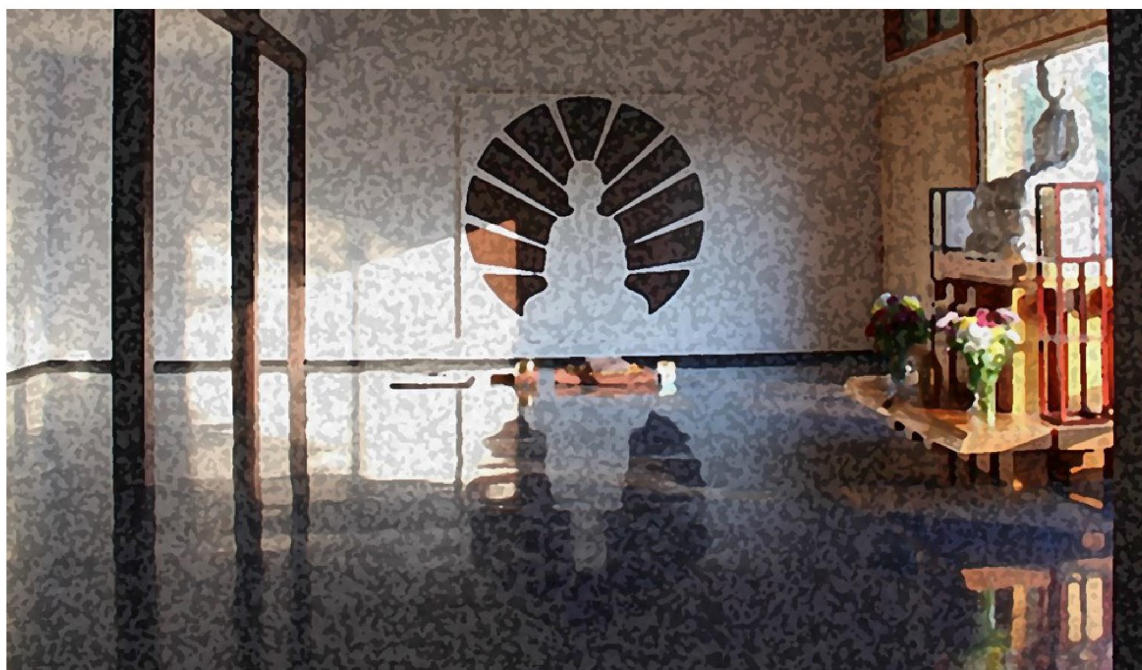




Sítavana
Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery



G u e s t G u i d e

Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery ('Sítavana')

Guest Guide



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Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery ('Sitavana')

WELCOME to the monastery! We are pleased that you could join us.

Most of us in the West are not familiar with what goes on in a monastery. First-time visitors to the monastery may wonder about how to behave and what kind of conduct is expected. But it is not difficult to understand, once you realize why Buddhist monasteries exist.

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, monasteries are centres of mindfulness where we retire in silence and solitude to contemplate the mind. Our practice is to watch what we are doing in each moment, keeping the emphasis on what is happening inside of ourselves and how we interact with the world around us. We are encouraged to receive whatever is offered with a spirit of contentment and gratitude, letting go of personal preferences and critical sensibilities.

Much of the problems of the world occur because people do things by habit, without really being aware of what they are doing. "Buddha" means "Awakened One". So our practice is to be aware and alert to our body, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and so forth. Thus the world becomes a better place, starting with each mindful individual.

Part of the practice is Right Speech. This doesn't mean that there is no talking in our monastery, but it means that any talking should be mindful – avoiding any speech that is false, harsh, malicious or frivolous. We can ask ourselves, "Do I really need to say what I am about to say? Is it true? Is it kind? Is it helpful?"

Visitors often wonder about certain aspects of the monks' protocol and conduct. The monks keep very strict personal guidelines and it is best to avoid shaking hands with them or becoming too familiar. Monks in the Thai forest tradition wear ochre robes. Nuns may wear white or black-and-white clothing, or brown robes, depending on their type of ordination.

