

# Buddhist Rituals & Observances

*Buddham* saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

*Dhammam* saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

*Sangham* saraṇaṃ gacchāmi



# Buddhist Rituals & Observances

Based on talks given at Cittaviveka by  
Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Candasiri,  
compiled by Dr. Barry Durrant





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## Preface

This booklet is a revised edition of a work originally composed by the late Dr. Barry Durrant, using material with which we had supplied him. We therefore dedicate the following text to his memory; he was a dedicated follower of the Buddha and a good friend to the Sangha and to all on the Way.

*'Just as a large banyan tree, in level ground where four roads meet, is a haven for the birds all around, even so, a lay person of faith is a haven for many people: for bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, male lay followers and female lay followers.'* (A.5, 38)

*Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Candasiri, 2016*

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# The Sacred and its Recollection 1



# The Triple Gem

In the West, the practice of Buddhism is most frequently associated with the quiet, reflective and introspective aspects of formal meditation. Less mention is made of the recollective and devotional means by which we can cultivate such qualities as inspiration, gladness and the uplift of heart. Indeed, for some people, the devotional aspects of practice may seem pointless, or even foolish. However, experience teaches us that meditation alone is not a guaranteed entry into the sublime; it can simply be a wearisome struggle with a wayward mind!

This booklet is about the recognition and cultivation of those means whereby we bring emotive and imaginative energies into our daily lives. It suggests ways of making the images of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, the 'Triple Gem', a meaningful part of our world-view. Furthermore, it may also inculcate a sense of fellowship with others

who have trodden or are currently treading the Path to peace and truth; such a shared aspiration and practice brings a sense of gladness and uplift.

Through this practice we are seeking to create an internal ‘crisis-free zone’ – to develop a sanctuary of our own, a Refuge which we can call upon, not just in formal meditation but at any time throughout our daily lives. So this booklet isn’t about deep calm or quiet absorption. It refers more to outward forms of practice which can help us to dislodge negative moods or states of mind, and replace them with a contemplative space of joy and *saddhā*. *Saddhā*, while usually translated as ‘faith’, actually refers more to a heart-felt sense of confidence. It is a sense of ‘rightness’ – an instinctive, intuitive awareness that ‘*This feels “right”.*’ When our *saddhā* is unshakeably rooted in the Refuge of the Triple Gem, the meaning of this term and its images evoke a sense of zest and enthusiasm. This sense is the healthiest basis from which to cultivate meditation.

As an image and recollection, ‘Buddha’ represents the Awakened, a quality that the historical Buddha manifested, but whose clarity, peace and compassion are a potential in all of us.

‘Dhamma’ is the order and harmony of truth. It is a Way and a Path to the fulfilment of that truth ‘immediate, not bound in time, accessible through wisdom in oneself’.

‘Sangha’ refers to the humans who, although of diverse characters, are united in their commitment to the Way and the Path.

We may have experienced a feeling of trust and sense of uplift when we behold a Buddha-image, visit a monastery or stand in silence before a shrine. There is a sense that beneath the superficial turmoil and struggle of life, all is well; there is something beyond our limited vision worthy of exploration, something worthy of applying ourselves to. Similarly, by chanting to and reflecting on this ‘Triple Gem’, and by making offerings to it on a daily basis, we can align the heart to timeless spiritual values and their beauty. Such enacted recollection

gives us a perspective on the realm of mundane existence, with all its worries, doubts and regrets. Then we have a sound foundation for the cultivation of concentration and calm.

## Devotional Practice

One purpose of this booklet is to encourage the development of devotional practice.

These include physical and verbal actions that indicate offering and respect: offering candles, incense and flowers; and chanting and bowing. These foster and support the meditative mind.

These ‘external’ practices help to focus the mind and to counteract the tendency to be drawn into self-view and its craving, a tendency that underlies our urge to ‘get somewhere’, or our longing to achieve some state according to a preconceived goal. Instead, we look behind such attitudes. Motivated by the intention to give up our self-view, we cultivate the practice of humility and relinquishment.

Only then can the mind settle into the loving, open awareness that is *citta*, the ‘heart’.

This giving and offering sense can also enrich our actions in daily life. Examples of these include a spontaneous and unfettered response to another’s need – whether this entails practical help, offering material support or giving clear but comforting advice. These not only bring support to the recipient, they also arouse joy and gladness in the heart of the one who offers.

With the cultivation of sensitivity and awareness, situations inseparable from the very fabric of life itself become opportunities for recognizing and overcoming the insidious demands of ‘self’. In their place we can discover an unrestricted tenderness and compassion towards all beings.

