

YOUR SKIN IS THE ROBE

Whether it is dirty or clean or beautiful is not the point.



Our okesa and rakusu robes are not just symbols of our teaching, but are Dharma itself. To think that the robes are a symbol of Buddhism is an incomplete understanding.

The proper understanding is that zazen and the robe are the same, not different. The right understanding of zazen is the right understanding of the rakusu or okesa. So unless you have the actual experience of zazen, the robe will not actually be the robe, it will just be something you wear. It will not be Dharma itself.

Dogen Zenji discusses the ten kinds of material that are appropriate to use for a *funzoe okesa*, a robe that is made of dirty, discarded things. *Fun* is dung, something dirty; *zo* is rubbish or dust; and *e* is robe.

The first material appropriate for a *funzoe okesa* is material that has been chewed on by animals. The second is material that has been bitten by rats. The third is burnt material, partly destroyed by fire. The fourth is material that has been used and thrown away by menstruating women. The fifth is material used in the process of childbirth. The sixth is material that has been used on shrines for various deities. The seventh is material that has been thrown away in the graveyard. The eighth is material that was offered at a shrine and has become rags. The ninth is material discarded by the king's servants. The tenth is material that is discarded after a funeral. Any of these materials are appropriate for making a *funzoe okesa*. The material that a person would ordinarily throw away can be picked up and used to make an *okesa*. Whether it is dirty or not dirty is not the point.

Dogen Zenji says that the point is not whether it is beautiful embroidery, silk, or leather, or whether it is dirty, discarded material. The *okesa* does not need to be made out of something beautiful, but it also does not need to be made out of something dirty. Whether it is dirty or clean or beautiful is not the point. This is important, but it may be difficult to understand.

If you understand what *zazen* is, you will understand this point. You may say that your *zazen* is good sometimes and not so good sometimes. Some-

times your zazen will be sleepy zazen, drowsy zazen. “This is not zazen!” you may say. But the true understanding of zazen cannot be like that: zazen is not sleepy zazen or drowsy zazen or good zazen. When you are free from the idea of good zazen or bad zazen or sleepy zazen, you have the right understanding of zazen. But when you hear this, you may think it is okay to sleep in zazen, and that is the wrong understanding.

Dogen Zenji talks about the Third Ancestor in India, who is said to have been born wearing his okesa. I don't know if that is true or not! Dogen Zenji asked, “What kind of robe was it that he was born with? Was it silk? Was it leather?” The Third Ancestor's original robe was not a traditional robe. Before he became the Third Ancestor in India, it was his ordinary clothes. After he joined the order, his ordinary clothes became his Buddhist robe. The robe is something that goes beyond our understanding. If you understand the robe as just some material to wear, it is not perfect understanding.

When making the robe, you should concentrate on every stitch, as you are concentrating on your breathing. We say “concentration,” but that is not actually the point. The actual point is to become one with what you do, to become one with your practice. In your practice, you should try to concentrate on each stitch, and someday you will understand what it means.

Dogen Zenji emphasizes having the robe with us always. It is not some special thing we wear; that is the wrong idea. It is something that we always

have with us, like the Third Ancestor's robe. He was born with the robe, so it is not possible for him to take it off. His skin is already the robe.