You may notice the monks and guests bowing to the Buddha statue. This often generates some confusion in the West. In Buddhism, we do not consider the Buddha statue an idol. The Buddha is not a deity that we worship. Rather, since Buddha means "Awakened One", we are taking refuge in our own capacity for being alert, for being mindful, for being awake and aware in this moment. Bowing to the Buddha is a symbol of this mindfulness.

Similarly, when we meditate, we are practising increasingly subtle and refined levels of mindfulness and concentration. That is why we keep the meditation hall quiet and are respectful of the other meditators, moving only when we must, and ever so slightly, so as not to disturb them.

Mealtimes are another area that new visitors find unfamiliar. In our tradition, the food is formally presented to the Abbot and the monks, which generates merit for those who gave and prepared the food. You may notice that the monastics are lined up in order of seniority. The senior monastics serve themselves first, followed by all those in training, and then our lay guests are invited to serve themselves.

Mealtimes are a formal occasion. Everyone eats in silence, which gives the opportunity for mindfulness and reflection on the nature of the body/mind, and the meaning of this existence. You may wish to be especially mindful while you eat – taking the time to taste the food, feel its texture, and watch your thoughts.

Our current procedures and reminders are listed in this Guest Guide and posted in various locations around the monastery. These policies change from time to time, so please read the signs, and do your best to harmonize with our current practices and guidelines.

We are sure that you will have many more questions and we will be most pleased to try to answer them! Feel free to ask any of our resident stewards about the schedule and other household matters, or leave a note for them on the corkboard in the main foyer.

Teaching, retreats, food and accommodation are provided free of charge. The practice of Dana, or giving, is a key element of Buddhist practice. As we operate solely by donations, funds and labour are joyfully received. If you are interested in learning more about ways to give or serve the monastery, please feel free to ask.

**Thank you for your interest in the monastery.
We welcome your visit, and hope you enjoy your stay!**

Daily Schedule

(during formal retreats, please refer to the Retreat Schedule)

5:15 am	Wake-up bell
5:30-6:20 am	Morning Group Meditation in the Sala (meditation hall)
7:00-7:30 am	Breakfast (in silence), followed by meal clean-up
7:30-8:30 am	Light chores or free time (see duties list downstairs)
8:30-9:30 am	Meditation in the Sala (optional)
9:30 am-lunchtime	Individual meditation practice or free time (silence)
11:00 am-12:00 pm (11:30 am-12:30 pm - Daylight Saving Time)	Main Meal (in silence), followed by meal clean-up
After lunch-2:30 pm	Individual meditation practice or free time (silence)
2:30-3:30 pm	Meditation in the Sala (optional)
3:30-5:00 pm	Individual meditation practice or free time (silence)
5:00-6:00 pm	Teatime in Dining Area (silence) Ajahn Sona may join for Dhamma Q&A as announced at the main meal
6:00-6:55 pm	Individual meditation practice or free time (silence)
7:00-7:50 pm	Evening Group Meditation in the Sala (meditation hall)
8:00 pm	Bedtime or individual practice (silence)

Reminders

Please be on time for group meditations and the midday meal. This means being settled in your place five minutes before the starting time.

Bells, bells, bells, bells...

Wakeup: The “wake up” bell is at 5:15 AM; there is no further reminder for the group meditation starting at 5:30 AM. Please be settled in your place a few minutes earlier than the scheduled start time, before the Abbot enters the Sala.

Breakfast: Breakfast is served at **7:00 AM** (monastics are served first).

- ❖ You may get your mug from the guest utility room between 6:30 – 6:55 AM and help yourself to tea/coffee (during formal retreats, please wait until breakfast).
- ❖ The monastics are served their breakfast first (please do not come into the kitchen while they are serving).
- ❖ A bell is rung after the monastics have been served, inviting the lay people to serve themselves to breakfast (around 7:05 AM).

