

Comment on the Kesa Sutra

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech at the Nice dojo

People who have been ordained bodhisattva, nun or monk, recite the kesa sutra before putting on their kesa or their rakusu (miniature kesa). In four short sentences this sutra completely expresses the meaning of our practice, the spiritual dimension of the practice of zazen. So when Master Dogen was young and practising in China with Master Nyojo, he cried with emotion when he heard the kesa sutra being sung for the first time, because it impressed him so much. Here in the dojo and also during sesshin, we chant it together every morning.

Here are these four sentences:

Dai sai geda pu ku - Oh robe of great liberation

Muso fukuden e – A limitless robe, field of happiness

Hi bu nyorai kyo - Now we receive the Buddha's teaching

Ko do sho shujo - To help all beings, *shujo* : all sentient beings

The *kesa* is the symbol of the great liberation realized during the practice of zazen, but of course, zazen with right posture and breathing, as well as right mind. This is a mind concentrating on the posture and breathing, in unity with the body, simply observing what is happening, internally and externally, with regard to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, desires, without becoming attached to phenomena, without rejecting them either, but deeply observing their impermanence and their lack of fixed substance, in other words their vacuity.

Practising this way we realize this *dai sai gedatsu*, this great liberation, this letting go with regard to what we call our *bonnos*, our attachments, the causes of our suffering, such as for example greed, this constant need to grab, obtain something else, as if to fill a lack of something in ourselves, a dissatisfaction which never really goes away.

Greed shifts constantly from one object to another. Sometimes it remains simply in a state of desire. We imagine that desire is a cause of satisfaction whereas, on the contrary, it's often the cause of frustration because deep down in us, there is a desire that we don't often experience, the desire for deep realization, spiritual realization. If this desire is not realized, if this need for awakening is not accomplished, all the other objects of desire function like substitutes, compensations. And the constant pursuit of them becomes a cause of exhaustion, suffering, disappointment.

Practising zazen with the *kesa* is practising zazen with the deep faith that we are already Buddha nature. In other words, if we stop obscuring our hearts and minds by pursuing futile objects, if on the contrary we turn our gaze inward and let this Buddha nature manifest itself - this life in unity with the whole universe, without separation – then we really feel free.

Freedom, or liberty, has many meanings : the freedom to do, to think, to act, to move, to speak, to express yourself, but there is a much deeper freedom which is realized when we really become one with what we are deep down, because we find ourselves in harmony with our true

nature. At this moment we are really liberated because we no longer need to beg for something else. That does not mean that we do not find satisfaction here and there, but we do not depend on this permanent exhausting quest for objects.

Practising zazen with the *kesa*, having received ordination, means that we practise with this deep faith which leads to realization, which allows us to practise with what we call *mushotoku* mind, without object, without looking for profit, because what we are looking for is already there. In zen, faith is not a belief in something transcendent, but the realization of unity with reality which is at the same time within us and penetrates the whole universe. If this faith conducts our life, we can feel truly free because we can realize it, practise it everywhere. And this doesn't depend on having this or that, this doesn't depend on circumstances.

Having taken the vows of bodhisattva, monk or nun, the practice of zazen with the *kesa* brings us back to this profound dimension of practice, so the *kesa* becomes what it really is, the robe of unlimited happiness, or the unlimited robe which is also the field of happiness. *Muso*, translated by unlimited, also means without form: *mu*, without, and *so*, form or aspect. Whereas the *kesa* has a precise form, transmitted traditionally for centuries in the way it is sewn and worn, in reality it's without form, because when we concentrate on sewing it, when we put it on with deep faith, in this concentration and in this faith in practice, the mind which creates limitations is abandoned.

The mind in zazen is *muso*, without form. It's how it really is. Non-identified with thoughts, perceptions and sensations. It's like a vast mirror which reflects everything without adhering to anything. It's without its own form but reflects them all. Concentrating on the practice of the posture and breathing, the mind reflects all the phenomena which come up as they appear and it doesn't identify with these phenomena, so remains beyond all thoughts, beyond all forms.

If we practise zazen dressed in the *kesa*, faith in the profound dimension of practice deepens. Master Deshimaru often said: « If we do zazen without the *kesa*, without ordination, without having pronounced the vows, the risk is that zazen remains just as a technique for well-being, for concentration, relaxation. »

For zazen to be a real practice of awakening, it has to be practised in its real, profound dimension which is a religious dimension, connecting us to the real nature of existence - without substance. *Dai sai gedatsu*, the first verse of the *kesa* sutra, speaks of this great liberation which occurs when we realize this.

