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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

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Summary

This article provides a guideline for laypersons to consider when visiting Buddhist Temples and Centres, and when interacting with Buddhist Monks and Nuns.

Buddhist Protocols and Etiquettes

Please find below some practical guidelines and considerations of etiquette when you are visiting Buddhist Temples, Teaching Centres and Buddhist Events, and in the company of Monks and Nuns.

There are three main traditions in Buddhism or the practice of Buddha Dhamma. They are Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Then under each come many lineages, traditions and cultural variations. In each country where Buddhism is practised, it adapts to the cultural and social norms of the country as well as following the laws of the land.

The following guidelines are practical in nature and directed to helping persons feel at ease, while fostering self-discipline, humility and mutual respect. They are suitable for those who may be going to a Buddhist Temple for the first time or have not met or been in the company of Buddhist Monastics before, or who are seeking to know a little more about suitable etiquette.

If in doubt, it is always best to observe what others are doing and if still unsure, just ask and someone will be pleased to help you.

Greetings

In the Buddhist religious practice, ordained Monks and Nuns as a group are called the Sangha and can be correctly and respectfully referred to as the Most Venerable Sangha. Individually you may address them as Venerable. It is the same if giving a speech and acknowledging the Monks and Nuns.

Buddhist Monks and Nuns, or the Sangha, maintain many precepts or rules of conduct. The purpose of the precepts is to lay out a code of conduct by which Monastics live by. When Monks or Nuns are visiting a Centre or other place, and in their company, we show respect by mindfully facilitating their observance of those precepts.

A traditional greeting is to place the hands together in a prayer-like gesture in front of your chest, at the level of your heart. When you greet an ordained Monk or Nun, you may also give a slight bow while your hands are still in the “lotus” or “prayer” position. This may or may not be reciprocated, according to the particular tradition of the Monastics concerned. When greeting Monastics, the hands are sometimes (in some traditions) held higher than usual (near the forehead).

Offerings

Generosity is a highly valued virtue, so if one wishes to give a gift, for example flowers, please feel welcome to do so. There is no need to ask, simply note the appropriate time to do so, and if in doubt ask an attendant for assistance. If offering money, this should be placed in an envelope, and given to a lay attendant who will hold it in trust for the Monk or Nun, or the Temple it is donated to.

Diet and Eating

Some Buddhist Monastics (mostly, but not exclusively, Theravada Tradition) do not eat after midday until dawn the next day. Please therefore be thoughtful about eating while in their presence. Many Buddhists choose to be vegetarian, and in some cases, whole orders are strictly vegetarian. This is often the case in the Mahayana tradition. Keep this in mind if you expect to be eating with or in close proximity to the Monastics, or if you are considering offering foodstuffs or meals to them.

Inside the Temple, Meditation or Teaching Hall

If you have been invited to an event or Teaching in a Temple, out of respect for others always arrive early, allowing ten minutes or so before proceedings are timed to begin, so you don't disturb other attendees as they settle to meditate, or simply to focus their mindfully on what is about to happen.

Dress appropriately (see below), remove your shoes and head coverings/hats outside. If you need to keep head coverings on while inside, due to personal reasons, health or your own religious practice, simply ask one of the attendants or Venerable Sangha, and they will explain to the Monastic's. They will understand and welcome you.

It is best to stand both when the Monastics enter the hall, and while making their prostrations at the altar, or are taking their place. If you do not wish to make prostrations yourself, there is no need to do so.

It's good practice also not to disturb others present, so where possible avoid leaving the programme early. If not able to stay for the full time, better the invitation be politely declined. If in a hall with Buddha images, or Sangha present, when you leave, or need to go out briefly to the toilet, it is the custom to respectfully back away one or two steps from the Buddha before actually turning your back.

You should not hold in your hands an umbrella, staff, walking stick, kitchen knife or any weapon or like item. Turn off all electronic devices and phones.

Generally speaking, be aware that Buddhist texts, printed or other materials are never placed directly on the floor, or stepped over, but handled respectfully, and placed in a clean space when not being used.

Appropriate Clothing

For both men and Women, clothes should be clean and tidy, and should cover most of the legs (knees at least) and the upper part of the arms also. Shorts or mini-skirts are not appropriate, nor are tight or low-cut dresses or tops, or dirty feet.

Body Language

If a Buddhist Monastic is sitting show respect by also sitting before beginning a conversation with him or her. When sitting down, make sure that you don't sit higher than he or she is.

When the Venerable Member of the Sangha stands, it is polite and correct practise to rise as well, until they have departed, or you have been directed to sit again. Similarly, if sitting down, you will observe at functions where the Sangha or Monastics formally enter the room, all persons will stand, until the Monastics have taken their places.

Buddhist practitioners avoid pointing the soles of their feet toward any person, or toward a statue of the Buddha, or images of Monastics or Buddhist Teachers, whilst sitting (the soles of the feet in ancient times were considered a dirty part of the body). It is also requested not to sit holding your knees, nor to lie down or slump. When you sit on a chair this is easy,

but if you sit on the floor, or a cushion, keep this in mind, and either sit cross legged, or place your legs and feet to the side.

If a Monastic is walking while talking, you should stand too (unless directed to do otherwise – look to what the officials and practitioners are doing) but not walk ahead of them or obstruct their path in any way.

When giving or receiving something from a Monastic, wherever possible it is best to do so with both hands. If not possible, use your right hand. Do not point with your index finger to indicate something – but rather use your whole hand, with the palm facing upwards.

Gender Issues

In most Buddhist traditions, women do not touch Buddhist monks. Men equally do not touch Buddhist nuns. Handshakes and hugging is therefore discouraged. In some traditions it is inappropriate for something to be handed directly to a Monk or Nun by a member of the opposite sex. It is always best to check first and save embarrassment or difficulties for all concerned.

Buddhist Monastic's lead a celibate life and typically will avoid or withdraw from any potentially intimate or inappropriate conduct, situations or behaviours.

References

1. www.accesstoinsight.org
A Lay Guide to the Bhikkhu's Rules, compiled by Bhikkhu Ariyesako;
Vinaya Rules Study Class, Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd
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