



Introduction to Vassa  
(Rain Retreat)

&

The place of purification

BY SUJAN BHANTE

# Rain Retreat & Kathina Ceremony

By Ven. S. M. Sujano

## Introduction

The term 'Buddhism' refers to Buddhadhamma, the doctrine or teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha is a title given to the Prince Siddharth after his enlightenment. Buddhist history starts with the birth of prince Siddharth in Lumbini present day Nepal about 2600 years ago.

There are many special or holy days held throughout the year by the Buddhist community. Many of these celebration directly related to Prince Siddharth, the Buddha to be and Siddharth Gautama Buddha or other significant dates in the Buddhist calendar, i.e. Vesak day (Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away), Asalha puja day and Kathina day (see below for detail) and Maghapuja day (great congregation of the sangha) are the most significant events in the Buddhist world.

### **The Asalha Puja Day**

Among those celebrations, Asalha Puja Day, the full moon day of the eighth lunar month (Asalha Purnima, usually in July) is one of the most sacred days in Buddhism. It is also known as "The Dhammacakkappavattana Day" or "The Sangha day".





The legends records that it is the day, in which Bodhisatva Siddhartha, the Buddha to be entered his mother's womb (Patisandhi), also the Great renunciation (leaving family life), the day

he delivered his first sermon after his enlightenment to the five ascetics, establishment of the Sangha Community, fulfilment of The Triple Gem (Tiratana=Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) and the beginning of the rain retreat (Vassa) for the Monks. Vassa and Kathina Ceremony will be discussed in this paper.

### **The Rain-Retreat or Vassa**

“Vassa” a Pali refers to tradition that every Buddhist Monk should take a vow to live in one place for three months and cultivate his knowledge and meditation.

The origin of the Vassa is related to time of the Buddha. During those days Buddhist monks continue travelling according to Buddha's instruction to share and teach Dhamma even during the rainy season. However, this stopped due to two main reasons; effect on plants and crops of laities and laities would like to see monks at one place for certain time's as other religions do in those days. So, Lord Buddha instituted the retreat at the request of the laity, primarily for practical considerations and it became a vassa retreat as a rule to be followed by all Buddhist Monks during the monsoon months, which starts on the full moon day of Asalha. In some monasteries, monks dedicate the Vassa to intensive meditation practice or dedicate to study and practice. Further, during Vassa, many Buddhist lay people reinvigorate their spiritual

training and adopt more ascetic practices for example, in Thailand, the laity will often take monastic vows for the Vassa period and then return to lay life.

The focus of celebration by the laity is the first day of vassa during which devotees come and offer 'Rains Bathing Cloths' (vassaavaasika) to the monks and donate candles along with other necessities to temples. Further, people also take this opportunity to perform wholesome deeds by observing five precepts or Eight Precepts, attending Dhamma sermons, offering dana (gifts to the monks), doing meditation and purifying their minds which leads to the end of their sufferings and gain the ultimate happiness in life. Similarly, the Monks also take this opportunity to practice Dhamma (teaching) and Vinaya (discipline) with strong dedication. They also take this opportunity to bless and instruct lay people according to Buddhist ethical principles. Therefore, the vassa period became one of the important tools to perform communal activities between Lay and monks and to better understand each other.

Vassa is followed by two other major festivals of the year; Pavarana – a invitation ceremony, is the last day of the observance of vassa and Kathina. The end of vassa is marked by joyous celebration. The following month, the Kathina ceremony is held, during which the laity gathers to make formal offerings of robe cloth and other requisites to the Sangha.

### **The Sangha and the Vassa**

sangha means the community of the certain number of people. However, according to Buddhist scripture, Vinaya





pitaka, Sangha means a minimum group of four Monks. If there are four or more Monks, which may be hundreds or thousands, it is called Sangha. In Theravada Buddhism, the word Sangha means the community of Monks (Bhikkhu) or Nuns (Bhikkhuni) only. It is not

used for lay people.

It is compulsory that all Sangha members must spend or observe the Vassa (Vassupanayika in pali). Vassa means living at one place or monastery for three months during rainy season. During the Vassa period, the Monks can not leave the monastery and stay over-night unless in especial circumstances like invitation to attend Sangha meeting or has to admit in hospital or fire in monastery, visit their sick parents etc. In these circumstances, however, they can leave the monastery only for not more than seven days.