In the past, the *kesa* was made up of scraps of material of different origins, dyed the same colour. Usually it was a mixed dark colour which was relatively undefinable. It is said that Buddha's *kesa*, handed down until Eno, was black mixed with dark blue/green. Blue is the colour of the depths of the ocean, a colour which unifies all colours and which at the same time cannot really be defined, grasped, which is *muso*, beyond all perceptible aspects. It's like the mind in zazen which, as it identifies with nothing, has no fixed form. We can try to reduce it to concepts, ideas, definitions, including saying that it's infinite, ungraspable, but it's still beyond all of that : *muso*. It's the mind of Buddha, which exists without being confined within any sort of notion.

The *kesa* symbolizes this great liberation which is realized when we are in harmony with this ungraspable dimension, beyond all notions of our existence, and not only of our existence but all forms of existence. This is what Buddha realized on the morning of his awakening under the Bodhi tree when he exclaimed that he had realized awakening with all beings. It has become the essence of the transmission of the Dharma, which is itself symbolized by the transmission of the *kesa*.

In zazen, through concentration, not only do we not identify with *bonnos*, with attachments which come up, (which allows us to let them pass) not only do we not consider ourselves the author (which allows us to abandon this attachment to an idea of ourselves, the ego) but this letting go is made even easier by the realization that all of this is really without fixed substance. As fluid as water which, depending on the temperature, turns into ice, flows in torrents, rivers to the ocean, evaporates, turns into clouds, rain, hail, snow, ice again then water. Finding this fluidity of the body and mind again in the practice of zazen and in our daily lives is the practice of *unsui*, « the clouds and water ». It's the practice of monks and nuns of the school of zen who are, for this reason, called *unsui*. Through this practice, the mind resides on nothing, is always fluid, available, present and therefore creative, able to respond to each new situation in our lives.

During zazen, we continue to concentrate on the posture of the body. Whatever happens, we remain still. We don't repress thoughts or emotions which come up but we don't become attached to them either. We place all our attention on our breathing. In this way, even if the greatest attachments, the biggest preoccupations, worries about daily life reappear in our minds in zazen, we are not obsessed by them, our consciousness is not troubled by them. Not repressing or eliminating the phenomena of daily life changes our attitude toward them. We can consider them from a higher, deeper point of view as being relative phenomena, temporary, lacking in substance of their own. In this way, these phenomena of daily life lose their power to disturb us. No longer being deeply attached, we can once more find the capacity to face up to them in a creative way, with wisdom and compassion.

The mind liberated in zazen is spoken of in the *kesa* sutra through *dai sai gedatsu*, the great liberation. It's not a mind which has escaped from daily reality, but one which looks at it in another way, from a point of view of Buddha, from a point of view of the *hishiryō* consciousness of zazen. Consciousness which identifies with nothing because we perceive the vacuity of all the phenomena that preoccupy us. Not identifying with phenomena doesn't require effort because we are at that moment in contact with a deeper dimension of life, a dimension beyond our little ego, a truly religious dimension, and thus these phenomena lose their power to attach us.

In this dimension, our egocentric preoccupations diminish because they lose their importance. We remain simply preoccupied by the way in which we can help others to overcome their difficulties, their suffering.

It's the conclusion of the *kesa* sutra: *Ko do shoshu jo*, to help all sentient beings

It's the meaning of practising a zazen which is truly liberating, *gedatsu*, not only for ourselves but also for others, zazen which is really the incarnation of the teaching of Buddha, *nyorai kyo*.

This is realized when we practise zazen with profound faith in the fact that zazen itself is awakening and liberation. In other words there is nothing to expect beyond zazen but that zazen is itself the realization of the absolute dimension of existence, the dimension which is not limited by our mental constructions. In this dimension the deepest help is realized, which doesn't make a distinction between oneself and others.

Even though we chant the four vows of the bodhisattva in which we make the vow to help all beings, even though the kesa sutra finishes with *Ko do shoshu jo*, to help all sentient beings, when we practise this zazen with this kesa, we don't need to think about helping anyone. Because it's not us with our personal will, with our own ego, which help, but it's the practice of zazen with the kesa, the zazen of Buddha which helps ourselves and others, beyond the separation between ourselves and others. And precisely, in the abolition of this separation resides the greatest help. This occurs unconsciously, naturally, automatically, without the intervention of the will but through the power of this faith which is non-dual. The true zazen of Buddha is to practise zazen with an undivided mind.