Midday Meal: The midday meal is usually served at **11:00 AM (11:30 AM during Daylight Saving Time)**. Please find your way to the basement dining room five minutes before this time and help yourself to a Meal Blessing chant card (located on the pillars to the left and right of the tea station). The monastics in residence will lead the group in a meal blessing chant and then serve themselves to the meal. After the monastics have finished serving, the lay people will be invited to serve themselves.

Teatime: Teatime is usually at **5:00 PM**. Ajahn Sona will join us occasionally for teatime to answer questions on the Dhamma. On other days, teatime will be held in silence. Tea, juice and other “allowables” will be available in the guest utility room. Teatime is optional.

Evening Meditation: There is a reminder bell at 6:55 PM for the **7:00 PM** evening meditation. Please help yourself to a Chanting Book just to the right of the sala entrance and be settled in your place five minutes earlier than the scheduled start time.

Who's Who

at Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery ('Sitavana')

Venerable Bhikkhu Sona - Abbot

Addressed as "Luang Por Sona," "Ajahn Sona" or "Venerable Sona" ("*Luang Por*" is the Thai term for "Venerable Father"; "*Ajahn*" is the Thai term for "teacher")

Maechee Mon, Thai nun, addressed as "Sister Mon"

Visiting monks – if you do not know his name you can address him as "Venerable" or "Bhante"

Visiting nuns – if you do not know her name, address her as "Sister"

Or (if she is wearing brown robes) as "Ayya"

Or (if she is wearing white, or black & white) as "Maechee"

Resident Lay Stewards – a list of our current resident stewards is posted in the guest utility room.

Monastic Titles & Dress

Bhikkhu is the word for a fully-ordained monk. They wear brown robes; the shade of the robe has no significance as to seniority. They are addressed as “Bhante” or “Venerable” or “Tahn” (sometimes spelled “Tan”) along with their Pali name. For example, Bhante Gunaratana, Venerable Pavaro, Tahn Subhara.

Luang Por is a Thai term meaning “Venerable Father” and is used as a title of respect for senior Buddhist monastics. For example, Luang Por Chah.

Ajahn is a Thai term meaning “teacher”, and is technically reserved for a monk who is a teacher of other monks, but is often loosely used for any monk with 10 *rains* or more (*rains* is the way monks count years in the robes).

Samanera is the word for a novice monk. Typically, a candidate for full ordination spends at least one year as a *samanera* before taking higher ordination. They also wear brown robes. They are addressed as “Tahn” (sometimes spelled “Tan”) along with their Pali name.

Anagarika is the word for a monk-in-training. It means “homeless one” and “going forth into homelessness”, the expression used for taking up monastic training. This is the first stage of training; it usually lasts a year or more. They wear white clothes. They are addressed as “Anagarika” along with their English name, for example, Anagarika John.

Bhikkhuni is the word for a fully-ordained nun. They wear brown robes; the shade of the robe has no significance as to seniority. They are addressed as “Sister” or “Ayya” or “Ajahn”. For example, Ayya Khema, Ajahn Sundara.

Maechee is the Thai word for Eight-Precept nuns. They wear white, or black and white clothing. They are addressed as “Sister” or “Maechee”, for example, Sister Mon.

There are other variations for women; if you do not know her, it is best to ask a nun how you should address her. “Sister” is usually acceptable.

Etiquette Guidelines

It is wise to think of Buddhist monasteries in the West as special cultural zones. Feel free to ask the stewards or Abbot (at teatime) if you have questions regarding "appropriate behaviour" in a monastery. At Birken, we don't expect guests to adhere to the refined and culturally-specific etiquette practised at monasteries in Thailand or Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, it is valuable to observe some general points:

- ❖ Theravada monastics avoid making physical contact with people, so the customary Western handshake is not practised. A fine way to greet a monastic is to put your palms together in front of you 'in anjali', and/or to bow slightly.
- ❖ Monks are dedicated to meditation practice, mainly in silence and solitude. Please do not approach them to chat or ask questions as they go about their business during the day. Bring your questions to teatime with the Abbot during the allocated times.

