

On the Transmission of the Kesa

(*Den'e*)

Translator's Introduction: This discourse and Discourse 84: On the Spiritual Merits of the Kesa (*Kesa Kudoku*) are both concerned with the kesa, the cloak-like robe which has traditionally been worn by most Buddhists, both monastic and lay, since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. This discourse was based on a Dharma talk that Dōgen gave to his assembly and it appears in the earliest version of the *Shōbōgenzō*, whereas the *Kesa Kudoku* was apparently written to cover, in greater detail, certain points raised in *Den'e*, but it was not formally incorporated into the *Shōbōgenzō* until some time after Dōgen's death. While both discourses share common topics and even some similar or identical passages, each has much that is unique, and readers may well find the reading of both to be worthwhile, despite any repetitions.

Two technical Buddhist terms that are applied to the kesa in both texts need some explication. The first is *juji*, translated as 'to accept and keep to (the kesa)'. While, from a linguistic perspective, it might also be rendered as 'to receive and keep (the kesa)', Dōgen explicitly states in both texts that he does not intend this latter meaning with its passive implication of 'being given something which is then put away for safekeeping'. That is, it is not enough to receive a kesa, the recipient must also accept it and what it implies; likewise, the robe is not to be stored away, but is to be put to use. 'Putting it to use' implies keeping to it and what it stands for, just as one keeps to the Precepts and what they stand for, an analogy that Dōgen implies in both texts but does not explicitly make.

The second term is *butsue*, which has multiple meanings, including 'the Buddha robe', 'the Buddha's robe', 'a Buddha robe', and 'a robe for a Buddha', referring to both a physical garment and that which spiritually enrobes the trainee. In some contexts, it is clear which meaning Dōgen intends, whereas in other contexts more than one of these may be intended, so that the meaning of the passage becomes ambiguous, permitting a different understanding according to whether the reader is, say, a lay person, a novice monk, a transmitted monk, or one who has or has not had a kenshō, that is, the experience of one's Buddha Nature. And there are times when Dōgen is obviously talking about a physical robe, only to suddenly shift to talking about a spiritual robe, and then almost immediately to go back to his discussion of a physical robe. It is left to the reader to discover and enjoy this multidimensional, kaleidoscopic aspect in Dōgen's writing.

In these two texts, there is also an aspect of tone that needs comment, for it may seem to some readers that, in a number of passages, Dōgen is being singularly bombastic. This is not the case. Dōgen was faced with several problems in the training of his disciples. First, he was having difficulty with state and ecclesiastical authorities who did not want him (or anyone else) to teach pure meditation to the exclusion of other forms of meditation. Second, his reputation had already spread widely enough that he was beginning to attract disciples who had done training under other teachers, teachers who were given to mixing all manner of non-Buddhist teachings and methods in with their Buddhist training. Third, as a verse from the monastic ordination ceremony

states, “All bodhisattvas, when converted to the Truth for the first time, search therefore, but their minds are hard and set and cannot be broken,” but Dōgen attempts to help his bodhisattvas by hammering away at some of the hardness and rigidity of their thinking. Fourth, because trainees are apt to dismiss points of teaching which seem trivial to them, Dōgen, through his strong expression of feelings about these points, is helping his disciples to realize the vital importance of keeping true to the Dharma. Such an emotional appeal would have been more persuasive to his medieval Japanese compatriots (and more easily remembered) than a finely wrought, elegantly presented logical refutation of erroneous practices and teachings.

The robe and the Dharma which Buddhas correctly Transmit to Buddhas were, beyond doubt, properly Transmitted to China only by the Highest Ancestor Bodhidharma at Shōrin-ji Monastery. That is to say, the Highest Ancestor was the Ancestral Master of the twenty-eighth generation from Shakyamuni Buddha. The twenty-eight generations in India passed this robe and Dharma on in succession, and They were properly Transmitted through six generations in China. These comprised thirty-three generations altogether for India and China.¹

The Thirty-third Generation Ancestor, Meditation Master Daikan Enō, received the Transmission of this robe and Dharma on Mount Ōbai in the middle of the night and safeguarded Them throughout his life. To this day, this robe is still safely enshrined at Hōrin-ji Temple on Mount Sōkei. Various generations of imperial rulers respectfully requested that it be brought to court, where they made venerative offerings to it. It is treated as an object protected by wondrous spiritual guardians. Three emperors of the T’ang dynasty—Chu-tsung, Su-tsung, and T’ai-tsung—repeatedly had it brought back to court, so that they might make venerative offerings out of respect for it. Whenever it was sent for or returned, the emperors would have an imperial emissary accompany it, along with their edict on the matter. This is indicative of their great respect.

Emperor T’ai-tsung once sent the following edict when returning the Buddha’s robe to Mount Sōkei, “I am now pleased to entrust to Commander General Liu Chung-ching, Pacifier of Our Nation, the return of this robe with all courtesies. We declare this robe to be a national treasure. Venerable Abbot, I pray that you will safely enshrine it in your temple, placing it under the rigorous care and protection of those monks of your community who have personally received from you the tenets of our religion, never letting it fall into neglect.” Because of this attitude, emperors over a number of generations all regarded it as an important national treasure. Truly, the one who safeguards this robe of the Buddha in his

1. That is, Bodhidharma was considered both the twenty-eighth Indian Ancestor and the first Chinese Ancestor.

country is also a great treasure who surpasses even those who may hold dominion over any of the three-thousand great-thousandfold worlds, which are as countless as the sands of the Ganges. It is an object that far outranks Pien-ho's jewel.² Even if such a gem were to serve as the imperial seal at an enthronement, how could it possibly compare with the wondrous treasure that Transmits Buddhahood?