During the beginning of the Vassa junior Monks used to visit senior Monks to pay respect and ask for forgiveness for any mistakes made knowingly or un-knowingly. On the other hand at the end of three months rainy season, the Sangha perform a ceremony Called 'Invitation Ceremony' or Pavarana in Pali. It means inviting the members of the Sangha to point out offences or wrong doings if there are any, and to promise to correct the wrong doing promptly and dutifully. Only those who stay in a monastery for the whole three months without breaking their stay and who perform the 'invitation ceremony' are entitled to accept Kathina. The Sangha that accepts the Kathina robe must have spent the whole three months in the monastery. They must also have

performed the invitation ceremony (pavarana). The offering Kathina robe is made to the Sangha, and not to an individual Monk. In case, if one temple has only two or three Monks as a group taking vassa, devotees can offer Kathina robe by inviting Monks from other temples.

There are two activities or ceremonies involved in Kathina. One is the Kathina Robe is offered to the Sangha as a whole and second one is that the Sangha select an individual Monk to offer that Kathina robe.

### Kathina Ceremony

The word Kathina, a pali word in origin, means a wooden frame used in sewing robes on. On the other hand, Kathina also refers to the clothes prepared and presented to monks who have fulfilled the requirements during the rains retreat. Kathina Robe can be either one of these three pieces; outer robe (civara), shoulder robe (Sanghati) and Sarong like garment (Antarvasaka=sabong in thai). This ceremony is necessarily a monastic code supported by generous devotees.

Its origin dates back to the time of the Buddha. Once, a group of thirty monks travelled from Pava city to Savatthi city, the Jetawana monastery, where the Buddha was living in order to pay respect and seeking for some guidance. Unfortunately, they could make it only to neighbouring city Saketa before the Vassa or Rains retreat began. As per rules, when the compulsory day to observe the vassa they stopped their journey and waited for the Pavarana, a invitation ceremony, which will be after three months. Immediately, when vassa came to an end, they set to Jetawana monastery without having any delay. Having seen the unusual condition of the 30 monks, the Buddha



realised a need of extra robes for monks after the rains retreat, declared a permission to collect or receive new pieces of clothes/robes given by the devotees ever since.

### **Why offering Kathina is special?**

Kathina Robe offering is considered as a special offering in Buddhism because of these three reasons apart from qualities and benefit of generosity.

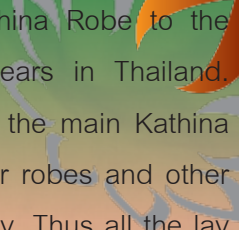
First of all, Kathina robe can be offered to the Sangha in a monastery, only once in a year. It cannot be done twice a year at same temple.

Secondly, the Kathina robe can be offered only during a specified period, which starts from the end of Vassa or full moon day of October to the next full moon day of November.

Thirdly, Kathina robe is to be offered to the Sangha, not to an individual monk.

Therefore, the offering of the Kathina robe is a rare opportunity for lay people and also it is beneficial to Monks in more than one way. As the Buddha says that offering to the Sangha is always more beneficial and brings meritorious results. Whenever we get the chance, we should make offering to the Sangha as a whole, which is indeed wholesome deed. Once the recipient is virtuous our offerings will bring more results. The Sangha is a group of virtuous Monks right from the time of the Buddha till today.

The offering of Kathina Robe to the Sangha by lay devotees and the celebration of Kathina day is one of the most sacred functions in Buddhism. In Buddhist countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar



devotees may have to wait for years to offer Kathina Robe to the Sangha. Sometimes they have to wait over 20 years in Thailand. However, there are group Kathina offerings. Beside the main Kathina Robe by one individual or family, devotees also offer robes and other materials to the Sangha on the Kathina day ceremony. Thus all the lay people get the opportunity to participate in this function and do meritorious deeds. Further, these days Kathina robe offering function is also become a way of fund raising to maintain and support the monastery and sangha to spread of Buddhist teachings.

It's a greatly beneficial ceremony for both lay people and Monks for the goodness and happiness in the present, in the middle and in the ultimate until the achievement of Nibbana. May this act of merit be a strong support for you, for success in life and helpful in gaining the ultimate happiness of Nibbana.

