



Although the following is primarily regarding those within the Tibetan tradition, you can safely apply the advice to any ordained sangha member in any tradition if you are not familiar with their particular code.

Bikshuni Choesang 20 January 2008

Choesang@the-hermit-online.co.uk

Please forgive the self serving nature of this document. It is impossible to pass on the protocols without it appearing self serving. There are various protocols (rules) that apply to all monks and nuns, and some extra ones which apply to nuns as we have a stricter discipline to follow and many precepts regarding interaction with monks and the laity. These are not a matter of rank - ie if one is a Rinpoche or not, but based on how many vows you hold.

- It is not appropriate for a lay person to touch a monastics robes.
- It is not appropriate for a monk to touch a nuns robes.

- It is certainly not appropriate to greet a monastic by giving them a hug.

Protocols for interacting with Sangha

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and kiss form of greeting. If you see a nun using this form of greeting, she has probably decided in a bodhisattva way that this is acceptable amongst her dharma group.

You may see a Tibetan monastic shake hands with another monk or nun. This is a Tibetan courtesy between friends.

Some Tibetans use the touching of hands and foreheads as a personal greeting. This may happen between student and lama and is wholly governed by their particular relationship and should not be initiated by the student.

Nuns are able to hug other nuns, although it does not happen between traditions, unless they become personal friends. There are many restrictions between Bikshunis and we are finding ways of living within the tradition of the past and our Western propensities, without compromising our vows.

Monastics, in practicing bodhisattva behaviour, will willingly give someone a gentle hug if they are ill or dying. They also 'break' some of their other vows in this type of situation and each situation needs to be wisely decided on its own merits.

Some great lamas will also give a nun a hug. Usually one can see that they are totally beyond any sexual inference and someone like Garchen Rinpoche will always greet me by hugging in front of students, but this would never happen in private if there were not any chaperones around.

At the time of Eating

This is the most popular one that causes contradictions and some distress.

Like a number of the vows, they have been interpreted with a different inference throughout time and a repetition of a corruption of anything becomes 'set in stone'; in time.

The Buddha did not actually say that one cannot eat after midday as the only comment. He stated that the morning was for cooking and eating, the afternoon for commerce and the evening for entertainment. He made the precept of eating just one meal a day for a number of reasons. He did not want the monks to ask for food when no one was cooking as it would cause people difficulty if they had to stop and cook. He did not want the monks hanging around the locality eating all day and upsetting the lay community. He instructed that monks and nuns were to beg for their meal and return in order to finish eating by midday, in order that they could then spend the rest of the day and evening in practice and learning. If we were to follow this as a strict vow and not a guideline, we would have to eat our one meal in the early evening as it is popular to now eat the main family meal between 6 and 8pm.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama stops for lunch at 12.30. This appears to be an appropriate time, given the time tendency for lunch in many western countries. In our nunnery and many monasteries that I have visited, we queue at 11.45 for food and usually finish the meal by 12.30.

Please do not assume that because we do not eat strictly before midday that we do not follow our vows and it does not matter. Also, please do not judge us against each other, or against any particular lama. We are all trying to find ways of making this work within our own communities and how we manage in private or in retreat times may be far stricter than our male counterparts (remember that nuns have more vows and a stricter code of behaviour). It will be so much easier for us when we have established monastic communities where we can make arrangements en bloc.

Please ask a visiting monk or nun if they observe a specific time of eating. Just check with them your proposed time and usually they will readily accommodate.

Also, please remember that monastics do not eat onions and garlic. The eating of onions is a difficult one because at different levels and within different practices it can change but garlic is definitely out for all.

For meal times: it is honouring the robes if you ask a monk or nun to go forward in the queue for their meal. It would be a lot better if we could adopt a habit of, either allowing monastics to take their food before lay people leave the floor to queue, or by asking them if you could serve them by filling their plate and allow them to sit comfortably somewhere while you did the queuing. Both of these ways have developed among Thais and the Chinese.

A monastic must always be seated for eating and drinking and it is not appropriate to offer a monastic a drink that is still in the carton or bottle, unless you offer a straw. It is not considered appropriate for us to swig a drink on the move. Of course, little sensible habits have formed when travelling by car. For instance, one cannot have an open cup at this point.

If you are at a table with bowls of food in the centre: follow the bodhisattva rule of 'being mum' and serve from the most senior monastic first down to the 'youngest', and then your fellow lay sisters and brothers.

You will often find that a senior lama will quickly get up to serve all of those around him. It is appropriate (after a little denial) to allow them to do this. It is seen as a way of gaining merit and we must be generous to each other to allow for this.

As senior nuns, we are not allowed to leave anything on our plates. Therefore, it is helpful not to over fill a nuns plate. It is better to offer a little on their plate and some in a side bowl or dish. Novice nuns also learn to follow this practice.

If you are amongst monastic and foreign laity, you do not have to eat everything that is offered. It is better to pass/offer to a more senior member of the group first and then take just a little yourself as a politeness.

Regarding seating protocols

It is not appropriate to sit closely to a monk or nun in a situation where you are touching the robes.

If you are a male, it is important that you do not compromise a nun's vows by sitting close to her and it is better if you are able to allow her to sit next to another female, just in case there should be any inadvertent touching in a crowded situation. Of course, the ideal is to offer a sangha only table if you have the space and allow the nun to decide if she wishes to sit amongst sangha. Often we have very few opportunities of spending time with friends, students and colleagues from around the world and frequently we choose to sit with a particular group in order to maximise the opportunity of their company but we always observe our precepts in this matter.