Consequently, instead of continuing to live simply in conformity with established customs of the everyday secular world, we can find symbols and images that have a special significance for us, and

that come alive through our living relationship to them. Their very presence will support us. They enable us to check unwanted, unskilful perceptions such as worries, grudges or fears that can otherwise tend to dominate our thoughts. Furthermore, when we adopt and develop suitable rituals as an integral part of our practice, we come to appreciate their inestimable role in strengthening our resolve. They provide a tangible form through which we can express our commitment and devotion.

## Time and Place for a Shrine

Although there are several useful ways in which to develop meditation, one of the fundamental systems is the recollection of the Triple Gem. This is a method recommended by the Buddha himself, where one brings to mind the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. One ponders over them, slowly considering each of them – rather as one uses a mantra or rosary. By taking them into the heart, thoughts

and intentions of a worldly orientation are displaced. In the Buddhist tradition, such recollection is a daily practice and may be used as a prologue to contemplation of the body, mindfulness of breathing or meditations on goodwill.

This is a practice that brightens the heart by turning the mind towards an auspicious theme. The Buddha pointed out that during the time the mind is occupied in this way it is free from less wholesome thoughts – from worries, fears or anxieties. Such recollection, and the gladness it evokes, functions at a different level from mundane reality; it operates according to a more imaginative and deeply-felt perception.

It is important to recognize also that whilst not wishing to reduce our devotions to the level of a routine duty – something that one *has* to do – it is psychologically helpful to adhere to a regular time for formal practice (as seen in the formal morning and evening pujas within the monastery). Ideally, we dedicate a room solely to our

formal practice, but when this is not possible we can create a shrine in a peaceful part of our living space. Then, when we have a regular place and time for our devotional recollections, the mind is encouraged to form a supportive established pattern for daily practice.

## Religious Occasions

Another purpose of this booklet is to enable newcomers to feel more at ease with the ceremonial practices associated with the monastic Sangha. The formal practices of relating to the shrine and Triple Gem can seem very strange and foreign at first, although they come alive when they give spiritual depth to occasions such as birth, marriage, or death.

Whatever the culture, such events are significant and there is a universal need to give them a special place in the heart. It is the role of religious ceremonies and rituals to do just that. In this way, our practice becomes more alive and sensitive to the significance of

those particular occasions which thereby come to be imbued with auspiciousness. Using ritual can support more careful attention to what is actually happening, thereby enabling a deeper appreciation of the quality of that occasion.

Such ceremonies as taking Refuge in the Triple Gem and committing to the Five Precepts can bring about a sense of unity and common initiative within a group of people who would otherwise have no special affinity with one another. They foster a wider, all-embracing sense of fellowship and community. Similarly, when people from different backgrounds meet at the monastery to make offerings, that very activity, that corporate generosity, can establish a sense of unity – a feeling of belonging and kinship.

As well as the observances for larger gatherings, described above, there are more personal, intimate ceremonies which each have a particular significance in introducing a sense of the sacred into daily life. These include the blessings 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 or to bless one's home.

Thus there are many ways in which the spirit and practice of devotion can support and strengthen our hearts.





## Buddha-images 2

Buddha-images come in a range of postures – standing, sitting, walking and reclining. Each image suggests a different way of reviewing Awakening. Those standing suggest a balanced authority; the sitting posture suggests an upright composure; the walking, a sense of fluid engagement; and the reclining, a sense of accomplishment. A Buddha-image is also referred to as a ‘Buddha-rūpa’. It has both an external form and an internal meaning.

The positions of the hands of Buddha-rūpas, called ‘*mudrā*’, are also significant. Beyond their most fundamental meaning, these images can serve to foster further reflection and contemplation.

## Earth-touching Mudrā

In the earth-touching *mudrā* (*bhūmiphassa mudrā*), the Buddha’s right hand is touching the ground by his right knee. It symbolizes the moment of his Awakening, otherwise called the ‘repelling of Māra. ‘Māra’ is the persuasive force of delusion whose presence we can acknowledge in our compulsive desires and restless distractions.

‘Repelling Māra’ is a fitting name for this gesture because it implies that a ‘coming to one’s senses’ – getting grounded 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 beset by ‘the host of Māra’, he called upon the Earth to bear witness to the countless lives he had spent cultivating virtue – including 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 bear witness to its powerful current and, clarified and strengthened by this, realized Enlightenment (or Awakening). In simple terms, his mind was no longer subject to delusion.

