

The Kathina

October 30, 2005

The kathin hasn't been spread yet, so it's not yet done. But we have some time now to stop and settle our minds after all the activity of the day.

It's all about a piece of cloth, but of course it's about more than just a piece of cloth. It's about cooperation: getting the donations together, hosting the event, cleaning up, taking the cloth and making it into a robe. All these things depend on cooperation, which is probably why the Buddha instituted the kathin to begin with.

You look in the Vinaya and there's not much explanation. It doesn't say why the Buddha thought up the kathin, how it came about. It's in a very unusual section of the Vinaya. It seems to assume that the people reading the section already know what the kathin is all about, so very little is explained. So you have to read between the lines.

Just look at the event. The monks have been together for the rains retreat. Back in those days, at the end of the retreat, the monks would scatter. Go off into the forest. Find some time to meditate alone. But before they would go, lay people had the opportunity to give them cloth. And one gift of cloth was special: the cloth that was used to spread the kathin.

The word kathin—or kathina, in Pali—means “frame,” like the frame used in a quilting bee. Stretch the cloth across the frame, and you can make it possible for a lot of people to sew all at once. This is the time when the monks can pass on their sewing skills. The older monks can teach the younger monks how to cut the cloth, how to sew, how to dye the robes, all of which are very important skills, given that the robe is one of the basic requisites, the one that's most likely get torn, the one that's most likely to get old. So before the monks scattered into the forest, they would get together to make one robe together as a group.

To encourage the monks to participate in this group activity, the Buddha relaxed some of the rules for the monks who had participated in the kathin. They're pretty minor rules. Probably the one that impinges most on the monks' life is the one about not having to have all your robes with you at dawn. For most of the year, you have to be very careful about that: Where are you at dawn? Where are your robes at dawn?

The rule was instituted to keep the monks from just leaving their robes all over the place where their friends had to take care of them. But for the period of time after the kathin has been spread, you can meet at dawn without all your robes

together. There are a few other rewards as well, but they're all pretty minor. It's interesting, though, that the Buddha would encourage the monks to participate in the kathin by relaxing a couple of rules.

The rewards or the benefits of the kathin would last as long as you still have one of two commitments. One would be the commitment to making a robe and the other, a commitment to staying on in the monastery or returning to the monastery before the end of the cold season. Again, it's a way of encouraging a sense of community. Say you want to go back to that monastery. If you felt it's a good place to practice, there was a sense of rapport between the monks and lay people, the Buddha encourages you to develop that rapport.

It's interesting: People think of Theravada as being selfish form of Buddhism, where each of us is looking after only him- or herself, but that's not true. Our practice depends more on volunteer cooperation and on this sense of community than most people would suspect. Look at how our kathin happened. It was all volunteer, and it all came together. Things worked out, and then everybody cleaned up afterwards and went home without anybody having to give orders, without anybody being under any compulsion.

There's a Thai word for this quality, called, *namchai*—literally it means “heart juice” or “heart water”—for that quality of your willingness to give yourself when nothing is being required, just for the goodness of the act in and of itself. That's a quality that cooperation develops.

So think about that. The Buddha didn't just teach meditation. He taught a whole social structure of the monks, and cooperation among the monks, cooperation between the monks and the lay people, as the context for the practice. And this quality of *namchai*, the willingness to give of yourself, is very important in all aspects of the practice. Meditation doesn't happen unless you give of yourself. If you sit back and wait for things to be proven for you, it doesn't happen. After all, the Buddha taught a path leading to total happiness. If you wait until someone sets out on a chart how they've proven that total happiness can be found and this is the way to do it, you're going to die first. It just can't be done, because happiness is something totally inward. And the causes of happiness are inward as well.

So the practice requires a willingness to make sacrifices, a willingness to give of yourself. This path seems reasonable, it seems admirable, it seems to produce good results. You see it in the people around you who practice it. As the Buddha said, those are not absolute proofs, but they are indications that this is a good path. So you can't wait for everything to be proven. You have to give of yourself first before the results will come.

This is why the Buddha created the monkhood. He created the relation between the monks and lay people to be one of voluntary cooperation, to develop this quality of giving of yourself, to encourage this quality. You learn that it feels good to do something that's really good, even though it can be physically tiring, demanding in one way or another. After all, the path is going to be tiring all the way through, it's going to be demanding. But if you're up for the challenge, it makes all the difference in the world.

So this is one of the qualities the Buddha wanted us try to develop when he set forth the tradition of the kathin. It involves work, corporation, and a state of mind that's willing to do the work, willing to cooperate. As for the few rules that are rescinded, for the four months after the kathin, you can ask the monks: Is all the work going into the kathin simply for the sake of those few rules' being rescinded? And the answer is always No. There's something more that comes out of this than just the robe, just the privileges, or the pointers you learn in sewing. It's the sense of community, the sense of cooperation, this voluntary giving of yourself: That's the real reward of the kathin.

So reflect on that same principle in your meditation. This is a quality the Buddha encouraged, and it's not just around robes. It's around every aspect of the practice. Your willingness to give of yourself: That's what makes all the difference in the world.