### **Reference;**

*Bhikkhu Dhammasami, 'Kathina Robe-Offering Ceremony: Historical and Spiritual Significance', <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas>*

*Phra Sunthorn Plamintr, Basic Buddhism course, (Free printed by CBBEF of Taiwan, EN111, 1636)*

*Ven. Sayadaw U Silananda 'Kathina Robes Offerings' Dhammananda Newsletter, Vol. 23, April 03No.1 pp. 3-6)*

*[www.accesstosight.com](http://www.accesstosight.com)*







# Temple

## *A Place of the Purification*

*By Ven.S. M. Sujano*

### **Introduction**

'Vihara' Buddhist terminology for temple, originally meant "a secluded place in which to walk", and traditionally referred to "dwellings" or "refuges" used by wandering monks during the rainy season. It is also the place where spiritual and moral values are preserved, where people can always feel free and able to take a fresh spiritual breath. In particular to Buddhism, temple is divided into:

1. avasa: a temporary house for monastic practitioners called a vihara. Generally more than one monk stayed in each house with each monk in his own cell, called a parivena.

2. arama: a permanent and comfortable arrangement than avasa. The property is generally donated and maintained by the generosity of people. This is also suggested by the name – Arama means both pleasant and peaceful park. (Wikipedia/Vihara)

Temple according to the Buddhist perspective, therefore, is the beacons of learning and scholarship as well as the place for the preservation of cultural and intellectual achievements of different people and various communities throughout hostilities and afflictions. The temple is not only a place of religious activities but social and spiritual developments. A Nakulapita, a genuine disciple of the Buddha who was disappointed at his inability to visit the temple due to his old age expresses;

*'My lord, I am getting old and not capable to walk alone anymore. Thus, I won't be able to visit you as frequently as usual at the temple. Hence, would you please deliver a suitable discourse for me?'*

Visiting Buddhist monasteries in order to respect monks and to the Buddha - in paying due respect and listening to his teachings – were his usual activities in his life.

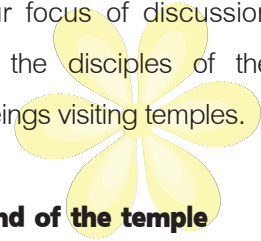
It is in fact a Buddhist customary to visit temple and to pay respect, as well as to seek guidance from the monks. In Buddhist countries, therefore, people try not to fail to visit temple at least once a week. In particular to Thailand and Sri Lanka, people would visit temple in order to make an offering to a monk regularly at least once in a month. The most common days, however, are full moon days. Such as, Atthami day (day 8 before and after full moon) and day 15 after full moon. On these days, it is customary for the people to visit temple to make their offerings, practice chanting and meditation with a hope of achieving happiness and fulfilment in their wishes.





In the discourses of the highest blessing (Mangala sutta) the Buddha says that amongst the 38 highest blessings visiting holy places such as monasteries and having an opportunity to discuss on teachings with venerable monks are one of them. Accordingly, it has been customary to Buddhists from the beginning to visit temples to seek guidance for a better life. Similarly, associating with a wise one is also one of the highest blessings says a Buddha. A wise one indicates three kinds of person according to Buddhism. The first one is the Buddha - the compassionate one, enlightened by his own effort and capable to guide and teach all the sentient beings – who gave a

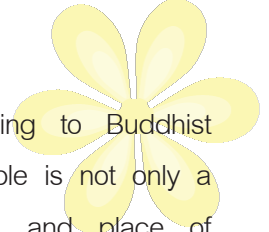
message of peace, harmony and overcome all sufferings. The second wise one is called the Pacceka Buddha - enlightened on-their-own. Lastly, there are the disciples of the enlightened beings, who follow the noble path and live according to teachings. Our focus of discussion here will be the disciples of the enlightened beings visiting temples.



### **The Background of the temple**

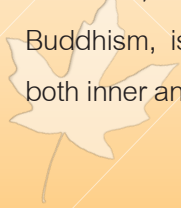
A Temple is a place of worship where spiritual activities, such as prayer and sacrificial rites etc. take place. It is also known as the consecrated or sacred abode. It can be considered as a place of centralisation and spiritual unification for a living being. In this respect, a Buddhist centre 'vihara' could be signified or identify as a temple. Nevertheless, a vihara is a Buddhist term for a Buddhist centre, which literally means 'a dwelling place'. It is particularly used to signify a dwelling place for the understanding of