This particular *mudrā* is very commonly seen in Thai Buddha-rupas. In Tibetan Buddhism it is associated with the Buddha of the East, that is, ‘The Imperturbable’. Aksobhya – the one who reflects without interference or destruction like a clear mirror. To align one’s heart to this image gives it strength.

## Abhaya Mudrā

In the *abhaya mudrā*, the Buddha is depicted with the right hand raised in front of him (the right hand being the most auspicious), the palm facing outwards, the fingers pointing upwards. *Abhaya* means ‘no fear’ – so this *mudrā* portrays fearlessness and protection.

In Thailand, the posture also indicates ‘Giving the Blessing’, and in Tibetan Buddhism, this *mudrā* is associated with the Buddha of the North – Amoghasiddhi, who represents ‘the unswerving application of perseverance’. This is the dedication, and the ability to keep going and not to be put off from realizing the goal. One could call this the ‘*you can do it*’ gesture – an undaunted affirmation. This image offers safety and assurance.

## Samādhi Mudrā

In the *samādhi* (or *dhyāna*) *mudrā*, which, in some schools of Buddhism, is associated with Amitabha, the Buddha of the West, the hands are placed together in the lap, signifying the Buddha's collected, or concentrated mind, enjoying a state of serenity and bliss.

It is an image that reminds of us of the sublime happiness that is available for the composed mind.

## Dāna Mudrā

In the *dāna mudrā*, the hand is shown touching the ground, but with the palm facing outwards in what is known as the bliss-bestowing gesture. Here it is said that the Buddha is offering his qualities to the world. This is the Buddha of the South, the *mudrā* of charity and generosity – that especially offers the gift of knowledge. The *mudrā* is

primarily associated with Nepalese and Tibetan images. The Buddha in this posture is known as Ratnasambhava, the ‘Jewel-Originated’. The image reminds us of the enrichment that comes through acts of wise giving.

## Dhammacakka Mudrā

In the *dhammacakka mudrā*, the right hand is held higher than the left and the curled forefinger of each hand touches the thumb to form a closed circle. The remaining fingers radiate out like the spokes of a wheel in a gesture that symbolizes the presentation of the teachings.

The *dhammacakka mudrā* is specifically associated with the Buddha’s teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, the establishing of his Dhamma. The image brings to mind the entire Path of practice, its integral unity and its progressive turning in our hearts.

## Caring for Buddha-images

Because of the religious symbolism of these images and the gratitude for the teachings they evoke, it is important that Buddha-images are handled with respect and reverence. When one wishes to move them, one should first make ‘*añjali*’ (the hands joined in prayer position close to the chest) and then, using both hands, lift them from the base. They should never be picked up by the head, placed on the floor or stepped over. Neither should they be used for any inappropriate purpose such as an ornament, bookend or toy.

In similar fashion, copies of the scriptures, religious and chanting books should be respected by not placing them directly on the floor or handling with soiled hands. Instead, they can be placed on a table, laid on a cloth, or covered with a special cloth whilst in use. When Dhamma articles in journals have to be disposed of, burning or recycling them is more appropriate than throwing them into a dustbin.



## Shrines 3



Shrines may be large, elaborate and formal or quite simple and basic; they can be found anywhere – both in private houses and in monasteries. They represent a focus for what is most precious and should therefore always be raised up, rather than at ground level.

It is usual to have a Buddha-image as the centre piece of a shrine. This may be a statue, a picture, or a symbolic representation of the Buddha – such as a statue or image of the bodhi-tree or of his footprints.

Traditionally, candles, incense and flowers are placed on a shrine as additional enrichments. It is usual to have the Buddha-image at the highest point of the shrine, with the candles, incense and flowers placed lower down on either side. These items may be regularly ‘offered’ to the shrine (as explained later). Each particular offering has a symbolic value, representing *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* (morality, concentration and wisdom).

*Sīla*, or morality, is symbolized by the flowers because they have a fragrance and beauty reminiscent of someone living a life committed to values and integrity.

Incense symbolizes *samādhi*, or the mind firmly established in measureless composure. 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 natural objects such as stones or crystals of anything else that has a particular personal significance and beauty. These should all 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, candles and incense are light in weight, when offering any of these, it is usual to hold them in both hands whilst placing them on the shrine. The giving of complete attention to the act is another way of showing respect.

The incense, lit from a candle and held between the two hands placed palm to palm in *añjali*, 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.

In some Buddhist traditions food and water are also seen as appropriate offerings to place on a shrine, while 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.

When extinguishing the candles, it is considered more gracious to use a candle snuffer or to fan them with a sharp downward movement of the hand than to blow them out (whereby one sprays them with moist breath).

