

The Kesa of Gold Brocade

After serving as Makakashyo's chaplain for twenty years after the Buddha's death, and even though he had been entrusted with Shakyamuni's Dharma and knew all the scriptures by heart, Ananda still questioned, "My elder brother in the Dharma [Makakashyo], when the World-honoured One Transmitted the kesa of gold brocade to you did he pass on anything else?" [A dialogue ensued and when Ananda was spiritually ripe, Makakashyo instructed him to give up trying to figure it out with his intellect.] Responding to [Makakashyo's] voice, Ananda awakened to his TRUE SELF and the Buddha's Kesa descended naturally onto Ananda's head. That golden Kesa is, beyond doubt, the Kesa that was, is and will be Transmitted by the Seven Buddhas.¹

At the recent "Buddhist Visions" exhibit at our local university's art museum, one section was devoted to a display of beautiful ceremonial kesas [priests' meditation robes] from 19th century Japan. Definitely works of art in their craftsmanship and design, they were made of costly silk brocades woven or embroidered with exquisite designs and patterns. The showpiece of the exhibit was a kesa of gold brocade, with the kesa unfolded completely against a wall and spotlighted so that all its shimmering threads of gold shone with a regal and heavenly brilliance.

The exhibit's respectfully written introduction tried to explain the incongruity between humble Buddhist monks' patchwork robes, originally made of cast-off fabric, and the splendor of these expensive ceremonial vestments. However, the explanation somehow left me dissatisfied. In reflecting on this dissonance for several weeks, I finally saw the missing pieces. It seemed to me that the article lacked an insider's understanding of the certain acceptance Buddhist practitioners hold regarding the teachings on rebirth, karma, and merit, and perhaps as well of our devotion to our teachers and the symbolic meaning of the kesa.

The explanation mentioned how these beautiful robes were gifts of devoted followers. However, out of context, and particularly in Western religions with strong iconoclastic trends in their histories (Judaism, Islam, and Protestant Christianity), such offerings can seem preposterous and a terrible waste of money. What is not seen here is the merit of making the gift that bears fruit in subsequent lives and the love with which the offering is given. If one sees karmic effects limited to ripening only in this one life and this one world, yes, it might appear to be money misspent. The Buddha taught a broader view that encompassed thousands of worlds (at least) and that actions (karma) are inexorably followed by matching effects or results at sometime in this or a future life, unless other karma mitigates. Who are we to judge another's offering, especially one given with reverent love and

generosity and which epitomizes the very heart of our faith—the Precepts, or Buddha Nature?²

Traditionally, from the time of the Buddha, lay trainees have offered robes, along with other necessities, to monastics. What is of critical importance is the generosity of the intent. Yes, there is the practical necessity of providing requisites to renunciates who have no source of income, and this interchange between laity and monks, with the monks in turn offering Dharma, is one that the Buddha established in order to give people the opportunity of cultivating merit. The merit is based not on the value of the gift, but on the mind with which the offering is given. This perspective was Great Master Bodhidharma's teaching to the Chinese emperor when the newly arrived Indian monk informed the emperor that his imperial highness had not gained any merit from all his temple building, scripture printing, and requisite providing. The reason? It had all been done with the selfish purpose of trying to acquire merit, rather than with the unselfish love of pure-hearted generosity.

Since we cannot see and thereby know the intent behind these beautiful kesas, we would be wise to not be too hasty to judge. People give because they want to, there is no coercion, and such expensive vestments were only for distinguished high abbots, often much loved masters. The abbot or master wrapped in the kesa was the embodiment of the Buddha Himself for his or her disciples, and the Precepts, the True Treasure represented in the patchwork pattern, cause the kesa to shine brilliantly.

Such robes also usually belonged to the temple, not to the individual monk. We saw this played out at Shasta Abbey when Rev. Master Jiyu died. Most of her ceremonial robes, some of which were personal gifts to her, were bequeathed to her successor as the abbot of the monastery (who in turn will pass them on). The rules of our Order, established by Rev. Master Jiyu and based on ancient vinaya practice, teach the vow of poverty not as monastics not having anything for their personal use, but rather as not using anything selfishly. So long as these beautiful kesas are used to glorify the Unborn Buddha Nature and its phenomenal expression in the Precepts, there is no misuse. And, as a reminder for monastics, there are various scriptures that describe particularly gruesome hells for monastics who use alms wastefully. We have lots of incentive not to do so!

The giving of such ceremonial robes is akin to the construction of beautiful temples and stupas, altar statues and scrolls, calligraphy and printing of scriptures, etc. All these things are given and created to inspire our hearts to practice Dharma. Rev. Master Jiyu once remarked concerning the use of language in translating and writing that one needs to "feed faith." We do not need lyrical translations or lovely buildings and furnishings to practice—we could meditate in a cow barn and use Pidgin English for reciting scriptures—

but are not our hearts inspired through beauty? Do we wish to become like the puritanical Roundheads during the English civil war who destroyed all the colorful furnishings and much of the stained glass of the great medieval cathedrals in their effort to “purify” the Church, or like the Muslim armies who defaced all Buddhist images in India because they viewed them as heathen or idolatrous? Traditionally, Buddhism has understood, encompassed, tolerated, appreciated, and supported both approaches— aniconic (no images) and iconic.

