

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Sewing and Wearing the Buddhist Robes and
How It Relates to Our Practice
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San Francisco Zendō

NOT VERBATIM

Last Sunday I told you that, whatever religion you belong to, it doesn't matter when you to come and sit with us. That is because our way of sitting, of practice, is for you to become yourself. Katagiri-rōshi always says, "to settle oneself on oneself." To be yourself. When you become you, yourself, at that moment your practice includes everything. Whatever there is, it is a part of you. So you practice with Buddha, you practice with Bodhidharma and you practice with Jesus. You practice with everyone in the future or in past. That is our practice. But when you do not become yourself, it doesn't happen in that way.

So if you come here and sit with us, you're not only sitting with us, but you are also sitting with everything, including animate and inanimate beings. Dogen Zenji said, if your practice doesn't include everything, that is not real practice.

It is not that after practicing for long time, you attain enlightenment and your practice includes everything, and you can practice with everyone. When you join our practice, your practice includes everything. And if you think that in two or three years, after your practice improves, that your practice will be perfect enough to include everything, that is a mistake. Something is missing in that practice. The sincerity is missing.

When you do practice, forgetting yourself, or where you are or how long you are there, then your practice includes everything. When you say, "I practice zazen at Zen Center." "I" and "Zen Center" are extra. You're limiting your practice by the idea of "Zen Center" or "my practice." When you say "my practice," the practice is very small. When you say "Zen Center," practice is very limited. When you forget all about those kinds of ideas and just practice, then, at that time, your practice is perfect and includes everything, past, present and future. That is the point of practice.

If you have this kind of spirit in your practice, you will not be happy with lazy practice, or be involved in the ideas of "how long," or of "what kind" of practice it is. You will not be so happy to hear the words "Buddhism," or "Zen," or "Rinzai," or "Sōtō." You'll be bothered by those names.

You may ask me, "Why do you wear this kind of robe all the time?"

Why do you sit in the same way all the time?" Tomorrow we will start a sewing sesshin, an *okesa* or *rakusu* sewing sesshin. You may think we are wearing some special robe but actually it is not so. The way Buddha made this robe was, as you know, that he collected the various materials on the street, or at a graveyard, and he collected material which was thrown away by the people. There were big pieces and small pieces, so after cleaning and purifying them, he sewed them together in this way.

This kind of design is planned so that you can use big and small pieces of material. Small pieces can be used for the smaller parts and big ones can be used for the big parts. The color also cannot be a bright, beautiful color because the materials Buddha used were old. So whatever it was, Buddha used it, and it became his robe.

He said that when human beings first appeared on this earth, they had a very long life and were very big. Much bigger than you are. They were very big. But, gradually, people became smaller and smaller, like the Japanese (laughs). But you shouldn't think that a big robe, bright in color could not be used for Shākyamuni Buddha's robe. That would be a wrong understanding, he said. A bright colored robe could be a robe for Shākyamuni Buddha. What this means is that, whatever color it is, it could be Buddhist robe. Only when you forget all about what color it is, or what material it is made of, can it be our robe. It could be silk, it could be linen, it could be cotton, but when we use it, it is not silk or cotton or linen. It is Buddha's robe.

When we say "Buddha's robe," it is just a robe, just that material. When this material is just this material, it is not any particular material. It is part of the universe. Not this material. Because you say this is for this table, or that stool, it is special. But if this is just this material, then it could be mine, it could be for Buddha, and it could be for you. This is exactly the same practice as your zazen practice. When you just become you, then that is how that practice includes everything. When we let this material just be this material, without saying mine or yours, then this material could be for everyone. And it is something more than material to cover this stool.

With this understanding, we make a robe. You may say, "that is a Buddhist robe," but we do not make our robe just for ourselves. We are making something greater, which will include everything, which could be everyone's. So if there's a certain way to make a robe, that way summarizes this real practice in something we wear. Anyway, we need something to wear. Especially when it is cold, you must wear something. So maybe it's better to wear something by which we can express our real understanding so that people can join our practice. That is why we make a robe.

If you miss this point, our robes will not be our robes, will not be Buddha's robe. Only when we understand this point and can make a robe with this spirit, is it Buddha's robe.

Right now you're listening to me, but each one of you should live in the world with this spirit we have been talking about. Strictly speaking, you shouldn't listen to me; you should do it yourself, you should be you. You should have your own way of life with this kind of spirit. Then all of you, each one of you, is a Buddhist. When you force your way on others, when you think Buddha's way is the best way, Buddhism cannot be Buddhism. Buddhism is not one of the many ways, but, rather, each one's own way. It is not the Japanese way or the American way.

