

What is Kathina?

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Dhamma class



Introduction to Kathina?

Kathina is an annual robe offering ceremony. Kathina robe (cīvara) offering is associated with several Buddhist rules and regulations. Buddhist monks are required to stay at one place for the first three months or the last three months of the rainy-season, which lasts for four months in India. The former is called the first vassa and the latter the second vassa. At the end of the rains-retreat, they perform the pavāraṇā (invitation), and after the rains-retreat the Kathina robe offering ceremony takes place annually for one month by performing Vinaya activities.

Meanings of the word, Kathina

1. In the Commentary to the Kathinakkhandaka [Section on Kathina] of the Vinaya Piṭaka, Kathina is defined as;
 - a **concept of conglomeration**, which means bringing things together.
 - **wooden frame** used by the monks in sewing their robes during the Buddha's time.
 - In our present context, it means **firmness, stability and durability** because it has the power of providing the five privileges.
3. The word Kathina denotes **the robe (cīvara** in pali) known as Kathina cīvara, offered to the monks annually after the end of the rains-retreat (vassāvāsa). The Kathina robe is offered to the monastic Saṅgha by lay followers. Apart from the lay followers, monks, nuns and novices also can offer to the Buddhist Saṅgha.

The background of of Vassana (rain season) precept

The word kaṭhina is very popular in this time of the year because we are coming to the end of the rains retreat season and getting ready to offer the kaṭhina robes. Contemporary to the Buddha, there was a tradition among the **other religious groups to observe a rains retreat**, which means that they **stayed at one place during the 3 months of monsoon rain**. They did so **to avoid the hardships of exposure to rains, and to not step on new sprouts, or worms that came up on earth during the rains**. However, the disciples of the Buddha were not instructed to keep this tradition hence people complained when they saw monks were wandering even during the rains season. When this was reported to the Buddha, he laid down a rule that monks too should follow this tradition and observe a rains rule by abstaining from wandering from town to town. Since then, monks stayed in one place and continued their practice as well as taught dhamma to people as they came to listen. Since monks got more time to dedicate to their practice, a lot of monks became arahants.

How was Kaṭhina (robe offering) begun?

The historical background of the Kaṭhina robe offering is mentioned in the Vinaya Pitaka. While the Buddha was dwelling at Jetavana Vihara in Shravasti, a group of thirty monks wanted to observe rains retreat at Sāvatti with the Buddha. Unfortunately, monsoon rains started before they reached to Sāvatti. They had to observe rains retreat at Sāketa, a closer city to Sāvatti. After the end of the rains season, they started coming to Sāvatti to pay homage to the Buddha. On their way to Sāvatti they had to face many obstacles due to continuous rain. Their robes were ripped apart and were wet, but they approached to the Great Compassionate One. The monks reported their story to the Buddha who in turn gave the permission to use an extra robe. From that day people started offering a robe to monks who observed the rains retreat. That is how Kaṭhina tradition came to exist.

The way of offering the Kaṭhina to a monk

After having decided on the recipient of the Kaṭhina cloth, the Sangha should then execute a formal act to give the kaṭhina cloth to the monk.

“Bhante, let the Sangha listen to me. This Kaṭhina cloth has accrued to the Sangha. If the Sangha is ready, the Sangha should give this Kaṭhina cloth to the monk so-and-so for spreading the kaṭhina. This is the motion. Whoever agrees to the giving of this kaṭhina cloth to the monk so-and-so for spreading the kaṭhina should be silent. Whoever does not agree should speak. The Sangha agrees; therefore, it is silent. Thus, do I understand this.”

6 Phases of Kaṭhina Ceremony

The Kaṭhina ceremony can be classified into six phases.

1. Sponsoring the kaṭhina cloth (by giving it to the Saṅgha) - At least 5 monks are eligible to initiate the kaṭhina ceremony.
2. Appointing an individual monk to receive the kaṭhina cloth –
3. Converting the kaṭhina cloth to individual property (when the Saṅgha formally gives it to an individual monk)
4. Making the kaṭhina cloth into the kaṭhina robe
5. Spreading the kaṭhina with the kaṭhina robe
6. Rejoicing in the spreading of the kaṭhina.