According to Buddhist philosophy, a temple is not only a place of worship, and place of performing rites and rituals. It is also a centre for learning and practice, especially, to learn and listen to the teachings of the Buddha and to seek guidance for a better life from Buddhist monks. There are a number of examples in Buddhist scriptures that people who understood and attained enlightenment after listening to a dhamma talk in a temple and were freed from the never ending cycle of (re)birth and death. Similarly, there are also many examples of parents sending their children to a temple to train them to be good members of the family and of the temple. Nevertheless, there may be many other reasons for each individual to visit a temple. Some are seeking a peaceful environment, to perform devotional acts and meritorious deeds. Some are visiting the temple for spiritual guidance, for a better life and to cultivate good

monastic life. This could be under a tree, cave or even in a building etc. Later, with the establishment of permanent dwelling places for the monks at the request of lay devotees, a vihara became a place of religious practice and a place of spiritual development through performing meritorious activities. Further commentary states that any place where bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, upasakas and upasikas continually reside, where pious people are bent on the performance of the ten meritorious deeds, and where the dhamma exists as a living principle can be called a vihara or place of blessings (Narada, The Buddha and His Teaching, 1977; p. 674). Therefore, a temple, according to Buddhism, is designed to motivate both inner and outer peace.





deeds; thereby accumulating merits for their benefit in the present, future and ultimate happiness at the end. The purpose of visiting a temple, however, for each individual is invisible and depends on their situation and circumstances the way how do look like. Let's draw from some examples presented in Buddhist scripture.

### **Affirmative effect of Temple**

Anathapindika, a well-known businessman achieved saintly hood sotapanna (Stream-winner) after hearing the teachings from the Buddha in his first visit to the dwelling place called Jatavana. Anathapindika invited the Buddha along with his monks to observe the rainy season at Savatthi, where he

bought the park belonging to Prince Jeta at a price determined by covering the whole site with gold coins and established the famous Jetavana Monastery at the great cost. This monastery where the Buddha spent nineteen rainy seasons and the major part of his life was the place where he delivered many of his sermons. Later, he became the chief supporter of the Buddha and his dispensation was regarded as the foremost alms-giver (dayaka). Anathapindika breathed his last after hearing a profound discourse from venerable Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha (MN III, 262) and was immediately reborn in Tusita heaven. The story further records that at very night Deva Anathpindika, illuminating the whole Jeta Grove, came up to the Buddha, saluted Him and expressed his pleasure on seeing the Buddha and his disciples residing in his monastery, and said:

*'Goodwill and wisdom, mind by  
method trained,*

*The highest conduct on good  
morals based,*

*This make mortals pure, not rank  
nor wealth.'*

(Kindred Saying, Part i, p. 80/ Narada, 1977; p.  
174)

*Anathapindika* used to visit the Buddha daily. He was, however, unable to persuade his son to join the temple. As the son of wealthy family, wealth spoiled him. *Anathapindika* was not happy with his son's bad manners and behaviour. He was unsuccessfully trying many different ways to teach him social manners. Finally, he actually paid his son to visit the temple and listen to teachings of the Buddha. However, his son's intention of visiting temple was to get paid once he got back home, so, he didn't pay any attention to the dhamma talk. *Anathapindika*, his father paid him to go three times. All his friends started to make jokes and tease him, saying 'he goes to temple only to get paid'. As a result

he was bitterly shy. So, on his last visit he conscientiously paid attention and was able to realise the teaching and attained *Sotapanna*, the first level of Noble hood stage. Now, this result was more joyous than expected. He had become not only a good boy, but a noble being.

Similarly, there are many other stories relating to the quest for peace of mind in the temple. *Patacara Theri*, one of the poorest and saddest ladies, had lost her nearer and dearer. Her husband died due to a snake bite. Her newly born child was taken away by an eagle and another by a flood. Her other family members also lost their lives to the same flood. She lost every thing and became completely unconscious. Unconsciously, she was wandering around and became estranged from society. In the course of time Fortunately, one day she happened to visit a temple where the Buddha was preaching. Having seen the Buddha at the temple, she was able to open her inner eyes and





widen her understanding of life.

*Kisagotami Theri*, another sad lady, lost her dearest son and was distraught with grief. She was wandering with the corpse in her hands begging for medicine to bring her son back to life. In due course fortunately, she was guided by one of the well wishers to visit the temple and ask the Buddha for the solution. Now, having seen the Buddha at the temple and following his instruction, instead of continuing to beg for medicine to wake her son up, she asked for ordination from the Buddha. Finally, she realised the true meaning of life.

*Venerable Sariputta*, the Buddha's personal right hand disciple, for instance, was in search of the true teachings – having heard only half a stanza from the Arahant Assaji, one of the first five disciples of the Buddha; became a disciple.