At all times it should be remembered that making such an offering is doing something special – whether it be to the shrine, to the Buddha or to a respected teacher. The whole procedure can be seen as an opportunity to enter into the uplifting experience of reverence.

## Care and Respect for a Shrine

The shrine should be taken apart and cleaned on a regular basis, with each item being picked up and carefully cleaned before being put back. This can be seen as an act of devotion and mindfulness that can help to bring the mind to a state of peace and balance. Such an activity can be particularly helpful if the mind is depressed or agitated.

Note that it is considered disrespectful to place Buddha-images or other sacred objects directly on the floor. It is good to place them on a small table, or even a tray or cloth, rather than directly on the floor.

It is also inappropriate to sit with one's feet pointing towards a shrine.



Stūpas 4



Stūpas have a distinctive architecture. They comprise a broad base, as if taking their stand on Mother Earth, and a high pinnacle pointing towards the sky – representing the aspiration towards truth and liberation. They commonly house religious relics and serve as a focal point for one’s recollections, devotions, and respect. A stūpa is often constructed with shrines arranged around its circumference according to the cardinal points of the compass. The shrines will contain Buddha-images in the following way:

- ◆ The *abhaya mudrā* occupies the North
- ◆ The *bhūmiphassa mudrā* occupies the East
- ◆ The *samādhi mudrā* occupies the West
- ◆ The *dāna mudrā* occupies the South
- ◆ The *dhammacakka mudrā*, occupying the centre, may be enclosed within the body of the stūpa, or in its central spire.

## Circumambulating a Stūpa

One can circumambulate a stūpa (also called a ‘dagoba’, a ‘chedi’ or a ‘pagoda’) as a way of establishing mindfulness and uplift. Circumambulation of a stūpa is often included as part of a festival or celebration. Those participating walk in a file, generally with elders and community leaders to the fore, and others following\*. As one draws near to the stūpa one acknowledges it with a bow and *añjali* (see below: ‘Relating to Devotional Images’) before circumambulating three times – the first time one recollects the Buddha; the second time, the Dhamma; and the third time, the Sangha.

Circumambulation is an ancient way to express respect. Traditionally, the right side has always been regarded as the most fortunate side. In the scriptures, those visiting the Buddha would always show their respect by keeping their right side towards him as they took their

\* Protocol around ‘seniority’ in terms of age or leadership is a common feature of Buddhist custom.

places for a Dhamma talk, or sought his advice and guidance. Because of this, one circumambulates a stūpa in a clockwise direction, keeping the right side of the body towards the stūpa.

As one circumambulates the stūpa one may walk silently or chant and carry offerings such as candles, incense and flowers, which can be offered at any one of the four cardinal shrines.

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



Paying Respect:  
A Relationship Based on Spiritual Values 5



Acts of showing respect and reverence are rather limited in Western society. The ideal that is held up is one of egalitarianism – although in practice there is inequality in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, wealth and social background. In Buddhism we replace all that with respect for values, spiritual commitment and experience. Although paying respect may, to a newcomer, feel like fawning or being overawed by someone or something that has power over us, it is a way of indicating trust in what the image or the person stands for; and it can bring to mind those values in ourselves. Paying respect establishes a relationship based on spiritual values; not on power, wealth, beauty or worldly success.

We pay respect and thereby bring a sense of the sacred to mind, through bodily movement and posture. In this way of practice, parts of the body have distinct meanings. The head, the highest part of our form, symbolizes the intellect, whilst the heart region is the place for devotion, warmth and trust. The hands express offering and giving, protecting and supporting, directing and receiving. While the feet,

both literally and symbolically, express our contact with the ground; they bring us fully here. They should not be raised towards a shrine or another person; so when sitting, one keeps the feet tucked beneath the body, or pointing behind it.

By tradition the upper body – the hands, head and chest – are brought together in the act of paying respect; through bowing the upper body, inclining the head forwards and down, and making *añjali* with the hands. In this way, we soften our self-image with its pride or anxiety.

## Making *Añjali*

This is a gesture of respect whereby the hands – palm to palm with the fingers extended upwards – are brought together in front of the chest, then raised to the forehead whilst the head is slightly tilted forward. It can be used as a greeting, an alternative to the more familiar handshake; usually the ‘junior’ person would initiate such an exchange. We could see this as symbolically making the gesture to

point the hands towards the head – the highest part of the body, home of the wisdom faculty. The gesture of *añjali* can also replace the five-point prostration before a sacred image or shrine where constraints of time, space or circumstance make the full bow unsuitable. In Asia, this is a universally recognized way of showing respect.

