

B UDDHIST R ITUALS & O BSERVANCES



Based upon talks given at Cittaviveka

by

Ajahns Sucitto and Candasiri

Publications from Amaravati are for free distribution. In most cases this is made possible through offerings from individuals or groups, given specifically for the publication of Buddhist teachings.

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BUDDHIST
RITUALS &
OBSERVANCES

A decorative flourish consisting of a single, elegant, wavy line that starts on the left, curves upwards and then downwards, ending on the right.

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Ajahns Sucitto and Candasiri

Compiled by Barry Durrant

For Free Distribution

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through offerings from Buddhist groups and individuals donors
who support the Saṅgha

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Introduction

The practice of Buddhism is most frequently associated with the quiet, reflective and introspective aspects of formal meditation, with little recognition or realisation of the many means by which we can cultivate such qualities as joy, gladness and the uplift of the heart.

The devotional aspects of our practice as seen through solitary meditation can seem pointless, or even foolish, but experience teaches us that meditation alone is not a guaranteed entry into the sublime – it can be a wearisome struggle with a wayward mind!

This booklet therefore is about the recognition and cultivation of those means whereby we bring emotive forces into our daily lives.

We need to make the Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha a vital, integral part of our world-view, to inculcate a clear sense of reverence and pride in being disciples of the Blessed One and a sense of fellowship with all those who have trodden and are currently treading the Path to Peace and Truth.

We can feel gladdened and uplifted by the sense of aspirational belonging. So we are seeking to create a ‘crisis-free zone’ – to develop a sanctuary or refuge of our own which we can call upon or retire to, not just in formal meditation, but at all times throughout our daily lives.

This booklet is not concerned with quiet absorption or introspection. It refers more to those outward forms of practice which help us dislodge negative moods or states of mind and substitute in their place, a contemplative space of joy and *saddhā*.

Although *saddhā* is translated as ‘faith’, it refers more to a heart-felt sense of ‘rightness’ – an instinctive, intuitive awareness that ‘this is Right’. When our *saddhā* is unshakeably rooted in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, they, in their turn, evoke a sense of zest and enthusiasm to continue.

Once we are firmly established in the Triple Gem, and once we can call upon our sanctuary whenever there’s the need, we have a sound foundation for the cultivation of concentration and calm. This is because the mind, being thereby lifted up, gains perspective on the realm of mundane existence with all its worries, doubts and regrets. However, this is not a refuge that we can simply conjure up at will; it needs the right conditions and we must create them.

We may have experienced a sense of uplift, a feeling of trust when we behold a Buddha image, visit a monastery, or look at a shrine. There is an all-pervading sense that beneath the superficial turmoil and struggle of life, all is

well; there is something beyond our limited vision worthy of exploration, worthy of intense effort.

Devotional Practice

One purpose of this booklet is to encourage us to develop our devotional practice, making such symbolic bodily actions as offering candles, incense, and flowers, chanting and bowing, to foster and support the meditative mind. Such practices help us create and focus the mind which otherwise might be drawn towards those commonplace manifestations of the ego; our wanting something, our hoping to 'get somewhere', or the longing to achieve, acquire and possess some self-orientated goal. Instead, we should be seeking the very opposite motivation – to give up 'doing' anything; to cease the constant wanting, and to practise humility and relinquishment.

Only then can the mind settle into the loving, open space of *citta*, the heart.

On occasions when silent recollection is not strong enough to bring us to this space, we need to have recourse to actions which will facilitate or catalyse this transformative process.

A spontaneous, unfettered response to another's need – be it by practical help, material goods or the comforting touch of a caring hand not only brings succour and support to the recipient, but arouses joy and gladness in the heart of the donor.

With the cultivation of increasing sensitivity and awareness, situations inseparable from the very fabric of life itself, offer ample opportunities to recognise and overcome the insidious demands of 'self' and to develop in its place, an unrestricted tenderness and compassion towards all beings.

Although most of us could live at a prosaic level of everyday reality for a while, once we begin to meditate and cultivate the mind, we feel the need to uplift and gladden the heart, rather than living by simply conforming to established customs.

If we can find symbols and images which come to have a special significance for us, coming alive by our living relationship to them, then their very presence will help us check unwanted, unskilful perceptions such as worries, grudges or fears which otherwise would come to dominate our thoughts.

Furthermore, in adopting and developing suitable rituals as an integral part of our practice, we come to realise the inestimable role they play in strengthening our resolve and motivation, offering as they do, a tangible form by which we can express our commitment and devotion.

Recollection of the Triple Gem

One of the fundamental meditation systems taught in the West, is the recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. This is a method recommended by the Buddha himself, where one brings to mind, thinks about, and considers the quality of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. One ponders over them and recollects them rather as one uses a mantra or rosary, taking them into one's heart to uplift the spirit and displace other far less noble thoughts and intentions. This is no superstitious gimmickry, but a skilful practice to brighten the heart by turning the mind towards an auspicious theme.

The Buddha pointed out that all the time the mind was occupied in this way, it was free from far less wholesome thoughts, from worries, fears or anxieties.