At Teachings

When at teachings the protocol is for monks and nuns to sit at the front of the space. This is done as we are honouring the number of precepts that each holds. It is important that if you are sitting next to or immediately behind a monastic that you do not touch the robes or their sitting cloth (dingwa).

When you get up from the teaching space, it is appropriate to let all monastics leave the room first. They do this in ordination order. It is a blessing offered and received to honour the robes and precepts in this way. Often at large teachings, monastics will choose to remain for one reason or another and it is appropriate, after giving an opportunity for them to leave, that you leave the teaching quietly.

Unfortunately, the majority of these protocols are not known or considered important by western lay people. When one travels in Asian countries, one can see the local laity honouring monks and nuns in this way, especially in Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan etc. It is a difficult one, as we cannot appear precious when amongst company that does not follow this behaviour. However, often a nun will discreetly manipulate herself to minimise contact with lay people and thereby compromising her vows.

Nuns practising within the Tibetan tradition hold the same vows that their sisters hold within other traditions. If they are novice nuns, their 36 vows are, in their strictest sense, more than those held by Theravadin nuns, however the more relaxed style is to recognise that they are the same, as the Tibetan way has been to expand the base vows into thirty six. All Bikshunis not only hold their 348 vows, but follow all the moral discipline, ethical standards and behavioural guidelines as decreed by Shakyamuni Buddha. The more help that is offered by laity living in the west, and the more opportunities there are for us to practice our code of conduct amongst our lay sangha, then naturally higher standards will develop and be maintained.

In the presence of Monastics

Through non-understanding of monastic vows one can inadvertently cause a monk or nun to compromise their vows. For instance, a monastic teacher is breaking a vow if a lay person lays down in their company while a teaching is in progress or sits while the teacher is standing. I have many instances of this happening when a Tibetan lama has been teaching and certainly many more cases when western lay buddhists are in the presence of western monastic teachers. There has been a slight development in this protocol as, in the west, it is common for a lecturer to stand while the audience is seated. However, this is the exception rather than the rule.

It is not appropriate to wear a hat while in the presence of a monastic teacher.

It is also appropriate to stand when any monastic enters the room. The appropriate behaviour is to stand and make supplication by raising ones hands in the Asian greeting and bowing slightly. One then waits for the monastic to sit before resuming one's seat. Often, particularly the resident lama or teacher will indicate that the student/s should remain seated.

A nun will always stand when a monk joins the table, especially their lama or a teacher. Sometimes this protocol slips when amongst monks and nuns who are friends and from the same organisation.

Nuns teaching lay people

There is a protocol that one should invite the most senior monastic to teach. Within any monastery, nunnery and lineage, there is the protocol of always deferring to one's senior. One does not willingly teach in front of one's teacher or senior, and a deferment conversation takes place between the said individuals. Sometimes a teacher will ask a student to continue, as he may be the lama of his own dharma centre, or the teacher wishes to see how their student teaches.

This same protocol should be adhered to in any situation where you find a teaching taking place. If a monk or nun arrives to a teaching that you have arranged, it is polite to ask them to take over the teaching. In most cases, it is not appropriate for the said monastic to accept and they will graciously decline. One can then ask if they would like to say any prayers or words, either at the beginning or the end of the teachings. Again, usually they will decline.

The same applies to the performing of any liturgy / puja. One should always defer to the most senior monastic. If they are not familiar with your style of practice, they will decline the offer, or they may return the honour by asking you to continue.

In both instances, it is important not to embarrass a monastic by expecting more from them than they are happy to do. Each lineage and even different Gompas within each lineage have different words and music for the same prayers, and no one wishes to feel that they are pressured into leading something that they are not practised in.

One way in which you can easily honour a nun is by asking them to say grace at mealtimes. It is a lovely way in which they can learn some responsibility.

One of our vows, as nuns, is that we are not supposed to teach monks. From your side you do not need to concern yourself about this, however, it would be helpful if you would let the teaching nun know if a monk is in the vicinity. We have our little ways of overcoming the vows, which allows us to follow our internal protocols and apply them to the modern day.

All actions with mindfulness

If in doubt, let mindfulness govern all actions. The Buddha counselled us to work in a state of mindfulness in all of our activities. If you understand and honour the commitment that a monk or nun has made, no matter which nationality and what age that they are, you are helping them to sustain their vows and in turn behave more mindfully and develop the demeanour of a monastic.

It would be helpful if lay people would give nuns space to be what they are, ie to show that you honour the robes and understand that nuns have not only their vows to keep but their code of conduct.

An easy way would be to just ask. When you first meet a nun, ask what their personal requirements are. Offer to understand and support us in our commitment to live our lives as a child of the Buddhas.

We are in the very early stages of developing monastic orders in the west and we are all at the learning stage in many aspects. Within both the Tibetan tradition and the Vietnamese Bikshuni tradition, we are not supposed to share our precepts with the laity. However, I feel that we need to work towards a greater understanding of monastic requirements and if we shared some of our way of life, I am sure that we would all benefit and you would be helping us to develop the demeanour and habit of nuns who are an inspiration to one another and any lay person that we meet.

This advice has been offered with all kindness and humility and I pray that no one feels offended with our words of request.

Ani Tenzin Choesang (Bikshuni)