The Stanza says;

*“Of things that proceed from a cause,*



*Their cause the Tathagata has told and also their cessation: thus teaches the Great Ascetic.”*

Venerable Sariputta along with his friend Moggallana visited the Buddha at the temple and attained Sainthood, etc. Similarly, there are many other examples which demonstrate daily suffering that can be related to the modern day. It can be argued that the modern world, despite having progressed materially and technologically, has not always advanced in practice, and many complicated problems have been left behind for us to solve. Thus, Buddhists in particular are using temples in different ways for different purposes for the enlistment of (spiritual support) their daily life, especially for mental development



known as meditation, a technique which can assist in managing stress and emotions, in order to cope with the rapid development of the modern world.

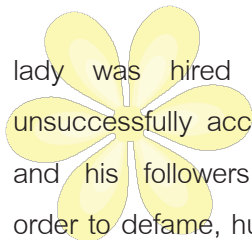
### **Unconstructive activities at temple**

Nevertheless, temples have also been used for wrong purposes, not only in the past, even in the present day. Despite it is being a place of worship and purification of the mind, no one knows the intention of each visitor, accusation and blame have plagued inside Buddhist dispensation from the time of the Buddha. The Buddha himself had to face different accusations and blames at different times, i.e. Sundari and Cincamanavika accused the Buddha of adultery in the midst of an audience at the temple. The commentary Mahajayamangla Gatha (The discourse on victory of Lord Buddha) says that Cincamanavika had been used by the opponents of the Buddha to

defame him. She went out of Savatti each evening, and slept at heretic quarters near Jetavana temple. When she returned in the early morning, she told people that she had spent the night with the Buddha. After eight or nine months, she then pretended to be pregnant. Then, standing in the middle of an assembly while the Buddha was preaching, she accused the Buddha of making her pregnant and demanded that he should take responsibility.

In the same way wherever the Buddha visited, Suppabuddha and some followers of other faiths were protested and accusations. Similarly, Magandhiya, a beautiful





lady was hired by bandits to unsuccessfully accuse the Buddha and his followers everywhere in order to defame, humiliate and stop them preaching. Similar stories have happened and have been happening throughout the history of Buddhism. In recent years, Thailand has faced similar problems, which may have caused people to hesitate in visiting temples and seeking counsel or association with monks etc.



to walk”, and referred to “dwellings” or “refuges” used by wandering monks during the rainy season. It is also the place where spiritual and moral values are preserved, where people can always feel free and able to take a fresh spiritual breath. Human life is full of misery and the temple can provide techniques for the path of liberation called spiritual development. It provides a standard line that would help you to find the foundation for the elimination of your problems in life. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a well-known Thai Buddhist monk says ‘mind your business not others’. The Buddha also says, ‘Intention that defines any actions as good or bad. Furthermore, the Buddha says, people are classified as good

### Conclusion

Despite these obstacles in the course of 2600 years of Buddhist history, Buddhist monasteries and monks play an important part in the transmission of literacy and culture, guidance regardless of race, colour, country and caste. Additionally they hold an important place in promoting charitable causes, building libraries, hospitals, schools, and universities. Thus, although, the vihara originally meant “a secluded place in which

or bad in accordance with their action not because of their birth. Hence, it is our duty to learn more about moral and social values from the temple and to develop that which would help with the elimination of suffering and misery. This can be achieved through mental development and wisdom. Therefore, we as Buddhists and supporters should feel mutually responsible to not only support and protect a temple and its activities but also to promote and propagate the teachings of the enlightened one which would help and benefit our entire society. In addition, the Buddha's teaching teaches that mutual respect and good treatment of each other are of paramount importance in creating happy union. Thus, the temple is the place where one learns to control the senses, to gain clear understanding and comprehension of problems which would lead to the purification of our lives. Let me bring a noble verse

and invite you to come and participate in taking a vow to free all beings;

**I shall always go for  
refuge to the enlightened one  
I shall always go for  
refuge to the noble teachings of  
the enlightened one  
And I shall always go for  
refuge to the sangha community  
Until I reach full enlightenment  
And all beings achieve  
ultimate happiness of fully  
enlightenment.  
Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu**

**Further reading:**

*Narada, The Buddha and his teachings, 1977, CBBEF, EN096*  
*Gary Gach, The complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism, Alpha 2004. USA*  
*The Dhammapada*