Eight Precepts

All visitors are expected to undertake the basic training rules (which Buddhists follow in daily life) that are embodied in the first five of the Eight Precepts.

Overnight guests and residents are required to follow all of the Eight Precepts:

- 1. I will refrain from killing or harming any living being.*
- 2. I will refrain from taking what is not given (stealing).*
- 3. I will refrain from sexual activity.*
- 4. I will refrain from false, harsh, malicious, or frivolous speech.*
- 5. I will refrain from taking intoxicating drink or drugs.*
- 6. I will refrain from eating at improper times (after noon).*
- 7. I will refrain from singing, dancing, listening to music, playing musical instruments, indulging in entertainment, and using perfume, jewellery and cosmetics.*
- 8. I will refrain from using luxurious seats and beds.*

Dress Code

Both men and women are asked to wear modest, practical clothing in order to not distract other meditators. Please select your clothing with modesty, silence, and comfort in mind. Wear loose clothing, and dress in layers.

- ❖ Shoes are not worn in the monastery building or living quarters.
- ❖ No footwear (slippers or sandals) is permitted in the meditation hall.
- ❖ Please avoid fabrics that swish or rustle when you move.
- ❖ Slippers (for walking meditation) must be absolutely silent.
- ❖ Sleeveless shirts, short shorts, short dresses, tights, body-hugging and revealing clothing are not appropriate.

Gestures of Respect

These are traditional gestures of respect for the holy life, and for those who choose to dedicate themselves to living the holy life. Experiment, and use those you feel comfortable with from the list below:

- ❖ Anjali is the gesture of placing the hands, palms together, at about heart level.
- ❖ If a monastic is sitting, do not stand looming over them; sit at their level or lower.
- ❖ When walking with monastics, let them go first through doorways, narrow places, etc.
- ❖ Do not interrupt a monastic who is speaking.
- ❖ During conversations with monastics, put your hands in anjali if you wish to speak, and wait until the monastic acknowledges you.
- ❖ Do not point the soles of your feet toward the monks, the altar or Buddha images. This means, when you are sitting, do not stretch out your legs toward the front of the Sala, or toward a monastic.
- ❖ Please respect our books as well; no reading or books on the dining tables while eating or drinking.

Right Speech Guidelines

The following guidelines help to create an environment that supports our practice.

Please observe Silence - Speak only if you can improve upon silence

Right Speech, Wholesome Speech: Speech that is appropriate and helpful in the spiritual life

From Sallekha Sutta and Majjhima Nikaya (MN 8):

- ❖ Others will speak falsehood; we shall abstain from false speech here
- ❖ Others will speak maliciously; we shall abstain from malicious speech here
- ❖ Others will speak harshly; we shall abstain from harsh speech here
- ❖ Others will gossip; we shall abstain from gossip here

From Anguttara Nikaya V.19:

- ❖ It is spoken at the right time
- ❖ It is spoken in truth
- ❖ It is spoken affectionately
- ❖ It is spoken beneficially
- ❖ It is spoken with a mind of good-will

Topics of Proper Conversation are:

- ❖ Talk on modesty, deportment, humility, minimizing the self and observing the appropriate code of conduct
- ❖ Talk on contentment and renunciation
- ❖ Talk on physical and mental solitude
- ❖ Talk on freedom from defilements
- ❖ Talk on freedom from the hindrances
- ❖ Talk on avoidance of entanglements and of simplicity
- ❖ Talk on arousing energy and right effort
- ❖ Talk on virtue
- ❖ Talk on meditation
- ❖ Talk on wisdom
- ❖ Talk on release from suffering
- ❖ Talk on the knowledge and vision of release from suffering

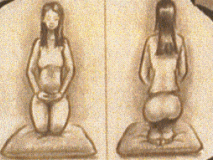
Please avoid pointless talk, frivolous talk, idle talk, empty chatter