Such recollections, and the gladness they evoke, function at a different level from ordinary, mundane reality; they operate according to a different kind of perception – a 'soulfulness'. Yet, it is important to recognise also, that whilst not wishing to reduce our devotions to the level of a routine duty, it is psychologically helpful to adhere to a regular time for formal practice (as seen in the morning and evening pūjās within a monastery).

Ideally, we dedicate a room solely to our practice, but when this is not possible we create a shrine in a peaceful part of our living space. Rather than seeking excuses to avoid or postpone practice, the mind comes to accept an established pattern for the day, when we have a regular place and time for our devotions.

Religious Occasions

Another purpose of this booklet is to help newcomers feel more at ease with the formal practices involved in relating to the shrine and Triple Gem on such religious occasions as births, marriages, house blessings and deaths.

Whatever the culture, one always finds that such occasions have a specific significance.

There is a universal need to give them a particular place in the heart, and it is the role of religious ceremonies and rituals to do just that.

By so doing, our practice becomes more alive and tuned to those particular occasions, imbuing them with a special kind of auspiciousness; a greater attention to the occasion in all its detail serves to convey the quality of that occasion more deeply.

Furthermore, such ceremonies as taking the Three Refuges and Five

Precepts have a valuable role in group situations where there might be a number of people with no special affinity to one another, yet who feel united and bound in a common initiative, realising, in their collective devotions, a wider, all-embracing sense of fellowship and community.

Similarly, when people from different backgrounds meet at the monastery to offer *dāna*, that very activity, that corporate generosity, inculcates a sense of oneness, a feeling of belonging and kinship. Finally, apart from such observances for larger gatherings, there are more personal, intimate ceremonies, each with their own particular significance, each bringing a sense of the sacred into daily life. *

So there are many ways including a diversity of devotional language by which we can support and strengthen our practice.

* *These are: the blessing of a marriage (after a civil ceremony); the rites of passage to help the bereaved as well as those who are dying, or have died; and ceremonies to commemorate birthdays.*

Buddha Images

Buddha images come in a range of postures – standing, sitting, walking and reclining – to suggest different ways of reviewing Awakening. Those standing suggest a balanced authority, the sitting a collected composure, the walking a sense of engagement, and the reclining a sense of accomplishment. A Buddha image is also referred to as a Buddha rūpa.

The positions of the hands of Buddha images, called mudrā, are significant. Out of their most fundamental meaning, further implications can arise for recollections.

Earth-touching Mudrā

In the earth-touching mudrā (Bhūmiphassa mudrā), the Buddha's right hand is touching the ground by his right knee. It symbolises the moment of his Awakening, otherwise called the 'Repelling of Māra'.

Repelling Māra is a fitting name for this gesture in that it implies that a 'coming to one's senses', reaching ground level, or actually meeting Reality, is equivalent to dispelling delusion.

In the folk culture of Buddhism it is said that at the moment when the Buddha was most beset by the terrible forces of delusion, he called upon the earth to bear witness to the countless lives he had spent cultivating virtue – giving up his life and his wealth innumerable times for the sake of others. Now he wished to tap into that great goodness, so he touched the earth to remember what he truly was – Enlightened, Awake, his mind no longer deluded by the influences of Māra.

This particular mudrā is probably the most frequently used in Thai Buddha images, and in Tibetan Buddhism, it is associated with the Buddha of the East, 'The Imperturbable' Aksobhya; the one who reflects without interference or destruction like a clear mirror.

Abhaya Mudrā

In the Abhaya mudrā, the Buddha is depicted with (usually) the right hand raised in front of him (the right hand is probably the most auspicious), the palm facing outwards, the fingers pointing upwards. Abhaya means 'no fear', so this mudrā portrays fearlessness, or protection.

In Thailand, the posture indicates 'Giving the Blessing', and in Tibetan Buddhism, this mudrā is associated with the Buddha of the North – Amoghasiddhi, representing 'the unswerving application of perseverance' – dedication, the ability to keep going and not to be put off from realising the

goal, a ‘you can do it’ gesture – all these expressions of undaunted affirmation.

Samādhi Mudrā

In the less common, Samādhi or Dhyāna mudrā, that of the Buddha of the West, the hands are placed together in the lap, signifying the Buddha’s concentrated mind, enjoying a state of serenity, and of bliss.

In Japan, the Pure Land school is associated with this Buddha, the Buddha of good fortune, well-being and blessings.

Dāna Mudrā

In the Dāna mudrā, the hand is shown touching the ground, but with the palm facing outwards in a bliss-bestowing gesture, the Buddha giving his qualities to the world. This is the Buddha of the South, the mudrā of charity and generosity, especially giving the gift of knowledge. The mudrā is mostly associated with Nepalese and Tibetan images, the Buddha in this posture being known as Ratnasambhava, the ‘Jewel-Originated’.

Dhammacakka Mudrā

In the Dhammacakka mudrā, the curled forefinger of each hand touches the thumb to form a closed circle, the rest of the fingers radiating out like the spokes of a wheel, a gesture offering the teachings. The right hand is held higher than the left.

The Dhammacakka mudrā is specifically associated with the Buddha’s teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path: the establishing of the Dhamma.