From the time of the great T'ang dynasty on, the monks and laity who have looked upon this robe with reverence and bowed to it have undoubtedly had a great capacity for faith in the Dharma. Had they received no help from the good that they did in previous lives, how could they possibly have received that body of theirs which made possible their actually looking upon, and reverently bowing to, the Buddha's robe that Buddha after Buddha had directly passed on? The skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of those who accept it in faith will take delight in it; those who cannot accept it in faith, even though this is the result of their own doing, will regret the absence of this seed of Buddhahood.

Even common folk say, "To see someone's daily deeds is to see what that person really is." To look upon and respectfully bow to the robe of a Buddha is to see Buddha, in all humility, right now. We should erect hundreds of thousands upon thousands of stupas* in venerative offering to this Buddha robe. Any beings who possess a mind, be they in the heavens above or in the oceans below, will deeply respect it. Among humans too—from saintly ones who rule over vast empires on down—anyone who can discern what is true and recognize what is surpassing will prize it.

Sad to say, some of the kinsmen who became rulers of China in later generations did not realize the enormous treasure that they had in their country. Often misled and captivated by Taoist teaching, many indeed abandoned the Buddha Dharma. At those times, they did not don the kesa but put the cap of a Taoist upon their shaven domes, and, when they lectured, their talk was in the direction of how to extend the length of one's life. This occurred during both the T'ang and Sung dynasties. Even though such types were considered rulers of their nations, they must have been more base than any of their subjects.

You should calmly consider whether the Buddha robe has come to abide in our country and is present here now. And you would also do well to ponder whether ours could be a Buddha Land for the robe, for it is more valuable than any

2. Pien-ho was a person in ancient China who offered to three rulers a huge, unpolished jewel that he had found, but none of these rulers were able to perceive its intrinsic value, and therefore summarily rejected the offering.

* See *Glossary*.

ash relic or such. As for ashes, we have them for rulers of vast lands, and for lions, and for ordinary folk, as well as for pratyekabuddhas* and the like, but mighty rulers do not have a kesa, nor do lions, nor do ordinary folk: accept in deepest faith that Buddhas alone have the kesa.

Nowadays, foolish people in great numbers highly prize ash relics whilst knowing nothing of the kesa, much less of how they should preserve and keep to one. This is due to the fact that those who have heard of the importance of a kesa are few, and even they may not yet have learned of the True Transmission of the Buddha's Dharma.

When we carefully take into consideration how much time has passed since the Venerable Shakyamuni was in the world, it has been scarcely some two thousand years. Many of our national treasures and ancient sacred utensils that have come down to us today are older by far: the Buddha's Dharma and the Buddha's robe are newer and nearer our times. As the *Lotus Scripture* observes, the spiritual benefits arising from the propagation of the Buddha's Teachings will be wondrous, no matter how widely this Teaching may spread—be it through farmlands or towns—even if one person passes It on to only fifty others. National treasures and sacred utensils do have their merits, and the merits of the Buddha robe can never be less than, or even merely equal to these, for this robe has been truly Transmitted by authentic Dharma descendants.

Be aware that we can realize the Way when we hear the four lines of the kesa verse, and we can realize the Way when we hear a single line of Scripture. Why can the four lines of the verse or a single line of Scripture produce such a profound spiritual experience of being 'with It' here and now?³ Because, as it is said, they are part and parcel of the Buddha Dharma.

Now, each kind of robe, including the nine types of sanghati robe, has been correctly passed on from the Buddha's Teaching.⁴ None can be inferior to the four lines of the kesa verse or less beneficial than a single line of Scripture. Because of this, for more than two thousand years, the various beings who have been exploring how to follow the Buddha—both those whose practice stems from faith and those whose practice stems from understanding the Dharma—have all protected and kept to the kesa, and treated it as their very Body and Mind. Those folks who are in the dark as to the True Teaching of Buddhas do not revere or prize

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3. To be 'with It' here and now is an attempt to render the term *immo* when used in its Chinese slang meaning for the condition of persons or things being just what they truly are, without any sense of an existence separate from time and without any sense of a false self.
 4. The sanghati robe is the largest of three basic types of kesa. Dōgen gives a detailed explanation of all three in Discourse 84: On the Spiritual Merits of the Kesa (*Kesa Kudoku*).

the kesa. Now, both Shakrendra [ruling lord of the Trayastrimsha Heavens] and the dragon lord who dwells in Anavatapta Lake, for instance, have guarded and protected the kesa, even though the first is a celestial lay ruler and the second a dragon lord.

Be this as it may, that type who shave their heads and then go around calling themselves ‘disciples of Buddha’ have not the slightest awareness of those who, having put on the kesa, accept and keep to it. This is to say nothing of their having any knowledge about its materials, colors, or dimensions, nor are they aware of the ways in which it is worn, nor, even less, have they ever seen, even in their dreams, the dignified manner in which it is treated.



From ancient times, when the kesa has been spoken of, it has been called ‘the garment that protects us from overheating our brains’ and ‘the garment of liberation’. In short, its spiritual merits are beyond measure. By virtue of the kesa, a dragon’s scales can be liberated from their three types of burning pain.⁵ When any of the Buddhas fully realized the Way, it was undoubtedly due to Their having made use of this robe. Truly, even though we have been born in a remote region at the time of the final stages of the Teaching, if any of us have the opportunity to choose whether to be Transmitted or not, we must accept in faith—as well as guard and maintain—the true inheritance that is being passed on to us.