HOW TO SIT IN

MEDITATION



Full Lotus



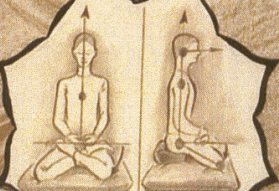
Seiza



Half Lotus



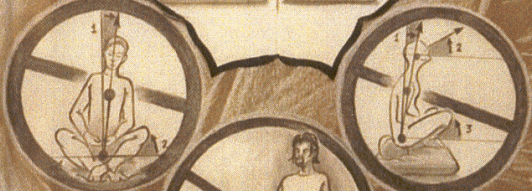
Seiza with Bench



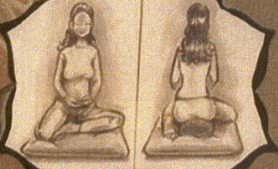
Quarter Lotus



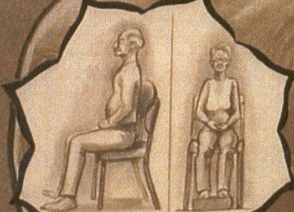
Seiza with Cushion



Burmese



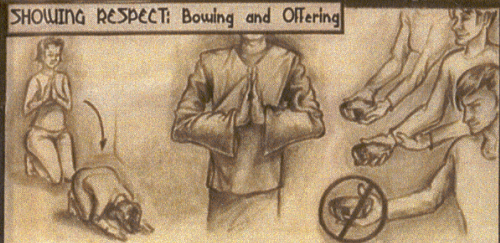
Mermaid



Chair



Hands



SHOWING RESPECT: Bowing and Offering

In the Sala (Meditation Hall)

The Sala is available for sitting meditation 24 hours a day. Please regard it as a sacred place, like a church or a temple. When entering and leaving the Sala, it is traditional to kneel and make three bows, if you feel comfortable with this gesture of respect.

When we meditate, we are practising increasingly subtle and refined levels of awareness. This is why we keep the meditation hall quiet and are respectful of the other meditators, moving only when we must, and then ever so slightly, so as not to disturb them.

- ❖ Maintain silence at all times; no conversation, talking or whispers.
- ❖ Clothing should be “silent” – no fabrics that rustle loudly when you move.
- ❖ If you are cold, you may wear a hat/hood for meditation, but please remove it when bowing, chanting, or listening to a Dhamma talk.
- ❖ No footwear other than socks (no slippers or sandals) in the Sala.
- ❖ No walking meditation, exercises, stretching, yoga poses, or audible breathing techniques in the Sala.

Group Meditations

Please plan to arrive about five minutes early, so that you are settled and quiet by the time the Abbot enters. You may help yourself to a chanting book, meditation mat and cushion or kneeling bench from the racks. You may also use a chair at the back of the hall; please do not move them. After the evening meditation, you may leave your place set up for the early morning meditation. After the morning group meditation, please put everything away so that the Sala can be cleaned at 6:30am. You may set up your mat again any time after breakfast.

During a group meditation, if you need to leave the Sala (e.g. to visit the bathroom, or for a coughing fit), please remain outside the Sala until the bell ends the meditation; you may then return for the closing homage.

- ❖ It is okay to swallow, cough, sneeze, or blow your nose if you need to.
- ❖ If you have a coughing fit, or some problem that will create an ongoing disturbance, please kindly leave the Sala.
- ❖ If you have a cold, please consider meditating in your room until the symptoms abate.

Chanting

At the beginning of each evening group meditation, the leader will indicate which chants, if any, will be recited that evening. Please help yourself to a chanting book to the right as you enter the Sala, near the mats and cushions.

Words in square brackets [like this] are chanted or recited by the leader alone.

You will notice that many of the chants in the chanting book have arrows above or below some words. Most of the chants are on just three notes, and this simple notation indicates to raise or lower the tone for that syllable.

The Closing Homage (which we chant at the end of each group meditation) is on the last page in the chanting book.

Around the Vihara (Guesthouse)

We are pleased to provide a quiet and secure monastic environment that keeps distractions to a minimum for training the mind.

