

Why is the *kaṭhina* robe so called?

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Every Theravādin monastery is supposed to hold an annual ceremony at which a monastic robe is made and offered to a monk considered particularly deserving. The decision to award it is one of the very few formal acts of the Saṅgha laid down in the canonical *Vinaya*, and the only one which is prescribed to happen annually. The robe (*cīvara*) is known as the *kaṭhina cīvara*, and the name *kaṭhina* also attaches to the ceremony as a whole. However, the etymology of *kaṭhina* has been forgotten.

This article describes the modern ceremony. Comparing the *kaṭhina* ceremony with funerals, I trace the origin of making monastic robes out of pieces stitched together to the earliest times. This reveals that *kaṭhina* means “rough”, because originally that is what the robes were. Though nowadays lay piety demands that monks wear the finest cloth, the *kaṭhina* ceremony reflects the prestige of the archaic.

Finally I garner some corroborative evidence from the Pali *Vinaya* section on the *kaṭhina*, though I show that part of the account of how the ceremony came into being has been lost. The Ven. Analayo has kindly checked for me the parallel sections of the *Vinayas* surviving only in Chinese, but they turn out to be of little use. Though itself damaged, the Pali version is clearly the oldest.

Every Theravādin monastery is supposed to hold a ceremony soon after the end of the annual rains retreat, at which a monastic robe is made and offered to a monk who has been considered by the abbot to be particularly deserving. Typically this monk will have spent the preceding three months of the rains retreat locally. The decision who is to receive the robe is made formally by a gathering

of monks, to whom the proposal is made in a precisely worded *ñatti* (“motion”). This is one of the very few formal acts of the Saṅgha laid down in the canonical *Vinaya*, and the only one which is prescribed to happen annually. The subsequent proceedings are fairly elaborate, involve the participation of both monks and laity, and are usually the occasion for a large public celebration. My breadth of knowledge is not sufficient for me to say with certainty that this ceremony survives in every part of the Theravāda tradition; but given its place in the *Vinaya*, I think it likely.

The robe (*cīvara*) is known as the *kaṭhina cīvara*, and the name *kaṭhina* also attaches to the ceremony as a whole. Strangely, however, the etymology of *kaṭhina* has been forgotten; it is considered to be a technical term of obscure origin. Margaret Cone’s *Dictionary of Pāli* (vol. 1, pp.614-5) gives two entries, i.e., considers that there are two homonyms. The first is an adjective meaning “hard, stiff; harsh; fierce”; the second is the *kaṭhina* which figures in this ceremonial context. The very long entry for this second word begins “a framework (covered with a mat) to which the cloth for making robes was attached while being sewn.” It would therefore seem that Cone posits that the word originally referred to the technology of making the robe and was transferred from that context to a specific robe. This suggests the question why only this one robe, made on one occasion in the year, receives this name.

In this short article I shall argue that the word *kaṭhina* should receive only a single dictionary entry and that the technical meaning is just a specific usage of the normal adjective. The key to this lies in cultural history.

The *kaṭhina* ceremony is the topic of a section of the *Vinaya*; in the Pali Canon it is *Mahāvagga* chapter 7 (*Vin.II. 253-267*). I take it that this is enough to prove that the custom is very old, which is not to say that it has undergone no modification over time. I myself witnessed the ceremony in central Sri Lanka in 1964, and what I saw showed no obvious discrepancy with what J.F. Dickson described in an article published in 1884.¹ He writes that in the month of *Kattiko* (Oct-Nov) “... on some convenient day the material for the *kaṭhinaṃ* is presented. The people ascertain beforehand which of the three robes the priest is in need of, and they subscribe, everyone giving something, to purchase the required calico or linen.”

¹Dickson, J.F. “Notes illustrative of Buddhism as the daily religion of the Buddhists of Ceylon and some account of their ceremonies before and after death,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, v.VIII (29), 1884, pp.203-36.