What other tradition has genuinely Transmitted the robe and the Dharma of our Venerable Shakyamuni as we have genuinely Transmitted Them? They exist only in the Buddha’s Way. Who, upon encountering this robe and Dharma, would fail to be generous in respecting Them and in making venerative offerings to Them? Even if, in the space of a single day, we were to renounce our physical life for times as countless as the sands of the Ganges, we should make venerative offerings to Them. We should vow that we will humbly raise Them above our head whenever we encounter Them in life after life, for generation after generation. Even though we may have been born in a place separated from the Buddha’s native land by more than a hundred thousand leagues of mountains and seas, and even though we may be muddle-headed, ignorant provincials, the fact that we have heard this True Teaching, and have accepted and are keeping to this kesa, even if it be only for a single day and night, and are exploring how to put into practice a single line of Scripture or the whole of the kesa verse, this cannot be due simply to

5. Namely, suffering from fiery heat, from fierce desert winds, and from being devoured by a garuda bird.

the blessings and merits from our having made venerative offerings to just one or two Buddhas; it must be due to the blessings and merits from our having made venerative offerings to, and having attended upon, countless hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhas. Even if it were due to our own efforts, we should feel respect for the robe and Dharma, cherish Them, and prize Them.



We should show our gratitude to the Ancestral Masters for their great kindness in Transmitting the Dharma to us. Since even animals repay kindness, how could humans fail to understand kindness? If people do not recognize kindness, they must be inferior to animals; they must be even denser than animals.



Those who are not Ancestral Masters who Transmit the Buddha's True Teaching do not even dream of the spiritual merits of this Buddha robe. How much less could they come up with anything that clarifies for others what its materials, colors, and measurements are? If you would follow in the footsteps of the Buddha, then you should, by all means, follow this robe and Dharma. Even after a hundred thousand myriad generations, people would still be able to correctly pass on the genuine Transmission for, undoubtedly, it will be the Buddha's Dharma. The proof of Its authenticity will indeed be evident.



Even the secular Confucian teaching admonishes its followers not to wear clothing which differs from that officially worn during the time of the previous ruler, nor to act in ways that go against the regulations of previous rulers. It is also the same for the Buddha's Way: if something is not in accord with the Dharma clothing of previous Buddhas, do not use it. If it is something other than the Dharma clothing of previous Buddhas, what are we to clothe ourselves with so that we may train in and practice the Buddha's Way and attend upon all the Buddhas? Were we not to clothe ourselves with this 'garment', it would be hard indeed for us to enter into the assembly of the Buddhas.



Since the middle of the Yung-p'ing era (67 C.E.) of Emperor Hsiao-ming of the Later Han dynasty, monks who came from India to eastern lands ceaselessly followed upon the heels of their predecessors, and we have often heard of monks heading to India from China, but none of these travelers said that they had ever

encountered anyone who conferred the Buddha Dharma face-to-face. All they had to show were words and forms that they had vainly learned from disputatious teachers and pedantic scholars of the *Tripitaka*.^{*} They had not heard of the direct heirs of the Buddha's Dharma. Because of this, they could not go so far as to impart to anyone that the Buddha's robe was actually to be passed on, or to say that they had personally encountered anyone to whom the Buddha's robe had been passed on, or to tell of having seen or heard of anyone who had Transmitted the robe. Be very clear about this: they had not crossed the threshold and entered into the Buddha's family. Those fellows saw the kesa as just an item of clothing and nothing more, and did not realize that it was the most venerable and prized manifestation of the Buddha Dharma. Truly, what a pity!

Those who are genuine successors and have continued to Transmit the Treasure House of the Buddha's Dharma have also continued to pass on the robe of a Buddha, which they had received in turn. Among ordinary people, as well as among those in more lofty positions, it is widely known that the Ancestral Masters to whom the Treasure House of the Dharma has been genuinely Transmitted have never failed to see the Buddha robe or failed to pay attention to what it signifies. Hence, the Ancestors have come to accurately pass on what the materials, colors, and dimensions of a Buddha's kesa are. Since they have actually seen and paid attention to such a kesa, they have accurately Transmitted what its great spiritual merits are and have genuinely Transmitted the Body and Mind, Bones and Marrow of the kesa of a Buddha—all of which occurs only through the actions of those in the tradition of the authentic Transmission. It is unknown to the various traditions associated with the *Āgama Scriptures*. A robe that has been established according to some personal design of the moment is not a genuinely Transmitted one, nor is it the robe of any legitimate descendant.



When our Great Master, the Tathagata Shakyamuni, conferred on Makakashō the Dharma of Supreme Wisdom—which is the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching—He passed on along with It the Buddha robe. After that, the robe was received by successor after successor down to Meditation Master Daikan Enō of Mount Sōkei, spanning thirty-three generations. Each generation had personally seen and passed on what the materials, colors, and dimensions of monastic robes were to be. Our Zen tradition has long passed this information on and, as is evident today, has accepted and kept to it. In other words, that kesa which the founding Ancestors of the five branches of Chinese Zen have each accepted and kept to is what they have correctly Transmitted. It is likewise evident that there

has never been any confusion about this between any Master and his or her heir, not even in those traditions having forty, fifty, or even more generations. They have all worn and constructed the robe according to the methods of previous Buddhas, which each Buddha on His own has passed on, just as all the Buddhas have done, generation after generation, without the slightest interruption.

In the instructions of the Buddha which heir after heir has correctly passed on, the following are mentioned:

The robe of seven panels, each comprised of three long segments and one short segment.

The robe of nine panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of eleven panels, each comprised of three long segments and one short segment.

The robe of thirteen panels, each comprised of three long segments and one short segment.

The robe of fifteen panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of seventeen panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of nineteen panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of twenty-one panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of twenty-three panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of twenty-five panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of two hundred fifty panels, each comprised of four long segments and one short segment.

The robe of eighty-four thousand panels, each comprised of eight long segments and one short segment.

What I have now given you is an abbreviated list. There are, in addition, various other types of kesas which, all together, comprise the sanghati robes.

No matter whether a person is a householder or someone who has left home to be a monk, he or she accepts and keeps to the kesa. When I speak of accepting and keeping to it, I am referring to wearing it and putting it to use, not to uselessly keeping it all folded up and stored away somewhere.