Caring for Buddha Images

Because of the religious symbolism and the gratitude for the teachings which they evoke, it is important that such Buddha images are handled with respect and due reverence.

They should not be picked up by the head, placed on the floor, stepped over or used for any inappropriate purpose such as a door-stop, bookend or toy, when the need to move them arises, this, ideally, should be preceded by making añjali first and then moving them by holding the base only with the hands.

In similar fashion, copies of the scriptures, religious and chanting books should be respected by not placing them directly on the floor, or, if there is no alternative, by protecting them with a suitable cloth whilst in use. If articles in journals have to be disposed of, then burning or recycling them is more appropriate than throwing them into a dustbin.

In the Tibetan tradition, white scarves (kata) are commonly placed around the neck of the Buddha rūpa as a sign that one is making an offering. (Food and water are also seen as appropriate offerings to place on shrines).

Shrines

Shrines may be large, elaborate and formal, or quite simple and basic; they can be found in both private houses and in monasteries.

It is usual to have a Buddha image as the centre piece of a shrine, and this may be a physical model, a picture, or a symbolic representation of the Buddha — such as a model of the bodhi-tree or his footsteps.

Traditionally however, there are additional embellishments such as candles, incense, and flowers. It is usual to have the Buddha image at the highest point of the shrine, with the candles, incense and incense-containers, and flowers placed lower down on either side.

These items are to be regularly ‘offered’ to the shrine (as explained later), each particular offering having a symbolic value, representing sila, samādhi, and paññā (morality, concentration and wisdom).

Sila or morality is symbolised by the flowers because they have a fragrance and beauty reminiscent of someone living a good, virtuous life.

Incense symbolises samādhi or concentration – the measureless composure of the mind. Just as incense smoke can go everywhere, so the composure of the mind extends throughout consciousness.

Candles represent paññā or clear vision – understanding, the light of wisdom.

Additional items can be a picture of a teacher, or articles of personal significance such as stones and crystals, pieces of moss or similar natural objects.

Images of teachers should be placed on a lower level than that of the Buddha.

A shrine serves as a focal point for the mind, a reminder and representation of the qualities we so respect and revere. Just sitting in the presence of a Buddha image, or before a shrine can bring much peace. This effect is enhanced by one’s activities of offering to, and caring for a shrine.

Offering to a shrine

When offering to a shrine, the same basic principles apply throughout. Although flowers and candles are light in weight, when offering any of these, it is usual to hold them in both hands whilst placing them on the shrine. It is another way of showing respect by giving complete attention to the act.

The incense, lit from a candle and held between the two hands placed palm to palm, is raised to the forehead, the head being slightly bowed to meet the hands; the incense is then placed in the incense container, and a final gesture of añjali to the shrine completes the offering. One may then bow three times, as is explained later.

To extinguish lit candles, it is considered more gracious to use a candle snuffer or to fan them with a sharp downward movement of the hand rather than to blow them out.

At all times it should be remembered that making an offering to the shrine, to the Buddha, or to a respected teacher, is doing something special, and the whole procedure should reflect one's respect and reverence.

Caring for a shrine

Apart from keeping a shrine tidy and clean, if the mind is very upset and restless, it can be very soothing to mindfully take the shrine down and clean every artefact that is there – an act of devotion, mindfulness and concentration which brings the mind once again to peace and greater equanimity.

Stūpas

Stūpas, even from different cultures, have a distinctive architecture comprising a broad base as if taking its stand on mother earth, and a high pinnacle pointing towards the sky, much as one aspires towards lofty aims and visions.

They commonly house some religious relics and serve as a focal point for one's recollections, devotions, respect and reverence.

Arranging Buddha Images in Creating a Stūpa

In creating a stūpa, the various Buddha images are assembled and arranged according to the cardinal points of the compass.

- The Dhammacakka mudrā occupies the centre
- The Abhaya mudrā occupies the North
- The Bhūmiphassa mudrā occupies the East
- The Samādhi or Dhyāna mudrā occupies the West
- The Dāna mudrā occupies the South

Circumambulating a Stūpa

As one draws near to the Stūpa one acknowledges it with a bow and añjali (see below) before circumambulating three times – the first time recollecting the Buddha, the second time the Dhamma, and the third time, the Sangha.

Circumambulation is a very ancient way to express respect. Traditionally, the right side has always been regarded as the most fortunate side (the left side the less fortunate), and in the scriptures, those visiting the Buddha would always show their respect by keeping their right side towards him as they took their places for a Dhamma talk or sought his advice and guidance.

One always circumambulates a stūpa in a clockwise direction, keeping the right side of the body towards the stūpa.

As one circumambulates the stūpa one can chant and carry offerings such as candles, incense and flowers, and these can be offered at any one of the four shrines (facing North, East, South, and West), which form an integral part of the stūpa.

Circumambulation brings together bodily movement, chanting, the carrying of offerings and the accompanying recollections in a concerted expression of our respect and reverence.

Relating to Devotional Images

Showing respect and reverence is becoming increasingly less common in our so-called egalitarian society. One reason for this might be the difficulty experienced by some people in distinguishing between an expression of respect and a personal fawning or being overawed by someone or something. Some people feel that lowering themselves before an image or another person is self-denigrating or belittling.

