

THE END OF BUDDHIST LENT

I. Offering food to monks in Thevo style

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Buddhist Lent with its three rainy months and the retreat of the monks to the temple ends on the full moon of the 11th lunar month (usually in the latter part of October). On this day the people make special merit by offering food to the monks, and some older people listen to special sermons preached by the monks at the temple. Once during his life time the Lord Buddha retreated to heaven for the rainy season, and there he preached a sermon to his mother who had gone there after death. On the last day of the retreat Lord Buddha came down to Earth, when the people presented food to him and his disciples. To commemorate this event in some places people arrange a special offering of food for the monks. They may place a Buddha image under a canopy in a decorated cart, and in some localities the people bring the image down from a low hill imitating Lord Buddha's descent from heaven. Following the image are monks in retinue as his disciples, and at the temple people wait along the route of the procession to put their rice and other edible offerings for making merit in the monk's begging bowl which stands before the Buddha image. Food is also given to the monks who follow the cart carrying their begging bowls. This kind of merit making is called "thevorohana" (เทโวโรหนะ devorohana) which means "the coming down from the deva or heavenly world", but popularly it is known as "tak bat thevo" (ตักบาตรเทโว) or the offering of food to monks in the thevo style. The "thevorohana" is the same as the Tawadeintha Feast in Burma as described by Shwe Yoe in his book "The Burman, his life and notions".

2. The Thot Kathin

On the succeeding days after the end of the religious retreat come the well-known "thot kathin" festival; "thot" (ทอด) means to lay down, and "kathin" referred originally to a wooden frame used by monks for stretching cloth in making monks' robes. Later the term "kathin" was applied to a robe made for a Buddhist monk

in the course of a single day and night. This gift is considered highly meritorious. Sometimes the whole process of making the robe from raw cotton is done in a single day. The kathin must be formally presented by the donor before a chapter of at least five priests (Childer's Pali-English Dictionary). The kathin robes must be presented within one month after the end of the Buddhist Lent, i.e. between the first day of the waning moon in the eleventh lunar month and the full moon of the twelfth lunar month (latter part of October).

The origin of "thot kathin" may be briefly told. During the time of Lord Buddha a group of monks on their way to see the Lord Buddha had to stop and spend a retreat during the rainy season in a certain town before they could reach their destination. After the retreat ended, the monks hastily left before the rainy season had definitely ended. Wetted and muddy on their way, they were a sorry sight when they reached their destination. As monks were not allowed at this time to receive robes from anyone and were expected to make their own robes by washing, cutting and sewing discarded clothing, the Buddha, seeing the dilemma of the visiting monks, gave permission for any monk to receive a robe presented by anyone during the month after the retreat. This is the origin of the "thot kathin" ceremony. Later on when the number of robes presented on these occasions did not suffice for all the monks, the Lord Buddha decreed that any monk coming out of retreat with a robe more tattered than those of his brethren might receive a robe from any person, provided he be well-versed in the Buddhist Code of Law (Vinaya ^{วินัย}) and provided the donation be approved by all the assembled monks. Today the kathin robe is presented in this formal manner, and the abbot of the temple becomes the recipient by consent of the assembled monks who must number no less than five.

The kathin robe is formally presented in the following manner. When the time for presenting the robe is near at hand, the big hanging gong of the temple is sounded for the monks to dress and

assemble in the hall or chapel of the temple. Usually a raised platform is provided within the chapel where monks only may sit before the altar with the many Buddha images. The principal one, bigger than the rest, is in the middle and is called Phra Prathan (พระประธาน) or the principal Buddha image. On the arrival of the donor a special person waiting outside the door of the chapel hands him the robe. It is composed of three pieces a loin cloth, a shoulder shawl and a robe. The donor then receives the robe with his two hands held in a decorous and respectful manner. (No well-mannered Thai will give anything to a respected person with one hand, and if compelled to do so, he will have one hand support the other in a formal way. It is exceedingly bad mannered to hand a person something with one's left hand). The donor holding the robe in both hands then enters the chapel. Music, if an orchestra is present, will only be played at the time that the donor receives the robe, and this music acts partly as a signal to announce the beginning of the ceremony and partly to make the occasion more festive. The donor walks straight to a place, usually on the left, where a stand has been placed before the abbot's seat. Then after placing the robe on the stand, lighting candles and joss sticks before the principal Buddha image, and prostrating himself three times (as I have described elsewhere), the donor stands up repeating three times the well-known Pali formula of adoration of the Buddha and a Buddhist Credo. In translation it runs somewhat like this:

"I adore Him who is the Blessed, the all-perfect, omniscient Buddha.