*Añjali* is also used when chanting, the hands held close to the heart – a way of expressing the heart-felt sense of devotion to the Triple Gem.

Other than being offered in these situations, *añjali* is also used as a means to introduce oneself into someone else's conscious space. Often members of the monastic Sangha make *añjali* when first addressing or calling attention to one another – indicating an intention or wish to speak. It's rather like saying, 'Excuse me' or, 'May I?' Another use of *añjali* is as a preliminary gesture towards monks and nuns before, as when approaching and offering to help them to take their bowl, luggage or to otherwise offer assistance.

## Bowing

The fullest means of paying respect is through bowing. Within the Buddhist tradition there are a number of ways to bow. It is usual for Tibetans to do a full-length prostration, and for the Japanese to bow from the waist. In S.E. Asia people usually perform a bow from the kneeling position while in Sri Lanka, people often show their respect by squatting down and lowering the head as they make *añjali*. The gesture is made towards the shrine or the person who is being acknowledged.

In this particular lineage we use the form of bowing known as the 'five-point prostration'. For this, a kneeling posture is assumed with the hands placed in *añjali* in front of the heart. The hands are then raised to the forehead, the head being tilted forward to meet them. The body is then bent from the waist as the joined palms sweep down the body, each forearm being placed full-length on the ground. The

head is then brought down and placed on the floor between the hands. Thus the head, forearms and palms of the hands complete the five points of contact. The gesture is repeated three times: once each for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. After the last repetition the head is slightly tilted forward to complete the movement.

Bowing in this way can present difficulties for elderly people, or for anyone with physical disability. It is, however, perfectly acceptable to modify the form according to one's physical limitation: bowing from the waist while standing, or sitting in a chair. Ideally, bowing – whatever style or modification is used – is an elegant expression of respect and reverence, and conveys a sense of calm composure arising out of sincerity and mindfulness. Whatever the means, it is important to make the gesture of respect with that attitude in mind.

Composure and finding the right time and place to pay respect is crucial: if it is done in a busy place, hurriedly or with a sense of inner agitation, it can become awkward. In fact, 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 leave it for a more suitable occasion.

Bowing can be incorporated into a small but important personal gesture of devotion, made towards a shrine or Buddha-rupa at the start and end of each day. One can bow just before retiring for the night, and as the very first thing to do on rising. This composes the mind for sleep, and sets the mind aright for starting another day.

Bowing is also a way of showing respect to monks and nuns and one's respected elders.

Another gesture of respect is one of stooping slightly – and thereby softening one's body image – when passing close by or between people who are meditating or conversing. This helps to minimize the intrusiveness of one's presence and to indicate one's sensitivity to other beings when walking through such a group. A similar attitude is adopted towards Buddha-images; one avoids towering over them, relating to them with due reverence.





## Making Offerings to the Sangha 6



As mentioned earlier, the monastic Sangha is entirely dependent on offerings from lay people. While it is not suitable to offer money directly to a monk or nun (financial donations may be handed to a lay steward or put into the donations box in a monastery), food and other requisites can be offered by anyone to monks or nuns (who are collectively known as '*samaṇas*').

Prepared food can be offered directly into the alms-bowl of a monk or nun. This may happen at formal occasions when those attending each have the opportunity to offer a small amount of food (such as rice) to each monastic – a practice referred to as '*pindapāta*'. It can also happen when a small group of *samaṇas* walk to a nearby town and stand in an open place with their alms-bowls in order to receive offerings for their daily meal. This is a recognized feature of daily life in many Buddhist countries.

Other food items and requisites for a community or individual monk or nun are usually presented at the time of the meal, although it can

happen at any time. The etiquette for this is to draw near and to place the item/s directly into the hands of the person. The custom in Thailand is, in the case of a woman offering to a monk, that the food is offered onto a receiving cloth which the monk will touch as the offering is being presented. In a Western context this may not be necessary, but Thai monks and lay people generally conform to this standard.

Another consideration is that once a monk has received an item of food or drink, it should not be touched or moved by anyone who is not a monk – otherwise it will need to be re-offered. This does not apply for offerings received by nuns.

Nuns may receive and make use of items offered directly into their hands (as above), or simply through a spoken invitation, for example, the donor may say, ‘please help yourself to anything on this table’ – or the donor might make an arrangement to that effect.

