

# LIVING BY VOW

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A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION TO EIGHT  
ESSENTIAL ZEN CHANTS AND TEXTS

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CULTIVATING THE VIRTUOUS FIELD:  
THE ROBE CHANT



## VERSE ON THE KESA

Great robe of liberation.  
Virtuous field far beyond form and emptiness.  
Wearing the Tathāgata's teaching  
I vow to save all beings.<sup>42</sup>

*Dai sai gedappuku*  
*Musō fukuden e*  
*Hibu nyorai kyō*  
*Kōdo shoshu jō*

**W**HEN DŌGEN ZENJI went to China and began to practice at Tiangtong monastery in 1223, he found that in the sōdō (monks' hall), the monks rested their folded okesas (the formal term for the *kesa*, or monk's robe) atop their heads with veneration and chanted this verse after early morning zazen each day. He had read of this practice in the *Āgama Sutra* but had never seen it. When he experienced the traditional chanting of this verse and saw the monks put on their okesas, he was deeply impressed. Dōgen Zenji

wrote about this experience in the chapter *Shōbōgenzō* “Kesakudoku” (Virtue of the Kesa): “At that time, I felt that I had never before seen such a gracious thing. My body was filled with delight, and tears of joy silently fell and moistened the lapel of my robe.”<sup>43</sup> The young Dōgen vowed to transmit this practice to Japan. As a result, for the last eight hundred years in Dōgen Zenji’s lineage we have chanted this verse every morning after zazen when we put on our okesas or rakusus.

The Buddha himself decided the kesa’s design. A king who was a lay student of Shakyamuni Buddha went to visit the Buddha one day. On the way he saw a religious practitioner walking across the road. He thought this person was a disciple of the Buddha and got off his cart to greet him. When he found that he was not a Buddhist monk he felt a little embarrassed. He asked Shakyamuni Buddha to make a special robe for his disciples so they could easily be recognized as Buddhist monks.

One day the Buddha, walking in the countryside with his attendant Ānanda, noticed the beautiful patterns of rice paddies newly planted with green seedlings and surrounded by footpaths. They are especially beautiful in the rainy season when the rice is new. The Buddha remarked to Ānanda, “These are so beautiful. Could you make a robe like this?” Ānanda agreed. The Buddha conceived the pattern and Ānanda created the design. Since then, Buddhists have worn the okesa in all traditions and in all countries.<sup>44</sup>

In Japanese the first words of the verse of the kesa is *dai sai*. *Dai* means “to be great” or “magnificent.” *Sai* has no meaning by itself but functions as an exclamation mark: “How great!” The next part of the verse gives three different names for the okesa. In the chapter “Virtue of the Kesa” Dōgen Zenji introduced many names for the okesa. He said, “We should understand that the kesa is what all buddhas have respected and taken refuge in. The kesa is the Buddha’s body and the Buddha’s mind. The kesa is called the robe of liberation, the robe of the field of virtue, and the robe of formlessness. It is also called the robe of supremacy, the robe of patience, the robe of the Tathāgata, the robe of great compassion, the robe of the victory banner (against delusion),

and the robe of unsurpassable enlightenment. Truly, we should receive and maintain it gratefully and respectfully.”<sup>45</sup> These are all different names for the okesa used in various Buddhist scriptures. In this verse, the first three names are mentioned: the robe of liberation, the robe of formlessness, and the robe of the field of virtue.

The first name for the okesa is the robe of liberation. The Sanskrit word *kaṣāya* refers to a muted or broken color (*ejiki*). To make okesas, Indian monks collected abandoned rags from graveyards and refuse heaps, so that they would have no attachment to the material. They cut the rags into pieces and washed, dyed, and sewed them together. They didn’t dye them pure colors—blue, yellow, red, black, or white—but instead mixed different colors together to darken the cloth, rendering it valueless by ordinary standards. The okesa was made out of materials that had no value and were not attractive to people. Even today if we have new material from which to make an okesa, we cut it into pieces so that the material loses its value. No one would want to steal it. This is why the okesa is free from attachment. In Buddhism, things free from attachment are immaculate. When we become Buddhists, we receive the okesa as a symbol of our faith in the Buddha’s teachings. This means we also become free from ego attachment.

The construction of the okesa symbolizes the emptiness of the five skandhas. The pieces come from all over, are sewed together, and stay for a while in the shape of a robe. The okesa is an example of emptiness or egolessness (*anātman*), impermanence, and interdependent origination. So the robe is much more than a uniform; it embodies the basic teachings of the Buddha.