However, in offering respect to someone else, we also indicate that attitude towards ourselves, so our use of body language is a way we can recognise and depict a sense of the sacred through bodily movement and posture. For example, the head, the highest part of our form, can symbolise the intellect, whilst the heart region is taken as the place for devotion, warmth, and trust. The hands express offering and giving, supplication, feelings and intentions, whilst the feet, both literally and symbolically, express our contact with the ground or ‘reality.’

By tradition, we do not point our feet either at people or a shrine, but keep them tucked beneath us. The upper body – the hands, head and chest, are largely used to denote respect; through bowing, inclining the head forwards and down and making añjali.

Making Añjali

In making this gesture of respect, the hands — palm to palm with the fingers extended — are brought together in front of the chest, then raised to the forehead whilst the head is slightly brought forward. It is as if one is symbolically making the gesture to point the hands towards the head – the highest part of the body, home of the wisdom faculty.

Similarly, when chanting, the hands are brought together in the same way, holding them close to the heart region, indicating or expressing the heart centre or feelings, through the hands.

Apart from making añjali in these situations, it is used as a means to introduce yourself into someone else’s conscious space. Very often members of the Sangha use the gesture when first addressing or calling attention to each other – to indicate an intention or wish to speak. It’s rather like saying, ‘excuse me’ or ‘May I?’

It is also another form of greeting used instead of shaking hands; a gesture to convey greetings, a taking one’s leave, a request to speak. It is commonly used as a preliminary gesture amongst members of the Sangha before, say, approaching and offering to help anyone, i.e., to take their bowl, heavy luggage, or to offer assistance in any way.

Bowing

Another way of expressing respect is that of bowing, and within the Buddhist tradition, there are a number of ways to bow.

Tibetans do a full-length prostration; the Japanese bow from the waist; in Thailand and South-East Asia one sees the kneeling bow, and in Sri Lanka, people offering respect may squat down on the haunches and lower the head.

In this particular lineage, we use the Thai form of bowing, the ‘five-point’ prostration, so called because five areas of the body touch the ground simultaneously.

In the five-point prostration, a kneeling posture is assumed, the hands are placed in the añjali posture before the heart, then raised towards the forehead as the head is tilted forward a little to meet them. The body is then bent from the waist so that each forearm can be placed full-length on the ground, with the head touching the ground between the hands; thus head, forearms and palms of the hands complete the five points of contact.

This gesture is then repeated three times – once each for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha — and after the last repetition, the head is slightly tilted forward to complete the whole movement.

The physical movements involved can present difficulties for those physically disabled who may need to modify the form (such as bowing from the waist whilst standing up), in the light of the physical limitations.

In essence, however, the gesture should convey a sense of calm composure, because unless done with mindfulness, composure and sincerity, what can be a most elegant expression of respect and reverence turns into a superficial, awkward contortion.

The depth of meaning this gesture conveys is such that if the situation does not allow it to be done mindfully, it is better to avoid it altogether. Furthermore, when bowing, it is important to make the gesture purposefully towards the person or shrine you wish to acknowledge.

This whole gesture can be incorporated into a small but important personal gesture of devotion, made towards a shrine or Buddha rūpa at the start and end of each day, making the gesture as the very first thing to do on rising, and the last to do when going to bed. This composes the mind for sleep and sets the mind aright for starting another day.

In Thailand, the bowing gesture is not only made towards monks and nuns but also towards respected persons. Furthermore, in a culture where it is common practice for people to engage socially whilst sitting on the floor, it is a

gentle gesture to soften the body image by slightly stooping when entering an already active social occasion, passing close by, or between conversing people. This helps to minimise the intrusiveness of one's presence, and to politely indicate one's sensitivity to other beings when walking through a group.

A similar attitude is adopted towards Buddha images in that one does not 'loom' over them but relates to them with due reverence and respect.

Offerings to the Sangha

Both men and women can make offerings (most commonly food items when offering a meal) to monks or nuns by placing them directly into their alms bowl. As an alternative, they may receive an offering directly into their hands. However, it is a common practice to avoid receiving anything directly into the hands of someone of the opposite sex. This is on account of the practice of strict celibacy as outlined in the monks' and nuns' training rules.

A monk will receive such things from a woman on a 'receiving cloth' or directly into his bowl.

Any offering from a man to a nun has to be offered 'by body, speech or arrangement.' The donor must make his intentions quite clear by saying something like 'this is for you, sister' before placing the offering close to the nun or directly into her alms bowl.

Once an offering has been received by a monk or nun, a lay person should not touch it again; otherwise it must be re-offered. Even in a private house, once some food, drink or any article has been offered and received, it should not then be touched. This is why, on any traditional festival day when food is being offered to a considerable number of the Sangha, several monks may be required to unobtrusively ensure that once the food has been offered, then no-one will touch or move the dishes, however helpful that intention may have been.

Receiving or Handling Money

In this tradition, monks and nuns are not permitted to handle money in any form, although the use of telephone cards, travel warrants and bus passes is permitted. The novices (anagārikas), however, are allowed to use money on behalf of the monks and nuns, so if someone actually gives money at one of the festivals such as the Kāṭhina, they may leave it where novices or lay 'officers' may readily see it and take care of it for the Sangha.

