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# Washing the kesa

**By Eveline Kogen Pascual from Aachen (Germany), August 2025**

During ordination, we receive the kesa and rakusu from our master, as well as the precepts, symbols of the practice of awakening. Master Dogen said: "You will now receive and keep this kesa. You must place it respectfully on your head and keep it forever. " We always wear it during zazen and ceremonies, at home, at the dojo and during sesshin. It is beautiful with its rice field pattern and numerous regular stitches; it took us a lot of effort and energy to sew it with our own hands.

But with time, the first stains appear and it begins to smell bad. Master Deshimaru recommended that his monks and nuns wash their kesa at the end of the summer, once the summer camps were over. By that time, it has usually been used intensively, it is impregnated with incense smoke, sweat and it has a few stains.

## Why wash it?

Some people think that washing is unnecessary because the kesa is black and therefore dirt is not visible. Firstly, this is a mistake, as stains are clearly visible, and secondly, the kesa gives off an unpleasant odour after a while. Furthermore, this neglect is disrespectful to the kesa and what it represents. It is said that Master Deshimaru once said, 'If the kesa were white, you should all be ashamed!'

Signs of wear are particularly visible on the zagu, when the white folds turn grey, and especially where the forehead is pressed during sanpai, spot which gradually turns yellow. I have heard that some are proud of these yellow-brown stains, as they show that they have been practising for a long time and intensively. I find it rather a sign of negligence, and what is more, it leaves a bad impression, like having dirty feet.

## The kesa

How should we wash the kesa when it is dirty?
Master Dogen describes this process in the *Shobogenzo,* in the chapter *Kesa Kudoku*:

> "Soak the kesa for two hours in hot, scented water. If it is very dirty, you can wash it in hot water mixed with ash. Once the water has cooled, rinse the kesa several times with hot, clear water, without wringing it with your hands. Then hang it on a clean bamboo rod to dry. When it is completely dry, fold it and place it in an elevated place, light a stick of incense, scatter flower petals and perform sanpai in front of it. "

This seems very complicated, and where can you find the appropriate ashes? Fortunately, nowadays there are also very mild detergents that make it easier and just as effective to clean our kesa. The following instructions have proven effective in practice for thorough and gentle washing:

- Before washing, check the colour fastness of the fabric. Stains must be pre-treated: traces of dirt brought back from walks should be brushed off; grease stains should be

rubbed with gall soap; other stains, such as those caused by genmai, should be rubbed with a little washing powder.

- Soak the kesa in a large basin filled with warm water and a mild detergent for wool and silk for about 10 to 30 minutes, depending on how dirty it is. Then gently squeeze the kesa in the washing water. Rub the stains very gently.

- Rinse the kesa in cold water and change the water several times until it runs clear. Do not wring out the kesa or rub it too hard.

- After rinsing, gently squeeze the kesa by hand, without pulling on the fabric.

- Spread it out on a terry cloth towel, roll up the towel and squeeze it vigorously with your hands clasped together to extract the water.

- Do not hang your kesa on a line to dry, as this will distort the seams. Do not put it in a tumble dryer, as this will damage the fabric and seams. It is best to lay it flat on a clothes horse.

- Once dry, the kesa should be ironed and folded.

## The zagu

The zagu is generally dirtier than the kesa because it is in contact with the floor and, during sanpai, the forehead is pressed against its upper edge. It therefore requires special treatment:

- If the fabric is colourfast, the zagu can be soaked for longer in warm water with a mild detergent. Stains should be pre-treated as described above and the soiled fabric should be rubbed thoroughly between your hands, especially in the folds.

- Rinse the zagu thoroughly in cold water until the water runs clear, without wringing out the fabric.
  Practical tip: add a little starch to the water during the final rinse. The starch helps to preserve the folds after ironing, even after prolonged use, making it easier to fold after the ceremony.

- Gently wring out the zagu without pulling on the fabric, spread it out on a terry towel, roll up the towel and squeeze it vigorously with your hands clasped together to extract the water.

- Place the zagu on a drying rack to dry.

## What about the rakusu?

The rakusu is more difficult to wash, as the inner silk lining must first be removed. To do this, undo the four small squares that connect the silk to the rakusu, then undo the loose stitches that hold the silk inside the rakusu.

- The pre-treatment and washing of the black part of the rakusu is done in the same way as for the kesa.

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- Once the fabric has been dried and ironed, replace the lining and white silk, secure them, then sew the four squares back together.

As cleaning is quite complex, care must be taken to ensure that the rakusu does not get stained. Most of the time, it is sufficient to brush it gently or rub it with a clean, damp cloth.

The support piece with the Soto symbol on the back of the neck becomes slightly greasy with use. You can soak it separately in a small bowl with detergent, rinse it, wring it out in a towel and dry it.

## The pocket

The pocket is more difficult to wash, as you first have to remove the silk lining and then sew it back in. So you have to be careful not to get it dirty.

## In the washing machine?

Some people wash their kesa in the washing machine, and even their rakusu. I don't think this is a good idea. Firstly, it wears out the seams and fabric, making the kesa more likely to need repair. Secondly, it is disrespectful, because the kesa is not a T-shirt or a pair of jeans, but the symbol of our practice, the authentic transmission of the Buddhas and Dharma ancestors. We cut and sewed it with great devotion, care and effort. We put so much of ourselves into it... How can we then simply entrust it to a machine because we don't want to take the time to clean it with care and devotion?

Master Dogen said: “Until one has experienced and explored the very heart of the transmission of the kesa and the Dharma face to face, one cannot know how to wash the kesa, how to receive it and how to preserve it.”

If you have any doubts about how to treat the kesa or rakusu, simply ask your master for advice. And don't hesitate to read the chapters *Kesa Kudoku* and *Den E* of the *Shobogenzo*, in which Master Dogen explains in detail the meaning and connection between the kesa and our practice.