I take refuge in the Lord Buddha

I take refuge in His Law

I take refuge with his Sangha or Order"

This constitutes the well-known Triple Gems or Tri Ratana of the Buddhist Credo.

Then turning toward the robe on the stand, the donor picks it up reverently with his two hands before the assembled monks and states the formula of request in Pali, which may be translated thus:

“Revered Sirs, I beg humbly to present a robe with its appendages (i.e. a loin cloth and a shoulder shawl) to the Venerables.”

The assembled monks will then say in unison “Sathu” (सत्तु-sadhu) or “be it so”. The donor then presents the kathin robe to the monk who sits in front of him, and with the formal presentation over, he turns back to sit waiting while the monks perform their part of the ceremony. A monk will say to the others in Thai “This kathin robe has glided down like a divine object from heaven. I think the abbot is worthy to wear this robe, for he is a venerable and learned monk. If this proposal meets with your approval, let every one remain silent; if not, speak out.” Only rarely does a monk object. Then the abbot dons the kathin robe in the manner prescribed by religious laws. Music may be played at this time until the abbot returns to his place in his new robe. Then the donor of the kathin and his party presents to the abbot the remaining part of the eight necessary articles for a monk and any other things that he may wish to give beyond these. The eight necessary articles in addition to the three parts of the robe are an alms bowl, a razor, a needle for sewing, a sash and a water strainer. Presents are also made at this time to the other monks, who after this chant a formula of gratitude while the donor pours water from one cup into another as a libation, already described elsewhere. Here ends the ordinary “thot kathin” ceremony in its religious aspect: I say ordinary for there is a special kind of “thot kathin” which will be described later.

It is customary for the king as an upholder of the Buddhist Faith, to initiate the presentation of the royal kathin robe after the religious retreat to the various royal temples in the kingdom. As there are many royal temples both in and outside the capital, the

king can preside over the presentations in the chief temples only. Chief princes, high dignitaries and provincial governors are delegated to represent him in other temples. From 1932 onwards the delegations were extended to various ministries and departments, organizations and public bodies, and even private persons. H.M. the king supplies the royal kathin robes and other necessary articles to be presented to the monks. The royal delegates may add more if they wish "to follow the royal merit making". After the ceremony the representative will receive a report from the temple containing a graded list of monks spending a three-month retreat in the wat. This list is in turn tendered to the king.

The royal temples to which the king personally presents the royal kathin robe, may in any year be attended to by royal delegates with the exception of the few royal wats which always exclusively receive the personal presentations of the royal kathin robes from His Majesty himself. To these wats the king will proceed in state annually, progressing to one by land route and another by water route. The former is commonly called kathin bok (กฐินบก) or land kathin, and the latter kathin nam (กฐินน้ำ) or water kathin. Once every three years, not more than twenty years ago, the royal state procession to present the royal kathin robes both by land and water was in a grand style. The royal procession by land consisted of various regiments and units escorting the royal kathin robes and his majesty the king with all the traditional royal emblems; insignias and attendants. The royal procession by water was composed of the royal barges of many sizes and designs and manned by sailors in colourful old style uniforms. The chief boats were paddled rhythmically with golden paddles. Songs were sung by the leaders of the boatmen and chorus. It was a grand sight full of pomp and pageantry. (1)

(1) C. E. M. Joad in his "A Republican Repents" (Picture Post Vol. 37 No. 8) emphasises the point when he says that "Man cannot live by bread alone, and also demand circuses. In other words his life needs gaiety, colour and glamour. This fact has been known in all the civilizations of the past. There is not one but has included among the duties of the state, the staging of public shows and ceremonies in which citizens might take delight, when

We now come to the "hot kathin" by the people. Usually in a village or district there is at least one temple meet for religious festive occasions, and the wat also served them in the past as the peoples' spiritual, intellectual and social centre. In the old days a village was a self-contained unit. The people grew their own rice and other kinds of vegetable food, built their own houses and other things by voluntary and reciprocal aid from their neighbours. They also wove their own cloth. It was the duty of families to train their daughters in the art of weaving. A girl who could weave skilfully was the pride of her family. Thus there was no cloth for sale in the village. The annual kathin robe for presentation to a monk had to be woven and made beforehand. I am particular about this description for I have something more to say about it later on.

their work was done, and feel at one with their community, being imbued with a gaiety and lifted to an exaltation of spirit beyond their individual compass, and given a sense of the beauty, passion and colour of life, keener and more vivid than their unaided vision could realise.