Visitors or guests wishing to donate cash or a cheque for the monastery may leave it in a donation box where it is dealt with by a novice or lay person.

Monks and nuns on their alms-round in nearby towns are frequently approached by generous members of the public who offer to put money into their alms bowl; this has to be politely refused and an explanation given so that no-one is offended.

Tradition, Form, and Relationships

In any culture there are unspoken rules, customs, traditions and taboos which have evolved as a means to bring about harmony in that society. These will facilitate relationships in families, in the social order, in the maintenance of law and order and in financial transactions or bartering. Traditions bring about an understanding, a common ground, or an acquiescence with the norm which naturally fosters co-operation, and avoids conflict.

However, it is not uncommon for people to become over-awed by ritual and protocol. They follow the dictates of the local establishment as a routine rather than with any warmth of personal expression or respect for that particular idiom or format. It is far better to relax and express oneself in an unaffected but clearly conscious way, than to clumsily falter in trying to conform to unfamiliar patterns of conduct.

Our behaviour is only an expression of social conditioning and national culture, so it is ill advised to expect the mannerisms of one culture to be adopted and flawlessly used by another. Furthermore, social norms are themselves changing all the time, some aspects being gradually lost whilst new patterns emerge over time. As can be seen in Britain and elsewhere, the monastic conventions adapt to their respective cultures.

Role of Samaṇas

The role of a samaṇa (monk or nun) is not that of a priest; they cannot perform a marriage. Similarly, no monk or nun can act as a go-between for two parties, introducing couples or awakening interest in one party for another. However, they can offer a supporting role in the form of ceremony and blessing. They may also offer blessings for the dead, or help to consecrate other significant rites of passage; this is outlined in the next section.

Monks and nuns cannot practise as doctors; it is not their role to assume responsibility in that particular context. Any mistake, however much care was taken, would be associated inevitably with blame, and if they were successful healers, people would start to come to the monastery for healing rather than Dhamma. It follows too that monks and nuns cannot be expected to tell horoscopes, nor practise herbal medicine.

Rites of Passage

It is traditional to mark significant domestic events such as births, marriages, house blessings, and deaths with a suitable ceremony involving *samaṇas*.

This section refers to more personal or smaller scale ceremonies as opposed to the larger, public festivals mentioned below.

These rituals and ceremonies offer a continuity, a sense of connection in time for us. They link the inevitable aspects of living into a meaningful continuum through Dhamma; the blessing of marriage and the birth of children, and the reflections upon impermanence at the death of grandparents, all taking place under the aegis of the Triple Gem. They offer a growing sense of belonging and support at a time when one might otherwise feel a sense of isolation.

Births, Marriages, and House Blessings

In a ceremony for a birth, a marriage, or a new house, all of those present endeavour to create an atmosphere suited to the nature of the occasion whether this is one of auspiciousness and joy, or quiet reflection. A number of *samaṇas* are invited – in Thailand, odd numbers are invited for births and marriages, whilst even numbers are invited for ceremonies around a death. Nine is regarded as especially propitious for happy occasions.

A shrine is set up, offerings are made to the shrine, and typically, the Sangha are invited to a meal. Commonly, the principal participants for the ceremony request the Three Refuges and Five Precepts.

These indicate their commitment to the standards of conduct by which they can order their lives, as well as an auspicious way to start a new life, a partnership in marriage, or setting up a new home.

Having taken the Refuges, a chanting of the Parittas by the Sangha is frequently and appropriately requested.

The Parittas or Paritta suttas are auspicious verses spoken by the Buddha on a number of different occasions. As an asseveration of Truth, they are highly regarded for arousing wholesome states of mind. Therefore, they afford their hearers protection from negative, unskilful thoughts. Certainly, ‘a paritta recital produces a sense of mental well-being in those who listen to them with intelligence and with every confidence in the Buddha’s words’ (Ven. Piyadassi Thera, ‘The Book of Protection’).

There is a special formula in Pali for requesting a recitation of the Paritta suttas, called *Vipattiṭṭaṭṭibāhāya*. This may be learned beforehand, or read at the time of the ceremony. Alternatively, the request can be made in English.

As an integral part of the Paritta recitation, and to make the asseveration more tangible, a thin white cotton thread can be connected to the Buddha rūpa, to the incense tray, to each of the members of the Sangha (who hold it as they chant), and back again to the Buddha image. At the end of the ceremony, the thread is cut into lengths which can either be kept in safe custody, or tied around the necks or wrists of the assembled participants.

Even a baby can have the thread lightly tied around the wrist. At a wedding ceremony, the monks may tie the thread around the wrist of the groom's karmically active hand – usually the right hand. The groom then ties a length around his wife's wrist. (If a nun is officiating, then she would tie the thread around the bride's wrist first.)

Marriages as such, are not conducted by monks or nuns who have no official capacity to act as priests, but people may have a civil ceremony first and then have the marriage blessed at some time thereafter. This obtains even in such Buddhist countries as Thailand.

