

Kesa Kudoku: Virtue of the Kashaya

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Preface: From transmitting *kashaya* to virtue of *kashaya*

In the Zen school, there is a tradition of transmitting the *kashaya*. *Kashaya* is the Sanskrit word for *kesa* (or *okesa*) in Japanese. The *kashaya* is the robe worn by the Buddha and his followers. Today it is worn by Buddhist clergy. We can see many examples of its transmission: Shakyamuni Buddha's entrusting the *kashaya* to Mahakashyapa, Fifth Ancestor Daiman Konin's transmitting it to the Sixth Ancestor Daikan Eno, and the transmission of Fuyo Dokai's *kashaya*. These accounts imply that the dharma of the Buddha was transmitted at the same time as the *kashaya*. Therefore, the *kashaya* is not just a piece of clothing.

In Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo*, there are two fascicles on the *kashaya*: *Den-e* ("Transmitting the *Kashaya*") and *Kesa Kudoku* ("Virtue of the *Kashaya*"). At the beginning of each fascicle, there is a story concerning the *kashaya* entrusted to the Sixth Ancestor, Eno. After it was transmitted from the Fifth Ancestor, the Sixth Ancestor's *kashaya* was kept at Mt. Sokei to avoid a fight for it. It is said that successive emperors of the Tang Dynasty all worshiped the Sixth Ancestor's *kashaya* as a sacred object. The *Den-e* fascicle, after mentioning this story, moves on to discuss the authentic transmission of the *kashaya*. The *Kesa Kudoku* fascicle discusses the broad benefit of revering a buddha's *kashaya*.

The Sotoshu greatly emphasizes the *kashaya's* value. It is natural for Buddhists to value the *kashaya*. At ordination as a Buddhist priest, one receives three kinds of *kashaya* - five-panel, seven-panel and nine-panel. It is believed that when buddhas attain the Way, without exception they always wear a *kashaya*. Particularly in the Sotoshu, from the earliest stage of practice a novice is rigorously trained in deep appreciation of the *kashaya*. This reverence for the *kashaya* includes the words used to name it, its treatment and, ultimately, a deep faith in the *kashaya* itself.

Names for the *kashaya*

In *Shobogenzo Jikuinmon* ("Instructions on Kitchen Work"), Dogen Zenji tells us to use courteous words for the various materials employed in the kitchen. For example, he says we should call rice not "*kome*" ("rice" in Japanese) but "*oyone*" (the honorific form of "*kome*"). Therefore, the Sotoshu has a tradition of courteously giving honorific titles to things embodying the Buddha Dharma. We should not speak of these things without using these honorific titles. This form of speech should be applied to the *kashaya* as well. When, as beginners, we unthinkingly call this robe a *kesa* in Japanese, forgetting the honorific title, we are admonished by a teacher or senior monk to call it not a *kesa* but an *o-kesa* using the honorific prefix *o*. It is imprinted on our consciousness through daily training that we should treat the *kashaya* with great care. This eventually leads us to faith in the *kashaya*.

In *Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku*, Dogen Zenji lists other names given to the *kashaya* as praise for its virtue – “the clothing of emancipation,” “the robe of the field of benefaction,” “the robe beyond form,” “the robe of patience,” “the Tathagata’s robe,” “the robe of great love and great compassion,” “the robe as a victorious banner,” and “the robe of unsurpassable, complete, enlightenment.” It is said that to wear the *kashaya* is itself to immediately attain Buddha’s wisdom and total liberation from all anguish.

Treatment of the *kashaya*

Menzan Zuiho, a Soto Zen scholar monk, wrote *Admonitions Concerning the Buddhist Robe* (*Shakushi Hoikun*, published in 1768). In this text Menzan criticizes a monk who, at a public bath, takes off a five-panel robe along with his underwear and sits naked on them after finishing his bath. It is, of course, outrageous behavior, but it was a part of the reality of those days. Even now as we imagine that situation, we can only totally disapprove.

In *The Record of Personal Experiences During Hoei Era* (*Kenmon Hoeiki*, published in 1744), which records the sayings and doings of Menzan’s teacher, Sonno Shueki, Sonno admiringly pointed out a novice monk “to be honored as highest in the city of Edo” because this monk very courteously took off his *kashaya* for a pee. It is not a person who is proud of enlightenment or who is eminent in study that should be highly honored, but a person who treats the *kashaya* in a proper manner.