Because I am Japanese, I am doing things the Japanese way. That is the only reason that I behave like a Japanese. I don't say the Japanese way is the best way of all. If you think that way, that cannot even be the Japanese way. When a Japanese person becomes Japanese, then he is really Japanese. He can be understood wherever he goes. There's no need for me to change my way. If you really want to make an *okesa* or *rakusu*, it will be Buddha's robe. If you feel as if you are imitating Buddha's robe, then that is not Buddha's robe.

So if you really want to be a Buddha, or Buddha's disciple, naturally you will make and wear Buddha's robe. But that does not mean propagating Buddhism. It just means that you really want to be a Buddhist. That's all. If you really want to be a Buddhist, through and through, naturally what you say and do will be like what Buddha did or Bodhidharma did.

That point is rather confusing. Before, I said that if you really become you, you include everything. Right now I'm saying if you're a Buddhist, if you really want to be a Buddhist, you will naturally want to wear Buddha's robe. The reason I wear this robe is that this robe symbolizes that spirit in its true sense: the spirit of using material as it is, and of being me, myself. Because this robe symbolizes that spirit, I wear it. So when we wear those robes, there's no contradiction. Do you understand?

Student: No. Rōshi, you said there's no contradiction, but you just said that robes are only worn to be a disciple of the Buddha and not to propagate Buddhism. But just before that you said you wear the robe to express your understanding so that the people can tell—

Rōshi: Not to propagate Buddhism, but to help them understand what each person's way should be. That's the difference. A non-Buddhist may think I am a Buddhist, but I don't think I am a Buddhist. If it is necessary for them to call me something, or to call

myself something, maybe, for the sake of convenience, I can be a Buddhist. That's okay. I am happy to be a Buddhist.

[Another question not intelligible. Clarified by someone in the audience as: "If you don't think you're a Buddhist, Rōshi, what do you think you are?"]

Rōshi: You need your name, so it is okay to have a name, but it is not necessary to stick to my name just for the sake of convenience. In Zen Center we have some rules. On the one side, the rules are to guide our practice, and on the other side to encourage our spirit. Often, people want to be someone special: "I am Buddhist," or "I am Zen Master." [Laughs.] So to discourage us from sticking a label or name on ourselves, we practice zazen and we have rules and rituals. Unfortunately, people may think they are practicing the Sōtō way, and, therefore, the Sōtō way is pretty good. We may become very proud of the Sōtō way. That is the danger, so, I must have a big stick!

Student: Isn't there the danger that people may want to wear those robes or special costumes to be something special? And is it necessary then to wear those robes to be called a Buddhist?

Rōshi: If you going to discuss something like this, that kind of question arises. We are now in this building, and I'm giving a lecture and you are listening to me. That's all. [Laughs.] So now I'm explaining why I am talking and why you are listening. That's all. I started to explain a little bit about what a robe is. Anyway, we have to wear something, so to encourage that kind of spirit, we have this kind of thing.

Student: What do you think we are?

Rōshi: I don't know. If you say that I am Suzuki, that makes me think more. Something like, "That is Suzuki's name," [laughs] so maybe it would be better not to have any name. But I don't feel good if you think, "he's so great, and I'm so small." Small Suzuki and ... [laughs] Great Suzuki. Perhaps it's better not to think about it so much. Actually, that is practice, you know. You asked me, "What do you think you are?" but I am trying to forget who I am! [General laughter.] Maybe that is a pretty interesting discussion. You get the point.

Sōtō Zen Buddhists have very elaborate rituals and a very elaborate practice. In one way, it is an advantage, but in another way it may it will create some problem for you. So we must have a strong spirit, so that we don't get lost in our practice. When you have a strong spirit, then the Sōtō way will help you, but when you rely on this kind of practice too much, you will be lost completely. You must be very

careful, and when you become very careful about this kind of danger, then your life will be taken care of pretty well. When you have real spirit, this kind of practice will extend into your city life. And you will be well taken care of by Buddha. Naturally, the rules are provided to help to protect us from that kind of danger. Without knowing that it is a danger, we become proud of our danger, and that is terrible.

This is a danger not only for Sōtō students, but for all human beings. We suffer from this kind of pride or selfish satisfaction. We have no time to be satisfied with anything. We must continue to do one thing after another; we have no time to stick to any one thing.

Thank you very much.

This transcript is a retyping of the existing City Center transcript. It is not verbatim. No tape is available. The City Center transcript was entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. It was reformatted by Bill Redican (2/19/02).