a monastery, therefore in a formal situation the introduction should be Khen Rinpoche. However, the norm that has developed for Lama Lhundrup is Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lhundrup Rigsell when introducing him on a formal basis and sometimes in a more informal address we refer to him as Khen Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup.

As a student, when talking with him I would prefix everything with Lama – ie Lama, may I speak with you, Lama, would you consider....

Although within the Kagyu lineage the title of lama is given when someone has completed at least one three year retreat, again it is invariably given to the monks and male nagspas and not to nuns. A few nuns who have become teachers within the Karma Kagyu and are also heads of Dharma centres hold the title lama eg Lama Zangmo at Samye Dzong in London.

I know of one nun who has spent many years in retreat and she is still called Ani, whereas her peers who are male have been given the title Rinpoche. Of course no one asks for the title for themselves, therefore no Tibetan nun will push herself forward and her fellow sisters are taught to believe that monks are more important than nuns.

Lamas can also come from amongst the lay community. Often it is a recognised teacher – either as a tulku, or through experience. They start in the monastery in the usual way but as adults decide to live as a lay person, eg Chime Rinpoche and Dayab Rinpoche.

This becomes even more confusing within the Nyingma tradition as it is difficult to understand who is a monastic and who lives as a lay lama, as they still retain their titles of Rinpoche etc.

Use of suffix – la

'La' is the familiar and is commonly used as a term of familiarity in a 'loving' kind of way - ie a student uses it for their teacher, both when talking to them and about them, eg Geshe la or Lama la.

If you really wish to over emphasise a request in a humorous but loving way, then adding the familiar 'la' at the end of the name is commonly used within a monastery and nunnery - eg Lama la or Ani Choesang la. This way one knows that one is being approached to say yes to something that the student or younger monk/nun wants. It is all taken in the style that it is delivered.

Humour is an everyday part of any monastery or nunnery and the more enlightened the teacher, the more sense of humour they appear to possess, so do not be frightened to be naturally humorous when you understand the norm in that environment. However, I have found that English wit often does not translate and can cause confusion unless one explains and then more often the humour is lost in the translation and explanation.

Geshe

In the Geluk tradition and now Bön, if you are a qualified teacher then your title is Geshe. This means Doctor of Philosophy. The title Geshe is given to those who have passed their philosophy exams at the end of a 15-25 year study programme. If one gains a 'first' within these examinations then one passes as a Lharampa Geshe. I have been advised that one has to be a fully ordained monastic to receive the qualification of Geshe, which raises an interesting conundrum in that Tibetan nuns within the Tibetan tradition are now studying for their Geshe qualification and none of them hold the Gelongma ordination!

Again, when making a formal introduction, one would use the title and then their full name. After this, usually the familiar 'la' is added and they are referred to as Geshe la when talking about them and also Geshe la when talking to them (it is pronounced *Gaysh* when adding the la and *Gay-she* when using it as the prefixed title to their name). It is important to make the distinction in pronunciation when talking or introducing to lay people so that it does not sound like the Japanese 'geisha'.

Naming Protocol

You probably know already that within many Asian countries they say the family name first, followed by the given name. So Choesang is in fact my first name even though my name is written as Tenzin Choesang. Also, within Tibetan Buddhism names are changed upon receipt of each set of vows and it is up to the individual to decide which name (amongst their collection of names) to choose, unless the ordination master who has given the names decides for them. The names are chosen as an aspiration for the monk/nun to work towards, as the majority of the names are an adjective, with the 'surname' also one of the names of the ordination master - eg I received my novice ordination from His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet and he gave me his name of Tenzin and chose the first name as Choesang. Tenzin means 'keeper' and

Choesang 'Dharma - pure' which can also be a metaphor for the tantric teachings. Therefore I was given the aspiration of becoming a keeper of the pure Dharma and the foundation of becoming a teacher of Buddhism.

Tibetans also change their names in line with an important event in their lives as a protection or aspiration, all adding to the general confusion of what to call someone. □

Western Monastics and their Ordination names

It is a matter of personal choice if a westerner keeps their 'Christian' name or adopt their ordained name. Certainly in the early days the majority kept their western names due to the attitude of the majority of people in their countries/communities. In today's more enlightened and flexible society, it has become more common to adopt our ordained names, or create a mixture of the two.

All Monks and Nuns

For all monks and nuns, their original title is Venerable, shortened to Ven. when you are writing to them. It is not appropriate to talk to any monastic within Tibetan Buddhism by just using their first name. It is considered rude and as if you are shouting at them.

If you do not know the person and wish to attract their attention you can use Venerable and this is considered polite.

From their own side, monks and nuns do not consider themselves to be VENERABLE and do not become attached to the idea. It is a courtesy from your side and an honouring of the robes, the precepts, and the great commitment that a monastic is making.

Within the monastery and nunnery, monks and nuns only refer to their senior ordained sangha as venerable.

Nuns

Nuns have other titles as well. All nuns are referred to as Ani. This means Nun. So when I sign off ' Ani Choesang' , this means Nun Choesang. A few western nuns do not like this title, but most are comfortable with it.

Often in western countries we have adopted the title of Sister as it is difficult for non buddhists to understand that the Ani is not a first name called Annie. I find that it saves confusion and still allows for the necessary politeness to be observed. Also, people are still familiar with the attitude of respecting a Sister and this allows for the slight distancing and natural protocols to be observed.

When you know them you can call a nun Ani - la the 'la' being the familiar, or dear Choesang la, especially when REALLY requesting something. There are so many little ways of addressing someone. These develop organically amongst peers in the early days and it is just a matter of learning their common form of address.