## Receiving or Handling Money

In this tradition monks and nuns are not permitted to use or handle money in any form. However, the use of telephone cards, travel warrants and bus passes is permitted, both for convenience and because the use is restricted. Novices (*anagārika/ās*) are allowed to receive and deal with money on behalf of the *samanas*. If money is offered at one of the festivals, it can be placed where the novice can see it; they then can make sure that it is removed and put aside for safe-keeping.

Visitors or guests who wish to donate cash or a cheque for the monastery may leave it in the monastery donation box. A lay steward or novice will collect it at the appropriate time.

Monks and nuns on their alms-round in nearby towns are sometimes approached by people who wish to offer money into the alms-bowl. This has to be politely refused and an explanation given so that, as far as possible, no one is offended.

# Tradition, Form and Relationships

There are unspoken customs and traditions in all cultures – as well as taboos. These have evolved as a means to bring about harmony in that particular society. Such customs facilitate relationships in families and in the social order, maintain law and order and govern financial transactions and bartering. They help to bring about an understanding, a common ground; they can also support cooperation and serve to avoid conflict.

However, people can sometimes feel overawed by the rituals and protocols when visiting monasteries of our tradition. What can happen is that they end up following the customs of the monastery as a blind routine, or fearful of ‘doing the wrong thing’, rather than with any warmth or respect. In fact, it is far better to relax and express oneself in an unaffected and clearly conscious way than to clumsily falter, trying to conform to unfamiliar patterns of conduct. An attitude of goodwill and mutual respect

is the key; then one can learn the customs and protocols with the right attitude.

## The Role of Samaṇas

The practice of a *samaṇa* is to live according to the Rule they have undertaken, following the guidelines laid down by the Buddha. They also share their understanding with others, when invited to do so and can be available to receive offerings. They are not priests with sacramental power and would not be able to perform a marriage. In fact, the Rule they follow explicitly prohibits them from acting as a go-between for two parties, introducing couples and so on. They may, however, offer a blessing for a couple who have already been married. They may also offer blessings for the dead and can help to consecrate other significant rites of passage such as the birth of a child. This is outlined in the next section.

Monks and nuns cannot practise as doctors; it is not their role to assume responsibility in such a context. This is for good reason. Any mistake, however much care was taken, would inevitably be associated with blame; and any success in healing might result in people visiting the *samaṇa* for healing of the body rather than to learn the Dhamma – which is for the healing of the mind. It follows too that *samaṇas* should not be expected to read horoscopes or to practise herbal medicine.





## Rites of Passage 7



It is traditional to mark significant domestic events such as births, marriages, house blessings and deaths with a suitable ceremony involving *samañas*. This section refers to more personal or smaller-scale ceremonies as opposed to the larger public festivals mentioned below.

These rituals and ceremonies link aspects of living into a meaningful continuum through Dhamma; the blessing of marriage, the birth of children and the reflections upon impermanence at the death of friends or relatives, all taking place under the aegis of the Triple Gem. They offer a sense of belonging and support.

## Births, Marriages and House Blessings

In a ceremony for a birth, a marriage, or a new house, well-wishers 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* may be 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.

The setting is simple. Typically, participants set up a shrine and make offerings to it and offer a meal to the invited *samaṇas*. Usually, the principal participants for the ceremony would request the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. These indicate their commitment to the standards of conduct by which they guide their lives, as well as being an auspicious way to start a new life or a partnership in marriage or when setting up a new home.

Following the taking of the Refuges and Precepts, the participants often request ‘*paritta*’ chanting by the Sangha. *Paritta* 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 and dispelling negative moods. It is said that, ‘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’ (Venerable Piyadassi Thera, ‘The Book of Protection’).

There is a special formula in Pali for requesting a recitation of the *paritta* suttas, called *Vipattiṭṭāṭṭibhāya* (See overleaf). 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 bowl, 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 kammically 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.)

While the monks and nuns have no official capacity to perform marriage ceremonies, they may bless a marriage after the couple's civil ceremony. Lay Buddhist practitioners on the other hand may be authorized to officiate at marriage ceremonies.