Even if someone shaves their head and beard, should that person not accept and keep to the kesa, but instead hate and despise it, or be afraid of it, such a one is outside the path and will attempt to bedevil and obstruct others. As Meditation Master Hyakujō Daichi once said, “A person who has planted no good seeds in former lives will shun the kesa, despise the kesa, and both fear and despise the True Teaching.”



The Buddha once said:

Let us suppose that some person enters into Our Teaching and then commits some heavy offense or falls into false views. If, within the space of a single thought, that person shows deep reverence for the sanghati robe out of a feeling of respect, then all the Buddhas, including Myself, will surely give this person a guarantee that he or she shall realize Buddhahood from within any one of the Three Courses.* If any—be they lofty beings, or dragons, or ordinary humans, or hungry ghosts*—are able to show even the slightest respect for the spiritual merits of this person’s kesa, then, once having entered any of the Three Courses, they will neither regress nor turn away from them. Suppose that there is some hungry ghost or spirit, or even any other type of sentient being. Should such a one be able to obtain even a four-inch bit of a person’s kesa, he or she will have what they hunger and thirst for completely satisfied. Suppose that there are sentient beings who are about to fall into false views through having antagonistic attitudes towards each other. If they hold in mind the spiritual potential of the kesa, then, due to the influence of the kesa, they will be able, before long, to give rise to a compassionate heart and return to a state of immaculacy. Suppose that there is some person who is in military service. Should he have in his possession the smallest bit of a kesa which he respects and reverently prizes, he will undoubtedly attain spiritual liberation.

So, obviously, these spiritual merits of the kesa are peerless and beyond anything that we can imagine or conceive of. Whenever anyone has faith in this kesa, accepts it, protects it, and keeps to it, he or she will, beyond question, attain future liberation as well as a state of non-regression. This was not proclaimed by Shakyamuni Buddha alone: it has likewise been proclaimed by all Buddhas.



We must recognize that the bodily aspect of all Buddhas is the kesa. This is why the Buddha said, “Anyone who has fallen into wicked ways will loathe the sanghati robe.” Thus, whenever anyone sees a kesa and pays heed to it, should thoughts of loathing then arise, he or she should give rise to a compassionate heart, saying, “I am about to let myself fall into wicked ways,” and, feeling remorse, admit to what he or she has done.

Moreover, Shakyamuni Buddha, right after He had left the royal palace on His way to entering the mountains, was forthwith presented with a sanghati robe by a tree spirit who said to Him, “If you respectfully place this robe above your head, you will avoid being disturbed by bedeviling obstructions.” At that time, Shakyamuni Buddha accepted this robe and respectfully lifted it above His head, and then, it has been said, for the next twelve years until His awakening, He did not let it drop for even a moment. This is reported in the *Āgama Scriptures*.

Some say that the kesa is indeed an auspicious garment, and that anyone who makes use of it as raiment will surely arrive at an exalted spiritual rank. Speaking in more general terms, there has been no season when this sanghati robe has not existed right before us. Its manifestation at any particular time is an instance of its continual existence, and its continual existence reveals itself at some particular time within the long stretch of eons. To obtain a kesa is to obtain the banner that is the badge of Buddha. Because of this, there has not yet been any Buddha Tathagata who has not accepted and kept to the kesa. There has never been anyone who accepts and keeps to the kesa who will not realize Buddhahood.



The Methods for Wearing a Kesa

The usual method is to keep the right shoulder bare. There is also a method for wearing a kesa over both shoulders. [You begin with the unfolded kesa held behind your back by its upper corners.] When placing the upper right and left ends atop the left arm and shoulder, bring the right corner across in front [passing it under your right arm] and drape it back over the left shoulder. You then tuck the right vertical edge between your left arm and your torso. Next, bring the left corner to the front over the left shoulder and arm, and then tuck the left vertical edge in towards the back between your arm and your torso.⁶ This reflects the Buddha’s

6. Dōgen’s description conforms to the way in which the kesa is still being worn in the Theravadin tradition. In present-day Sōtō Zen, a clip or tie is used to hold the kesa at the left shoulder, which necessitates a slightly different procedure.

everyday behavior. It is not something that any of the shravakas* saw or heard about, nor did they pass it on, nor has a word of this leaked out from the teachings of any of the *Āgama Scriptures*. In general, the dignified procedure for wearing a kesa in the Buddha's Way is what was undoubtedly accepted and kept to by Ancestral Masters who passed on the True Teaching that was being manifested before them. Beyond question, what we accept and keep to should be what was accepted and kept to by these Ancestral Masters. Accordingly, the kesa that the Ancestors of the Buddha have correctly passed on is not something that Buddhas Transmitted to Buddhas in some haphazard manner. It is the kesa of former Buddhas and of present-day Buddhas: it is the kesa of old Buddhas and of new Buddhas. It transforms what 'the Way' means: it transforms what 'Buddha' means. It transforms the past, the present, and the future. In doing so, it makes a genuine Transmission from the past to the immediate present, from the immediate present to the future, from the immediate present to the past, from the past to the past, from present moment to present moment, from future to future, from the future to the immediate present, and from the future to the past—because it is the genuine Transmission of each Buddha on His own, just as it has been for all the Buddhas.

Because of this, starting with our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma's coming from the West and continuing through the hundreds of years of the great T'ang and Sung dynasties, there were many expert lecturers on the Scriptures who saw through what they were vainly doing. When these folks, who were involved with such things as philosophical schools and teachings on monastic rules and regulations, entered into the Buddha Dharma, they discarded their former kesa, which was a shabby old robe, and straightaway accepted the kesa that was authentically Transmitted in the Buddha's Way. The effects of their doing so are strung together, one after the other, in such works as the *Ching-te Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, the *T'ien-sheng Era Record of the Widely Illumining Lamp*, the *Supplementary Record of the Lamp*, and the *Chia-tai Era Record of the Lamp Whose Light Reaches Everywhere*. Letting go of their numerous narrow scholastic views on doctrine and monastic rules, they straightaway prized the Great Way that the Ancestors of the Buddha had Transmitted, and all became Ancestors of the Buddha. People today should also take a lesson from these Ancestral Masters of old.