"Now it is an open question whether man's life was ever more starved of colour and glamour than in contemporary England. There have been few more painful moments in our history than the present. Royalty provides the occasion for a little harmless pageantry. We neglect this occasion at our peril, for the demand for colour and glamour denied expression along its natural channels, is driven underground and presently finds its way to the surface in unexpected and sinister places, in our own age, in the worship of the state and dictator, as the embodiment of the state".

To have seen such a progression of state in all its pageantry is an impressive aid to the reading vividly of one's own history and literature. No doubt pageantry is in a way snobbery. As Joad says, "Snobbery is innate, and cannot therefore be eradicated, and that being so, it is better to recognise it, provide for it, and canalise it along channels that, smoothed by tradition, have become comparatively harmless through familiar usage, than to let it rant and rip and roar all the way up and down society like a ravening lion deprived of all its legitimate food". The progress of state as such in the other sense was in the old day a periodical review of the army and navy as to their readiness. It also helped to impress sentimentally upon the people the pomp and grandeur of the King, State and Religion.

The "thot kathin" by the villagers in a body is usually never made to their own village wat, but to the wat of another village. This is a friendly gesture among the different villages, The "thot kathin" is arranged beforehand. When the day of the "thot kathin" arrives, the donors of the kathin robe will arrange a procession with music and other entertainments to accompany the kathin robe which is borne either on a decorated cart or on the back of an elephant or other kind of conveyances as the case may be. If the procession is by water there will be a number of boats with the principle boat decorated gaily as a carrier of the kathin robes. If the distance is far between the two villages, the procession starts early in the day. When the people hear the sound of drums or other kinds of musical instruments in connection with the "thot kathin" or other religious undertaking, they will come out of their houses to see the procession. As the procession passes by with either a kathin robe, an image of Buddha, or other sacred things on a carrier, it is customary for those standing to kneel and raise their hands in worship as an act of approbation with the people who have arranged such merit making.

When the procession is nearing the village where the kathin ceremony is to be performed and celebrated, the villagers will come out to meet the procession, sometimes with music and other entertainments too. They join the party in the procession and reach the wat before the monks take their forenoon meal, that is 11 a. m. The villagers of that wat will act as hosts and provide feasts for the monks and their guests from the other village. This is an expression of goodwill and in return the hosts usually present a kathin robe to the wat of the guest village the following year.

When the monks have finished their meal, as prescribed not later than noon, the people of both villages take their turn in the feasting. After the feasting the ceremony of presentation of kathin robe commences. A procession of the kathin robe circles the chapel thrice in a clockwise direction. After this the kathin robe is carried into the chapel and ceremonially performed in the same

manner as already described. After the ceremony the people of both villages join in games and pastimes until late in the afternoon when the guests take leave of the hosts who may also present them with fruits and other products of the village. Seldom are there any rowdy elements among such simple folk. Should difficulties arise the people themselves act as their own officers at law. I do not know how much this has been changed and whether such expressions of goodwill and reciprocity are still observed.

During the "kathin season" the sound of drums or music is occasionally heard either along the road or the river or canals, mostly in the morning as a sign that a kathin procession is passing by. In Bangkok people rarely come out to do that meritorious act of worshipping the kathin robes as I have previously described. One may see boats gaily decorated with flags carrying kathin robes along the river nearly every morning during the one-month kathin season. The tradition of "thot kathin" is still a living force among the people. Apart from customary merit making, the people have opportunity to enjoy themselves in a picnic along the river during its flooded season.

The wat where a "thot kathin" is to take place is decided upon beforehand. A person will go privately to find a temple suitable for the purpose and arrange with the abbot or his deputy for the "thot kathin" on a certain date. The name of the would be donor of the kathin robe and the date of the ceremonious presentation is written on a piece of paper. This is put up at the entrance to the temple in order that those interested may know that there is already an "owner of kathin robe" to be presented to the wat. After the kathin robe has been presented, two crocodile banners are placed on either side of the entrance to the temple. A repetition of "thot kathin" at the same wat is not allowed in the same year. The pecuniary expenses may be borne by one man or shared by a number of people, or through subscriptions. People of small means may help in the merit making by contributing a certain sum

of money to the main fund. There is a popular custom that a young man joining the Order temporarily for one rainy season will not be deemed complete in his customary monkhood unless he has participated in the kathin ceremony. That is why a young man seldom leaves the Order, unless through necessity before the day of the kathin ceremony. Many young monks leave the Order as soon as the kathin ceremony is over. There is obviously a reason for doing so.