When formally introducing a nun you would say Venerable and then their name. After that you can refer, both about them and to them, as Ani la while in the same conversation. If you are referring to a senior nun, especially if they are your teacher, you would continue to refer to them as Venerable, eg when writing a newsletter or in correspondence to their group. Venerable Thubten Chodron, who has started a nunnery in America, is now always referred to as 'Venerable'.

When you are ordained it is appropriate to refer to each other in both written form and verbally by the first name, or a combined name only without any title, or the prefix Ani. The same applies between Gelongmas (senior nuns). A Gelongma would address a younger nun by her first name only. A junior nun holding either Rabjung or Getsulma vows would address her seniors as Ani – eg Ani Choesang.

When nuns refer to another nun, either verbally or in writing to a non monastic, then they would prefix the nun's name with either Venerable or Ani.

Also for nuns: as we have had to take our senior vows from another tradition (this will be explained later), we have to write the title Bikshuni. So when I write a formal letter I write from Venerable Tsuiltrim Tenzin Choesang or Bikshuni Tsuiltrim Tenzin Choesang and when it is within the sangha community I write Bikshuni Tenzin Choesang or, in really informal and everyday situations, Ani Choesang. It depends on whether the audience is Tibetan, from southern Asia or the West. I also have another title of Tsuiltrim which is always used in the first introduction and then can be dropped. Tsuiltrim can sometimes be given as a title and sometimes as a name.

The title Bikshuni is called Gelongma in the Tibetan tradition. The male form is Gelong and the ma is the term used for a female (often Tibetan words are suffixed with ma to denote the female with pa for the male). Among Tibetan monastics I am often referred to as a Gelongma, although technically I am a Bikshuni and I took 347 vows, as apposed to the 365 vows found in Mūlasarvāstivādin documentation for the proposal of Gelongma ordination in Tibet. It is easier for Tibetans to understand that I am a Gelongma – rather than mentioning Bikshuni.

Various levels of ordination

TAKING PRECEPTS (VOWS) WITHIN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

LAY BUDDHIST

Male and Female

Refuge

Layman /Women's Vows

Gengyen

Bodhisattva vows

Tantric Commitments

ORDAINED BUDDHIST

Female

Refuge

RABJUNG

GETSULMA (Novice)

Bodhisattva vows

SIKSHAMANA

BIKSHUNI (Gelongma)

Tantric Commitments

ORDAINED BUDDHIST

Male

Refuge

RABJANG

GETSUL (Novice)

Bodhisattva vows

GELONG (Bhikshu)

Tantric Commitments

I will just mention a little about these, to help in the understanding of what to call a member of the ordained sangha.

Rabjung: Is the first level of ordination and taken by those that wish to leave the home life and learn how to become a monastic. This is given to those first entering the monastery or nunnery. In the west, due to our peculiar circumstances, it has developed as the first step and we frequently do not leave our own homes at this point. Under special circumstances one can also choose not to put on robes at this point, but use it as the first step of commitment while learning more about how to become a monk or nun.

Within the Kagyu lineage one can take the basic precepts (vows) for a period of one year, or for a three year retreat for instance. Within the Gelukpas it is for life, or until one takes higher vows.

Novice: It is called Getsul for men and Getsulma for women. These can be taken by both male and female of any age.

Senior vows: They are called Gelong for male and Gelongma for female. Due to the virtual non establishment of the Gelongma vows in Tibet, as nuns we take our vows in either the Vietnamese Mahayana tradition or the Taiwanese/Chinese traditions. Both are from the Dharmagūpta Vinaya school, whereas the Tibetan Vinaya is Mūlasarvāstivādin based.

The titles are then Bikshu - Bhikshu for men and Bikshuni - Bhikshuni for women. Within the Theravadin tradition, the Pali pronunciation is written as Bikkhu or Bikku for men and Bikkhuni or Bikkuni for women. One has to be an adult to take these vows.

As you can see, various 'Romanised' spellings have developed but they are all referring to the vows of a senior monastic (*also different spellings abound with regards to Tibetan titles and names, adding to the confusion over any one teacher and their lineage*).

There is also an intermediate vow for women (sikshamana) between novice and full vows but these are not referred to in any formal title.

Other titles

Nagpas A Nagpa is a lay person who holds specific commitment precepts. they can live their life as a householder, as a yogi in cave, or in a monastery. The title can also be used for yogis and yoginis who have completed their 49 day dark retreat.

I am only using my colloquial knowledge on this subject, therefore if anyone has any further information regarding this title (from a verifiable source), please let me know.

Khenpo A title for the Manager of the Monastery.

This title is also refers to a degree in the Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyu traditions, and represent between nine and fifteen years of study.

Gheko Disciplinarian in monastery or nunnery

The order in which you refer to those holding precepts

One last section that you may find useful is: In which order should one refer to members of the sangha and lay community? This is one that I often see written incorrectly.

One should always start with the most senior monastic and work down in order. If it were a long list, then it would include the most senior lama – junior lamas – senior monks – junior monks – senior nuns – junior nuns.

Particularly in writing credits for a book, referring to a group photograph, etc, one should observe the protocol of mentioning monastics before lay people. I have often noted that an article will refer to lay people before monastics, or have them mixed up. I have also noted that articles will refer to the contributors as Venerable for the monks and Ani for the nuns. If you wish to distinguish between monks and nuns, it is appropriate to say Venerable Ani, or Ven. Ani and then their name. If you are using both names for monks, then it is also courteous to use both names for each nun. It is not appropriate to just use the name when further into your documentation and certainly not appropriate to just use the last name, an American style that I think has already disappeared in the media. I saw an American Dharma magazine which referred to Venerable Robina Courtin as just Courtin throughout the article!

I hope that in some small way that this helps your understanding.

Ani Tenzin Choesang (Bikshuni)