Silence

- ❖ Kindly respect the peace of other guests and residents.
- ❖ Remember that you can be heard very clearly in the room above, below or beside you, which may be the meditation hall.
- ❖ The monastery is a place of silence. If you would like to have a conversation, please go for a walk outside.
- ❖ Please move quietly, open and close doors mindfully and softly.
- ❖ Speak little and practice Right Speech.

Computers/Internet

- ❖ Please do not bring computers, cell phones or other such devices to the monastery; this is a time for you to get away from worldly concerns.
- ❖ The office facilities are not available to guests: no use of phones or internet. There is no cell service at Birken, and guests are not permitted to use the monastery Wi-Fi network. Please finalize your travel and personal arrangements before you come.

Accommodation

- ❖ Each room and kuti has been carefully set up by the Abbot to meet all the needs of monastery living.
- ❖ Guests are not permitted to specify room preferences or request room changes, and are encouraged to accept their room assignment with a spirit of contentment and gratitude.
- ❖ Please do not move the furniture: beds, wardrobes, desks, etc.
- ❖ Please do not adjust the thermostats or feed the wood stoves anywhere in the monastery.
- ❖ No beverages or food are allowed in the rooms or kutis at any time.
- ❖ No burning of candles or incense in the rooms or kutis at any time.
- ❖ There is no smoking permitted anywhere in the monastery or on our grounds.

Housekeeping Guidelines

- ❖ Please sleep inside the “sheet bag” provided; please do not sleep in direct contact with the mattress or comforters.
- ❖ Please always use a pillowcase over our pillows.
- ❖ Extra pillows and comforters are available in the linen closet on the 2nd floor.
- ❖ If you forgot your own towel, a limited supply is available in the linen closet.

Spirit of Orderliness

Please regard the room as your meditation cell, a safe refuge, a sacred space. Keep it clean and tidy, a place of peace and beauty where you can be at ease. Here are some suggestions:

- ❖ Unpack your clothing and toiletries into the wardrobes, closets, drawers, and bins – not lying out on the desk or floor.
- ❖ Put your suitcase or backpack away out of sight (under the bed, in the closet, or on top of the wardrobe are good places).
- ❖ Hang your towel and washcloth neatly on the towel bar in your room or on the hangers in the coat area if you are staying in a kuti.

Library

We hope you will use the library while you are here. You will find a wide selection of books and MP3 players loaded with Dhamma talks available for your use.

- ❖ You will see a place to sign out books and MP3 players with headphones, which you can then take to your room during your stay.
- ❖ Please put books back on the right shelf when you are finished with them. If you do not remember where you got them from, please leave them on the shelf labeled: *Reshelving*.
- ❖ Please respect our books and other materials; no reading or books on the tables, during meals or teatime. No reading or writing while eating or drinking.

Outside

We encourage you to enjoy the peaceful surroundings.

- ❖ Walk the labyrinth (located towards the end of 'Kuti Road' – entrance is shared with K7), explore the logging roads, try canoeing on the marsh as the water level permits.
- ❖ Please respect the privacy of residents – do not wander down the paths marked with numbered posts to the kutis (cabins)...unless you are staying in one!
- ❖ Remember to wear sunscreen, and insect repellent as needed. Expect temperature change; dress in layers and bring extra warm clothing and rain gear.

Helping Out

It is monastery tradition for guests to help with daily chores and work projects, thereby lessening the load of the resident community and making merit in the process! Each guest is assigned for "Yogi Duties" (light chores) for the duration of their stay – these duties are listed in the guest utility room.

Food & Drink

“Only for the maintenance of the body”

Birken’s Food Policies

***Important*:** We provide a variety of simple, nutritious, mostly vegetarian meals appropriate to a forest monastery. Food donations are warmly welcomed, but please understand that they will not necessarily be served during your visit. We are not in a position to prepare special meals for individuals, nor are guests permitted to prepare their own meals. Please do not pester the stewards or monastics with health food or hygiene theories and do not ask them to accommodate your particular food sensitivities, allergies or preferences. Please be content with what is served and do not go into the kitchen to help yourself or add items to the table during mealtimes or at any other time. The spirit of the monastery is to let go of personal preferences, views and opinions, and receive whatever is offered with contentment and gratitude.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding our food policies, please address them to the Abbot. Do not raise them with the stewards at any time.

