

Buddhist Monasticism in Modern Western Society

It can be difficult for people from a modern egalitarian society to understand the way a Buddhist Monastery operates. It was difficult for me too at the beginning. But unless you are willing to put preconceived ideas on a hold you will not be able to learn from the Buddhist elders. However it might help to see the Monastery as your spiritual training ground. Bowing to the Buddha statue and the monastic robe is like pointing your mind and body to those good qualities of wisdom, concentration and virtue that you wish train within yourself.

Think of the Buddhist Monastery as a place to learn – not as a strict English boarding school, but rather a family where knowledge and wisdom is passed down from generation to generation. In this family we treat the monks and nuns as the elders of the family, showing them respect for their moral standards and the fact that they are willing to share their wisdom and knowledge with us.

Bowing is an outward sign of respect for the Buddhist wisdom that the monks and nuns possess, a gesture to keep a high degree of harmony within the family. Bowing is not a tool to oppress you, it is a voluntary gesture of respect, much like shaking your father's or grand father's hand when approaching them.

The Buddhist Monastery is like a family that encourages individuality and not conformity. The elders are there to teach you to be free, not to enslave you. The bowing and the precepts are there to assist every family member on their individual journey towards enjoying greater freedom in life. See the Monastery and its traditions as the ideal environment for assisting you in your emancipation from the slavery of sense desires; two thousand five hundred years of experience has shown us that this is the way for us to bring our minds and hearts most naturally and gloriously back to their natural, blissful home in the present moment.

I offer this for your reflection.

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