Here I may be allowed to make a short digression on the "crocodile banner" previously mentioned. The banner has a picture of a crocodile in black on a white background. Sometimes there is a picture of a mermaid instead of a crocodile which, to me, seems to be a later development. According to a folk story, a certain crocodile wishing to have a share in gaining merit from the "thot kathin", followed a kathin boat in the river for sometime and became exhausted. As it could not follow the boat further, the crocodile asked the owner of the kathin robe to help it gain merit indirectly by having its picture drawn on a banner. The owner of the kathin robe complied with the crocodile's request, thus originated the practice of placing crocodile banners in front of the entrance of a wat when a "thot kathin" has been performed. We will overlook this folk explanation as crocodile banners are not utilized in the kathin ceremony only, but in other ceremonies pertaining to the wat as well. The word crocodile is sometimes called "makara" in Sanskrit. This word becomes in Thai "maṅkawn" (มังกร) but means Chinese dragon. In Thibetan Buddhism, a dragon or a dragon horse flag is used in connection with its rites. If the Thai crocodile banner and the Thibetan dragon horse are related in some way, assuredly it is a far cry from here to Thibet. But to continue my story:—

When the kathin procession from Bangkok arrives at the appointed wat, the customary feasting of the monks and other persons in the party is done in the same manner as already described. In

such an undertaking there is a sizable boat in the retinue which is used as a kitchen boat where free food is prepared for all. Usually for convenience sake, rice and articles of food are wrapped in plantain leaves in parcels to be distributed among the participants. Such parcels are called "Khao haw" (ข้าวห่อ) or rice in parcels. The people who live near the wat sometimes bring fruits, usually young coconuts, sugar cane and ripe bananas as presents to show their goodwill to the kathin party. They usually never fail to join in the merit making.

After the ceremony of "thot kathin", there are entertainments and games. Usually there is a boat race between the folk there and their Bangkok rivals. Late in the afternoon, before the kathin party leaves the wat, they are presented with fruits and other things peculiar to that locality. These gifts are mostly supplied to the temple if the abbot is much revered by the people. The presents lie in heaps at the back of the temple and are commonly called "khong kong" (ของทอง) or "things heaped". Sometimes a special amount of money is presented by the kathin party to the wat as a fund for repairing or building schools or any other structures of the wat.

It was a belief in the past that whoever built a wat would obtain great merit. In fact the merit would be greater than that gained through a wat belonging to somebody else. Hence in well-populated areas there are many temples within short distances of one another. The small, less well-known temples with few monks may miss a "thot kathin" altogether. In such circumstances it is deemed a great merit to have a "thot kathin" at such temples. If no one has done so by the time the end of the kathin season draws near, the people living near the temple will anxiously raise a fund expressly for the purpose of having a "thot kathin" even though it be on a small scale. Some people after having performed a "thot kathin" have a surplus kathin robe in reserve and sets of articles for presentation to monks in other temples. If he does not wish to make a "thot kathin" in the ordinary way, he may perform

extraordinary kathin in as many temples as he likes. Such "thot kathin" is called "kathin tok khang" (กฐินตกค้าง) that is a left-over-kathin or "kathin chone" (กฐินโจร) meaning robber-kathin. The latter name is derived from the manner of going to the wat unexpectedly like robbers getting into a house. Sometimes a number of articles with the exception of a kathin robe still remain after "thot kathin", then a "thot pha pa" (ทอดผ้าป่า) is made. It is called "pha pa hang kathin" (ผ้าป่าหางกฐิน) being the tail end of a kathin or in other words a supplementary to the kathin.

We now come to a special kind of "thot kathin" called "chul kathin" (จุลกฐิน) or literally a minor kathin. This special kind of kathin is usually done on the last day of the kathin season. The kathin robe has to be made directly from a process picking cotton bolls, carding, spinning and weaving into a cloth, cutting and sewing to the required size and pattern, including also dyeing the cloth in yellow to serve as a monks' robe. All these must be done and finished within 24 hours in order to be in time for the presentation of the kathin robe.

The first thing they do is to have a sufficient number of cotton bolls for the purpose. These cotton bolls are hung on a cotton tree or other kind of tree brought for the purpose to the wat. They pretend to pick these cotton bolls from the tree and then begin the process of turning them into cloth. There are many weaving machines to each of which a virgin weaver is allotted to weave a portion of the robe. There is a competition in the weaving. The maiden who can weave dexterously and finish her allotted piece of cloth before the others is the winner. The operation is done in an open hall in the wat where there are many onlookers. After all the parts are woven, they are cut and sewn according to a prescribed pattern. Look at the monk's robe in its entirety and you will see that it is sewn in many squares like partitions of a rice field with its ridges.

