

Sewing a kesa or rakusu

Kusen by Eveline Kogen Pascual – Cologne, March 2021

The same attention we give to zazen, we give it to the sewing of a rakusu or a kesa. Just as the posture of zazen becomes too tense if one practices inattentively because of mental excitement or soft if one is drowsy or careless in zazen, the stitching points become crooked and unbalanced if they are not given full attention.

Sewing a kesa or rakusu, a small version of the kesa, requires a lot of concentration and patience. It's a great practice to let go of our own ideas. It is a *fuse*, a gift, because one must give something of oneself, of one's time, energy, attention, to create this garment of liberation. The kesa embodies the practice and spirit of the bodhisattva, his wish, his only wish, to help all beings to free themselves without asking anything in return. Thus, it is also the garment of compassion. The path of the Buddha is not a path of selfish realization. One cannot go through it without the spirit of deep compassion for all beings. It is the virtue of the kesa to evoke this spirit in us.

Buddha Shakyamuni created the kesa, the robe of awakening, of liberation, the noblest of robes from rags that no one wanted anymore. He wore it constantly to practice. So the kesa became a part of him, like his skin. When he passed on the essence of his teaching to his disciple Mahakashyapa, he gave along his kesa. The kesa was his closest object to him, his most familiar one. Thus, he gave a part of himself that expressed his experience. The kesa thus became the symbol of transmission.

The kesa or rakusu is carried by the body that practices zazen. This body that does zazen in deep trust is Buddha, which means being completely one with zazen, in complete connection with everything around us, with the entire universe. This is exactly what is achieved during the zazen experience. It is not something secret and elitist; anyone can experience it.

The kesa is a symbol of zazen and the connection with the universe we keep alive through practice, because we sew it ourselves, we carry it, we keep it.

Sewing a rakusu or kesa is not easy. For many people, they are not familiar with sewing by hand. Beginners in sewing keep complaining that they can't do it, that they have two left hands. They are not satisfied with what they produce because the points are not always aligned or are irregular. They compare their points with those of experienced people and are frustrated because they find that their own points are not good enough.

If we are talking about sewing a kesa, then there is no "right" or "wrong" sewn. Of course, some people have more aptitudes to use a needle and thread than others, but that's not so important. What is important is to make a sincere effort, to put your heart into it, to follow the teachings carefully, just as in zazen.

A kesa doesn't have to be beautiful, it has to be sewn properly, to our best ability. It is not a decorative object, nor a sign of status, nor an object of exhibition. It expresses the pure, honest

and naked spirit of the person who sews it with his hands, who wears it, who puts it on during practice. It is therefore absurd to decorate a kesa with beautiful embroideries or to make it in expensive fabrics. A kesa is naked, it is humble, like a mirror it reflects the true spirit of the practitioner.

Why should we embellish a kesa? It is beautiful if you sew it with all your heart, if you treat it with care, if you sit with it on the zafu or if you bow in *sanpai*. It is complete, it contains everything, there is nothing to add, just as there is nothing to add to the open and sincere spirit in zazen.

A kesa is not sewn by following a manual, nor according to instructions found on YouTube. Made this way, one cannot transmit the true spirit of the kesa, just as one cannot grasp the true spirit of zazen in this way. Beginners must learn to sew directly from an experienced person, *i shin den shin*, from mind to mind, from heart to heart. It is not only about learning a stitch and assembling pieces of fabric, but it is also a Dharma teaching.

A kesa, a rakusu always reminds us to practice. Dogen said, "The kesa and the teaching of dharma are one and the same thing." It reminds us of the promise we made to each other during our ordination, the vows, the kesa sutra, the sangha.

This is why it is important not to put the kesa and rakusu in a drawer or closet when not wearing them. They must be clearly visible in our home, be part of our life, because they embody the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, because they remind us that our self is not limited to the ego, to the ordinary mind, but goes far beyond.

The kesa reminds us that we do not practice only for our own liberation from suffering, but that true liberation comes only when we all become true bodhisattvas, when we help all sentient beings to free themselves from their suffering, when we act and think with wisdom and compassion, without preferring, without rejecting.

It may seem difficult, but no one should do it alone. By putting our trust in the kesa and the practice of zazen, we walk together on the path of the Buddha.