It is conceivable that a lay Buddhist might be officially recognised for the purpose of solemnising a marriage in a civil ceremony similar to the authority granted to a registrar of births and deaths. A preliminary ceremony would then be followed by a blessing conducted by members of the Sangha.

An additional element to the blessing of a house or marriage is the sprinkling of holy water over the participants or around the house. It offers a lightness and tangible sense of infusing or distributing blessings as one distributes the water.

Some monks have misgivings about this aspect of the ceremony because human nature being what it is, the holy water can be seen as possessing highly desirable qualities and properties which can then arouse unwholesome thoughts of stealing, or even violence and aggression. So this must be used as a reflective ritual not an act of magic.

Funeral ceremonies

A funeral ceremony includes a shrine, offerings to the shrine, and chanting by samaṇas.

The chanting centres upon the Abhidhamma Teachings which detail the basic processes and infrastructure which make up all human consciousness. This fine analysis offers the opportunity to reflect upon the nature of our physical body, and our mind or consciousness, showing how our being is but a conglomerate of mental and physical energies, forces and relationships rather

than a static, unchanging form. It helps us to develop a sense of dispassion and objectivity, an increasing awareness of the arising and passing away of all phenomena.

Typically, the funeral ceremony takes place at the funeral parlour. Beforehand, the family and friends bring the components of a small shrine and arrange it with care. Usually, they include a Buddha rūpa, candles and incense. In addition, each person can bring a flower to be placed on the coffin during the ceremony.

The following is a typical programme for the ceremony when samaṇas are present. If there are only lay people, they adjust the programme as necessary.

1. A monk or nun lights the candles and incense.
2. The senior monk or nun gives a short talk about the significance of a Buddhist funeral.
3. The relatives and friends pass by the coffin spreading mettā to the deceased person and dedicating the blessings and merits of their practice to the deceased person as a way to say goodbye. If they have brought flowers, each person lays one on the coffin.
4. The monks and nuns lead the hearse to the cremation site.
5. Before the cremation, the senior monk or nun gives a short talk on the significance of death according to the Dhamma.
6. The monks and nuns do the funeral chants (called the Mātikā), while placing their hands on the coffin.
7. The mechanism for transporting the coffin into the fire is activated.

Note that some families like to add a Paṃsukūla ceremony. In this case, in step 6 robes are offered to the samaṇas after the Mātikā chanting. The family places the robes on the coffin and the monks and nuns touch them as they chant Paṃsukūla chanting: recollections on impermanence.

Memorial Ceremonies after the Funeral

Whilst we are all too aware of the death of a loved fellow-being, the insight into impermanence decreases with time. For this reason the hundredth day after death is also commemorated, although ceremonies with chanting, the transference of merit and the offering of food and requisites to the Sangha (dāna), are frequently arranged any number of years after the death. Such commemorative ceremonies soften the grieving process, allow us to recall our

gratitude and respect for those who have died, and sharpen our awareness of the transitory nature of life.

The following are ways that we can remember the passing away of a friend.

1. Take some form of positive action in memory of the person who has died such as dedicating the merits of a retreat or a day of meditation, planting a tree at the monastery, a Buddhist Temple, or a Peace Pagoda, doing service in a local organisation, sponsoring a retreat, starting a fund to benefit the homeless, offering *dāna* to the Sangha, etc.
2. Ask the Sangha to chant the traditional funeral chants, dedicating them to the person who has died. Such chanting usually takes place during the evening chanting period on the day the request was made.

Auspicious times to request chanting or to remember the person who has passed away include the day of the death, and the first three days after it (or the day of the funeral/cremation), 50 days after death, 100 days after death, one year afterwards, and annually thereafter.

3. Come to the monastery with family and friends to hold some form of remembrance ceremony. The 100th day following the death is a good time for such an occasion. It could include any of the following:
 - Offering almsfood or other requisites to the Sangha.
 - Planting a tree in memory of the deceased.
 - Asking the Sangha to chant some of the traditional funeral chants at a tree planting.
 - Requesting the Sangha to offer some Dhamma reflections appropriate to the occasion.
 - Bringing the ashes to the monastery and scattering them around the area of the stūpa.
 - Placing some of the ashes at the site of a tree, if one is planted in memory of the person, and scattering the remaining ashes.

Readings for Funeral and Memorial Ceremonies

The following are appropriate texts to be read or chanted at funeral and memorial ceremonies:

- Sections from the Pamsukūla chants
- The story of Kisāgotamī and the Mustard Seed (Therīgāthā: 43)
- A Single Excellent Night (Bhaddekaratta sutta MN 131)
- Verses of Sharing and Aspiration

Public Festivals

Public Festivals are usually celebrated at a monastery, some are observed each year, whilst others are observed more often.

Three Principal Festivals

Within the Theravāda tradition, there are three major festivals. Each is celebrated once a year on a day that depends on the moon.