I remember how this issue arose when I was training at Shasta Abbey with Rev. Master Jiyu. The treasurer at the time was refusing to grant her requests for expenses for religious items that he considered frivolous or unnecessary and that he felt the temple could not afford. You have to remember that this was a time at the monastery when monks went into the local community to tear down dilapidated houses for lumber to build monastery cloister, and lay trainees often spent much of their working meditation straightening nails to hammer the cloister boards in place! At the same time, there is the principle in the Zen Buddhist tradition that all donations are considered gifts to the abbot, since the master is the temple. So, Rev. Master Jiyu established her own abbess’s fund to which people could donate in order that her expenses would not be a drain on the monastery treasury. What was she buying? It was teaching aids, such as dolls for the children’s Dharma school, paper for photocopying manuscripts for monks, and craft supplies for making book covers for the monks’ liturgy books. She commented, after this treasurer had left and a new treasurer installed, how much she appreciated the new one’s willingness to approve her expenses. (We phased out the special fund after a few years.)

Rev. Master Jiyu used this example to illustrate to the community the importance of being willing to purchase items that inspired people to practice, things that had “religious” value only and not necessarily any utilitarian purpose. The purpose of religion is to help people find the Unborn. Anything that does that is a legitimate expense. If one looks at the great sacred spaces and art of the world—the Taj Mahal, medieval cathedrals, Russian Orthodox icons, Buddhist temples in Asia, native people’s sanctuaries—they are incredible works of great beauty that inspire us to practice, often embedded with symbolism, and are teachings in and of themselves. And of course one doesn’t want to be excessive. As Great Master Dōgen instructs the chief cook in *Tenzo-kyokun*, “Be [both] single-minded [whole-hearted, sincere] and practical.”³ This is where it is particularly valuable to have a teacher to guide us, to help us find the right balance.

This shortsightedness seems common to people in most religions, since we see it addressed in the Christian Gospels a couple of times. One is that of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with an expensive ointment, right before his betrayal. Jesus’ disciples were indignant over the waste, complaining that it could have been sold and the proceeds

given to the poor. Their teacher pointed out the value of contemplative offerings, explaining that they would always have the poor with them, but his time in this world was limited. (Matthew 26:6-13) Another story is that of Mary and Martha. Martha was very busy attending to the responsibilities of hosting a visit by Jesus in her home. Mary, her sister, in contrast, just sat at Jesus' feet listening to the teaching. (Was she "just sitting"?) Martha complained to Jesus that she was doing all the work and that he should ask Mary to help her. (Human nature doesn't change much over the centuries, does it?) Jesus chastised Martha, pointing out that she was overly concerned with external matters, and that Mary had chosen the "needful thing" and to let her be. (Luke 10: 38-42) My understanding is that this story is the source for the Roman Catholic Church including both active and contemplative orders. In my last years at Shasta Abbey I saw this issue arise frequently as the abbot had to almost wrest time out of the schedule for meditation, Dharma talks, and ceremonies—activities which were not necessarily practical to the running of the temple, but which are essential to its purpose. It's interesting to note that the story of Mary and Martha follows Jesus' instructions of how to inherit eternal life—"Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself"—and his parable of the good Samaritan illustrating who one's neighbor is, thus underscoring the importance of not limiting our religious life to works only. Again, we need to find the right balance.

Rev. Master Jiyu explained it this way in a letter to a lay trainee: "Mystical religion does not ignore external responsibilities, but rather views them as part of inner responsibilities yet subordinate to them. It is right and necessary to help others and to make sure physical needs are met, but help should be given with an internal knowledge of what is right, otherwise it becomes do-goodism, which is usually a form of meddling. Also, far too many people do good works to hide from their inner responsibilities."⁴

So when you see the kesa of gold brocade, beautiful statuary, impressive architecture, and lovely furnishings at a temple, be careful not to judge too quickly as to their worth. Their existence as meritorious offerings, inspirational teaching, and expressions of love go far beyond what may be visible and audible to the human eye and ear.



¹ Great Master Keizan, *The Denkoroku: The Transmission of Light*, trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman, ed. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., Shasta Abbey Press, 1993, pp. 12 & 14.

² See my article "The Buddhist Kesa: Clothes of Enlightenment" in *Journal of the OBC*, Winter 2006/2007 and Spring 2007.

³ Rōshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, 4th ed., Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, p. 146.

⁴ "Internal Work and External Work," *Journal of the OBC*, Winter 2001, p. 4.