If you would accept and keep to the kesa, it must be a correctly Transmitted kesa that has been correctly Transmitted to you: it must be one that you have faith in and accept. You must not accept and keep to a spurious kesa. When I speak of that 'correctly Transmitted kesa', I am referring to the one that has been correctly

Transmitted through Shōrin-ji Monastery and Mount Sōkei:⁷ this is the one that generation after generation of successors received from the Tathagata without skipping a single generation. Because of this, those engaged in the Way unmistakably accept and pass it on, relying upon the Buddha kesa being personally placed in their hands.

The Way of Buddha is straightforwardly Transmitted to the Way of Buddha: it is not left to idle people to acquire the Transmission at their leisure. There is a common saying, “Hearing about something a thousand times does not compare with a single sighting of it, and seeing something a thousand times does not compare with a single direct encounter.” When we reflect on this, even if there were a thousand sightings and ten thousand hearings, they would not compare with the actual acquiring of a kesa: indeed, they could not compare with the direct Transmission of the Buddha robe. Those who may doubt that there is an authentic Transmission should doubt even more those folks who have not encountered the authentic Transmission even in their dreams. The person to whom the Buddha robe is authentically Transmitted will be more directly involved than the person who just hears someone else passing on Buddhist doctrines. And a thousand direct encounters with a robe or ten thousand acquisitions of one can never compare with a single realization of Truth. It is the Buddhas and Ancestors who have realized and given proof to the Truth. So, do not copy the stream of those ordinary, mundane students of doctrines and monastic rules.



To speak more generally about the spiritual merits of the kesa in our Ancestral line: the authentic Transmission has been duly received, its original form has been passed on from person to person, and its acceptance and maintenance—along with the inherited Dharma—have continued on, unceasing, to this very day. Those who have genuinely accepted it are all Ancestral Masters whose realization of Truth has been attested to, and who Transmit the Dharma. They surpass even those who are ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’.* We should revere and respect them, bow and humbly place them above the crown of our head.⁸

Were you to trust and accept the principle of the authentic Transmission of the robe of a Buddha just once whilst in this body and mind, then that would be an indication of your encountering Buddha, and it would be the way to learn what

7. Shōrin-ji Monastery is associated with Bodhidharma and Mount Sōkei with Daikan Enō.

8. To place them above the crown of our head means to esteem them more highly than we esteem ourselves.

Buddha is. How pitiable your life would be if you were incapable of accepting this Dharma! You should deeply affirm for yourself that, having once wrapped your body in a kesa, it serves as an amulet for safeguarding you, so that you may settle the Matter* and fully realize Spiritual Wisdom.⁹ It is said that if you let a single sentence or a single poem of Scripture permeate your trusting heart, Its radiance will continually shine forth for the long stretch of eons. If you let one bit of Dharma permeate your body and mind, Its effect will be the same.

The thoughts that permeate the mind find no place of permanent abiding and are not part of us, yet their spiritual merits are completely as just described. And it is likewise with the body, which finds no abiding permanence. The kesa has no coming forth from anywhere, nor any place to which it goes. It is not something that we ourselves or any others possess, yet it manifests and dwells wherever someone keeps to it, and enlarges those who accept and hold to it. Whatever spiritual merits you may realize from it will manifest the same qualities.



The ‘making’ in ‘making a kesa’ is not the kind of ‘making’ that ordinary people or even saintly ones do. The import and significance of this ‘making’ is not something that the ten times saintly or the thrice wise will exhaustively penetrate. Those who are lacking the seeds of the Way from previous lives, though they pass through one or two lifetimes, or even immeasurable lifetimes, will not see a kesa, or hear about the kesa, or know what a kesa is. How, then, could such persons ever possibly accept and keep to one? There are people who receive spiritual merits from having the kesa touch their physical body just once, and there are people who do not. Those who have already received such merits should rejoice, and those who have not yet received them should hope to do so, since not to receive them is a pity indeed!

Whether within or outside the great-thousandfold world, only in the lineage of the Buddhas and Ancestors has the robe of Buddha been passed on, as commoners and those in lofty positions alike have universally come to know through what they have seen and heard about.

The clarification of how the robe of Buddha looks is to be found only in our Ancestral tradition; it is unknown in other traditions. Those who are ignorant of

9. This sentence, as translated, may lead some readers to an erroneous conclusion. Dōgen is not asserting that the kesa has some inherent magical property which wards off evil; rather, it protects the wearer by serving as a constant reminder of the purpose for which he or she donned the robe in the first place, as well as serving as an outer sign to others of the wearer’s spiritual commitment.

this and do not feel sorry for themselves are dull-witted people indeed. Even though someone knows the eighty-four thousand meditative mantras, yet is without the genuine Transmission of the kesa, lacks the Dharma of the Buddhas and Ancestors, and has not yet clarified what the authentic Transmission of the kesa is, such a person cannot be a true heir of the Buddhas. How much people in other countries must wish that the robe of Buddha had been genuinely Transmitted to them as it was Transmitted in China! That a genuine Transmission has not been done in their countries must be a source for feelings of shame and deep regret.

Truly, to encounter the Teaching in which both the robe and the Dharma of the World-honored Tathagata is truly passed on is due to the seeds of great merit from spiritual wisdom accrued over past lives. In the world today, when the Dharma is in Its last stage and the times are wicked, there are many devilish bands of people who are unembarrassed that they have had no genuine Transmission, whereas others have been jealous of the True Transmission. Whatever they themselves may possess, wherever they may make their dwelling place, these are not their True Self. Just to authentically Transmit the True Transmission is indeed the direct path for learning what Buddha is.



