

Vas Season and its Importance

by

Ven. Siri Vajirārāmaye Ñāṇasiha Thera



1. What is *Vas* and what is the *Vas* season

Pali term is *vassāvāsa*, which literally means ‘rains-residence,’ but with reference to the sangha has the special meaning of ‘rains-retreat’. The *Vas* season of three months, except for those who observe *vas* a month later, is from the full-moon day of the month of *Esala* (July) to the full-moon day of the month of *Vap* (October).

2. Circumstances under which the Buddha enjoined the observance of *Vas*

There was a public outcry that whilst the followers of other teachers like Mahavira, the Jain leader, were confined to their residences during the rainy season, the followers of Gotama, the Buddha still go on the alms-round and travel about, thereby causing harm to the environment by trampling the undergrowth and small creatures.

This matter was brought to the notice of the Buddha and the following Vinaya rule was proclaimed.

“Anujānāmi bhikkhave vassāne vassaṃ upagantum. Dvemā bhikkhave vassūpanāyikā: purimikā pacchimikā ca”

‘I enjoin that the bhikkhus observe the rains-retreat during the rainy season. They could observe the rains-retreat in two ways: earlier (*purimikā*) i.e., the day after the full-moon day of Esala; or later (*pacchimikā*) i.e., one month after that date.

3. Observing ‘Rains-retreat’ is compulsory for an *upasampadā* bhikkhu or bhikkhuni – hence the importance

What the Buddha expected was for the bhikkhus to make an extra effort during the period of rains-retreat to realise Nibbana. Accordingly, many retired to the place they have resolved to spend the rainy season with a subject for meditation in order to fulfil this task.

- 4 *Vas-ārādhana* – individual invitation by the laity to observe *vas*. The invitation meant that during the period of the rains-retreat, the four requisites of the bhikkhus or bhikkhunis, who are observing *Vas* at that place, will be provided. Along with the invitation, it is usual to offer to the bhikkhu or bhikkhuni a rains-bathing cloth (*vassika-sāṭṭikā*) to be used during the rainy season.
5. Preparations prior to invitation – Preparing the hermitage (*paṇṇasālā*), constructing individual huts or abodes (*paṇṇakuṭi*), attending to roof-leaks, looking into other amenities such as water, medicinal requirements, supply of requisites, place to take food (*dāna-sālā*), facilities for religious observances etc.

It is after such preparations are completed that the invitation is made to observe the rains-retreat. However, such extensive prior preparations are not needed today because the bhikkhus are not itinerant monks like in the days of the Buddha but are residential in build-up temples.

6. Preparations by an *upasampadā bhikkhu*:

- Expiation in a *sīmā* (consecrated boundary to perform acts related to the Vinaya), followed by reciting together the *pātimokkha* mindfully by the assembled bhikkhus.
- After the formal invitation is received from the laity, the bhikkhu resolves to spend the rains-retreat in such place by stating solemnly the following in the presence of all bhikkhus who are spending the rains retreat there: -
- “*imasmiṃ vihāre imaṃ temāsaṃ vassaṃ upemi. Idha vassaṃ upemi.*”
- ‘I shall observe the three month’s rains-retreat in this dwelling. I observe the rain retreat here.’
- All *upasampadā* bhikkhus who resolve to spend the rains retreat in a particular place has to abide by the seven-day rule, which is to return to the place where a bhikkhu has resolved to spend the *Vas*, before the elapse of the seventh dawn, ‘if no harm happens to my life’. (*sace me jīvitantarāyo na bhavissa puna sattāhabbhantare āgamiissāmi.*)

7. Significance of *Vas* to lay Buddhists

- It creates a sanctified environment salubrious for fostering closer links between the Sangha and the laity;
- It provides a greater opportunity to meet the bhikkhus (*samanānaṃ dassanaṃ*), timely hearing of the Dhamma (*kālena dhamma savanaṃ*), and have timely discussions on the dhamma (*kālena dhamma sākaṇṇā*), which, in turn, will lead to developing such noble qualities as reverence (*gārava*), humility (*nivāta*), contentment (*santuṭṭhi*), gratitude (*kataññū*), patience (*khanti*), obedience (*suvaca*), self-control (*tapo*), noble life

(*brahamacariya*) and finally the realization of Nibbāna (*nibbāna saccakiriya*);

- It offers many opportunities to perform wholesome deeds.

8. How to proceed – Each one to oneself

- Investigate oneself mindfully and observe to which character trait one belongs. The character traits mentioned by the Buddha are six, according to which the appropriate subject for meditation is given by a *Kammaṭṭhāna Teacher*. The six traits are as follows: -

(1) greedy or lustful natured character (*rāga carita*) (2) hate natured character (*dosa carita*), (3) stupid or dull natured character (*moha carita*), (4) faithful / devoted natured character (*saddhā carita*) (5) intelligent natured character (*buddhi carita*) (6) reflecting / thinking natured character (*vitakka carita*)

- Determine one's strengths and weaknesses after a SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis on oneself;

There are many Opportunities e.g., COVID-9 gave plenty of additional time and the period of *Vas* the necessary environment for mental development based on the subject for meditation given or selected.

Threats to a meditative mind comes from the five hindrances (*panca nīvaraṇa*), viz. sensuous desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīṇa middha*), flurry and worry (*uddhacca kukkuccha*), and sceptical doubt (*vicikicchā*)

ALL these factors are WITHIN you, and not EXTERNAL to you.

- Take the example from the *Mātikāmātā* episode that happened during the time of the Buddha.
- *Mātikāmātā* invited 60 monks, who were in search of a place to spend the rains-retreat. It so happened that she was able to attain the state of *anāgāmi*, whilst the 60 bhikkhus were still struggling.
 - **Hence, it is possible for everyone to make a resolution to change one's lifestyle during the vas season. For example, a smoker of cigarettes can resolve to gradually reduce the number of cigarettes smoked per day and at the end of the vas season be a non-smoker; a person who consumes alcohol to be a teetotaler; meat-eater could be a vegetarian; a vegetarian could be a vegan; etc. etc.**
- Also, there may be habits that have downgraded a person's quality of life. Identify them and make amends during the vas season.
- It is also possible, out of compassion (*karunā*), resolve to reduce one's carbon footprint and help in the survival of humanity
 - **During the period of rains-retreat, endeavour to live according to the advice of all Buddhas viz.,**
 - * *Sabbapāpassaakaranam-Kusalassaupasampadā Sacittapariyodapanam-Etam buddhānasāsanaṃ*
 - * Not to do any evil; To cultivate good; To purify one's mind. This is the advice of all Buddhas

(Dhammapada V.183)

