Your Guide to Buddhist Etiquette

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The following are guidelines and common practices more than rules. Tibetans tend to be very practical people and don’t insist on anything that doesn’t make common sense. If a person is elderly or physically disabled, for one example, some of these guidelines don’t apply.

Some helpful general principles
Buddha’s teachings (the Dharma) are considered sacred and are shown respect by placing whoever or whatever transmits the Dharma in the highest possible position. Dharma books, for example, are placed on high shelves, never on the floor, and never stepped over. Monks and nuns and Buddhist teachers (lamas) are seated higher than lay people and higher lamas tend to be seated higher still. A sincere, heartfelt motivation to honor the Dharma is without doubt your best guideline.
Monks, nuns and lamas

- Tibetans generally avoid touching a monk’s or nun’s head.
- When sitting, we avoid extending our feet toward a teacher or a shrine.
- We generally avoid hugging monks and nuns and lamas, especially if they are of the opposite gender.
- For greeting, it is common to put our hands together, with thumbs tucked inside, and bow our heads. The bow in the image (above) is a normal one, while for a very high lama, we would bow more deeply.
- For serving, we offer monks, nuns and lamas the best food and drink, and serve them before anyone else.
- When serving, we start with the highest lama or monk or nun. (If all other things are roughly equal, we start with the oldest first.)
- If giving or offering something, we do it with two hands, even if it something small that fits in one hand.
• For referring to monks and nuns, Tibetans usually use “Ani la” for nuns and “Kushu la” for monks. The “la” is an honorific, and is often used for lay people too, to show respect.
• For reincarnate lamas, one can say “Rinpoche” (no “la”). For teachers who have received the Geshe degree, we say “Geshe la.” If you don’t know the status, it’s fine to say “Kushu la.” All nuns can be “Ani la.”
• Generally speaking, it is not considered appropriate to wear revealing clothing when meeting monks or nuns or attending a teaching.
• It is common to stand up when a lama or member of the sangha (monastic community) enters the room, especially if he or she is teaching. At a teaching, people generally also make three prostrations after the teacher is seated and then again as the teacher is leaving.
Sacred objects

• The most sacred objects are the books of scripture (sutra), statues (of the Buddha, for example) and stupas (in this case, meaning the smaller versions made for shrines). These should not be placed on the ground or where people sit. Generally speaking, they should be as high as possible.
• We avoid pointing at sacred objects with the index finger. Instead it is common to gesture toward the object with an open palm. (This same rule applies to monks, nuns or lamas, and even more generally to all people.)
• We take care not to step over any of these holy objects.
• Trengwa (mala beads, or prayer beads) are not as sacred, but are still treated with care and not placed on the ground.
• There is a practice, when lighting incense, not to blow out the flame with your breath, but rather to wave it with your hand to extinguish it. The same is true for candles and butter lamps. You can wave with your hand, or use a candle snuffer if needed.
• We don’t place sacred objects in dirty places, like the bathroom.
• Generally speaking, we don’t use sacred objects as artistic displays.

Holy places

• Normally one will make prostrations when first entering a temple.
• For a shrine room, it is common to remove our shoes, but at times the local custom may be different.
• Remove your hat on entering a shrine room or temple, or attending a teaching. There can be an exception, if for example, the teaching is outside and the weather calls for warmth or sun protection.
• It is common to circumambulate holy Tibetan places, which means to walk clockwise around the sacred place while prayer or reciting mantras. (Unless you are a Bon practitioner, in which case the circumambulation is counter-clockwise.)

Above all, try to use common sense, and good hearted intention to honor the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

May you be happy,
Lobsang and Yolanda
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