After the many pieces of cloth are sewn into a robe, the whole is dyed yellow and dried. By this time it is night and there is no sun to dry the cloth, so they fan it in order that the robe may dry before morning. As can be seen, it requires many persons working together to complete the process. There is, of course, a great deal of bustle and ado, jokes and merriment, throughout the whole process to say nothing of feasts and entertainments. The presentation of the kathin robe is ceremonially performed in the same way as the ordinary "thot kathin".

It is obviously difficult for an ordinary man to initiate such a kathin unless he is somebody eminent in public estimation through his wealth or dependents. In the matter of such merit making the neighbours will voluntarily join in the preparations.

There is yet another form of this special kathin presentation. A piece of white cloth is also presented along with the kathin robe. The white cloth is made by the monks into a robe by cutting, sewing and dyeing in the same manner as the special kathin previously described. No doubt this is an abbreviated form of the aforesaid special kathin.

I now venture to make a conjecture on this special merit. As already mentioned, a monk may not receive a present of a robe from anyone. He has to utilize discarded clothing which he finds into a robe by cutting, assembling the patches into one and then dyeing it into a tawny colour using the dye from the bark of a tree. Hence a monk must have with him a razor and a needle included in the eight necessary things of a monk. Usually a monk is not always an expert in making a robe to the required size and pattern, therefore a wooden frame for stretching the cloth when sewing is required. This wooden frame as already mentioned is called "kathin". The robe being square in pattern is undoubtedly made from patches sewn together. The Lord Buddha ordained that a monk could receive a present of a kathin robe only during the month after the end of the retreat. This has evolved into the ceremonial

presentaion of kathin robes. If it so happened that only one day remained before the presentation of kathin robe as ordained came to an end, and no cloth for a robe was available, the only course open to the villagers in a self-contained village was to make a robe as best as they could in the limited time at their disposal. This conjecture may be right or wrong.

3. Thot Pha Pa

Thot pha pa (ทอดผ้าป่า) literally means the laying down of a forest cloth. In actual practice a piece of cloth is placed on a branch of a tree in the wilderness for any passing monk to take and utilize as a robe. As already mentioned elsewhere, a monk may not ask and receive a present of a robe from anyone except in certain conditions as ordained in the Buddhist Code, for instance the kathin robe.

During the Buddha's time a monk had to be satisfied with a robe made from discarded clothing from the living or in some cases belonging to a corpse which he may happen to find. A person wishing to present any wandering monk with a robe could do so by hanging a cloth or clothing somewhere in an uninhabited place for the monk to take as his own. This is the original meaning of "thot pha pa".

In actual practice those who wish to perform a "thot pha pa" hang a robe or a piece of cloth somewhere in an out of the way place. In addition other articles are provided for the monk. Usually a small earthen jar is filled with articles, including of course a robe or a piece of cloth. In the middle of the jar a miniature tree or an actual branch of a tree is fastened into position. On the many branches are hung numerous small articles, chief among them being a towel folded into the form of a gibbon. This doll is hung on a certain branch of the tree, obviously to give the effect of being a tree in a forest. The whole can be conveniently transported to any

place. This jar of things is carried into a wat. A monk will come up and touch the robe or cloth with his right hand silently saying words in Pali which may be translated thus: "This cloth is owned by nobody. It is a rag from a dust heap. It ought to belong to me." He then takes it along with the other things. Anyone invited to participate in a cremation ceremony at a temple will notice that before the funeral pyre is formally lighted, a robe is placed on or near the coffin by a distinguished guest. A monk will appear and touch the robe with his right hand and then take it away. This is done in the same manner and has the same origin as described above.

The "thot pha pa" which usually takes place during the kathin season may be performed at any other season or time. In theory many monks, with the exception of the abbot of the wat, have no opportunity to receive a kathin robe. Some do not have anyone promising them during their religious retreat, to present them with cloth or robe during the kathin season, as is allowed by the Code of Buddhist Law. The robe or cloth from "thot pha pa" relieves them of such difficulty in not having to wear their old robes which by this time have become tattered and soiled. The people take advantage of the rainy season to have a picnic excursion along the rivers and canals, and carry on with their merit making at the same time; hence "thot pha pa" like the "thot kathin" is usually performed during this season.

The "thot pha pa" may be one man's show or it may be organized by a group or party. Sometimes there are competitions to see who can provide the "pha pa" with the most costly or gay decorations. There are also music and processions. People of small means may combine their resources by subscribing to their own "thot pha pa". On the eve of the appointed day there may be a celebration of the "pha pa" with plays and other entertainments. Some "pha pa" in the past were on a grand scale. The people are willing to go to great pains and expense as they consider it all a matter of merit making. Undoubtedly it is the instinctive desire in man to express himself of his own Person.