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

## Requesting Paritta Chanting

After bowing three times, with hands joined in añjali,  
recite the following:

Vipatti-paṭibāhāya sabba-  
sampatti-siddhiyā  
Sabbadukha-vināsāya  
Parittaṃ brūtha maṅgalaṃ

*For warding off misfortune,  
for the arising of good fortune,  
For the dispelling of all dukkha,  
May you chant a blessing  
and protection.*

Vipatti-paṭibāhāya sabba-  
sampatti-siddhiyā  
Sabbabhaya-vināsāya  
Parittaṃ brūtha maṅgalaṃ

*For warding off misfortune,  
for the arising of good fortune,  
For the dispelling of all fear,  
May you chant a blessing  
and protection.*

Vipatti-paṭibāhāya sabba-  
sampatti-siddhiyā  
Sabbaroga-vināsāya  
Parittaṃ brūtha maṅgalaṃ

*For warding off misfortune,  
for the arising of good fortune,  
For the dispelling of all sickness,  
May you chant a blessing  
and protection.*

## Funeral Ceremonies

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

The chanting centres upon the Abhidhamma teachings which detail the processes that make up human consciousness. This 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 may 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 no *samaṇas* are present, participants may adjust the programme as necessary. (See \*)

- 1 A monk or nun (\*or lay elder or family member) lights the candles and incense.
- 2 The senior monk or nun (\*as above) 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 offer the *Mātikā* chanting, 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* (robe-offering) ceremony. In this case, 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 recollections on impermanence.

## Memorial Ceremonies after the Funeral

Even after the death of a loved one, the insight into impermanence decreases with time. For this reason, the hundredth day after death is also commemorated. In addition, ceremonies including chanting, sharing of the goodness and goodwill of the living with the deceased, 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. This may include: dedicating a retreat or a day of meditation to their memory, doing service in a local organization, sponsoring a retreat, starting a fund to benefit the homeless, or making offerings to a local sangha or monastery.
- 2 Asking the *samaṇas* 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), fifty days after death, one hundred days after death, one year afterwards and annually thereafter.

- 3 Visit a monastery with family and friends to hold some form of remembrance ceremony. The hundredth day following the death is a good time for such an occasion. It could include any of the following:
  - ◆ Offering alms-food or other requisites to the sangha.
  - ◆ Planting a tree in memory of the deceased and ask the sangha to chant some of the traditional funeral chants.
  - ◆ Requesting the sangha to offer some Dhamma reflections appropriate to the occasion.
  - ◆ Bringing the ashes to the monastery and scattering them around a sanctified area.
  - ◆ Placing some of the ashes at the site of a tree that one has planted in memory of the person.

# Readings for Funeral and Memorial Ceremonies

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

- ◆ Sections from the *paṃsukūla* 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 7



Public festivals are usually celebrated at a monastery. If facilities are likely to be insufficient to cater for the number of people expected to attend, a large hall can be hired for the occasion. Some festivals are annual events; others may be observed more frequently.

## Three Principal Festivals

Within the Theravada tradition, there are three major festivals: Māgha Pūjā, held on the full moon of February; Vesākha Pūjā, held on the full moon day of May; and Asālha Pūjā, held on the full moon day of July.

**Māgha Pūjā** is a commemoration of the time when 1,250 arahants simultaneously arrived to see the Buddha. At this gathering the Buddha conferred the title of ‘Chief Disciple’ on Venerables Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggallāna. Sometimes it is referred to as Sangha Day. It was also the day that the Buddha presented the *Ovāda Pātimokkha*, a teaching that forms the basis of the samaṇa training. For monks and nuns it is customary to visit one’s teacher or preceptor to pay respects at this time.

**Vesākha Pūjā – Wesak**, or ‘**Buddha Day**’ is the time for commemorating the Buddha: his Birth, Enlightenment and Final Passing (*Parinibbāna*). Festivals are organized in each of the monasteries at a convenient time either on the May full moon or within a month of it.

**Asālha Pūjā** commemorates the day when the Buddha gave his first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. This discourse outlines the Four Noble Truths, including the Middle Way, which is the essential framework for practice within Theravada Buddhism. For this reason it is often referred to as ‘Dhamma Day’.

On the day following Asālha Pūjā, the three months Rains Retreat (*Vassa*) begins. The monks and nuns undertake to remain in one place during this time; often they use it as an opportunity to review the rules that constitute the monastic training. Pavāranā Day, which occurs three months later, usually on the full moon of October, is a time that members of the monastic community make themselves available to receive feedback from each other.

The month following the end of the Vassa retreat time is referred to as the 'Kathina' season. During this time a Kathina Festival may be organized by lay supporters at a monastery where a minimum of five monks have resided for the Vassa. At the Kathina Festival, the lay supporters offer Kathina Cloth to be used for making robes.

In those monasteries where there have been only nuns or fewer than five monks resident, such an offering ceremony would be called a 'Pha Ba' and the cloth offered referred to as 'cloth offered at Kathina time', rather than the Kathina Cloth. Although a Pha Ba can occur at any time of the year, there is only one Kathina Festival per annum.

In either of these occasions many other things apart from the cloth can be offered, including funds for the upkeep of the monastery. Prior to the festival, a *dāna* list may be provided to the organizers so they can let people know what items are needed.