When I first studied “Kesakudoku” (Virtue of the Kesa), I was confused because Dōgen discussed the virtue of the okesa in various ways. He wrote that the okesa had been transmitted from Vipaśyin Buddha, the first of the seven buddhas. It is said that each buddha’s life span was shorter than the last. Their bodies also became smaller and smaller. And yet the okesa transmitted from the previous buddha perfectly fit all of the following buddhas. I wondered how Dōgen could say such a thing, since he knew that the okesa was designed by Shakyamuni Buddha and

his disciple Ānanda. How could all the buddhas before Shakyamuni have worn and transmitted it?

Dōgen also discusses the fact that Shakyamuni's okesa was transmitted to Mahākāśyapa, and then from Mahākāśyapa to the next ancestor. It was then transmitted through each subsequent ancestor to Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma brought it from India to China, and then the okesa was transmitted through six generations to the sixth ancestor, Huineng. The okesa was used as the symbol of the Dharma and also of the authenticity of the Dharma's transmission.

Dōgen Zenji encourages us to sew our own okesa and venerate it as the symbol of the Buddha's vow to save all living beings, the symbol of the Dharma itself, and the symbol of the authenticity of transmission in his lineage.

Later I realized that this corresponds to the Three Treasures he mentions in *Kyōjūkaimon* (Comments on Teaching and Conferring the Precepts). Here he comments on the precepts of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha and on the Absolute Three Treasures, the Manifesting Three Treasures, and the Maintaining Three Treasures.<sup>46</sup>

The okesa used by all buddhas in the past, present, and future—and which perfectly fits all of them despite their differences in size—corresponds to the Absolute Three Treasures. The okesa designed by Shakyamuni and Ānanda corresponds to the Manifesting Three Treasures. And the okesa used as a symbol of transmission and the okesa Dōgen encourages us to sew, wear, and venerate correspond to the Maintaining Three Treasures. When Dōgen discusses the virtue of the okesa, he freely switches among these three meanings of the word. This is why I was confused. The okesa is the symbol of the Dharma itself in its various facets.

The second name of the okesa is the robe of formlessness (*musō*). In our sutra book, *musō* is translated as “far beyond form and emptiness.” This is a questionable translation. It seems to me that “far beyond form and emptiness” refers to a line in the *Heart Sutra*: “That which is form is emptiness and that which is emptiness, form.” In this case “form”

is a translation of the Sanskrit word *rūpa*, one of the five aggregates, which means materials that have physical form and color. The Chinese translation of *rūpa* is *se*, and the Japanese pronunciation is *shiki*. The *Heart Sutra* says that material beings are emptiness and emptiness is material beings. But here the word used is not *shiki* but *sō*, a translation of the Sanskrit *nimitta*, which means “appearance,” as opposed to *shō*, “nature” or “essence.” Other possible translations of *nimitta* are “mark” or “attribution.” *Musō* is *animitta* in Sanskrit. This use of “form” does not imply material beings. Instead, it means temporal form or appearance. The reality of emptiness has no fixed form. The robe of formlessness (*musō-e*) means that this robe has no form (*animitta*), not that it is beyond form and emptiness.

In this English translation, the phrase “far beyond form and emptiness” modifies “virtuous field” (*fukuden*). This is not a correct interpretation of the line because *musō-e* and *fukuden-e* are the two different names of the okesa.

The *Diamond Sutra* says, “To see all forms as no-form is to see the true form.” What is beyond form and emptiness? Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. There is nothing beyond form and emptiness. And in this verse there is no word that refers to emptiness. Here “formless” means that the okesa has a form and yet the form itself is formless or empty. Emptiness means moving and changing moment by moment. In this moment, this robe exists in the form of the okesa but has no fixed, permanent form. *Musō* also means free from attachment. Because it is formless, we cannot attach ourselves; we cannot grasp it. If we grasp this as the Buddha's teaching, as something important and hold on to it, we miss the point of the Buddha's teaching. Instead we open our hands. This is the meaning of formlessness.

It is the same with our lives. Our body and mind are collections of many different elements that exist in this moment. Because they are always changing, we cannot grasp them as “my” body, “my” mind, or “my” property. And yet we attach ourselves to the present, transient form. But since nothing is substantial, we cannot actually grasp it. When we try to control it, we diminish our life force. Instead, we

open our hands. This is what we practice in our zazen. The okesa and our body and mind are the same. This subtle difference in attitude can change our lives completely. When we grasp something, we lose it. When we open our hands, we see that everything we need is an offering from nature. If we have something extra, we offer it to others. This is the life attitude of a bodhisattva. Just open our hands. The okesa is a symbol of this attitude.

As noted just now, the third name of the okesa in this verse is the robe of the field of virtues (*fukuden-e*). *Fuku* means “happiness,” “blessing,” “fortune,” or “virtue,” while *den* means “rice paddy.” In Asian countries people consider rice paddies the foundation of everything good. Rice is the most important product and the basis of the whole economy. When rice grows we are blessed by nature. The Buddha’s teachings, the Buddha-mind, and the practice of Dharma are often compared to a rice paddy.

