

Katina, The Ritual Offering of the Robe

Swarna Wickremeratne, Loyola University Chicago

Author of the book: *Buddha in Sri Lanka*



Katina refers to the offering of the special robe (*Katina civara*) prepared and presented to monks who have completed the three-month period of retreat called *Vas* in Sinhala, and *Vassana* in Pali, meaning the period of rain. *Katina* literally means ‘firm,’ or ‘solid,’ because the offering of a *Katina* robe helps to earn solid good karma. The *Katina* Ceremony is over 2500 years old. It is a monastic tradition preserved and observed by Buddhists all over the world because it is an extraordinary opportunity to acquire merit once a year.

Three Gems of Great Value

In Buddha’s time the Triple Gem, which Buddhists the world over venerate was a visible reality – the Buddha, and the Dharma that he evolved and preached, and the Sangha, whom he assiduously trained in mastering his teachings, were all alive. After the Buddha’s passing away the Triple Gem in its entirety was personified in the institution of the monks, who are therefore rightly called the sons of the Buddha.

When it Rains Monks Must Stay Indoors

According to our earliest records, monks did not stay in one place for long periods of time. They traveled distances, from place to place, teaching and preaching the *dharmā* and meditating. As stated in the Mahāvaggapāli the Buddha instructed the monks thus, “Go forth, O monks for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the welfare, benefit and happiness of gods and men.”

As time passed, the Buddha was made aware of the difficulties the monks faced when traveling during the rainy season, which usually lasted for three months. As a result the Buddha established the practice of *Vas* or a retreat during these months of rain when monks would be domiciled in a single monastery. Monks commence the retreat usually starting on the full moon day of the month of July and ending in October.

Although the origin of *Vas* is related to the rainy season, the Buddha’s intention of recommending this practice had loftier intentions and objectives. In time the ideals and practices of the retreat season, transcended the issue of the rainy season and acquired more profound depths and meaning. The Buddha transformed this rainy retreat to a period of intensive practice of the Dhamma. Monks were advised to limit their traveling and spend more time dedicated to spiritual practice and sharing of the Dhamma with lay people. Lay followers are also advised to closely associate with monks and spend their lives committed to spiritual practice.

Invitation to the Monks

On one occasion during the time of the Buddha a prominent chief lay lady disciple, Visakha expressed her desire to offer a special piece of cloth to each monk and invite monks for *Vas* observation in the monastery. The Buddha accepted the invitation. Following this custom, Buddhists follow the practice of inviting monks to go into retreat and the invitations is called *vas aradana*.

It is customary for prominent supporters to invite the monks formally to observe the retreat in a temple or other dwelling place. If the monks accept the invitation, the

hosts would assume responsibility for providing all the needs of the monks during this period, and this is done with diligence as it is regarded as highly meritorious. **Vas** provides an opportunity to lay Buddhists, to express their devotion to Buddhism and to the Sangha with diligence.

Monastic Confessional

At the close of the *Vas* retreat, the monks perform the *pavarana* ceremony. During this ceremony, the monks get together and invite one another to point out their faults and lapses. It is friendly and constructive criticism and almost invariably well received. The practice is intended to help the monks purify themselves.

Another benefit of the *pavarana* ceremony is that it could also help to keep the monastic rules alive. Retreat spent together provides the monks with an opportunity for in depth evaluation of their spirituality and commitment as monks. Each member of the *Sangha* (community of monks) has equal rights regardless of hierarchy to point out lapses and errors in judgment and conduct of others for the good of the whole Sangha. This tradition is one of the earliest examples of the development and evolution of democratic norms and ideals in human civilization.

At the end of the *pavarana*, the *Katina* ceremony proper is held. Robes can be offered to monks any time. The offering of a *Katina* robe is of utmost significance to a Buddhist who knows the meaning of it, and is of curiosity to someone with no knowledge of it.

Why is the *Katina* Robe Special?

The *Katina* robe is significant because during the three-month **Vas** period, Buddhist monks are required to remain fully dedicated to purifying themselves through the rigorous practice of meditation and moral conduct. As the monks end the retreat and come back to society, they become deservedly worthy of offering and veneration as ‘punnakkhetta’ or ‘field of merit’ to the fullest extent possible. A robe offered to such a

monk potent with spirituality and dedication to religious living at this time, helps one to earn solid merit or good karma.