To speak in general terms, you need to realize that the kesa is what the Buddha Body is, and it is what the Buddha Mind is. And also, it is called ‘the garment of liberation’, ‘the robe that is a fertile field of blessings’, ‘the robe of forbearance’, ‘the formless robe’, ‘the robe of merciful compassion’, ‘the robe of the Tathagata’, and ‘the robe of supreme, fully perfected enlightenment’. By all means you should accept and keep to it in this manner.

Now in the present-day country of the great Sung dynasty, because that bunch who call themselves scholars of monastic rules and regulations are intoxicated by the wine served up by shravakas, they feel no shame that they are passing on a lineage that was unknown to their own tradition, nor do they regret it, nor are they aware of what they are doing. They have altered the kesa that has been passed down from India, which was passed on for ever so long during the Han and T’ang dynasties, acceding to one of smaller size, which complies with their small views—narrow views that they should be ashamed of. If you today were to use a small-sized robe like theirs, how could the everyday behavior of a Buddha ever continue for long? Their views take the form that they do because their exploration and passing on of the behavior of a Buddha has not been extensive. It is quite clear that the Body and Mind of the Tathagata has been correctly Transmitted only through the gates of our Ancestors and has not been disseminated through the

activities of that bunch's lineage. If, by chance, they actually recognized what the behavior of a Buddha is, they would not violate the Buddha robe. As they are still unclear as to the texts of the Scriptures, they cannot hear Their import.



Further, to stipulate rough cotton cloth as the sole material for a robe is to go deeply against the Buddha's Teaching. Since such cloth is not the only thing that a disciple of the Buddha may wear, this stipulation, in particular, does violence to the Buddha robe. And why is this so? Because, by proffering a judgmental opinion concerning cotton cloth, one has violated the kesa. What a pity that the opinions of the shravakas in the Lesser Course* should so twist and turn about, sad to say! After you have demolished your opinions concerning cotton cloth, the Buddha robe can fully manifest before your eyes. What I am saying about the use of silk and cotton cloth is not what just one or two Buddhas have said: it is an important Teaching of all the Buddhas that we consider waste cloth as the highest grade of immaculate raw material for a robe. When, later on, I list the ten types of waste cloth, it will include types of silk and types of cotton, as well as other types of cloth. Are we not to collect waste bits of silk? If such is the case, then we are acting contrary to the Way of the Buddhas. If we are already prejudiced against silk, we will also be prejudiced in regard to cotton. What reason could there possibly be for feeling that we should be prejudiced in regard to silk or cotton? To look down on silk thread because it was produced through the killing of a living being is vastly laughable, for is not cotton cloth the product of a living thing? If your view of something being either sentient or non-sentient is not yet free of any commonplace, sentimental feelings, how will you possibly understand what the kesa of a Buddha is?

Also, there are those who talk in wild and confused ways, bringing up the so-called 'theory of transformed thread', which is also laughable.¹⁰ What, pray, is not a transformation of something? You folks who bring this theory up may trust your ears when they hear the word 'transformation', but you doubt your eyes when they see a transformation. It is as if your eyes had no ears and your ears had no eyes. Where are your ears and eyes at this very moment?

Keep in mind, for the moment, that while you are picking up some waste material, there may be times when it resembles silk or when it looks just like cotton. In using it, do not call it silk or cotton; just designate it as waste material.

10. An ancient Indian view that silk is thread which is created by a living creature; it is not naturally occurring of itself.

Because it is waste material, as waste material it is beyond being ‘silk’, beyond being ‘cotton’. Even though there is a time after death when ordinary people and those in lofty positions may ‘continue to exist’ as waste matter, we cannot speak of them as ‘having sentience’, for they will be ‘waste material’. Even though there is a time when a dead pine tree or chrysanthemum have become waste matter, we cannot speak of them as being ‘non-sentient’, for they will be ‘waste material’. When we understand the principle that waste cloth is neither silk nor cotton, and that it is far from being either pearls or jade, the robe of waste cloth will fully manifest before us, and, with its arising, we will meet and experience the robe of waste cloth. When your opinions about silk and cotton have not yet dried up and fallen away, you will not see ‘waste material’ even in your dreams. Although for your whole life you may accept and keep to a kesa made from coarse cotton cloth, should you hold in your mind the view that it is cotton, what you have accepted will not be the genuine Transmission of the Buddha robe.



Further, among the various kinds of kesas, there are cotton kesas, and silk kesas, and leather kesas. Buddhas have all made use of each of these at some time, for these have the Buddhist merits of a Buddha robe. They possess the fundamental principle that has been genuinely Transmitted without ever having been interrupted. However, those folks who have not yet discarded their commonplace, sentimental feelings treat the Buddha’s Dharma lightly and do not trust the Buddha’s words. They aim at following where others have gone based on commonplace, sentimental feelings, and we should certainly speak of them as non-Buddhists who have latched onto the Buddha’s Dharma. They are a bunch that would demolish the True Teaching.

Some have claimed that they altered the Buddha’s robe based on instructions from a celestial being. If this is so, then they must be aspiring to celestial Buddhahood! Or have they become part of some stream of celestial beings? Disciples of the Buddha will expound the Buddha’s Teaching to celestial beings; they do not ask celestial beings what the Way is. How sad that those who lack the True Transmission of the Buddha’s Dharma are like this!

The perspective of the host of celestial beings and the perspective of a disciple of the Buddha are vastly different in both large and small matters, yet celestial beings come down to ask disciples of the Buddha for the Teaching. This is because the Buddhist perspective and the celestial perspective are so vastly different. Chuck out the narrow-minded perspectives of scholastics and shravakas, and do not study them: recognize that such persons are of the Lesser Course. The

Buddha said, “Such folks may indeed feel remorse for having killed father or mother, but they may well not feel remorse for having slandered the Dharma.”

In sum, the path of small-mindedness and foxy suspiciousness is not what the Buddha intended for us to follow. The Great Path of the Buddha’s Dharma is beyond anything that the Lesser Course can reach. No one outside the Ancestral Path that is connected with the Treasure House of the Dharma even knows of the way that all Buddhas correctly Transmit the Great Precepts.