- a. Māgha Pūjā, held on the full moon day of February, to commemorate the time when 1250 arahants simultaneously arrived to see the Buddha. At this gathering, the Buddha conferred the title of ‘Chief Disciples’ on Venerables Sāriputta and Moggallāna. The day therefore commemorates Sangha, an act of harmony, a gathering together; it was also the day that the Buddha outlined the Ovāda Pātimokkha, the basis for the training rules.
- b. Wesak (Vesākha Pūjā), held on the full moon day of May, to commemorate the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and Parinibbāna.
- c. Asāḷha Pūjā, held on the full moon day in July, to commemorate the day when the Buddha gave his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana sutta. The sermon established the Four Noble Truths (The Turning of the Wheel of the Law). He gave this teaching to the five ascetics who had deserted him when he chose the Middle Way as the Path to Enlightenment, rather than continuing with the unfruitful practices of extreme asceticism.

On the day after Asāḷha Pūjā, the Rains Retreat (Vassa) begins. Pavāraṇā day is at the end of the Rains Retreat, on the full moon day in October.

The Vassa and Pavāraṇā Day are of greater importance to the Sangha than to the laity.

Kaṭhina Festival

The Kaṭhina is a ceremony which takes place after the Vassa, and centres upon the offering of cloth and other requisites to the Sangha by lay supporters. It has to be a particular kind of cloth, and the ceremony can only take place if there are five or more bhikkhus present who have spent the preceding Rains retreat together. Around the core of this ceremony a festival has evolved in which offerings of all kinds of requisites are made, Dhamma talks are given and people get a chance to meet and converse informally. The people of Thailand are especially keen on alms-giving, and as one Kaṭhina ceremony each year seems to be insufficient for their generosity, they not infrequently

organise impromptu Tort Pah Bah's (which means 'offering forest cloth').

The story goes that the Buddha allowed the monks to search for cloth with which they might make themselves a replacement robe or repair an old one. These rags (designated Paṃsukūla 'refuse rags') might even be taken from corpses or anywhere where they were seen to be lying about.

Gradually the custom evolved in which lay people, knowing the samaṇas' needs, would purposely hang material in a tree so that the samaṇas would 'find it.' The custom then advanced so that not just pieces of rag or cloth were left for the monks, but whole made-up robes would be left as well!

Then people saw the opportunity to offer a meal and requisites as well to the monks and in this way the Tort Pah Bah has evolved.

Uposatha Observances

Uposatha is an ancient term implying something like 'sabbath.' The Uposatha days fall approximately on the full and new moons of each month, and are days when the Sangha recite their own training rules, and often have a meditation vigil.

On moon days (indicated on all Buddhist Calendars), the practice of joining other practitioners at the monastery, to take the Three Refuges and Five or Eight Precepts and meditate with members of the Sangha, can be both an inspiration to oneself, and supportive and encouraging to others. Even if one is unable to get out of the house, it is still uplifting to conduct one's own pūjā, and to take the Refuges and Precepts before starting meditation.

Glossary

Abhaya Mudrā: the Buddha's hand gesture, fingers pointing up, palm facing out at chest height, signifying protection. Seen on seated and walking Buddha images.

Abhidhamma: the analysis of the Dhamma in terms of structure and relationship of dhammas.

Ajahn: (Thai) a teacher; in the West a bhikkhu or siladharā who has reached ten Vassas/years.

Aksobhya: in Vajrayāna Buddhism, the symbolic Buddha of the eastern direction.

Almsfood: Food offered to the monastic community.

Amarāvati: The deathless realm.

Amida/Amitābha: in Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna, the Buddha of the West.

Amoghasiddhi: (Vajrayāna) the Buddha of the northern direction, hand held in the Abhaya Mudrā.

Anagārika/Anagārikā: One (male/female) who is training to join the monastic Saṅgha and keeps the eight precepts.

Añjali: the gesture, palms pressed together, fingers pointing upwards, of respectful greeting in Asian and Buddhist culture.

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one;” a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Asāḷha Pūjā: the festival, generally on the full moon of July, which commemorates the Buddha's first transmission of the Dhamma.

Bhikkhu: Buddhist monk.

Bhūmiphassa Mudrā: the hand gesture, fingers pointing down to touch the earth, palm facing back, signifying Awakening. Seen on seated Buddha images. In some this is Aksobhya Buddha.

Bodhi tree: The tree under which Gotama attained Awakening and became the Buddha.

Buddha: ‘Perfect Enlightenment’, Universal Buddhahood, is the state attained by a Universal Buddha (sammā-sambodhi), The Awakendone; i.e. one by whom the liberating Law (Dhamma), which had become lost to the world, has again been discovered, realized and clearly proclaimed to the world.

Citta: ‘state of mind,’ a subjective sense of how one is at any moment.

Dāna: giving, offering (of food, requisites, etc.).

Dhamma: the Teachings and Way of the Buddha; the Truth, the Law, etc.

Dhammacakka Mudrā: hand gesture, fingers of both hands held with the forefingers just touching the thumb tips while the hands are arranged as if around a circle.

This signifies the Buddha giving the teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: the first sermon, setting out the teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

Dhyāna Mudrā: the hand gesture, fingers pointing down to touch the earth, palm facing forward, signifying Bestowing, or Generosity. Seen on seated Buddha images.

Kaṭhina: The annual robes-giving ceremony, offered sometime during the month following the Rains Retreat, normally during October-November.

Kata: white silk scarf offered as a ceremonial gift in the Tibetan tradition.

