

KAṬHINA

In the annual rhythm of Buddhist monastic life the **Kaṭhina celebration** is the opening of the so called robe season, a time of receiving robes and robe cloth and of making robes.

This tradition of donating robes and robe cloth to spiritual seekers dates back to times even before the Buddha. Lay people expressed their respect for people who dedicated their lives to the truth or the divine.

When the Buddha established the bhikkhu order about 2500 years ago, he initially did not allow the monks to accept robes or robe cloth from the lay supporters. The bhikkhus had to be content with thrown away, ownerless cloth which they found in the forest, in cities and villages and especially on the charnel grounds.

On request by lay people he later allowed to present and accept robe cloth, not in order to provide good cloth for his monks, but to give an opportunity to make good kamma.

The Canon reports how the robe season came about. At one time the Blessed One stayed near Sāvathī, in the Jeta grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. During that time a group of 30 monks was travelling from Pāva in order to see the Buddha and spend the rains retreat with him. They didn't make it in time and had to spend the 3 months of the rains near Saketa, just 100 km away from Sāvathī. After the retreat they continued their journey even if the roads were still muddy and it was still raining a lot. Soakingly wet they arrived at the Jeta grove. When the Buddha heard about their fate he uplifted them with a Dhamma talk and took the opportunity to install the so called robe season and the kaṭhina ceremony.

Robe cloth may be offered all year round but during the robe season and on kaṭhina day this gift gets a special significance arising from the traditional life style of the bhikkhus. In the old days the bhikkhus were leading a nomadic life, staying in the wilderness a lot of the time, following the Buddha's example. Only in the rainy season, for practical reasons, they took on a more permanent residence. This made it possible for the lay people living near the monastery to get to know the monks a bit better, listen to Dhamma, bring food on a regular basis and so on. After the rains the monks prepare to set out travelling once again. Therefore this is a time very suitable to provide the saṅgha with cloth and other necessary requisites.

The opening of the time of making robes is the so called "spreading of the kaṭhina". The kaṭhina originally was a wooden frame on which the monks arranged pieces of robe cloth before they sewed them together by hand. This frame was necessary because large pieces of cloth often were not available and several monks had to join hands to work on one robe. The kaṭhina frame provided stability to the work project and prevented the pieces from slipping out of their proper position.

Nowadays we got sewing machines. Thus we could call the opening of the robe season "plugging in of the sewing machine" but we still maintain the old expression and speak of "spreading the kaṭhina".

The kaṭhina celebration has to be initiated by the lay community without interference by the sangha. In Thailand's forest monasteries usually white cloth is given, which has to be dyed and dried, but pre-dyed cloth is permitted, too.

The kaṭhina has to be held in the first month after the rains retreat. At least 5 bhikkhus have to attend. The Buddha relaxed a few rules for the time of receiving and making robes which makes those procedures easier. This is called vassa privileges and they are in effect for this one month. If a kaṭhina has been formally spread they are valid for 4 months and are called kaṭhina privileges. The kaṭhina day is a good opportunity for experienced monks to pass on their sewing skills and for the whole community to work together in harmony.

For the ceremony a piece of cloth is given which must be big enough to make it into a robe. Then the sangha then agrees on a monk who is qualified to receive the cloth, make a robe and spread the kaṭhina with it. Then the monks give a blessing and rush to start making a robe. It has to be finished before dawn of the next day in order to spread the kaṭhina with it and receive the kaṭhina privileges. It is the custom that all members of the sangha help with making the robe according to their abilities.