Long ago on Mount Ōbai, in the middle of the night, the robe and the Dharma of the Buddhas were genuinely Transmitted upon the head of Daikan Enō, our Sixth Ancestor. This was truly the authentic Transmission of the passing on of the Dharma and the passing on of the robe. It occurred because the Fifth Ancestor ‘knew his man’. Fellows who have realized any of the four stages* of arhathood, or those who are thrice wise and ten times saintly, or are academic teachers of philosophical theories or of Scriptural doctrines might well have conferred the robe on Jinshū, but they would not have passed it on to the Sixth Ancestor.¹¹ Even so, because an Ancestor of the Buddha, in singling out a Buddhist Ancestor, crosses beyond the well-trodden road of commonplace thinking, the Sixth Ancestor had already become the Sixth Ancestor. Keep in mind that the principle of descendant after descendant of Buddhist Ancestors ‘recognizing his or her man’ by recognizing the True Self is not something that can be left to those who weigh and measure things.

A certain monk once asked the Sixth Ancestor, “Is the robe passed on to you on Mount Ōbai in the middle of the night one made of cotton, or one made of silk, or one made of taffeta? Pray, tell us, what on earth is it made of?”

The Sixth Ancestor replied, “It is not cotton, or silk, or taffeta.”

This was the way that the Highest Ancestor of Mount Sōkei put it. Keep in mind that the Buddha robe is not silk, or cotton, or some fine quality broadcloth. Those who vainly judge it to be silk, or cotton, or some fine-quality broadcloth are folks that slander the Buddha’s Dharma. How could they possibly recognize the kesa of a Buddha? Moreover, there is the occasion when people come in good faith to take

11. Jinshū was the most intellectually gifted and respected monk in the Fifth Ancestor’s monastic assembly, and the one who all his fellow monks assumed would be named the Fifth Ancestor’s Dharma heir.

the Precepts. The kesa they obtain, again, is beyond any discussion of silk or cotton: it is the Buddha's instruction in the Way of Buddhas.

Also, Shōnawashu's robe was an everyday garment when he was in lay life.¹² When he left home to be a monk, it became a kesa. This principle should be calmly considered and concentrated upon. It is not something that you should disregard, acting as if you had neither seen nor heard of it. Moreover, it has an import that comes with the True Transmission of Buddha after Buddha and Ancestor after Ancestor. That bunch who tot up words cannot perceive it, nor can they weigh and measure it. Truly, how could the thousands of shifts and the myriad variations in the way that a Buddha says things possibly be in the realm where commonplace thinking flows? Yes, there are meditative states and mantric prayers, but those fellows who tot up grains of sand cannot see the precious Pearl that lies beneath the robe.



Now, we should take the materials, colors, and dimensions of the kesa that the Buddhas and Ancestors have genuinely Transmitted to be the true standard for the kesa of all Buddhas. From India to the lands in the east, examples of it have long existed. Those who distinguished the true from the false had already gone beyond the experience of realizing Truth. Although there were those outside the Ancestral Path who used the word 'kesa', none of the original Ancestors ever affirmed them as their offshoots, so how could they possibly germinate the seeds that produce the roots of virtue, much less the fruits of it? Not only are you now seeing and hearing the Buddha Dharma that those others had not encountered over vast eons, you are also able to see and hear about the Buddha robe, to learn about the Buddha robe, and to both accept and keep to the Buddha robe. This is precisely our respectfully encountering Buddha. We are hearing the voice of Buddha, and are pouring forth the radiance of Buddha, and are accepting and making use of what a Buddha accepts and utilizes. We are transmitting one-to-one the Mind of Buddha, and are obtaining the Marrow of Buddha.



The Transmission of the Robe

Whilst I was in Sung China doing my training on the long bench in the Meditation Hall, I noticed that at the first light of every day, following the striking of the wake-up block, the monks who sat on either side of me would raise their

12. His name means 'He of Hempen Robe'.

folded kesa in a gesture of offering, place it atop their head, respectfully make gasshō,* and recite a verse to themselves. On one occasion I had a feeling that I had not experienced before. A joy filled my body to overflowing; tears of gratitude, stealing from my eyes, rolled down my cheeks and soaked my collar. I had been reading the *Āgama Scripture* and, though I had seen the passage on humbly offering up the kesa above one's head, its relevance had not wholly dawned on me. Now I was personally witnessing it. In this connection, sad to say, was the thought that, when I was in my native land, there had been no teacher or any good spiritual companion to instruct me in this. How could I not regret the days and years I had so wastefully spent, or not grieve their passing? But now I was seeing and hearing this and was able to rejoice because of some good deed done in a past life. If I had vainly spent my time rubbing shoulders with any of those in the temples in my native land, I could not possibly have sat shoulder-to-shoulder with these Treasures of the Sangha who had donned the Buddha robe. My joy and sorrow were not unmixed, as my myriad tears issued forth.

Then, in silence, I took a vow, "Somehow, be I ever so incompetent, I will correctly Transmit the true inheritance of the Buddha's Dharma and, out of pity for the sentient beings in my homeland, I will help them see the robe and hear the Dharma that Buddha after Buddha has authentically Transmitted. Should my steadfast faith come to my aid in some unseen way, then surely my heartfelt vow will not have been in vain."

Disciples of the Buddha who are now accepting the kesa and keeping to it should humbly raise it above their head and unfailingly strive, day and night, to amass the effects of training, for this will produce real spiritual merits. The reading or hearing of one sentence or one poem from Scripture may well be as common as trees and stones, whereas the spiritual merits from the genuine Transmission of the kesa are undoubtedly difficult to encounter anywhere throughout the ten directions.