Kisāgotamī: the woman who asked the Buddha to cure her dead child, figured in the parable of the Mustard Seed.

Māgha Pūjā: the festival, generally on the full moon of February, which commemorates the gathering of 1250 arahants at the Buddha's dwelling, to whom the first outline of Buddhist training was given. Thus it is held to commemorate Saṅgha.

Mahā-Moggallāna: the Buddha's second chief disciple, renowned for his psychic powers.

Mahāyāna: one of the three major Buddhist traditions. It lays particular emphasis on altruism, compassion and 'emptiness' as essentials for full Awakening.

Māra: The personification of evil and temptation.

Mātikā: summary, list, code.

Mettā: 'Loving-kindness', is one of the Sublime Abodes (brahma-vihāra, q.v.).

Mudrā: hand gesture on a Buddha image that conveys a spiritual meaning.

Ordination: Technically incorrect, this Christian term is used to signify the Going Forth or Acceptance procedures that allow a candidate to enter the Saṅgha.

Ovāda Pātimokkha: the first outline of Buddhist training, given by the Buddha to a gathering of 1250 arahants on the full moon of Māgha, which is generally February in the solar calendar.

Pāli: The ancient Indian language of the Theravāda Canon, akin to Sanskrit. The collection of texts preserved by the Theravāda school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed.

Parinibbāna: The Buddha's (or an arahant's) final passing into Nibbāna at the death of their body.

Paritta: protection (term for certain suttas and verses recited for that purpose).

Pamsukūla: discarded cloth that a samaṇa can pick up to make into a robe; the standard that implies frugality of needs.

Pavāraṇā: Invitation; (i) by a donor to supply requisites to a particular bhikkhu or nun; (ii) a ceremony for the monastic community held at the end of the Rains Retreat.

Precepts (*five*) 1. To refrain from killing living creatures, 2. To refrain from taking what is not given, 3. To refrain from sexual misconduct, 4. To refrain from harsh and false speech, 5. To refrain from taking intoxicating liquor and drugs.

Ratnasambhava: the symbolic Buddha of the southern direction, seated with right hand in the Dhyāna Mudrā.

Saṅgha: Community. In the Vinaya texts it usually refers to the monastic community, either of a specific place or as a whole. There must be a local community of at least four bhikkhus before it counts as a Saṅgha. It is also, of course, the third of the Three Gems and the Three Refuges where it applies to the ariya-saṅgha. On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns; on the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained some of the stages on the path to Awakening.

Saddhā: Faith or confidence, one of the five spiritual faculties (indriya).

Samādhi Mudrā: the hand gesture, both hands resting in a cradling gesture in the lap, that signifies meditation. Seen on seated Buddha images, and in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions associated with the Buddha of the West, Amida/Amitābha.

Samaṇa: monastic (term for ordained monks and nuns).

Sāmaṇera: novice who keeps the 10 precepts, and therefore does not handle money; see Ordination.

Sāriputta: the Buddha's first chief disciple, renowned for his wisdom.

Sīla: 'Morality', 'Virtue', is a mode of mind and volition manifested in speech or bodily action. It is the foundation of the whole Buddhist practice, and therewith the first of the three kinds of training that form the 3-fold division of the eightfold path, i.e. morality, concentration and wisdom.

Sīladharā: 'One who upholds virtue', a term for Buddhist nuns in the Western tradition.

Sutta: discourse of the Buddha.

Therīgāthā: verses uttered by arahant nuns.

Theravāda: 'Teaching of the Elders', is the name of the oldest form of the Buddha's teachings with texts in the Pāli language. The 'Southern School' of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia.

Tort Pah Bah: alms-giving ceremony.

Uposatha: for bhikkhus and sīladharā this is the fortnightly Observance Day when the monastic rules are recited. Weekly Observance Day for Upāsaka-Upāsikā.

Vassa: the yearly three months of the ‘Rains retreat’, corresponding to the monsoon in India, approximately July-October, during which time *samaṇas* are expected to stay in one place. Seniority in the Saṅgha is measured by the number of Vassas one has spent in the Order.

Vajrayāna: a Buddhist tradition that makes extensive use of symbols and mantras to convey teachings. Found predominately in the sphere of Tibetan culture.

Vesākha Pūjā: the festival, generally on the full moon of May, which commemorates the Buddha’s Awakening under the Bodhi tree at Bodh-Gaya. Thus it is held to commemorate the Buddha.

Wesak: another word for Vesākha Pūjā.

Notes:

AJAHN SUCITTO became a Theravāda Buddhist monk (bhikkhu) in Thailand in 1976. After returning to England in 1978, he trained as a disciple of Ajahn Sumedho, for 14 years before being asked to supervise the teaching and training of the community at Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex. Although he also travels to give teachings, Cittaviveka is where he currently resides and where the talks that form the substance of this book were given.

AJAHN CANDASIRĪ was born in Scotland. Having met Ajahn Sumedho in 1977, she was one of the first four women to be ordained at Chithurst Monastery. She took the Eight Precepts as an anagārikā in 1979 and the Siladharā ordination in 1983. Currently she lives at Amaravati Monastery in Hertfordshire as the senior nun. She also teaches meditation retreats in the UK and abroad.

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