The offering of the *Katina* robe is considered immensely meritorious since it involves three months of preparation and dedication. The ceremony become important and meritorious because of the potency of the merit gathered during the period of retreat, both by the monks and the devotees. The *Katina* robe is symbolizes the successful culmination of the rainy retreat.

And Now for the Robe!

The main event in the *Katina* ceremony is the offering of the special robe known as the *Katina-civara* to the *Sangha*. This ceremony is meant to be performed with devotion and is an occasion of religious significance for Buddhists all over the world.

Offering of the *Katina* robe started during the time of the Buddha. A group of monks went to a place for retreat. At the conclusion of the retreat they returned to visit the Buddha. On the way they were caught in a heavy downpour of rain and one monk got more wet than the others. The Buddha seeing this monk, advised the monk to accept an extra robe as a *Katina*. The extra robe was always given to the one who needed it the most. There are many traditions and rituals of offering a piece of cloth to monks in the name of *Katina*.

Chance to Gain Great Merit

Katina is the most significant merit making ceremony performed by Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia. **Vas** is also the time for lay Buddhists to express their devotion and practice generosity by providing their temples with the requisites for maintaining the temples and the inhabitant monks. It is an important period for gathering merit for both the layman and the monks. During this period devotees are given the opportunity to learn the Dharma from the monks by listening to sermons, getting involved in dhamma discussions, participating in meditation programs, and listening to *pirith* chanting. It is a time to get blessings for good living by

performing and participating in religious ceremonies. Monks help the community to lead a pure life, emphasizing the importance of practicing the Five Precepts and teachings of the Buddha.

More significantly **Vas** is a time to strengthen ties and form bonds between monks and the laity. As spiritual leaders, monks guide the lay people towards ways of resolving problems with compassion and understanding, thereby forming strong bonds with the community. Monks dwelling in one place during **Vas** have more time to communicate with the laity on a one to one basis. They get the opportunity to listen to the problems of the laity and provide solutions to live a stress free life.

For the above-mentioned reasons, the offering of the **Katina** robe is considered one of the greatest meritorious deeds. Whatever else is offered to a monk on **Katina** day is also considered meritorious on this special day. It is even said that one who offers a **Katina** robe, to a monk who has observed the spiritual guidance given by the Buddha with diligence and commitment, even on a single occasion in his lifetime, would in *samsara* when he is born over and over again-never be in want or destitution and never to be reduced to rags for want of clothes.

Glory of Giving

One of the stanzas chanted during **Katina** glorifies the greatness of the merit which one gets from performing **Katina**. It says that even this solid earth, or a solid rock or a piece of diamond could tremble, shake and break at times. However, the merit obtained by offering of **Katina** cannot be nullified by anything until one achieves the ultimate goal of Buddhist aspiration which is **Nirvana**.

It is also believed that the merit, or the positive **karma**, gained by the offerings at the **Katina** ceremony could reduce the negative effects of other minor bad **karma** one may have committed. One would be blessed with long life, happiness, good health, good complexion, physical strength, peace and wisdom in this life and many more lives to come until one attains **Nirvana**. However, it is important to remember the receiver of the **Katina** robe needs to be spiritually cleansed and worthy of receiving such a glorious

offering to get the maximum benefit from the offering. **What makes Katina ceremony a wholesome meritorious deed, is not the ceremony itself, but the spiritually and purity of the monks in retreat and the devotion and commitment of the laity. The totality of this will bring most merit and make it a solid good karma.**

Oh Wishing Tree! Oh Wishing Tree! Grant Me My Wishes

A fascinating ritual associated with the *Katina* ceremony is the setting up of the "wishing tree", traditionally referred to as the *kapruka*, (legendary tree of bounties, which grants all that one would wish for) in the temple premises. The idea is that by offering various items for the use of monks, including money which the devotees tie on to the tree, all their wishes would be granted. In Thailand, I have seen every conceivable item that could be of use to the monks, hung on the wishing tree at *Katina* time, in the hopes of acquiring merit.

Swarna Wickremeratne

Chicago, Illinois