The kaṭhina ceremony nowadays

Today, the kaṭhina robe offering ceremony is celebrated as the largest festival among traditional Buddhists in the world. Throughout the day, Buddhists enjoy the ceremony with cultural entertainment and performing many meritorious acts. According to the schedule, it begins early in the morning. People gather in the monastery, undertake the five precepts, and listen to Dhamma talks. The first session is concluded before noon. Thereafter, the devotees serve a meal to the Saṅgha and enjoy whatever is left over.

The main theme of kaṭhina begins at midday, around 13:00, where many monks give Dhamma talks and talk about the significance of the Kaṭhina robe offering. A representative of the laypeople leads the ceremony and announces the offering. After receiving the robes, monks do other activities and perform some Vinaya rules. At the ending session, the festival is concluded by sharing the accumulated merits to relatives and sentient beings. In the evening, the people perform some cultural programs such as singing Buddhist songs and traditional dancing. It is important to mention that, in this present day and age, people offer ready-made robes to the Saṅgha for the kaṭhina robe. In contrast to this, some monasteries' devotees in Bangladesh offer handmade kaṭhina robes. Within the Kaṭhina day, a group of people scratches the fibers, cut the threads and make the cloth. After sewing the robe, it is dyed and made a suitable color, and the resulting robe is offered to the Saṅgha.

The kaṭhina ceremony is now an internationally established festive occasion where the Saṅgha and the laity meet to participate in mutually rewarding, meritorious activities, which may or may not be directly pertinent to its original aims.

What are the benefits of kaṭhina?

The Buddha himself stated the significance of the offering of kaṭhina robes in the Vinaya Piṭaka. In the Mahāvagga, it is stated that the kaṭhina robe offering is the highest offering and the most meritorious of skillful deeds. The immeasurable merits of offering the kaṭhina robe can be illustrated in many examples. In a previous life, the Venerable **Nāgita Thera** offered the Kaṭhina

robe to the Sangha. As a result of accumulated merits, he enjoyed divine pleasures and reigned as the king of heaven for many eons. He never suffered in the unpleasant planes and in his last birth he became an Arahant (a worthy one), during the Buddha's era.

Modern kaṭhina ceremonies demand more **determination, firmness and stability**, and the sponsors, receivers, and makers accumulate immeasurable **merits**. The ceremony is far more special than other offerings. It is the most important and beneficial skillful deed that cultivates all that is good within us. And from that, we gain all the blessings toward the **highest goal known as Nibbāna**.

Five Privileges for monks

The Buddha has given five privileges to monks who have completed the vassa to spread the kathina.

1. *Anāmantacāra* - Freedom of going (to visit families before noon) without having informed another monk [freedom of movement before noon in spite of having accepted an invitation for a meal]
2. *Asamādānacāra* - Going (around) without taking (the full set of three robes) [freedom to stay apart from one's set of three robes at the break of dawn]
3. *Ganabhajana* - Freedom to accept invitations for a group meal
4. *Yāvadatthacīvara* - Freedom to keep as many robes as required (without having to determine or assign them according to Vinaya regulation)
5. *Yo ca tattha cīvaruppāda* - Exclusive right to Sanghika robes given at one's vassa monastery.

Buddhist tradition has given five privileges for devotees who sponsor Kaṭhina ceremony.

1. Go anywhere without danger, hindrances or obstructions.
2. Fire, water, wicked kings, thieves and ungrateful children cannot destroy their property. They can perform their tasks without difficulty.
3. They will not meet with any harm. They will not meet with any danger on account of their meals.
4. Their belongings will be kept safe. They can get many clothes.
5. They can own many other possessions. They will be able to keep their properties.

Reference: Kathina Then and Now by Aggacitta Bhikkhu