As for the treatment of the *kashaya* in a training monastery, in *Bendoho*, Dogen Zenji meticulously advises us, “When you fold up your *kashaya*, do not stand on your seat or do not hold the edge of the *kashaya* in your mouth. Do not hold up the *kashaya* with both hands and shake it vigorously. When you fold it, do not step on the *kashaya* or hold it under your chin.”

We learn all these things on the spot in the monastery. The reason we have to treat the *kashaya* with much care is that it is something that all buddhas revere and take refuge in. And all buddhas protect and support the efforts of a person wearing a *kashaya* to realize unsurpassable awakening. This is why we must not make little of the *kashaya*.

The Virtue of *the Kashaya*: Nun Utpalavarna

There are many accounts of the virtue of the *kashaya*, but perhaps the most highly valued story is that of Nun Utpalavarna, included in the fascicles *Shukke Kudoku* (“Virtue of Home Leaving”), *Kesa Kudoku*, and *Doshin* (“Heart of the Way”) of *Shobogenzo*. This story is originally found in Nagarjuna’s *Daichido Ron* (*Treatise on Realization of Great Wisdom*), volume 13. It tells how Nun Utpalavarna accomplished the six miraculous powers and arhatship under Shakyamuni Buddha. Nagarjuna explains that Nun Utpalavarna was an entertainer who put on a nun’s *kashaya* as a joke. Because of the virtue of the *kashaya*, through this action she was reborn as a nun at the time of Kashyapa Buddha. In a later life, she met Shakyamuni Buddha, left home and became a great arhat. She broke the precepts many times during this process but the virtue of putting on the *kashaya* was much more powerful than her unwholesome deeds.

***Kesa Kudoku*: The five sacred virtues**

In *Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku*, Dogen Zenji quotes passages from the *Compassionate Flower Sutra*, volume 8, and talks about five vows related to the virtue of the *kashaya* among the 500 great vows Shakyamuni Buddha made in the presence of Ratnakosha Buddha. The five vows are

1. Not regressing to a stage from which it is impossible to receive a prophecy that one will become a buddha
2. Not regressing from the stage one has already attained
3. Having enough to eat and drink and having wishes come true immediately
4. Not having hateful feelings toward others and arousing compassion and wholesome thoughts
5. Always defeating enemies and escaping from troubles

Dogen Zenji suggests that when picking up the virtues of the *kashaya* from many sutras and commentaries, we should have those five sacred virtues as its basis.

The virtues of the *kashaya* include not only its secular benefits but also the great help we receive when we walk on the Buddha's Way, leaving behind the secular world.

Verse for Wearing the *Kashaya*

I would like to close by mentioning "The Verse for Wearing the *Kashaya*" transmitted by Dogen Zenji. This verse is also called "words while putting the *kashaya* on the head." When Dogen Zenji was practicing in China, he observed the monk next to him put the *kashaya* on his head and chant a verse. He transmitted this verse to Japan, and we chant it when we end morning zazen and put on the *kashaya* every morning.

In *Kesa Kudoku*, Dogen wrote "When I was in China during the Song Dynasty, practicing on a long sitting platform, I observed a monk sitting on the next seat. At the end of morning zazen, he would hold up his *kashaya*, place it on his head, and chant a verse quietly with palms together:

Great is the robe leading us to the liberation,
The robe beyond any attachment, bringing wonderful benefit to all beings
Wearing the Tathagata's teaching
I will save all sentient beings

At that time I had a feeling I had never have before. I rejoiced, tears wetting the collar of my robe."

When Dogen Zenji observed the way the *kashaya* was worn and heard the verse, he rejoiced so much that he wet the collar of his robe with tears. This verse is that precious. He had already read this verse in the *Agamas* (it is not clear about which part of the stura he meant) but he did not have specific knowledge of how to wear the *kashaya*. He was very moved by the poise of the monk next to him. This monk's manner was very courteous. The verse he chanted praised the virtues of the *kashaya* and clearly demonstrated that the *kashaya* is the embodiment of wisdom and vow. When we consider the virtue of the *kashaya* as expressed in this verse, wearing the *kashaya* has virtue

that enables us not only to attain the wisdom to bring about personal liberation but also to walk the Buddha's Way, wrapping ourselves with deep vow to save all beings as well.

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