In the morning the laity go in procession to the monastery and present the cloth with the words “*imaṃ kaṭhina-dussaṃ saṅghassa dema*”.²

The monks then set about making the robe; according to Dickson the participants must be fully ordained, and eight to ten of them are needed, “as the robe must be dyed and completed before sunset”. The laity supply everything required, such as scissors and dye. “The cloth is cut, if for the outer robe (*saṅghāṭi*) into thirty pieces, if for the upper robe (*uttarasamgo*) into fifteen pieces, if for the under robe (*antaravāsako*) into fifteen pieces – and the pieces are sewn together into the proper shape. The robe is then washed and dyed yellow, and, if practicable, dried in the sun. When this is done, the priests resume their seats in chapter, and the priest to whom the robe has been allotted takes it, and kneeling, says, “*imaṃ saṅghāṭiṃ adhiṭṭhāmi*” (“I appropriate this robe”), and he proceeds to mark it, saying, “*imaṃ kappabinduṃ karomi*” (“I put this mark upon it”); he then puts it over his knee, saying “*imaṃ saṅghāṭiṃ attharāmi*” (“I spread out this robe”).³

Let me add some short comments. Firstly, when I saw it, fewer monks were needed. I have also seen photographs of a recent *kaṭhina* ceremony at a Theravāda monastery in Bangladesh where it is clear that the robe is being prepared by lay-women; I have no idea how widespread this is. Secondly, a *kappabindu* is literally a “legitimate spot”, i.e., a mark of legitimation. I assume (but do not know) that this will act as a permanent reminder that possession of this particular robe is an honour.

More relevant to my theme are the cutting and dyeing. Nowadays the cloth supplied is new white cloth of high quality, bought from a shop which supplies ecclesiastical materials. It seems obvious that originally the robe did not start out as a single piece of cloth which had to be cut up before it was put together, but that the material used consisted of several pieces and the sewing was necessary in order to create the robe. In other words, the material was not provided by a donor, let alone bought in a shop, as happens nowadays, but consisted of rags, pieces of cloth, which were collected to be used for this purpose. Monks wear robes of which the colour varies widely throughout the Theravādin world; the commonest colour is yellow to orange, and in European languages it tends to be referred to as “saffron”. The variety of colours used is perfectly understandable, because the Pali word is *kasāya* or *kasāva*, which, so far from meaning “saffron”, means “stain”. If the cloth begins as white, the colour of purity and newness, it

²“We give this *kaṭhina* cloth to the Saṅgha.”

³Dickson, pp.226-7.

needs to be dyed simply in order to match the rest of any monk's wardrobe. But if the robe is assembled from pieces of stained cloth, whatever their precise colour or colours, dyeing would be required to make them at least somewhat uniform.

Some of the earliest features of monastic living seem to be preserved for us in the voluntary ascetic practices known as *dhutaṅga*. Before I go further, I would like to offer my own etymology of the word, which the commentaries explain as “one who shakes off either evil dispositions (*kilese*) or obstacles to spiritual progress (*vāra, nīvarana*)”;⁴ they thus connect it with the verb *dhunāti*. I suggest that the word comes from *dhuti-aṅga*,⁵ where *dhuti* is from Sanskrit *dhṛti* and the compound means “constituent of firmness / resolve”. My only evidence for this is that it seems to fit the context.

One of the *dhutaṅgas* is to wear *paṃsu-kūla*, “rag robes”. The *PED* gives *paṃsu-kūlika* as “one who wears clothes made of rags taken from a dustheap”.⁶ I do not doubt this traditional interpretation, but at the same time I wonder how easy it can have been in ancient India to find discarded on dustheaps pieces of cloth which were large enough to be useful as components of a robe. However, there was certainly one reliable source of supply: the shrouds used at funerals.