The *Suttanipāta* is one of the oldest collections of short suttas in Pāli. In it we find the *Kasībhāradvāja Sutta* (The Farmer Bharadvaja), which records the Buddha’s conversation with an Indian farmer. When the Buddha was staying in a farming village, he woke up one morning, put on the okesa, and went out to the village for *takuhatsu* (begging for food). The Buddha came across a rich farmer’s house. The farmer was giving food to his workers. The Buddha was standing in front of the farmer to receive food.

The farmer said, “I eat after cultivating fields and planting seeds. I eat after working. Why don’t you work? Why do you beg for food?” The Buddha replied, “I am a farmer, too. I also work.” The farmer asked further, “You say you are also a farmer. But I never saw you farming. I ask you, what do you mean when you say you are a farmer? Tell me so that I can understand.” Then the Buddha answered, “Faith is a seed. Practice is rain. Wisdom is my yoke and plow. Repentance (having a sense of shame) is my plow bar. Aspiration is a rope to tie a yoke to an ox. Mindfulness is a plow-blade and digging bar. I behave prudently. I am discreet in speech. I eat moderately. Truth is my sickle to mow grass. Gentleness is untying the yoke from an ox when finished working.

Diligence is my ox which takes me to peacefulness (nirvana). I go forth without backsliding. Once I reach peacefulness, I have no anxiety. My farming is done in this way. Its result is sweet dew. If you engage in this farming, you will be released from all kinds of suffering.”<sup>47</sup>

The farmer left home and became the Buddha’s disciple. In the Buddha’s simile, farming is a practice aimed at freedom from ego-attachment and a peaceful life. When we wear the okesa, we are also farming. This is the meaning of “robe of virtuous field” (*fukuden-e*). This body and mind is the field we work. It is not a field of fortune from which we can expect to receive blessings without practice. We have to cultivate our life.

The third line of the verse is “Wearing the Tathāgata’s teaching” (*hibu nyorai kyō*). *Hi* means “to open,” “unfold,” or “uncover,” so I translate this line as “I unfold and wear the Tathāgata’s teaching.” First we have to unfold the Buddha’s teaching and cover ourselves with it. *Bu* means “humble,” “thankful,” or “respectful.” Then what is meant by “the Tathāgata’s teaching” (*nyorai-kyō*)? The Buddha taught the interdependent origination of all beings. Since no beings have self-nature, we should not attach ourselves to anything. We should be free from ego-attachment, transform our way of life, and choose a path to peacefulness. We unfold this teaching through practice. We receive the teaching of the Tathāgata, unfold it, wear it, and are covered by it. This is the meaning of wearing the okesa and practicing zazen.

Formlessness means the same as emptiness, egolessness, and interdependent origination. Since we are not substantial, we cannot live alone without being supported by other beings. We have to live together with others. This is another essential point of the Buddha’s teaching. We cannot be completely peaceful unless all living beings are in peace. We cannot be completely happy if we are aware of someone who is unhappy. When we awaken to this reality, the bodhisattva vows arise naturally. The vow to save all beings is not a duty or a promise to the Buddha. The vow does not mean that we are great people and we have to save all others, like millionaires who give money to the poor. When we open our eyes to the reality of our lives, we simply cannot help but

share happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain with all beings. To be peaceful, we have to do something for other beings. We live within the Buddha's vow to save all beings.

Zen Master Dongshan Liangjie (Tōzan Ryōkai, 802–869) was the founder of the Chinese Caodan (Sōtō) school. Dongshan asked a monk, "What is most painful?" The monk replied, "To be in hell is most painful." Dongshan said, "No, it isn't." Then the monk asked, "What do you think, then, is most painful?" Dongshan replied, "Wearing the okesa yet not having clarified the great matter is most painful." Hell is the worst part of samsara and is considered the most agonizing. But Dongshan said that there is a more painful condition. When we wear the okesa, we are in nirvana. We are apart from samsara, and yet when we chase after something, even enlightenment, our practice becomes an activity within samsara. When we look for something better through zazen, that striving is more painful than hell. If you suffer in samsara because you don't know the Buddha's teachings, you can be saved by studying the Buddha Dharma and practicing zazen. But if you already know the Buddha Dharma, receive the precepts, wear the okesa, practice zazen, and *still* chase after something, there is no way to be saved. One of the most famous sayings of Kōdō Sawaki Roshi is, "Wear the okesa and sit in zazen: that's all." That's it. There is nothing else to search for. There's nowhere to go. Still, we look for something more valuable. Even when we sit in the zendo we are often hungry ghosts in samsara.

Whenever we deviate from where we are now, we immediately return to what's right here, right now, by letting go. This is our zazen. This is the meaning of wearing the okesa after reciting this verse.