Special Needs

Guests who are on a special diet for medical reasons should have their dietary request approved by the senior resident monastic before they book a visit. Any requests for special foods at mealtimes should be made to the Abbot, not to the stewards.

If you have a medical need to take food outside of mealtimes, please request formal permission when submitting your registration form, and consume your food discreetly in the guest utility room between 6:00 – 6:30pm. Bring your own special foods that are ready-to-eat and do not require preparation, heating, or refrigeration. Please keep personal medicines, supplements, and special foods in the allocated space in the guest utility room, not in our refrigerator or in your room. Please clean up after yourself: wash, dry, and put away any dishes you used, and clean the counters. Any questions may be directed to the guest steward.

Meal Procedures

As of spring 2024, our kitchen areas have been substantially renovated and meal procedures have changed. Our current meal procedures are as follows:

- ❖ Mealtimes are a formal occasion. Everyone eats in silence, which gives the opportunity for mindfulness and reflection on the nature of the body/mind.
- ❖ Please do not enter the kitchen except during mealtimes, or if your yogi duty supporting the kitchen. Guests are no longer permitted on the sun porch.
- ❖ All guest dishes/cups/cutlery can be found in the guest utility room, off of the basement dining area. Before each meal, please wash your hands and help yourself to a place setting. Getting these before the breakfast bell/meal blessing is OK and helps alleviate traffic jams.
- ❖ After finishing each meal, please wash up promptly: take your dishes and cutlery to the guest utility room, scrape off any food in the 'food waste' bin, and place the dishes in the dishwasher.
- ❖ Tea and coffee are available in the guest utility room.
- ❖ Please do not take food or beverages out of the designated downstairs eating area. You are, however, welcome to take them outside.
- ❖ Our water comes from a deep well, and is filtered. Water from all taps is drinkable. Please fill your water bottles from the tap in the guest utility room or the foyer washroom.

When You Leave...

If you are in the guest house:

- ❖ Vacuum the carpet, or sweep the floor and bamboo/tatami mats.
- ❖ Empty the wastepaper basket into the nearest washroom garbage.
- ❖ Place any Birken linens (sheet bag, pillowcase, towel) which you used in the laundry basket in the second floor linen closet.
- ❖ Please do not remove the duvet cover or mattress cover.
- ❖ Leave on each bed: fresh pillowcase and sheet bag (from the linen closet)
- ❖ Make sure you take all your personal belongings.

If you are in a kuti:

- ❖ Sweep, dust, clean as necessary (cleaning supplies are provided in each kuti).
- ❖ Place any Birken linens (sheet bag, pillowcase, towel) which you used in the laundry basket in the second floor linen closet.
- ❖ Please do not remove the duvet cover or mattress cover.
- ❖ Wash urine and water jugs thoroughly in the foyer washroom. Return clean, dry urine jug to your kuti.
- ❖ If you used the sawdust toilet, empty the contents into the garbage can located near your kuti, rinse the pail thoroughly in the foyer washroom and, once dry, place it back in the sawdust toilet.
- ❖ Take any other garbage/recycling to the garbage shed, behind the kitchen.
- ❖ Propane kutis: Follow instructions listed in the kuti. Do not turn the pilot off.
- ❖ Make sure you take all your personal belongings.
- ❖ Leave in the kuti cubicle:
 - Head lamp
 - Clean water jug

Dana (Donations)

The practice of Dana, or giving, is a key element of Buddhist practice. Teaching, retreats, food, and accommodation are provided free of charge. As we operate solely by donations, funds and labour are joyfully received. A donation box is located in the main foyer. Anumodana for your generosity – we rejoice in your good merit!

We look forward to welcoming you back to Birken again soon!