In Great Sung China during the wintry tenth lunar month of the seventeenth year of the Chia-ting era (November, 1223), there were two Korean monks who came to Ch'ing-yüen Prefecture. One was called, in Chinese, Chi-hüen, and the other Ching-yün. These two incessantly talked about the meaning of Buddhist doctrine and were, moreover, men of letters. Even so, they had no kesa or alms bowl and were like ordinary folk. Sad to say, even though they had the superficial form of monks, they lacked the Dharma of monks, which may have been due to their being from a small, remote country. When those fellows from our own court

who have the superficial form of monks take to going to other countries, they are probably just like these two monks.

Shakyamuni Buddha, before His enlightenment, had already humbly raised the kesa above His head for some twelve years, never neglecting it. As His distant descendants, you should investigate this. If you turn away from bowing to celestial beings, spirits, rulers or their ministers—since all such bowing is done in the vain pursuit of fame and gain—and turn towards humbly placing the Buddha robe atop your head, it will be a great joy in which we can rejoice.

Recorded on the first day of winter in the first year of the Ninji era (October 17, 1240) at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple.

*The mendicant monk Dōgen
who entered Sung China
in order to receive and Transmit the Dharma.*



For robe material to make a kesa, we use that which is immaculate. ‘Immaculate’ refers to robe material donated in veneration as an offering in pure faith, or something purchased in the market place by lay folk, or something sent you by the gentry, or the pure alms-gift of some spiritually empowered dragon, or the pure alms-gift of some fiercely protective guardian, all of which are robe materials we use. And pure alms-gifts from rulers and their chief ministers or pure pelts can also be used.¹³

Further, we consider ten types of waste cloth to be immaculate:

First, cloth chewed by an ox.

Second, cloth gnawed by rats.

Third, cloth singed by fire.

Fourth, menstrual cloth.

Fifth, cloth discarded from childbirthing.

Sixth, cloth abandoned at a wayside shrine for birds to peck apart.

Seventh, cloth from a dead person’s clothing abandoned at a grave site.

Eighth, cloth from abandoned prayer flags.

13. ‘Pure pelts’ probably refers to skins taken from animals who died naturally or by accident, or were attained as a by-product, as distinct from those specifically hunted for their pelts.

Ninth, cloth from robes discarded by officials upon their advancement to higher rank.

Tenth, burial shrouds discarded by those returning from a funeral.

We consider these ten types to be robe material that is especially immaculate. Those in the world of common customs discard them: those on the Buddha's Path make use of them. From these everyday ways of working with things, we can realize the difference between the mundane road and the Buddha's Path. As a consequence, when we search for the immaculate, we should seek out these ten types of cloth. When we obtain them, we should recognize what is clean and distinguish it from what is unclean, just as we can recognize mind and distinguish it from body. When we obtain any of these ten types of cloth—whether of silk or of cotton—it is its cleanliness or lack of cleanliness that we should consider.

It would be the height of silliness to hold to the notion that this waste cloth is being used simply to create 'the shabby appearance of a raggle-taggle robe'. The kesa of waste cloth is something that we in the Buddha's Way have come to use for clothing ourselves on account of its splendor and singular loveliness. When it comes to what would be considered raggle-taggle clothing from the perspective of the Buddha's Way, what we would call 'raggle-taggle' is the impure aspect of a garment fabricated from brocaded or embroidered cloth, from fancy-patterned cloth or silk gauze, or from gold or silver cloth studded with pearls and jade.¹⁴

Speaking more generally, in the Buddhism of this land or of other countries, when we use what is immaculate and wondrously lovely, it should be of those ten types, for not only do they transcend the limits of what is clean and what is unclean, they also go beyond the realm of what is tainted with delusion and what is not tainted with delusion. Do not discuss them in terms of mind and matter; they are things unconnected with gain and loss. Simply, those who accept and keep to what has been genuinely Transmitted are Ancestors of the Buddha. When someone is an Ancestor of the Buddha, we accept and keep to this person as an Ancestor of the Buddha, for he or she has accepted, and is passing on, the genuine Transmission. And this Transmission does not depend on what is or is not

14. What makes such garments 'impure' is the discriminatory attitude towards them that extols whatever is deemed rich or costly. 'Raggle-taggle' from the Buddhist perspective therefore does not refer to the quality or 'look' of a garment, but to a discriminatory attitude of mind about the cloth from which it is made.

manifested by the body, nor does it depend on what is or is not offered up by the mind.

We should lament that in this country of Japan, for ever so long up to recent times, male and female monks have not worn the kesa, and we should rejoice that they now may accept and keep to one. Any householder, male or female, who can accept the Buddhist Precepts should don a kesa of five, seven, or nine panels. How much more should those who have left home to be monks do so! Why would they not wear one? It is said that everyone—from Lord Brahma and those in the six worlds below him, down to male and female prostitutes and those in forced servitude—can receive the Buddhist Precepts and don the kesa, so are there male and female monks who would not wear one? It is said that even animals can take the Buddha's Precepts and put on a kesa, so why would a disciple of the Buddha not don the Buddha robe?

Thus, those who would become a disciple of the Buddha—be they denizens of some heavenly state, ordinary folk, rulers of nations, or government officials, or be they laity, monks, those in forced servitude, or animals—should all accept the Buddha's Precepts and have the kesa correctly Transmitted to them. This is indeed the straight path for correctly entering the ranks of Buddha.



When washing and rinsing a kesa, mix various sorts of incense powders into the water. After it has dried out, fold it up, place it in an elevated place, make a venerative offering of incense and flowers, and bow three times. After that, kneel before it and, with hands in *gasshō*, humbly place it atop your head, and then, rousing your faith, intone the following verse:

*How great and wondrous is the robe of enlightenment,
Formless and embracing every treasure!
I wish to unfold the Buddha's Teaching
That I may help all sentient beings reach the Other
Shore.*

After reciting this three times, stand up, reverently unfold the robe, and put it on.