In the article already cited, Dickson also describes a funeral, though his account is very brief. The body is carried to the cemetery on a bier, covered by a cloth. It “is placed on sticks at the top of the grave. The cloth which covers it is removed and presented to the priest, who says: – *Aniccā vata saṃkhārā* ... [the verse said to have been recited by the king of the gods when the Buddha died]. The priest departs, taking with him the cloth; the friends of the deceased remain to bury the body.”⁷

My own account⁸ goes into more detail, but I shall only reproduce what is relevant here. The funeral I witnessed was more prosperous, with several monks and a coffin. I write: “When the coffin has been placed in the pyre or over the grave, according to whether the body is to be cremated or buried, a white cloth is laid on it.” Those present recite a Pali formula giving the cloth to the Saṅgha, at which the monks spread out the cloth across the coffin. After reciting the *Aniccā* verse, they then “pick up the cloth, symbolically appropriating it, and someone takes it away.”

⁴ *PED*, 342a.

⁵ For the loss of final *-i* in external sandhi before a vowel, cf. *sat-ādhipateyya*.

⁶ *PED*, 379a.

⁷ Dickson, p.233. For the full text of the verse and a translation, see my account (see next fn.).

⁸ *Precept and Practice*, pp.241-2.

The ideal for Theravāda Buddhists is to be cremated; in theory, burial is only for children and those who have met sudden untimely deaths. However, cremation costs more because a pyre requires a lot of firewood. In Dickson's account, I surmise that the family could not afford cremation and made do with the sticks he mentions, to symbolize a pyre. In ancient India, it was normal for poor people to be unable to afford cremation, and they left the corpses of their relatives in charnel grounds, where they were soon devoured by vultures, jackals, worms, etc.

In my book I comment: "By picking up the cloth from the coffin, the monk is symbolically taking the winding sheet ... and thus conforming to the letter of the *paṃsukūla* practice. On the other hand the dead man's next of kin are giving the cloth, which therefore is the best new white cloth, to enhance the value of the gift; they have made the funeral an occasion for transferring [to the deceased] the merit earned by a gift to the Saṅgha, thus destroying the spirit of the *paṃsukūla* idea so that the original meaning of the term has been completely lost."

The main point of this article is to claim that that is not the only loss of the original meaning of a term. I owe this insight to my wife, Dr. Sanjukta Gupta. When applied to cloth, *kathina* means "rough", the opposite of smooth. No one is going to waste their money on a shroud of high quality, smooth cloth, when it is either going to be burnt with the body or, as in most cases, left covering the body in a charnel ground – where a wandering mendicant can pick it up. Normal people could not reuse a cloth which had served such an impure purpose.

My wife also suggests that the robes were dyed so that at least their colour was somewhat uniform, and this was done by soaking them in mountain streams which ran with mineral dyes, ranging from yellow through orange and red to ochre.

The Buddha urged his monks to live frugally; but from the beginning they were the victims of their own success,⁹ in that the Buddhist laity honoured them and wanted to treat them as well as was permitted, even bending the rules to that end. Giving to the Saṅgha has always been the most obvious way of making merit, and an expensive gift is thought to earn more merit – the principle that it is only the intention that counts is soon lost sight of.¹⁰ Not only, therefore, should monks not be left to find rags from which to make up their robes; they should always have robes made of the finest quality cloth. Dressing in a dirty old shroud becomes

⁹This problem, particularly as related to the *dhutaṅgas*, is discussed in my *Theravāda Buddhism: A social history*, 2nd ed., p.96.

¹⁰I discuss this at some length in *Precept and Practice*, pp.248-250.

virtually unthinkable. And yet, at the same time, the prestige of the archaic also remains. Though the *dhutaṅga* practices are somewhat discouraged, a minority of monks in every Theravāda tradition do adopt them, though usually only for a limited period. Thus a robe which symbolically can be linked to the rough, stained cloth which the Buddha originally envisaged for his followers still finds its place in a ceremony which in terms of function has become wholly redundant, for no monk depends on a *kaṭhina* presentation to maintain his supply of robes. The whole *kaṭhina* ceremony is nothing but a re-enactment of archaic Buddhist values, and the robe at its centre is the quintessence of this.

