

Sivura: The Story Of The Saffron Robe

Posted on



An alms bowl (patharaya), the three robes (thun sivura) and a shaving knife (deli pihiya)

The vivid saffron robe of the Buddhist monk is far more than mere attire. It symbolises a monastic life, a life of detachment. To the layman it is a symbol, which in essence represents the Buddhist order of the bygone and present times. The sober shades of browns and deep oranges thus inspire obeisance and a sense of humble veneration amongst people. A Buddhist monk is thus characterised by this symbolic adornment and within its many folds and hems lie preserved, a timeless and stringent practice, since the times of the Buddha.

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The offering of the sivura or the monastic robes finds its place in the upper echelons of the many items of alms or Pirikara in the Buddhist practice. Even more so is the Ata Pirikara, a combined offering of eight items including three types of robes, belt, needle and thread, alms bowl, cloth filter and shaving knife, and regarded as the

foremost amongst alms items. The practice of a monk taking on the customary robes arose with it being instated by the Buddha who laid down the many disciplines for its proper use. It would embody the renouncement of all things worldly and accordingly inherited the boundaries for its origin, material, colour and usage.

During the Buddha's age – a time where there was a scarcity of clothing material – discarded clothes and material, particularly the white cloth that was used to cover the dead were obtained by monks for their re-use. This further added to the symbolic nature of the robes in that it represented the impermanence of life – a fundamental teaching of Buddhism. These fabrics were collected and washed and dyed before use. Even to this day a ritual has prevailed stemming from this age-old custom referred to as the Pansakula. It is the offering of a length of white material to the monks by the families of the deceased, where the monks in return invoke merit for the departed.

The many intricacies were followed so that the robe would not inspire any attachment, desire or admiration and would be a thoroughly devalued item.

While certain sources to prepare robes were prohibited, for instance, hair, skin, and feathers so too were the use of plain colours such as blue, yellow and black. Instead a 'mixed' hue, was recommended that could be derived from boiling plant specimens, such as the bark of the Nuga tree, to render kahata – a 'discolour' and the robes were in relation referred to as the kahata wasthraya – discoloured garb. Although forest monks who reside in seclusion still obtain robes prepared in the traditional method and seen adorned in its characteristic brown shade, city monks who are often seen amidst the people and working closely with the community are offered robes prepared in brighter shades of orange though still within the recommended guidelines.

There is however another precept that has been followed unchanged. The many seams that run across the robes are unmistakably present upon the robes of monks from any region. These are as a result of the whole cloth used for the robe being first shredded into parts and then stitched together to appear segmented. This pattern the Buddha himself likened to the paddy fields of the Magadha region of India. All of these many intricacies were followed so that it would not inspire any attachment, desire or admiration towards the 'dress' and would be a thoroughly devalued item that which would not even motivate theft. Aside from these precepts, standards of measurement too were laid down where a monk could

measure the required amount of cloth from the breadth of his palm.

The eight items encompassed in the Ata Pirikara meets four requisites for the monks – robes, alms, shelter and health (filtered water). It is for this reason that the Ata Pirikara is given much importance among Buddhist devotees.

With all these precepts in mind the monk from the moment of his ordination must have in his possession the ‘thun sivura’, that is three variations of robes; the andanaya or inner wear, thanipota sivura or single robe and the depota sivura or the double robe. The double robe was introduced by the Buddha in the latter stages, when the need for better protection from cold and other external elements was recognised during a period of stay in the Seetha Vanaya – cold forest.

Consisting of a double layer of cloth, it served not only sufficient cover and protection for the travelling monk, by folding it eight fold it also offered seat for meditation and a sleeping mat when arranged four fold. Additionally, wear and tear as a result of prolonged use and rustic environments, necessitated that a monk should also in his possession, have a needle and thread so that he could mend his robes to maintain its integrity.

As related in a discourse by Ananda Thero, the Buddha’s closest disciple, to King Udeni, the monastic robes of the monk are put to use to such extent that there virtually remains no room for wastage. No longer wearable the lifespan of a robe takes on a course as a floor mat, a carpet, a dust cloth and at long last, embedded in the clay walls of monastic abodes.

Aside from the three robes, a belt for the inner robe (andana kada), the needle and thread, an alms bowl to receive alms for consumption, a cloth filter (perahan kada) to filter water for drinking and shaving knife (deli pihiya), have prevailed as the sole items of the monk’s possessions even on his travels and deemed sufficient to meet his every need for a simple existence. These are the eight items that have now been encompassed in the ata pirikara that which meets four requisites for the monks – robes, alms, shelter and health (filtered water). It is for this reason that the Ata Pirikara is given much importance among Buddhist devotees, and is often offered at alms givings.

The Sivura, of the Buddhist monk, thus depicts an entire monastic lifestyle, the practice of religious precepts and the humble homage to the teachings of the Buddha. Preserved unchanged for 2600 years it is deemed worthy of worship and remains a distinctive symbol of religious heritage to this day.

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