

The Rakusu and Verse of the Kesa

by Sensei Gerry Shishin Wick

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In our formal koan study, the very last thing that we study are the precepts, so don't expect that you will have a complete understanding of the whole thing. I can fairly safely say no one fully understands the precepts when they take Jukai. In my own case, I felt like I had to accomplish a certain level of understanding in Buddhism before I was worthy to have Jukai. Then one day, Roshi said, "Why don't you take Jukai?" This after I had been here for about three or four years. I said, "Will it help my practice?" He said, "Oh definitely," and I said, "Okay."

Our understanding continues to change, just like our reason for coming to practice. We may have one reason why we start to practice, but as we continue to practice, these reasons always evolve and change.

The amount of importance that is put upon the wearing of the rakusu or the kesa is illustrated by some stories in a book entitled Zen Master Dōgen, by Yuho Yokoi. Dōgen Zenji emphasized the merit of wearing the rakusu or the kesa over and over again. Just taking the precepts and wearing the rakusu, even though we aren't able to maintain the precepts, is better than having never taken the precepts at all.

I'm not very well versed in the history of the kesa and rakusu. My understanding is that the rakusu is an abbreviation of the original kesa that was worn by the Buddha. The kesa is the outer garment monks wear over the robe, covering only one shoulder. At a time in China, when Buddhists were being persecuted, they started to make these smaller versions called the rakusu, and wore them underneath their clothing. I think that is true in other religions that when there was an era of persecution, they had to wear certain symbolic garments underneath their clothing.

Part of the joy (for some of us) of having Jukai is that you make your own rakusu, which, for those of you who don't know how to sew, is a real challenge and a great feat of accomplishment when you're done. According to what I've heard, as you are stitching your rakusu, you should be chanting the Verse of the Kesa. This is the verse we chant every morning after dawn sitting. We take the rakusu out of its case or wrapping, place it on our head, put our hands palms together in gassho, and chant:

*Vast is the robe of liberation,
A formless field of benefaction.
I wear the Tathagata's teachings,
Saving all sentient beings.*

Then we put the rakusu on. Any time you put on your rakusu, chant that verse silently. Now, let's look at the Verse of the Kesa.

"Vast is the robe of liberation." That is the rakusu. It is vast, which means it is boundless, it has no beginning and no end. That's the true kesa which has been transmitted generation after generation, from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha up to the present time. That's the robe of liberation – free, unhindered, unrestricted, and unattached.

This actually is what the rakusu represents. The rakusu is the vast robe of liberation. If we really appreciate it, of course, it is none other than our life itself— vast, empty. That's what Bodhidharma said when he was asked, "What is the primary principle of Buddhism?" and he said, "Vast emptiness, no holiness." That is the rakusu — vast.

"A formless field of benefaction." Formless, meaning that there is no fixed form. As soon as we try to fix something, then we're attached, stuck. But everything is always changing. That's a basic Buddhist principle, impermanence. A formless field — if you look at the rakusu, it looks like a field with the different strips and patches. A formless field of benefaction, compassion, joy, but again, don't get stuck to it, to doing good.

"I wear the Tathagata's teachings." The Tathagata is another name for the Buddha. I'm wearing it; whether I wear the rakusu or not, I'm wearing it, but the point is when we are wearing it, we're reminded of it.

"Saving all sentient beings." Realizing the Buddha's teachings for the sake of others, that's the point.

When you make your rakusu, Roshi writes the Verse of the Kesa on the back. It will also have the name that Roshi gives to you and his name as the kaishi, the teacher of the precepts. His name will be on there, the name of the temple, the date of the ceremony, and his seal. This is what is on the reverse side of the rakusu.

Another interesting story about the origins of the rakusu is that the rakusu is supposed to come from discarded cloth, and you patch it together. That's where the phrase "patched-robe monks" came from. Originally, in India, they made some robes from the cloth that was used to cover cadavers. Since they used saffron and tumeric as embalming material, the cloth was that saffron yellow color. That's why originally in India and in Southeast Asia, they used these saffron-colored kesas and robes and rakusus. Of course, as Buddhism moved from one country to another, it took on more of the local traditions, local culture. Since it's a lot colder in the north in China, they had different kinds of kesas and robes. The ones that we wear come from Japan.

The little green design on the back of the rakusu strap is a pine stitch. It represents pine needles. During weddings or Jukai ceremonies, Roshi will take a branch from a pine tree and use it during the ceremony. What he does is bless the water in the cup, and then he'll dip the pine branch into the water. Then he moves it from the crown of his head toward the water, taking energy from himself and putting it in the water. Then he dips it in the water again and he'll move his hand in the opposite direction, from the front of his head to the back of his crown, and keeps turning the energy.

Let me mention a few things about the care and feeding of your rakusu. You shouldn't wear the rakusu when you're doing a kind of work that might get it dirty, nor should you wear it into the toilet. When you go to the toilet, take it off by bringing the two corners together and putting your hand behind your head and lifting it over your head. Then you fold it and set it down on a flat surface, or hang it on a hook or doorknob. When you come out of the toilet, you put it back on.

You should make a cover for your rakusu using a piece of cloth that you can fold into thirds, and put it in the center. You should keep it that way when you're not wearing it, and try not to get it dirty. Sometimes when people do food serving during sesshin, they might tuck their rakusu under a cord or a belt so that it doesn't flop out and get dirty. The point is that this is a garment of the buddha and it should be treated with that kind of respect.

Normally, the rakusu is worn inside the zendo, after the dawn sitting time, and removed when you leave the zendo. At the end of evening sitting, you remove it as indicated above, and put it into the cover or case.

Since the rakusu is a version of the kesa, monks only wear one or the other. The kesa is worn in the zendo at certain times, during formal talks, and during meals in the zendo. Traditionally, there were variations of the kesa, depending on the occasion. You would wear nine strips if you were visiting a king, or seven strips if you were doing something else. If, as we hear, everything is one, why nine, seven, etc.? Well, there is oneness and there are also differences.

Part of the practice is to see the oneness, but we also have to see the differences. It's nice to say all is one, but if you live your life like that, I think it would be a mess. I'll give you a ludicrous example. If everything is one, do we have to look both ways before crossing the street? You know, if you don't, then you really will be one with the bus or car. So what does this oneness mean? It doesn't mean that there are no differences. It just means that because everything is empty, we can appreciate the differences for what they are.

There is a story in Kapleau Roshi's book, *Three Pillars of Zen*, where he went to Japan and met Soen Roshi, who was bowing to the Buddha. Kapleau Roshi said, "What's this? I thought that Zen masters spit on the images of the Buddha." And Soen Roshi said, "If you want to, you can do that; but I prefer to bow."