

Dharma Etiquette

Here are some elements of respect and protocol when receiving teachings from a Lama (teacher) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Before the teaching: Please arrive early, so as not to disturb the class once it has started. This consideration also shows that you value the teachings and the teacher. Remove shoes and headwear before entering the shrine room. Students are welcome to bring items to offer on the altar, such as flowers, fruit, or food for our teacher or the food bank. Items should be clean, and fruit should be washed and set in a container so it isn't directly on the altar.

Avoid loud talking or laughing around the area of the teaching. It is best to sit quietly, placing yourself in a calm, receptive state of mind. Avoid the use of perfumes or other scents that may bother other people in the room.

Come with an open mind, ready to listen, analyze, question and contemplate!

Appropriate attire: In general, it is considered inappropriate to come to a teaching in shorts, short skirts, or revealing clothing. However, uncovered arms are acceptable. When in doubt, look at the Tibetan monks' robes!

Teacher's entrance: Out of respect, students stand during the teacher's entrance and while he or she prostrates to the Buddhas and his own teachers (visualized on the throne) and is seated. It is also typical to bow slightly towards the teacher with hands in prostration at the heart.

Prostration: After the lama is seated, practicing Buddhists perform three prostrations in deference to the teacher and the Dharma knowledge that is about to be shared. Others may join in or stand quietly. For those wishing to participate, the form is: with palms together touch crown of head, forehead, throat and heart, then prostrate on hands and knees, touching forehead to the ground briefly and rising quickly. This is repeated three times. To conclude, once more touch hands to the crown, forehead, throat and heart, pausing briefly at the end for contemplation, and take your seat.

Comportment during the Teaching: In addition to what we are being taught, an important aspect of the class is our own practice of mindfulness. There are general acts of mindfulness of body, speech and mind such as not interrupting, use of appropriate language, and sitting quietly and alertly. There are also a few points of protocol specific to Eastern traditions and Buddhism. Avoid stretching your legs toward the teacher or altar, pointing the soles of the feet is considered disrespectful. Avoid putting your backside toward the teacher or altar for the same reasons. To recognize the precious value of the Dharma words, Buddhists are mindful not to put spiritual texts directly on the floor (it is okay to place them on a mat or other item which is on the floor) and do not walk over them. It is also considered disrespectful to use saliva to wet your fingers to turn the pages.

Teacher's exit: As the teacher stands to leave a formal teaching, students again stand and bow slightly until he or she is out of the room. Prostrations are not done at this time, the omission conveying our wish for the teacher to return.

Addressing the teacher: The titles Kushok (pronounced koo-show), which means servant of the Dalai Lama, or Geshe (pronounced ge-shey), which means teacher of the highest degree, are correct and respectful titles. Our resident teacher, Lobsang Dhamchoe, has expressed his preference to be addressed as Kushok, or Kushok Lobsang. The addition of the Tibetan suffix "la" is used as an honorific (i.e. Kushok-la, Geshe-la).