The reader may be wondering why, if the *kaṭhina* ceremony is described in the *Vinaya*, I have chosen rather to base my article on modern descriptions. The composition of the chapter in the Theravādin *Vinaya* that has come down to us is strange. It starts with a brief narrative. A group of thirty monks who practise various *dhutaṅgas* intend to come and see the Buddha. Their *dhutaṅgas* include that they wear rag robes (*paṃsukūlika*) and possess only three of them (*tecīvarika*).¹¹ Before they reach the Buddha, the rainy season starts, so they cannot travel, but have to spend three months immobile, though they are only six *yojanas* away from him. As soon as the rains retreat formally ends, they complete their journey, but it is still raining, so that when they arrive they are drenched. The Buddha receives them with the usual courtesies, and they tell him what has happened.

Here the narrative ends abruptly; we never hear of these monks again. The Buddha now lays down the rules for the *kaṭhina* ceremony, and the rest of the chapter elaborates on those rules in great detail, with many technical terms which are hard to translate or understand. There is nothing here to further our historical understanding, and it is obvious that such detailed prescriptions must have been elaborated over time.

I would deduce that an important chunk of text continuing the narrative and leading naturally into the Buddha's decision to give certain monks new robes has been lost. The monks have behaved with strict rectitude because, despite their frustration, they have not moved during the rains retreat. However, they are now in a bad way because their robes are soaked, and they possess no others to change into. This explains the timing of the ceremony. Moreover, as they have taken a vow to wear rag robes, they need something as close as possible to such robes, and

¹¹ Because the costume of a monk consists of three robes, each with its name and function, someone who has only three is minimally equipped and has nothing to change into.

if only better cloth is available, it can be cut up and then sewn together to at least simulate a rag robe.

While this text explains certain major features of the ceremony, it does not get us back to the intimate connection between such rag robes and shrouds. I would however assume that in ancient India, for the reasons explained, this was too obvious to require spelling out.

I hoped that a more coherent or informative version of this story might be found in one of the five versions of the *Vinaya* extant in Chinese translation. Not knowing Chinese, I asked the Ven Analayo to help me. I am extremely grateful to him for his willingness to do so, even though the results were disappointing.

The five *Vinayas* in question are the Mahīśāsaka, the Dharmaguptaka, the Sarvāstivādin, the Mahāsāṃghika and the Mūlasarvāstivādin. In comparative studies, it is common to find that the first three listed differ increasingly from the Theravāda as one moves down the list, and the last two differ most. We shall see that here too the data roughly conform to this pattern.

He found that all five have a section on *kaṭhina* robes. He writes¹²: “The Mahāsāṃghika goes completely its own way and has nothing whatsoever in common with the other versions. Here a wife of the king offers 500 cloths, whereupon the Buddha makes various regulations, such as that they can be kept for 10 days, and after those 10 days are over they can be made into *kaṭhina* robes.

The other four versions have the story about the monks who at the end of the rains want to visit the Buddha (though not necessarily with the detail that they spent the rains close by; this is peculiar to the Theravāda and the Mahīśāsaka). On their way they get caught in heavy rain and their robes become heavy, so that they become exhausted by having to carry the wet robes around.

Only in the Dharmaguptaka version is it specified (as it is in the Theravāda) that the visiting monks are wearing rag-robes. In the other versions there is no indication that they are following any ascetic practice.” However, this could be a secondary development, for the Ven Analayo writes: “My impression is that the Dharmaguptaka has a doubling of stories. It looks as if to an original version in which the monks are simply monks in general (as in the other versions) was added another version in which the monks are identified as *paṃsukūlikas*.”

Since the central argument of this article is that the association between the *kaṭhina* robe and the rag-robe is ancient and original, my hypothesis about the

¹²I am quoting directly from the Ven Analayo’s e-mails, though I have taken some minor liberties with the wording.

Dharmaguptaka double version would rather be that it reflects the use of two sources, not necessarily at the same time, one of which mentioned that monks were *paṃsukūlikas* and the other didn't.¹³ Whatever the sequence of events in the creation of the Dharmaguptaka version, I feel sure that the identification of those monks as *paṃsukūlikas* is original. It explains why, when the monks needed to be given new robes, the material for those robes was cut up to make them resemble rag-robes.

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¹³Such a mixing of sources is known in textual criticism as "contamination".