



Jamyang Foundation



## Etiquette

Etiquette for volunteers is a combination of basic good manners and cultural sensitivity. There are two main concerns. One is etiquette in relation to the nuns, and the other is etiquette in relation to the villagers. If you teach in Spiti, Zangskar, or Kinnaur, your neighbors will be rural villagers, who have little exposure to Western culture. In Kinnaur, there will also be Hindus neighbors and in Zangskar, some Muslims. Under the circumstances, it's very important to be aware of cultural differences and help the monastery maintain good relations with the surrounding community.

It is important for volunteers to dress modestly. Indian clothes are appropriate, since they are suited to the cultural value of modesty. Even in Himalayan villages, salwaar kameez (long shirt over baggy pants, with a scarf for the chest) is considered modest and appropriate. You can buy them ready-made in Delhi or any large town. If you wear Western clothes, be very sure to have your legs and upper arms covered. If you wear pants, wear a long shirt over them. Skirts should fully cover your ankles. If you have long hair, it is best to tie it back. You can be a bit more relaxed while "at home" with the nuns. Please do not to smoke, both for the benefit of the nuns and the villagers.

In both Indian and Himalayan cultures, it's very insulting to point the soles of your feet or your shoes toward anyone. It is especially important not to point the soles of your feet toward a religious statue or picture. When sitting on the floor, it is best to keep your feet tucked under you. If you need to stretch your legs, be sure to point them away from people and sacred objects.

As you may have heard, the left hand is considered unclean in India. It is important never to eat with your left hand or touch people with it. Himalayan peoples are quite understanding, but in other parts of India, left-handed people must learn to eat with their right hand. It is considered disgusting to put your left hand near your face or mouth.

Buddhist etiquette centers on the five precepts for laypeople. Volunteers are not expected to be Buddhists, but are expected to follow these basic ethical guidelines. Ethical guidelines for Buddhist temples, monasteries, and society in general include observing the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no lying, no sexual misconduct, and no intoxicants. Since these guidelines may be interpreted a bit differently in different situations, the nuns can advise you if you have specific questions. Buddhists are careful not to harm living creatures and do not even kill bugs, including mosquitos. It is important to respect their sensitivities in this regard.

These ethical guidelines should be observed quite strictly. Avoid expressing affection in public, sexy behavior, immodest dress, and smoking. The villagers watch others' behavior very closely, and volunteers' behavior will reflect on the monastery. As a volunteer, you represent both Western culture and the nuns, so it is important to be sensitive to the local culture. Also please keep in mind that you are a guest of the nuns while you are staying in the monastery.

Loud talking, boisterous laughter, physical contact, and imposing on people's hospitality are not appropriate. Be mindful of your body language with members of the opposite sex and avoid communications or behaviors that may be misinterpreted. In Indian society, it is generally considered improper for women to talk with men other than members of their own family. Tibetan societies are more relaxed.

Indian and Himalayan societies frown on premarital sexual relations, so it is important to be discreet in this regard. Couples may be asked to stay in separate rooms. When one volunteer's boyfriend visited, he slept in the library.

Sometimes the neighbors invite volunteers to tea. The nuns will usually accompany you on these social visits. If you have brought any little souvenirs from home, you can offer them to your hosts. After a few cups of tea, you can excuse yourself and go back to the monastery.

Loud noises, even beautiful music, are not permitted in the monastery. The nuns' precepts prohibit them from listening to music. It is considered impolite to play music within earshot. Musicians may be able to arrange practice space in the village; please ask us for the details. Please use headphones with your walkman, if you bring one.

### Temple Etiquette

Etiquette at places of worship is a combination of basic good manners, cultural sensitivity, mindfulness, and respect for others. Polite conduct is important as an expression of respect for the religious communities you visit. These guidelines are offered to help you feel more comfortable in unfamiliar settings and avoid offending your hosts. If you are unsure about what is appropriate in a given situation, it is perfectly acceptable to ask.

### Dress

When visiting temples, it is important to dress appropriately. Avoid shorts, skirts above the knee, and tight, skimpy, or revealing clothing. In Buddhist settings, it is common practice to take shoes off before entering the main hall. Pointing your feet toward the altar or teacher is regarded as disrespectful. If you need to stretch your legs, be sure to point them away from people and sacred objects. If seating is on the floor, take care when you cross your legs to avoid embarrassment.

### Conduct

During visits with villagers, avoid smoking, displays of affection, loud talking, boisterous laughter, physical contact with other people, and imposing on your host's hospitality. Be mindful of body language, especially around members of the opposite sex. In some cultures, it is considered improper for a woman to talk with a man alone. If you run into communications problems, a smile goes a long way.

### Seating

Seating indicates social status in Himalayan societies, so it is best to wait until someone shows you where to sit. In Buddhist and many other religious settings, pointing one's feet toward the altar or teacher is regarded as disrespectful. If you need to stretch your legs, point them away from people and sacred objects. If seated on the floor, take care when you cross your legs to avoid embarrassment.

## Interviewing

When you wish to interview someone, it is appropriate to ask, "May I ask you some questions?" The same applies to taking photographs or video footage. If you wish to conduct a lengthy interview, it is a good idea to schedule an appointment beforehand.

## Meals

If you are invited to stay for lunch or tea, try to observe the manners of your hosts. A prayer may be chanted before the meal or tea, so it is best to wait until others begin. Avoid wasting food by taking just as much as you can eat. If you think you will not be able to eat everything on the plate, you can ask for an empty plate and put some back. Do this before you begin eating from the plate. Offerings to your hosts are appreciated, though not obligatory: flowers, fruit, or a monetary donation placed in the monastery offering box are appropriate.