## Uposatha Observances

‘Uposatha’ is an ancient term implying something like ‘sabbath.’ The Uposatha days, which fall approximately on the full and new moons of each month, are days set aside for increased devotion and attention to Dhamma practice. The monastic Sangha conduct their fortnightly confessions and recitation of their respective training rules (*Pātimokkha*). In some monasteries it is customary to extend group meditation practice through the night.

Likewise, lay followers gather at the monastery to take the Three Refuges and Five or Eight Precepts, make offerings to the Sangha, listen to Dhamma talks and meditate with other lay supporters and members of the Sangha. These ‘Observance Days’ can be both an inspiration to oneself and supportive and encouraging to others.

Even if unable to visit a monastery on the Uposatha Days, many lay people observe these days at home, conducting their own *pūjā*, taking the Refuges and precepts and extending their meditation practice.





## 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 sīladharā who has reached ten Vassas/years.

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

**Almsfood:** Food offered to the monastic community.

**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 within 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.

**Bhūmiphasa Mudrā:** The hand gesture, fingers pointing down to touch the earth, palm facing back, signifying Awakening. Seen on seated Buddha-images.

**Bodhi tree:** The tree under which Gotama attained Awakening and hence was referred to as ‘Buddha’ (= Awake).

**Buddha:** Literally, ‘Awake’ (or ‘Enlightened’). A Buddha is one by whom the liberating Law (Dhamma), which had become lost to the world, has again been discovered, realised and clearly proclaimed to the world.

**Citta:** Mind, heart or awareness. Also a reference to the state of mind that is being experienced 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 that takes place during the month following the Rains Retreat, normally during October-November.

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

**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 Sangha.

**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:** Kindness, goodwill.

**Mudrā:** Hand gesture on a Buddha-image that conveys a spiritual meaning.

**Ovāda Pātimokkha:** The first outline of Buddhist training, given by the Buddha to a gathering of arahants on the full moon of Māgha. (q.v)

**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).

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

**Pavāranā:** 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.

**Pha Ba:** Alms-giving ceremony.

**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 *samaṇas*, 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:** Renunciant, those who have ‘Gone Forth’.

**Sāmaṇera:** Novice who keeps the 10 precepts and therefore does not handle money.

**Sāriputta:** The Buddha’s first chief disciple, renowned for his wisdom.

**Sīla:** Ethical integrity, moral sensitivity. This is the mode of mind as it manifests skilfully in terms of speech and action. It is the foundation for Dhamma practice.

**Sīladhara (pl: Sīladharā):** ‘One who upholds virtue’, a term for Buddhist nuns in the Western Theravāda tradition.

**Sutta:** Discourse of the Buddha.

**Theravada:** ‘Teaching of the Elders’, is the name of the form of the Buddha’s teachings with texts in the Pali language. The ‘Southern School’ of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia.

**Uposatha:** For bhikkhus and sīladharā this is the fortnightly Observance Day when the monastic rules are recited. Weekly Observance Day for lay followers (*upāsaka/upāsikā*), who determine the five or eight precepts.

**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 predominantly 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 Bodhi-Gaya. Thus it is held to commemorate the Buddha.

**Wesak:** Another word for Vesākha Pūjā.



## About the Authors

## Ajahn Sucitto

Ajahn Sucitto was born in London in 1949. He entered monastic life in Thailand in 1975 and received Admission into the Sangha there in 1976. He returned to Britain in 1978 and took up training under Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in the lineage of the Thai forest master, Ven. Ajahn Chah.

In 1979 he was one of the small group of monks who established Cittaviveka, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, in West Sussex. In 1992 he was appointed abbot of Cittaviveka where he remained until October 2014.

Apart from serving the Triple Gem in this way, Ajahn Sucitto has also written several books and presented teachings throughout the world for many years.

## Ajahn Candasiri

Ajahn Candasiri was born in Scotland in 1947 and brought up as a Christian. After university she trained and worked as an occupational therapist, mainly in the field of mental illness.

In 1977 an interest in meditation led her to meet Ajahn Sumedho, shortly after his arrival from Thailand. Inspired by his teachings and example, she began her monastic training at Chithurst as one of the first four Anagārikās. Within the monastic community she has been actively involved in the evolution of the Nun's vinaya training. She has guided many meditation retreats for lay people and particularly enjoys teaching young people and participating in Christian/Buddhist dialogue.

Ajahn Candasiri now resides in Milntuim Hermitage in Perthshire, Scotland.



# Buddhist Rituals & Observances

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